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Tameside Graveyards Survey

A Report on the Pilot Study at St Lawrence's, Denton,

A Report By: B Grimsditch

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1. *Introduction*

In May 2009 funding was agreed in principle with Tameside MBC to conduct a survey of the burial record of non-municipal graveyards within Tameside to enhance the partially complete record of the municipal graveyards. Due to problems encountered when the University of Manchester Archaeological Unit ceased to conduct business in July 2009 the survey was not started until the creation of The Centre of Applied Archaeology which took on responsibility for the Tameside Archaeological Survey and associated projects at the end of September 2009.

Initially the project was to take the form of transcribing the burial records for inputting into a searchable, on-line database. However, it was soon realised that a more comprehensive and valuable historical and archaeological resource could be created by including the surveying of the extant graveyards and creating monumental inscriptions of the surviving grave markers.

The second and equally important aspect of the survey would be to transcribe the burial records. These can be found in various locations ranging from the church record books, national and local archives and the diocese archives. Tameside is fortunate in possessing an excellent local studies and archives centre that holds a great deal of the burial records of Tameside churches on microfilm.

It was also considered that this survey would be an ideal format for community inclusivity especially for those members of the community who, although they may have a great deal of interest and wish to be involved in investigation and recording of their heritage, are unable or unwilling to be involved in projects that are essentially archaeological excavations. This project involves research, transcriptions, data inputting and relatively non-energetic fieldwork all of which could be easily taught to anyone wishing to be involved under suitable supervision and organisation.

In late November 2009 a pilot study was developed to test the feasibility of this enhanced graveyards survey with the site chosen as St Lawrence's Church, Town Lane, Denton (**Fig. 1**). This church was chosen because of its long and full history, having been established in the 1530's as a chapel of ease and spanning the full history of the development of the church and church development in general. It also had major issues such as post-medieval and modern intrusion and alterations to the church fabric and its graveyard which still contains a number of varied grave markers of various periods.



Fig 1 – Western entrance of St Lawrence's church

The results of this pilot study are detailed below. However, the survey was started in mid-November 2009 with the anticipation that, from the site visit held earlier, there would be a maximum of 30 grave markers. However, on commencement of the survey it was realised that several grave markers were hidden below a shallow layer of gravel. This layer could be easily removed and reinstated and permission was given by the church authorities to remove record and reinstate this gravel layer in order to gain a fuller record. Also there were over ten grave stones in the nave of the church and these too were recorded leading to a revised estimate of grave markers over double the initial estimate. Together with the Christmas break and the very inclement weather in January the completion of the pilot study was necessarily delayed and the final few graves will not be recorded until late February.



2. *Pilot Study*

Permission to carry out the survey was given by the present incumbent of St Lawrence's, Reverend Elizabeth Pope, and the Church Warden, Beryl Brown, who were very helpful and enthusiastic about the survey and who should be acknowledged for their support. Reverend Pope allowed the survey team to remove the gravel at the entrance to the church to facilitate the full recording of the markers there, allowed the team to spend time inside the church and to use all the facilities free of charge. As a direct result of this project and a commercial evaluation inside the church members of the TAS and The Centre for Applied Archaeology were invited to the Bishop of Manchester's reception held at the church on 31st January 2010.

With regards to the burial records, these were viewed and transcribed by one person via the microfilm copies held at Tameside Local Studies and Archives supplied by Manchester Central Reference Library. The records available begin at 1695 and to date have been transcribed to include all dates to 1790. This has resulted in over 1,000 separate entries. It has therefore become obvious that both sections of the Tameside Graveyards Survey will take a considerable time to complete, especially when the inputting of data is considered.

Regarding the fieldwork survey of the graveyard it was decided to utilise and adapt a methodology developed by Harold Mytum outlined in his book "*Recording and Analysing Graveyards*" (CBA, 2000). This allows for a proscribed record sheet to be completed and checked on-site using agreed numerical codes for the various and highly detailed descriptions, types and decorations of a grave marker. These forms then allow for ease of input into a computerised database.

