The Glen Parva Lady

Display at Jewry Wall Museum

Whilst we are out and about we are often unaware of the history, recent and ancient that lies beneath our feet. Most people who live in Glen Parva have heard about the Glen Parva Lady but how many of think that she was found near Glen Parva Manor, and how much do we know of her origins?

In 1866 workmen were digging for gravel on Rye Hill Close (now Woodbank) on land belonging to Major Joseph Knight of Glen Parva Manor. They came across a rough stone arch two feet below the surface. On breaking through the stones they uncovered a skeleton in a perfect state of preservation. They thought they had uncovered a recent murder victim so sent for the police. However, it soon became clear that the skeleton and the goods buried with it had not been buried recently.

The skeleton was identified as that of a young woman, aged between twenty and thirty. Her bones were strong and her teeth free from cavities. In life, she had been a healthy young woman around 5 feet 6 inches tall. The orientation of her burial, North to South, indicated that she was a Pagan and the grave goods buried with her confirmed that she was of high status. The goods included a glass cup, a necklace of glass beads, a piece of crystal and several bronze rings and broaches. The date of her burial was estimated to have been between 500 to 550CE. Later two male skeletons were found; both male and perfectly preserved. One of the male skeletons was buried with a spearheads and a sword, so it was assumed the men were warriors.

The Glen Parva Lady is very important because she is a gateway to our understanding of the early Saxon, pre Christian era. The richness of her grave goods show that this little understood period was more sophisticated and artistic than the term Dark Ages implies. We do not know if she was passing through Glen Parva or living there with her companions and we do not know how they died.

So what happened to the lady? Major Knight, as the landowner, took possession of the skeletal remains and grave goods and they were exhibited at various places throughout the county during the 19th Century. Eventually they came into possession of the museum service and found a home in the Jewry Wall Museum where there was a major display. Many of us will have visited the display ourselves or in the company of children and grandchildren. Sadly, the Jewry Wall Museum is currently closed and its future redevelopment into a major tourist attraction to showcase the Roman baths is uncertain.

It is a great pity that there is no sign in modern day Glen Parva that such an important lady ever existed.

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