

New project to identify Jack the Ripper's last known victim

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Mary Jane Kelly's grave. Credit: Carl Vivian University of Leicester

Members of the University of Leicester team who undertook genealogical and demographic research in relation to the discovery of the mortal remains of King Richard III have now been involved in a new

project to identify the last known victim of Jack the Ripper - Mary Jane Kelly.

The researchers were commissioned by author Patricia Cornwell, renowned for her meticulous research, to examine the feasibility of finding the exact burial location and the likely condition and survival of her [remains](#). This was done as a precursor to possible DNA analysis in a case surrounding her true identity following contact with Wynne Weston-Davies who believes that Mary Jane Kelly was actually his great aunt, Elizabeth Weston Davies.

Now, in a new report, 'The Mary Jane Kelly Project', the research team has revealed the likelihood of locating and identifying the last known victim of Britain's most infamous serial killer known as 'Jack the Ripper', who is thought to have killed at least five young women in the Whitechapel area of London between August and November 1888.

The research team consisted of Dr Turi King, Reader in Genetics and Archaeology at the University of Leicester and lead geneticist of the Richard III project, Mathew Morris, Field Officer for University of Leicester Archaeological Services (ULAS) who discovered the remains of Richard III, Professor Kevin Schürer, Professor in English Local History who carried out the genealogical study of Richard III and Carl Vivian, Video Producer, who was video producer for the Richard III project.

As any DNA analysis would rely on the unambiguous identification of the remains being those of Mary Jane Kelly before such a project could even be considered, the University of Leicester team conducted a desk-based assessment of the burial location of Mary Jane Kelly.

The team visited St Patrick's Catholic Cemetery, Leytonstone, on 3 May 2016 in order to examine the burial area. Research was carried out in the

cemetery's burial records and a survey of marked graves in the area around Kelly's modern grave marker was undertaken.

Their work was commissioned by Patricia Cornwell who is a crime writer, known for writing a best-selling series of novels featuring the heroine Dr Kay Scarpetta, a medical examiner, and has also written two books on Jack the Ripper.

Wynne Weston-Davies is a surgeon and author of *The Real Mary Kelly*, an investigation into the life and death of the Ripper's final victim. In his book published in 2015, Weston-Davies claimed that the woman known to everyone as Mary Jane Kelly was living under a pseudonym and was in fact his great aunt Elizabeth Weston Davies.

Patricia Cornwell contacted Dr Turi King at the University of Leicester to assess the possibility of testing the DNA from the remains of Mary Jane Kelly and matching them against those of Weston-Davies.

Dr King said: "During initial discussions, two issues arose - it was widely reported in the press in 2015 that the Ministry of Justice had indicated that it would issue an exhumation licence to Wynne Weston-Davies - however in fact, they had only acknowledged that they would consider such an application if submitted.

"Secondly, to complete any exhumation application to the Ministry of Justice, a compelling case for the exhumation as well as detailed information on the location and state of the grave would be required, not only for the exhumation of Kelly's remains, but also to determine if any other remains might be disturbed in the process.

November 17	1894	James Reid	52	18 Wintery Street New York	(Died)
" "	95	Mary Brien	60	4 Papier Road	New York
" "	94	Margaret Jones	18	10 Wellington Place	Y.
" "	97	Patrick Symmetry	18 wks	4 Thomas Place	Y.
" "	98	James Parry	6 yrs	24 Franklin Street	Y.
" "	99	Thomas Richards	3 wks	2 Elizabeth Street	Y.
" "	200	Daniel Lynch	60	Y. George's	Y.
19	1	Mary Jeannette Kelly	25	Whitechapel Mortuary	Y.
" "	2	Mary Began	50	Whitechapel	Y.
25	3	John Leary	84	West Ham Union	Y.
" "	4	Catherine Grady	47	52 Worship Street	Y.
" "	5	Julia Barrett	8 yrs	Childrens Hospital	Y.
" "	12	William Welsh	4 wks	4 Mayfields Building	Y.
" "	7	Margaret Gordon	1 year	2 Longdale Street	Y.
" "	8	Mary Gullivan	44	5 Green Park	Y.

Burial records of Mary Jeannette Kelly from 1888 St. Patrick's Catholic Cemetery. Credit: Carl Vivian University of Leicester

"However, the precise location of her grave is unknown and, not only that, it rapidly became clear that as such, the remains of a number of other individuals would have to be disturbed and that her remains are highly likely to have been dug through when the communal gravesite she was buried in was reused in the 1940s making accurate identification of any of her remains highly problematic if not impossible."

Mathew Morris said: "There have been several modern markers in the cemetery which have commemorated Kelly since the 1980s and its location is likely to have little or no relevance to the real location of the grave. Problems surrounding the location of the grave stem from the fact

that this area of the cemetery was reclaimed in 1947, with earlier grave positions being swept away to make way for new burials."

"Based on numerous calculations, we concluded that in order to locate Mary Jane Kelly's remains, one would most likely have to excavate an area encompassing potentially hundreds of graves containing a varying, and therefore unknown, number of individuals."

Furthermore, current law relating to the exhumation of [human remains](#) in England and Wales states that consent from the next of kin for each set of remains would be required - and in cases where there are a large number of remains within a grave, it is unlikely licences will be granted.

Professor Kevin Schürer, said: "In order to make an application to the Ministry of Justice for a licence to exhume Mary Jane Kelly's remains, the case for Kelly being Elizabeth Weston Davies needs to be compelling, not least because to test the theory by exhuming the remains will almost certainly involve disturbing the remains of other individuals buried in the vicinity.

"Relatives of these individuals would need to give consent and therefore traced and permission sought. Given the number of individuals whose remains would likely be disturbed, it would take months, possibly years, of genealogical research to trace them all."

The team concluded that without a full review of the evidence cited by Weston-Davies, much of the case for Mary Jane Kelly and Elizabeth Weston Davies being the same individual appears to be circumstantial or conjectural.

However, the report also found that DNA testing of the remains of Mary Jane Kelly - should she be discovered - would allow for a comparison to be made between those remains and Weston-Davies in order to

determine if the genetic data is consistent with them being related, and therefore likely to be Elizabeth Weston Davies.

Dr King said: "As information presently stands, a successful search for Kelly's remains would require a herculean effort that would likely take years of research, would be prohibitively costly and would cause unwarranted disturbance to an unknown number of individuals buried in a cemetery that is still in daily use, with no guarantee of success.

"As such it is extremely unlikely that any application for an exhumation licence would be granted. The simple fact is, successfully naming someone in the historical record only happens in the most exceptional of cases.

"Most human remains found during excavations remain stubbornly, and forever, anonymous and this must also be the fate of Mary Jane Kelly."

Provided by University of Leicester

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