Digging for the dead: archaeological practice as mortuary commemoration,

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Digging for the Dead: Archaeological Practice as Mortuary Commemoration

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Archaeologists have yet to fully appreciate the complex interactions between archaeological practice and contemporary responses towards death and commemoration in the UK. The paper reflects upon the experience of working with the local community during archaeological fieldwork in and around an English country churchyard at Stokenham in the South Hams district of Devon in southwest England during 2005 and 2006. Using this case study, it is argued that the current theories and parameters of both mortuary archaeology and public archaeology fail to adequately engage with the diverse community perceptions and concerns over mortality and commemoration. At Stokenham, the archaeological research and student-training programme engaged local people in the discovery of their past but (more importantly for the local community) also helped to secure an acceptable commemorative future. It is argued that this provides a case study of how archaeological practice can interact with community attitudes to death and memory.

Introduction

There is now an extensive archaeological literature debating the ethics of digging up, displaying and curating human remains in the UK (Swain, 2002; Curtis, 2003; Scarre, 2006; Tarlow, 2006; see also Crossland, 2000) and some well-rehearsed examples of archaeologists negotiating with communities over the treatment of mortuary remains (e.g. Lilley et al., 1994: 298–301). Furthermore, some studies have discussed the experience of archaeologists themselves in dealing with the recent-dead (Kirk and Start, 1999). Despite this, archaeologists have barely begun to investigate the complex nature of the popular appeal of the mortuary remains they study in the UK. Between the perception of mortuary archaeology as a method for scientific research into past societies and an awareness of the ethical and socio-political environment within which this work takes place, few studies have addressed the popular appeal of mortuary archaeology itself.

Certainly the popular attraction of exploring the tombs of the dead has deep roots in British history and can be traced to the Middle Ages (e.g. Schnapp, 1996: 97–98). Disturbing the dead is embedded in the very roots of the discipline in the 18th and 19th centuries (Trigger, 1989: 66–67). Yet today, the popular fascination with the ancient dead takes many forms, from popular books and articles on graves,
cemeteries, tombs and mummies (e.g. Bahn, 1996, 2002; Parker Pearson, 1999; Chamberlain and Parker Pearson, 2001) to experiencing human remains during visits to museums (e.g. Werner, 1998; Swain, 2002), public involvement in the archaeological excavation and analysis of human remains (e.g. Hatton and Burrill, 2005: 12–14) as well as via the media (e.g. Richards, 1999: 6–14). British archaeology’s popular persona is saturated by death and the dead.

Many reasons are often cited for the popular appeal of the archaeological dead in the UK. The interest might be dismissed as simply one element of the broader voyeuristic fascination with graphic images of death in British culture. Yet few would doubt that human remains have an important scientific and educational value and are frequently perceived as a direct means by which archaeologists may access past peoples’ lives and deaths (Bahn, 1996: 11; Richards, 1999: 11).

There may also be sociological reasons for this appeal. Mortuary remains are perceived as directly connecting people to real or imagined ‘ancestors’ (Richards, 1999: 8), defining their own sense of identity and affiliations with place, events and the past. Equally, graves can reveal an innate ‘humanity’ of past people in their care and respect for the dead but also give insights into past acts of violence and therefore people’s widespread ‘inhumanity’ (e.g. Fiorato et al., 2000). The archaeological dead often elicit emotional and social engagements with both the past as well as mortality, morality and spirituality.

The process of digging up and studying the dead also has an appeal. This can be regarded as an extension of a materialistic attraction of, and appeal in, revealing ‘hidden treasure’ (Holtorf, 2005: 16–38). Yet uncovering graves also resonates with the perception of the archaeologist as the heroic explorer of underworlds (Holtorf, 2005: 39–59) and the archaeologist as forensic detective, criminal investigator or surgeon who works by interpreting the ‘clues’ left by the dead (Holtorf, 2005: 34–38, 60–77). To this we might add the appeal of the perceived dangers and perils (practical, biological and spiritual) frequently associated with the disturbance of graves and tombs (e.g. Kirk and Start, 1999). Graves may also attract people because of their inherent ‘uncanny’ character (see Moshenska, 2006: 92–94) by revealing what should not be seen and challenging modern sensibilities. The apparent ‘ghoulish’, ‘body-snatching’ and ‘tomb-raiding’ nature of archaeological activity simultaneously exposes mortuary archaeology to criticisms but also holds the aura of an activity only partially sanctioned by contemporary mores.

