Driffield Terrace

An *Insight* Report

By Kurt Hunter-Mann

Contents

Figures

1. Location and historical background

Driffield Terrace lies about 1km south-west of York city centre on the north-west side of The Mount, part of the main road into York from the south. It lies on the high ground formed by the York Moraine, a ridge of material left behind at the end of the last glaciation about 12,000 years ago. This ridge provides a means of crossing the low-lying Vale of York from east to west, and has been an important routeway since Roman times, if not earlier. The modern main road line represented by Tadcaster Road, The Mount and Blossom Street broadly follows the line of the Roman road.

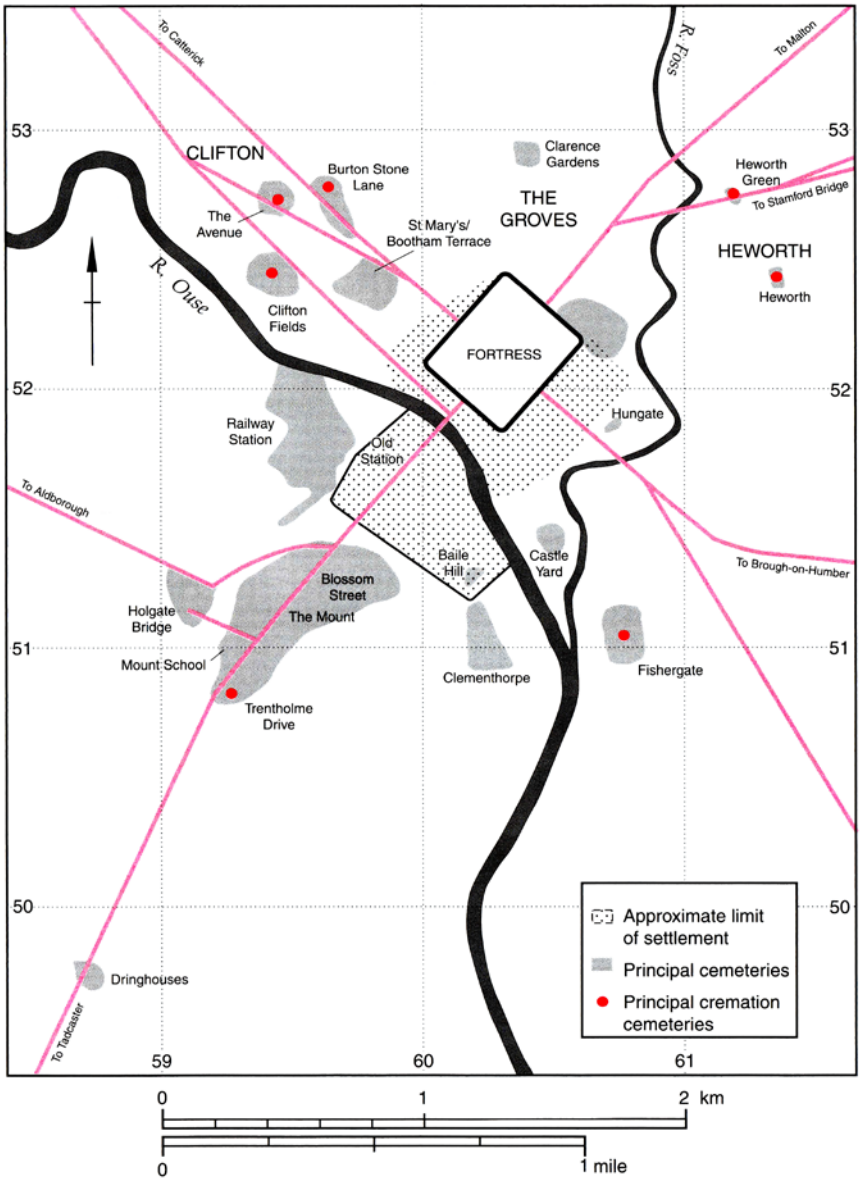

***Figure 1**: Location of the principal cemetery zones of Roman York.*

York was chosen as the base for a Roman legion in the late 1st century, and a legion was garrisoned there until the end of the Roman period. A civilian settlement developed to serve the legionaries. As burial within the city was forbidden under Roman law, people were buried in the surrounding area. The burials tended to concentrate alongside the main roads, partly because people wished to be remembered, even if only by passers-by. As the main route into York from London and the south, the Roman road on The Mount would have been one of the more sought-after places to be buried. Many Roman tombstones and other funerary monuments have been unearthed in the area since the 18th century, indicating that this area was a popular spot for the burial of the wealthy and influential.

