

Ashes to assess: an archaeological perspective on death and donkeys

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Williams, H. 2011. Ashes to assess: an archaeological perspective on death and donkeys, *Journal of Material Culture* 16(3): 219-39. DOI: 10.1177/1359183511412880

Abstract

This article considers the Donkey Sanctuary, Sidmouth, Devon, UK, as an example of how animal rescue centres and sanctuaries have developed in the UK over the last 30 years as a new form of charity-run commemorative landscape. Human ashes are scattered in the Sanctuary grounds, memorial plaques cover the buildings of the Sanctuary, and many more are set on benches and beside memorial trees around the donkey paddocks. Through text and material culture, these memorials constitute a commemorative parity between people and animals in death, and the Donkey Sanctuary has become a complex memorial landscape. Using a sample of over 500 memorials from the Sanctuary's grounds, the article explores the use of material culture in creating an emotive and utopian 'donkey heaven' in the contemporary Devon landscape.

Keywords

cremation, death, donkeys, sanctuary

This article is dedicated to the memory of Dr Elisabeth Svendsen MBE (b. 1930, d. 2011), the founder of one of the UK's most successful charities: the Donkey Sanctuary.

Ashes: emotion and memory in modern mortuary commemoration

Regenerative and ecological themes have increasingly pervaded the commemoration of the British dead (e.g. Clayden and Dixon, 2007). This trend coincides with the rising popularity of cremation over the last half century. More specifically, it reflects the popularity in recent decades for mourners to dispose of ashes in sites away from crematoria and cemeteries. For these mourners, ash becomes a potent mnemonic substance: part person, part material (Prendergast et al., 2006: 884; see also Williams, 2004). When transferred spatially and embedded into material culture, memorials and landscapes (Williams, 2008), the scattering of ashes avoids inert oblivion and anonymity. Instead, it creates various mnemonic absences and presences for the dead (e.g. Hockey et al., 2007; see also Sørensen, 2009, 2010). In this way, ash disposal does not signify the end of mourning, but creates unfolding relationships between the living and the dead in which remembering and forgetting both play a part (Davies, 2002; Kellaheer et al., 2005: 239; Prendergast et al., 2006: 883). Ash disposal connects death to places where ongoing bonds with the dead are forged (Kellaheer et al., 2010).

Recent studies have explored the institutional frameworks and human experiences of ash disposal, yet little detailed attention has so far been paid to the materiality of mortuary material culture, monuments and landscapes associated with ashes when they are disposed of away from the cemetery environment (see Woodthorpe, 2010). The ashes of humans and animals are now widely scattered and dispersed in homes, gardens and the wider landscape (Hockey et al., 2007; Kellaheer et al., 2005, 2010; Prendergast et al., 2006).

However, the precise ways in which this takes place, and how human and animal commemoration, material cultures and spaces are interwoven need further scrutiny. In particular, the strategies by which ash disposal transfers memories to material and place require further contextual investigation.

This is a topic to which archaeological studies can contribute; 'contemporary archaeology' has largely avoided the study of death beyond the narrow confines of conflict archaeology and the forensic investigation of crime scenes (e.g. Harrison and Schofield, 2010). Yet an archaeological perspective on contemporary mortuary practices offers considerable potential for revealing mourners' untold stories (Williams, 2011a). Contemporary archaeologies of cremation bring a fresh perspective and attention to material traces (e.g. Williams, 2011b). Their detailed analyses of material evidence provide a fine-grained alternative to interview-focused studies of what people say they do in response to death and when mourning the dead. Furthermore, an archaeological approach to ash disposal highlights the commemorative efficacy of the ephemerality of ash as well as the agencies of the material cultures, substances and places associated with human ash. By studying the themes, variability and temporal fluctuations associated with contemporary ash disposal, archaeologists can join other disciplines in exploring the perceptions and material constructions of the deceased and modes of emotional expression and embodiment in contemporary mortuary practices. Such studies promise to be equally relevant to death studies, material culture studies and mortuary archaeology.

Animals: towards a zoo-archaeology of modern death

The interaction between humans and animals in funerals is a crucial theme in mortuary archaeology. Archaeology has certainly offered deep-time perspectives on changing human–animal relationships among hunter–gatherer societies and animal domestication over many millennia, including how this is manifest in graves and tombs. Indeed, the contribution of animals to mortuary practices in past societies has been extensively discussed in recent years, including my own studies (Williams, 2001, 2005). However, I contend that archaeologists might also be able to offer a material-focused appraisal of human–animal relations in recent and contemporary death rituals. Furthermore, this approach contributes to a rich vein of recent study into the archaeology and heritage of zoos and other animal spaces in modern society (e.g. Holtorf, 2008; Holtorf and Van Reybrouck, 2003). It also links up with studies of human–animal relations across disciplines, including those by anthropologists, historians, geographers and theologians. More specifically, animals in mortuary practice are an aspect of the broader revalorizing of death in recent decades in Britain and elsewhere in the West where individual and intimate identities are expressed publicly in death through material culture and ash disposal.

