

# Excavations at St Peter's Church, Petersham: a wealthy post-medieval community beside the River Thames

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## Introduction

This article summarises the results of archaeological investigations carried out by AOC Archaeology Group at the site of St Peter's Church, Petersham, between November 2017 and February 2018.

Excavations uncovered 26 inhumation burials, interred in earth-cut graves and brick-lined vaults, and two deposits of co-mingled human remains dating to the late 17th to early 20th centuries.<sup>1</sup> Osteological analysis of these individuals, combined with historical research and the analysis of coffin furniture, has allowed for a detailed picture of life in post-medieval Petersham to be created.

## St Peter's Church, Petersham

The village of Petersham is located on the southern bank of the River Thames, one mile south of Richmond (Fig 1). The church is located to the north-east of Petersham village and is a Grade II\* listed building with a large graveyard located on its north, east and south sides. The development for which this work was undertaken consists of an extension to the southern side of the church building, occupying a broadly rectangular area of approx. 0.4 hectares.<sup>2</sup>

The area around Petersham became popular as a rural retreat for rich aristocrats in the 1600s and by the early 1700s there were around 30 houses in

the village, most of them large mansions.<sup>3</sup> Information from the parish registers and land tax records shows that the inhabitants included financiers, merchants, lawyers, goldsmiths and members of the aristocracy.

Petersham continued to be an affluent middle and upper-class area into the 1800s.<sup>4</sup> The first census returns of 1801 show that there were 59 houses and 422 inhabitants (253 females and 169 males). Typical households consisted of a resident family who owned or rented the property, and the cooks, gardeners and housemaids that they employed. The village had grown to around 800 inhabitants by the end of the 1800s with the variety of occupations expanding to include solicitors, physicians, dress-makers and a post-mistress.<sup>5</sup>

## The burials

Twenty-six inhumation burials were excavated from the churchyard of St Peter's Church, Petersham, all following an east-west alignment with heads positioned to the west (Fig 2). Twenty-nine above-ground grave monuments, some of which were substantial constructions, were recorded prior to excavation. Nineteen individuals were recovered from earth-cut graves in the western half of the site.

The modern ground surface in the graveyard was at c. 8m OD and the grave cuts commonly reached depths of around 1.7–1.9m below this surface, although a few were as deep as 2.15m. Many had been truncated by later burials, resulting in two deposits of co-mingled remains, in addition to modern services. While the coffins in the earth-cut graves were extremely