A small Anglian cremation cemetery was found about 100m to the north-east in 1859, but there is little other evidence for activity after the Roman period. The area was probably used for farming until the 18th century, interrupted only by the construction of a sconce or fort in the mid-17th century during the English civil war. Mount House and a number of other large houses were built alongside The Mount during the 18th century; no doubt many of the Roman discoveries were made during these building works, and again when these houses were replaced with a row of houses lining the newly constructed Driffield Terrace in the later 19th century.

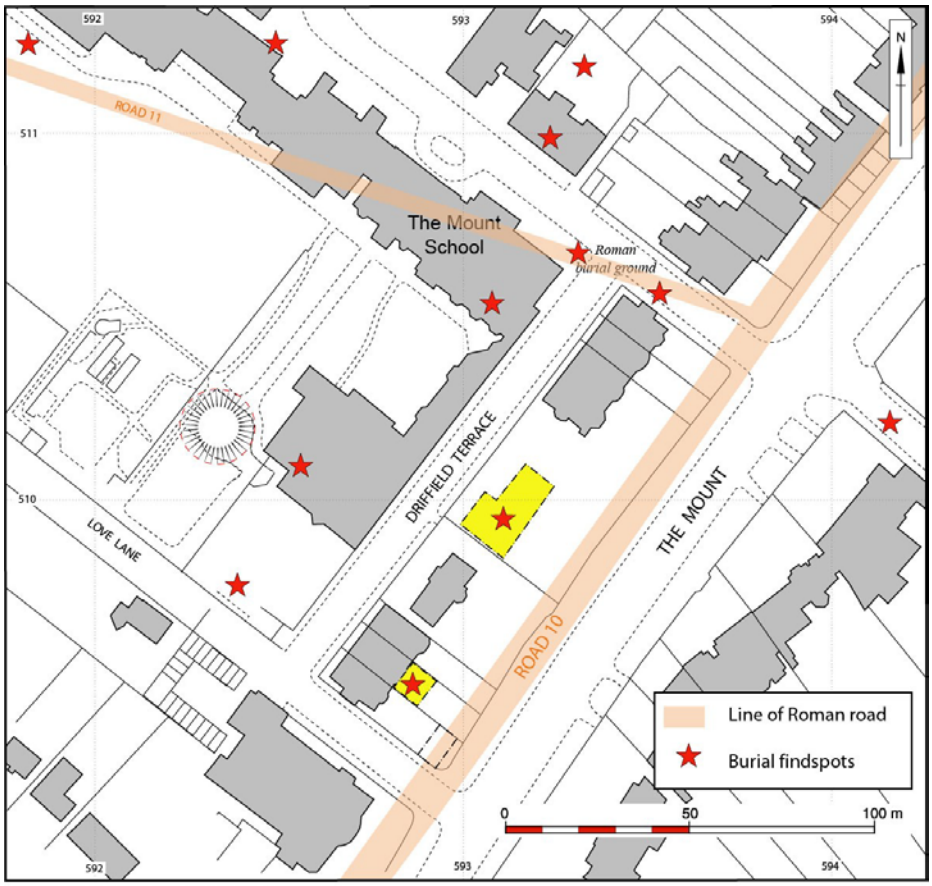

***Figure 2**: Location map showing 3 Driffield Terrace (larger yellow area) and 6 Driffield Terrace (smaller yellow area).*

2. Excavations: Introduction

In 2004 plans were developed to build flats on an open space next to 3 Driffield Terrace, and so an evaluation, in the form of four test pits, was carried out to ascertain whether any archaeological remains were present on the site. The evaluation confirmed that there were ancient human burials present, which meant that an archaeological excavation would be required to remove any human remains before the development could take place.

The excavation at 3 Driffield Terrace took place in late 2004 and early 2005. Very quickly it became clear that there were many burials of Roman date on the site. In total, 56 inhumations and 12 cremated burials were found – another part of the vast Roman cemetery along Blossom Street and Tadcaster Road. However, it was also immediately clear that a high proportion of the inhumations had been decapitated, which was unusual.

