

# Publishing the peopling of medieval London

William White

## SUMMARY

*From 1983 to 1997 a number of medieval cemeteries were excavated in London, but none were published. This paper explains how the ongoing MoLAS monastic London publication programme is addressing this issue and highlights some interesting results of recent skeletal research, including the incidence of DISH.*

## THE SCOPE OF THE PROBLEM

As recently as 1997 it was possible to bemoan the fact that 'At the moment only about thirty excavations have taken place in English medieval cemeteries, of which about ten have more than a hundred bodies. Fewer still have been comprehensively published.' (Daniell 1997).

No medieval London cemetery site had been published since 1988 when the parochial cemetery of St Nicholas Shambles was published (White 1988). Now the archaeology of the associated parish church (see Fig 1, 7) has also been published (Schofield 1997). This situation altered dramatically with the publication of the excavations at the Priory and Hospital of St Mary Spital, this volume being subtitled confidently 'MoLAS Monograph No.1' (Thomas *et al* 1997). The aim of this paper is to demonstrate that the dearth of published material on medieval London cemetery sites is in the process of being addressed and should be resolved within the next five years.

The St Mary Spital publication deals with the archaeological and documentary evidence for what was the largest hospital in London during the Middle Ages (see Fig 1, 30). It includes the analysis of 126 articulated skeletons from excavations carried out between 1982 and 1991

(Conheeneey 1997). A fascinating aspect of this study was the opportunity to compare the health and longevity of the inmates buried in the hospital's cemetery with those of their clerical patrons buried within the church itself. Thus, the influence of status is seen in the significant difference in average height between the monks and the sick in their care, in the types of disease that they suffered and in life expectancy, the clerics on average dying at a greater age than the hospital inmates (*ibid* 223-4).

The St Mary Spital volume is the first in a planned series concerning London's monastic institutions (Thomas 1998). This series of publications includes four Greater London monastic houses, excavated between 1983 to 1994. This wealth of data will allow comparisons to be made amongst the monastic populations from houses of different religious affiliations (see Table 1). Additional comparative assemblages are provided by excavation of the mid 14th-century Black Death cemetery at Tower Hill and the cemetery of the Abbey of St Mary Graces (see Fig 1, 24) which was built over the Black Death grave pits (discussed in Conheeneey's paper this volume).

## SIGNIFICANT CASE STUDIES

Although the excavations at the Priory and Hospital of St John of Jerusalem, Clerkenwell (see Fig 1, 26) produced relatively few human skeletons they are of great interest, since they include only the second medieval case of death during childbirth known from London (Sloane & Malcolm forthcoming). This tragedy echoes that from St Nicholas (see Fig 1, 7) in that the

Table 1. Publication backlog: monastic houses excavated in the London region (after Sloane 1998)

House	Order	Foundation date	Region
St John, Clerkenwell	Hospitaller	1144	Suburban (N)
St Saviour, Bermondsey	Cluniac	1089	Hinterland (S)
St Mary, Merton	Augustinian	1117	Rural (SW)
St Mary, Stratford Langthorne	Cistercian	1135	Hinterland (E)

skeleton of the mother included an 'android' (*ie* male-type) pelvis, inadequate for the successful passage of a full-term foetus so that in the absence of surgical intervention the mother and unborn child eventually perished through 'maternal exhaustion' (Wells 1988). A difference here is that the St Nicholas Shambles example dates from the 11th-12th centuries, whereas that from St John Clerkenwell is late medieval and therefore ought to have been governed by the Councils of Canterbury (1236) and of Trèves (1310) which in such cases required mother and child to be separated surgically for separate burial (Anderson & Parfitt 1998).

St Saviour, Southwark, was founded as a Cluniac priory in the 12th century and reconsecrated as a Benedictine abbey in the 14th century (Fig 1, 28). About 200 burials were excavated in 1984. St Mary, Merton, was an Augustinian priory that was excavated in 1976-77 and in 1986-88 producing nearly 700 skeletons, and St Mary, Stratford Langthorne, to the east, was a Cistercian abbey where a similarly high number of burials was found in two seasons of excavations (1983 and 1994). The finding of an exceptionally high prevalence of the disease known as 'DISH' (Diffuse Idiopathic Skeletal Hyperostosis) at one of these sites, Merton Priory, has led Dr Tony Waldron to propose that DISH was an occupational disease of the upper clergy, previously seen at other ecclesiastical sites such as Wells Cathedral, St Albans Abbey, St Mary Graces, London, St Mary Spital (Waldron 1985). Although, the suggestion had been made somewhat light-heartedly, for this was in a bumper Christmas issue of the *British Medical Journal*, the hypothesis continues to hold up in that at these latter monastic sites in London, though adhering to different rules, there was

likewise a very high proportion of spines showing DISH. The disease may be manifested elsewhere in the skeleton but the classic sign is for four or more consecutive vertebrae of the thoracic or lumbar spine to be fused together via the calcification of the longitudinal ligament to the right of the spine, giving a typical 'dripping wax' appearance with preservation of the disc spaces. Here the osteoarchaeologist has an advantage over the clinician in that it is easy to detect the early stages of the disease ('incipient DISH') in isolated vertebrae than it is in X-rays of living people. Today DISH normally affects elderly males who are obese and enjoying a very rich diet and way of life. In the context of medieval monasticism it therefore readily evokes the stereotypical image of the 'fat abbot'. A second but more prosaic cause for the condition that has been suggested is a defect in the metabolism of vitamin A (*ibid* 1763). The problem with this explanation is that it does not account for the high prevalence of DISH in monastic skeletons for, rich as the diet may have been, there was not necessarily an excess of vitamin A. Barbara Harvey's research among the Muniments of Westminster Abbey shows that even at the very end of the monastic era c.1495-1525, when dietary abuse allegedly was greatest, there was, on balance, a deficiency of vitamin A in the typical monastic diet (see Table 2) (Harvey 1993, 64-5). Thus, there is the exciting anticipation that research being performed on these medieval sites will be of relevance to concurrent medical research into DISH.