The overall survey was and continues to be supervised by Brian Grimsditch the Tameside and Community Archaeologist at The Centre for Applied Archaeology. Members of the local archaeology society, Tameside Archaeology Society (TAS), lead by Lorraine Gregory, conducted the fieldwork for the pilot study directed by Brian Grimsditch and included the archaeological recording of the grave markers, to the agreed methodology, inside and outside the church and the surveying and locating of these markers (**Fig. 2**).



Figure 2 – Tameside Archaeological Society Members recording the gravestones at St. Lawrence's

Although only partially completed due to the problems outlined earlier several grave markers of note were recorded. Of particular note was one discovered at the west entrance to the church hidden below the gravel layer deposited several years earlier to fill the uneven pathway to the church. On first sight this appeared to represent a member of the stone mason with classic symbols including set squares, compasses and a trowel. On further investigation when the gravel was removed other motifs were discovered that included Sun and Moon motifs (other Masonic motifs) and Masonic text inscriptions but importantly a muzzle loading canon and a mortar with a sword in the bottom left panel were also revealed. Together with the monumental inscription that stated this was the grave marker of Samuëll Bromley “.....Company Sergeant 3rd Battalion Royal artillery” and that his wife died in 1802 could indicate that this was the resting place of a soldier from the Napoleonic War period as well as being a mason (**Fig. 3**).



Figure 3 - The upper half of Samuel Bromley's grave stone



3. *Problems Encountered*

The intention of the pilot study was to test the feasibility of the survey and to predetermine any problems that may be encountered during the various parts of the survey.

Fieldwork

Apart from the obvious problems with weather the only problems encountered were those of a practical nature. Several markers, especially those of any age, were damaged by movement and weathering leading to partial or minimal transcriptions and recording. This was not an unforeseen problem but is a problem encountered in all archaeology and historical research. The problem would not be as aggravated when churches and grave markers of churches that are not as old as those at St Lawrence's are surveyed.

Weather can play a deciding factor during the fieldwork in that inclement weather is a health and safety issue and volunteers may not wish to stand and work outside during rain or cold. Summer brings its own issues with such a survey as this. Vegetation cover can obscure less well maintained graveyards and overgrown grass can delay the recording.

A further problem concerning the grave markers is that it appears that several at St Lawrence's have been moved and indeed many were taken away from the graveyard in the 1960s in an attempt to landscape the church grounds. Nothing can be done about those removed completely but those that have been relocated still provide valid information, especially when corroborated by the burial registers. This is despite the fact that anyone visiting a relocated grave marker cannot be sure that it is where the deceased lies.

One other problem, not encountered at St Lawrence's, is accessibility and permission. The scope of this can only be judged after the completion of the pilot study and the authorities from other churches are approached.

Research

For the pilot study one person, with some experience in archival and family history research, was utilised to transcribe the burial record for St Lawrence's. This in the main was done from the microfilm records produced by Manchester Central Reference Library and held at Tameside Local Studies and Archives.

The only problems encountered with this section of the survey were the sheer volume of records. The transcription of the St Lawrence's burial record is only partially complete at the time of this report with the records dating from 1695 to 1795 having been transcribed. This has resulted in over 1000 individual records and it is expected that the records for the next 100 years will only increase in volume. Indeed when further churches are investigated the estimate of the number of individual records will increase exponentially.

The transcription of this number of records from the microfilm to a Microsoft word document has taken in excess of 10 working days and this by someone experienced in reading old documents. Delays may occur should volunteers require training and during the initial stages

of transcription by inexperienced researchers. However, as they gain experience delays will be obviated.

Finally it has become apparent that there are certain gaps in the records caused by such things as lost books, damage to the manuscripts and in some cases their destruction. Whilst this may lead to some unavoidable gaps in the record it is estimated that there would be a more than sufficient amount of records to provide a viable and extensive historical and archaeological record that would be of statistical value.



4. *Other Issues*

There are some other issues that have arisen during the initial feasibility study that would impact on the whole of the Survey.

