

The Buried History of the Winchester Geese: Part 2

Intro: Hello and welcome to Hampshire HistBites. Join us as we delve into the past and go on a journey to discover some of the county's best and occasionally unknown history. We'll be speaking to experts and enthusiasts and asking them to reveal some of our hidden heritage, as well as share with you a few fascinating untold tales.

Ellie: Welcome back to Hampshire HistBites, where we follow on from last week's episode in which I talked to Lucy Coleman-Talbot about the Winchester Geese. This was a term given to prostitutes working in the Southwark area of London, from the 11th century, on land owned by the Bishop of Winchester. We learned from Lucy how the Geese were given their name, the rules that they had to follow and how the bishops benefited from their work. In this week's episode, Lucy and I will be continuing our discussion and looking at how the Geese are remembered today.

Welcome back Lucy.

Lucy: Hi, Ellie

Ellie: Let's move on now that we're finished with the memory of the Geese from the time they were operating. And let's look at how we remember them today.

Lucy: I found the other day that Dulwich College was founded from profits of the Geese and that St Paul's got a lot of money as well. So it's really interesting to see all these places that should have been, you know, straight and narrow, aren't as straight and narrow as we believe.

Well, let's just jump right in and link that to wider debates that are happening at the moment in respects of statues that relate to the slave trade or schools that are named after slave traders or buildings that have been built on the profits of the slave chain. There's a real comparison here, which is important, and it's certainly something that I look at in my work, in terms of the sex worker history. It's funny because, when I gave the talk last year, I tried to make really clear that, geographically, yes, Southwark Cathedral would have been the site for which this church was, which would have been St Saviours Parish Church and before that, St Mary Overie. However, Winchester Cathedral would have been built around this time as well. And I think it's really important to mention that geography is a really interesting thing to consider when we're thinking about memory. Everybody at that talk was a little bit perplexed, I think, and I can say that because somebody at the end was like, 'What is this got to do with Winchester?' And I got what they were saying, but the very bishops that were involved in this are entombed in Winchester Cathedral. The very documents that are showing, really, the only scratch of evidence that women were buried separately if they were perceived or identified as a sex worker, are held in our record office, in Winchester, that it's complex. And it's important to bring their memory to Winchester, in that regard.

Ellie: Great. So now we move on, again, to the graveyard itself and how it is helping us or educating us, is probably the term, to know about these women, to learn about these women.

Lucy: Stow doesn't give a location. That's a real misconception, actually, a lot of people say, 'Oh, Cross Bones was first mentioned by John Stow.' He doesn't mention Cross Bones. I mean, maybe he does, in that maybe the site he's talking about is Cross Bones. It's not out of

the realms of possibility. He doesn't give a geographical location for it. And at this point in time as well, the Cross Bones, it wouldn't have been known as this, so it's important to remember that too. The term "Cross Bones" in relation to this burial ground, comes in a little bit later.

Winchester Geese Connection to Cross Bones

Lucy: Social anthropology is what my PhD is grounded in, and this brings us back, directly, to my research and your question, Ellie, in that, how does the Winchester Geese get linked to Cross Bones Graveyard? Because we've established that nobody really seems to know where they're buried and there's a lot of questions around a lot of things. So why Cross Bones Burial Ground? But what we haven't talked about yet is the contemporary Cross Bones community.

So in 1996, a local resident and playwright, John Constable, not to be confused with the painter, he experiences a vision, whereby, John says, the spirit of a medieval prostitute, one of the Winchester Geese, comes to him and leads him on a pilgrimage around Southwark. And he goes to various landmarks within Southwark that are linked into the history. One's relevant to Chaucer. One's relevant to the more folklorish aspects of the church's history, in regards to St Mary Overie, the Shakespeare's Globe and at the end of this pilgrimage around this site, he stands in front of what he believes to be an urban wasteland, and he later learns is the Cross Bones Burial Ground. Now the reason John would have absolutely no reason to know that this was a historic site, is because at the time, it was pretty much a concreted car park, owned by Transport for London, facing development.

Ellie: Right.

Lucy: And the development was for the Jubilee Line Extension Project, which started in 1989. Transport for London bought the site in 1990 and were going through a process of planning in order to build a substation, which has been built on part of the Cross Bones Burial Ground. So thousands of remains will have already been exhumed from this site, within a couple of years of John's vision.