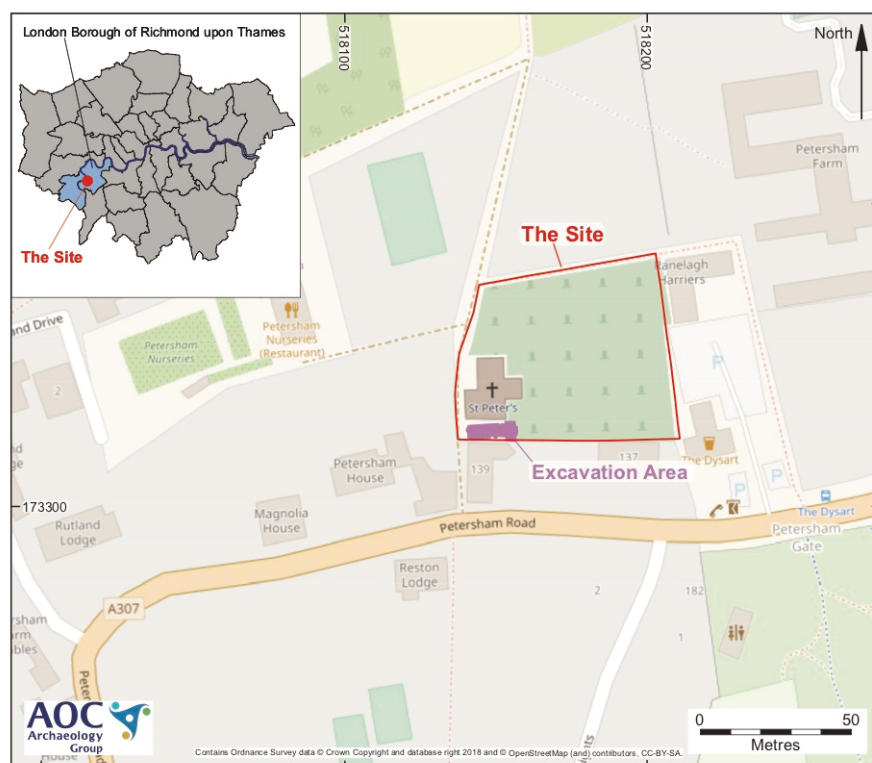


Fig 1: site location

poorly preserved, the condition of the human remains was generally moderate or good.<sup>6</sup>

Seven individuals were recovered from brick-lined vaults, where coffin preservation was generally better. These individuals could thus be associated with their identities based on information from surviving coffin plates and grave memorials. The burials within the vaults date to between 1782 and 1915, while the memorials associated with some earth-cut graves dated from 1689 onwards. Combined with the disturbance of earth-cut graves during the construction of vaults, this suggests that these graves can be assigned a general post-medieval date, with the majority pre-dating the brick-lined vaults, which represent a later phase of activity.<sup>7</sup>

### Demography

Through osteological analysis and the examination of inscriptions on coffin plates and grave memorials, it was possible to provide an estimate of sex for 17 individuals (7 males, 10 females) and age-at-death for 25 individuals. There was a clear age bias in favour of adults, who represented 69.2% of the total assemblage (n=18), which is not unusual for a post-medieval/early modern cemetery. Of the 18 adults, four could be aged between 26–35 years (22%), five between 36–45 years (28%), and four could be 46+ years (22%).

All non-adults and younger adults (26–35 years) were recovered from earth-cut graves, while inscriptions associated with the brick vault burials indicated that the majority of these individuals were older than 60 years, demonstrating a general trend for older individuals to be afforded more elaborate burials than their younger counterparts. Alternatively, this may suggest that wealthier individuals lived longer than those who could only afford an earth-cut grave and more simplistic coffin decoration.<sup>8</sup>

### Disease in a wealthy population

Osteological evidence for disease at St Peter's Church generally reflected the wealthy, older population here. For example, while fractures were present at levels expected for a wealthy London

