

Summary

A watching brief was undertaken by John Moore Heritage Services over six days between the 18th and 25th September 2013. A new wheelchair access path was to be laid between the road and the north door, and, more importantly with regards to the potential archaeology on the site, a 3m deep pit was to be dug by mechanical digger in the east of the graveyard for a septic tank.

20 human skeletons were recovered for re-burial from the septic tank pit. Although several burial deposits contained coffin furniture and fittings most did not. As expected all were aligned west-east with the head at the west.

1 INTRODUCTION

1.1 Site Location (Figure 1)

The church is located in the centre of the village of Turville, Buckinghamshire (NGR SU 7670 9115) at approximately AOD 81.5m. The underlying geology is on the margins of Upper Chalk and 1st (Floodplain) Terrace deposits of the Younger River Gravels.

Turville is a village and civil parish (CP) within Wycombe District in Buckinghamshire, England. It is located in the Chiltern Hills about five miles west of High Wycombe and five miles north of Henley-on-Thames.

1.2 Archaeological Background

The village name is Anglo-Saxon in origin and means 'dry field.' It was recorded in the Anglo Saxon Chronicle in 796 as Thyrefeld. Geoffrey de Turville (died 1250), Lord Chancellor of Ireland was born in Turville. The manor of Turville once belonged to the abbey at St Albans but was seized by the Crown in the Dissolution of the Monasteries in 1547. The manor house has since been rebuilt as Turville Park, a fine stately home in the village.

The church is of archaeological interest because it lies within the historic core of the village of Turville, although it is human occupation in the parish dates from the Mesolithic (Reed 1979, 32). The flint deposits in a field 300 m south of the village (HER 4530 (SU 76800 90900) & HER 4531 (SU 76700 90900)) have been identified as Neolithic (4000-2350 BC), while further scatters have been identified to the East (HER 4527, 4528, 4511, 5973).

In the field called the Malt House Close (SU 769 909) aerial photographs show marks of unknown origins (RC8-HH, Bucks County Survey 137), while the village morphology around the Old Vicarage and Churchyard (200 m and adjacent to the site) may demarcate earlier enclosures. Pre-medieval finds from the village include an Iron-Age coin (HER 0894 (SU 76700 91100)). The second manor of Turville (Turville Saint Albans) was granted to the abbey in AD 796 (VCH 1925, 103), which was probably located near the village church and rectory. The present church has parts dating from the 12th century, and is grade II listed (RCHME 1912, 297-298).

Figure 1: Site Location

The present village originally lay in the parishes of Turville (South Side) and Ibstone (North Side) until boundary alterations in the 20th century. Meanwhile, a map attached to the Epiphany Quarter Session now in the County Record Office (Bucks Rec Off Q/H/59) indicates that the main road through the village of Turville was re-routed in 1822. The course of the old road ran past the front of the White Cottage to the east of the church and around the curving south boundary of the Churchyard and to the north of the Old Vicarage.

2 AIMS OF THE WATCHING BRIEF

- To make a record of any significant remains revealed during the course of any operations that may disturb or destroy such archaeological remains.
- In particular: to record and recover all human remains, including both fully-articulated skeletons and isolated chanel for subsequent reburial in the churchyard

3 STRATEGY

3.1 Research Design

John Moore Heritage Services carried out the work to a brief given by the Diocesan Archaeologist, Julian Munby.

Standard John Moore Heritage Services techniques were employed throughout, involving the completion of a written record for each deposit encountered, with scale plans and section drawings compiled where appropriate and possible.

The recording was carried out in accordance with the standards specified by the Institute for Archaeologists (1994).

3.2 Methodology

The excavation of the storm drain trench and the pit for the septic tank was carried out under the supervision of the archaeologist. The layers were excavated incrementally allowing the archaeologist to monitor the soil changes and/or the presence of archaeological features or burials.

3.3 Adopted Strategy

The first phase, for the storm drain and wheelchair access path, consisted of topsoil stripping and soil reduction up to 14cm in depth. The fall of the storm drain pipe trench necessitated a depth of excavation up to 0.20m at the eastern end of the Vestry - which in this case revealed the natural underlying geology of chalk.

The second phase was the excavation by mechanical digger of a 3m deep pit measuring 2.5 x 2.5m to receive the Septic Tank for the new toilet facilities. This was undertaken by the contractors whilst under the supervision of the archaeologist. The

layers were excavated incrementally allowing the archaeologist to record soil changes and/or the presence of archaeological features or burials.

Standard John Moore Heritage Services techniques were employed throughout, involving the completion of a written record for each deposit encountered, with scale plans and sections drawings compiled where appropriate. A photographic record was produced.