Meanwhile, in 2004, planned landscaping to the rear of 6 Driffield Terrace was also evaluated by test pits, and again confirmed the presence of human burials. Consequently, an excavation of this, smaller development area was carried out in 2005. Here, 24 inhumations and one cremation were excavated. Remarkably, many of these inhumations had also been decapitated.

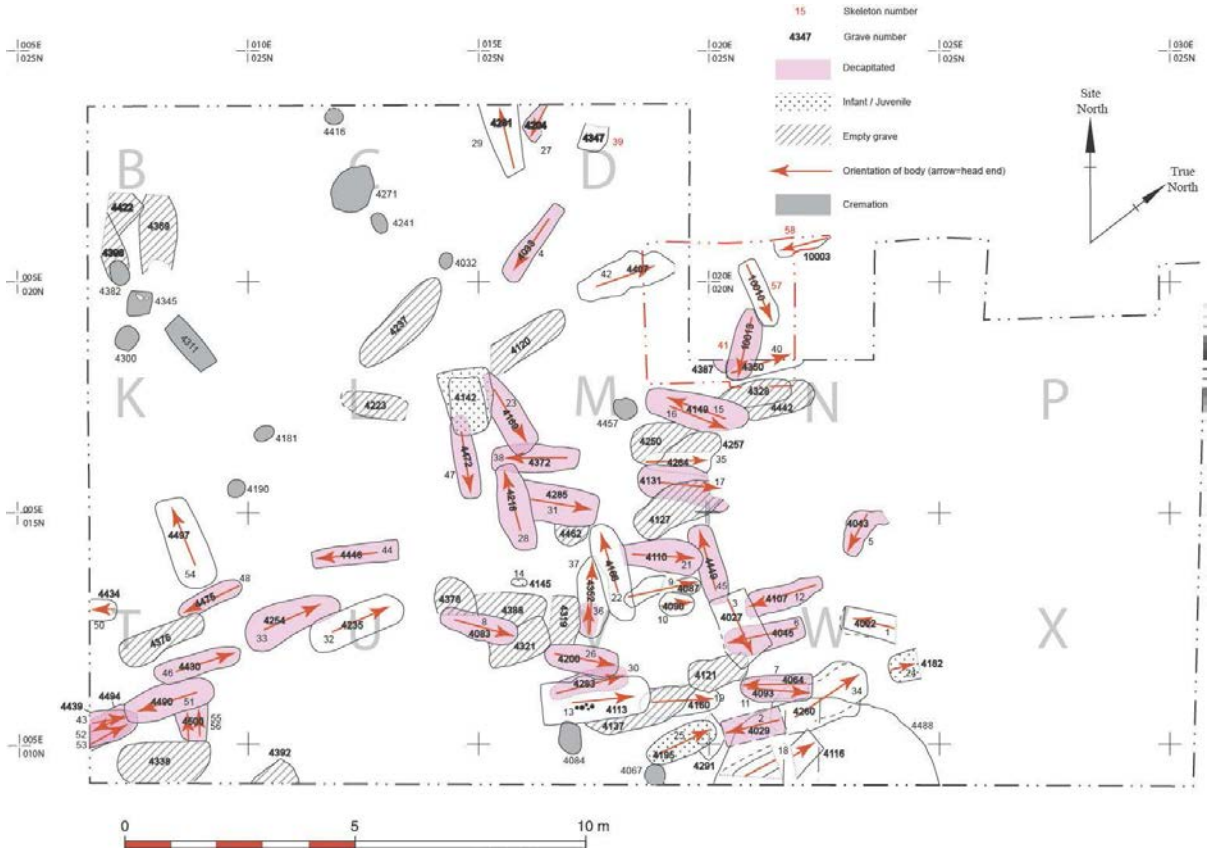

***Figure 3**: 3 Driffield Terrace site plan.*

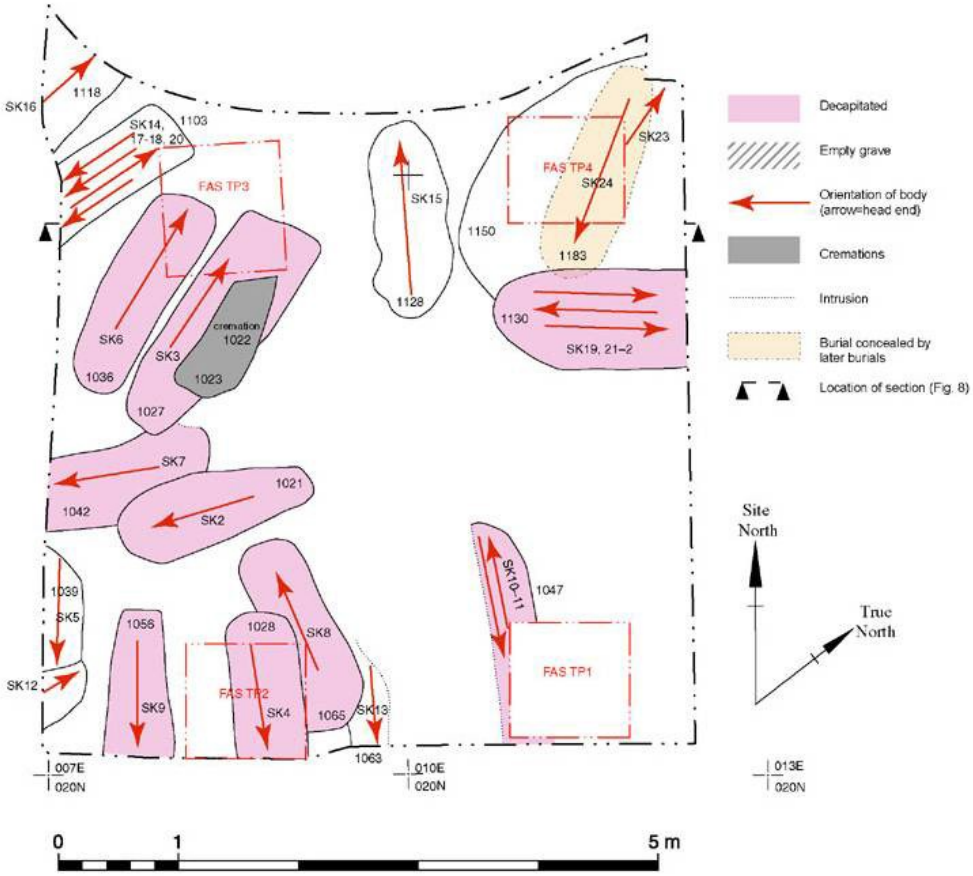

***Figure 4**: 6 Driffield Terrace site plan.*

3. Site Phasing

3 Driffield Terrace

Although several dozen burials were found at 3 Driffield Terrace, it was a large trench and so many were not inter-cut with other burials. This poses a problem with dating the isolated burials, especially if they were not found with pottery or other finds. However, sufficient burials were found cutting one another to suggest that the cemetery had been in use throughout the Roman period. The sequences of burials, along with the dating evidence provided by finds, make it possible to suggest four phases of Roman cemetery (Phases 3.1–4). Phase 1 was the pre-Roman ground surface. Phase 2 was a ditch that seems to have been parallel with the Roman road (aligned south-south-west/north-north-east), and was probably an early boundary marker that pre-dated the cemetery; however the ditch was probably not completely infilled until the early 3rd century and so formed a feature in the landscape until then.

Phase 3.1 (late 1st–earlier 2nd century AD)

This phase included about a dozen inhumations and several pits, scattered across the site. Most of the graves were on a similar alignment to the Phase 2 ditch, although in some cases this appears to have been due to selection of the ditch fill to dig into because it was easier to dig than the clayey subsoil.

A very large pit might also have been in use at this time, as there have been cases elsewhere of such features being used for ritual purposes. However, it was only partially excavated, so its purpose is unclear. A couple of later burials were dug into the upper fills of this feature.

Phase 3.2 (later 2nd–earlier 3rd century)

In this phase a considerable number of graves were dug, along with some 'empty graves' and pits. It is thought that 23 individuals were buried in this phase. Again, the most common alignment of the graves was parallel to the Phase 2 ditch, although it may well have been the case that the Roman road had the greatest influence on grave alignment by this stage.