However, this paper wishes to suggest that a further and important appeal of mortuary archaeology lies in its connections with contemporary death-ways. It is ironic that it is possible for the British public to become intimately familiar with bog bodies, ancient mummies and prehistoric skeletons by viewing their cadavers and associated material culture in museums or in archaeological texts more readily than it is possible to engage with the bodies of well-respected and loved relatives! Mortuary archaeology can be seen as providing a socially sanctioned environment within which engagements with our own mortality and bereavement can be played out. Archaeological can hence be seen as an important outlet for contemporary expressions of bereavement and commemoration through dealing with the corporeality and materiality of death in a society in which the process of dying, the moment of physical death and the corporeality of the dead remain carefully
managed and hidden from mourners (Walter, 1996, 2005). In this sense, archaeology embraces religious metaphors and practices as well as secular and personal ones of dying, death and commemoration (see also Swain, 2002: 95).

If this argument is accepted, then it is possible to rethink the role of mortuary archaeology and its popular appeal. Archaeologists have the potential to engage with and contribute to, key contemporary popular attitudes towards mortality. It is to illustrate this argument that the paper suggests that archaeological fieldwork can operate as a form of mortuary commemoration as well as a means of uncovering the past. In some instances the discovery of mortuary remains and monuments can contribute to scientific research but also to a community’s perceptions of their identity and social memories as well as their own understandings of mortality. Yet, equally, it can be the anticipation for future mortuary commemoration that provides the appeal of archaeological practice.

**The Method and Approach of the Study**

As a means of illustrating how archaeologists can interact with perceptions of mortality in the UK, the paper will consider the authors’ recent experiences of archaeological fieldwork at Stokenham, Devon in the southwest of England. The authors are aware that in focusing upon a single case study, only a proportion of the relationships between archaeology and the popular culture of death can be explored, particularly as no old graves were found during the fieldwork under consideration. Given the social, political, economic and religious diversity of British society, it must also be appreciated that archaeological projects will encounter very different attitudes and responses to mortality in the communities they work with. Hence this study cannot address the full range of archaeological experiences with mortality.

It is important to mention that rather than a formal ethnographic study of an archaeological project and its community context, the paper is based on a mixture of in-depth conversations with local people and first-hand observations by the authors of the behaviour and attitudes of the community to their churchyard as the archaeological project unfolded. The paper also draws upon evidence concerning how members of the Stokenham parish responded and became engaged with the archaeological process itself, including both excavations of prehistoric and medieval settlement evidence and the recording of the churchyard memorials.

Partly due to the nature of the community’s attitudes to death and commemoration only slowly becoming clear to the authors and partly because of the sensitive nature of the subject matter, this study does not rely on directed and structured data from formal interviews or the quantification of questionnaires. Instead, the paper benefits from the experience of dealing with, living amidst and working alongside an English rural community and recording their unsanctioned responses to the project. The study also incorporates the comments of a range of community members to early versions of this paper. It is not claimed that all members of the community responded to or would adhere to all of the attitudes and practices represented in this paper. Instead, the paper has synthesized a diversity of attitudes to mortality among those from the community interested in the archaeological work, particularly mature and elderly community members.
The study sets this evidence with reference to the broader interdisciplinary literature on contemporary British death-ways currently unrecognized and untapped by archaeologists. In doing so, the case study demonstrates the importance for community-focused archaeological projects of a deep and contextual appreciation of contemporary death-ways.

Community Archaeology at Stokenham, Devon, UK, 2005–2006

Archaeological fieldwork was conducted around the Anglican parish church of St Michael and All Angels situated on the eastern side of Stokenham village in April 2005 and July 2006 (Williams and Turner, 2005; Williams, forthcoming; Figure 1). The archaeological research (including field-walking, topographical survey, geophysical survey and excavation) focused on a field to the east of Stokenham churchyard known as Manor Field. The fieldwork revealed a series of prehistoric ditches as well as medieval and Tudor settlement occupation connected with the site of the manor of Stokenham abandoned in the 1580s (Waterhouse, 2002: 48). Both fieldwork seasons also involved a systematic churchyard survey (see Mytum, 2000; Figure 2).

