

# The Dangerous Dead: The Early Medieval deviant burial at Southwell, Nottinghamshire in a wider context

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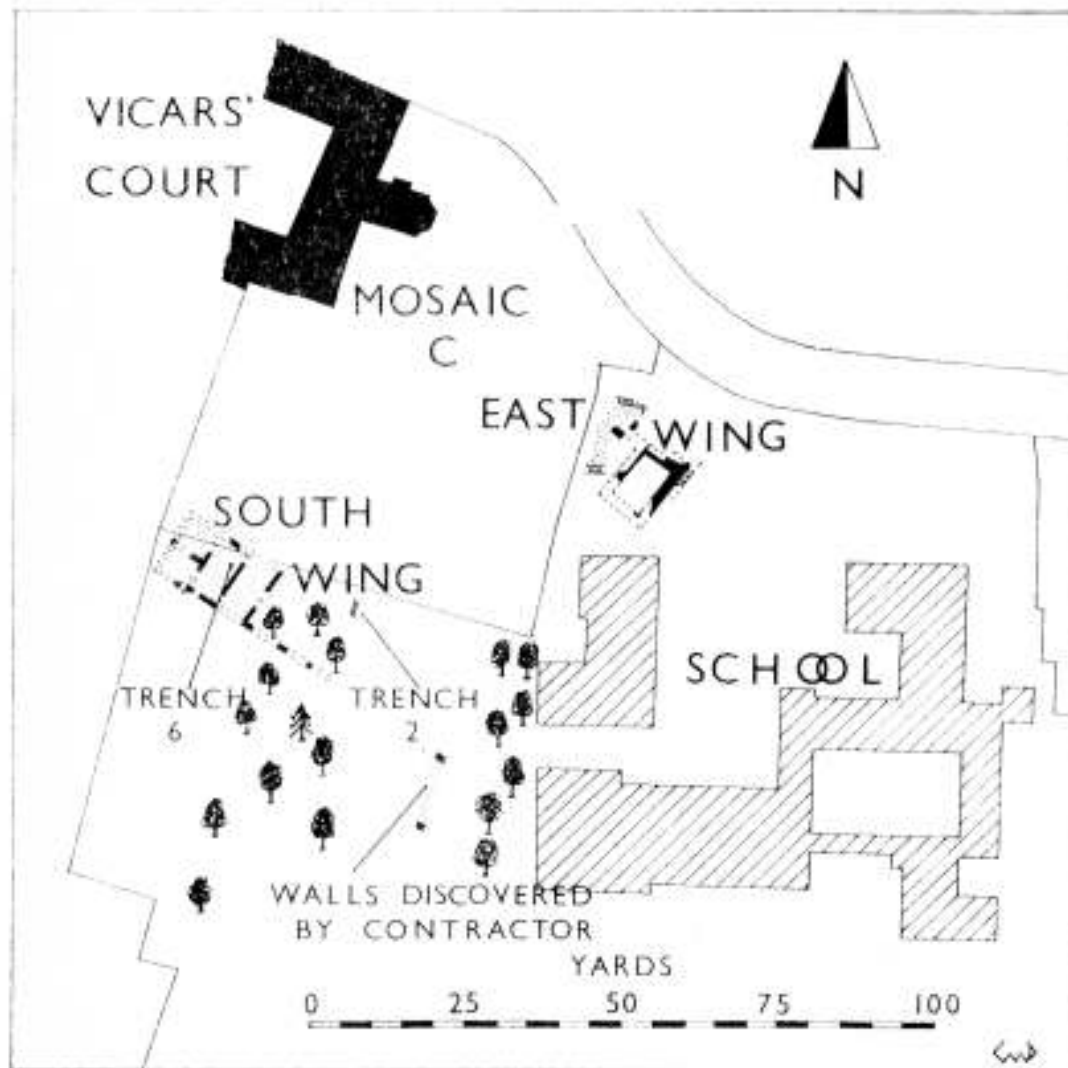
*MBArchaeology Local Heritage Series*, Number 3, October 2012

## **Introduction**

In 1959 Charles Daniels discovered the skeletal remains of an Anglo-Saxon inhumation burial whilst undertaking excavations in preparation for a new school that was to be built on Church Street, Southwell, Nottinghamshire. This burial is one of close to two hundred and fifty that have since been unearthed at the Church Street site, but it is also unique. For what Daniels discovered was a deviant burial or, to paraphrase Dr. John Blair, one of the ‘dangerous dead’ (Blair, 2009), because the remains had been ritually staked, with iron nails piercing the shoulders, heart and ankles (Daniels, 1965), a practice that although so far unique to Southwell, is widespread in the early Anglo-Saxon period.

