

# BIRMINGHAM PARK STREET BURIAL GROUND:

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## HS2 IN BIRMINGHAM

HS2 is Europe’s largest infrastructure scheme and its first phase follows in the steps of Stephenson’s London and Birmingham Railway (L&BR) from London to the West Midlands. In 1838, the line made its name not only as the first intercity line into London, but also as the first of its kind in the world! The project today is no less complex, but perhaps for different reasons.

While Stephenson’s line was a feat of engineering through previously uncharted ground conditions, it lacked consideration of the environment and communities. Fast forward to the 21st century and these are of foremost importance to HS2 Ltd – addressing these issues alone has legitimately taken the same time it took Stephenson to build the entire L&BR.



Archaeological excavation in the North Site tent. Credit: LMJV



Bird’s-eye view of excavation tents looking south west. Credit: LMJV

HS2 undeniably represents an exceptional opportunity for British archaeology. Its discoveries have the potential to span half a million years of history, allowing us to rethink the Ice Ages in the Midlands, celebrate the architecture of post-war urban council housing and everything in between.

The aims and objectives of the project are driven by the ambitious Historic Environment Research and Delivery Strategy (HERDS), which, among other objectives, aims to improve archaeological working practice.

As part of its innovative approach, the overarching HERDS objectives are to create knowledge, involve people, and cultivate a legacy. The historic environment programme therefore directly feeds into HS2’s design vision *People, Place and Time*: a design that meets the needs of everyone, creates a sense of place that supports quality of life, and stands the test of time. It aims to ensure that through engaging with people and communities, the scheme is of real public benefit – resonating with past TA articles (Geary, *The Archaeologist*, Issue 105)

### MAJOR BURIAL GROUND EXCAVATION: OPPORTUNITIES AND ISSUES

This TA looks at the opportunities major burial ground excavations offer and the issues that arise. As one of the largest 19th-century burial sites excavated outside London, Birmingham’s Park Street burial ground has and will face spiritual, religious and scientific ethical challenges in design, excavation, further study and reburial. Here we focus on the beliefs of the church, how they align with scientific ethics and the relationship with community engagement in delivering public benefit.

Archaeologists are no strangers to the sensitive and complicated issues that burial excavation introduces, and are often answerable to questions of ethics and decisions

# ETHICS AND COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

on how to balance respecting Christian beliefs about death and burial with educational and scientific gain.

On the project the treatment of human remains has been approached with dignity, care and respect, and in accordance with HS2's legal undertaking with the Church of England. However, even following best practice proves challenging when managing the views of various interest groups, from the parish and religious leaders to Historic England, history groups, academics, local authorities, residents and local businesses.

An ethical approach involves listening to the views of those with a legitimate interest (APABE 2017, 4) from the start. Through the HERDS, HS2 places community-centred objectives at the forefront of project design, thereby allowing views to be heard and to inform the work itself. Engagement should be regarded as indispensable to an ethical approach – it helps to manage conflicting perspectives and plays a vital role in the process of delivering public benefit.

## PARK STREET AND COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

Park Street is at a key location on the HS2 route: within the footprint of what will be the new Curzon Street terminus, a reference to the original double terminus of the L&BR and Brunel's Grand Junction Railway. The burial ground opened in 1810 as an overflow cemetery for the church of St Martin-in-the-Bullring and closed 63 years later. During its lifetime it existed in a state of dilapidation, maligned as a dangerous 'black spot' with loitering gangs and open sewers. The burial population of around 8000 shows the hardships of largely poor, unnamed Christians who suffered diseases and working conditions that we in the UK no longer experience.

To enable people to develop an understanding of local history and burial archaeology, the design consultant WSP (in consortium with Ramboll) worked with an archaeological team from MOLA-Headland Infrastructure (MHI) for the Principal Contractor LM (a Laing O'Rourke & J Murphy & Sons Ltd joint venture) to design an inclusive programme of talks, workshops, traineeships and school sessions.

Events reached a range of groups (youth, ethnically diverse and low-income) and built partnerships with a range of stakeholders, in particular Birmingham museums, sister organisations such as the Potteries Museum (PMAG) and the Birmingham Conservation Trust Coffin Works museum. HS2's Commonplace website has provided an accessible platform for information on events as well as for monthly blogs.

Family and school activities have been particularly successful: 'Meet the Expert', held at Birmingham's

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*Trainee Eleanor surveying – Trainee programme 2018 LM/MHI with the West Midlands Combined Authority and BMet. Credit: LMJV*



*Object handling, Birmingham City University Family Day in June. Credit: LMJV*

Thinktank Science Museum, gave families the opportunity to talk to professionals and to play with teaching skeletons, dig boxes and see artefacts, while educational packages for schools affected by the works have brought to classrooms concepts like map regression and what we can learn from recording skeletons.



Archaeological digital and photographic recording of burial vaults.  
Credit: LMJV



MHI's Stuart Milby with teaching skeleton at Birmingham City University Family Day in June. Credit: LMJV

## CONCLUDING REMARKS – ETHICS AND PUBLIC BENEFIT

Public interest in Park Street has been demonstrated by the work carried out so far, and the archaeology will continue to offer rich and stimulating material through post-excitation. HS2 offers a good example of an archaeological project in which community engagement is at the fore and benefits have been delivered through design, including through linking with social sciences, museums, engagement professionals and the arts. This is particularly important with burial grounds, where early consultation and listening to views on religion and science are part of an ethical approach.

Stepping outside the world of HS2, early community engagement could benefit archaeology more generally. The practice of planning, generating, measuring and communicating public benefit could be improved through the application of frameworks for evaluation (such as the *Magenta Book* or HLF evaluation guidance) that ensure public benefit is designed into projects from inception, and can be properly demonstrated at the end.

We would welcome opportunities to discuss any of the issues raised or talk about HS2 community events and activities in the Midlands. Burial archaeology ethics will be explored further at the HS2 session at this year's Theoretical Archaeology Group Conference.

### Mary Ruddy

Mary is technical lead for Park Street burial ground for the WSP Cultural Heritage and Archaeology team. Previously, Mary was Museum of London Archaeology's Head of Osteology and Environmental Services until 2017 and played a part in major projects such as Crossrail's New Churchyard at the Broadgate Ticket Hall, Three Quays Wharf and Deptford Royal Dockyard.

Her underpinning interests are in Quaternary science, geoarchaeology, Holocene environmental change, river evolution and reconstructing past landscapes. Mary appreciates the importance of supporting stakeholder and community engagement, and volunteers with the Coastal and Intertidal Zone Archaeological Network (CITiZAN) and in schools.

## References

Advisory Panel on the Archaeology of Burials in England (APABE) 2017 *Guidance for Best Practice for the Treatment of Human Remains Excavated from Christian Burial Grounds in England*, second edition

## Links

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