This is not to say that archaeologists have been completely unaware of how animals are an important aspect of contemporary death rituals. But in previous works, the treatment of animals in contemporary mortuary and commemorative contexts was only mentioned as a cautionary tale. Notably, in his famous 1969 paper on the difficulties of interpreting funerary remains in past cultures, Peter Ucko briefly used the commemorative practices in Western pet cemeteries to critique archaeological assumptions that offerings and grave goods reveal afterlife beliefs: 'the pet owners had no thoughts about their animals needing these objects in the afterworld, or on the journey to an afterworld, but simply wished to

dispose of objects which had particular emotional connotations' (p. 265). While I would question Ucko's blanket judgement over the motives of artefact deposition on pets' graves, what is important here is the strong precedent he established but that has subsequently been squandered. Since his article was published, archaeologists have only rarely commented on the mortuary material culture, memorials and landscapes of involving animals in modern society (for a rare example, see Jennbert, 2003). Indeed, the few studies of recent and contemporary death that have been conducted by archaeologists have focused exclusively on human commemoration (e.g. Mytum, 2004; Parker Pearson, 1982; Tarlow, 1999).

Therefore, a superficial glance at this archaeological literature might lead one to assume that, while Western societies may certainly mourn dead animals, they retain strict and impermeable physical, spatial and conceptual separations between humans and animals in death. Yet while non-human agency has been studied for contemporary commemorative practice and the mourning and commemoration of pets has been considered as a social and emotional phenomenon (Davies, 2002: 182–195; Howell, 2002; Shell, 1986), the role of material culture in linking together animals and humans in mortuary commemoration has received little detailed attention (an exception being for pet commemoration in Japan, see Chalfen, 2003).

I suggest that animals pervade modern commemorative practices in the West in a surprisingly varied number of ways. Moreover, with the revalorization of death in the last few decades in British and other European societies, this trend has become even more pronounced. Animals are serving as the environments of human burial and commemoration, and the means and substance by which the dead are commemorated. Yet animals are also themselves becoming the subject of complex mortuary and commemoration practices by people in the UK. Furthermore, increasingly the places, contexts and media of human and animal commemoration are being merged together.

This study explores one aspect of this broader rise in the Western use of animals in mortuary practice, investigating in detail how animal charities have taken on a role as institutions for disposing of, and commemorating, the cremated dead. The donkey serves as a striking case study of this phenomenon. For, while zoos carefully manage the representation and materialization of death, the Donkey Sanctuary choreographs an unprecedented saturation of memorials within its grounds. The Sanctuary presents human and animal death as related and comparable; it creates a novel environment in which the dispersal and ephemerality of ashes create the possibility for presenting the dead through a range of other spaces and material cultures. These take the form of 'living memorials' (trees) and 'living spaces' (benches on which to sit and plaques placed on public view beside paths). This study considers how the mnemonic agency of ashes can be transferred to these living things, materials and places through ash scattering and burial. Ultimately, however, the principal 'memorials' at the Sanctuary are the living (rescued and nurtured) donkeys themselves, non-human agencies by which the dead are remembered. In this regard, the discussion here serves as a case study for intimate and relational engagements between people and animals in mortuary contexts in contemporary Western societies. Yet the case study is more than this. By studying the material evidence, we can identify the specific ways in which the embodied actions of visiting, walking with pets and petting live donkeys

choreograph the emotive mnemonics of the Donkey Sanctuary as a place of restitution and regeneration, and a heavenly and dreamlike utopia of rural life without death.

Assiduity: death and donkeys

Donkeys are widely afforded human-like qualities and are seen as companions as well as commodities. They hold specific symbolic associations and perceived human attributes distinct from other species. Since ancient times, asses have been maligned as stubborn and stupid, yet they have also been valued as gentle, calm, loyal and humble beasts that thrive on human company. Their hardiness, perseverance and long-suffering nature has a distinctive popular appeal (Hankins, 2003). Specifically, the prominence of the ass in the New Testament of the Bible has made their character an allegory for human suffering and hopes for salvation. These ideas permeate beyond orthodox Christian thought and are revealed in many unexpected ways in secular modernity. Today, people grow up encountering donkeys in hymns and biblical stories more than they encounter them in daily life. However, donkeys appear and are experienced in numerous media from petting zoos to childhood nativity plays, from seaside holidays to the comic and gloomy Eeyore from AA Milne (2009[1926]) and the upbeat comedy of 'Donkey' in Hollywood's Shrek franchise.

In the British context, there is a long tradition of commemorating selected equine deaths, originating with the paintings and landscapes of aristocratic country homes, but also at racecourses and stables (Toms, 2006). However, asses and mules have a different and distinctive place in human commemorative perception and practice. Like other equines in the UK, they certainly have a history as domesticated working animals, but they lack the aristocratic associations of horses and ponies. As beasts of burden and agricultural labour, they are 'working-class' animals, regarded as long-suffering and downtrodden, meriting pity and empathy. This association as victims of cruelty is matched by their association with children and fun. This is mirrored in their widespread association with family entertainment and holidays – donkey rides were an iconic aspect of the British seaside holiday during the 20th century. More recently, donkeys have become show animals as well as family pets (Svendsen, 2009: 188–196). In all contexts, they can be subject to cruelties and require rescue, a service that the charity the Donkey Sanctuary has pioneered over the last 40 years, now operating worldwide to educate the public about donkey welfare and care and to rescue animals from abuse (pp. 150–173).