4.1 Copyright

The main issue is that of copyright. The burial records come in the form of several formats some of which do overlap each other. The original format is that of the hand written primary source in the form of the church burial registers. These whilst preferable to use, being a primary source, are not always available due to damage, destruction or loss. They are also in many cases lodged with the individual church authorities and thus time, expense and convenience are compromised by having to arrange with the church authority to spend time at their church in order to transcribe the registers. Churches are not always willing to devote the time required and if so can only give a small amount of time to the researcher.

In the case of Tameside many of the burial registers have been converted to microfilm and are available at Manchester Central Reference Library and Ashton Local Studies and Archive Library. This makes the task of transcription much easier and more convenient, especially when the task is being completed by volunteers. However, this highlights the issue of copyright. I have been in contact with the Manchester Diocese archivist, Canon Christopher Ford, who is considering the issue and will contact me with his decision in due course. Canon Ford is the archivist for the Church of England records. There are a large number of Non-Conformist churches and I have been in contact with Alan Rose of the Tameside History Forum who will be seeking copyright permission with those bodies concerned.

4.2 Creating a Database

The issue of creating a database for the information gathered has been addressed but there are several factors to be considered before coming to a final decision on its format. The database should include a field to add a picture of the grave marker as well as fields for personal details of the deceased as obtained from the burial registers. The Tameside MBC has a searchable database with information of those interred within municipal graveyards; however, this database does not have the facility for a photographic field. It is intended to liaise with the IT department at Tameside MBC to discuss the suitability for adding the information from the non-municipal graveyards. Ideally this would be the best option but if it is not suitable then further options will have to be addressed.

4.3 Positive Outcomes

A positive result of the pilot study is that four members of the TAS have been trained to carry out on-site fieldwork in the recording of graveyards. One in particular has been trained and shown competent enough to allow for a limited supervisory role and would be able to conduct a survey with minimal supervision and advice from the professional archaeologist. This would enable more than one site to be surveyed at any one time and has also added to the portfolio of work this person has developed for her qualification for an NVQ in archaeology. Another member of the volunteer survey team has also been able to use and

include the work on the pilot study towards his qualification for an NVQ in archaeology in which he was recently successful



Conclusion

From the work carried out so far it appears that the Tameside Graveyards Survey could ultimately provide an extremely valuable archaeological and historical resource for those researching family and local history at many levels. It could also provide a local and regional resource in that there could be many statistical, historical and archaeological projects based on the information gathered during the survey such as life expectancy, geographical and historical movements of a population to mention just two.

As an educational resource the Survey could be used in conjunction with Key Stage modules for primary and secondary schools and the basis for many interdisciplinary modules for higher and adult education. It is believed that the Survey could be incorporated in any future collaboration between the schools in Tameside, Tameside MBC and the Centre for Applied Archaeology. Already stated is the fact that one person and shortly another have obtained a qualification in archaeology by including this and other Tameside archaeological projects in their portfolio.

As a community-based project it allows for those who cannot or are unable to participate in a more physical archaeological survey such as excavation thus increasing inclusivity of the local community and allow for their participation in the conservation and recording of their heritage. There are several people apart from the local archaeological society who have expressed an interest or have already volunteered to participate in the project and it is hoped that following the completion of this pilot study other churches will be surveyed and they would be given the opportunity to take part.

The pilot study has indicated that the survey will be viable and once copyright permission has been given then the data gathered from the burial records could be incorporated. Even without this permission the surveys of the graveyards themselves and the gathering of the monumental inscriptions would be a useful and valuable exercise.

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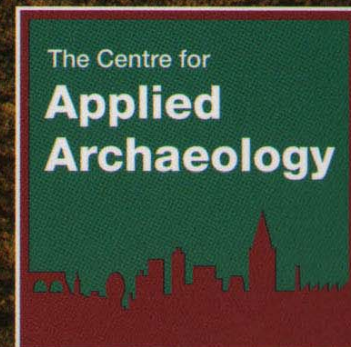
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