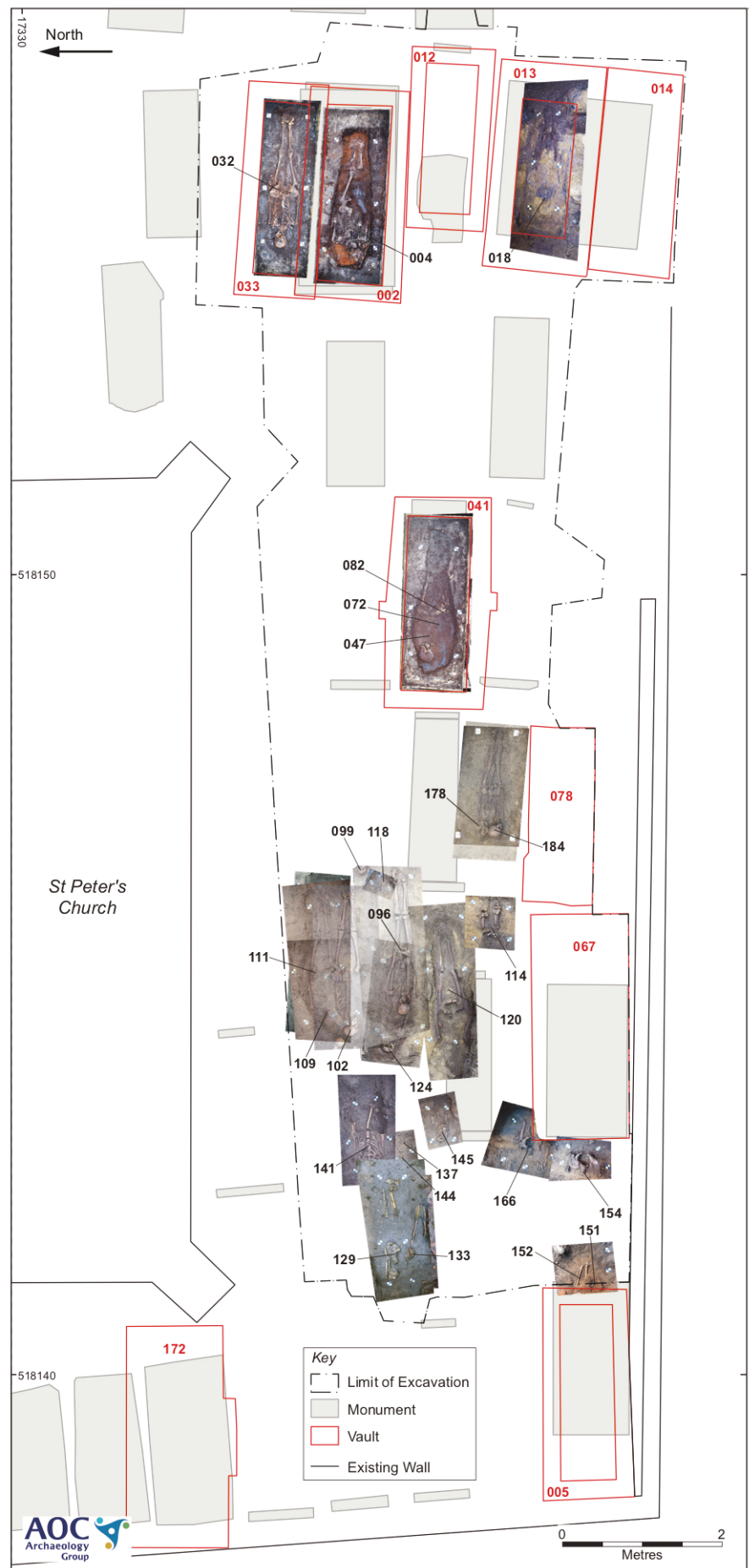


Fig 2: plan of excavated graves

borough at this time, affecting 15.4% of individuals, fractures indicative of osteoporosis were present at a rate of 5.6%, which is higher than the post-medieval average of 1.2%.<sup>9</sup>

Degenerative joint disease (DJD), which also increases in prevalence with age,<sup>10</sup> was recognised in five individuals, with seven individuals displaying the more severe changes of osteoarthritis. This rate of osteoarthritis is relatively low, reflecting the undemanding, sedentary lifestyles of the people of Petersham.<sup>11</sup>

Dental diseases affected a large proportion of individuals from St Peter's Church. Caries and antemortem tooth loss occurred in 63% and 64% of individuals, respectively, with 77% of these cases occurring in adults aged 36 or older. This is broadly comparable to the prevalence rates of caries observed at the other wealthy London cemeteries of Chelsea Old Church and St Marylebone, Westminster.<sup>12</sup>

Caries develops when bacteria in the mouth secrete acid following the consumption of sugars and starchy carbohydrates,<sup>13</sup> suggesting that these populations favoured a sweet diet. Rates of calculus, deposits of mineralised plaque that build up with a diet of soft, refined foods and a lack of oral hygiene, were also particularly high at St. Peter's Church, even when compared with other wealthy London assemblages.<sup>14</sup> One individual had evidence for dental treatment in the form of a maxillary dental plate (Fig 3) and two gold fillings, which are discussed further below.