The suffering of donkeys and their need for care provides a basis for understanding their specific funerary and commemorative associations. In this regard, asses take on special commemorative importance at particular locales. For example, the hard-working donkeys of Carisbrooke Castle (Isle of Wight) famously continue their age-old role, working the treadmill that drives the well-wheel as a tourist attraction. They are commemorated through postcards but are also memorialized with gravestones within the castle grounds (Toms, 2006: 38). Subsequently, they re-entered our mourning culture in the late 20th century alongside that of other animal companions as a means of articulating emotional and mnemonic linkages between the living and the dead (Morley and Fook, 2005). Eeyore (usually the Disney version) is depicted on or placed beside many human gravestones, particularly but not exclusively those of infants and young children.

Yet the place of the ass in British popular mortuary culture seems to originate not with Milne and Disney but with warfare (Svendsen, 2009: 24). This is the ultimate context in which the donkey is seen as victim in modern culture. Mules have a specific association with suffering in British and Commonwealth conflict commemoration because large numbers were employed, maimed and killed in the Boer and First World Wars. Mules have also been regimental mascots, living emblems for soldiers living and dead (Toms, 2006: 42–43). Individual animals are even remembered for acts of 'heroism'. Famously, a beast known as Murphy, Duffy or Abdul helped the British-born ANZAC John Kirkpatrick bear wounded from the Gallipoli battlefield, and Kirkpatrick and his mule are commemorated together in the UK and Australia (pp. 25–26). Unsurprisingly, the 2004 'Animals in War' memorial in Hyde Park uses two mules as its centrepiece. The bronze statues of war-weary mules weighed down with First World War military equipment serve to epitomize animal suffering through human conflict.

Donkeys are therefore more than pets or beasts of burden; they have come to be seen as patriotic and humble sufferers of hardships, victims of atrocity and cruelty, and mild-mannered companions deserving of rescue, care and kindness. This constellation of qualities and associations renders donkeys as intimately linked with human death and the dead, and, in particular, hopes for their resurrection. Asses are therefore good to think about and good to care for. Yet they are also good to mourn and commemorate, and good to remember with.

Asylum: the Donkey Sanctuary

Given this background in which donkeys operate as emotionally affective, spiritual and patriotic media and subjects of commemoration, it is perhaps not surprising that there is a mortuary and commemorative element to the Donkey Sanctuary's role in rescuing thousands of donkeys from the UK, Europe and increasingly worldwide (Svendsen, 2009: 9–20). The Sanctuary's headquarters at Slade Farm near Sidmouth in Devon, UK, is free to visit and has become a tourist attraction with annual visitor numbers running into six figures (Glendinning, 2008; Saner, 2008). The Sanctuary raises over £22 million per year (based on 2008 figures: <http://drupal.thedonkeysanctuary.org.uk/reports>), much of it from bequests and wills, connecting donkeys to the elderly as well as to the young. There is a free visitor car park at the Sanctuary, as well as a café, shop and stables where some of the donkeys can be petted and viewed (The Donkey Sanctuary, 2008: <http://drupal.thedonkeysanctuary.org.uk>; Svendsen, 2009). Next to the farm is the Elizabeth Svendsen Trust's Slade Centre, where disabled children can ride and enjoy activities with the donkeys (<http://www.elisabethsvendsentrust.org.uk>; Svendsen, 2009: 15–87).

Beyond the farm buildings, a number of longer walks (lettered A to H) around the paddocks encourage walkers to visit the Sanctuary. There is also a maze. The farm itself has a sea view and one walk leads down a steep coombe to a secluded beach. This environment is a rural idyll, with sea, farm, paddocks and donkeys. It is visited by those who support the Sanctuary, love donkeys and seek the pleasure of interacting with them. For others, it is a pleasant place to walk their dogs or to have a free family day out. Yet the landscape also enshrines the physical benefits of exercise and the moral, emotional and spiritual benefits of supporting the Sanctuary's work. Hence, for some, it is an appropriate place to mourn the dead, scatter their ashes and set up memorials.

Assemblage: the Sanctuary as mortuary archaeology

The Sanctuary's grounds certainly contain archaeology, including an historic farm and field system, ancient quarries and a 19th-century folly – a 'hermit's house' – carved into the cliff on the side of the valley. Yet approaching the Donkey Sanctuary as a modern archaeological site involves careful on-site observation and recording of its commemorative material culture. This study was conducted on a site open to the general public and by non-intrusive means. Field observations took place through 10 site visits over a 5-year period from 2004 to 2009. Initially, these were visits made with family members, but walking past so many memorials inspired visits to investigate the memorial culture of the Sanctuary in more detail. I took digital photographs of the memorials on subsequent visits and consulted these to create a database of a sample of the memorials observed.

In this regard, I am here treating the memorial plaque(s) and their associated benches, trees and buildings as comparable to prehistoric or early historic mortuary contexts; expressions and statements to remember the dead made by the living (see, e.g., Williams, 2006). The memorials constitute a practical and varied 'technology of remembrance'. This is managed and guided, but not directed, by the Sanctuary. Hence, rather than a materialization of a single ideology, or set of ideals promoted by the charity itself, this is an instance where the Sanctuary is benefiting by meeting the demands and needs of its members and visitors. The memorials result from, and facilitate, a range of formal and informal commemorative practices. They construct multimedia memories through text, image and materiality as well as location and spatial associations. In the case of the Donkey Sanctuary, living things – asses in their paddocks, trees and visiting people – are integral elements of the commemorative context. Moreover, they were located in relation to a particular rhythm of movement. Unlike cemeteries, the memorials at the Sanctuary are along paths and in gardens. Hence they are visited by mourners but mainly viewed by other visitors. Memorials individually and collectively choreograph particular emotive and mnemonic dispositions among mourning family and friends and set up expectations of behaviour and engagement with mortality at the Sanctuary. In this way, the memorials are more than a mnemonic technology; they become part of the atmosphere of place for the visitor experience.