4 RESULTS

4.1 Introduction

All deposits and features were assigned individual context numbers. Context numbers in [] indicate features i.e. pit cuts; while numbers in () show feature fills or deposits of material.

During the topsoil stripping phase and trench digging for the storm drain no archaeological deposits were observed or disturbed. However, the trench did reveal three distinct ground layers (101), (102) & (103) - see Fig. 2: Sections 1 & 2

During the excavation of the pit for the septic tank, a brick-built barrel vault [106], [107] & [176] was encountered at a depth of 0.34m as well as a backfill of rubble (including flint nodules, fragmentary bricks and tiles, etc) of a soak-away (104). Directly beneath this rubble at a depth of 1.15m human remains were revealed, firstly as disarticulated charnel then as complete inhumations.

The removal of the turf and topsoil (101) c.11cm in depth revealed a 'mixed' subsoil (102) beneath, which was 0.23m in depth and whose composition suggested it had been brought in to landscape the churchyard. Beneath this, at a depth of 0.24m, layer (103) appeared to be a 'graveyard' soil which showed signs of mixing from it being constantly turned over for burials.

During the excavation of the septic tank pit at the east of the chancel wall, a brick-built barrel vault feature [107], [176] with a row of bricks [106] (acting as a kerb or delimiting a burial plot) was encountered directly below layer (102) at a depth of 0.24m. This appears to have been the sealed floor beneath a former table-top tomb which may have belonged to Skeleton 7. It was possibly built as a deterrent against grave robbers, sealing the ground beneath the table-top tomb memorial above. It was recorded, drawn and photographed and subsequently removed to allow the excavation of the pit to continue.

This brick built feature had been constructed on a bed of mortar (108) set directly onto the rubble back fill (104) of a soak-away [105]. The rubble continued under (102) for a considerable distance either side of the excavated pit and was up to 0.64m thick. It consisted of fragmentary ceramic building material (brick, tile, etc), flint nodules, degraded chalk and mixed building rubble. Its lower layers also included a large amount of disarticulated human remains (charnel) and rusted coffin nails.

The mechanical digger was able to reach the depth of the burials but the human remains had to be cleaned and excavated by hand to prevent further damage; the

Figure 2: Plan of Burials & Sections

creation of the former soak-away and the rubble fill had crushed and damaged many of the skeletons (particularly the skulls) making subsequent examination (i.e. the identification and verification of their sex) difficult. It is possible the soak-away was constructed at the same time that the Vestry was added c.1900.

4.2 The Skeletal Remains

Burial Horizon A

All the burials were located directly below the soak-away rubble save two; the aforementioned Skeleton 7 associated with the brick barrel vaulting and Skeleton 16 – both of which had been re-cut through the rubble down into the natural chalk at the bottom of the sequence. This layer of burials made *after* the creation of the soak-away has been identified as Burial Horizon A.

Due to the restrictions of space and the nature of the excavation it was impossible to ascertain all of the archaeological relationships between the skeletons. Each skeleton was excavated as it was discovered rather than them being exposed together ‘in plan’ thus some of the relationships were lost or not seen in totality. However, broadly speaking, four burial ‘horizons’ (A, B, C & D) were identified and three types of relationships identified. Firstly, there were those burials which shared the same grave cut (Sk.3 & 5, 4 & 6), those skeletons which re-cut earlier graves (Sk. 2, 12, 13, 14) and finally, those which *overlay* earlier burials but whose relationships to each other are unknown as there was no discernible physical contact between them (Sk.1 & 9, 15 & 19). Finally, two definite ‘clusters’ or ‘concentrations’ were identified which may denote family plots and which have been divided into the North-East Group and the South-East Group - but this division may prove to be arbitrary. However, it is helpful to denote the area where each of the individuals is interred.

In the following description burial ‘deposit’ is used to denote all the features of a burial - the physical cut of the grave, the presence of a coffin (or shroud), the skeletal remains and the subsequent ‘fill’ which followed the coffins’ collapse (or shroud/body deterioration).

The burial deposit of Sk.16 is a special case in the South-East group as it can clearly be seen to cut through all other burials which it encountered (Sk.13, 17 & 20) and its grave fill is predominantly the chalk natural and soak-away rubble that had been backfilled into its grave cut. It possessed what appears to be 19th – 20th century coffin fittings of gilt hand grips and plates. The void created in the top of the burial by the collapse of its coffin lid had been subsequently filled with a considerable quantity chancel that had either tumbled in from surrounding graves or that had been thrown into the backfill on top of the coffin by the gravediggers at the time of burial. This burial had been cut deeper than any of the previous burials in the South East Group and thus penetrated the natural chalk to a greater degree.

