Excavating All Saint's

a Medieval church rediscovered

When excavations started at the site of the 'lost' church of All Saint's in York, archaeologists knew they would find burials. What they found was much more than expected: an Anchoress and the remains of soldiers who helped Oliver Cromwell take the city at the Siege of York in 1644. **Lauren McIntyre** and **Graham Bruce** explain the evidence.

Routine rescue excavations on the small plot of land at the junction of Kent Street and Fawcett Street in York were started in 2007, in advance of a major new redevelopment project. The site had previously been a cattle market, and then a massive leisure centre; it was known there were burials and foundations there, most probably associated with a Medieval church that had since disappeared. So archaeologists were not surprised when they encountered burials; however, when mysterious mass graves began appearing, the site suddenly got a lot more interesting.

In 1644, York was besieged for the first time in its long history, during the English Civil War. York was a Royalist stronghold; so, from April to July 1644, the city was under siege by Oliver Cromwell and his Parliamentary army. It was only with the Battle of Marston Moor on 2 July that the Parliamentarians were finally successful. By the end of July, the siege was over and York had been taken from the Royalists.

Historical records note that, ironically, those who suffered most in the siege were the Parliamentary forces outside the city, rather than the well-provisioned Royalists within. The besieging forces were under-supplied and suffered severe hardship; soldiers are more prone to disease as a result of poor living conditions and high levels of physical activity. Fatal disease is documented as occurring frequently in siege armies and many

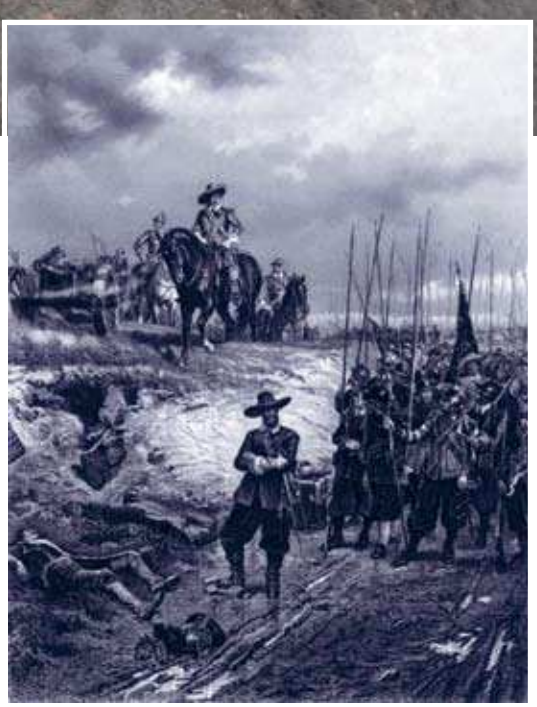
ABOVE RIGHT Excavating a mass grave on site at the lost church of All Saint's, York.

PHOTO: all images courtesy of On Site Archaeology unless otherwise noted.