FIGURE 1 A view of the Stokenham churchyard showing the proximity between the excavations and the most recent graves. Note the internal boundary between the older churchyard and the most recent extension. The churchyard is almost full, prompting the archaeological investigation of a newly purchased further extension into Manor Field.
The Stokenham fieldwork successfully fulfilled both research and student-training objectives. In addition, building upon previous community archaeology projects involving the University of Exeter (Brown et al., 2004), the Stokenham fieldwork integrated the X-Arch project supported by the Heritage Lottery Fund. Activities included local volunteers working on the excavations, and a range of activities arranged for open-days and the visits from primary schools, local people, archaeological societies and visitors (Figure 3).

Owing to the elderly composition of the community, only some local people wanted to actively participate in the fieldwork, although many more helped in other ways. Assistance included free access to land, facilities, equipment and (last by no means least) refreshments. It would be easy to regard such forms of support as subsidiary, yet the success of the project depended entirely on the generosity of the community. In addition to the interest of the discoveries uncovered, the project fostered local enthusiasm in the history of the village and its environs and solidified the community into a common purpose at its spatial and conceptual heart.

**Figure 2** Nick Tingley and Lauren Cook, archaeology students from the University of Exeter, recording grave-stones in the Stokenham churchyard, July 2006.
The Perception of Stokenham’s Past

Stokenham parish contains many families including farmers and those employed in the tourist industry, but the region is also a popular retirement location. The population of the parish therefore includes a high proportion of elderly people who have spare time and interests in local wildlife and history. There are many regular church-goers and a large number of local people of all ages actively contribute to community events on a regular basis. These full-time residents are joined in the summer months by tourists who flock to this popular holiday destination close to Slapton Sands, some of whom are regular visitors to the area with long-standing attachments to the community.

Many local people were fascinated by the discovery of both the prehistoric and medieval remains uncovered. However, it was apparent that there was far more interest in the survey of the churchyard and our record of the predominantly 19th and 20th century memorials to the dead of the parish. Equally, despite the fact that no graves were uncovered, the juxtaposition of the church and churchyard with the archaeological excavations led to frequent enquiries over whether burials were uncovered, fuelling interest in the excavations beyond what was actually found.

Indeed, further interest was generated through the associations of the fieldwork with the more recent history of the parish. Stokenham was subject to a distinctive experience during World War II that remains pivotal to the history of the area and the sense of place and identity for local people. Stokenham parish was deserted
between 1943 and 1944 so that it could serve as part of the US Army’s training area in preparation for the D-Day landings on Utah beach (Exercise Tiger: Bradbeer, 1973; Rose-Price and Parnell, 2004). Today these training exercises are well-known both locally and internationally for the deaths of up to 1000 US soldiers. Some of these deaths were due to ‘friendly fire’ but a large proportion can be attributed to a single incident in which poorly defended US landing craft loaded with soldiers participating in exercises in Lyme Bay were attacked by German E-boats (naval attack-craft armed with machine-guns and torpedoes: Small, 1988). More US soldiers died in this action than were lost during the D-Day landings on Utah beach. With prominent memorials at Slapton, Torcross as well as within Stokenham church and churchyard, the Stokenham parish forms part of a ‘sacrificial landscape’ of World War II but of a very different kind from those usually discussed in relation to battlefields and war cemeteries (see Tarlow, 1999: 147–165; Holtorf and Williams, 2006: 246). The churchyard at Stokenham is an element of this commemorative landscape, providing a focus of remembrance for both the sacrifices of local people who agreed to give up their homes and both British and American war-dead. Indeed, since Stokenham has grown so much since the 1950s, with many new-comers from outside of the region joining the community, the World War II desertion and American soldier’s deaths provide a common focus for the history and identity of the parish, with the soldiers becoming ‘adopted ancestors’ for local people. Hence, there was an inevitable expectation by local people that the excavations would uncover traces of the war-time American occupation. The fact that the excavations neither produced evidence of the training exercises that left the church and adjacent pub severely damaged by American shelling or uncovered the war-graves of US soldiers killed during Exercise Tiger did not prevent the excavations encouraging considerable discussion and speculation in the parish over these war-time events.

