

## PRESS RELEASE

# The Oxford Castle Curse – ‘The Black Assize’

Oxford Castle is no stranger to death. During the excavation of the site that is now *Oxford Castle – Unlocked*, archaeologists discovered more than 60 skeletons dated from the mid-16<sup>th</sup> to the mid-18<sup>th</sup> centuries between the former prison and the old castle. They had uncovered a mass grave that may throw light on one of the strangest and most gruesome events of the Elizabethan age: the curse of Rowlande Jenkes.

Rowlande Jenkes was a 'foul-mouthed and saucy' bookbinder, a Roman Catholic of Belgian extraction whose radical views led to his trial at the assizes court in the Shire Hall or Sessions House, within the castle walls. He was convicted on 6 July 1577 of supporting the Pope. For his temerity he was sentenced to be nailed by his ears to the local pillory and responded by laying a curse on the courtroom and city.

No sooner was the penalty announced than “*there arose such an infectious damp or breath among the people that many there present ...were then smothered, and others so deeply affected that they lived not many hours after.*” – An account by Anthony Wood from the register of Merton College.

Six hundred people became ill in Oxford on that same day, plus a further 100 who had returned to their homes in outlying villages. Several hundred local men – but strangely no women, children or poor people - dropped dead within the space of just five weeks. Wood described the victims as “*very calamitous and full of sorrow, occasioned by the rage of their disease and pain. Others like mad men would run about the streets, markets, lanes and other places. Some again would leap headlong into deep waters.*”

Among the victims were most of the magistrates, including the sheriff, two judges, a clerk, the coroner, nearly all the jury and 100 scholars who had been standing in the courtroom - which was then located just outside the castle - when Jenkes shouted out his curse.

On 12 August the contagion ceased as suddenly as it had begun. This led to rumours of divine influence and sorcery. Jenkes himself survived, became a baker and moved back to Belgium where he lived to an old age (until about 1610) - minus his ears!

‘The Black Assizes’ as the event was later known, became an infamous tale relating to the trial at the assize court. The dig provided the first palpable evidence that the legend had its roots in reality. However, the

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discovery is still clouded in mystery as the skeletons were mostly of young men but also include five women in their late forties and fifties. Intriguingly, some of them also show signs of having been dissected. Three skulls had their tops skillfully sawn off and another had been carefully separated from its skeleton.

Some say that they are the bodies of executed criminals which were used by anatomists from nearby Christ Church college. But this scenario also raises problems, since at the time, the dissection of criminals was strictly limited to only four murderers per year for the entire UK. There is no way to tell from their skeletons what killed them, and so it seems this grim and foreboding place holds some secrets that may never unfold...

**Oxford Castle – Unlocked is open daily from 10.00am to 5.30pm (last tour 4.20pm). See [www.oxfordcastleunlocked.co.uk](http://www.oxfordcastleunlocked.co.uk) or call 01865 260666 to find out more!**

## **ENDS**

**For further media information, images or to arrange a visit, please contact: Keira Relton or Heidi Folland on 01904 527700 or [krelton@continuum-group.com](mailto:krelton@continuum-group.com) / [hfolland@continuum-group.com](mailto:hfolland@continuum-group.com).**

### **NOTES TO EDITORS:**

*Oxford Castle - Unlocked* is open daily from 10.00am to 5.30pm (last tour 4.20pm). Admission prices: Adults £7.50, Children £5.35, Concessions £6.20.

*Oxford Castle - Unlocked* opened on 2 June 2006 and gives visitors the opportunity to learn about the real people who lived and died throughout site's turbulent past. Visitors are able to walk through the ancient buildings and experience the stories that connect the real people to these extraordinary events.

The guardians of this important historic site, The Oxford Preservation Trust were awarded a £3.8 million grant by the Heritage Lottery Fund to restore the castle and site buildings. The post of Learning and Access Officer is funded by Oxfordshire County Council.

*Oxford Castle - Unlocked* is operated by Continuum - visitor attraction operators and specialists in the tourism and leisure industry. See [www.continuum-group.com](http://www.continuum-group.com)