

CARDINAL MORTON'S SKULL

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Stonyhurst College, a well-known school in Lancashire, has a collection of holy relics and interesting memorabilia associated with famous Roman Catholics, including a skull -- reputedly that of John Morton, Richard III's great enemy and one of the most important players in late-fifteenth century England.

In 1991 the college decided to have the skull analysed by Professor A. Busuttill, Regius Professor of Forensic Science at Edinburgh University, to establish whether the association with Morton could be true, and if so, whether the skull should be sent to Canterbury Cathedral for reburial.¹ Back then, there was no DNA testing so Professor Busuttill was unable to conclude that the skull was unquestionably Morton's., however, given all the research carried out on Richard III's bones, it is interesting to revisit the 1991 forensic finding.

Professor Busuttill carried out an examination of the cranium and mandible as well as a chemical analysis of tiny portions of the skull for nitrogen content and amino acid concentration. The nitrogen method had been pioneered by Professor Bernard Knight of Cardiff University. The amino acid analysis was part of studies being carried out by Professor Busuttill's department at Edinburgh.² Radiocarbon dating was not used. In his unpublished report, Professor Busuttill stated:

*No specific or characteristic anomalies or peculiarities, of either traumatic or congenital origin, that would have been expressed as specific features in the physiognomy of the man, could be identified in the bones. No pathological abnormalities due to disease processes are present.*³

The results of the examination and analysis led Busuttill to the conclusion that the skull was of 'an elderly and well-nourished adult Caucasian male who died about five centuries ago'.⁴ The condition of the teeth and jaws indicated that 'the person was well-nourished and not suffering from protein or vitamin deficiency' and therefore it was 'likely that he lived in the higher socio-economic strata of his society'.⁵

With regard to the age of the skull at time of death: '[T]he absence of any osteoporosis or osteoarthritis in the temporo-mandibular joint sockets' implied to Busuttill that the man was not older than sixty-five or seventy years.⁶ He also commented that it was unusual for a man to survive to that age particularly in that period without developing osteoporosis or osteoarthritis.⁷ Cardinal Morton was reputed to be around 80 when he died on 15 September 1500 at Knole.⁸ Certainly, the image of Morton that comes through as Raphael in Thomas More's *Utopia* 'in the full vigour of a green old age' was of a man of great mental agility, and since More would have only been in his mid-teens when Morton died, it does not seem likely the cardinal died of a lingering illness especially when he was still Chancellor of England as well as Chancellor of the University of Oxford at his death.

Historian J.C. Mansel Pleydell in his introduction to John Budden's manuscript on Cardinal Morton in the Dorset Records Office states that 'Morton died broken by age and infirmities, after a lingering illness'.⁹ This disagrees with Busuttill's conclusion that the owner of the skull

was in good health. It is also contradicted by Morton's last will and testament, which he made when 'his mortality was to be put off'. Budden's translation from the Latin reads:

*'I, John Morton, of sound memory and in health, thanks be to God, of both body and minde, meaditating with myselfe that there is a necessitie of diing imposed upon all men, and that ther is nothing soe certaine; nor uncertaine as the manner and the time.'*¹⁰

The cardinal's will, now held by the National Archives, was dated 15 June 1500 and proved on 22 October 1500, a month after his death,¹¹ so his health seems to have been extremely good several months before he died. Perhaps the rich living led to a heart attack or sudden stroke.

Morton's actual date of birth is unknown but is thought to have been around 1420. He was the son of Richard Morton of Milborne St Andrew in Dorset (the family originally came from Nottinghamshire) and it is likely he was born there or at Stileham near Bere Regis.¹² He was educated at Cerne Abbey and from there he went to Balliol College, Oxford. By 1448, he was a Bachelor of Civil Law at Oxford, Principal of Peckwater Inn by 1453 and practising as a proctor in the Chancellor's court at Oxford in 1448-50.¹³

If the skull was that of an elderly fifteenth century male, was the tradition linking it with Morton true? Why would a cardinal and archbishop's skull go missing from an elaborate tomb in Canterbury Cathedral? Well, Morton was never laid to rest beneath his monument. After a lavish funeral, he was interred before the altar of Our Lady in the crypt of Canterbury Cathedral. Although he appears to have requested a simple marble slab for his gravestone,¹⁴ it is likely that a commemorative brass may have been laid across the marble as there is evidence of an indent for the plate.¹⁵

According to Canterbury Cathedral's records, Morton's posthumous problems began during the Civil War when Roundhead soldiers removed all the brass plates in the cathedral for recycling as munitions. With nothing to protect it, the marble slab began to crack badly, revealing Morton's shallowly deposited remains. By 1670, most of the bones had been pilfered and Ralph Sheldon, the nephew of the archbishop at that time, suggested to his uncle that it might be wise to remove the head and remaining graveclothes for safekeeping.¹⁶ The archbishop agreed and Sheldon placed Morton's head in a lead box and kept it as a curiosity. When Sheldon died in 1684, all his possessions, including Morton's head, passed to his niece, Frances Sheldon, one of the maids of honour to Charles II's queen, Catherine of Braganza.