Aspects: the donkey memorial landscape

The Donkey Sanctuary has no human, pet or donkey cemetery. In this sense, bodies and graves appear absent. But from the late 1980s, supporters and visitors increasingly desired to use the Sanctuary as a final resting place for their own ashes and as a memorial locale. The Sanctuary has subsequently become a place where ashes are scattered and many hundreds of memorials have been erected. Dead animals and people are thus everywhere and nowhere, absent and present. The memorial aspect of the site clearly resonates with the charity's discourse of rescue and rehabilitation for the donkeys. The memorials reflect and consolidate the powerful lifelong commitment and affinity of many visitors and supporters to the donkeys and the Sanctuary.

These practices have been clearly cultivated by the Sanctuary in order to harness a valuable income stream for the charity. The Donkey Sanctuary website provides details of how to arrange a legacy or bequest, how to make donations on the death of a relative and to arrange for pew envelopes for funerals to collect for the charity. Indeed, it is possible to set

up a 'Field of Dreams Fund' to simultaneously remember a loved one and raise money on the charity's behalf (<http://drupal.thedonkeysanctuary.org.uk/view/fieldofdreams>). The website also honestly records the minimum donations required to establish different memorials in the Sanctuary's grounds: £350 for a plaque beside a tree and £500 for a bronze-coloured plaque in the Russell Garden at the centre of the farm. Benches used to be a more expensive option but are no longer available as there are deemed to be enough benches now at the Sanctuary (Donkey Sanctuary, 2010, personal communication). Therefore, there is a complex nexus of relationships between death, mourning and material culture at the Sanctuary.

First, there is a garden of remembrance – the 'Field of Dreams' – on the south slopes below Slade Farm where the ashes of people and some pets are scattered. In contrast, donkeys are disposed of away from the Sanctuary (Donkey Sanctuary, 2010, personal communication). A woodland walk above the 'Field of Dreams' also has benches. Wreaths of flowers placed within the wood suggest its use by some for scattering ashes. Permission is required from the Sanctuary to scatter ashes and visitors are requested to do this early morning or late evening to avoid contact with other visitors. Mourners are also requested not to dispose of ashes outside the 'Field of Dreams' owing to the damage that ash can do to flowers and trees associated with particular memorial plaques (Donkey Sanctuary, 2010, personal communication). However, given the open access of the site, it is likely that many visitors dispose of ashes wherever they wish.

The farm buildings are a memorial space themselves but they commemorate living sponsors named on plaques consisting of black letters on a white background. In contrast, using white letters on a black background, many more plaques commemorate dead individuals – human and animal – throughout the Sanctuary. The wording of the plaques is left up to the mourners although the Donkey Sanctuary ensures a conformity of style in terms of size, shape and colour (Donkey Sanctuary, 2010, personal communication). Many are placed on large fixed panels attached to the external walls of the donkey hospital on the farm, suggesting a link between the restorative context of the building and the commemoration of the dead. Memorials are also found on the stables, along the paths, in picnic areas and in the dedicated memorial gardens of Slade Farm.



Figure 1. A view along one of the Donkey Sanctuary memorial walks lined with benches and trees with inscriptions to humans, their pets and donkeys. © Photographer: Howard Williams, 2009

However, many more memorials are placed along the walks around the paddocks, created by establishing new fence-lines within the historic field boundaries. These walks run for many kilometres along circular routes from Slade Farm and are lined on both sides by planted memorial trees. Trees and the memorial walks on which they are found constitute a medium for commemoration replete with restorative and growing metaphors. The ongoing popularity of the practice is evidenced by newly created paths planted with trees, some marked 'reserved for ...' together with the name of a donor. Trees appear usually to receive one or two (but sometimes up to eight) memorial plaques situated upon wooden stakes beside the trunks (Figure 1). A smaller number of memorials are fixed onto benches around Slade Farm and provide the context for a further 10 per cent of the plaques along the memorial walks (Figures 2 and 3). Memorials are therefore positioned for visitors to pass by and sit upon. There is a book of remembrance (<http://drupal.thedonkeysanctuary.org.uk/bookofremembrance>) and even an annual memorial day on the feast of St Francis of Assisi (the patron saint of animals) when wooden crosses are placed on all the memorials (<http://drupal.thedonkeysanctuary.org.uk/memorialday>).



Figure 2. A memorial bench at the Donkey Sanctuary. © Photographer: Howard Williams, 2009.

Assuagement: commemorating humans and pets

Out of a sample of 559 memorials recorded in this study from the memorial walks around the paddocks, most were found to commemorate human loved ones. While the Sanctuary explicitly discourages such practices as they prefer the trees and memorials to be the principal media of commemoration (Donkey Sanctuary, 2010, personal communication), a minority of trees have offerings of flowers tied or placed beside them. In rare cases, photographs of the dead person are tied to the memorial. In a few cases, tended flower gardens have been planted at the base of trees. Many of the memorial texts are brief and formal, reflecting the commemorative language of contemporary cemetery culture. Yet a large minority are private and personal in a way rarely seen in cemeteries and churchyards. Those commemorated are mainly family and friends but there are also instances of memorials raised to remember work colleagues.