The excavation of 50 12th-century burials from St Lawrence Jewry (see Fig 1, 9) will prove exceptionally interesting as they derive from a rare metropolitan parochial cemetery. They will also make a valuable comparison with the 18

Table 2. Daily vitamin intake: Westminster monks (c.1495–1525)

Unit	VITAMIN			
	A (µg)	B (mg)	C (mg)	D (µg)
Monk's allowance daily (excluding Lent)	367–611	5.4–9.0	4.3–7.2	9–32
Recommended daily intake	700	2.3	40	10

Adapted from Harvey (1993).

Table 3. Publishing the peopling of medieval London

Site	Excavation	No of burials	Publication date
St Mary Spital	1985–88	129	1997
Priory of the Order of St John, Clerkenwell	1989	13	2000
St Saviour, Bermondsey	1984	195	2001
St Mary, Stratford	1983, 1994	675	2001
St Mary, Merton	1976, 1988	700	2002
St Lawrence Jewry	1992	70	2003

Saxon (or Anglo-Danish?) skeletons from the same site and datable to c.AD 1050 (Bateman 1997). The Guildhall reports form a series of publications separate from the MoLAS Monographs and the publication on the human remains will appear a little later (see Table 3).

Finally, the handbook accompanying the *London Bodies* exhibition at the Museum of London, October 1998–February 1999 was published in the Autumn of 1998 (Werner 1998). This volume is of relevance to the peopling of London for it addresses the physical appearance of Londoners from prehistory to the present day, drawing upon costume, adornment and fine art but especially upon the remains of Londoners themselves, chiefly from archaeological excavations in the Greater London area. The public display of our ancestors also raises the question of finding the right balance between respect for the dead and successful public presentation (Swain 1998).

Meanwhile, the study and publication of skeletal material from other periods of London's history is not being neglected. Romano-British studies have been advanced by the publication of the volume on the East London Roman cemetery which deals *inter alia* with 587 inhumations and 122 cremation burials (Barber

& Bowsher 2000). Likewise, the post-medieval sites of Redcross Way, Southwark (160 burials) (Brickley, Miles & Stainer 1999) and St Brides lower churchyard (604 burials) will be published early this century (Conheaney & Miles forthcoming).

#### ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The programme of analytical work discussed in this paper is being funded by English Heritage as part of the ongoing Greater London archaeological publication programme.

#### BIBLIOGRAPHY

- ANDERSON & PARFITT (1998), T Anderson & K Parfitt 'Two unusual burials from medieval Dover' *Int J Osteoarchaeol* 8, 123–4
- BARBER & BOWSHER (2000), B Barber and D Bowsher (eds) 'The Eastern Cemetery of Roman London: excavations 1983–90' MoLAS Monograph No.4
- BATEMAN (1997), N C W Bateman 'The early eleventh-to mid-twelfth century graveyard at Guildhall, City of London' in G de Boe and F Verhaeghe (eds) *Death and Burial in Medieval Europe: papers of the medieval Europe Brugge 1997 conference* 2, 115–20

- BRICKLEY & MILES (1999), M Brickley, A Miles & H Stainer *The Cross Bones Burial Ground, Redcross Way, Southwark* MoLAS Monograph No.3
- CONHEENEY (1997), J Conheeney 'The Human Bone' in Thomas *et al* 218–231
- CONHEENEY & MILES (forthcoming), J Conheeney and A Miles *A Post-Medieval Population from London: Excavations at 75–82 Farringdon Street*
- DANIELL (1997), C Daniell *Death and Burial in Medieval England 1066–1550*
- HARVEY (1993), B Harvey *Living and Dying in England 1100–1540: the Monastic Experience*
- SCHOFIELD (1997), J Schofield 'Excavations at the site of St Nicholas Shambles, Newgate Street, City of London, 1975–9' *Trans London & Middlesex Archaeol Soc* 48, 77–136
- SLOANE & MALCOLM (forthcoming), B Sloane & G Malcolm *Excavations at the Priory of the Order of the Hospital of St John of Jerusalem, Clerkenwell, London*
- SWAIN, H Swain 'Displaying the Ancestors' *The Archaeologist* No.33, 14–15
- THOMAS *et al* (1997), C Thomas, B Sloane & C Phillpotts *Excavations at the Priory and Hospital of St Mary Spital, London* MoLAS Monograph No.1
- THOMAS (1998), C Thomas with B Sloane 'The Museum of London Archaeology Service Monograph Series on London's Religious Houses' *Univ of York Monastic Research Bulletin* 4, 1–6
- WALDRON (1985), T Waldron 'DISH at Merton Priory: evidence for a "new" occupational disease' *Brit Medical J* 291, 1762–3
- WELLS (1988), C Wells 'Appendix 3: an early medieval case of death in childbirth' in White *Op cit*, 71–73
- WERNER (1998), A Werner (ed) *London Bodies: the Changing Shape of Londoners from Prehistoric Times to the Present Day*
- WHITE (1988), W J White *Skeletal Remains from the Cemetery of St Nicholas Shambles, City of London* London & Middlesex Archaeol Soc Special Pap 9