

The Bull Hill Skull

Some people have heard rumours about the existence of a skull at Bull House (now Bull Hill House or Bullhill House, its historical name). Is there any truth in it?

On 12th July, 2012, we travelled from South Devon to view Bull House, which had just been advertised for sale in the *Western Morning News*. For 2012 it was a typical June day: leaden skies, broolly-busting wind and almost horizontal rain. Perfect for a house-viewing; if you like a house in those conditions, you know it's Mr Right.

We were impressed by the house. Who could fail to be? We were even more impressed by the downstairs loo, which was awash, not to mention the sheer cataract of water gushing in through the side of the kitchen window. Quietly aghast, the estate agent carried on as though it was all part of the medieval plumbing.

The cellar doors had a crooked 'No Entry' sign stuck to them with a drawing pin. As if to reinforce the point, an old church pew barred the double doors. As prospective purchasers we asked to go down. Sorry, apologized the estate agent, not sounding apologetic in the slightest: Elfin Safety.

It wasn't her fault. She didn't know we came from Totnes.



The instant she excused herself to make an emergency call to the National Trust over Angel Falls in the kitchen, we shifted the pew, had the doors open, excavated a torch from my Ninja rucksack and shone the light down into the black abyss of the cellar. 'That's water,' I said. 'That's sand,' said my husband. 'Actually, it's water,' he added, after backing down the steep wooden steps. 'About two feet of it.' There was a silence and then he shot, white-faced, back out of the hole. 'There's a skull down there,' he said, 'a skull! You go down, you go down!' And so I found myself face to face (so to speak) with the skull, sitting on a small square of lead on a kind of concrete plinth just across the water. It was a surreal moment and quite scary. Like being dropped into your very own *Pirates of the Caribbean*. Just then Jack Sparrow called down that the enemy was approaching fast, so there was a scramble to escape, restore the scene and chat idly as though nothing had happened.

The National Trust was a little coy and faintly embarrassed about this aspect of the contents now included in the sale. The requisite authorities had been informed, apparently. To the National Trust's disappointment, they had simply not bothered to follow it up and remove this unique selling point.

We discovered from the previous owner's notes that Mr Corney had found not one skeleton, but seven, in the upper garden below the churchyard wall. They were all extremely fragile and crumbly. No one seems to know exactly when he found them; possibly in the late 70s/ early 80s. Unusually, all were oriented with their heads to the east. This led Mr Corney to believe that they had been monks or priests from the former Benedictine priory just nearby, though there were no obvious grave goods, such as chalices etc. that might have marked out a priest.

According to Mr Corney's builder, Mr Brian Williams, the skull was called George and Mr Corney kept him in the undercroft to frighten unsuspecting visitors who came to read the gas meter down there...

In January 2013 we decided it would be interesting to get the skull dated and a reconstruction made with a view to creating some future interpretation for the house. It would also mean we could in due course give the skull a decent and appropriate re-burial. One of our friends was horrified that we wanted to 're-generate' the person this way, but we see it instead as a mark of respect. The skull had suffered a good few decades of indignity down there in the cellar; now something constructive and personal would come of that lost time.

We researched the possibilities online. The options were principally at Manchester or Dundee, the latter where they do a lot of computerized reconstruction. We thought that sounded potentially less damaging for the fragile skull, and made enquiries from Professor Caroline Wilkinson. The arrangement was that one of her students doing a MSc in Forensic Art would base her summer term project on our skull. Normally the students produce only a digital 2D facial reconstruction, but by offering to fund the production of an acrylic head from the original laser scans of the skull, our student could produce a 3D, life-like head as well. For radiocarbon dating, samples would go to Professor Gordon Cook at Glasgow.

Coincidentally, only a few weeks after arranging this, Richard III hit the screens and headlines. His reconstruction was done at Dundee by Caroline Wilkinson, so we knew then that we had made a good decision with the Bull Hill skull. Anyone who saw that programme will probably agree that it made fascinating viewing, and from it we were also able to learn a little more about what would soon be happening to our Pilton skull.

In early April we had to deliver the skull to Dundee. Air travel appealed. Picture, though, the scenes after check-in: 'Sir, do you mind telling us what you have in that box...?' No official clearance from the Coroner's department, so no plane. Train? Very slow, very expensive, and I didn't fancy nursing Skull all the way, or getting it bished by other people's luggage. So we had a weekend trip to Dundee and back in the car. It was something of a high point for us. We had moved in only three weeks before, and the prospect of a heated car and centrally-heated B&B had much to recommend it following three weeks at six Celsius.

Actually, the day we travelled was beautifully hot and sunny after a long period of bad weather. The roads were empty (we figured everyone had hit the beach or the garden), and we saw only one wind farm. After a night in the B&B at Moffat when, we discovered, the car lock had gone funny and opened all the windows, no one had even nicked the skull. Marvellous. But by the next night's B&B in Dundee itself, it was snowing. I didn't want any residual moisture in the skull to freeze and risk cracking it further, so indoors it went with us. I put it (in its box) on the floor by my husband's side of the bed. He didn't like that. We may as well have had a single bed.