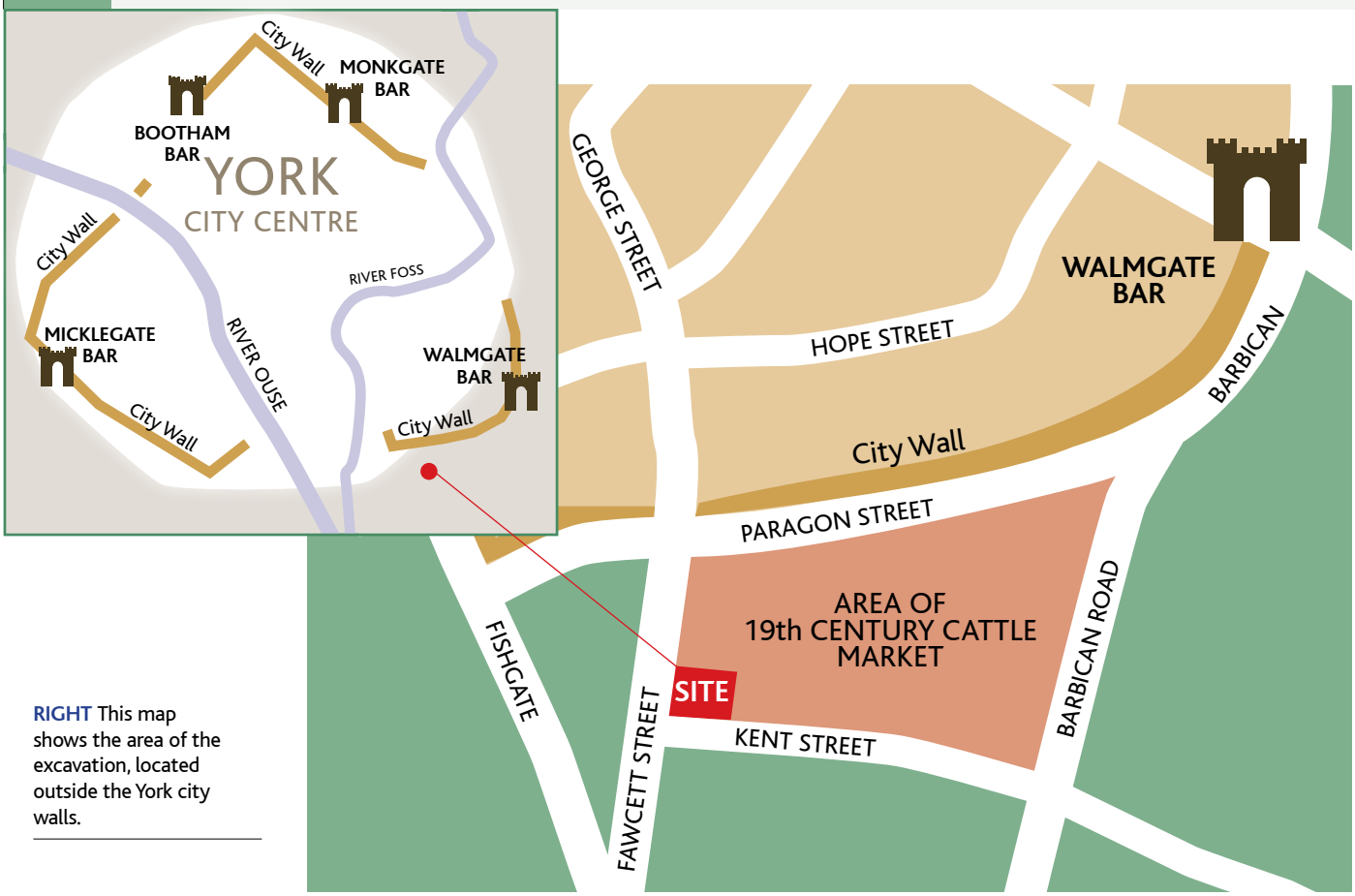
soldiers would have died outside the walls of York. Where could the bodies be buried? At Fishergate to the south of the city walls, there was a ruined church, abandoned at the time of the Dissolution of the Monasteries a century before. Here was surely an ideal place to bury the dead, in land that had once been consecrated. After the siege, they were forgotten; but now, they have all been excavated and their story can be told.

The lost Church of All Saint's, Fishergate

On Site Archaeology excavated the site between June 2007 and February 2008. Trial investigations in 1987 and 2003 had revealed a number of



RIGHT Oliver Cromwell at the battle of Marston Moor, 2 July 1644, artist unknown.



RIGHT This map shows the area of the excavation, located outside the York city walls.

Medieval burials in the area, together with cobble wall foundations, which had been interpreted as belonging to the 'lost' church of All Saint's, Fishergate. The site was scheduled for redevelopment into residential properties, and thus further excavations were needed based on the previous findings.

Very little documentary evidence exists for the church of All Saint's. The first reference to the church dates to between 1091 and 1095, telling us that the church was given to Whitby Abbey on the condition that a small number of monks from the Abbey should reside there and pray for the souls of William II and his successors. The church did not survive much after the surrender of Whitby Abbey in 1539, as part of Henry VIII's dissolution of the monasteries. Subsequently, the parish was combined with that of St Lawrence's in 1586 and the exact location of All Saint's Church was lost. In the 1820's a cattle market was constructed covering the site and a large part of the surrounding area. Documents from that time recorded that many bones were disturbed, but the precise location of these was not recorded. By the time the First Edition Ordnance Survey map was published in 1852, the approximate location of the church was shown within the limits of the cattle market.

