

# The Maiden Bradley Lady

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**A 35 year  
mystery is  
finally solved**

**Ceri Lambdin  
and  
Dawn Hodgson**

In August 1965, during excavations for a swimming pool at Bradley House – the ancestral home of the Duke of Somerset in Maiden Bradley – a greensand sarcophagus was discovered. Inside the sarcophagus was a lead coffin and, within that, a skeleton. The burial was excavated by Ken Annable, latterly of Devizes Museum and a short report was published in the Wiltshire Archaeological Magazine (WAM) the following year.

The burial was oriented north south and there were no grave goods present. Therefore the possibility that this was a Roman burial was based on the manufacturing techniques of the stone and lead coffins, and this was the focus of the report. Apart from the referring to the skeleton as ‘a fully extended adult’ there was no further information recorded about the person who had been buried (Annable, 1966).

The coffins and the skeleton were moved a short distance to All Saints Church, with part of the stone lid and the lead coffin lid removed so that the bones could be seen; in effect the skeleton was put on display for the public. To protect the coffins a glass topped table was placed over them. Later, in order to use that part of the church, a wooden cover was made and this obscured the view of the skeleton.

Having heard many years ago that a possible Roman burial was within the church and having recently started to research Roman occupation in the local area, I was intrigued and, with assistance from the Local History Group and the Parochial Church Council (PCC), decided to investigate further. This led to the ‘Discovering Roman Maiden Bradley’ project, with an afternoon event in April 2010 to encourage the villagers to take part in a garden survey and bring along finds for identification by myself, Robin Holley and Marek Lewcun. With permission from the PCC I was able to gain access to the skeleton for Dawn Hodgson in order that she could assess it and also remove a bone for radiocarbon dating to determine whether the burial was Roman or Medieval.

Having obtained funding, a clavicle was sent to the Chrono Centre at Queen’s University, Belfast. The result was a calibrated date between AD253-408, putting the death of Maiden Lady within the Roman period.

The attention that the skeleton received inevitably raised the issue of the display of the human remains, and the change of view since 1965. Robin and I were able to advise the PCC on options for the skeleton and coffins and it is now planned to re-inter Maiden Lady within the churchyard. A report has been sent to the Wiltshire County Archaeologist in order to update the Historic Environment Record.

## The Skeleton Report

During the afternoon of the 17 April 2010, when items of archaeological interest could be brought to be identified, I was allowed access to the skeleton. In spite of the rather restricted area around the coffins I managed to take the bones out and lay them on a sheet on the floor. Then, suitably kneeling on a hassock, I managed to identify, record and measure the bones. This was accompanied by a steady stream of interested spectators who all wanted to see ‘their’ skeleton.

The skeleton was almost complete, with all the major bones present (*see Figure 1*). There were, however, very few finger and toe bones. These may have been overlooked when the contents of the coffin were excavated. The shape of the skull, the small humerus and femur heads, and the shape of the pelvic girdle show clearly that this was a female. All the bones were fully fused so she must have been over 25, probably aged 25-35, from her teeth. On measuring the long bones it was estimated that she was about 166cm (5ft 5½in) tall. All the long bones were very smooth, with none of the enlarged attachments for muscles seen if they have been used extensively. She had done, therefore, very little physical activity, as might be expected in anyone of high status, as indicated by her burial in two coffins.

Why did she die so early? One possible explanation comes from her teeth. The first two molars on the upper left maxilla and both sides of the mandible showed very advanced decay. One molar had been lost before she died, two of the molars had abscesses, and the decayed molars had only a ring of enamel left (see Figures 2 and 3). There was calculus present on two of the third molars showing that she had had a soft diet - not surprising when you look at the state of her teeth. One possible conclusion is that she might have developed blood poisoning from the decayed teeth and this was how she died.



**Figure 1 left**  
**Maiden Lady in situ within her lead and stone coffins with the lids removed. The skeleton was almost complete, with all the major bones present**

**Figures 2 and 3 below**  
**Maiden Lady's decayed teeth, a possible cause of her early demise**



### **Acknowledgements**

Thanks to Robin and Marek for their assistance with the finds identification event.

Many thanks to Dawn for the skeleton report.

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Thanks to the Council for British Archaeology Challenge Fund for the grant for the radiocarbon dating.

### **References:**

Annable, F. K. 1966 *Wiltshire Archaeological Magazine* Vol 61 p96-97.