Phase 3.3 (later 3rd–earlier 4th century)

About 17 inhumations were buried at this time, and several pits were dug too. The burials were concentrated towards the eastern part of the site, close to and indeed cut into the large Phase 3.1 pit). Also of note was an irregular, shallow cut that probably formed part of a small enclosure, perhaps surrounding a notable burial.

Phase 3.4 (later 4th century onwards)

This phase is characterised by cremation burials and small pits, often in short rows. The half-dozen inhumation burials in this phase were all in the east corner.

6 Driffield Terrace

Despite being a small trench, the concentration of burials was much higher relative to 3 Driffield Terrace. The result was more inter-cutting of graves, which enabled at least four phases of burials to be identified. However, the limited finds evidence provided little help with site dating.

Phase 1 was the pre-Roman ground surface.

Phase 2a (2nd century?)

At least one inhumation was interred in this phase; others may have been but are thought to have been buried later. This burial was the only one from this site that showed no evidence of having been decapitated.

Several small pits were dug during this phase. However, they could have been gravel pits, dug to provide stone during the construction of the nearby Roman road, before the site was used for burial.

Phase 2b (early 3rd century?)

No burials could be assigned with confidence to this phase. Other than a number of small pits and gullies, the only feature of note was a deep pit that appeared to have a step cut into one side; this feature could have been a libation pit, used to pour liquid offerings.

Phase 2c (mid–late 3rd century)

Several graves were dug in this phase, along with a number of pits and 'empty' graves. One inhumation was buried with a large quantity of horse bone, in a large circular grave apparently covered with a tumulus or mound. This grave was cut by a grave containing three individuals, apparently buried together in a box and with another quantity of horse bones. A similar burial containing four individuals, and another with a single inhumation, are thought to have taken place during this phase; a further two burials, of two people and one person respectively, almost certainly did.

Phase 2d (4th century?)

This phase was characterised by single inhumations, all decapitated. There was a degree of inter- cutting, which suggests these burials did not take place in one short episode. They were confined to the south part of the trench, perhaps respecting the (presumably still evident) tumulus burial to the north.

The only cremation in the trench was probably the latest burial. It was dug into an earlier inhumation; the disturbed cranium was re-buried with the cremated material, leaving the mandibles in place. Although this could have been a late Roman cremation, it could have been much later, bearing in mind the radiocarbon date obtained for one of the cremations at 3 Driffield Terrace.

4. Human Remains

The total number of individual analysed comprised 82 skeletons and 14 cremation burials. Of these, 58 skeletons were found at 3 Driffield Terrace (including two additional skeletons found during building works in 2009), along with 12 cremations. 6 Driffield Terrace produced 24 skeletons and one cremation. Some disarticulated human remains were also studied.

The proportion of decapitations is striking, with at least 46 identified archaeologically and/or anatomically (71% of those where evidence for decapitation could be examined).

Furthermore, the manner of decapitation is also remarkable, as those at Driffield Terrace were carried out from behind and at about the time of death. In the rest of Roman Britain, the prevalence of decapitations is about 5% (mostly in rural contexts), usually from the front and probably some time after death. In many cases the decapitations were achieved with a single blow, but more than one cut was involved in a number of cases, 11 in one instance. However, the complete removal of the head was not always the primary aim, as in some instances the cut was not complete and the head apparently remained attached to the body.

Other than the decapitations, there were three cases of unhealed blade injuries, two to the backs of the hands and one to the femur. Three individuals had cuts to the neck. There was also evidence of large carnivore bite marks on one individual, perhaps a bear, lion or tiger.

Figure 5*: Pelvis showing carnivore bite marks*

The degree of other types of trauma evident on the skeletons was also noteworthy. Nearly a third of the adults had one or more fractured teeth, mostly upper front teeth and molars (back teeth). The majority of the upper tooth fractures were on the left side, indicating a blow from a right-handed opponent wielding a blunt object. The back tooth fractures were more evenly distributed and can be attributed to blows delivered to the chin or to teeth clenching. Thirteen individuals had healed cranial trauma, and there were a couple of cases of possible peri-mortem blunt force injuries to the cranium. Trauma to the rest of the body included a fractured scapula blade; several fractures of vertebral processes; a healed blade cut to the left thigh; two fibula fractures; and five metacarpal fractures, all in the right hand. There was also a high prevalence of broken ribs. Fractured clavicles, wrists, ulnas and a vertebra suggest injuries due to falls, whereas fractures and soft tissue injuries evident in the feet and ankles indicate twisted ankles.