The excavation was therefore started with the expectation that we would discover more evidence for a Medieval church and its graveyard. As the work took place from June 2007 until the following February, the archaeological team had to contend with one of the wettest summers ever recorded and, after a reasonably kind autumn, with the predictable ice and snow of the winter. Spirits were kept up by the fact that it soon became clear we were excavating rather more than just another Medieval church and cemetery. In addition to these anticipated remains, parts of a Roman cemetery, a possibly pre-Norman

BELOW The burials were located very close to the pavement, within easy reach for pedestrians - had they known what was on the other side of the barrier!

Conquest timber church, and a series of unusual post-Medieval burials were all found.

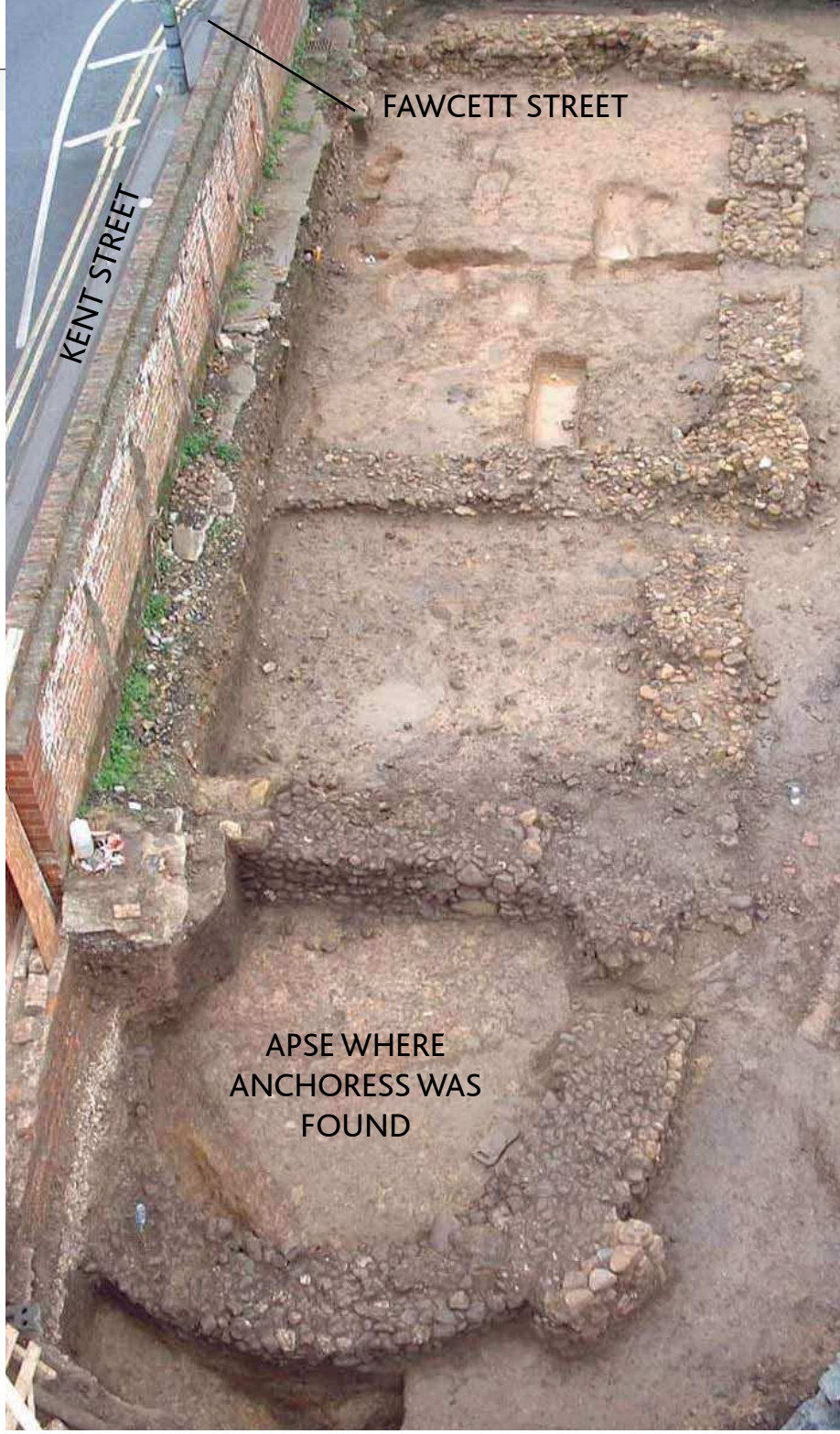
Early use of the site

The earliest archaeology discovered on the site was a cluster of seven Roman inhumation burials. These were quickly recognised as different to the Medieval burials due to the varying orientations of the graves and presence of grave goods, such as bronze brooches, rings and anklets. Scattered fragments of cremated human bone were also found spread across the site, within the fills of later graves. These earliest inhumations and evidence for cremations formed part of the larger Fishergate Roman Cemetery, evidence for which has been uncovered in this area of the city over the last two hundred years.

The Medieval church and churchyard

The church, though basically an urban parish church, was nevertheless closely associated with Whitby Abbey, and thus when the monasteries were dissolved the church suffered the same fate. Having discovered one probable wall of the Medieval church in the 2003 trial investigations, it was hoped that more of the church itself would be revealed. This did indeed prove to be the case, with the uncovering of the remains of a three-celled masonry church represented by cobble and rubble foundations. Although the walls themselves had all been removed, the foundations showed that the complete length of this church lay within the site, measuring approximately 19m long. It was at least 5m wide, but extended beyond the limits of the excavation area under the adjacent pavement. The western part of the church comprised a rectangular nave, 10m long. To the east of this was a smaller, rectangular chancel, with a semi-circular apse at the west end.

The cobble foundations of the masonry church cut through the remains of a small rectangular or square timber building, which lay on a slightly different alignment. This timber building had been built with a combination of square and circular postholes and shallow beam slots that were found cutting the natural clay within the nave. Only the south and east sides of the building were found, the north and west ones were almost certainly completely removed by the cobble