We had a whistle-stop visit to Professor Wilkinson to drop off the skull (her office walls were lined with them, quite unnerving). She could tell us that it was a 'he' (which we had assumed from the look of him anyway), that he was Caucasian and definitely adult when he died. He had probably had a natural gap between his two top teeth (like Madonna). And that was more or less it.



Our student, Hayley Fisher, did a similar trip down to Pilton to take photographs (*ours, left, shows the area where the skeletons were found*). She was very impressed with *The Pilton Story* website. This allowed her to do considerable research from home, and she was able to use some of its archive material and images in her final submission.

In Dundee, Hayley examined and analysed the skull and made extensive measurements of the bones. The extreme attrition to the molars and pre-molars (almost flat) indicated an age range of late forties to sixties; without the rest of the skeleton, they could not be more precise. Neither was the cause of death obvious from the skull.

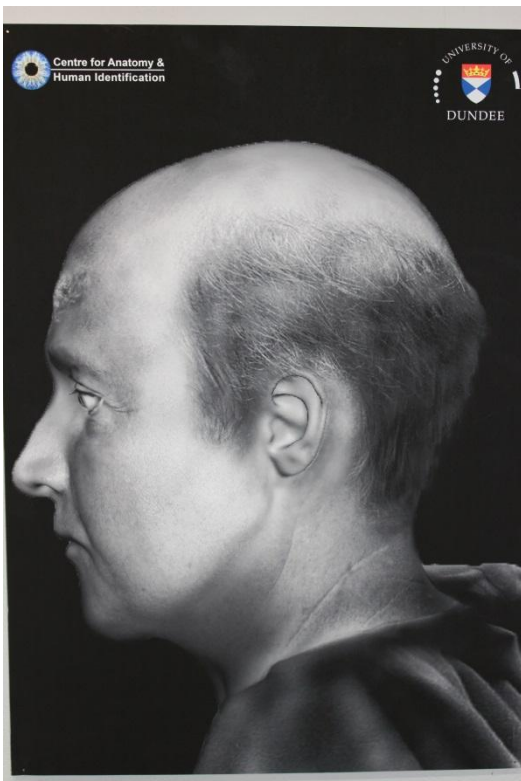
The whole skull was laser-scanned. The reconstruction of the head and face could then be carried out on the computer, attaching the muscles and adding skin according to the measurements taken, and various proportions and formulae derived from the practitioners of this work over the years. They reckon that about 70% of the face will be accurate to within 2mm.

The digital record of the finished head was sent to a company called PDR in Cardiff. They carried out a process of rapid prototyping called stereolithography. For the tekkies, they take the 3D computer information supplied and slice it into thousands of layers. They prepare a support structure, which is slowly lowered into a vat of resin. A laser is fired into the vat according to the computer data. The laser sets the resin and builds up the solid resin on the support like building a house wall of bricks. The layers are built up over a couple of days, *et voilà* – one acrylic head complete with ears, nose, skin, and holes for eyes.

The head was mailed back to Dundee. Hayley added eyes to it, decorated it with acrylic paint, applied hair and gradually created that very special thing that gives these 3D representations of skulls the 'wow' factor - personality.

We returned at the end of August to see the Masters' Show. We went on the last afternoon of the last day so that we could bring everything home with us. This was bad timing – Bank Holiday Friday to drive up; Bank Holiday Monday to drive back. Average speed, Gloucester to Stafford on the Friday: 10mph... Zzzz. But the Forensic Art exhibition was excellent. We were very impressed with all the students' work, Hayley's especially because it had that added dimension (sorry!).

At this time, for a number of reasons, the skull had still not been dated. Part of the delay was due to our man having a lesion to the bone of his forehead. This had required further analysis by Prof Sue Black, a specialist in forensic pathology, in case the lesion needed to be translated to the physical appearance of the final 2- and 3D representations (which it did, so he is extra distinctive). We were afraid that we had paid a not insignificant sum for the recreation of some Victorian postman, though privately we hoped – and suspected – he might somewhat older. *NB The photo below shows one of Hayley's 2D images. You can just make out the lesion to his forehead. We are keeping the 3D head for visits to the house when restoration work is complete.*



The radiocarbon and stable isotope dating came back in early September, and... he died between 1278 and 1393, which makes him early/mid medieval. The age range could have been tighter, but it is just bad luck that the C-14 decay rates at that period made a V-shaped 'wiggle' instead of decreasing in a linear fashion, so our results cut the C-14 line twice instead of once.

His diet comprised around 15% marine fish, which is not considered to be high. He did eat something more than purely 'terrestrial' food i.e. not just 'herbivorous meat' like mutton and beef, so 'omnivorous pork' or freshwater fish may also have played a part.

The current churchyard wall was built around 1830. There are also, according to Mr Corney (although we have not yet had time to excavate), the E-W aligned foundations of the wall of another building in our upper

garden. It is therefore not impossible that this could have been a church- or priory-related structure. Mr Corney, who was, we think, a bit of a romantic at heart, gave part of the upper garden the charming name of Priors' Walk. As for whether the people buried there were lay or religious, we can only speculate. It is a nice notion, nonetheless, that 'our man' lived or worked at the priory.

Wendy Clarke