But John, because of this vision, we're going to bring us back into the literary arts now. He writes a play called *The Southwark Mysteries*, and this play was first performed as part of the millennium celebrations in Southwark, at Shakespeare's Globe and Southwark Cathedral. And I am just absolutely fascinated by this because it geographically takes things full circle. There's a mythic origin of Cross Bones as a place where the Winchester Geese are buried. And then, then you have centre stage, in Southwark Cathedral - the Goose. This mythical creature who is the centre of John's play: *The Southwark Mysteries*.

So John's work has really pioneered, not just Cross Bones becoming this site of ritual, this site of pilgrimage. We could do a whole other episode just looking at the different ways people interact with this space, but, because of his focus on the single women's churchyard and Cross Bones being the site of it, what John has done is he's brought their memory back. It really just existed more in history books and scholarly works, and wasn't really existing outside of that, until John started telling their story at the gates of Cross Bones Graveyard and doing vigils for them there.

So that's the modern history really of the site in that regard. There are other individuals who have fought to protect that site, a local artist called Zana. There's been other individuals that

have been linked to the site, but in terms of the Winchester Geese specifically, John has really spearheaded that work and the bringing of their memory back.

Ellie: Amazing. I've got a small snippet from the Southwark Mysteries, which I do take from your work and it's:

"I was born a Goose of Southwark by the Grace of Mary Overie,
Whose Bishop gives me licence to sin within The Liberty.
In Bankside stews and taverns, you can hear me honk right daintily,
As I unlock the hidden door, unveil the Secret History."

And that is essentially what Cross Bones is doing now, isn't it?

Lucy: Yeah. Well, it's definitely what John is doing. And yes, as part of that, Cross Bones has become the physical manifestation of that. Within my work, I look at the various ways memory connect with a site. So I look at these mythic origins, which is why we're talking about the Winchester Geese today. I look at John's work and I look at John's movement. I also look at all the ways people interact with the site because of John's work. So they may not be so focused in on the Winchester Geese, but they may be doing memorials for their own dead or they may be sex workers that have been inspired by this story that like to come to the site and visit the site. John's vigils really focus on the Winchester Geese and the outcast dead, as he has coined it. And so a lot of people that come to this site feel a connection because they feel marginalized in some way from society because they engage in things are not necessarily deemed appropriate by wider society. So ethnographically, I look at that. I look at the way, at its root, John has created this space that people interact with in different ways.

Another aspect of my work is looking, and I do want to plug this, it's not part of our conversation today, but it's really important, this is a known post-medieval, pauper burial ground. So a big part of my work is engaging with the social history of those individuals known to be buried there.

What I want to do through my work is, I really want to honour the Winchester Geese. I want to understand them and their memory. And I want that to be very much part of Cross Bones' contemporary identity, but I also want to bring in the social history of the men, women, and children that were buried at the site as well. So that's just kind of a side note, but it's important in understanding, kind of, the multi-layered experience of a space. But in terms of John's work, it's really interesting because the International Sex Workers Union came to the site around 2009. They declared it as kind of the world's first International Heritage Site for sex workers, which I love, and I think it's something that from a heritage management perspective at Cross Bones, we shouldn't be afraid of, we should support, we should work with. I think we should have intersectional approaches to the understanding of modern sex worker struggles and we should advocate and make sure that we're telling all aspects of the Winchester Geese's story in support of things that are happening now within contemporary society. So I think that's really important.

John's work is everywhere at Cross Bones. It's carved into walls. It's performed at the site. Other people come and perform his work. He really has kind of cemented them, I think, in contemporary memory, and that's important. But I'd love to just mention, and this will tie as hopefully nicely into my installation that I did at Winchester Cathedral last year, Sex Objects Museum London, they actually created a piece, and I think we could link to that in the bio as well cause it'd be lovely for people to see if they didn't catch it in Winchester Cathedral.

Ellie: Yeah, absolutely.

Lucy: But essentially, the premise of Sex Objects Museum London is that there are a lot of items in the same way, you and I, Ellie, have been talking about what doesn't get written down. What doesn't get recorded. Objects and artifacts feature in that. So, Sex Objects Museum London, creates the missing artifacts from history in relation to sex. And one of the artifacts that they created was a clay plate for the Winchester Geese, made in a traditional style. All that information will be included in that link that we do and you can see a photo of it. But she created this as this kind of missing artifact. And it got me thinking, this replica that often a lot of people, when they see it, they think it's real and they just can't believe that this thing was created. And it should have been created. These women should have been honoured, right? So I had this idea and I thought, 'What if we got the bishops to face the Geese? And what if we did that by bringing an artifact into the space that they now occupy, which is the Cathedral, because these bishops are entombed in the Winchester Cathedral.' Winchester Cathedral were very supportive of it and allowed me to do it as part of the Heritage Open Days open evening.