ABOVE The foundations of the Medieval church. At the far end of the nave, the early timber building is visible. The Anchoress was found in the apse towards the front.

INSET A chalice found in a grave in the chancel, almost certainly the burial of a parish priest.

ABOVE A double burial, containing a 60-70 year old woman below a teenage male.

ABOVE RIGHT A Medieval double burial, containing a 25-40 year old man and a 1-2 year old child.

BELOW An early Medieval burial, cut by the church foundation.

foundations, but it measured approximately 5m across. It is notable that the foundations of the stone church not only cut through the small timber building, but also through several burials. This early timber structure may therefore be an early church, possibly predating the Norman Conquest, or an early monastic cell.

A total of almost 550 Medieval burials were found within the church and extending outside it to the west, north and east. The northern boundary of the churchyard could be recognised by the absence of burials from the northernmost part of the site and the presence of rubbish pits in this area. There was not an obvious physical boundary such as a wall or ditch, thus a relatively lightweight fence may have sufficed, but has left no trace.

As the church and churchyard had been in use for over 400 years, many of the earlier burials had been cut by later ones, resulting in only a fairly small proportion of the skeletons being intact. The majority of the graves contained a single extended inhumation with the head to the west. There were, however, instances of double graves. Some of these contained an adult and a child, whilst others contained two adults. These may all have been members of a single family, or members of the one community who died at the same time. Occasionally the Medieval graves contained objects, such as brooches, or a possible belt. One individual found inside the chancel had been buried with a chalice and was almost certainly the parish priest.

Analysis of the skeletons showed that they represented a population of normal Medieval civilians. Many of them suffered from a degenerative joint disease, a condition similar to arthritis where joints such as the knees, shoulders and spine become worn as a result of physical activity and every day wear and tear on the body, indicating that both men and women from the All Saint's population were very physically active from a young age.

The 'Anchoress'

One of the most interesting burials was found in the apse of the stone church. It was a middle-aged woman, who was buried in an unusual, tightly crouched position rather than the normal extended position seen throughout the rest of the Medieval graveyard. The burial of the lady in the apse of the church suggests she was of high social status, as wealthy church benefactors and their families were often buried inside churches during the Medieval period. However, the unusual burial position implies that this lady represented someone other than a church benefactor.

