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# Richard de Wispeton: coming face-to-face with an 800-year-old Lincolnshire priest

Since 2011 Hugh Willmott and Peter Townend from the University of Sheffield have been excavating on the site of the Augustinian monastery at Thornton Abbey. Their work has uncovered many unknown and unexpected aspects of the site's past, including the location of a forgotten hospital and cemetery that served the local lay population. Whilst the majority of the medieval dead are anonymous to us today, very occasionally named individuals are identified providing archaeologists with further clues about the lives they lived. Hugh tells the story of one such person and what archaeologists are beginning to reveal about his life and work on this the 800th anniversary of his death.

Over the course of the time the team has been working at Thornton, the most unexpected of their discoveries was the location of a medieval hospital just to the south of the inner precinct wall. This consisted of a rectangular stone chapel, with a brick-built residential building attached to its western end. To the north lay the hospital cemetery, which students from the University of Sheffield have been excavating for the last four years. However, it was only in the summer of 2016 when they turned their attention to the inside of the hospital chapel itself that the most recent find was made. At the east end of the chapel, just in front of the altar step, two parallel burials were located, set into what had originally been a tiled floor. One was missing its grave cover, although the place where it had originally been set was clearly visible. This was not particularly surprising, as excavations two years earlier close by had revealed a 16th-century limekiln. This had been built here specifically to heat the limestone used in the finer architectural elements of the medieval buildings (and presumably the missing grave cover) to form slaked lime for the mortar of the post-medieval buildings that replaced the abbey.

Whilst the first grave's cover was unfortunately missing, much to the archaeologists' surprise the second was intact if clearly disturbed. The reason for this was partly due to the fact it was made from a fine-grained gritstone, and unsuitable for turning into slaked lime. Despite this, finding intact grave slabs is still surprisingly rare, such well-cut stone could easily be recycled into windowsills, doorframes or other features in later buildings. The reason this stone remained became apparent from its positioning, it had been tipped on its edge, before sinking halfway into the grave below, which must have still contained a cavity, making it too much bother for the robbers to remove (Figure 1).

The fact the grave had clearly been disturbed was not encouraging, and the team did not hold high hopes of finding an intact burial below. But before they could even think of this, they had to solve pressing problem that had defeated the 16th-century robbers, how to extract the stone intact and without being able to bring any heavy machinery on site. This was eventually achieved through careful excavation of the grave around the stone and then the concerted effort of a large number of staff and students! Once out of the way, on site osteologist and Sheffield PhD student Emma Hook was able complete the excavation of the grave to look for any skeletal remains. Fortunately, on getting to the bottom of the grave cut Emma started to find the remains of its original occupant, amongst the decayed fragments of a wooden coffin. The torso area was heavily disturbed and much of the bone degraded, this seem to be

the result of the original robbers searching around for anything valuable to take away. What they were perhaps looking for was found discarded on legs of the body, a pewter chalice. Although heavily decayed so that most only survived as a stain, sufficient remained that it could be reconstructed as a type know to have been specifically made for burial, (Figure 2), the first indication that this grave belonged to a priest.

Once out of the ground the archaeologist were able to gently clean the grave slab and reveal the inscription (Figure 3). The main portion of the stone contained a full length image of the dead priest wearing clerical robes, feet resting on a dog and in the act of blessing a chalice, which was remarkably similar to the fragmented remains found buried with him. Such a scene is typical for grave slabs of priests or canons, but what surprised Hugh was the accompanying inscription, which contained far more detail than is normally found on memorials of this period. At the top of the stone the date of death was listed as the Ides (13th) of April 1317, and below the name of the priest Richard de W'Peton, an abbreviation for 'Wispeton', the modern day village of Wispington near Horncastle in Lincolnshire. Even more unusual, followed a reference to the bible verse Philippians 2:10 "that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, of those in heaven, and of those on earth, *and of those under the earth*".

On bringing Richard's skeleton back to the laboratory, Emma was able to start her examination to try and piece together as much as she could about his life and his death exactly eight centuries earlier (Figure 4). When he had died, Richards was approximately between 35-45 years of age and stood at around five foot four inches in height. Although a priest at the end of his life, there were some suggestions that he might have had humbler origins. His muscle attachments were robust, indicating that had undertaken strenuous activities at some point during his life. Also his teeth displayed evidence for dental enamel hypoplasia, indicating that during childhood he had been subject to nutritional or physical stress.

In an effort to find out more about his state of health, Sheffield doctoral student Courtenay-Elle Crichton-Turley undertook a detailed 3D laser scan of his skull in an attempt to reveal other details hard to see by the naked eye (Figures 5 and 6). This revealed a slight depression in the back of the skull, evidence for an extremely well-healed blunt force trauma suffered many years beforehand (Figure 7). Yet, none of these investigations revealed what might have been Richard's cause of death at a relatively young age. However, there is one possibility that the team is now considering, as this year is also the 800th anniversary of another, now largely forgotten, catastrophic event that affected the whole of Europe. As Hugh explained, "Spring 1317, when Richard died, was height of the so-called Great Famine that had already ravished Europe for two years, during which period crops failed and most of the livestock died. Although not as devastating as the later Black Death, it still caused massive suffering to rich and poor alike, killing millions across the continent". Such an event would have undoubtedly had an affect on the hospital at Thornton Abbey where Richard was working as its priest. Medieval hospitals traditionally cared for the poor and hungry as well as the sick, so during the Great Famine would have been in the front line. He certainly would have ministered to the starving, perhaps succumbing himself to the natural disaster that was unfolding around him. Whatever the case might be, after his death he was clearly held in high regard. He was afforded an elaborate burial in the most prestigious location in front of the altar in the hospital

chapel, where he had spent the end of his life working amongst the poor and the dying.

Figures
1- Grave slab being excavated
2- Chalice reconstruction
3- Full grave slab
4- Emma Hook examining skeleton
5- Courtenay-Elle Crichton-Turley scanning the skull
6- 3D reconstruction of the skull