So I got to display this plate, in Winchester Cathedral, opposite the bishops and educate people on the Winchester Geese's story. And that was really exciting to do. No one had heard of them, unless maybe your history teacher was there. And a lot of people got very emotional, a lot of people really understood what I was trying to do, and it felt important.

Ellie: It's a massively powerful move, I think. And so righteously so, that after all of this time, after all of the abuse and we don't need it written down to know that it was probably horrible to be a woman in that situation, at that time, for these bishops who, we can't lie about it, abused their position, profited from something that they also declared un-Christian like, you know, not right. And here they are lying in their Chantry Chapels, facing their wrongdoings and that is powerful.

Lucy: I mean, I love to think that they were there, facing it. However, I think what is really powerful about it is the fact that the contemporary church is facing it. And that leads me quite nicely onto the work of Southwark Cathedral.

Ellie: Tell us about what Southwark Cathedral are doing to help the memory of these women.

Lucy: So, I would like to mention as well, that one thing that I've looked at in respect of Cross Bones, is religious interactions with the space and one example would be that in 2015, when the memorial garden opened, there was a site clearing that was done. And, Father Christopher, who is at The Most Precious Blood, which is the Catholic Church just next to Cross Bones, he came and did a blessing of the site. And at that time, John did his own blessing there as well. And so there have been little interactions with it through time where people are engaging with Cross Bones as a sacred site, you know, there is this really strange, mythic history that is very unique and unusual and not completely out of the realms of possibility, that give it something that people are drawn to. Anyway, for the last four years now, an act of regret, remembrance and restoration has been happening at Cross Bones Graveyard. And what this is, is the Very Reverend Andrew Nunn and the clergy of Southwark Cathedral, pilgriming from the cathedral to Cross Bones and performing this act. And it is so powerful and unbelievable.

And how this links to what I was talking about in respect of me standing and doing an installation in front of the bishops is I think a massive part of the Winchester Geese and their lesson, is understanding that this part of history cannot just be left to disappear into an

archive. It needs to still continually be lived because it's so relevant to society now. The very act of Winchester Cathedral allowing me to honour sex workers within the cathedral is so important and Southwark Cathedral coming down to the site and saying, 'We are sorry for what happened in the past, we can't change it, but we are here in ritual,' is something powerful. I'll read you, from the order of service for this year, one of the lines is:

"We cannot undo the sins of yesterday, but we can do right today. And that is why we are here today. As we have been here before with regret, in remembrance and to pray for restoration, of this land, of these memories and of the eternal souls of our sisters and their children."

So there's a real acknowledgement there that change is bought through confronting difficult history. And I think this is very topical to what's going on at the moment. There seems to be, or certainly, you know, this is not affiliated with anyone other than the world, world according to Lucy, but I feel like, I've seen shifts in heritage praxis over the last few years.

And it's been really, really great to see women's history, black history, being acknowledged, projects happening in relation to these things, to difficult aspects of history. And by difficult, I mean difficult because society has to be accountable for the ways people have been treated, but I think this is really important because I also feel that during this time, what I've noticed is there's almost this palatable form of heritage, you know, there are certain things - we can talk about Jane Austen, but can we talk about the Winchester Geese?

And if we talk about the Winchester Geese in the context of modern sex worker rights activism, is that something that we can do as heritage organisations? And I would say absolutely, yes. And we need to do more of it, but people can feel very awkward about prostitution, talking about sex, talking about these aspects of life, which are still massive issues within our society in terms of how they're dealt with.

So, I can feel myself getting on my soap box right here, but to me, this ritual relationship between the church and the memory of the Winchester Geese is really, really important and that was a big factor in why I brought it to Winchester. Initially, mainly because I wanted to ask the question and see if they'd say yes, and they didn't hesitate. So that was really amazing.

Ellie: Absolutely. And I feel like it shows, I think acceptance is the word or growth or dignity is the right one, but it does show such openness.

Lucy: It was a start. That's how I see it. I mean, maybe I'm not going to rest until I get my permanent memorials on the go.

