

# Mystery of the Oaks Estate skeletal find

Skeletal remains uncovered during drainage works near Canberra earlier this year have been found during scientific tests to be up to 170 years old.

The grisly find in April has provided the ACT Region with a most unusual inquiry.

Officer in Charge of the ACT Crime Division's City District Crime Branch, Detective Superintendent Brian Brinkler, said it provided some interesting information on the history of the region.

"Any find of this type is required to be investigated by police, but not all have such close links with our past," he said.

Detective Superintendent Brinkler inspected the site soon after the find.

"When I arrived there, my initial reaction was one of sadness," he said. "Life was tough enough for the people of those times. Many were ex-convicts and wouldn't have had much in their lifetime. It seemed a pity that they had to be disturbed in this way."

During the investigation, Crime Branch Detective Acting Sergeant Brett McCann had to spend time searching historic records to help solve the mystery.

Police were called to the outer suburb of Oaks Estate, bordering on the southern New South Wales city of Queanbeyan, when work-



Part of a human skeleton found during earthworks in the Canberra suburb of Oaks Estate. The historic area was used as a burial ground in the early 1800s.

• Pictures courtesy of *The Canberra Times*.

men found skeletal remains during pipe-laying activities in the area.

The find was made near the historic homestead called The Oaks, Queanbeyan's oldest existing building. Built of stone in 1836, The Oaks also became the first licensed public house in the district just two years later.

Investigations into the discovery began immediately and the

remains were later conveyed to the Anthropology Unit of the Australian National University for examination.

Initial studies showed that they were those of a male, Caucasian, believed to have been buried more than fifty years ago.

In an effort to obtain an estimate of the actual age, bone fragments were submitted for radio-carbon dating treatment.

These tests were completed and the results collated early in September.

A report from the Acting Head of the Radio Carbon Dating Research Unit of the ANU, Professor John Head, was sent to Sergeant McCann.

Professor Head advised that the results indicated the age of the skeletal remains to date back to between 1825 and 1881 AD.

Detective Superintendent Brinkler said that in light of the close proximity of the ages put forth by Professor Head and the fact that The Oaks Burial Ground was the site of burials between



Police Forensic Science and Search and Rescue members mark out the location of the burial site for Australian Heritage Commission records.

1836 and 1863, it is safe to conclude the skeletal remains are in fact from the former burial ground.

"As the inquiry is of significant value to the records of the Australian Heritage Commission, the full findings of the investigation will be passed on to them," he said. "The matter has also been co-ordinated through the ACT Coroner's Office, and now that all tests have been completed, arrangements will be made to have the remains reinterred."

In an official Minute to the Officer in Charge, City District Crime Branch, **Detective Acting Sergeant Bret McCann** provided this comprehensive report on the police investigations required to ascertain the identity(ies) of the human remains discovered.

#### DISCOVERY OF SKELETAL REMAINS AT OAKS ESTATE.

About 8.30am Monday 22 April 1991, three workmen were excavating on premises situated at 9 Florence Street, Oaks Estate, in the process of laying storm water pipes along the eastern border of the premises.

Approximately 10 metres north of the roadway, a piece of bone was sighted. It was examined and believed to be the bone of an animal, and as such discarded. Excavation continued in a southerly direction on the parcel of land. About 11.30am that date, the workmen uncovered the skeletal remains, including the skull, of a human being. The remains were approximately 1 metre below ground level. They were removed from the site, and police notified.

Members of the City District Crime Branch attended and in conjunction with members of the Forensic Services Branch, an investigation was mounted.

The Government Pathologist attended and stated that the initial piece of bone located was in fact part of the pelvic bone of a human being, and that the full skeletal remains did belong to a human being.

The skull and pelvic bones were conveyed to the Anthropology Unit of the Australian National University, and examined.

Initial examination revealed that the remains were those of a male, believed to have been buried in ex-



*Forensic Science Unit members sift through soil at the site of the discovery.*

cess of 50 years ago. Further examinations to this time have revealed that the remains are those of a Caucasian. There has been no dental work completed on the deceased.

At this time, the skeletal remains of a further four humans have been uncovered as excavation has continued. These remains have been maintained in safe custody.

Included in these remains are a further two skulls. Examination of one of the skulls reveals a complete surgical sever around the circumference of the cranium. This appeared consistent with a post-mortem examination.

In light of the apparent age of the remains, and the fact that the skeletal remains were located in such close proximity, inquiries were channelled in the direction that the site was an old graveyard.

Inquiries were conducted with the owner of premises on the block of land where the findings were made.

He stated that he and his wife have conducted research into the history of Oaks Estate, which reveal that in the early 1830s premises known as 'The Oaks Homestead' were built in neighbouring Hill Street. This residence is still standing approximately 200 metres north of the site of the findings.

Investigating police were presented with documentation which indicated that 44 persons were buried in close proximity to 'The Oaks Homestead' between 1838 and 1863. Inquiries also were conducted with Mr Gordon Walsh, of Queanbeyan City Council, and Queanbeyan and District Historical Society. They stated that they were aware that 44 persons were buried near 'The Oaks Homestead', and that study was undertaken in 1982, with assistance from various reli-

gious authorities and surveyors. This extensive study had failed to reveal the exact location of what is known as 'The Oaks Burial Ground'. There were no maps or records in existence to indicate the exact site. Inquiries were conducted with Canberra and District Historical Society, and documentation obtained relating to 'The Oaks Homestead and Burial Ground'.

'The Oaks Burial Ground' is described as 'the earliest burial place in Queanbeyan' and as 'a paddock adjacent to The Oaks house, selected for the purpose apparently when the gradual provision of official amenities after the mid-1830s made the Village Reserve a centre'.

Investigating police have been contacted by the Australian Heritage Commission. They requested that the final police findings relating to The Oaks Burial Ground be forwarded to them, as they believe it is of significant historical value and that it is part of the Canberra and Queanbeyan district heritage.

Excavation on the site was concluded on Monday, 29 April 1991, and as a result police will no longer monitor the parcel of land situated at 9 Florence Street, Oaks Estate.

#### Conclusion

From all the evidence available, and the research conducted, it would appear that the skeletal remains are those of persons interred in what was known as 'The Oaks Burial Ground' between 1838 and 1863. Further evidence of this is the description in relation to the close proximity of the burial ground to 'The Oaks Homestead' which is still standing. There do not appear to be any suspicious circumstances surrounding the origins of the skeletal remains.