

EARLY CAREER OSTEOLOGY: developing new specialist skills for the sector

Michael Henderson, Senior Human Osteologist, MOLA Headland Infrastructure

Infrastructure projects and particularly large urban burial ground excavations present many challenges. It is vital that specialists have an appreciation of the nature of the excavation and its objectives from the start. In osteology, it is crucial to know the characteristics of the skeletons on site – the burial context, preservation and condition in situ – in order to understand the buried population. Burial grounds from the 18th and 19th centuries were intensively used and often include high-density burials, close plots containing multiple burials, and deeply interred burials within stacked graves. On-site osteologists are able to offer their specialist skills to support the archaeological team, advise on site-specific methods, give toolbox talks and share their knowledge of bone identification.

The MOLA Headland early career osteologists. Credit: MOLA Headland Infrastructure; © HS2 Ltd



Excavations for HS2 at the site of the 18th–19th century St James’s burial ground in Euston, carried out by MOLA Headland archaeologists on behalf of Costain Skanska JV, were the largest of their kind from this period ever undertaken in Britain, necessitating a large team of osteologists working on site. Eleven Early Career Osteologists (ECOs) were recruited to work closely alongside a team of experienced archaeologists and human osteologists. All successful candidates had a degree in archaeology and a post-graduate qualification in osteology or a related discipline, but many had not yet had the chance to apply their knowledge of osteology in a professional setting. Bringing with them enthusiasm and willingness to learn, the role offered them a chance to gain experience in commercial archaeology and to continue their career development beyond university. The creation of the role as a route into specialist work on

MOLA Headland volunteer gravestone recording. Credit: MOLA Headland Infrastructure; © HS2 Ltd





Rob worked for MOLA Headland as an archaeologist for two years prior to becoming an ECO. Credit: MOLA Headland Infrastructure; © HS2 Ltd

development-led projects also contributed to addressing potential future skills shortages within the sector, a key objective of the HS2 Historic Environment Research and Delivery Strategy (HERDS). The ECOs were involved at all stages from excavation and identification, through to careful washing and packaging, and recording for later analysis. The treatment of the human remains with due dignity, respect and care was at the centre of these approaches, supervised throughout by a team of senior osteologists in a bespoke lab which was purpose-designed by Costain Skanska JV.

On a project of this scale, lasting almost a year, and involving a huge team of archaeologists, it can sometimes be difficult for individuals on site to get an overview of the patterns and trends that characterise the excavation. At St James's, the large ECO team meant that osteologists were able to provide instant feedback to archaeologists about the osteological details of the skeletons excavated. Largely good preservation of the excavated remains allowed a wide range of pathologies to be identified, from more relatively commonly seen conditions in skeletal populations, such as dental disease, to rarer and unique examples including cases of bone cancer. Weekly talks to visitors and the field team provided the ECOs with experience in presenting findings and an opportunity to share interesting examples with the wider team, keeping them up to date with emerging patterns and trends related to the health and disease of the buried population.

Ultimately, for those just starting out in their careers in osteology, the site at St James's provided excellent experience of working on a large, commercial project. It demonstrated the importance of close collaboration with the client and other contractor teams, and enabled the development of skills to work rapidly and accurately, often under pressure and as part of a larger team (the mainstays of commercial archaeology). It was an opportunity for many of the osteologists, for whom

I wanted to work on this project as soon as I heard it was going ahead and was even more determined to when I heard about the ECO role. The main draw of the role was the opportunity to get professional commercial experience in osteology, especially on a project of this size. I am frequently encountering things that I have read about but never expected to see for myself. The on-site purpose-built osteology facility makes it possible to get a quick and direct flow of information between site and office, something that is not always possible on other projects I have worked on.



Greer has worked in commercial, academic and museums archaeology as well as heritage tourism and is particularly interested in public engagement through osteology. Credit: MOLA Headland Infrastructure; © HS2 Ltd

I'm loving getting a chance to share all the interesting things we can identify on the skeletons with the archaeologists as they're excavating. I think the close relationship between the archaeologists and the osteologists is a fantastic feature of this project and a really great way to ensure that we learn as much as possible whilst working on this unique site. I'm looking forward to the conclusions we'll be able to draw about life in the 18th and 19th centuries in London from such a large cross-section of the population.

excavating in central London was a novel experience, to learn how to overcome challenges often faced on site, while conveying their enthusiasm, expertise and energy to the team as a whole.

Michael Henderson

Michael is a Senior Human Osteologist with MOLA Headland Infrastructure and has undertaken osteological analysis of a variety of multi-period assemblages from around the UK, including Roman, Saxon, medieval and several large post-medieval burial grounds in London. Recently he was part of the team involved with the excavation at St James's Burial Ground, Euston.

