Construction Crew Discovers Grave of ‘‘Tiny Tim’’

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London (IP).—Construction workers renovating an 18th century church in south London this week uncovered the grave site of Timothy Cratchit, the popular figure of Charles Dickens’ A Christmas Carol. Archaeologists and forensic anthropologists from the Royal Historic Society have confirmed the finding. Experts feel that this discovery will shed new light on the controversy regarding the nature of ‘‘Tiny Tim’s’’ crippling disease and death.

Excavation to strengthen the buttresses and roof supports of St. Andrew’s Church in London led to the discovery of 13 grave sites dating to the late 19th century. The graves and marker stones had been buried under decades of debris and paved over in 1963. While the discovery of forgotten graves is not uncommon in this section of London, this discovery was particularly exciting, according to Dr. Peter Brown of the Royal Historic Society. ‘‘We are often called to examine the markers or graves for their potential archaeologic value. It was almost by accident that we discovered Cratchit’s tombstone.’’ After moving several of the large stones, workers stumbled across a stone that read ‘‘In Memory. Timothy Cratchit. 1839–1884. Beloved Husband of Julia, Father of Robert, and Son of Robert and Martha.’’ Immediately beneath the stone, skeletal remains were discovered. They were of a man approximately 40 years of age wearing a frame of metal and leather on his legs and lower back.

The discovery of the skeletal remains of Timothy Cratchit has sparked great interest among members of the Royal Historic Society. ‘‘We finally have a reasonable idea of the nature of his crippling disease and death,’’ Dr. William McClean, a forensic anthropologist with the Royal Society, explained. ‘‘This will settle an issue which has been debated by physicians for 50 years.’’ He went on to explain that Cratchit’s skeleton revealed changes that pathologists had seen before. In 1910, Elliot Smith, working in Egypt, examined the mummified remains of a Priest of Amon named Nesporenhep, who lived roughly 1000 years before Christ. Dr. Smith discovered a curve of the backbone and evidence of muscle infection characteristic of tuberculosis (TB) of the spine. ‘‘The skeleton of Timothy Cratchit revealed the exact same findings,’’ Dr. McClean stated in a press conference here. ‘‘In addition, samples from the spine submitted to the Microbiology Research Institute of Cambridge have tested positive for Mycobacterium tuberculosis by polymerase chain reaction. This makes it all but certain that it was Pott’s disease, TB of the spine, which afflicted Tiny Tim as a child, and very likely it was TB that ultimately killed him.’’

Tuberculous spondylitis, or TB of the spine, was described by Sir Percivall Pott (1714–1788) 60 years before Timothy Cratchit was born. Typically, children become infected first with TB pneumonia, which they contract from a contagious adult. The bacteria then spread through the bloodstream and lodge in the backbone, where they begin an insidious destruction. Usually the body is able to fight the initial infection, but the TB in the backbone continues to smoulder. The majority of cases of TB of the spine, or Pott’s disease, occur in children between 3 and 10 years of age. Children develop pain and stiffness of the back, followed by gradual wasting, fatigue, and intermittent fevers. A section of the spine is gradually destroyed, leading to shortened trunk height. The legs may become weaker if the crumbling backbones push on the spinal cord. The children often lose the ability to walk normally. ‘‘While it is possible for children to live for years and even decades with this condition,’’ Dr. McClean explained, ‘‘death will often occur rapidly in the weakened or malnourished child, when the bone infection leaks into the fluid surrounding the spinal cord and brain, causing meningitis.’’

Recent articles have explored the possible causes of Tiny Tim’s affliction. In 1972, Jones suggested the possibility of TB of the hip in an article in the Australian Pediatric Journal. A pediatrician suggested the possibility of Pott’s disease in an American pediatric journal in 1991. Dr. Donald Lewis captured the imagination of the press worldwide with a 1992 article in the same pediatric journal, suggesting that Tim suffered from a rare form of kidney disease, distal renal tubular acidosis (RTA). Dr. McClean reviewed these theories in a recent press release. ‘‘Distal RTA is so uncommon that a busy pediatrician may see a case or two at most in his or her entire career. However, in 1843 when Dickens wrote A Christmas Carol, approximately one-half of the English population was affected with tuberculosis. It was the single most common disease and cause of death in the Western World. It was particularly common among families of the lower classes. It has always been easy to imagine that Timothy Cratchit suffered from a complication of tuberculosis.’’ He concluded, ‘‘Now we have the definitive proof.’’

The TB theory had been criticized because in Dickens’ account, Cratchit’s death was predicted but never realized, as a result of the benevolence of Ebenezer Scrooge. However, pa-
TB, the “white plague” of the last several centuries and probably the greatest single killer in the history of civilization, has reared its head again. Over the past several years, the incidence of new cases of TB has risen in the United States. TB is still quite common in less-developed parts of the world. It is estimated that as many as 1.7 billion people, or roughly one-third of the world’s population, have been infected with TB, as evidenced by a positive skin test. It is an affliction of poverty and also seems to attack patients whose ability to fight disease is diminished, such as those with immune deficiencies. Thus, Dr. McClean summarized his findings and sounded a word of caution concerning our present TB epidemic: “We would all do well to heed the words of a somber Bob Cratchit: ’I am sure we shall none of us forget poor Tiny Tim, shall we?’”

tients with Pott’s disease can experience a type of remission, where the process of bony destruction ceases. This is particularly true if adequate rest, recumbency, and bracing are provided with effective antimicrobial therapy. Antimicrobial therapy did not become available for TB until the discovery of streptomycin in 1944 by Selman Waksman, Albert Schatz, and Elizabeth Bugie. However, the importance of rest, recumbency, adequate nutrition, and proper bracing was recognized in Cratchit’s day, if the patient could afford that therapy. “Financial support is likely what Scrooge contributed to Tiny Tim’s care,” Dr. McClean concluded. “Ebenezer’s Christmas Eve reformation and subsequent generosity probably insured that Tim would live to adulthood, marry, and father a child, as the gravestone indicates.”