

Thomas Street Burial

**Not so much
of a crime
scene, more
an elusive
Roman burial**

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The third burial which the Society was asked to excavate, was discovered by the owner of a house in Thomas Street, Walcot, Bath in November. The owner was enlarging a small basement level courtyard, when he discovered the foot end of a Romano British stone coffin behind a side wall, some seven feet below the garden level. He cleared around the end and over the lid for about eighteen inches before calling the County Archaeologist, who attended with the Senior Scenes of Crime Officer (SOCO) from the Avon and Somerset Constabulary. The owner had by this time levered the lid to one side, revealing bones, two of which, the tibia and fibula, were removed by the SOCO, who took them to Southmead Hospital to see if the pathologist could state whether they were old!

On arrival it was obvious that this was a Romano British burial, but that excavation would be very difficult, as one side of the coffin was tight against a retaining wall of the property; above was the paved garden path and a small wall. The owner offered to lift the garden path and to dig down about three feet, which would be well above any related finds.

However, on return to the site some days later, it was discovered that not only had the hole been dug, but that the face had been excavated back, and the wall foundation bridged with a concrete lintel which rested on the foundation wall to the left. This was propped with a wooden post resting on a breeze block, which in turn had been dug into a hole alongside the right side of the coffin. Any finds from the initial digging had been put into a skip, but anything found since our visit had been put to one side, but of course the context was not known!

The only practical method of excavating was to dig down in layers from the exposed foot end, under the propped wall! Finally the level of the coffin lid was reached, only to reveal that the slab was in two separate and distinct pieces. A few fragments of Romano British pottery were found in the layers above the slab. It was decided at this stage, to remove the slab at the foot end and to excavate the coffin contents in two parts.

The slab was raised and rolled off the coffin on a sheet of plywood. The side of the coffin had been damaged in the recent work, but had also been damaged when the house was built in the 1800s. The skeletal remains at this end had been disturbed by the removal of the two leg bones, but it was apparent that disturbance had taken place in the past. The fill material sloped upward towards the point where the two slab halves met; it was clear that soil and clay had entered the coffin at this point. The coffin sloped eleven degrees towards the foot end, due to hill creep over the last one thousand eight hundred years, contributing to the apparent disturbance of the contents.

When the lower end of the coffin had been fully excavated, it was time to remove the head end slab; this proved very difficult due to the limited work space and the ever threatening lintel and wall overhead. This slab and the left side of the coffin were



Figure 1
**The stone coffin with the skull laying
on the surface at the head end.**

mortared into the retaining wall, indicating that the coffin had been discovered when the house was built. However, once removed, the rest of the coffin could be excavated; the skull lay on the surface of the fill, face down and intact but the lower jaw was missing. The rest of the fill comprised sticky clay which was impossible to trowel and each bone had to be extricated from the clay, which was then hand searched for the smallest fragments.

This excavation was carried out lying on a plywood sheet resting on the coffin sides. All of the bones were bagged up, with pottery fragments and other finds including hobnails and a fragment of blue glass. The excavation was then complete, except that the owner wished to see if he could remove the coffin. It is not clear how the situation was left; but on return a week later, the coffin had been broken when the lintel and wall collapsed. The owner had then excavated the exposed side of the coffin and in so doing found many fragments of pottery, flagons, plates, a black burnished bowl and pieces of Samian. This assemblage was certainly a burial rites feast, where pottery was placed or thrown into the grave.

The Skeleton Report

The bones found in the coffin were in a reasonable condition. They had been disturbed at some time as the skull was reversed and the arms were further down the coffin than would be expected. Where the two stones covering the coffin met, the water must have seeped through and the ribs and thoracic vertebrae in this area were decayed and in very poor condition (*Figure 2*).

Figure 2
The skeleton of a young Roman man.



The cranium was in good condition except for the facial bones. There were nine teeth in the maxillae, one of which was removed for radiocarbon dating. The mandible unfortunately was missing completely. The cervical vertebrae, the last lumbar vertebra and the sacrum were in very good condition but the rest were decayed and fragmentary.

The limbs and limb girdles were in much better condition. There were both scapuli but only the left clavicle and this was unfused at the sternal end. Both humeri had unfused proximal epiphyses. The radii and ulnas showed fused proximal and unfused distal epiphyses, but there were only 3 carpals, 7 metacarpals and 11 phalanges from both hands. Both pelvises were present, both with unfused iliac crests. All the leg bones were there, again with some epiphyses fusing. The femurs were fused proximally but not distally, the tibiae had just fused at both ends but the fibulae were rather broken. The foot bones had survived well except for the toes. There were 12 tarsals, 8 metatarsals and only 3 phalanges.

As bones fuse at the end of adolescence in a regular sequence it is possible to age this skeleton more accurately than usual so that we can say it was probably aged 18 or 19 years old. The well formed occipital ridge on the skull, the mastoid size, narrow sciatic notch and very large femur head show that it is a male. From the lengths of the femur and tibia and using the Trotter and Gleaser formulae, the young man was about 175cm (5ft 9in). There is no indication of the cause of death. So we have the skeleton of a well built young male who lived in the Roman period. When we get the results of the radiocarbon dating we shall know more exactly when he lived.