

A gripping, semi-fictional debut novel by our journalist Simon Caldwell is being published this month...

A Catholic Thriller

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By Jack Fenwick

MARK Smale remembers the attempted exhumation of the body of St. John Plessington very well. It was 1962 and he was a 'rookie' police constable at the time, aged just 19, and was sent out on a night shift on his bike with a list of jobs, which included checking the doors of the vestry of St Nicholas's, an ancient Anglican church in the village near Chester, England, once every two hours.

"It was like *Wuthering Heights* out there that night," he told the *Shrewsbury Catholic Voice* several years ago when he recalled how he crept up to the church at about 2am. He tried the door and to his relief it was locked. Then he felt something brush across his leg, possibly a cat. "I didn't linger," laughed Mr Smale as he described how he leaped back on to his bike and pedalled off frenetically.

Inside the building were the contents of a grave emptied that day by

a team from Liverpool University. With the realisation that the Vatican was looking favourably on the canonisation of a group of English and Welsh martyrs, the Home Office had granted the Catholic Church in England and Wales an exhumation order in the expectation that Plessington, a 17th century priest martyred during the hysteria of the fabricated 'Popish Plot' of Titus Oates, was likely to be among them.

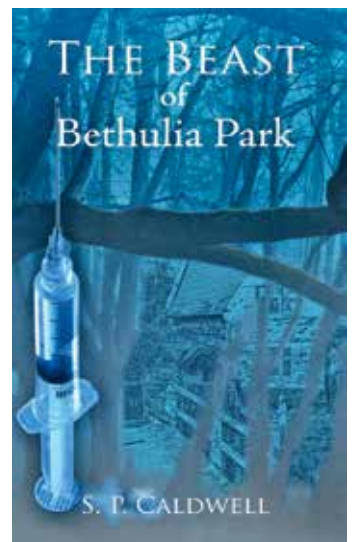
Had identifiable bones or other relics been recovered, it could be assumed that the Church would have relocated them in a place more fitting with the status of canonised saint, like a shrine or a reliquary, where they could be venerated by the faithful.

Mystery bones

Plessington's body, however, wasn't there. The team instead recovered the intact skeleton of a man some 15 years younger, bearing signs of injury only to vertebrae

in the neck. Plessington, however, had been hanged, drawn and quartered – a process in which the victim is partially hanged, disembowelled and beheaded before he is hacked into four pieces. The skeleton in Plessington's grave showed no evidence of such ritualistic butchery. It could not have been the priest.

Back in 1878, however, a set of bones were



Our journalist Simon Caldwell with the book cover of *The Beast of Bethulia Park*; published by *Gracewing*, it is available from all major online platforms and bookshops

discovered in North Wales which showed precisely such marks. The skull in particular had a hole in the crown that was made by a sharp instrument driven from the inside – consistent with the head being impaled upon a pike. Yet the bones have no provenance and no-one has yet to prove definitely precisely to whom they belong. They remain a mystery.

Serial killer

In London this month a thriller called *The Beast of Bethulia Park* will be launched, which takes up this mystery from its opening chapter. It concludes with a very striking and disturbing explanation indeed.

There is, of course, no fun in spoiling a good story, so it is sufficient to say that this debut novel of S.P. Caldwell, a contributor to the *Messenger of Saint Anthony*, begins in the aftermath of the priest's execution in July 1679 when soldiers delivered Plessington's remains to the Massey family of Puddington Hall, where the priest served as chaplain, only to be driven away by a Catholic mob (which actually happened). The fate of the priest's body and the identity of the man found in his grave form a sub-plot to the

main story, which is set in 2019, and which concerns a quest to unmask a sophisticated serial killer and to bring him to justice.



Fr. Calvin

The main character in the story is Fr. Calvin Baines, a young and idealistic hospital chaplain who takes up a challenge to identify the bones as he fights for his sanity on being “propelled into a dark world of sexual obsession, danger and death,” according to the blurb on the jacket of the novel.

The readers of this magazine may wish to enjoy the story and to discover Fr. Baines's conclusions for themselves, not least since William Cash, the editor of the *Catholic Herald*, has heaped praise upon the novel, saying the character of the chaplain is so well drawn that he “belongs in the top literary gallery of priest protagonists.”

The conclusions in the book, although fictitious, may well lead to renewed speculation about these mysterious bones and whether they can ever be truly identified.

