Living and Dying in Southwark 1587–1831

Excavations at Cure's College Burial Ground, Park Street

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Front cover: View of Cure's College Almshouses (1808) by George Smith (© London Metropolitan Archives)

Back cover: Excavation of burials (© Museum of London Archaeology)

Map underlay © MOTCO

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Contents

List of Figures

List of Tables

Summary

This volume presents the results of archaeological investigations of 16th- to early 19th-century burials at Park Street, Southwark, believed to be from Cure's College Almshouse burial ground, established in the parish of St Saviour in 1587. The burials were excavated as part of the Thameslink Project, an infrastructure upgrade which involved substantial construction works at Blackfriars Station and London Bridge Station, and along the New Borough Viaduct.

Fieldwork undertaken by Museum of London Archaeology (MOLA) involved the excavation of nine pile caps, and monitoring during the installation of drains. This covered approximately 34% of the burial ground and revealed some 250 earth-cut graves which contained a total of 331 individuals. The graves were characterised by heavy intercutting. They were generally east-west aligned and contained single and multiple stacked inhumation burials numbering up to nine individuals. One mass grave, apparently less well organised than the others, contained 36 men, women and children, possibly victims of an epidemic and/or famine, some contained within coffins and others not. Overall, these patterns are consistent with existing historical and archaeological evidence which reflects a London suburban parish struggling to provide burial space and cover the cost of burial at a time of high mortality rates.

A small number of artefacts found with the individuals and in the disturbed cemetery soils include (primarily) coffin remains, but also occasional dress items such as pins and buttons. None of the individuals could be identified, except for a William Pope who died in 1816, whose remains were found in direct association with a coffin nameplate. Less direct information about the individuals was obtained from burial records, in particular fees books. Cure's College was founded for the sick and poor, but the records point to a group that did not just represent inmates from the almshouse, but also individuals from the wider parish and other London parishes. They included locals and immigrants from the Home Counties, continental Europe, Ireland and Scotland. Further, they were not among the poorest members of society. Although some had their burials paid for by the parish most, especially from the 18th century, were earning a living as, amongst other trades, labourers, skilled craftsmen, and trades people, and they paid their own fees, which were not the cheapest in the parish.

All 331 skeletons underwent full osteological analysis. They comprised 245 adults (104 males, 73 females, 68 unsexed individuals), and 86 juveniles (individuals less than 18 years of age). A high number of individuals were aged between 18 and 35 years, an unusual figure compared with other assemblages from London. One explanation is that it reflects high numbers of working age immigrants in Southwark, who were more susceptible to earlier deaths than the local population because of exposure to new diseases, possibly epidemics, against which they lacked immunity. If correct, this finding is consistent with historic sources which document a high intake of immigrants and migrants into London between the 17th and 19th centuries.

A range of diseases was observed on the skeletons, most notably scurvy, rickets, and syphilis. This is in keeping with local historical sources which depict an inadequately nourished population experiencing living conditions which were detrimental to health, in particular, overcrowding, poor sanitation, and atmospheric pollution. Compared with other assemblages from the rest of London and the country, these and other health indicators (for example, cribra orbitalia, enamel hypoplasia, and non-specific infection) were not very prevalent, possibly because the Park Street individuals had weaker constitutions and had succumbed to disease faster, before conditions affected the skeleton. This was supported by estimated adult statures which were found to be lower than most other populations, and considered to relate to physiological health stress in childhood, inadequate nutrition, and poor maternal/carer health in particular. There was also little evidence for trauma, but the high number of incomplete skeletons in the assemblage was probably a key factor in this.

Further insight into childhood nutrition was provided by incremental isotope analysis, a relatively new method which provides the opportunity to explore childhood dietary patterns over relatively small timeframes (for example, years and months) using adult teeth. This showed that diets were varied, including some individuals who had been breastfed as babies and others not. During their first eight years of life, boys and girls had consumed different diets, and this may reflect either physiological differences between the sexes or cultural practice.