## **Excavations at Church Street, Southwell**

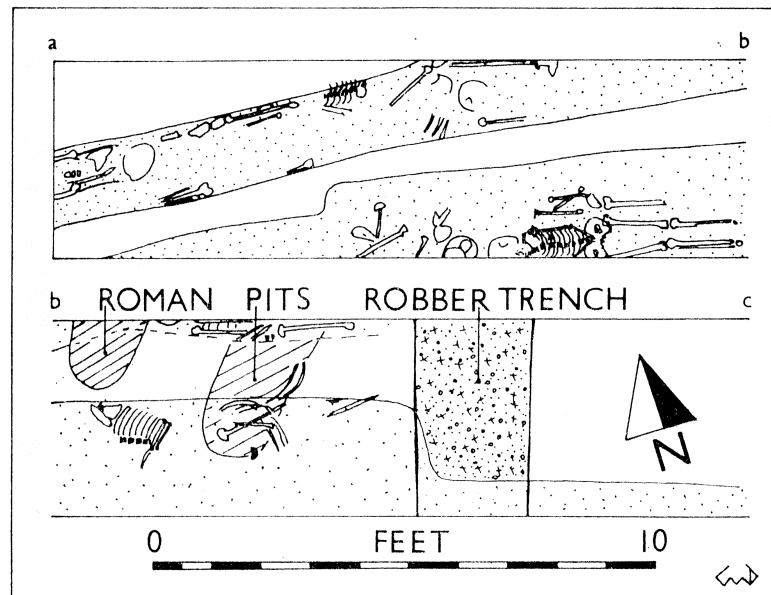
Ever since Major Hayman Rooke found evidence of the Roman villa in and around the Church Street site in 1787, the Saxon remains have played second fiddle. In his 1959 excavations, Daniels gained evidence relating to the bath-house of the villa in the East Wing, and of several rooms complete with mosaic floors in the South Wing. And more recent excavations at the proposed development site on Church Street by Pre-Construct Archaeological Services Ltd. (2008-09) revealed further structural remains and sections of a large stone wall probably dating to the 2<sup>nd</sup> century AD. Yet what these excavations also revealed were some of the jigsaw pieces relating to the early Saxon church and cemetery site at Southwell, a church whose whereabouts remain elusive, at least for the present.



**Figure 1:** Plan of the Church Street site showing location of the school, the bath-house of the Roman villa (east wing) and the south wing of the villa with Daniels' Trench 2 and 6 (Daniels, 1965)

When Daniels excavated part of the South Wing of the Roman villa (his Trench 6) he discovered the remains of later Saxon burials, of which he found thirty in the areas of rooms one and six of the villa. These were intact Christian burials (aligned east-west) or remains that had been disturbed by later ones. Trench 2, which was further to the east and close to the current development site, revealed an altogether different picture. Here two thin, diagonal trenches had been dug that cut across Roman features, and

into these the disarticulated remains of several individuals had been deposited (Daniels claims at least a dozen), with one exception. This was the deviant burial, which had been buried (or reburied) intact along with a further leg and lower arm bone (Daniels, 1965). Daniels (1965, 25) believed that in Trench 2 he was ‘outside the limits of the churchyard, and dealing with something other than normal Christian internment. Without speculating wildly on the implications of the iron studs, it is known that treatment of this sort was accorded to bodies which had died unnaturally or when there was some reason to fear the supernatural’.