In the light of this evidence, the Stokenham project not only enhanced an appreciation of the community’s distant past, it also generated interest in Stokenham’s recent history, including the commemoration of both the community’s dead and the war-dead of an allied nation. Hence, the archaeological project operated as a catalyst for interest in the past, regardless of the actual discoveries made. However, perhaps more than any interest in the past, it became clear that the project’s success at community engagement derived first and foremost through interaction with future commemoration rather than the remembrance of the past.

The Future of Commemoration at Stokenham

The primary reason for the community’s extensive and unswerving support for the archaeological research lay in the circumstances by which the churchyard required an extension and archaeological intervention was deemed necessary. Stokenham’s church and churchyard have been a place of religious worship but also the parish’s primary locus for death, burial and commemoration since at least the 12th century AD. However, in the later 20th century, the original churchyard was extended upon two occasions to provide space for memorials for the community. This reflected the increased size and wealth of the post-war community, the rising popularity of
raising permanent memorials among all social classes and perhaps also a rising reluctance to re-use old graves (see Mytum, 2004). However, by 2004 it was clear to the vicar and parish council that the churchyard was running out of room for new graves. Rather than re-using old graves or resorting to distancing the dead through burial in local authority cemeteries in Plymouth or Torquay, the only solution perceived by the community was to purchase additional land to extend the graveyard to the northeast into Manor Field. Archaeological evaluations of this plot by the contract unit Exeter Archaeology led Devon County Council to stipulate the requirement for a full archaeological excavation prior to the consecration of the plot and its use for new graves. With limited funds at their disposal, the parish council approached the University of Exeter to complete the work, hence providing a prime opportunity to investigate a medieval and Tudor manor site to meet research, student-training and community archaeology requirements of the University’s Department of Archaeology. From an archaeological viewpoint, the crisis on churchyard space may be seen as fortuitous. From the community’s perspective, the interest of Department of Archaeology might be regarded as a fortunate and cheap way for the community to achieve a practical need. However, it became clear that the desire to retain the churchyard as a mortuary and commemorative space was more than an issue of utility, it built on the manifold significances and values of the churchyard for local people. It is to the importance of the churchyard as a place in the community landscape that we must now turn to appreciate its importance for local people.

The Mortuary and Commemorative Significance of the Stokenham Churchyard

Despite a burgeoning literature on mourning, dying, burial and commemoration by sociologists and anthropologists in the UK (see Hallam and Hockey, 2001; Walter, 2005; Valentine, 2006), there has been limited attention paid to English rural communities and the uses and significances they afford to graves and their churchyard settings. Recent studies have emphasized the enduring importance of the grave as a place of commemoration for many different social, religious and ethnic communities in British society but the tendency has been to focus on urban local-authority cemeteries (Francis et al., 2001, 2005). Churchyards are regarded as traditional and hence peripheral to the principal changes in 19th and 20th century mortuary and commemorative practice (Jupp, 1993, 2005; Davies, 2002; Walter, 2005). Equally, archaeological studies of post-medieval death and commemoration have increasingly contributed to these debates but rarely have dealt with the evolving use of churchyards (see Mytum, 2004). Indeed, researchers tend to assume that churchyards are now peripheral to the modern English way of death. However, for many rural communities such as Stokenham the churchyard is encountered regularly by worshippers at the church but it is also the focus of a range of other practices. As identified for cemeteries that originated in the 19th century and continue to be a focus of burial and commemoration, churchyards provide a site of personal and community identity rooted in the past (Bailey, 1977: 197–209; Francis et al., 2005: 201).
**Burial rituals**
In modern Church of England burial rites, the service is conducted within the church and ends at the grave-side. The churchyard is therefore the end-point of successive mortuary rituals. At Stokenham, the graves of one or more individuals were commemorated by gravestones (Figure 4). Since every parishioner, whether a regular worshipper or not, has the right for burial within the churchyard, it is clear that successive mortuary rituals perpetuate one kind of fixed and monumental community that cuts across social and religious divides at the spatial heart of the parish and the village. The continuation of this function was the primary concern for the archaeological excavations to go ahead.

**Committals for cremations**
In the UK cremation is less common away from towns and crematoria (Jupp, 1993, 2005) but has increasingly been embraced by rural communities as a relatively cheap and space-efficient means of commemoration in which the dead can be returned to the churchyard. At Stokenham there is a large cremation plot south of

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**FIGURE 4** A view from the church tower looking east over the churchyard. The eastern boundary of the original churchyard is marked by a path and two successive extensions to the east can be seen. The site of the excavations in Manor Field is visible in the middle distance. Slapton Ley, the storm-beach at Torcross and Lyme Bay are visible in the far distance.
the church as well as a new plot laid out and prepared during the July 2006 season. While inhumation remains a popular choice in the Stokenham parish, cremation burials are an increasingly common option for the community. It was observed that they were especially popular for those who came from the parish but have died a long way from home.

