

Title: Ron Shoesmith Interview

Creators: Rick & Julia Goldsmith

Project: 'The Close in Living Memory: Hereford Cathedral
Close oral reminiscences''

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Identifier: Ron-Shoesmith

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Interviewee: Ron Shoesmith (speaker, male)

Interviewer: Marsha O'Mahony & Julia Goldsmith (speaker,
female)

Camera & Sound: Richard Goldsmith (male)

Producer: Julia Goldsmith

Language: English

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Stereo/Mono: Stereo Mixdown

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Transcript:

(00:00)

Ron gives a rundown of The Close through the ages. The Close that we see now is not what it would have been like in the medieval period when you would have had large houses for the Canons around - of course the Cathedral barn is probably the remnants of one of those. You would have had a series of these houses - some 12 houses around the close. The probably approached with narrow little lanes, rather like the one that goes up by Holly House now, because there wasn't a need for a vast open space - and around the Cathedral there were thousands and thousands of burials all with gravestones and big tombs. (00:57) The whole impression of it to any visitor would have been much more like visiting a large churchyard somewhere rather than this vast open space that we have now - it was only in the 1840s that this was changed. The other thing that happened of course was that as these burials kept going the ground level started to rise - every time you put something in the ground got built up a little bit more. Until eventually you were actually having to come up steps from Church Street and Castle Street. The ground level actually against the Cathedral was about 2 or 3 feet higher than it is now. (01:40) So the whole feeling would have been totally different until the 1840s when the entire thing was lowered, lots of burials were then disturbed as most of the burials weren't the 6ft deep you get nowadays - they were quite a lot shallower. Now, with the work that's going on, the burials that were put in before 1840 are very close to the surface because you've lost that 3ft of overburden. As soon as you take the turf up you immediately find burials which is what's been happening over the last 6 months.

(02:21)

Now it's 15 years since the Mappa Mundi building was put up, but before that there was obviously a need for an excavation because the building has a basement underneath the whole setup - which likely people don't realise. That's where all the rare books, documents and what have you are kept. The excavation was perhaps a little difficult at times because it started off first of all with the problem of how much it was going to cost and how many burials are we likely to find. (03:06) At that time Ron was running what is now Archeological Investigations, but was then the City of Hereford Archeology Committee, and he said 'based on what I've seen before I reckon you're going to hit about a thousand burials there', 'oh that's far too much, we can't afford that' they said so they got a rather eminent archeologist down and he said 'about two or three hundred burials at the most' based on his experience.

(03:43)

They had 1,144 burials, so Ron thinks his estimate was a bit more accurate! This created a financial problem in that all the money that had been allocated for the excavation and the work that had to be done on the bones afterwards was spent just on the excavation. There was no money left to complete the project, and it took the dean and chapter several years to get that money together so that the project could continue. In fact it is still continuing because all the bones are still at Worcester where their archaeological unit are putting together a final report. So the thousand or so burials that were found were all processed, first of all in

Bradford where they have a very important unit for dealing with skeletal material and then Worcester who's putting the whole thing together and will turn out a one or two hundred page report by the end - so there's still a lot going on there. (05:09) The other thing that they didn't expect during the investigation was that they found the late Saxon cellar which had been used rather as a cesspit which had a lot of splendid [Saw? 05:20] thrown in the bottom. Towards one side of the excavation they had parts of three large square pits in which bodies had been flung and this was the plague time in Hereford. So they were finding traces of Saxon road, traces of a Saxon building, a lot of individual burials and then the plague pit. The whole site was fascinating.

(05:51)

The dig was actually organised and directed by the dean and chapter and Ron lent them the staff from the City of Hereford Archeology Unit. During the excavation there was probably 15 or 20 people working - but you've got to imagine that this hole was quite a problem as it went down 10 or 12 feet. They had to have shoring put in on all sides and great beams across to hold the shoring in place, everything you could catch your head on was there. You had people dealing with individual skeletons and buildings and the whole excavation probably took about 6 months. (06:47) They did have it open for the public quite regularly, so they had a viewing gallery where they could come along and see what was going on. Ron thinks that's something that is rather missing this time, but hopefully once they get on and aren't in the enclosed area that will be easier.