**Figure 2:** Daniels' plan of Trench 2 showing Saxon ditches filled with human remains cutting through earlier Roman features. The deviant burial can be seen in section b (Daniels, 1965)

With this evidence it seems that we could suggest the deviant burial and the disarticulated remains were buried outside the churchyard, or at least in unconsecrated grounds. Pottery fragments found by Daniels seemed to suggest an early 6<sup>th</sup> century date. Problems with Daniels' theory arose when in 1971 a watching brief was carried

out in the area just to the west of the new school, when construction work was carried out prior to an extension being built. During the work, two hundred and twenty five skeletons were discovered, reflecting that the early Saxon churchyard spread much further to the east than was first envisaged (Alvey, 1975). Supposedly, all but two or three of these were aligned east-west suggesting that this region was certainly inside the consecrated ground. More importantly, perhaps, it meant Daniels' deviant burial was now amongst standard Christian interments, suggesting there was no clear division. In 2003, another burial and further disarticulated remains were recovered during excavations at South Muskham Prebend (on the opposite side of Church Street), and excavations by the author and the Southwell Community Archaeology Group in July 2011 to the front of Kirkland and Lane Solicitors revealed part of a humerus and rib bone that may also be human. This suggests widespread burial of both intact and disarticulated remains to the east, south-east and quite some way south of the current Minster building.

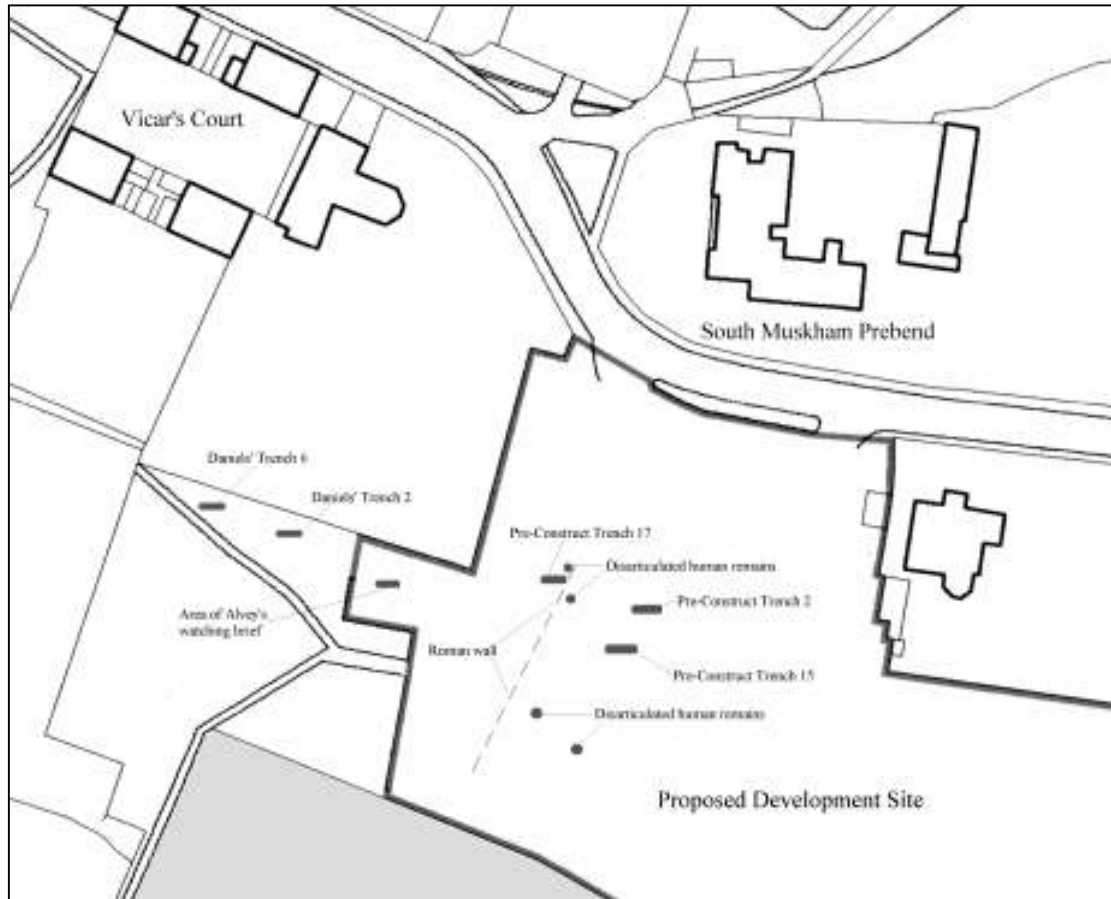
During the excavations carried out by Pre-Construct Archaeological Services Ltd, five of their twenty-four trenches revealed human remains, again some intact and others disarticulated. Trench 2 revealed an inhumation grave (Grave A), aligned east-west, that contained 'the well preserved skeleton of an adult individual, laid out extended and supine with its head to the west in the Christian tradition' (Rowe 2010, 13). This was radiocarbon dated to  $1262 \pm 34$  BP, which places it in the mid-8<sup>th</sup> century. Trench 15 revealed three inhumation graves (Graves B, C and D) and again all were aligned east-west. Grave B had a single sherd of pottery dating to the 3<sup>rd</sup> / 4<sup>th</sup> century in the grave fill, reflecting Roman occupation in the immediate vicinity. Finally, Trench 17 was the only other grave (Grave E) to have a complete burial, and this was just to the