One possibility is that the woman is a historically recorded anchoress named Lady Isabel German. Lady Isabel is known to have lived in the All Saint's churchyard between 1428 and 1448. An anchoress (or anchorite if referring to a man) is an individual who voluntarily withdraws from normal society to lead a deeply religious existence. The person would live in an 'anchorhold', a simple room or cell built up against the wall of a church. The door would then be sealed shut by the Bishop, in a special ceremony. Food and so on could be passed through a small window facing the outside, and parishioners would be permitted to come to this window to seek spiritual advice. A second window on the inside of the church would allow the anchoress to hear Mass and

'Living saints'

The practice of anchoritism – religious enclosure which was solitary and voluntarily embraced, very often in a permanent capacity – was widespread during the early and High Middle Ages. Anchoritism developed into an elite vocation which was popular amongst both men and women; in the later period it was particularly associated with pious laywomen who appear to have opted for this extreme way of life as an alternative to marriage or remarriage, allowing them, instead, to undertake the role of 'living saint' within the community.

Julian of Norwich (8 November, 1342–*c.*1416) is one of the more well-known English anchoresses, though little is known of her life aside from her writings. She was last known to be alive and in residence at the Church of St Julian in Norwich in 1416, when she was 73 years old. At the age of 30, suffering from a severe illness and believing she was on her deathbed, Julian had a series of visions of Jesus Christ, which ended when she recovered her health. These visions are the source of her major work, called *Sixteen Revelations of Divine Love* (*c.*1393), which is believed to be the first book written by a woman in the English language. Julian became well known throughout England as a spiritual authority.

BELOW The anchorhold at All Saints Church, King's Lynn is the only one surviving on the south side of a church anywhere in England. The original 12th century anchorhold is intact - and still very much in use during the daily worship of the church.

PHOTO: Daniel Gibbins/King's Lynn Church Website Design Project

receive communion. Known archaeological examples of anchorholds have been found at Letherhead Church and Compton Church in Surrey, Chester-le-Street in Durham, and at All Saint's North Street in York. There is also a surviving cell at St Julian's in Norwich.

Lady Isabel is mentioned seven times in wills where money was left to her in exchange for prayer. She is also known to have had a servant. This servant might have simply been responsible for bringing food and drink to Lady Isabel, or might have had more wide-ranging duties related to grooming and bathing. An anchoress would not leave her cell once she had assumed her post, and it is likely that such confined living would affect her health. Analysis of the skeleton showed that she was suffering from very severe osteoporosis, a condition associated with lack of movement. Furthermore, she showed advanced signs of venereal syphilis. Suffering from both these debilitating conditions means that this lady would have been severely disabled. Her mobility would have been very limited, and it is unlikely she would have survived for long without care from another person such as a servant or relative.

Another question that must be asked is whether or not there was a Medieval awareness of syphilis as a sexually transmitted disease; and if so, whether a high-born lady who had contracted it might be presented with a rather grim choice between doing penance as an anchoress, or some other suitably macabre Medieval punishment for wantonness. Additionally, whether the skeleton would have been recognised as having the specific disease syphilis at the time is debateable; there is not much osteological evidence for syphilis in pre-Columbine Europe and many theories state that the disease was brought to Europe from America in the late 15th century. Thus, her condition might have been mistaken as leprosy. However, there is definite evidence to suggest that physical deformity was directly associated with sin; considering the advanced nature of syphilis in the case of the Anchoress, it is likely that she contracted the disease via sexual contact during her adolescence or young adulthood, and so the disease could have been one of many reasons why she became an anchoress. The limited evidence currently available for the Anchoress skeleton means that it is difficult to even begin to speculate as the whether she retired from the world willingly or under duress.

BELOW The skeleton of the Anchoress at All Saint's, buried in a tight, crouched position.

PHOTO: S Aubrey Spink/ City of York Council

ABOVE This image shows the barbican of Walmgate Bar, from the city walls in 1957. Walmgate Bar is the only one retaining its barbican; this gate was the subject of some of the fiercest attacks during the Siege of York. The pens for the cattle market, held here from 1827–1970, can be seen at the right of the picture.

RIGHT A Medieval grave, showing a sharp cut down the centre of the skeleton, caused by the 19th century cattle market drains.