But Cross Bones for me is going to be preserved, you know, at the moment, the status of Cross Bones Graveyard, I touched on Transport for London's link to it, but there's a huge development happening, Landmark Court Development, that includes Cross Bones and the Northern part of the site, that runs along Southwark Street. And as part of that, there is a commitment to preserving Cross Bones as a memorial garden for the next thirty years. So this has been an ongoing struggle. I mentioned Zana earlier. I've mentioned John Constable. These people have worked tirelessly to campaign for the protection of this space. And it's almost become a tradition. People have done it throughout time, you know, in my PhD, I talk about campaigns in the 1880s to protect the site. And I think actually in many ways, it's the Geese that have protected it because there are many post medieval pauper burial grounds that are no longer in existence because they're exhumed and a hotel is built.

But Cross Bones has constantly defied development because of this little bit of memory that, if this is the site that they're buried and you get rid of that, where do they physically exist in memory? And I think that's a challenge for some people. I also think it's because it just brings up every so often, the erasure of a very difficult history, that the church were profiting of this and potentially denying these women Christian burial and that's awful. So I would really like to see Cross Bones Graveyard preserved. I would like to see the Winchester Geese come more into public memory. I'm one of the people that is aiming to do that and bringing it to Winchester Cathedral was a first step.

Ellie: Yeah, absolutely. Just to really understand the significance of Cross Bones as a burial site, is there any kind of figure of burials that have happened there?

Lucy: What I need to do, first of all, is give a caveat, in that a lot of what you read online, people will say there's 15,000 prostitutes buried there. First of all, I reiterate the fact that we're not sure they're buried there. And secondly, this 15,000 figure was an estimation that Museum of London Archaeology gave when they did some routine investigative trench work in preparation for the Jubilee Line Extension Project. So it was a projection figure. And it's very hard to give that kind of figure when you have a site like Cross Bones, that has constantly had people dug up, has had multiple pits. We know in parts, for example, I mean, there was a charity school on the Cross Bones Graveyard and when they were digging next to the foundations there, there was so much compacted bone where people had just been stacked. So it was a projection figure. I think it's important to have that projection figure because it gives some idea to people of the amount that are there, but people get really stuck on it. In 1990, Oxford Archaeology Unit did some initial work at the site and they estimated 25,000. It's the 15,000 that typically gets quoted. And that's because the Museum of London Archaeology monograph is the more widely available. It's one of the only texts that really exists in relation to Cross Bones as documented history and the archaeology, but we don't really know. And I think that's kind of another thing to highlight. There is a lot of illusion and confusion around the history.

One thing I hear regularly is people saying that over half the burials on the site were children. Now there will, absolutely, with certainty, I can say that there will be many children buried at that site, but that figure has got confused with an archaeological finding because when Museum of London Archaeology did their excavation, 148 skeletons were exhumed and 70% of that sample were young children. So that would be the nought to five category. And the majority of which were under two years of age. And the reason for this being was, it was very common at post-medieval burial sites to bury the children at the top of the pits because they were smaller and there was more room. But at the same time, a lot of what I look at in my work is memory and the way it materializes. And I don't think it's necessarily been a bad thing that people have had a misconception around that number because many people have come to Cross Bones to remember their own children, as a result of that. I haven't actually talked about the site itself in any great detail because we've just been talking about so many things, but I mentioned that John started his ritual work at Cross Bones in 1996. From 2004 onwards, he started doing a monthly vigil. And part of that was the replenishing of what people refer to, loosely, as the People Shrine. So the big, industrial gates at Cross Bones are adorned with ribbons and artefacts, messages, all kinds of different things, it's really beautiful. And the reason I mention it now is because many of the tributes that I've seen over the years have been to young babies or to the loss of a child. And so Bankside Open Spaces Trust actually have installed some statues honouring the children buried at Cross Bones and the

people that come and remember their children at Cross Bones now. So it really is a fascinating place. And the Winchester Geese are a huge part of why it's fascinating, but there's all these other interesting things going on there as well.

It's really is a unique site.

Ellie: And I suppose my final question, what can we do to preserve the memory? Is it just research? Do we visit? Do we donate? How do we keep the memory of the Winchester Geese alive?

Lucy: It's quite a tricky question on one level. I mean, I can tell you how I intend to keep them alive, and then I can tell you how John Constable's work is keeping them alive, which we've already touched on and Cross Bones.

In respect of Cross Bones, you can donate. It's a very grassroots operation right now. We have this fantastic skull donation box that a local artist created out of 2p pieces. It's really beautiful. And you can leave your donations in there. Bankside Open Spaces Trust have held the lease for Cross Bones since 2015. So if someone felt compelled to donate to the project, they could give them a call and see how they can donate to them.