north-west of the large Roman wall. However, disarticulated remains were recovered in Trenches 1, 17, 22 and 23 respectively, and this fits the evidence found by Daniels and on the opposite side of Church Street. The Pre-Construct report also suggested that further graves may well exist further into the central-western area (which lies inside the proposed development area).

A dump deposit seems to have been built up to the east of the large stone wall, comprising soil with a large amount of stone rubble and occasional disarticulated bones. Late Saxon / early Medieval masonry was also found near the base of the wall (Lowe, 2010) in Trench 17 in the form of a column base of Attic or Chalice style (c. 11<sup>th</sup> / 12<sup>th</sup> century). Many other pieces of masonry came from the foundations for the old school buildings, suggesting material was readily available in the 1950s, perhaps from the local garden of Vicar's Court. From this it seems that 'the large block wall appears to have remained exposed until at least the 12<sup>th</sup> century and as such a physical barrier must have existed between the burials identified within the southern wing of the villa and those east of the wall' (Rowe 2010, 34). So this evidence now recreates the divide suggested by Daniels, but also means the 225 burials from Alvey's watching brief are in the same region as the deviant burial. However, I believe we may well be looking at two, distinct periods of use for the cemetery site, as we have dating evidence for one of the burials to the east (c. mid-8<sup>th</sup> century) and John Blair (2009, 542) offers evidence that the western burials (or at least some of them) may be earlier when he argued that:

'(there were) deep-rooted fears, going far back into pre-Christian English culture (and) mounting evidence from sixth- to seventh-century cemeteries for the

deliberate disablement of corpses in precisely the ways that would later be employed by East European vampire hunters’.



**Figure 3:** *Overall plan of the Proposed Development Area showing the location of known Saxon burials and evidence of disarticulated human remains (Beresford)*

What we may have, then, is an early sixth- to seventh-century use of the site to which our deviant burials relate (at least four intact with many more disarticulated), followed by a later eighth- to ninth-century use also as a burial site, and then a final period in the tenth- to eleventh-century when the existing Saxon church was demolished to make way for a Norman one, attested to by the masonry and contemporary pottery that has been found in the proposed development area.