4.3 Burial Horizon B

Skeletons 1, 2, 3 & 4 were the first encountered, emerging on the interface between the soak-away [107] and the surface of the natural chalk bedrock (117). This has been denoted as Burial Horizon B at 1.15m below the current churchyard ground level. All

burial deposits had been heavily damaged by the creation of the soak-away and the weight of the rubble fill (104). Sk.1 (juvenile), the first burial to be encountered, had particularly suffered from the creation of the soak-away. Skeleton 2 (adult) is anomalous as it is the only skeleton which does not share the regimented west-east alignment of the other burials being more southwest-northeast in orientation. However, it is above Sk.12 (adult) in the sequence, so the presumption is that it is a later burial. Both burial deposits for Sk.3 (adult) and Sk.4 (adult) contained evidence of having been buried in a coffin. Sk.2 had a number of gilt studs or buttons running along the edge nearest to the right leg whilst the deposit of Sk.4 contained a grip (coffin handle) and a number of coffin nails *in situ* suggesting the line of the wooden coffin which had long since rotted away.

Horizon B also contained burials Sk.8, 10, 13, 14 & 15. In the event, Sk.8 (juvenile) was subsequently identified as articulated charnel as opposed to being a full inhumation and therefore may have been in a secondary context moved from its original position. The burial deposit Sk.10 (adult) contained grips, gilt studs and coffin nails *in situ* whilst the rest did not have any evidence for coffin furniture save a few displaced coffin nails. Both Sk.13 (juvenile) & Sk.14 (adult) had subsequently been re-cut by later burials (the aforementioned Sk.7 & Sk.16) thus making them earlier in the burial sequence. Sk.15 (adult) was only partially revealed in the south-east angle of the pit so therefore only a few bones were recovered.

4.4 Burial Horizon C

Burial horizon C was considered to contain those burial deposits that had been either re-cut by later burials or had a direct physical relationship to those above them thus demonstrating their place as earlier burials in the sequence. This horizon contains burials Sk.5, 6, 9, 11, 17, 18 & 19.

Burial deposits Sk.5 (juvenile, sex unknown) & 6 (sub-adult, possible male) both shared the same grave cuts – and were directly underneath – burials Sk. 3 & 4 respectively, which suggests a family plot or direct relationship between the people that were buried together. Sk.3 above Sk.5 is a robust adult (possibly a male although no diagnostic bones were visible) interred over an earlier, juvenile skeleton Sk.5.

Sk.9 was a juvenile in a poor state of preservation overlain by Sk.1 and can be considered, nominally, as part of part of the North-East Group.

Sk.11 (sub-adult) was one of a number of closely clustered burials that make up the South-East Group. It was cut by Sk.13 (juvenile) causing it to lose its right-hand arm, pelvis and right leg. Sk.11 slightly cuts nearby Sk.12 (adult, unknown sex) which in turn loses a hand. None of the above burial deposits appear to have been interred in a coffin.

The dramatic effect of earlier burials being cut by later ones is illustrated by the truncation of Sk.17, an adult male later cut by Sk.16 (an adult male, interred in a coffin). The later burial removes nearly all bones below the pelvis of the earlier Sk.17. However, Sk.17 is interesting in that this skeleton (that does not appear to have been buried in a coffin) was discovered with charnel ‘arranged’ around its skeleton within its grave cut, suggesting that it may have been buried in a shroud. Buried in this

fashion, there would have been enough room around it to allow the insertion of loose bones that had been either cut through or that were loose in the surrounding soil matrix. Sk.19 (juvenile, male) underlay Sk.15 (adult) although it did not appear to have been cut.

4.5 Burial Horizon D

Burial Horizon D contains two burials, Sk.18 (juvenile) and Sk.20 (adult) which seem to be the earliest in the sequence having been either cut or overlain by later burials. Both were in a poor state of preservation and Sk.20 was initially concealed from view as its grave cut had been re-filled with re-deposited chalk natural.

5 FINDS

No finds were retained from the archaeological layers (101) through to (103) as they all represent 'modern' layers of landscaping, made ground and 'mixed' graveyard soil as detailed earlier in the report. A small amount of ceramic building material, one pottery sherd and a piece of metal was recovered from the soak-away backfill (104) but even this material is residual and in a secondary context. As previously noted, it is likely that the creation of the soak-away dates to the building of the Vestry c.1900 as the fill contains a large quantity of building rubble.

None of the burials contained grave goods of any kind, or indeed any random finds or intrusive material that may have entered during the back filling phase of the burial or the collapse of their coffins (if present).

6 DISCUSSION

As noted earlier in the report, the method of excavation was of general graveyard clearance as opposed to a full, open-area excavation 'in plan' of the burials. This methodology was adopted to ensure that the building contractors were not unnecessarily delayed before they could recommence work on the pit for the septic tank. Therefore, not all relationships between the burial deposits were observed or recorded. However, a number of inter-relationships and an indication of changing burial practices can be observed from the evidence as recorded during the excavation.