Stress injuries indicative of an active lifestyle were also common. Schmorl's nodes, herniation of the vertebral disc due to excessive pressure on the spine, were very common.

Spondylolysis, fractures through the neural arch, were also identified and have a similar cause. Notable was *os acromiale*, a failure of part of the scapula to fuse during adolescence possibly due to increased stress placed on the shoulder during development. There was a case of Osgood-Schlatter's disease, avulsion fracture of the tibia due to excessive force being applied to the quadriceps thigh muscle, which is often observed in athletes. Two examples of factures of the central spine, known as 'clay shoveler's fractures' and indicative of heavy labour, were also indentified. There were many case of soft tissue damage and dislocations.

An additional remarkable aspect of the burials was the large number (74) of young to middle adult males. There were no older males and only one female. Of the 7 non-adults, 3 were aged 16–19 and so could be classed as young adults, but the proportion of males remains very high. The proportion of adult males (98.5%) is similar to that from the cemetery excavated at Ephesus, which has been interpreted as a gladiator cemetery.

Figure 6*: Skeleton 4164.*

The people at Driffield Terrace were slightly taller than the average for an adult male in Roman York and indeed Roman Britain. Joint and dental disease was relatively infrequent, as might be expected in a population of mostly younger adults. Some osteoarthritis was present, but mostly as a result of earlier trauma. Cases of *cribra orbitalia* (porosity in the orbit roofs) and dental enamel hypoplasia (defective enamel formation) indicating episodes of childhood stress, perhaps due to poor diet, parasites and infectious disease, were more in line with the Romano-British average. Overall, the impression is of typical group of individuals in childhood but subject to a degree of selection in adulthood.

Scientific analyses, initially isotopic and more recently genetic, have aided interpretation of the origins and lifestyle of these individuals. For example, two people appeared to have had millet as a diet staple, indicating that they originated in North Africa. These results point to a population more diverse than the typical Roman population in Britain, with many people originating from outside Britain and some from outside the Empire.

5. Pottery

The chronological span of the Roman pottery from 3 Driffield Terrace is from the early 2nd to the 4th century, with a concentration in the late 2nd and early 3rd centuries. The earlier 2nd-century wares include amphorae and mortaria, indicating disposal of domestic material. A number of intact vessels were found as grave goods with the burials and include Ebor ware flagons, samian ware, Nene Valley colour-coated ware and grey wares. Several individual sherds were found in grave fills and could have been deposited as token offerings; otherwise they were casually deposited in the backfilling of the graves. Later pottery includes Dales ware, Crambeck wares and some calcite-gritted wares. Some pottery was burnt, and in one or two cases was found in a cremation deposit, indicating that it was burned as an offering on funeral pyres. Fragments of tazze, Castor boxes, candlesticks, head pots, white-slipped Ebor flagons and colour-coated wares may have had a funerary function. Burnt pottery was presumably derived from cremations that had been disturbed by later graves.

The Roman pottery assemblage from 6 Driffield Terrace is smaller and less informative than that from 3 Driffield Terrace. It mostly dates to the late 2nd and early 3rd centuries and is largely domestic in character, including Ebor wares, Nene Valley colour-coated wares, amphorae, grey wares and East Gaulish samian ware. No vessels were found as grave goods with the burials. However, Castor boxes, miniature jars, tazze, lamps and candlesticks suggest a ritual or funerary function, as indeed could the amphorae and samian ware.

6. Finds

By far the most common finds were nails, most of which were used as coffin nails. Many were found in situ in the graves, still marking the position of the coffin even though the wood had long since decomposed. Hobnails were also recovered from 3 Driffield Terrace, in two cases at least still marking the position of shoes that had been deposited as offerings in the grave.

An unusual pair of iron rings was found fitted around the legs of one of the skeletons at 3 Driffield Terrace. They were not linked and so probably did not act as leg irons; rather they seem to have had a symbolic purpose. Another find of note was a pair of miniature smith's tongs made in silver.

