

Technical Report on Archaeological Excavations at Prestwich Place, Green Point, Cape Town

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1. Situation as of 11 August 2003

The background to the discovery of this site has been described in detail by Malan and others. In the following pages the archaeological context of the site is explained, initial observations are commented on, and where relevant or appropriate, concluded as far as evidence will allow.

There is good reason to believe that the site that is currently being excavated is part of a massive burial ground that extends over much of Green Point – currently a focus of urban redevelopment in Cape Town.

By now, just under 30% of the city block to be known as Prestwich Place has been excavated. The remains found to date consist of 343 articulated individuals and a further 150 substantial accumulations of human bone – each of which may represent the parts of individuals or groups of individuals who have been disturbed during the course of use of the site as a cemetery during the 18th century and its subsequent development into a built up city block. As yet, the identity of the persons buried on the site is unknown as no physical analysis, forensic work or chemical analysis has taken place. What we do know from the archival records is that the graves represent the burial ground of anyone who was not a member of the Dutch Reformed Church. No records of names of individuals or specific burial plots exist.



View across the site

During the process of archaeological excavation to date, a number of observations about the burial styles, immediately visible features on the bone have allowed us to make some initial inferences – we believe that the graveyard contains the remains of Christians, Muslims, Africans, Europeans and in all likelihood Asians as well as perhaps people of local descent: - that is it represents the general populous of Cape Town as it was during the 1700's. It must be emphasised that that these are initial hypotheses that will still need to be tested through rigorous historical and scientific analysis.

2. Archaeological context

The site was originally open ground on the outskirts of Cape Town. It consisted of a gently sloping coastal plain, which extended from the lower slopes of Signal Hill to the rocky shoreline of western Table Bay. Unlike much of the city area, the ground consisted of windblown sands about 1.5m thick that lie on an ancient hard gravel and clay layer. People were clearly using the site as the surface sands were soft and could probably



Prestwich Place

The team at work on the burials. Note the shallow depth of the graves, which are just below street level. All the remains are contained within the shallow sand layer – a situation in contravention of modern cemetery regulations.

be dug by the naked hand or with simple tools such as spades. We don't know when the first burials took place but could be even before the establishment of the official burial ground of the DRC (1755) nearby. What is clear is that the shallow layer of sand was heavily overused and completely un-regulated. All the bodies on site are confined to the shallow sand layer, and in very rare instances are dug into the deeper harder underlying clays. This means that in many instances 3-4 bodies were layered on top of each other at different times. Burials that had only been in the ground a few months were being dug up to make way for more newly dead – their body parts beings scattered over the site in untidy heaps or thrown back into the fills of the lower and later graves. We have encountered numerous instances of coffins broken through by people trying to dig a hole to put in another grave. This state of disarray of the burial ground is consistent with the historical observations on the poor control of burials in Cape Town, especially during the smallpox epidemic of 1755 when the death rate in Cape Town was very high and the diseased corpses had to be buried immediately.

On average the density of human bodies on the site amounts to one person per square meter, which means that this particular property of 1200 square meters may have contained over 1000 graves.

By the early 1800's the site was no longer used for burial but was sold to private developers who dug their building foundations through the graves and ignore the massive quantities of human bone that lay immediately under the floor boards of the dwellings and business. Since that time the site has been redeveloped a number of times. Modern wall footings set out in the 20th century clearly impacted human bone, while a 33kv electricity cable laid down immediately adjoining the erf in recent years must have disturbed hundreds of graves, yet these events are never reported to the authorities. There is now good reason to believe that thousands of graves underlie the adjacent streets and are probably under at least 4 more city blocks in the area – many of which are destined for redevelopment.

3. Method

The core team consists of experienced excavators, senior students (honours and above) and volunteers. Soil is scraped away until the edge of the grave shaft or a colour change is observed. The shaft is then followed and the remains exposed using small tools, brushes and teaspoons. Each identified individual is assigned a number and details are recorded on a specially designed burial record form to capture information about orientation, burial style and visible pathology. The burial is then photographed (digital and analogue) and the position relative to the site (3 dimensions) measured in using a Leica TC307 digital total station with infra-red beam. The remains are then lifted, wrapped and packed in plastic bags which are left open so the remains can dry slowly and stabilise. Thereafter the remains will be packed into specially designed cartons, which are currently on order. Interim storage will be at the Department of Archaeology at UCT and Department of Human Biology at UCT.

4. Initial evidence of identity of persons buried

The evidence of the identity of persons buried at the site is based on initial observation, educated assumption and the results of two MSC dissertations that were completed on the Cobern Street Burial site (which we suspect is part of the same cemetery) two blocks away.