One visitor has been inspired to erect a memorial to the murdered schoolgirl Sarah Payne and her mourning family. There is also a Diana memorial fountain and garden at Slade Farm. Both these examples demonstrate that the Sanctuary is keyed into, and considered an appropriate venue for, broader commemorative themes in recent British popular culture. The locations of the memorials are public, on paths regularly passed by visitors and their pets and overlooking the paddocks. In this way, the dead inhabit the same spaces as the visiting living who overlook the paddocks containing the living donkeys. The physical,

visual and auditory presence of donkeys to the ashes and memorials is clearly a central component of their effective and affective commemorative nature.



Figure 3. Detail of a memorial bench at the Donkey Sanctuary, showing the affinity of people and donkey. © Photographer: Howard Williams, 2009.

The association with donkeys concerns more than location, however. The human dead are most often named on the memorials and they are remembered with love and affection, even though less than 1 per cent of memorials mention the deceased's occupation, personal qualities or attitudes towards other people. A similar percentage of memorials mentions the deceased's love of animals, wildlife and nature. In contrast, many more commemorate the deceased's affection for the Sanctuary as a place (5.5%). An even commoner commemorative subject (17%) is the deceased's affinity with the donkeys themselves (see Figure 3).

This affinity with donkeys during the deceased's lifetime was clearly the result of multiple visits from near and far. Some memorials locate the place of origin of the dead person, often far away in the UK and sometimes abroad (10%). This indicates the role of the Sanctuary as a pilgrimage place for 'Donkey Week' holidays. Some individuals clearly decided during their lifetime that their spiritual 'home' was away from family and community. The Sanctuary also celebrates human–animal togetherness since plaques throughout the cemetery remember dogs, cats, horses, ponies and a diverse range of other pets, either on the same plaque as its owner, or on a separate plaque beside it. Many of the dogs, in particular, are likely to have been animals that accompanied their owners on walks around the Sanctuary.

The Sanctuary appears to carefully manage memorial form and location, affording a tight conformity in memorial style – more so than the most stringent human or pet cemetery. This also serves to ensure a parity between the memorialized humans and animals. Conversely, the texts on the plaques enable a higher degree of personal expression than those in human or pet cemeteries. One example illustrates the powerful connection created between the human dead and the restorative/redemptive qualities of the rescued donkeys and the Sanctuary as a place: 'Now you're free from pain, You can walk with the donkeys, To watch the sea, Always in our thoughts.'

Therefore, the Donkey Sanctuary, like many churchyards and cemeteries, is regarded as a place of memory and reconstitution: a home and a garden for the dead, just as, more broadly, the Devon landscape is regarded as a place for recreation, retirement and rehabilitation (see also Williams and Williams, 2007). This is most evident in the fact that the donkeys are more than environment and media for commemoration; they are also subject to commemoration themselves.

An association: the donkey collective

Donkeys are commemorated through material culture as a collective at the Sanctuary, as a species. Comparable in some senses to the role of zoos in protecting rare species from across the globe, the Sanctuary embraces the conservation ethic. The site serves as a haven for endangered breeds of asses from specific geographical regions (like the Poitou donkeys, see Svendsen, 2009) as living 'memorials' to the history of the donkey in human society (Holtorf and Ortman, 2008). Yet while zoos celebrate their role in protecting endangered species, the Donkey Sanctuary also celebrates and commemorates the rescuing, physical restitution and good health of individually named donkeys. Each donkey has a history and an individual story of suffering, yet the Sanctuary commemorates the 'saved' as a collective.

Species commemoration is also evident in the bronze statue of a donkey providing the centrepiece of the Russell Memorial Garden at the centre of Slade Farm. This is a walled garden for remembrance (Figure 4) where a plaque explains that the sculpture is the Sanctuary's war memorial: 'Dedicated to all those donkeys and mules who have lost their lives in war.' Meanwhile, on the hillside viewed when approaching Slade Farm from the car park, a donkey is 'signed' onto the landscape. The donkey figure is outlined in white to mimic both the ancient and more recent chalk-cut figures of horses known elsewhere from southern England (e.g. Uffington, Pewsey and Westbury; see Figure 5), although the geology beneath the Sanctuary is not chalk. The donkey is also used as a pervasive memorial insignia upon both human and pet memorials: from the late 1990s, most plaques have a white border and a white-outlined donkey in the bottom right-hand corner (Figure 6). Meanwhile, all the memorial benches have a centrally placed cut-out donkey within the central slat of the backrest (Figures 2 and 3).



Figure 4. The Russell Memorial Garden at the Donkey Sanctuary. © Photographer: Howard Williams, 2006.

Asinine ancestors: donkey founders and donkey kin

Some supporters clearly wished to remember particular donkeys that they owned or sponsored and these memorials share a visual conformity to those of humans and pets and are juxtaposed with them throughout the Sanctuary. The Sanctuary's founders and leading lights clearly led this approach; in the inner memorial space provided by the Russell Memorial Garden, there are memorials placed to the favourite donkeys of the Sanctuary's founder, ED Svendsen, alongside memorials to key supporters including Dame Thora Hird,

DBE (Svendsen, 2009: 180). Plaques are laid out like those in a traditional garden of remembrance for humans, but include those for pets and donkeys. This is the only place in the Sanctuary where the memorial plaques are in black letters on a gold background rather than white letters on a black background. This elite set of human and donkey 'ancestors' are here remembered together.