(07:07)

With most skeletons it's very unusual to find anything else except perhaps with the earlier ones you might find the head was carefully propped with stones on either side and with the later ones, although the coffin had totally disappeared, you might find the rusty nails that held the coffin together which give you the shape of the coffin. Aside from that there is usually very little, you may find the odd pin that held a shroud together and small things like that. Unless it was perhaps a clergyman who was buried with a chalice.

(07:56)

There is this problem of 'why are we so worried burials are coming up in The Close now as there are over a thousand'. A thousand burials doesn't necessarily mean whole skeletons because as excavations for the various burials are made they cut through the earlier ones so you may only get an arm or a leg and that counts as a skeleton. Several people had said to Ron 'You've had a thousand already, another thousand from the Mappa, how many of these burials do you want? And what's the purpose of it?'. (08:40) Ron thinks what they don't realise is that this is one of the largest samples that has been excavated anywhere in the country and because they can work out with the intercutting a rough date for each burial they can then start looking at the population of Hereford and the surrounding parishes in various periods of history - look at the condition of the bodies, what age they died, what sort of height were they, what sort of illnesses did they have. They are going to get a tremendous picture of the various periods of the population of Hereford from the Norman conquests on and possibly even earlier. Though from the Norman conquests on is more likely as before that is probably deeper and they might not reach them, although they hit some in St. John's Quad. (09:40) Getting a picture of 1,000 years of the population of Hereford, what they were like, perhaps to a certain extent what they even ate - samples taken of the soil around and within the burial if it's in reasonable condition to see if anything comes out, you might get seeds or nuts or

things like that. The whole picture is going to come out from this work.

(10:15)

'Why does it matter?' Ron thinks one has to be interested in the history of your town, if you're not interested in it then obviously you'd think this is rather a waste of time and money and why don't they just dig them up with a JCB and stick them in a field somewhere else. Ron personally thinks that the history of Hereford, which at one time was one of the most important towns in the country, is tremendously important and while we can look at buildings and excavate the remains of buildings going right back before the Norman conquest, we don't have the details of the people who lived there - and this is where they're going to be able to relate the two together. So they can say this is the typical house of the 12th Century, we've found the foundations so we know roughly what it looked like and we know what sort of people were living there so you get the full rounded story - and without that archeology can be a bit boring.

(11:22)

Probably one of the biggest changes to the Cathedral Close in the 20th century was when it was decided to open up the view of the Cathedral from Kings Street. Up until that time there had been a row of quite large houses down the street frontage there which more or less blocked the view of the Cathedral completely. You could say perhaps that the Close was better enclosed then because the houses obviously had back fences to there and there would be a feeling that the traffic wasn't sort of part of the Close and the Close was perhaps a quieter place.

(12:15)

The earliest picture there is of the houses that were on broad street is on a painting by James Waltham [Spelling?] from about 1800 and this shows one or two that are black and white and a wall going across the front as well. So they were totally different, and these buildings were demolished and replaced in the middle of the 18th century with brand new buildings - one of which was a pub which eventually became a rooming house. There were two or three little shops there, a greengrocers and a saddlers. When it got to the 1930's the dean and chapter had bought most of these buildings gradually and they then got a grant of 3 - 4,000 pounds to demolish the buildings and open up the view completely. (13:20) This was done tremendously quickly, with many photographs showing the buildings coming down, which look a bit hairy by modern health and safety standards, seeing great piles of buildings collapsing. The ground was then cleared off, and the small amount of railings that were to the south of the buildings were taken down and a brand new railing was put up all along the side there complete with gates. These didn't last very long as they came down in 1941 as part of the war effort and you can see where the railings were (at time of recording) if you look at the stone plinths you can see the stumps of the railings all the way along. Now the railings are going to be replaced, but not the gates - it will at least give more of a sense of enclosure to the close but by not putting gates on it will still mean that people feel they can come in there without sort of being locked in or locked out. (14:40) The case used to be in the latter part of the medieval period that the gates were locked to keep the pigs out, as the pigs would come in and start rooting amongst the burials.

This film was made by Catcher Media for the Hereford Cathedral Close project in association with In Our Age and supported by The National Lottery Heritage Fund.

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