The plan suggests two groups or clusters; the North-East Group (8 burials) and the South East Group (11 burials) which may suggest two separate family plots. Spatially, there is a gap in the centre, with the two group areas having a high density of burials in the same location. The east end of the church, directly outside the chancel window (and thus closest to the altar) was considered to be the optimum location in the early medieval period so it is possible that the lower (earlier) burials in this zone represent higher-status families from the village or surrounding villages contemporary to that period.

There were two instances of two skeletons being buried in the same grave cut, those being Sk.3 & 4, both of which were adults buried over skeletons of younger individuals. Furthermore, as a possible indication of the time lapse between the

burials, Sk.4, directly above Sk.6 contained coffin fittings whilst Sk.6 did not. This occurs in exactly the same way in the burials Sk.3 & 5 which are in close proximity and taken together may suggest a family plot re-interring in the same graves over time. The differentiation between the burials may indicate the time elapsed between the burials, a change in burial custom or, indeed, a change in the fortunes of the family eschewing burial shrouds for wooden coffins.

It is perhaps interesting to note that in those instances where the substantial cutting of earlier burials occurs by later ones (i.e. where Sk.7 cuts Sk.14) these later burial deposits are the ones which contain coffin furniture – this may indicate a changing pattern in burial practice where less care and attention is paid to the earlier burials. On the other hand, it may be interpreted as a consequence of increasing demand for space in the graveyard. Equally it could suggest that the memorials on the surface had disappeared thus leaving earlier burials ‘unmarked’ and therefore cut in error.

Out of all the burials examined and excavated, only four out of the 20 burial deposits contained coffin furniture. Stylistically, the grips and plates appeared to be of c.19th century in date, and drew on the same suite of Christian imagery and iconography contemporary with that period. Another three burials (Sk.1, 2 & 7) contained coffin nails which suggested the outline of a coffin whilst the remaining thirteen must have been wrapped in shrouds. Only a handful of shroud pins were recovered during the excavation but as it was undertaken in haste without fine cleaning of the skeletal remains it is safe to conclude that some of these may have been missed. Burial practices of the time insisted upon woollen shrouds which were deemed biodegradable and these were often secured with metal pins whose deterioration can be seen as green staining on the bones during excavation.

7 CONCLUSIONS

The graveyard clearance at Turville utilised archaeological techniques to excavate and record the 20 burial deposits that were exposed during the creation of the pit for the septic tank. However, due to time constraints these practices were modified to allow for a quicker mode of working. Undertaking excavation of skeletal remains at speed is bound to lose the finer detail. Furthermore, the lack of post excavation analysis of either the finds or the skeletal remains means that a precise (or even a secure) relative dating of the burials is impossible. The finds (such as the coffin fittings, etc) have been retained by the church and no analysis of them has been carried out to date.

However, a number of conclusions can be inferred from the results. Firstly, that two concentrations of burials, the North East Group and the South East Group suggest a strong patterning amongst the burial assemblage so these may therefore represent family plots. Further, the interment of one individual above another in the same grave cut, seen in two examples in the North-East Group, seems to add credence to this inference of there being a familial link.

It has also been illustrated that where later burials cut earlier ones, the later burials often have associated coffin furniture in their deposit. This may suggest that either there was some considerable time difference between the burials or it may simply be an illustration of the changing fashions of burial practice over time.

It is commonly asserted in the literature that the eastern end of the church was often favoured for burial due to its proximity to the altar. However, burial customs changed over time and focussed upon other parts of the graveyard (for example, a desire to be interred close to or around the church's south door or entrance path). Therefore, it may be possible to infer that the burials at the east end belong to an earlier period of the church's history and therefore date to the early medieval period. As there are no coffins, grave goods, finds or post excavation analysis to be undertaken on the bones, it remains impossible to say so precisely.

The evidence has shown a number of cases where later burials (often in coffins) had cut earlier ones and appear to show less respect or 'care' for the earlier burials. It may indicate that the earlier burials had effectively become unmarked and were therefore cut through in ignorance. Or, just as equally, it may show shifting attitudes to burial practices and to the dead in general, where sensibilities had become more pragmatic and less concerned with disturbing the sanctity of the prior burials.

The excavation has raised a number of interesting points using the available data. However, it must be remembered that the proposed burial sequence (and the tentative identification of a number of burial 'horizons' or 'groups') is purely hypothetical, based upon the relative -or perceived - relationships between the burial deposits as recorded during excavation. Both the expeditious nature of the excavation and the lack of any post excavation analysis mean that many of the questions that have arisen will have to remain unanswered.

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