## **Fearing the Dangerous Dead**

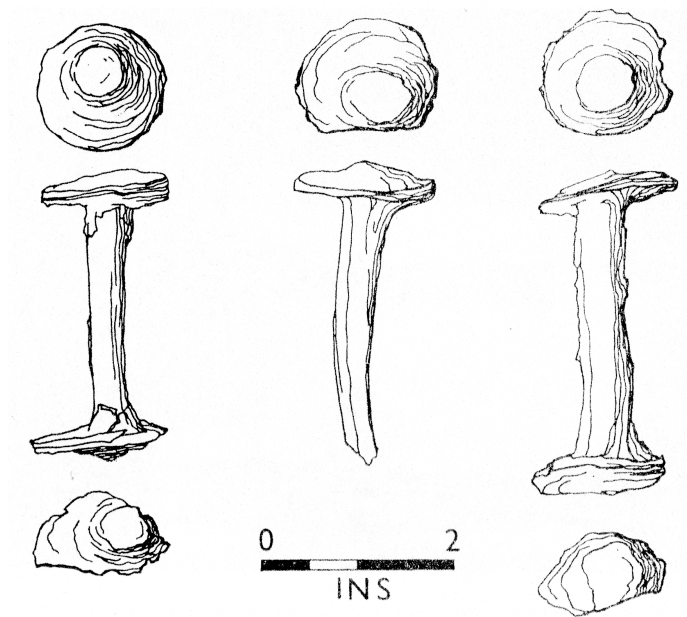
John Blair (2009) gives evidence that burial rites dating to the early Saxon period show a widespread and deep-rooted fear of certain people within society returning after death. Examples of protection methods include corpse mutilation, decapitation and burial face down in the grave (Beresford 2008), whilst wider cultural practices include rocks being placed on top of the body or burial with magical talismans or amulets (Beresford, in press). We can also note that quite often the Anglo-Saxon dangerous dead were buried in bogs or waterlogged areas, such as Cwoenthryth who was ‘thrown into some deep place’ according to the *Vita* of St. Kenelm, the sheriff who violated St. Edmund’s sanctuary and was taken from his grave, sewn in calf-skin and immersed in a pool, Abbott Brihtwold of Malmesbury who was dug up and plunged in a deep swamp, and the body of a Yorkshire rector from Byland that was ‘dumped in an eerie, tree-encircled lake called Gormire’ (Blair 2009). This notion of watery graves is useful to point out, as the eastern area of the Southwell cemetery site became heavily waterlogged during Pre-Construct’s excavations, with water having to be continually pumped out and the site having to be abandoned at one stage (Rowe 2010). The wider area is separated by Squire’s Pond and the Potwell Dyke to the south and east, and the water table must be close to the surface in the area of the proposed development site, so perhaps this was more boggy and waterlogged in Saxon times and the land notably slopes upwards from the area of the large Roman wall westwards towards the Minster and Bishop’s Palace.

A more local example of the dangerous dead comes from Stapenhill in Derbyshire, and relates to two peasants whom Geoffrey of Burton documents as having plagued the local village of Drakelow after their deaths. Several villagers reportedly saw the



dead men carrying their coffins through the streets and bringing sickness with them. Their bodies were consequently dug up, the heads cut off and the hearts removed, which were then ‘carried across the running water of the Trent to a place of the kind favoured by late Anglo-Saxon authorities for executing felons: a hilltop beacon above Burton at a junction of parish boundaries’ (Bartlett 2002). Blair (2009, 543) believes that Anglo-Saxon England saw a ‘minority of special individuals among the dead as both noxious and dangerous’ and it was finding a way to stop them plaguing the living that was a very real concern. Again this can be split into two distinct periods of time, the sixth- to seventh-centuries (early) and the eighth- to ninth-centuries (late), and this may be what we are seeing at Southwell.

It is this early period that sees stakings, or at least that is what the archaeology seems to reflect, as ‘some Anglo-Saxon cemeteries of c. AD550-700 contain corpses treated in curious ways...(that are), by contrast, extremely rare in normal cemeteries of the later Anglo-Saxon period...archaeologists may of course be failing to recognize heart-piercings’ (Blair 2009, 549). At Southwell, the heart-piercing was indeed noticed, but the importance of it was not. And this practice of heart-piercing, or staking as we might more commonly call it, is a widespread example of a fear of the returning dead throughout history, made famous by East European accounts from the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries, the Western film industry of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and perhaps more so by Bram Stoker’s novel *Dracula* (1897).



**Figure 4:** *Iron nails retrieved from the Southwell deviant burial during excavation by Daniels*

(Daniels, 1965)

The earliest archaeological evidence for the practice comes from the site of Dolné Věstonice in Moravia (c. 27,000BP) where burial DV13, part of a triple burial, had been staked to the ground by having a thick, wooden pole inserted through his thigh and into the ground below. Oldcroghan Man, an Iron Age bog body from Ireland found in 2003 and dating to c. 362-175BC, had both his upper arms pierced with a sharp implement, after which hazel rods were inserted through the holes. Finally, his head had been cut off and he had been partially dismembered (Beresford, in press). Clearly someone wanted to prevent him from returning after death. A final example comes from the Greek island of Lesbos where Professor Hector Williams discovered a burial that had been inserted into the ancient city walls at Metholini, with heavy stones placed over the coffin. Inside the coffin was an adult male aged between 40-50 years old who had been nailed to the coffin with three, twenty centimetre long metal spikes, one through the throat, one through the pelvis and one through the ankles. The

parallels to the deviant burial at Southwell are striking. A second burial from Taxiarcus on Lesbos, discovered in 1999, was also buried with metal spikes, but these were simply placed alongside the burial rather than piercing the flesh. Perhaps the presence of the spikes was enough to counteract him returning from death.

