THEORIES ABOUT THE BONES

F G Parsons notes that various theories have been made about the bones origins namely;

- Danes slain in battle by the Saxons (published in a lecture sometime before 1878 by Major George Whyte-Melville, a novelist of fox-hunting stories who rather paradoxically met his death while hunting in 1878)
- Bones of men slain at Naseby Battlefield 1645 (eight miles away) or at Bosworth Battlefield 1485 (thirty miles away)
- Remains of a monastic burial place
- Victims of a plague epidemic

All of these theories have now been debunked by most historians and researchers. The skulls do not reflect the injuries of a battlefield although some appear to have evidence of trepanning or damage by a sexton's mattock. Who would spend money and resources transporting dead bodies from the battlefield even though it was only eight miles away let alone thirty? The quantity of remains appears large for a monastic burial even over many centuries. Who in their right minds, unless they had a death wish, would place plague epidemic victims in a crypt or indeed dig up their bones and place them elsewhere? The plague bacillus can still be active to this day and archaeologists who suspect a plague burial site don full protective clothing.

George Busk in 1872 notes that “….it merely represents the gradual accumulation, through a long series of years, of skulls and bones removed from the adjacent churchyard. The remains therefore might be taken as fair representatives of the population of the surrounding district for a very considerable period, …..” ¹

Dr J Trevor of the Duckworth Laboratory, Cambridge noted that there were two radically different skull types; Type I resembling the medieval material (like Hythe) with short, high skulls and Type II similar to skulls from the 17th century. ² After cleaning the Type I skulls were whitish and Type II brown. Dr Trevor believed the Type II skulls to be due to tannic acid as they were buried in coffins which came into general use after the 16th century. Recently (in the 2000’s) Mr Bryan R Doughty of Rothwell, member of the Institute of Biomedical Science (IBMS), following histochemical studies found this to be putrefied skin.

Osteoarchaologists now believe that Rothwell has the remains of approximately 2,500 human individuals and also has a selection of animal bones (which is common in ossuaries) including cow, sheep, horse and deer (which indicates poaching was going on). Dr Trevor generally believes that the Type I skulls were moved from the churchyard in the later 13th century and early 14th century or were moved due to over-crowding in the churchyard. This coincides when in the early 14th century the church was enlarged, having transepts built and the nave extended; the nave being shortened by the end of the 14th century to its current length and the transepts being demolished in 1673. During this period in the 1330's it is now estimated that up to fifty per cent of the population in England died of the Bubonic Plague (Black Death). This huge mortality rate caused a dearth of labour, increasing incomes for the

² Thesis by J Trevor BSc (1934), “A study of the English skull in medieval times, with special reference to crania in the Department of Human Anatomy, Oxford, and at Rothwell Parish Church, near Kettering, Northamptonshire”,
labouring classes and conversely increasing costs for the noble classes; classes who endowed or built churches. It is possible that the Type II skulls were moved from the churchyard in the later part of the 16th century when the Jesus Hospital (alms house) was built in 1591. However, it should be noted that Dr Trevor's research was carried out in the 1930's and modern dating analysis with DNA testing may provide different conclusions which could support George Busk's earlier hypothesis that the bones were a gradual accumulation from the graveyard. It should also be noted that although bones may have been moved in the early 14th and late 16th centuries, this does not necessarily mean that they were from these periods; only that the more recent bones from these excavations may have been from these periods.

One earlier theory regarding the preponderance of femurs and skulls is that, as these were the only bones required by the Church for the resurrection, the other bones of the body were not placed in the bone crypt. However, the Right Reverend Peter Doyle, Roman Catholic Bishop of Northampton in 2012 has refuted this stating; ³

"Up to and including the Medieval period, there were many private opinions on the nature of the resurrection of the body. However, it was generally understood that the whole body would be involved. If for some reason parts of the body were missing, it was believed that God would be quite capable of finding them. Also, even if the whole body had been destroyed, it was understood that God would be able to raise it. This is particularly relevant to those saints whose bodies were burnt - either as the cause of death or afterwards. Indeed, it has been the constant teaching of the Catholic Church that the whole body will rise again and that this divine plan cannot be thwarted by the actions of humans."

On Wikipedia there is information that the Knights Templar believed that only the skulls and femurs were required for the resurrection and links this to the battle flag of the Templar galleys, the Beaucent or Jolie depicting the skull and crossbones, however Professor Jonathan Riley-Smith, an eminent historian of the Crusades refutes this also stating;

"I know the materials for the Templar process and cannot remember the Templars ever being charged with a belief that only certain parts of the body would be resurrected. This would anyway make little sense. All Christians who believe in bodily resurrection know, at the same time, that bones can become scattered (see the proliferation of relics) and even destroyed, …………, but they are convinced that these will be reassembled on the last day." ⁴

³ Email by the Roman Catholic Bishop of Northampton dated 10 July 2012 to the author of this missive; Mick Coggins of Rothwell

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