Figure 5. The 'chalk' donkey at the Donkey Sanctuary: © Photographer: Howard Williams, 2006.

It appears that the Sanctuary is itself perceived as a 'family' and 'home' for the donkeys, both living and dead. Among the donkey memorials, the Sanctuary receives an explicit mention. One donkey's rescue was 'a tribute to this Sanctuary' and another memorial extends a 'thank you to all the staff/who looked after them [the donkeys]'. The commemoration of donkeys is embedded into the history of the Sanctuary and certain donkeys were clearly popular 'celebrities' and 'ancestors' for the Sanctuary today. A rock within a memorial garden in the Sanctuary grounds remembers 'Naughty Face', 'whose arrival in 1969 resulted in the start of the Donkey Sanctuary' and who was 'loved by all'. The memorial to 'Blackie Star' in the Sanctuary's memorial garden states the beast's date of rescue following cruel treatment in an annual public ceremony in a Spanish town (Svendsen, 2009: 151) and subsequently his date of death. A brief prefix states 'sadly missed'. Likewise, 'Timothy' was 'dearly loved by so many supporters'. These 'celebrities', as 'special donkeys', stand for the rest. Memorials of this kind celebrate the generosity of supporters of the Sanctuary, the 'story' of the Sanctuary, as well as the lives of the animals themselves. This hall of fame serves to root donkey utopia and donkey fictive kinship to the place itself.



Figure 6. One of the memorial plaques at the Donkey Sanctuary. © Photographer: Howard Williams, 2006.

Assay: individual donkey memorials

Memorials to 'special' donkeys (Donkey Sanctuary, 2010, personal communication) are also found along the memorial walks, where an estimated 32 memorials (6%) commemorate donkeys. One of these commemorates 'all our rescued donkeys', but the rest commemorate specific named animals. All the living donkeys at the Sanctuary have names and visitors clearly pick out favourites to pet and adopt from a sample of donkeys chosen by the Sanctuary as especially comfortable around people. Evidently, upon their death, the loss is deemed by some to require a memorial gesture. The earliest plaque dates from 1992 and the most recent from 2008. Three of the sample are placed on benches, the rest are on trees. However, only 19 of these memorials explicitly refer to donkeys, meaning that in many further cases it is the type of name selected, context and association with other donkey memorials that make it likely that a donkey is being remembered. There are probably more donkeys commemorated in the sample but so many are ambiguous and for many it is not clear whether human or animal – dog, cat, horse, donkey or other – is being memorialized. Even the presence of a surname does not assure human status, as many pets are given their owner's family name. For example, the memorial text: 'Ozzy and Bluey/Three hearts together again' is utterly ambiguous as to the species owning the hearts. Meanwhile: 'In Loving Memory of/ 'Ben'/A much loved friend and companion./Still sadly missed' seems to refer to a pet or donkey through the use of quotation marks around the name, but beyond that little can be discerned. This ambiguity is more than a problem of identification for this study; it further reflects the personal nature and immediacy of the memorials and the parity perceived between commemorated donkeys, pets and humans.

Twenty-five memorials (78%) in the sample commemorate single donkeys, in the other cases either two or three donkeys are commemorated together. Donkeys are also remembered on individual plaques but clustered around the same tree. Hence, Lonely and Tammy have separate but adjacent plaques as do Holly and Bella and the three donkeys Gentle Beauty, Tina and Dolly. This donkey-relatedness is represented as a similar love and affinity to that between humans and the donkeys; one triplet of donkeys is remembered as 'friends for 17 years'. Donkeys are even mentioned as mourners; a donkey called 'Candy' is remembered by other donkeys while the human owners are secondary: 'your two donkey friends,/also very much missed by your owners,/Janet and Peter'. Upon another plaque, a deceased donkey is commemorated as the 'faithful companion' to another (presumably living) animal. In one instance, a donkey, 'Jill', is remembered alongside 'her two canine friends/July and Suzie'. A further memorial at the Sanctuary commemorates 'treasured memories' of a donkey alongside a pony and two dogs.

However, single or multiple donkeys are almost always remembered in relation to humans in specific ways. One memorial tree is shared by two plaques commemorating a husband and wife. The wife's plaque is inscribed: 'in memory of a dear wife and mother/and also /'Benny' her childhood donkey friend'. Interestingly, this is the only obvious instance where the donkey is already a treasured memory in the deceased's early life. The rest are clearly animals kept by families or else rescued, adopted or visited at the Sanctuary. A bench commemorates 'my mother Kathleen who loved all animals & of her donkey "Poppy"'. Person and donkey sometimes appear on the same memorial as with 'Joan Sylvia Buchan and her dear donkeys/Neddy & Pepi'. Another memorial commemorates a married couple and 'all their animal friends', which presumably included donkeys. 'Sean Byrne and his beloved donkey Sally' is another instance of parity in death; the memorial was erected to remember them together once both had died, the donkey six years after the man.