### **Conclusion: Placing the Southwell burial in context**

‘Staking (is) unlikely to be detected in normal cemetery excavations, but a sixth-century burial at Harwell (Berks.), where a spear was driven through the heart and left protruding from the body as it lay in the grave seems a convincing parallel (to those from) Viking-Age Scandinavia’ (Blair 2009, 542-53). This quote shows how important the example from Southwell is in our understanding of wider cultural practices in Early Medieval England. We can only ponder as to whether any of the 225 burials excavated by bulldozer in 1971 had a similar practice bestowed upon them. Also, the question must be raised as to whether those excavating the human remains in 2008-09 were aware of the potential of evidence of a similar vein. It seems that the Southwell deviant has disappeared along with his nails, as no trace of the remains can be found today. Curiously, Daniels commented how he could not retrieve the nail from the right shoulder as it ‘lay under the side of the trench’ (Daniels 1965, 25). Does this mean he did not remove the skeleton from the ground? Similarly, common knowledge attests to the fact that the 225 burials from 1971 were removed from the site, yet in Alvey’s report it clearly states they were reburied in the spoil heaps to the ‘west and rear of the new extension’ as a result of them being ‘so badly

damaged by the machine'. Whether further excavations in the area can add to the picture only time will tell.



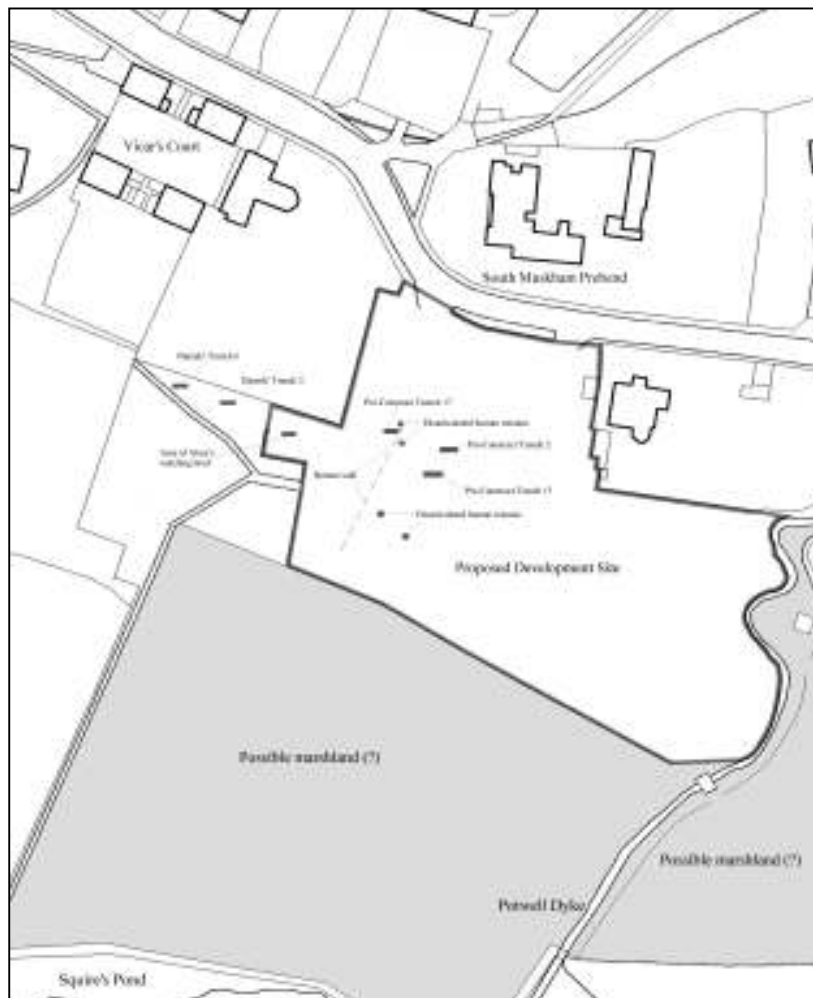
**Figure 5:** *The Southwell deviant burial (left) alongside further disarticulated human remains (Alison Wilson / University of Nottingham)*

