

The William Adams Club

– Statement –

William Adams (1564 – 1620) – Discovery of Remains

Given the occasion of the 400th anniversary of Adams death, on 16th May, 2020, The William Adams Club feels obliged to offer a statement to members and the wider public regarding the findings of research undertaken since the formation of the Club in 2015. Despite the fact forensic investigation is still on-going, we feel future results will merely confirm our conclusion. That is, The William Adams Club believes that the burial place of William Adams HAS been found, together with his skeletal remains, at the William Adams Memorial Park near the summit of Sakigata Hill, in Hirado-city, Nagasaki Prefecture, Japan.

In 2015, when The William Adams Club in Tokyo offered financial assistance to Hirado City Council to upgrade the William Adams Memorial Park on Sakigata Hill, and to enhance understanding and interpretation of the site, nobody realized the full-extent of the journey being embarked upon. We soon learned that the Memorial Park as we know it today (actually, it is more of a ‘large garden’ than ‘park’) was laid out between 1954 and 1964, in time for the 400th anniversary of Adams’ birth. Hirado City Council had acquired the land, and the three main monuments there were erected at that time; the largest, in the centre, declaring in Japanese that here was the grave of William Adams. However, no grave was ever unearthed during this period of landscaping. On the other hand, this small plot of land apparently has a long association with William Adams and a belief had been nurtured over the centuries that here was indeed his final resting place. Intriguingly, the family that had owned the land for at least three generations before selling it were called Miura – a name with clear associations to William Adams (who is widely known in Japan as Miura Anjin).

Another intriguing piece of evidence was a newspaper cutting from 1931, which described how local archaeologists had excavated a small area in or near the Memorial Park and discovered a western-style grave complete with skeletal remains.

Because of the large size of the bones they were judged to have belonged to a western individual, although there was nothing to suggest the remains were indisputably those of William Adams. Unfortunately, no other documentation for this dig survives, and even the precise location remained unclear. Interviews with surviving members of the Miura family suggested, however, that the excavation had taken place under or around the small unmarked stela which stands in the north-east corner of the Memorial Park. Hirado City Council were encouraged to follow-up this mystery, employing professional archaeologists, with the aims of re-discovering the grave and using latest technology to determine who the bones belonged to. The William Adams Club strongly promoted these goals, especially with the 400th anniversary of Adams' death in mind, and a partnership was formed.

Excavation of the stela took place in July, 2017, together with a second pit dug a few metres to the south of it, just beyond the Memorial Park boundary. The first trench proved indeed to be the site of the 1931 investigation, the bones having been placed in a Showa period ceramic funerary urn and re-interred in the grave, which had then been infilled with fist-sized stones. When all the infill was removed the base of a rectangular (approx. 2m x 0.4m) grave was revealed, having been hewn into the local bedrock to the depth of a few centimetres. Coffin nails were found here, confirming that this had been a western-style burial. Japanese burials of this period required a circular pit, to accommodate a wooden barrel (no nails being used), into which the body was placed in a seated position, the face turned to the west. This grave was an oblong shape with east-west orientation, and there was sufficient space for a tall person to be laid-down in a prone position. The lowest point was only about 0.6m below ground level – unusual for any grave. The 1931 newspaper report suggested this point was nearly 2m below the surface, however, highlighting the degree to which the landscape at the top of Sakigata Hill has changed since pre-war days, largely due to deliberate human landscaping activity.

It took six months for the excavated bones to be dried out, allowing cleaning and forensic examination to take place. During this time The William Adams Club considered a 'check-list' against which results could be compared, to help ascertain if the bones were indeed those of William Adams. Obviously, the requirement was that the bones should be those of a single individual only. He should be male, and aged in his mid-fifties at the time of death. The bones themselves should have been decaying for a period of about 400 years, having 'ceased living' in 1620. The bones should

belong to someone of English pedigree, as opposed to other western places where similar burial practices were followed, such as Spain, Portugal, and even Holland. More specific checks included, for example, potential evidence of a fractured clavicle, since Adams is thought to have broken his collar bone in a fall from a horse during his later years. As events transpired only about 5% of a complete skeleton had survived – due to the harsh, acidic soil conditions locally – and bones which could be identified were in generally ‘very poor’ condition. Detailed checks concerning a broken collar bone and so on were simply not possible. Nor, for that matter, could a facial reconstruction ever be achieved. On a more positive note, by the end of 2018 mitochondrial DNA had been extracted and a C₁₄ dating analysis undertaken by experts at the University of Tokyo.