Metabolic disease resulting from malnutrition was also present at a low level at St Peter's Church but, in some cases, supports the idea that the population was consuming refined foods. Two of the children from St. Peter's Church had lesions indicative of scurvy,<sup>15</sup> which is caused by a lack of vitamin C, and became a problem among wealthy London children in the 19th century due to the popular practise of weaning infants onto processed and pasteurised foods with low vitamin C content.<sup>16</sup>

The affected children were aged seven and 11 years and should have been consuming a diet that was much more adult in composition, but calculus deposits on their teeth suggest that they were eating very soft, refined foods,

implying a heavily processed diet of breads, pottages and porridge, with very little vitamin C content.<sup>17</sup>

#### Integrating historical and archaeological evidence

During the analysis of archaeological material from St Peter's Church, it has been possible to combine the osteological data summarised above with information from coffin plates, memorials and historical records to create detailed pictures of the lives of individuals buried here. This section of the article brings together information on the lives of individuals from a particular vault at St Peter's Church: Vault [002], which housed members of the Gage family, who were among the higher-status residents of Petersham in the 19th and early 20th centuries.

#### The Gage family

Frances Louisa Gage (Burial 004) and Lucy Amelia Gage (032) were wealthy sisters who lived together at 2 Downes Terrace, Richmond Hill, with a household of four servants, including a cook and a lady's maid. They had two brothers, Charles Wentworth Gage (1832–68), who died in Canada, and Archibald William Gage (1837–71), who had been a resident of Hampton Court. Their mother was one of eight daughters born to Caroline Douglas

(née Scott), the 6th Marchioness of Queensbury (1774–1854).<sup>18</sup>

The family appears to have been well-connected within London society and in 1861 Frances, or Fanny as she was known, sat for a portrait with the French photographer Camille Silvy.<sup>19</sup> Neither of the sisters were ever married and Frances was the sole beneficiary of Lucy's will, following her death in January 1905 aged 67, receiving £492 19s. 6d.

Frances died ten years later in July 1915 aged 81, leaving £4,361 6s. 11d. to her relatives Frances Elizabeth Stewart, the widow of a solicitor, and an army major, Sir Francis Henry Douglas Charlton Whitmore.<sup>20</sup>

#### Vault [002]

Frances, Lucy, Archibald and their mother, Caroline, were all buried within Vault [002], which was 2.55m long by 1.2m wide by 2.2m deep and constructed of unfrosted brick. It was located close to the church itself and was topped with a substantial monument, comprising a large marble cross standing on a three-stepped base, originally surrounded by railings.

The first burial within the vault was of Caroline Douglas (027), who died in April 1854 aged 79. Resting on a floor of stone flags that sealed the first burial [028] was a second coffin,



Fig 3: maxillary dental plate belonging to Lucy Amelia Gage

containing the remains of Archibald William Gage (026), who died in Kingston, Surrey, on 29 January 1871. Both coffins were made from lead with outer wooden coverings and were immediately reburied.<sup>21</sup>

The remains of Lucy Amelia Gage (032) were buried in a wooden coffin (031) in an extension to vault [002], constructed on its northern side. Frances Louisa Gage (004) was then interred in the original brick vault [002] on a second floor of stone flags [025]. She was buried in a simple, shouldered and tapered wooden coffin lined with hay or straw (003).<sup>22</sup>

*The remains of Lucy and Frances*  
Osteological analysis of Lucy and Frances Gage showed they suffered from a range of the complaints described above, reflecting both their advanced ages and their statuses. Both women suffered from osteoarthritis. Frances also suffered from degenerative joint disease and osteoporosis, while Lucy had Schmorl's nodes. Both also suffered from intervertebral disc disease.

In addition, Lucy's teeth showed evidence of enamel hypoplasia, calculus, caries, periodontal disease and ante-mortem tooth loss. Treatment had occurred in the form of two gold fillings and she had been fitted with a maxillary dental plate, probably made of vulcanite set with porcelain teeth (Fig 3). The latter appears to have been a bespoke piece made to a high standard. Evidence of a small repair to the front of the plate suggests that it was an expensive item.<sup>23</sup>

#### *The Gage family's coffin furniture*

Each of the Gage family's coffins was adorned with decorative fittings and plates. The marchioness's coffin was the only example at St Peter's Church adorned with what appeared to be gilded copper-alloy handles or grips, grip plates and lid motifs (Fig 4).<sup>24</sup> Although the use of gilded copper alloy in coffin furniture was not unusual in the late post-medieval period, it was



Fig 4: coffin furniture from the Marchioness of Queensbury's grave

more expensive than other available materials, demonstrating the wealth of the marchioness's family.<sup>25</sup> The coffin grips are highly ornate and the iconography of this set of coffin furniture provides information about Caroline Douglas' status as a marchioness.