Some individual memorials are paired with those of commemorated humans and were clearly set up to share the same memorial tree. By one tree is the plaque to 'Sheila Smith/11.6.1924 – 11.7.2001/Adored Donkeys/Always Loved/Sue and Grandchildren'. Loving the donkeys and being loved in death are paired together here. Two years later, this was joined by a second memorial plaque to 'Sheila's best friends,/Barnaby, Max, Konrad, Rudi,/Mandy, Harris & Hawkins', presumably (but not conclusively) donkeys. Indeed, one family's memorial tree is surrounded by eight plaques, three to humans, one to a pet (a dearly loved and very special little house rabbit) and four to donkeys whose relationships with each other are explicitly remembered as 'companion' and 'daughter'. Another memorial tree has four plaques added by the same family. The first two date from 1996 and commemorate a donkey, two dogs and numerous cats. The third personifies: 'Bill & Arthur/perfect gentlemen/our foster donkeys for many years'. The fourth and final plaque from 2009 commemorates a pet cat and a fox.

Assonance: donkey language

Memorial texts are short and formulaic and poetry is rarely used. One poem memorializing a deceased wife ('a tree for Joyce') has a verse that runs: 'The donkeys will shelter from the rain,/The songbirds sing their sweet refrain,/And I will see you once again – my love'. Donkeys do not get this treatment! Yet they are clearly part of the afterlife envisaged for the human dead. Unsurprisingly, the commemorative language for donkeys mirrors the

formulae of human gravestones. Donkeys are recalled with 'loving memories' (8 cases), 'treasured memories' (2 cases) and 'fondest memories' (1 case), a repertoire shared with human commemorative media. Donkeys are remembered for bringing happiness and pleasure (3 cases), as being missed (6 cases) and much or dearly loved (12 cases). Yet beyond this 'human' commemorative media, individual donkeys are also remembered for upholding their species' respected characteristics. In this sense, donkeys are remembered for their gentleness and for enduring suffering with courage. Hence, donkeys are referred to as 'gallant', 'gentle', 'kind and gentle', 'sweet natured and gentle', 'very special', 'our sweetness', 'loveable rogue', while one donkey 'touched the hearts of all who met you, a brilliant little chap'. The relationship between owner/visitor and donkey is sometimes made clearer still; donkeys are described as a 'faithful companion', 'friend', 'donkey friend', 'life-long friend', 'my best friend', or as 'a donkey who was special to me'. In further instances, the sense is gained that the donkeys were not only best friends, but like many pets they are fictive kin - 'part of the family' (Howell, 2002; Shell, 1986). This is indicated by one instance where the donkey gets memorialized (as do some pets at the Sanctuary) with the family surname as well as cases where donkeys are referred to as 'of' the family. In one instance, a donkey is memorialized as 'faithful companion' to two different families, presumably both visited and sponsored this particular rescued donkey at the Sanctuary. Through 'adoption', donkeys can have contemporaneous multiple kinship ties to several human families. One memorial in the Russell Memorial Garden describes a donkey as 'so sadly missed by his mum', in this case it might very well refer to the human owner.

Ascension: donkey heaven

The commemoration of the relationship between humans, loved pets and donkeys is prospective as well as retrospective (Holtorf and Williams, 2006). The human dead are remembered, but they are also imagined as dwelling on at the Sanctuary through the diffused presence of ash, growing trees and living donkeys. In this regard, the Sanctuary materially and textually embodies the extension of the Victorian idea of heaven as a home and garden shared by the family and its pets (Howell, 2002: 16–19). One plaque memorializes 'Dad and his beloved Eyore [sic]/"Gone to their tomorrows"' (Figure 6). Within the gardens of the Sanctuary, a donkey, 'Butch', is memorialized along with a former owner who are stated to be 'together again'. Two adjacent memorials to individual donkeys owned by the same family ('Gentle Beauty' and 'Tina') claim that they will be 'reunited' in death. The idea that donkeys and humans will share an afterlife is even more explicit with a pair of memorial plaques, one to a man who died in 2003 and commemorating his love of the Sanctuary and of 'Hannibal' in particular. The adjacent plaque remembers the man's 'favourite donkey', Hannibal, who died in 2007 and is now at 'rainbow bridge'. This last phrase is a pet-owner's ongoing attempt to reconcile afterlife companionship with a Christian orthodoxy in which animals have no souls and do not enter heaven (Davies, 2002; Howell, 2002; Toms, 2006: 5). The animal is here imagined restored to health and youth, and living an eternity in companionship with its owner or friends. Just such a vision of an animal afterlife is commemorated in London's 'Animals in War' monument mentioned earlier, where sculptures of suffering mules march towards an animal afterlife materialized in the form of a grassy knoll surmounted by sculptures of a dog and a stallion. The rehabilitation work of the Sanctuary is therefore extended after death and the biblical associations of donkeys may help to facilitate this afterlife imagining. The closeness of person and donkey developed through the process of rescuing and being brought to the

Sanctuary is made clear in one memorial: 'Dear gentle friend/I rescued you/You rescued me/d. 16.6.06'. Again, one wonders whether this plaque refers to the restoration of the commemorator's zest for life, his or her eternal salvation, or both? Many of the human memorials envision the dead as 'together forever' with the donkeys; there is clearly a sense that the spirits of the dead inhabit the Sanctuary or somewhere connected to the donkeys both living and dead. One memorial in the Russell Memorial Garden says it all: 'His heaven – the donkey sanctuary'.

Assessment: donkeys and the dead in modern Britain

Sociologists admit the lack of detailed documentation concerning what happens to ashes taken away from crematoria (e.g. Kellaher et al., 2005: 239). Archaeology may well provide a framework in which to investigate those material cultures, spaces and places associated with ash disposal away from the traditional grave, columbaria and gardens of remembrance. For while the ashes are ephemeral, archaeologists are trained to consider the re-use and transformation of existing mortuary landscapes (Holtorf and Williams, 2006; Williams and Williams, 2007) as well as to explore the creation of new forms of commemorative space and place (Walls and Williams, 2010). Certainly, archaeologists are well versed in interpreting material traces and the many kinds of absence they allude to, a perspective that has considerable potential for approaching death in the present as well as in the past.