John Constable's vigils, obviously we've been on lockdown in 2020, but they've continued online. They've been doing vigils for the outcast online and live streaming them through Facebook, which is pretty amazing. But let's imagine a world where we could actually go to Cross Bones and go to the vigil, you can donate to the Friends of Crossbones¹, which is the organisation that John Constable and his wife, Katy Nicholls, started when they started doing their activism around protecting the ground.

So there are ways you can definitely support the project in that respect. And I really feel that John's work has continued to inspire artists. And I track a lot of that. I look at the ways in which the Winchester Geese are remembered. And one of the things I'm interested in is the fact that really, if it wasn't for artists and activists and writers, they might have just dropped from public memory completely. And that just shows that, you know, the power of the people, that people are inspired by this, and they create in relation to it. And I've seen an increase actually over the last couple of years. Sarah Perkins made a beautiful piece, it's a stained-glass window. She actually depicts the woman who is a Winchester Geese in that artwork with an apron on. And I interpreted that as kind of giving her that dignity, which I really liked.

I've mentioned Sex Objects Museum London. There have been other people that have done things. Music has been written about the Winchester Geese over recent years. Also, I believe there was a show at Edinburgh Fringe, Miranda Kane did a piece inspired by them. So they're around, they're turning up. So what can you do? You can create and share their story too. But I certainly, going forward, feel that, post PhD, I really need to do a project on them. I feel that I want to, I want to think not just about how they're remembered, but kind of bring them, I guess, academically, into the realms of social anthropology, because I think it's interesting when I've looked at what has been written. Sondra Hausner wrote a book about the spirits of Cross Bones Graveyard. And there's some really great information in there, in respect of them but it's in relation to the ritual work that happens. And I really do see scope for a project that

¹ This is spelt differently from the graveyard itself.

looks historically at what we know about them and then looks at that in relation to modern day.

One of the things that we have at the moment that I think will just be my closing point, is we can continue to support modern sex workers and people that are exploited. But also people who are doing that work, who are marginalized by society and are doing it by choice. And we can educate ourselves on the implications that the law has on their safety, the ways in which they are marginalized by wider society socially. And I think in a way that is honouring the Winchester Geese, by understanding that this problem that we started when we started this podcast chatting today, we've talked about all these different things and we can honour them by understanding that a lot of the social issues that we've touched on in respect to their history, stand now. And so what we have now that we don't have, in respect of the Winchester Geese, is first-hand accounts and we can educate ourselves.

Social media is a great resource for that. I've found some incredible sources of information detailing experiences. One, I would love to flag to, is streethooker.com, the Work of Grace. It is so powerful. I have learned so much about life for street sex workers and the difficulties and complications around advocacy for them. And yeah, absolutely. We definitely need to link to that so people can have a look, but, Grace has worked in the Managed Zone in Holbeck. So, you know, earlier I was talking about this managed zone in Southwark and we've got some comparisons there that can be made. You know, there are aspects of that, that when we look at accounts from women who are working in that area now, we can see that there are aspects of this that make their lives a lot easier.

But also we can't look at that through a rose tinted lens, and that's the same when we look back at the Geese. Things can be very, very challenging and hard for people, and there are so many complex social issues around it. And what we don't want to do is fall into a trap where we move completely away from talking about the difficulties and challenges, because we fear that if we talk about those difficulties, in terms of contemporary sex work, that in some ways we're demonizing an entire industry and community which involves women who do engage with it in a more privileged sense as well.

So it's deeply complicated. And I just think a really lovely closing for is that sex work should not be erased from heritage. I hope over the coming years, I see more people involved in the history of sex work in relation to buildings and projects and all kinds of things, but also that, in some small way, this podcast inspires people to think about these historical issues in relation to modern issues too.

Ellie: Absolutely. Thank you so much, Lucy. That was absolutely fascinating. And I hope that listeners who listened to this episode will walk around Winchester with another thought in their mind this time of what was built out of some profit here? What can we see the links to what we've learned today? Thank you so much, Lucy.

Thank you for listening to the episode, once again, we look forward to seeing you next week.

If you've enjoyed listening to today's episode and would like to find out a bit more, all of the links will be available on our website.

Outro: We hope you enjoyed listening to today's episode. If you'd like to find out a little bit more about what we've been talking about, then please visit the website,

winchesterheritageopendays.org, click on Hampshire HistBites, and there you'll find today's show notes as well as some links to more information.

Thank you for listening.