Forensic analysis of the bones revealed the following. Anatomical detail showed the bones to have belonged to a sole western male, aged between 40 and 59 years. C₁₄ suggested time of death to have been between 1590 and 1620. DNA indicates ethnic origin of the individual to be a combination of north-European and west-European ancestry. This latter result is significant because not only does it exclude the possibility of Iberian origin, but also points to the fact that the individual was an Englishman with probable Celtic and Norse origins in his make-up rather than, for example, a (southern) Dutchman with continental European and Frankish origins. In other words, at this stage, the main checklist items had all been ticked, and there was no reason to state that the rediscovered bones were NOT those of William Adams. In fact, there seemed a very high probability that the bones ARE those of Adams. The only real doubt concerned the fact that at least eight Englishmen were known to have died in Hirado during the period indicated by the C₁₄ dating, and that the grave was possibly associated with others in an, as yet undiscovered, ‘Christian’ or ‘English cemetery’ near the top of Sakigata Hill. If there were any other western-style graves in this vicinity, great doubt would have to be cast on any formal conclusion reached regarding identity of the bones.

Such doubt could have been fueled perhaps, by the fact that the second trench dug in the 2017 excavation also yielded a grave. It was a Japanese-style burial, however, and forensic evidence (also funded by The William Adams Club) showed it to be a Japanese, young to middle-aged male, who lived and died in the 13th century. Nevertheless, this discovery prompted Hirado City Council to continue excavations, in July, 2018, from the area of the second grave towards the top of Sakigata Hill, to see if

there was any evidence of a cemetery. Four trenches were dug; three of them exposing two graves each, and one of them just a single grave, resulting in a total of seven previously undiscovered graves in all. All were Japanese-style 'barrel-burials' and, unusually, all contained one or more high quality ceramic and/or lacquer-ware grave-goods. These goods were all of Chinese origin, and dated to the late sixteenth century; c.1570 – 1610. The discovery of so many graves in such a small area certainly indicated the existence of a cemetery here, but it was clearly not the 'missing' English burial-place. Forensic examination revealed these skeletons to have been either Japanese or Chinese in origin, but the context of the grave goods firmly points to this area being part of a Chinese cemetery, perhaps on land set aside for Chinese merchants who died in Hirado during the second half of the 16th century. If so, the discovery is one of national importance, since it would pre-date the Chinese cemetery in Nagasaki. Possibly it ceased to be used when it became 'full', and all subsequent Chinese burials took place in Nagasaki after the early 1600s. Research continues, but the findings so far are important in providing a context for the 'Adams' grave'.

A traditional story which originates in Hemi (Yokosuka, Kanagawa Prefecture) from the wife, or widow, of William Adams (Oyuki) is that it was his wish to be buried near the top of a hill, overlooking the sea. To this end Adams set aside a plot at the edge of his estate where he wished to be buried *if* he happened to die in Hemi. Japanese records show that Oyuki set-up a memorial to Adams there a few years after his death, and it survives to this day (though is wrongly assumed by many to be his grave). There can be little doubt that once Adams began to spend more and more time in Hirado, from 1613, he made a similar arrangement for his burial in case he died there. His status as high-ranking *hatamoto* samurai enabled him to do this, and Matura, the lord of Hirado, seemed happy to grant permission. Adams therefore acquired, by gift or by direct purchase, a small plot of land near the top of Sakigata Hill, overlooking the sea, although not far from places where other foreigners were already buried, because it seems that the whole of Sakigata Hill was set aside for 'foreign' burials at that time. Adams himself would have selected the exact plot for his grave; as close to the hill-top as possible, but still overlooking the sea, taking care not to encroach on the 'Chinese cemetery' already in use. These graves were still clearly visible in his day, each being marked by at least one large stone, or perhaps a low cairn or circle of smaller stones. It is possible, of course, that Adams acquisition of this plot contributed to the decision taken by the Chinese community for all their own future burials to take place in Nagasaki. The much earlier Japanese burial had probably 'disappeared' by this time,

being no more than a small, unmarked hollow on the ground.

