

Unearthing bones!

Posted by Peter on 17 June 2010



Roman gladiators fighting in the arena.

Do you know the English word "unearth"? If you "unearth" something, you dig it out of the ground. Perhaps you remember the [podcast about the Staffordshire Hoard](#), a collection of gold and precious stones which had been discovered in a field. The man who found the hoard dug the gold and precious stones out of the field - he "unearthed" them. Or perhaps you remember the [podcast about my hens](#). The hens scratch the ground. They hope to "unearth" a worm, or something else which is nice to eat. Nice if you are a hen, I mean.

We can use the word "unearth" in a figurative way. Imagine that you are a newspaper journalist. You are writing an article about a well-known politician. You talk to people, and you ask questions, and you discover, or "unearth", some interesting things, for example that the politician has taken [bribes](#) from a big chemicals company. You have "unearthed" a scandal.

Today, we are going to unearth some bones, and we will learn something about the very [bloodthirsty](#) people - the [Romans](#), the [Saxons](#) and the [Vikings](#) - who lived in England or visited this country over 1000 years ago. For several years, archaeologists have been digging in the gardens of a group of houses in York, in the north of England. They have unearthed lots of bones, old bones, human bones. The bones date from the time, about 2000 years ago, when England was part of the [Roman Empire](#), and York was an important Roman city. The bones are of strong, healthy young men. Many of them show signs of serious injuries. Many had been [beheaded](#). Others had been killed by [hammer](#) blows to the head. Scientific tests show that the men came from many different parts of the Roman Empire.

The archaeologists think that the young men were professional fighters, called gladiators. The Romans, when there was nothing good on television, loved to watch gladiator fights. These fights often ended with the death of one of the gladiators. Sometimes, instead of fighting each other, gladiators fought with wild animals like lions or tigers, which the Romans brought at great expense from places like north Africa. And one of the [skeletons](#) found at York has the marks of the teeth of a large animal!

Some of the gladiators at York were buried with goods for them to use in the [afterlife](#) and there is evidence that great feasts were held at gladiator funerals. Gladiators were popular heroes in Roman times, like professional footballers are today. Professional footballers have short footballing lives - sometimes they have to retire after a few years because of injury. Gladiators had short lives too, because they often had their heads cut off during fights!

We have found some other interesting bones recently. In the south of England, near Weymouth, men who were building a new road found a large collection of bones from over 50 people. Like the bones at York, they

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were all young men and they had all been beheaded. These bones are later than the bones in York. They come from the time of the Saxons. The Saxons were the people who came to England when the Roman Empire collapsed. Their language is the ancestor of modern English. However, the bones are not Saxon bones. Scientists analysed the chemical composition of the bones and concluded that the men came from Scandinavia. In Saxon times, people from Scandinavia called the Vikings frequently raided England, to kill and steal, and Vikings settled permanently in some parts of the country. The Saxons tried paying the Vikings money to go away and leave them alone, but that simply made the Vikings more greedy. So what happened to the young Vikings at Weymouth? Probably the Saxons captured a group of Viking raiders, stripped them naked and then executed them. However, if you come from Norway or Denmark, do not worry. We give tourists a much warmer welcome nowadays!

This is the text of the podcast at <http://www.listen-to-english.com/index.php?id=532>,