- We have noted that some 7 individuals have filed or decorated teeth. This a trend that is more consistent with Central African groups rather than local. A similar individual found at the nearby Cobern Street site in 1995 proved to have chemical indicators in the bone that indicated at he/she was born in a tropical area outside of South Africa – possibly a first generation slave. Since we have 7 individuals with similar tooth styles, we

assume that these were also first generation slaves. Stable carbon isotope analysis of the bone will be needed to substantiate this.

- The majority of the individuals were buried in ordinary wooden coffins. The bodies were placed lying on their backs with hands crossed at the waist or on sides (heads towards Signal Hill, feet towards Table Bay). We believe that these people may have followed the Christian ethic, but were not Dutch Reformed and therefore could not be buried in the official cemeteries. They may have been baptised slaves, crews of passing ships, anyone who was not a member of the DRC. Physical analysis of the remains may provide indicators of nationality/occupation, chemical isotope analysis may provide diet and origin.
- About 5 individuals were buried with coins placed over the eyes – a European tradition.
- About 8 individuals were buried on their sides facing northeast. These may be people of the Islamic faith.
- More than 40% of all the burials were either children or infants.
- Many graves are haphazard and casual with bodies lying at all attitudes and angles, as if they were buried without any ceremony at all – were these anonymous paupers, felons or unknown shipwrecked sailors and passengers with no family in Cape Town?
- There is no direct evidence for foul play as yet.

5. Status of the site since work stoppage

The site has been fenced off with “ready fence” and the gates locked. Individuals lying on the surface which are vulnerable to rain, sun and theft have been removed. The remains of hundreds more lie within 10cm of the surface. No security is present on the site however the SAPS who have offices across the block have been asked to keep on eye on the site. A pub and bottle store across the road attract a permanent gathering of vagrants and unofficial parking attendants who dispose of empty bottles over the “ready fence” with the result that at least one full garbage bag is removed every week.

It is important to note that buildings have stood on the site for more than 150 years. This has maintained the bones in a relatively constant stable environment free of fluctuations in humidity and temperature. This situation has changed as a result of the legal demolition with the site now being subject to winter downpour and summer desiccation. This will accelerate damage to the remains.