So, why Southwell, and why does there seem to be re-deposition of so many disarticulated human remains? We know that an early foundation for the Minster dates to at least the tenth century but it seems highly likely that there was a church on the site for quite some time previously. A clue may come from a list of Saxon saints from AD1014 which shows that St. Eadburh, Abbess of Repton in Derbyshire in the 7<sup>th</sup> century, was interred at the Minster (Beaumont 1994). Why so? Possibly she was moved there from Repton prior to the Viking threat when the Great Army overwintered there, but this was in the winter of AD873-74. Does this suggest that there

was already an established Saxon church at Southwell before AD873? It would appear so, and that fits perfectly with our early cemetery stage. More to the point is why choose Southwell over other local towns? We know why the Minster was eventually built there, and we have the suggestion that the Roman villa was of a very large design and possibly the large stone wall relates to an early religious temple site, but what happened in between? I would suggest that the Roman site was of religious importance (much like the site of Chedworth near Cirencester, which also bears evidence of bath-houses, fine mosaics and a water-shrine) and that the establishment of an early Saxon church reaffirmed this. Perhaps Southwell was a religious centre in both Roman and Saxon times, something that continued into the Medieval period with the construction of the Minster itself.

We cannot be sure at this stage why Southwell was so important from a religious perspective, but its name alone could well reflect a link with religion and water, the South Well. What if this was a holy well, relating directly to the Roman villa (and we have the evidence of the bath-house) and was a theme that carried through into Saxon times. There is the statement from the Anglo-Saxon chronicler Bede who told how St. Paulinus baptised people in the Trent, but Bryn Walters put forward his argument at the recent Symposium in Southwell (Tuesday 29<sup>th</sup> April, 2011) that it may in fact have occurred at Southwell in the river that existed east of the Minster (what would now be the Potwell Dyke). Recent excavations by the University of Nottingham at several sites along Farthingate at Southwell revealed deposits of tufa (a variety of limestone caused by precipitation of minerals by water) at around 40-50cm below the present ground level, and excavation by the author and the Southwell Community Archaeology Group at number 22 Farthingate also uncovered tufa deposits along with

Roman, Saxon and Medieval pottery fragments. What this may suggest is that the slightly elevated area of Farthingate was, in essence, a low-lying riverbank with an area of waterlogged ground to the north-west (the present day playing field, see Figure 6). This theory is supported by the fact that test pits by the University of Nottingham in the summer of 2011 on the playing field just to the south-west of the development area (and the Saxon cemetery) revealed no archaeology, but if this area was underwater or at least waterlogged in Roman and Saxon times this is to be expected.



**Figure 6:** *Area of possible marshland surrounding the Church Street site with the Potwell Dyke at its centre and Farthingate as its eastern bank (Beresford)*

Although the water element relating to St. Paulinus is of a positive vein, widespread belief in early Saxon times could also attribute a negative one. Sarah Semple (2003) discusses the common practice of burial in water-logged places and suggests this creates an element of being ‘trapped’ on (or in) the earth, an eternal damnation and perhaps relating to hell. Are the dug-up and re-buried remains at Southwell being flung into unhallowed ground then? ‘It is possible that some of the prone and decapitated corpses excavated on such sites are not execution victims (as widely believed), but have been brought from elsewhere and treated in this fashion, after death or primary burial’ (Blair 2009, 552). From the mid-tenth century onwards we see the practice of consecrating graveyards, cleansing the ground and keeping the evil spirits at bay – why do this if not through a fear of the returning dead? The classic portrayal of the Dangerous Dead (more commonly known today as the vampire) is an undead corpse arising from the grave and all the accounts from this period, particularly those of William of Newburgh, c. 12<sup>th</sup> century, reflect this. Throughout the Anglo-Saxon period the ‘punishment’ of being buried in water-logged ground, face down, decapitated, staked or otherwise was reserved for thieves, murderers or traitors and later for those ‘deviants’ who did not conform to society’s rules: adulterers, disrupters of the peace, the unpious or oath-breaker. Which of these the Southwell deviant was we will never know, but nevertheless he provides a fascinating glimpse into the period of Southwell’s history that would have been known until fairly recently as, quite poignantly, the Dark Ages.

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