Cremation burial also facilitates the addition of the ashes to existing burial plots of family members. This is a relatively recent trend in the UK, particularly over the last decade (Davies, 2002: 77–80; Kellaher et al., 2005). In these ways, the churchyard has been adapted to receive and commemorate both the inhumed and cremated dead, both individually and collectively, as a community. Rather than a secular rite in contradiction to churchyard burial, cremation has now been accepted as a means of integrating the dead into the Christian churchyard (contra. Kellaher et al., 2005; see Williams, forthcoming).

Commemoration in the churchyard

Subsequent to the burial and the raising of a memorial, a range of practices render the Stokenham churchyard a focus of commemoration. In this sense, the churchyard is a place of personal bereavement as well as organized public ceremonies.

Some mourners living within the parish appear to visit the graves of relatives on a regular basis. There is clear evidence for the tending of burial and cremation plots as well as the placing of flowers and messages by the memorials. If not regularly visited, graves may be tended on public holidays, religious festivals and upon anniversaries, including the deceased’s birth, wedding and death.

While commemorative practices were most often observed in relation to the newer memorials, some older memorials were given an equal amount of care and attention. Moreover, local people were seen tending the graves and memorials of non-relatives while the warden also ensures that no graves appear uncared for (see below).

Visitors to the graves were frequently among those interested in the archaeological research. Interest was shown in the churchyard survey and many were pleased that the graves were being recorded for posterity. Moreover, given that the excavations were immediately adjacent to the newest memorials, the archaeologists were working alongside those tending graves on a daily basis. The churchyard therefore acts as a continued focus of engagement between the living and the dead.

The churchyard as garden and home

In many ways the churchyard, as with modern cemeteries, can be viewed as more than an arena for burial, memorialization and commemorative practice. The churchyard can be viewed as a landscape of commemoration in itself (see Tarlow, 2000). This significance revolves around the widespread concept of the churchyard as a ‘garden’ and ‘home’ (Francis et al., 2005: 210–212).

The respect for the graves is manifest by the churchyard’s overall pristine maintenance including individual graves, benches, paths and walls (contra. Walter, 1993; see Francis et al., 2005). This level of maintenance seems to hold a particular importance for the elderly in Stokenham parish and finds a close parallel with the carefully presented lawns of the retirement homes in the village (Figures 1 and 4). Yet, in
many ways, the tending of graves with flowers is the clearest connection between the concept of a grave as both garden and home for the deceased (Francis et al., 2005: 210). Equally though, the churchyard was observed in use as a place for walks and for local people to sit on benches and enjoy the view as well as visiting graves. These are further ways by which the churchyard at Stokenham appears to operate as a public space akin to that of parks and gardens in the urban context.

**Home by the sea**

The commemorative significance of the churchyard is also connected with the associations between the cemetery and the wider agricultural and natural environment around it. Visiting community members not only focused their attention upon the progress of the excavations but also upon the beauty of the spot. The new burial plot has an eastern prospect down a beautiful green valley edged by rolling Devonian hills towards Slapton Ley. Certainly the location of the new plot facilitated by the excavations fitted the existing tradition of an eastwards expansion of the churchyard (the only direction available for expansion). Yet it is this view of, and relationship with, the Ley and the sea beyond, as well as the wider positive aesthetics of the spot, that were repeatedly mentioned by local people as qualities that made the existing churchyard as well as the new burial plot appropriate and desirable final resting places (see also Pollard, 1999: 35–36).

The importance of acquiring a sea-view reflects the aspirations of the living community and is reflected in the morphology of the village as it has expanded since World War II. Each successive bungalow built around the historic core of the settlement has been placed on a south-facing slope vying for a sea-view to the east. Equally the economics of the tourist trade have directed this process, with a sea-view being a desirable attribute of any hotel, guest house or holiday cottage.