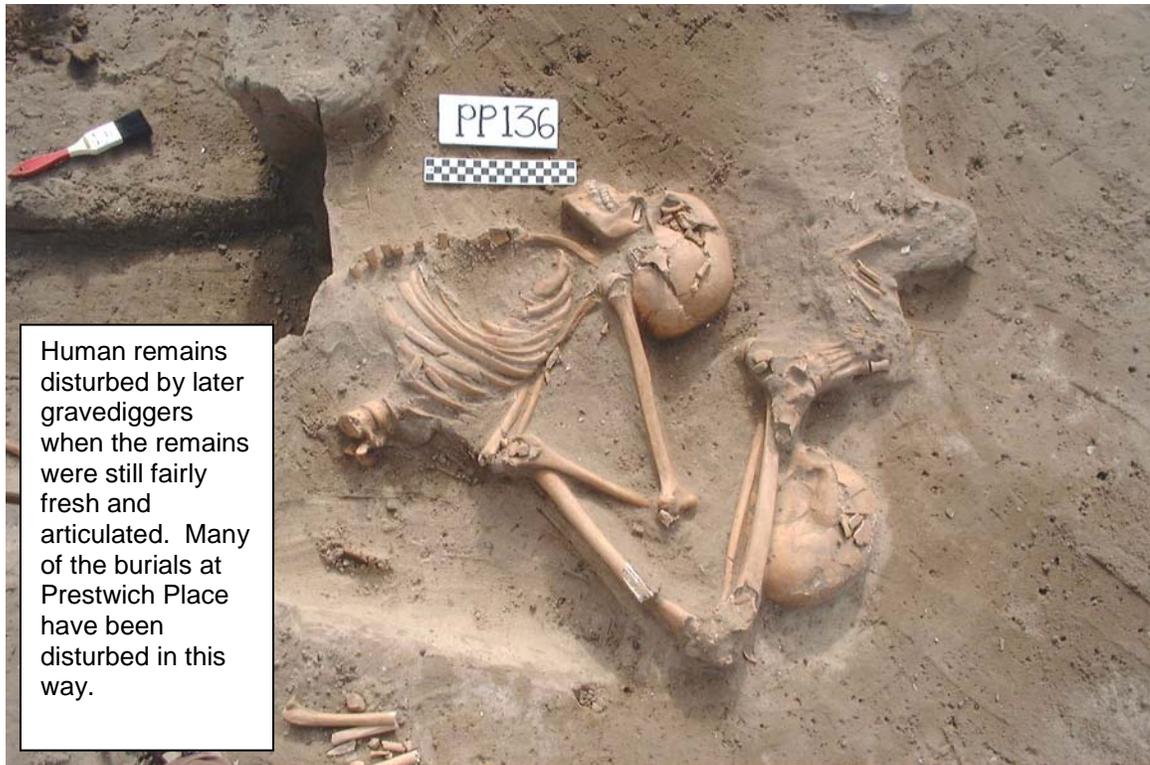
6. Conclusion

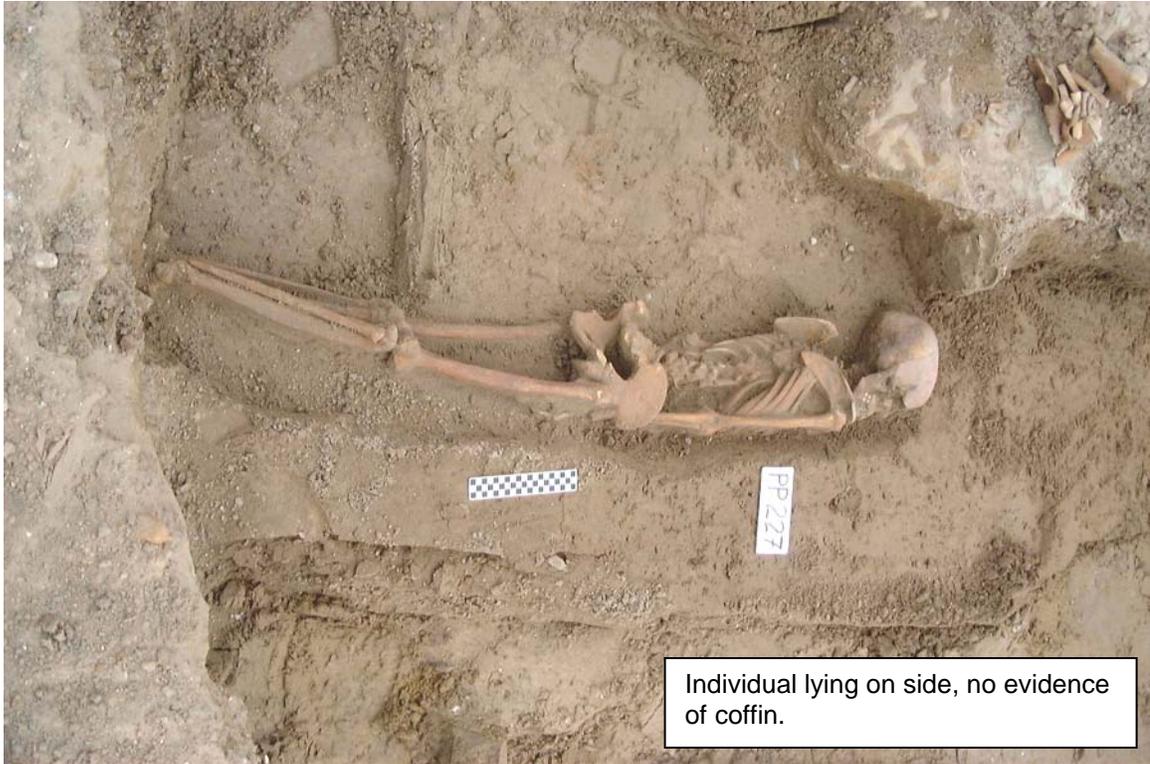
- The exposure of human remains on the Cape Town block to be known as Prestwich Place is just a glimpse into what we believe to be a much larger phenomenon that covers an area at least 10 times the size. Every time a service trench is dug, a cable renewed, or basement dug in the area human remains will be found. Up till now these finds have never been

reported and the remains often illegally exhumed and disposed of in landfill sites or road sub-base.

- The burials are immediately under street level and in a state of disarray.
- We need to establish the geographical extent of the cemetery under the surrounding roads and blocks and have a policy to ensure that they are not illegally disturbed. Either, all development, service maintenance and roadwork for a significant part of the city stops, or we exhume legally, sensitively and archaeologically with the remains being interred in a place of commemoration (yet to be identified).
- The identity of the remains to even a community level cannot be fully established without doing some measure of scientific investigation on the remains.
- The underclass of Cape Town of the 18th century remains largely buried in Green Point under buildings, streets, homes business and schools.

Photographic record – examples of burial styles





Individual lying on side, no evidence of coffin.



Group of 5 individuals, crammed together resulting in partial disarticulation. Note disturbed skull, 1 individual in coffin (lower).



European Christian style burial with coins over eyes - (1797) English cartwheel pennies. This burial probably took place in the early 1800's at the end of the time the site was used. Note the disarticulated skull underlying.



Adult individual buried in wooden coffin – no wood remains but iron nails and discoloured soils are visible indicating the outline of the coffin.