

POST-MEDIEVAL BURIALS NEAR DARTMOUTH CASTLE

By Ray Freeman

In April 1985 a gardener digging in a riverside garden of a house about 200m north of St Petrox Church, by Dartmouth Castle, put his pick through a human skull about a foot (0.3m) below the surface. This did not surprise the owners, since, when their house was being built in 1969, their workmen had found the remains of five skeletons. At that time they had informed the police, who examined a skull and pronounced it more than 100 years old, so of no interest to them. These bones were mostly reburied under the new house, apart from a few kept by the owners for interest. When the skull was found in 1985, since it had not been disturbed, they thought it worth archaeological investigation. Since no professional archaeologist could undertake the work, a small excavation was conducted by the writer in order to establish the character and date of these burials. About 20 volunteers took part in the excavation. They included several doctors, a dentist and a nurse whose special skills in identifying bones and commenting on teeth were valuable. The enthusiasm of the team compensated for their somewhat advanced years and tendency to back trouble.

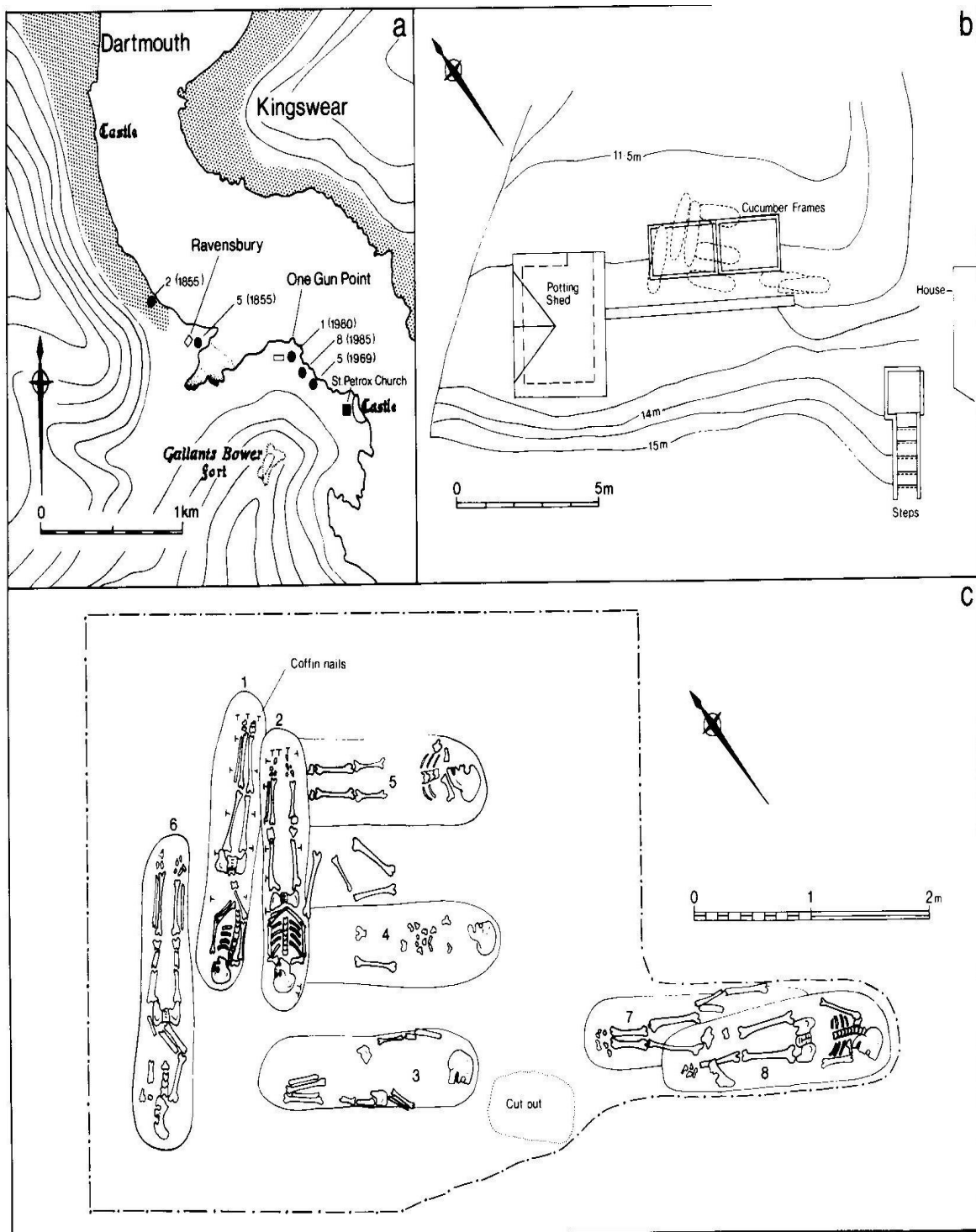


Fig. 13. Dartmouth: location and plan of post-medieval burials.