Hence the aspiration for a sea-view for the dead is not only a reflection of person and community links to the sea in life but perhaps also an extension of the late 20th and early 21st century obsession with viewing the sea during one’s retirement years. Indeed, the popular perception of living by the sea as rejuvenating (Laviolette, 2003: 233) might be connected with the regenerative symbolism associated with death across cultures (see Bloch and Parry, 1982) and manifest in the placing of flowers by the grave (Goody and Poppi, 1994; Francis et al., 2005: 212).

Those informants with whom we discussed this made it clear that this aesthetic was for the dead as well as to comfort visitors to the grave-side (Figure 4). This links very closely with the enduring concept of the grave as a home to be inhabited by the dead. Indeed dealing with planning applications and stipulations in order to extend the churchyard mirrors the struggles local people face to build or extend their homes. Both seem to be regarded by some locals as part of the same planning process and it seems that the grave is regarded by some as a permanent home for the dead, succeeding the temporary residence in life.

**Commemoration and the parish**

The churchyard encapsulates a relationship with parish community commemoration different from that operating in other types of cemetery. Stokenham is one of England’s largest parishes, so the burying community encompasses not only the
village itself but also other villages, hamlets and farms within the parish. The churchyard, hence, embodies a community of ancestors of the entire parish rather than simply the village, perhaps more than even the church itself (Holtorf and Williams, 2006: 240–241).

**Commemoration and the wider world**

The community created through the material presence of the churchyard is not an exclusive and insular one. This is because the churchyard at Stokenham commemorates a variety of connections between the parish and the wider world. Associated with a long tradition of seafaring, Stokenham churchyard commemorates memorials to community members lost at sea, including those whose bodies were never recovered. Furthermore, the churchyard contains the graves of individuals who died in the parish (again many who died at sea) but far from their native homes, including North America and Scotland. It was also clear that a main reason for churchyard visits was researching family histories by those who no longer live in the area. Hence the churchyard connects Stokenham to personal and family histories throughout the globe.

**War and commemoration**

As with many English churchyards, the war dead have a special place. With the distinctive grave-stones of the Imperial War Graves Commission, as well as the war memorial that commemorates the sacrifice of the parish in both World Wars (and therefore indirectly other conflicts), the churchyard connects the community with the history of warfare and the British Empire central to the community’s sense of identity. Equally, the church contains a memorial to the American war dead of Exercise Tiger, so important for local perceptions of the past (see above) as well as a focus for pilgrimages by American families and those interested in World War II.

Most recently the grave of Ken Small has become a focus for visitors. Small spent his lifetime researching and promoting the commemoration of Exercise Tiger, including the raising of a tank from the sea-bed for display as a war memorial at Torcross and authoring the book *The Forgotten Dead* (Small, 1988). During life, Small was an agent for the development of the commemorative landscape of World War II in Stokenham and Slapton parishes. In death, his grave is a further connection between the churchyard and the community’s sense of the past and a further mode in Stokenham’s commemorative landscape for both locals and visitors.

Drawing together these themes it can be argued that the Stokenham churchyard has multiple, overlapping uses and significances for different types of community – both geographically focused and dispersed across the globe. The churchyard is more than the burial ground of a tightly and exclusively defined ‘parish’ community, but a commemorative space that intersects many different social identities, attitudes to the dead and the past. The Stokenham churchyard can be seen as a place that makes and re-makes a common sense of community and its social memory through its use and physicality, rather than serving as an ancillary space appended to a living community and its place of religious worship. This is not an ‘ideal’ community but a constantly evolving commemorative space created through dialogues between the living and the ‘gardens’ and ‘homes’ of the dead.
Archaeological practice as mortuary commemoration

This discussion provides the context for reappraising the role of the archaeological fieldwork at Stokenham in 2005 and 2006. In combination, it is clear that whilst for many in the village its two pubs, the village hall and the church are important community foci, the churchyard remains at the heart of the Stokenham community. This seems especially the case for the elderly of the community, who regularly visit the churchyard for recreation or to tend graves and have a close interest in preserving its role as a focus for burial and commemoration. Indeed the archaeological activities themselves and the community participation in the fieldwork provide a clear illustration of the necessity felt by the community in perpetuating the churchyard as a social, religious and mnemonic space.