In 2019 Hirado City Council were moved to continue the search for the 'English cemetery' by excavating within the William Adams Memorial Park, to the west of, and on the same level as, the unmarked stela – the site of the 2017 investigation. Again, The William Adams Club funding was used to facilitate this research. Excavation was scheduled for July 2019, but bad weather and other reasons forced a delay until November. Three graves were found, in close proximity to the 'Adams' grave already described. All were Japanese 'barrel burials', however, and have been tentatively dated to the 'Early Edo' era due to the age and type of the grave-goods also found. These included simple ceramic dishes and, significantly, beads which may have belonged to a rosary. They have nothing in common with the type of goods found in the 'Chinese' cemetery, and there is no reason to suggest any connection with those graves. Also, one of the sets of skeletal remains has been identified as female, the only one discovered in all three seasons of excavation. It is too early yet for more detailed evidence to have emerged, as forensic examination is still continuing. It is possible that one of these burials may belong to a much earlier period, like the young man found in 2017 just south of the stela. However, there is every possibility that one or more of these individuals actually knew William Adams, and would have been well aware of the significance of being buried on this site. It is certainly worth noting that Adams is known to have fathered an illegitimate child when he lived in Hirado, believed to have been a boy, and that both mother and son survived him. There are no other burials within the William Adams Memorial Park, and this is definitely NOT the site of the still-unlocated English cemetery.

With the help of archivists in charge of the East India Company Collection at the British Library in London, research was carried out on the Englishmen known to have died in Hirado before 1621. Apart from William Adams, all were sailors who served on English ships supplying the English trading house, stopping over in the town for just a few weeks or months. All but one of these men were recorded as being interred either alongside the graves of shipmates, or in 'our usual burial place', or in the 'Christian burial place', or in a location which was clearly NOT Sakigata Hill (eg. 'at sea'). The exact location of their graves is of continuing interest, but is now irrelevant to the identification of the individual under the stela in the memorial park, since that grave is in isolation. The remaining individual is described as a 'mariner', named John Bailey, who served on the *Hosandier*, and died in 1616. In general terms, as Hakluyt

noted at the time, "...of so many [seamen], so few grow to gray heires", the proportion of mariners who were aged over 40 years was very low, and this is confirmed in recent studies into life aboard ship in the early 1600s. If, as seems likely, Bailey died under the age of 40, the skeleton in the 'Adams' grave could not be his on the basis of forensic evidence alone. It is also our belief that he is likely to have been buried in the 'usual' burial place, even though no specific mention of this is made in the records, and that the odds of an ordinary seaman being interred under a stela in a prime location near the top of Sakigata Hill are infinitesimally small.

In summary, there is now known to be just one western-style grave near the summit of Sakigata Hill, and it is located within the boundary of the William Adams Memorial Park, under the unmarked stela in the north-eastern corner. To the east is a Chinese (or possibly Japanese) cemetery which already existed in Adams day. Just within a metre or two on the other side of the grave, and also within the Memorial Park, are Japanese-style burials for three individuals who may have known Adams and, conversely, people whom he may have known and trusted, one of them being a female. Throughout the modern era, and probably before then, this site has been associated with Miura Anjin, that is to say, William Adams. The skeletal remains rediscovered in 2017 are completely consistent with the known characteristics of Adams himself, in terms of sex, country of ancestral origin, age at death, and year of death. The possibility that the bones belong to another person of north-west European origin is refuted, on the grounds that almost all English and Dutch traders, or mariners from visiting trading ships, known to have died in Hirado were buried with their compatriots in small 'national' cemeteries. William Adams, however, had expressed a desire to be buried in his own place of choosing, at or near the top of a hill from where his remains could overlook the sea. Doubtless only he had the means and the local status to arrange this.

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May, 2020