***Figure 7**: Leg ring, SF331, after conservation.*

Possible grave goods were restricted to a bone hair-pin and bridle cheek-piece, a copper-alloy pelta mount, an iron pen nib or goad and a fragment of pipeclay figurine. Fragments of glass vessels could also have been derived from burials, or perhaps as a result of funerary practices. Hair-pins were usually buried with females and the pelta mount is from a military belt.

The coins – from 3 Driffield Terrace – were bronze and issued by Trajan, Antoninus Pius, Constantine I and Constantine II, reflecting the use of the site through the entire Roman period.

7. Animal Bone

Several chicken skeletons were found at 3 Driffield Terrace, in vessels or grave fills, and were likely to be food offerings associated with funerary activity. Part of a sheep skeleton was recovered from one of the graves at 6 Driffield Terrace.

Quantities of horse bones were found at both sites. At 3 Driffield Terrace, individual bones and one articulated hind limb could be due to deposition as food offerings with the burial. At 6 Driffield Terrace, two grave fills contained the remains from at least four horses; most of the skeleton was present, although vertebrae, pelves and crania were mostly in one grave and limb bones were in the other. Butchery/skinning marks and evidence for dog gnawing could represent food waste being accidentally incorporated in the grave, but the absence of

food waste deposits in the vicinity and the concentration of the horse bone in only the two graves suggest the horse bones were funerary deposits.

Figure 8*: Horse bones 1144 over skeleton 1175.*

8. Burial Practice

The majority of the burials were of single inhumations, but there were five double burials, a triple burial and a quadruple burial. The individuals were often supine (on their backs) but sometimes flexed (on their sides with knees slightly drawn up). There was one case of a prone burial (lying face down). These body positions are not untypical of burials in Roman Britain.

The presence of iron nails in the graves, and fills in a rectangular shape within the backfill, indicate that many of the burials were in wooden coffins. This seems to have been the case with the triple burial at 6 Driffield Terrace – presumably the coffin was placed in the grave and the bodies then placed within it, as carrying such a loaded coffin any distance would have required tremendous effort! None of the inhumations showed signs of having been buried in a shroud or wrapping.

The graves were all shallow, basically of sufficient depth to accommodate the body (and coffin if used) but no more. They may well have been visible as low mounds, where the upcast from digging the grave was then piled up over the burial. In some cases it was still possible to identify a grave from the low mound of soil above it. The absence of tombstones and even marker posts indicates that most of the graves could only be identified as mounds.

In some cases graves were dug alongside one another, but generally the grave orientation was inconsistent and many of the graves cut one another. This suggests that the low mounds marked the position of a grave for a while and subsequent burials respected the grave, but eventually the mound became less evident as the grave fill settled, and later graves were often dug through them inadvertently.

Figure 9*: Coffin outline, grave 1065, looking north-west.*

Only a small number of burials included grave goods. Some had complete pottery vessels, a couple appear to have been provided with pairs of hobnailed shoes; a bone hairpin, a miniature silver tong and some glass sherds also point to personal items being placed in some of the graves. The occasional single animal bone may represent a joint of meat, to sustain the occupant on his way to the afterlife; the masses of horse bone deposited in two graves almost certainly were grave goods, but of a different sort.

As previously mentioned, the large number of decapitations is truly remarkable, although the skulls seem to have been buried along with the rest of the body in every case. The treatment of the skull in the burial was similar to decapitated burials elsewhere in Roman Britain, with the skull often placed in the correct anatomical position or close to the feet, and a smaller proportion alongside the torso. More complex treatment of the skull was visible with some of the multiple burials; in one double burial, the skulls were switched between the two individuals, and with the quadruple burial a skull was placed alongside the skulls of two undecapitated individuals to form a neat arrangement at one end of the grave.

Most of the cremations contained far too little human bone to represent a complete body. It seems that these deposits were only a sample of the material remaining after cremation, and so may have had a symbolic purpose.

