Dr Jenny Crangle from the University of Sheffield states that in 1254 the Vatican recognized purgatory to be the place you went after death and dependant on your good works and piety in live would reduce/increase your time in purgatory before entering into heaven. Dr Crangle believes that it was not coincidence that ossuaries came into being in the c13. Before 1254 there had been different viewpoints as to whether purgatory existed or not. 1 The ossuary was probably closed either at or even prior to the Reformation due to changes in doctrine only to be discovered in about 1700 by a sexton digging a grave outside the south side of the church. In 1976 Bryan Doughty, Holy Trinity Church Warden, proposed that because certain of the skulls were brown that they had been in coffins and therefore were from a later period and that possibly the land where the Jesus Hospital had been built in 1593 was cleared graveyard. However, Dr Jennifer Crangle notes that there “… is no definitive evidence to indicate the extent of the cemetery at the time of the Hospital’s construction, or that burial in coffins stains skeletal material brown.” 2 There has also been no evidence from the tenants at the Jesus Hospital that any bones have ever been found in the allotments or gardens. Additionally it would not make sense to clear an existing graveyard as diocesan approval would have had to be sought and the ground would be more expensive. The Elizabethan/medieval manor house was located next to the Jesus Hospital, probably on the field between the current bowling green (previously an orchard) and the Jesus Hospital (behind the graveyard), therefore it is likely that the manor’s curtilage included the land where the Jesus Hospital was built.

Dr Crangle also states that charnel houses did not necessarily house purely the bones from their individual churchyard but may also have had charnel from other parishes. An example of this is at Norwich Cathedral where Bishop Salmon who founded their charnel chapel in 1316 initially secured charnel from other parish churches in Norwich. This also may have the added benefit of attracting parishioners from other parishes to visit and pray in the cathedral. It has been speculated that St Leonard’s church in Hythe may also have collected charnel from the other four parish churches when these fell into decline some time before 1400. 3 Different soil conditions in other parishes would reflect different skull tinctures (e.g. The Hythe charnel appears to be white as it is on chalk based land rather than the clay in Rothwell). It is also not beneficial as a pilgrimage attraction if an ossuary when first opening has no charnel in it!

Holy Trinity, Rothwell, is probably also on the pilgrimage way from the Benedictine Abbey at Peterborough to Santiago de Compostela (via Southampton or Portsmouth and the Bay of Biscay) as it is believed that Holy Trinity owned a piece of the “true cross” due to its proximity (one and a half miles away) to a chapel at Glendon dedicated to St Helena, mother of the Emperor Constantine, who brought the true cross back from the Levant (see the piscina near Owen Ragsdale’s tomb in the south-east corner of the church south aisle). The nearest large church to a chapel to St Helen or St Helena routinely had a relic of the true cross.

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Dr Crangle believes that the chapel was to be regularly used by the congregation. People entering the south door of the church would clearly be able to see through the two sub ground level windows to the right and into the crypt. Also nineteenth century antiquarians state that on the east chapel wall was a Doom or Resurrection Painting. Such an expensive decoration would indicate that the room was well used as there would be no point in financing an expensive painting if it was not to be seen. There also may have been an aperture in the ceiling of the crypt towards the east wall “…permitting light from the church above to shine directly onto the wall painting below, or to allow masses said at the altar [above where there is a c13 double piscina] to be seen while in the crypt”. 4

Five skulls on the right hand top shelf as you enter the crypt and to the left of the blocked window have received C14 Radio Carbon Dating; the three pale skulls to the left date, from left to right; 1200’s, 1300’s and very early 1400’s. The two skulls to the right date from the late 1700’s or 1800’s; the left one of which has undergone a craniotomy. These one with the craniotomy is from a private collection or medical school, the other one being possibly from a late cemetery.