Stonyhurst's acquisition of the skull is not documented but the history of the school itself lends some veracity to the tradition that the skull is Morton's. In 1593 a group of Jesuit priests set up a college at St Omer. Two hundred years later, threatened by the advancing troops of the French revolutionary army, the college, which was by then based in Liège, had to evacuate, and was offered new premises in England. Their benefactor was an old boy, Thomas Weld of Lulworth in Dorset, whose family had inherited an Elizabethan hall at Stonyhurst in Lancashire in 1742. The mansion had been built by his relatives, the Shireburns, in the 1590s, at a time when Lancashire was a hotbed of recusants, loyal to the Church of Rome. The Welds had never made personal use of the mansion and eventually they made a gift of it to the college.¹⁷ The Weld papers in the Dorset Archives mention the

family's acquisition of Roman Catholic memorabilia over the years but no mention of the skull.

However, the Sheldon family had sent their sons to the Jesuit college when it was at St Omer and it may well be that a member of this family presented the skull to Stonyhurst since the college already had a valuable collection of early books and other treasures.¹⁸

Without any other collaborative documentation, the identity of the skull is dependent upon the results of the forensic investigation. But how accurately could age be assessed by such means back in 1991? Bussitil stated that previous work of a similar nature had been done only with skulls which had been exhumed after a far longer time in the grave and had been in far worse condition:

*In this particular instance it is known that these bones had not been interred and therefore not subjected to the erosive properties of soil and moisture for the entire time since death. This could introduce a certain amount of artefact as all the previous studies of this type were largely carried out on bones permanently interred during the 'post-mortem' interval. These studies however tend to strongly suggest that the bones belonged to a person who lived 450-500 years ago. Those analyses routinely used in similar instances, cannot be more accurate.*¹⁹

In 1992 Stonyhurst College were considering whether to return their gruesome relic to Canterbury Cathedral, or inter it in the grounds with a plaque mentioning the tradition. The 1992 article in the *Ricardian* concluded: 'Ricardians will probably feel that if Richard III's bones finally lie ignominiously beneath a municipal carpark in Leicester, it is posterity's justice that his enemy's head should continue to sit in a cupboard in Lancashire.'²⁰ And that is what happened.

The skull is still in the college's collection, together with a chasuble worn by Morton c.1495-1500 at ceremonies in Westminster Abbey.²¹ Although it might be possible to find descendants of Morton's siblings, DNA testing would be very costly and, unlike Richard's, the skull has been handled by many people over the centuries and, as Professor Busuttil says, would be very contaminated. A cheaper option might be to have a facial reconstruction and see whether the features resemble the chubby boss that is reputed to be an image of Morton in the church at Bere Regis.²² Whether Stonyhurst would want to go that far is up to them but with the public interest in the finding of Richard's bones, it would definitely be a fascinating exercise.

Notes and Acknowledgments

1. Correspondence, Reverend Michael O'Halloran 1991.
2. Correspondence, Professor A. Busuttil, 25 March 1992
3. A. Busuttil, 'A Report on Skull from Stonyhurst College', unpublished, 1991, p.2.
4. Ibid, p.3.
5. Ibid, p.2.
6. Ibid, p.3.
7. Correspondence, Busuttil, 25 March, 1992.

8. Notes of the Rev. Dowland accompanying the 1607 manuscript of John Budden on Cardinal John Morton, Trenchard Collection Mss, D-TRD/F48, Dorset Record Office. See also J.C. Mansel-Pleydell, 'A Biographical Sketch of Cardinal Morton', *Dorset Natural History and Archaeological Society Journal*, vol 3 (1879), pp.49-73; and S.B.Chrimes, *Henry VII*, London, 1972, p.105.
9. Budden (see note 8).
10. Emden (see note 8).
11. Morton's will, written in Latin, National Archives, PROB11/12/178.
12. www.dorset.ancestors.com/?p=427 gives Morton's birthplace as Stileham, Milton St Andrew[sic] and states that he was a descendant from the Turberville family of Bere Regis on his mother's side.
13. A.B.Emden, *A Biographical Register of the University of Cambridge to 1500*, Cambridge 1963. See also online *ACAD: Cambridge Alumni Database*.
14. J.C. Mansel-Pleydell, 'A Biographical Sketch of Cardinal Morton', p 73.
15. Correspondence, Anne Oakley, Senior Research Archivist, Canterbury Cathedral, April 1991. She states that the story about Morton's tomb comes from Wood's *Annals*, vol 1, p 642.
16. Correspondence, Anne Oakley. The story of Morton's skull being given to Sheldon is quoted from Wood's *Annals* by W.F. Hook, *Lives of the Archbishops of Canterbury* (1860): '[Sheldon] looking upon it as a choice relique, keeps it at this day in a leaden box, with its seer clothes remaining upon it.'
17. Correspondence, Rev. O'Halloran, 19 March 1992. See also David Brazendale, *Lancashire's Historic Houses*, Carnegie Publishing, 2005, pp.54-79.
18. Correspondence, Rev. F.J. Tuner, 28 May 1991. See also *The King's England: Lancashire*, ed. A. Mee, London, 1936, pp.272-75
19. Busuttil, Report, p.3.
20. Isolde Martyn, 'How Posterity beheaded Morton: the case of the missing head', *Ricardian*, vol.IX, No 118, September 1992.
21. Correspondence, Jan Graffius, Curator, Stonyhurst, 8 April 2015.
22. Morton paid for a carved oak roof for Bere Regis Church, and one of the bosses at the east end is reputed to be carved in his likeness. He also provided money for a chantry to be established in his memory and masses to be said there for his soul.

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