9. Some Issues

Site dating and phasing

The existence of several sequences of burials has enabled at least four phases of cemetery to be identified, which along with the limited finds and radiocarbon dating evidence suggest that this cemetery was in use throughout the formal Roman period. However, attempting to date the burials and the phases more precisely is problematical; it is likely that at least some burials have been assigned to the wrong phase due to the lack of precise dating evidence. For example, radiocarbon dates obtained for one sequence of burials has provided virtually identical dates for the two earliest burials, which indicates that the existence of a sequence of four burials does not always represent four phases of burial. Furthermore a number of burials were neither part of a sequence of burials nor contained dating evidence. As a result they had to be assigned to a phase on contextual and stratigraphic grounds, so such phasing cannot be relied upon overmuch. Finally, although four phases of cemetery have been identified at both sites, it does not necessarily mean that the equivalent phase at each site represents the same activity and is of the same date.

In addition, the end date of the cemetery is not clear. Activity beyond the end of the formal Roman period (about AD 410) is notoriously difficult to date due to the lack of datable finds such as pottery and coins. A radiocarbon date on a cremation in Phase 3.4 at 3 Driffield Terrace indicates that one or more cremations were buried on the site as late as the late 6th/early 7th century. This would be contemporary with the cremation cemetery found on The Mount some 100m to the north-east in 1859. However, the cremations at The Mount were buried in pots in the Anglo-Saxon tradition, whereas those at Driffield Terrace are in the Roman style and unurned. If the dating is accepted, the existence of two burial traditions close to one another has implications regarding cultural and racial affinities in what is known as early Anglo-Saxon England. At present, there is no way of knowing whether the inhumations in Phase 3.4 are late Roman or Anglo-Saxon in date.

The extent of the cemetery

Although the occasional decapitated burial has been identified elsewhere south-west of the civilian settlement at York, the concentration of decapitated individuals and adult males at Driffield Terrace suggests that there is a grouping of such burials in the Driffield Terrace area. This begs yet more questions though, such as how large this group is, what such a group represents and whether there are any other groupings within the cemetery.

10. Interpretation

A number of theories about who these people were have been proposed; all have their merits and disadvantages. One of the first ideas was that they were the result of a massacre carried out by the Emperor Caracalla as part of his rise to power in 211. However, any massacre or similar 'event' theory is ruled out, as the burials and the decapitations were clearly carried out over decades if not centuries.

Another suggestion is that this was an execution cemetery. Beheading was used as a method of execution by the Romans, reserved for citizens. One problem with this theory is that the degree of inter-personal violence associated with the Driffield Terrace people does not suggest a cross-section of the population (especially citizens) that happened to be executed. Another issue is that the bodies of executed people were usually disposed of in a casual manner, whereas those at Driffield Terrace were buried with a degree of care, and in a prime location in the cemetery.

It has been suggested that these people could be soldiers, decapitated in battle or perhaps executed for some serious misconduct. Certainly the age range and gender of the group supports this idea, as to an extent does the evidence for inter-personal violence. However the careful burial of executed soldiers seems unlikely, as discussed for civilians. As for the recovery of soldiers decapitated in battle, it is odd that this part of the south-west cemetery, so far from the fortress, was reserved for this group during the entire Roman period. Also some tombstones might have been expected to have been found with such burials. The presence of iron leg rings on a soldier is also inexplicable.

***Figure 10**: Detail of the Mosaic of the Gladiator, an early 4th-century work of art currently on display in Rome's Borghese Gallery.*

The other theory is that these people were gladiators. The age range and evidence for inter-personal violence suits; even the female burial could be explained as a gladiatrix. However, the most convincing clue is the bite mark of a large carnivore found on the pelvis of one person; this makes much more sense being inflicted on a venator or animal fighting gladiator rather than a soldier. Tombstones are lacking, but perhaps these were gladiators unfortunate enough to be killed early in their careers; such people would not have acquired the fame or fortune to warrant the commissioning of a tombstone.

This series of *Insights* has been contributed by York Archaeological Trust staff members and external specialists for Finding the Future. They aim to frame an understanding of aspects of the Trust's collection of artefacts and their archaeological context; and also to enhance staff involvement. The authors represent a broad range of experience and knowledge.

Insights are not presented as YAT publications, they have not been peer reviewed or edited to full publication standard. Rather they should be seen as statements reflecting the research, ideas, knowledge and interests of the individual authors. They are not necessarily designed to be the definitive word, may not always agree with the Trust's previous publications, and some of their content may be subject to debate or different interpretation. All within the spirit of Finding the Future.