

# Dales skeletons finally laid to rest

YORKSHIRE Water has staged one of the most moving ceremonies ever to take place in Wensleydale – and the village of Thornton Steward, near Jervaulx Abbey, took part.

It was a simple but sombre affair, which saw the burial of 17 skeletons unearthed during a major pipelaying

operation.

Last summer the water company was laying a new 8.5km pipeline between its water treatment works in the village and a service reservoir at Sowden Beck, when excavators came across an ancient burial ground, dating back to approximately 660-1200AD.



■ The inscribed headstone, surrounded by wreaths laid by the villagers of Thornton Steward. (Pictures by Nick Gill)

Archaeologists who were maintaining a watching brief over the work on Yorkshire Water's behalf immediately asked the company to suspend its operation and sought the permission of the private landowner to allow excavation work to take place.

Stephanie Walden, Yorkshire Water's environmental planning officer, said: "It was by far the most important archaeological discovery we have ever made and we immediately ordered our workmen off the site to enable the archaeologists to carry out further investigations.

"Before we start any pipelaying operation of this kind we always check to see we are not disturbing any sites of ecological, historical or archaeological importance. On this occasion we identified five sites in the area and, as a precaution, called in Northern Archaeological Associates to maintain a watching brief as the

work progressed.

"They were as surprised as we were at our discovery," added Stephanie.

The findings of the excavation were astonishing and immediately caused a great stir among the villagers.

Philip Abramson, a project manager with the Northern Archaeological Associates, said with the financial support of Yorkshire Water he had been able to carry out a comprehensive excavation and give the villagers a glimpse of life in Lower Wensleydale during the Anglo-Saxon and Viking period.

#### UNEARTHED

A total of 17 skeletons were eventually unearthed, alongside a jumbled mixture of bones of about ten more people.

Samples from three of them were sent to the British Museum for radiocarbon dating, which revealed they could have been buried up to 1,300 years ago.

"One interesting feature of the find was the fact that all the skeletons, bar one, were buried facing the west, which suggests they were afforded a Christian burial. The one which was facing east could have been the priest," said Mr Abramson.

"In those days the

idea was that on the Day of Judgement when the dead sat up they would be facing the east and the priest would be facing his flock. Alternatively, the one facing east could simply have been buried the wrong way round," he added.

The two-to-one ratio of men to women could possibly suggest some sort of monastic settlement was close by. However the limited number of skeletons discovered and the small scale of the excavation could point to the existence of a separate cemetery nearby for women.

One thing is for certain though and that is the fact that the men and women who lived in Wensleydale all those years ago were certainly not free from ailments.

One woman had severe dental problems and several of the skeletons showed signs of acute osteoarthritis affecting their hips, knees, ankles, shoulders and elbows.

The exact site of the excavation, which has since been covered over, is being kept a secret to prevent over-enthusiastic treasure seekers invading the area.

But the residents of Thornton Steward were kept fully informed of the findings and given an assurance by Yorkshire Water that the skeletons would be re-buried.



■ Yorkshire Water staff and archaeologists from the Northern Archaeological Associates with some of the remains.

"We thought it wholly appropriate to lay these people to rest once more in the soil in which the villagers' ancestors had buried them.

Throughout the whole episode – we always viewed them as people, not just bones," said Yorkshire Water's project manager, Jenny Rankine.

"The people of the village showed a great deal of interest in our work so Yorkshire Water decided to organise a second service of internment so they could say their own farewells," she added.

They gathered at St Oswald's Church where the Rev David Eyles led them in prayers. After Mr

Abramson said a few words the bodies, were laid to rest in a joint grave.

Villagers were each invited to carry a box to the graveside and laid flowers there.

A headstone marks the spot where the remains are buried, concluding: "May They Rest In Peace."