Through the period of the two field seasons, the community patiently endured the disruption and noise of a large archaeological project, including a churchyard survey and digging close to the newest graves. Indeed, frequently during the excavation the visitors to the excavations were those coming to tend fresh or recent graves. In fact it became clear that the primary reason for the considerable efforts in supporting the excavation by (mainly mature and elderly) local people were not a zealous enthusiasm for uncovering the past, but a desire to secure burial-plots with sea-views at the heart of their community. Helping the community to forge their own commemorative futures, archaeological practice was here a form of mortuary practice.

In early 21st-century Britain, preparing for one’s death is much about practical action. It concerns preparing one’s will, securing the finances for a burial plot and perhaps even planning and financing one’s own funeral and preparing one’s own gravestone as well as those of near-relatives. Local people were viewing the archaeological fieldwork from this perspective, as an element of their necessary practical preparations for the deaths of their family-members and for themselves. Indeed, this challenges the over-used archaeological adage that the ‘dead do not bury themselves’ (see Williams, 2004: 263–265) for at Stokenham the support for the church, its churchyard and its burial rights were forms of ante-mortem practical funerary activity. When observing and assisting the archaeological project, it was sensed that the archaeological work was about making space for the dead as much as revealing the past. Indeed, it seemed fitting that on the last day of the dig, we agreed to use soil from the spoil-heap of the excavations to prepare the new cremation plot within the churchyard. This might be regarded as a further way in which the archaeological work prepared the ground for the future-dead.

Conclusion: digging for the dead

The Stokenham project continues to value research and student-training parallel to its role of allowing communities to engage with and participate in their heritage. The public were attracted to the dig for many reasons, including the settlement remains found and the promise that ancient and recent burials might be uncovered. However, the circumstances in which the project arose have revealed the deep-seated social and religious significance of the English rural churchyard and its
importance as a continuing focus for death, burial and commemoration in the 21st century. As well as adding to the community’s experience of the past, the project facilitated the extension of the churchyard and helped to sustain the churchyard as a place for burying the dead, the committal of ashes and the various acts of remembering connected to it. The Stokenham fieldwork therefore enabled the community’s retrospective commemoration of the past and prospective commemoration for the future (see Holtorf and Williams, 2006). The more elderly Stokenham villagers who principally facilitated and at times participated in the excavation can be viewed as agents negotiating with archaeologists to secure the commemorative future of their community rather than simply as fellow explorers of a distant past. Perhaps in this sense, archaeological activities can be regarded as a further way in which material culture is implicated in modern death ways alongside memorials, photographs and embodied practices of bereavement (see Hallam and Hockey, 2001).

Holtorf (2005: 150–160) has emphasized that ‘archaeo-appeal’ is generated through archaeological experience and a series of metaphors surrounding archaeology as exploration. This was certainly the case for the appeal of archaeology for the Stokenham community. However, at Stokenham the value of archaeology was cultivated very differently from the meanings of the past in the present envisaged by Holtorf (2005: 99–111). Here the attraction of archaeology was one connected with mortality and faith as well as concerning personal, family and community pasts and futures. From this perspective, archaeology as popular culture is not about entertainment, carnival or political rhetoric, but about communities working through their understandings of who they are, involving both their remembered and imagined histories as well their aspirations for the future.

Concerning current discussions of the ethics and politics of mortuary archaeology, the Stokenham fieldwork serves to question the perception that archaeologists must balance between the necessity to respect the dead on the one hand, and the value of mortuary remains for scientific enquiry on the other. Both sides of this equation ignore the importance of archaeology in ‘popular culture’ by enabling and mediating modern people’s perceptions of, and experiences of death and commemoration (see also Curtis, 2003: 30–31). In the case of Stokenham, a focus on scientific value would have completely ignored the reasons why the community valued the perpetuation of their churchyard and wanted archaeologists to be there in the first place. Meanwhile, a focus on ethical guidelines and placing a priority upon ‘respecting the dead’ would risk ignoring what the community actually wanted from archaeologists. Such a view would risk overlooking the positive roles that archaeologists can make by joining together community aspirations and archaeological research.

The past serves to comfort and provide a focus for contemplation on death that is absent from the graphic depictions of death but concealed realities of dying, death and burial in modern culture. When archaeology serves directly to facilitate future commemoration, this appeal can be extended; archaeology becomes a mnemonic project of future burial and commemoration. At Stokenham, while no old burials were found in archaeological research, local people and the archaeological students were ‘digging for the dead’.
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