

PONTEFRACT & DISTRICT ARCHAEOLOGICAL SOCIETY.

THE RESCUE EXCAVATION OF A CEMETERY AT MONKHILL, PONTEFRACT.

Summary

Following the discovery of human remains by building workers, the Pontefract and District Archaeological Society under the direction of Eric Houlder investigated a site which appears to have been a medieval cemetery. At least sixteen skeletons or parts of skeletons were recorded, and lifted in one afternoon. Subsequent investigations showed that the area was already scheduled as a part of the St. John's Priory site, but that the responsible authorities had overlooked this when processing the planning application.

Acknowledgements The Society would like to acknowledge the help of the following:-

Mr. Collins of Wentcliffe Holdings for promptly informing the Society of the discovery.

Messrs. A. B. Sumpter, T. Wilmott, and P. Abramson of the County Archaeology Service who provided equipment and help.

Mr. Alastair Wilson of Darrington (member) who stripped the site.

Members of the parent society who took part.

Members of the Garforth Historical Society who took part.

The non-members who helped.

Site location. The site is a triangular plot of land situated to the north of the Grange Field, Pontefract, in which lies St. John's Priory, a Scheduled site. It is separated from the Priory by a cliff, out of which at various times skeletons have been eroded - (1951(?) 1960-1). The plot is bounded to the north by Ferrybridge Road, and to the east by the derelict buildings of Robson's Maltsters. NGR SE 46302273.

Basic Assumptions and Strategy. Following Mr. Collins, phone call on the morning of Sat. Nov. 15th 1986, the Society naturally assumed that the area selected for development was not covered by the A.M.B. Schedule. It was felt necessary to investigate the site to determine its exact nature before destruction by the builders. During the first visit to the site it became evident that much of the plot was covered in concrete rafts or builder's debris, with thick scrub on the rest. Visible burials in the two builders trenches were at a depth of between 0.7m and 1.1m. The latter fact alone necessitated a sampling strategy rather than a full area excavation. A section reasonably clear of debris was selected and cleared mechanically down to natural, which here consisted of badly-eroded magnesian limestone. This revealed filled intrusions all aligned east-west.

Stratification. The C horizon dips gently from north-west to south-east. On top of this limestone, even A and B horizons had developed. The graves had been dug from above the B horizon. Later agriculture had produced a typical plough-soil in the A, and at some time the natural slope of the ground had been compensated for by the tipping of topsoil at the south-eastern side of the site. This had the effect of making the graves here deeper from the present surface.

Because the graves were intercut, it is evident that the cemetery is not a single-period one but the area sampled was too small to reveal any horizontal stratification. The shallow nature of the infant burials at the north-western end of the site where the bedrock is highest, had led to some attrition by agriculture, building, and by our own mechanical stripping.

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Finds Other than the actual skeletons there was little in the way of small finds.. One or two fragments of pottery of largely indeterminate nature and a single shard of C12th in the fill of G7/7a were recovered, with a few amorphous pieces of oxidised iron. All could have reached their positions in the upper fills of graves by natural movements. The skeleton investigated in 1960 had an arrow-head embedded in its ribs(P&DAS Annual Journal & Report 1960-1, pg 8) and this is the only other dating evidence for the whole cemetery.

THE GRAVES

- Grave One. monfot 182/27-8 colfot 39/172
Extended inhumation of adult with possible pillow-stone. Cranium and mandible damage by the machine. Hands crossed over pelvis.
- Grave Two monfot 182/1-2 colfot 39/174
Extended inhumation of adult, hands by sides. Only upper torso, cranium and arms present; cranium tilted forward and looking ESE.
- Grave Two A. monfot 182/33 colfot 39/173
Extended infant inhumation, partly truncated by insertion of G2. Most of cranium not present.
- Grave Two B monfot 182/5-6 colfot 39/175
Extended adult inhumation cut through lower portion of G2. Lower limbs of G2 placed on top of coffin [?] of G2A.
- Grave Three monfot 182/25-6 colfot 39/176
Extended infant inhumation. Cranium down to lower mandible missing - removed by the stripping.
- Grave Four. monfot 182/29-30 colfot 39/177
Disarticulated adult inhumation in fill over G4A.
- Grave Four A monfot 182/9-10 colfot 39/178
Extended adult inhumation, head facing south. Partly inserted into possible G4B (unexcavated).
- Grave 5 monfot 182/31-2 colfot 39/179
Lower legs and feet of adult inhumation. Rest outside area excavated.
- Grave Seven. monfot 182/7-8 colfot 39/180
Extended adult inhumation, arms crossed over middle abdomen. Lower part outside area; right humerus and some ribs removed during insertion of 7A.
- Grave Seven A monfot 182/7=8 colfot 39/180
Extended adult inhumation, partly intruded through south side of 7A removing right upper arm of latter and some ribs. Lower portion not excavated
- Grave Eight monfot 182/34-5 colfot 39/181
Extended infant inhumation. Cranium in west baulk. Lower legs from knees not present.
- Grave Nine monfot 182/23-4.
Melange of several individual graves revealed by contractors machine, All bagged as G9.
- Grave Ten Not excavated.
- Grave Eleven monfot 183/16-7 colfot 39/182
Extended adult inhumation, hands together over pelvis. Cranium turned slightly south. Not fully excavated.
- Grave Eleven A monfot 183/16-7 colfot 39/182

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Cranium of adult turned slightly south. Extra-cranial skeleton not excavated.

CONCLUSION

Until the remains have been studied properly few conclusions can be reached. Both the arrow-head and the proximity to St.John's Priory suggest that the cemetery is medieval. The theory that the site was a war cemetery which was put forward by some society members following the 1960 discovery now seems untenable. The number of infants in the area sampled, together with the fact that many graves were intercut, leads to the conclusion that the burial ground was in use for a considerable time; certainly longer than would be the case if it had been a war cemetery. The society eagerly awaits Dr.Manchester's report on the human remains.

ERIC HOULDER, Nov.1986.

Site Director for the PONTEFRAC T AND DISTRICT ARCHAEOLOGICAL SOCIETY.