The site (Fig. 13) was part of the garden of a large Victorian house, built in 1841-2, called first One Gun Cottage (after the point nearby), later Gunfield House, and since 1947 the Gunfield Hotel. The ground slopes very steeply down to the estuary. The graves were shallow (up to c. 0.3m deep), and hardly disturbed the underlying hard natural shale. However, about 2m of soil had been removed by the Victorian gardeners to form a level area for cold frames, so the burials would originally have been much deeper. Eight burials were excavated; of these three (nos. 3-5) had subsequently been much disturbed, probably by later gardeners. All the burials except possibly no. 6 had been placed in wooden coffins, whose former presence was indicated by rows of coffin nails. In burials 1 and 2 the nails were well-preserved and indicated that the coffins were rectangular and narrow (c. 0.32 and 0.35m).

The boards were nailed at intervals of c. 0.20-0.30m. One coffin nail (in grave 7) retained a tiny fragment of adhering wood, which upon examination proved to be pine.

The sex of three of the burials was firmly established: they were all males. One burial (no. 2) may have been a female; the sex of the others could not be determined. All the burials were of adults, except no. 2, a young individual aged between 16 and 20. Burial 2 was also distinguished by a beautiful set of teeth, pleasing our dentist; all the others' teeth, though ground down, presumably by a coarse diet, were free from dental caries. No trace was found, despite careful search, of any indications of cause of death such as slashes on bones.

Two clues to the age of the burials were found. The tiny fragment of pine probably indicates a date after c. 1600 for burial 7, since pine is not a native wood and was imported from the Baltic in large quantities from about 1600 onwards. In grave 4, clay pipe stems were found between the bones; these appear to have been present in the grave fill rather than introduced subsequently. Clay pipes likewise came into common use c. 1600.

The archaeological evidence therefore suggests a post-1600 burial ground for adults, mostly or entirely male. Any answers to the question of who were they, and why buried here, rather than in the normal graveyards of St Petrox 200m away, would have to be sought from historical evidence. A search at the Devon Record Office provided two clues. A covenant of 1600 between the Feoffees of St Petrox Church and George Southcote has survived. The Southcotes were lords of the manor of Stoke Fleming and Southtown, including all the land in question, from about 1570 to 1797. This covenant confirmed to the inhabitants of St Petrox parish 'all that churchyard as it is now newly enclosed on the west and north side of the church of St Petrox... being within the Castle walls'. 'Inhabitants' were later defined as 'all dwellers within the parish of St Petrox, their family, friends, servants and all others whatsoever'. This description fits the present graveyards of St Petrox which are in two parts to the immediate west and north of the church.

A study of all the St Petrox parish registers was made, including the Bishops' transcripts for the period 1610-52 for which the register has not survived. No record exists in either version for the Civil War period — a likely time for burial of strangers when the castle was garrisoned by Royalists for three years, and then recaptured by Fairfax. The burials registers give no hint of where people were buried. However, on the very last pages of the 1652-92 Register are some rough notes, made in various hands, of items, some earlier than 1652, others within the period of the main book, but which for some reason are not in the correct chronological order. Among these scribbles are references to *where* some people are buried, eg. 'buried...at North Churchyard.' Two are relevant here:

Dec. 7th 1676 buried a Frenchman belonged to a Banker* at One Gunn. Dec. 12th 1676 buried a Frenchman belonged to a great ship from the West Indies, both buried at One Gunn.

* The word Banker may possibly describe a ship from the Newfoundland cod banks, frequently referred to simply as 'the banks'. Neither burial was recorded under 1676 in the main part of the register. In other cases on this last page a Dutchman and a Frenchman were recorded as 'living at the house of one of the parishioners-which might have entitled them to burial in the churchyard.

Although these are the only instances so mentioned, and then by the chance whim of a clerk who did not have to include such details, it seems a reasonable deduction that One Gun Point was the customary place to bury foreigners who died on ships coming into the port, the parish no doubt providing the coffin at the expense of the deceased or his friends. 'Foreigner' would in those days have applied equally to those who came from other parts of Britain, such as the Royalist soldiers during the Civil War.

So far no information has been found to explain the whereabouts of the old graveyard for St Petrox before the new one was enclosed in 1600, nor whether One Gun was ever given the consecration of the Church, or de-consecration after it ceased to be used. It is unlikely that the Southcotes were unaware of its use, as they lived nearby. It may be that they charged a nominal rent for it, as a rental of 1756 shows St Petrox Feoffees paying 'one pound of pepper or two shillings' to the Southcote heir, but it does not state for what. Neither are the boundaries of the burial ground clear: One Gun Point is marked on the map today as the place where the present Gunfield Hotel's garden extends furthest into the river, and therefore not exactly where these bones were found. It may be that more are buried there, and after the excavation was complete it was learned that the last owner of the hotel did in fact find one skeleton there c. 1980. Since he has died, no one knows exactly where.

Other skeletons have, over the years, been found in other riverside properties further away. In 1855 builders excavating for the foundations of Ravensbury, on the point of Warfleet Creek, were reported in the local paper to have found five skeletons, then explained as those of plague victims from a Dutch ship refused entry into the town. Since this excavation started, another was reported in the grounds of Ravensbury, where the remains of two skeletons were found in 1970 when a new house was being built (Fig. 13).

It would be of interest if any other ports have records of such unofficial burials, either of people from ships or strangers from other parts of England. At any rate, it seems that all memory of the burials was lost by the time the land passed to the Seale family in 1797, and when they sold it in 1834 to the builder of the house, now the Gunfield, no one had any idea of what lay beneath the soil.

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