Three Marquess Coronet lid motifs (decorative coffin fittings of pressed metal), featuring 'silver' balls and strawberry leaves, were found with the remains of the outer wood coffin, though their original positioning is uncertain.<sup>26</sup> The Marquess Coronet was also depicted on the engraved, outer coffin breastplate. No parallels to this particular style of lid motif could be identified, although the use of coronets as a mark of peerage is also seen with the Earl's Coronet lid motifs from a late 18th-century burial at Rycote Chapel Crypt, Oxfordshire.<sup>27</sup>

Two copper-alloy lid motifs from the coffin of Archibald Gage both feature different styles of crosses. The first, positioned above the breastplate, comprised a central cross with a serpent wound over it, while staffs on either side of the cross were gripped by the serpent's tail and head. The three components of the cross, serpent and a pair of staffs, are arranged to spell out the letters 'IHS', recognised in Christian iconography as the initials of the Greek and Latin translations of Jesus' full name. The second lid motif, a Maltese cross, was positioned at the foot of the coffin below the breastplate. No parallels could be found for these

styles of lid motif.<sup>28</sup>

It is possible that the fittings that embellished both coffins were custom-made to individual specifications. The iconography of Archibald Gage's lid motifs does not provide any specific information about his interests during life. However, the expensive materials used for Caroline Douglas' coffin fittings and the iconography employed in its lid

motifs, would have reflected both her social status and wealth to her onlooking funeral congregation.<sup>29</sup>

Lucy Amelia Gage's coffin was decorated with a trapezoidal breastplate and a simple but large cross. The breastplate was possibly of brass or bronze and was in good condition, with a clearly legible inscription: 'Lucy Amelia Gage Died 16th Jan 1905'.<sup>30</sup>

Frances Louisa Gage was buried in a simple, shouldered and tapered wooden coffin without studs or escutcheons and with a simple name plate situated at the foot end. The simplicity of this burial, in contrast to the others, may perhaps be attributed to the fact that Britain was at war when this individual died in 1915.<sup>31</sup>

#### *Personal ornament in the Gage family vault*

A number of objects were recovered from burials at St Peter's Church. Most common were copper-alloy and iron pins measuring 18–35mm in length, which were found in association with seven burials and were probably used to secure shrouds.<sup>32</sup> Two iron pins were found in the grave of Lucy Gage (032), indicating the wrapping of the body or fastening of a garment.<sup>33</sup>

Some members of the Gage family were also buried with jewellery. Through breaks in Caroline Douglas' lead coffin, a pendant made from a semi-precious stone, possibly Tiger's Eye, was observed along with a second pendant made from the same stone, framed with gold and with a gold chain attached.<sup>34</sup>



Fig 5: gold finger ring belonging to Lucy Amelia Gage

finger could possibly mark an engagement from earlier in her life. However, this could not be verified through archival records.

**Conclusion**

Historical accounts of post-medieval and early modern

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*The gold ring*

A single gold finger ring was recovered from the grave of Lucy Amelia Gage. The ring takes the form of a coiled snake with two semi-precious stones or glass set in place of the eyes (Fig 5). Rings of this style were popular from the later third quarter of the 19th century, especially as betrothal rings, with the snake symbolic of eternity.<sup>35</sup>

Although Lucy was unmarried, the location of this ring on her left ring

Petersham tell us it that was an affluent community. The archaeological evidence recovered from St Peter's Church supports this, showing some of its residents during this time lived to old age, enjoyed sugary, refined diets and possessed valuable personal ornament. The ability of wealthy families, such as the Gage family, to afford lavish burials and impressive grave monuments, provides further support for the affluence of the community.

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