Other observations were that patterns in the Park Street osteology, in particular the mortality profile and disease among juveniles, are different to lower status and higher status burial grounds elsewhere in the parish, namely, Cross Bones and St Saviour's. The osteology, therefore, seems to be consistent with the sector of society that Cure's College burial ground served, that is working class individuals who were not the poorest members of society, but were also not particularly wealthy.

Cure's was one of nine burial grounds in the parish of St Saviour's and is the sixth sizeable burial ground assemblage from Southwark to be archaeologically excavated and analysed. It is also the first sizeable post-medieval almshouse burial ground assemblage to be archaeologically examined from the country and, as such, contributes valuable new information on burial practice, population trends and patterns of disease in London during the 16th–19th centuries.

Foreword

The Thameslink Programme will transform north-south travel through London and has included, amongst other works, the rebuilding of London Bridge and Blackfriars stations and the construction of a new viaduct through Borough Market in Southwark. This massive undertaking required the bringing together of teams of highly skilled individuals over many years to ensure that the work was designed, planned and constructed to the highest standards and with the minimum impact on the environment, people using the existing railway and those who lived or worked nearby.

From the earliest planning stages, Network Rail recognised that some of the key areas of construction were located in the very heart of historic London and that it was highly likely that important archaeological remains would be discovered during building work. From the outset provision was made to integrate archaeological specialists within the Thameslink teams to ensure that any archaeological work was planned and undertaken to the highest standards.

Now that we have finished our archaeological work it is clear that the discoveries have lived up to expectations and Network Rail is pleased to make them known to the public in the four Thameslink archaeological monographs. These volumes represent the culmination of a massive programme of archaeological site work that started in a small carpark off Redcross Way, Southwark, and then spread through Borough Market and across Borough High Street, crossed the Thames to Blackfriars Station, and finally ended in the arches beneath London Bridge Station. That this work kept ahead of and did not delay construction is a testament to the skill, dedication, professionalism and sheer hard work of the archaeologists at Oxford Archaeology, Pre-Construct Archaeology and the Museum of London Archaeological Service, as well as the unwavering support of Thameslink's construction teams at Skanska, Costain and Balfour Beatty.

Our finds have been many and varied, but perhaps the most exciting was the discovery of an unknown Roman bathhouse beneath Borough High Street, which is discussed in Monograph 1. The importance of this find was recognised immediately and steps were taken to modify our works to ensure that it could be preserved beneath a new building planned for the site. The remains have since been deemed to be of national importance by Historic England and now have legal protection as a Scheduled Monument. Today, the building is occupied by a well-known restaurant chain and office workers and tourists eat their sandwiches and sip coffee just a few centimetres above the remains of a building that once provided a refuge to the tired and dust-covered inhabitants of Roman London.

As part of our project planning, we anticipated that we would uncover the remains of Londoners buried in the old Park Street burial ground. We weren't sure how many to expect, but not many were anticipated as the graveyard should already have been cleared in the 1860s when the first Borough Viaduct was built. We were surprised, then, to have to exhume over 300 individuals and many cubic metres of charnel that the Victorian engineers had left behind them. The work has provided a fascinating insight into the lives and deaths of the urban poor in 18th and 19th century London and we report on these finds in Monograph 3. The remains have all now been re-buried in a new burial ground belonging to the Diocese of Southwark, preceded by a ceremony at Southwark Cathedral in which the remains of a single, unknown parishioner were carried to and from the cathedral on a horse drawn bier.

Should anyone require greater detail on our discoveries, the archive of the project is housed with the London Archaeological Archive and Research Centre at the Museum of London.

Simon Blanchflower
Major Programme Director – Thameslink

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The Museum of London Archaeology (MOLA) undertook the first major phase of the cemetery excavation, with the second smaller phase carried out by OAPCA. OAPCA gratefully acknowledge the contributions and co-operation of MOLA, especially Project Managers Derek Seeley and Lesley Dunwoody. We also wish to extend thanks to their site staff for their contribution to the excavation, especially Project Supervisor Joanna Taylor, and fieldwork supervisors Iain Bright, Alex McAuley, and Ashley Pooley.

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