

Wargrave Local History Society

Latest News - May 2019

Wargrave Churchyard Excavations.

The May meeting of the Wargrave Local History Society was a fascinating illustrated presentation by Dr Stephanie Duensing, and Dr Ceri Boston about the archaeological excavations carried out in Wargrave churchyard in early 2018. Stephanie is the archaeologist who led the excavation work, whilst Ceri is an osteologist, who specialises in the analysis of the ancient bones that were discovered.

Stephanie began with an overview of the archaeological process, with findings from prehistoric to modern times. From the Mesolithic and Neolithic eras (around 12,000 to 15,000 years ago) and the Bronze Age, flints and a polished axe head had been found in the area, which showed that there had been a human presence here at that time.

Although no items had been found from the early Iron Age, a middle to late Iron Age sword had been found about 200 metres from Wyatts Boatyard, whilst scattered sherds had been found along the line of a Roman road, although no evidence had been found of any settled activity there.

There is no documentary evidence for a Saxon church at Wargrave, but a font from that period rests by the lych gate, and there are parts of a Norman arch in the north wall. Nothing that survives is demonstrably pre 12th century, but there the size and other features suggests that there had been an earlier church there. The hope, therefore, was that the archaeological work might produce some interesting finds, and might indicate if there had been any Saxon activity here.



The work began in January 2018, with a number of pits dug aligned to the foundations of the new building, which was intended to have as little impact as possible on the old burials. The excavations did find human remains, and cut through burial sites that dated from early ones, in shrouds (ie without coffins to 19th century ones. Relatively few datable items were found in the coffins – just a few brooches and pieces of jewellery, and a pocket watch and a seal, but coffin fittings, such as grips, brass tacks etc, survived. The material they were made of, and the style of decoration, were an aid to dating the bones that were found. Several of these were of a pattern not seen elsewhere, and so are now known as “Wargrave type”. Some of the grave sites had been used many times over the 500 years or so, and as a result the bones discovered

might be just a small part of a skeleton. Another method of dating the bones was stratigraphic – in other words, the lower the burial was in the soil, the earlier it must have been laid there. Unusually, whereas in many churchyards burials were in soil as little as 50cm deep, but the part of the Wargrave churchyard that was examined, the burial level was around 1½ m deep, with areas of incredibly dense non-articulated human remains. Stephanie suggested that this feature may have arisen from disturbances to the soil when the church was reconstructed in the early 20th century. One particularly interesting feature that was uncovered, but unable to be investigated fully, was a very firm flint course close to the north wall of the church – possibly evidence of an earlier structure there.

Ceri then explained that the osteological analysis tried to relate what could be discovered from the bones with what was otherwise known about an area's history. Records of burials survive from 1538 for Wargrave, but there are no records from the Saxon era, whilst those from 1813 are more detailed. These showed that the number of deaths was high in the pre-Elizabethan era, when it dropped, only to rise again in the 1640s. Some of these variations could be matched to natural disasters, which would affect the weather, and hence the effect of diseases, and in Europe the agrarian economy. The people of Wargrave were very much affected by the seasons, and if they were malnourished would be more susceptible to disease. 1644 was a particularly turbulent period in the area, with bands of armed men - Royalist and Parliamentary - coming and going, causing destruction and taking the food of the local townspeople. This led to a dramatic rise in the death rate for Wargrave. Another period when this happened was the early 19th century, when land was being enclosed, leading to great rural poverty in Wargrave at the time.

Osteology can determine various facts about a person, such as the age at death, the sex (for adults), the ancestry, the stature and robustness of build, as well as any damage or injury to teeth or the skeleton. Some of the disease and damage, such as muscle damage or fractures can be extrapolated to suggest their likely occupation.

In the part of the burial ground examined, there was a predominance of male burials, although it may be that the females were interred in another part of the churchyard. The excavations were on the north side – an area that was 'dark, cold and where the sun doesn't shine'). Until the Victorian area, the wealthy were buried on the south and east sides of the church, those on the north being from the poorer classes. Some of the fractures discovered were related to the person's occupation – often indicating a trauma caused by work related strains. An example of this was a fracture of an ankle bone seen particularly in female skeletons, and likely associated with the operation of a treadle when weaving. Other diseases might be associated with obesity, or heavy loading of the spine in young age, for example. Other types of fractures were overwhelmingly found in males – particularly in the ribs, which were likely caused by 'everyday accidents', but were also typical of the injuries caused by brawling. Evidence could also be found of other diseases, such as scurvy and syphilis., whilst chronic sinusitis was found more in females – maybe caused by them cooking over fires in houses without chimneys, so creating a very smoky atmosphere.

The final stature of people is a good yardstick of the health of the population. Locally, people were not particularly tall or short, but compared with typical working class builds – men about 5' 7", and women around 5' 3". One aspect that was notable was the very low rates of death caused by diseases associated with deficiency, such as anaemia, rickets or scurvy, although one skeleton discovered showed signs of gout – "a gent with 'fine living', no doubt".

Ceri's conclusions were that the burials were principally of working class agrarian or riverine people, who were occupied in work with strenuous repetitive activity, but who were not particularly deprived. She did add, though, that this was from just a small area - 89 skeletons out of some 17,000 in the churchyard as a whole.

It was noted that the human remains have been reburied, alongside the gravestones that were moved to make room for the new building, and that a full detailed report on the work will be published in due course.

The next events are In June, when the Society is participating in the Wargrave Village Festival, with a Historic Village Walk on Sunday, June 16th, whilst on Tuesday June 18th the Society hosts ‘The Magic of the Auction – an evening with Thomas Plant’ (the popular television antiques expert and local auctioneer). Please contact the Society, as below, to enquire about any remaining tickets for either of these occasions. In July, the Society will be having a visit to see the Gilbert White House and Oates Museum in Selborne, Hampshire.

See the Society’s website www.wargravehistory.org.uk/ for more information about the Society.