Two sets of bones

They were one of two sets of bones handed over together to the Jesuits in the late 19th century, and for many years the Society of Jesus has wondered if they belonged to members of their order. In support of such speculation is a popular myth linking the remains to the Star Inn, which was used by the Jesuits as a hostelry for pilgrims en route to the nearby shrine of St Winefride's Well. The Jesuits deny this. The tavern was demolished in 1799, almost a century before the bones turned up. The Cross Keys, another nearby pub used also for hospitality, was pulled down soon after. The Jesuits in fact have no record of how the bones came into their possession and have always struggled to identify them.



The bones of the ‘anonymous martyr’: a femur, or thigh bone, and a skull with a hole in the crown, probably caused by a pike forced through from the inside

That “no word of what they were or whose they were passed into oral tradition is surely very odd indeed especially as there was an almost unbroken succession of Jesuits ministering there from the 1580s to the 1930s,” one member of the Society of Jesus remarked in an email to the *Messenger of Saint Anthony*.

Violent death

In an attempt to satisfy their curiosity, the English Jesuit province in the mid-1990s asked two forensic pathologists from Edinburgh University to study the bones. The results were inconclusive, yet the team did offer evidence to dismiss a long-held but contentious theory that the bones were those of Jesuit priests Ss David Lewis and Philip Evans, com-

panions who were executed in South Wales in 1679.

They confirmed that one set of bones included the head and the right leg (an intact quarter) of a man who had been hanged, drawn and quartered. Besides violent injuries to the skull, the sacrum – the large triangular bone at the rear of the pelvis – had been chopped in half and neck vertebrae bore axe or cleaver wounds.

Yet the second set of bones show no sign of injury and could not have belonged to a man who was violently executed. While the anonymous martyr could be either Evans or Lewis, the undamaged bones surely belonged to neither of them. The theory did not stack up.

A report following the investigation did conclude that the executed man was likely to be “a 17th century Catholic martyr: almost certainly those of a priest, for whom this punishment was legally prescribed,” and it recommended further investigation to establish the identity of the victim.

Other candidates

Could these bones belong to St. John Plessington? It is not fanciful to imagine that his relics were secretly retrieved by Catholics at some point and taken to the shrine for safe-keeping. Because he was a secular priest, the Jesuits might not have been asked to take custody of his remains, at least initially.

St. John Plessington is not the only candidate in the frame, however. Some Jesuits have suspected that the bones might be those of



The priestly vestments of St. John Plessington, one of the 40 English and Welsh martyrs canonized by Pope St. Paul VI, are on public display at St Winefride’s Catholic Church, Neston, Cheshire

St. Richard Gwyn, a Welsh school-teacher and father-of-six executed at nearby Wrexham in 1584. Bishop Richard Challoner recorded in *Memoirs of Missionary Priests* that his head and a quarter were displayed from Denbigh Castle a short distance away.

Also, Blessed William Davies, a secular priest, was martyred in Beaumaris in Anglesey in 1593, and Blessed Charles Mahony, an Irish Franciscan, was hanged, drawn and quartered at Ruthin, North Wales, on August 12, 1679 – some three

weeks after Plessington died at Chester.

One could argue that these four are the most likely candidates. The Keble College Advanced Studies Centre at Oxford, using the Radiocarbon Accelerator Unit, would charge less than £500 to carbon-date the bones to determine their age. This would allow researchers to eliminate two of the four regional martyrs in one simple exercise.

If the bones are found to be from the 17th century, as the forensic pathologists suspect, then DNA tests, which can also be undertaken by the Oxford facility, could put researchers like Dr. Turi King, the scientist who identified the skeleton under a Leicester car park as that of King Richard III,

within reach of either conclusively identifying the martyr or finding out that it is someone else entirely.

It would cost probably a modest four-figure sum to attempt to match DNA from the bones to a relic of Plessington, for example, such as the lock of hair kept by the Franciscan friars of St Francis Church, Chester.

So far the Church has yet to decide if it will submit the bones to such speculative research. Sometimes, however, such decisions are taken only after decades of deliberations. There is nothing to prevent the Church from ordering a new study at any point, however. Only then will we know for sure if Fr. Calvin Baines, the fictional hero of *The Beast of Bethulia Park*, was right all along. ♦