The Mass Graves

Whilst the excavated Medieval church and graveyard are of interest, what made the site even more fascinating was the discovery of ten mass graves, containing a total of more than a hundred skeletons. These mass graves were the latest burials interred at the site, with seven of the graves located within the stone church foundation and three outside the foundation and slightly to the north. All ten mass graves cut through earlier Medieval graves, meaning that they were likely to have been dug after the site was officially used as a cemetery. The mass grave cuts within the church respected the west and north stone foundations of the nave and chancel, suggesting that these walls were at least partially standing when the graves were dug. Other graves overlapped the internal foundations of the church, showing that these internal walls must have been removed by the time the mass graves were dug. Consequently, the mass graves seem to have been dug inside the shell of a partially demolished church.

These graves varied in size, with the smallest containing four individuals and 18 in the largest. The skeletons were arranged in parallel rows. Only a few were laid on their backs; the majority of skeletons were laid either on their side on face down and, in many cases, the limbs of individuals overlapped. In the smaller graves there was only one row of bodies; larger graves had a second row where the heads of the second row would overlap the feet of the first. In one grave, a further four bodies had been squeezed into the remaining space at right angles to the second row, again overlaying the feet of the second row. The unusual positioning of the skeletons within these graves shows that it is unlikely any of the bodies were wrapped or tied in shrouds before burial. In fact, no finds related to clothing, such as buckles, buttons, fasteners or brooches, jewellery or other personal belongings were found in direct association with these skeletons. This indicates that these people are likely to have been stripped of clothing and belongings before they were buried.

Of the skeletons found in these mass graves, an astounding 87 were identified as male. Only six skeletons were female, the remaining 20 being unsexed or of indeterminate sex. Nor were any children or elderly individuals found, despite both age groups being well represented within the earlier graveyard. The skeletons ranged in age from teenagers to approximately 50 years old, with the majority of people aged between 35-49 years old.

Most people in the group had health conditions that can be caused by excessive amounts of physical activity. The majority of skeletons show evidence of spinal joint disease, and it is even present in the younger individuals. Spinal joint disease commonly appears in older adults, so its presence in the young individuals shows they were participating in repeated physical labour, such as lifting heavy objects, from a young age.

The combined sex and age at death information indicates the skeletons are likely to represent a military group who all died within a short period of time. Other male dominated groups, such as monastic communities, were discounted as explanations because a wider range of ages would be expected, as well as a larger proportion of older adults. Given the probable 17th century

ABOVE Forgotten men from Oliver Cromwell's besieging forces, found in a mass grave in the nave of the church.

date for the mass graves, it is likely that they relate to the English Civil War. It is known that York was subjected to Parliamentary siege between April and July 1644. Approximately 30,000 men were involved on the Parliamentary side alone. Is it possible that the mass graves contained men who were killed in battle during the siege?

This would have seemed a likely explanation, however the overall pattern of health and disease shows the mass grave population had only average levels of healed trauma, and almost no evidence of violent wounds of the sort associated with battle. This contrasts to other known battlefield assemblages such as the Towton assemblage, where soldiers killed in the 1461 Battle of Towton have copious amounts of wounds caused during fighting. Many of these would have been fatal. As we have no examples of this sort of trauma in our mass graves at All Saint's, it is highly unlikely that these men were killed in combat or as a result of violence.

It is far more likely that these mass graves contain the casualties of infectious disease. It is well documented that during the Siege of York, although the Royalist army were well provisioned behind the city walls, the besieging Parliamentary forces suffered severe deprivation. This would have made them more susceptible to illness and diseases such as dysentery, typhus and typhoid, which do not affect people skeletally. Considering the length of the siege and the number of men involved, it is very likely this group of people were killed by highly infectious disease. Additionally, it is known that the nearby Walmgate Bar was an area of strong Parliamentarian activity in 1644. Thus, these mass graves likely contain the remains of Oliver Cromwell's victorious army, responsible for the Royalist defeat at the Battle of Marston Moor and the shifting of control in the north of England.

Excavation of the site of the 'lost' church of All Saint's, Fishergate has proved valuable and fascinating, and continues to generate interest. The skeletons are currently being kept for curation and study at the University of Sheffield's Department of Archaeology; in addition to the forthcoming site publication, research into all three phases of funerary activity is ongoing. @

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