This article began by discussing the mnemonic and emotive power of ashes and their disposal at the Field of Dreams at the Donkey Sanctuary and subsequently showed how this practice constitutes only part of a far larger set of commemorative practices focusing on the asses as environment, medium and subject. I argue that the Sanctuary is more than a rescue centre; it has become a unique memorial space creating a landscape of commemorative parity between dead people, dead pets and dead donkeys as well as commemorating its own origins and history as a charity. This memorial activity serves the Sanctuary's visitors and generates revenues for its charity mission. Asses are remembered collectively and individually, as species and as personalities, as pets and as rescued and protected animals. In contrast to zoo architectures (Holtorf and Reybrouck, 2003: 210–214), the human–animal boundary is broken down at the Donkey Sanctuary. Donkeys are available for tactile interaction; to watch, stroke and even hug. Yet they are also afforded the same form of memorialization as people. For regular visitors, walking around the Sanctuary is about meeting old friends and making new ones among the donkeys. Yet it also becomes an embodied action of remembrance for many visitors, the uniformity of the memorial plaques and the shared medium of trees, benches and buildings enforcing a mnemonic and sentimental closeness and togetherness between humans, their pets and the donkeys in life and death.

With no 'cemetery' for humans, pets or donkeys on site, the dead are rendered materially present through the Sanctuary's landscape and living donkeys. I accept that many of the seemingly new practices associated with ash disposal in contemporary British culture can be seen as reconfigurations of traditional practices and attitudes towards the grave (Kellaher et al., 2005). Yet this perspective overlooks the new commemorative media that create a tension between presence and absence in ash disposal beyond the cemetery. The Donkey Sanctuary may be unique, but it can be understood as one manifestation of this

wider theme, where ongoing relationships with human and animal 'kin' are perpetuated and remembered beyond the grave.

Therefore, despite corporeal absence or dispersal, these memorials presence the dead in the Devon landscape (Hallam and Hockey, 2001: 168–177). Trees, benches, stables and buildings provide a private and intimate environment within this public space, while the absence of graves and the invisibility of scattered ashes serve to paradoxically presence the loved ones. This use of absence in commemoration (see also Sørensen, 2009, 2010) creates a place for private and embodied contemplation of lived lives and human–animal companionship and also affords an atmosphere of emotive and imaginative engagement with the dead without a 'traditional' grave.

The Donkey Sanctuary may continue to unfold as a commemorative landscape. Indeed, the sad news of the death of the Donkey Sanctuary's inspirational founder on 11 May 2011 (Lacey, 2011) raises the question: how will her life and legacy be commemorated in material form at the Sanctuary. Conversely, will the Sanctuary's ongoing success itself be regarded as sufficient monument to her life, work and love of donkeys?

Taking a broader perspective, the full extent and engagement with animals in British mortuary practices has scarcely been recognized, let alone investigated. Certainly, from teddy bears and other animal toys placed or inscribed on human graves to the rise and variability in pet cemeteries, there are many manifestations of the British engagement with animals in death. Contributing to the ways that animals and animal material cultures bring comfort to the living, particular categories of animal are mourned and used in mourning the dead. This is part of a sentimental quality to modern death where animals subject to suffering and mourning, and seeming to embody the human ability to suffer and mourn, are incorporated into commemoration. The act of care in death extends the care and attention afforded to animals as 'individuals' in life. The study of such material traces is simultaneously an archaeology of death, personhood and emotive intimacy that remains to be written in full.

The Donkey Sanctuary is distinctive but not unique. Other equine charities are clearly following the same route as the Donkey Sanctuary. One example is the Redwings Horse Sanctuary at Hapton in Norfolk (<http://www.redwings.org.uk/fundraising/remember-a-loved-one>). Therefore, although they are part of a secular charity, the memorials demonstrate that the Donkey Sanctuary is clearly regarded by some as a 'sacred' and 'spiritual' place where people, pets and donkeys live on through trees, benches and fields and are comforted by the presence of the living donkeys. The Donkey Sanctuary has created its own mortuary culture in which donkeys, pets and humans hold a parity. Rather than a physical, intellectual or dexterous parity, this is a parity and subsequent affinity constructed in the perceived equality of donkeys and humans to feel, suffer, endure, mourn and die. This sophisticated memorial landscape has come to provide an earthly paradise, a heaven-like 'field of dreams' where ashes to asses entwine.

Acknowledgements

This research was supported by a research grant from the Faculty of Humanities, University of Chester. This paper would not have been possible without the persistent encouragement

and critical comments of Cornelius Holtorf. Thanks also to Vanessa Greatorex Roskilly, Paula Jones, Jane Price, Anne Teather, Ralph Williams and Elizabeth Williams and the anonymous referees for their helpful comments on earlier drafts. I would also like to thank the staff of the Donkey Sanctuary for answering queries about the site's memorials and for their permission to use photographs taken at the Donkey Sanctuary in this study. All errors remain my responsibility. Finally, heartfelt thanks to a dedicated supporter of the Donkey Sanctuary, my mother, Susannah Eileen Williams.

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