

Combe Down Burial

**Coffins Galore
from three
BACAS
excavations
in Bath**

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and
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As part of the Society's activities, watching briefs and rescue excavations are carried out by several members, acting as consultants to Bath & North East Somerset Council's Archaeological Department. The first of note this year was at Combe Down.

In April a builder discovered a Romano British coffin at Beechwood Road, Combe Down, whilst excavating foundation trenches for a new house. Unfortunately the builder removed the coffin to the edge of the site, before the County Archaeologist was called in.

When the coffin was first examined it was thought that it had been broken by the builder when he moved it, as it was in two halves and only had one half of the lid. The builder was adamant that the coffin was broken, and with a part lid, when it was first exposed by the digger.

The coffin fill was very different in each half and the skeletal remains disturbed. Excavation exposed a jumble of bones, with some missing and one clavicle lay alongside the right foot. Once the skeletal remains had been removed, the stone coffin was examined in detail; it is certain that the two halves were not originally one but two separate pieces had been placed together. Whether or not, this was the result of breakage during manufacture, we shall never know.

Very little remained of the grave cut as concrete had been poured into the foundation trenches. However two small areas at the head and foot end of the cut remained and careful trowelling of the undisturbed soil produced two small fragments of modern concrete and two shards of rolled glass, indicating that the burial had been elsewhere and that there had been a reburial at this location, possibly when the adjacent house was built.

Figure 1
The Combe Down coffin found in two halves.

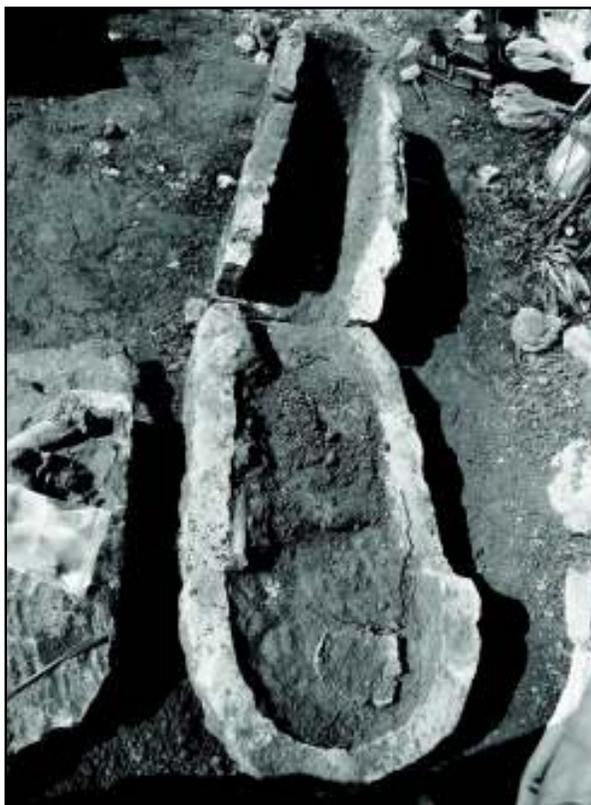


Figure 2
Detail of the coffin contents as found.



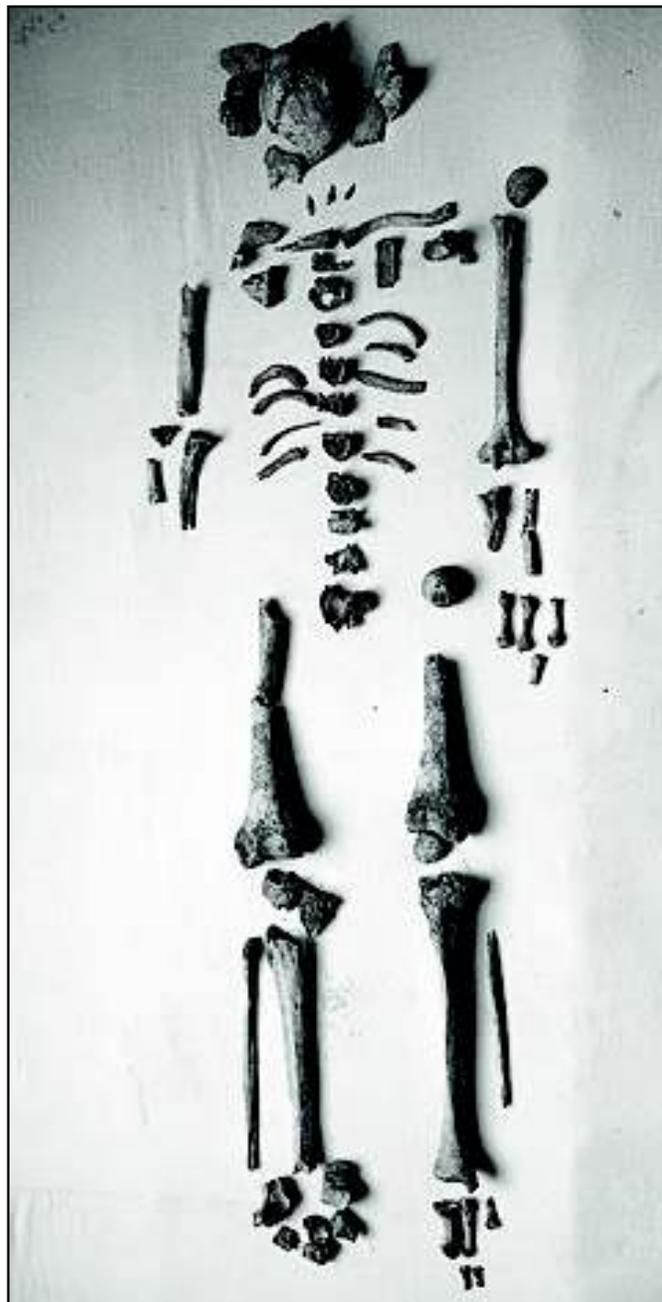
The Skeleton Report

When the coffin was opened it could be seen that the contents had been very much disturbed as can be seen in Figure 2. Once the bones were removed and looked at many of them were identifiable and a fair proportion of the skeleton was present as can be seen in Figure 3.

The skull was very broken but a lot of it was present. Only fragments of the maxillae and mandibles were there and only four teeth, one of which has been sent for radiocarbon dating. The vertebrae too were very broken and parts of only 10 were found.

Of the bones which make up the shoulder and arm only the left clavicle and humerus were complete, but parts of the others were identifiable. There were no wrist bones and only 4 bones from the hand. The legs were in better shape but even here there were missing bones. Both pelvises have gone and the only complete bone is the right tibia. All the ankle bones came from the right foot but the two foot bones were from the left.

Figure 3
Assembled bones of a young male, height about 5ft 6in.



Conclusions

Some conclusions can be drawn from these fragmentary bones. The sternal epiphysis of the clavicle is fused so it is over 25 years old. There is little wear on the single molar tooth indicating a young adult rather than mature. This conclusion is supported by the fusion of the skull bones none of which are fused externally.

The sex of the individual was more difficult to determine as the skull was fragmentary and there were no pelvises. The occipital ridge was visible in the skull fragments and it was very male like. Unfortunately the mastoids were of different sizes and had to be discounted. However the femur head could be measured and was within the parameters of a male so we can say that this was a young adult male.

Using the single complete tibia and the Trotter and Gleaser formula for a male, his height was 168cm (5ft 6in). There were no indications as to the cause of death. There were some signs of wear on the thoracic vertebrae but this was probably normal wear and tear.

This is the skeletal remains of a slightly built, young male. When exactly he lived must await the results of the radiocarbon test.