

### 3 Sue Black Interview

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Sue Black holds a Professorship in Anatomy and Forensic Anthropology at the Centre for Anatomy and Human Identification at the University of Dundee. As well as using her expertise in a number of high profile criminal investigations, she is involved with many research projects and has numerous publications to her name. Known to television viewers as the leader of the team in the *History Cold Case* series on BBC 2, she has in the last few years become a familiar face to those interested in history, archaeology, anthropology and science.

Post Hole Submissions Editor Jacqui Mellows, who has a deep interest in human bones and anthropology, conducted this e-mail interview with Professor Sue Black in September 2011.

**Jacqui Mellows** – I suppose the obvious first question is what made you interested in forensic anthropology?

**Sue Black** – I was not really interested in the subject at all. I fell into it through requests to look at remains and it really just snowballed from there. I was enthused by my biology teacher at school and through university I was only any good at botany or anatomy – and I do not like plants. I also have a morbid fear of rodents and all the research projects were utilising rats, mice or hamsters and so I could not do that work. So bones were the only things that I felt comfortable to study for my research and this continued from my undergraduate into my postgraduate degrees.

**JM** – Osteology and forensic anthropology are very difficult fields to break into. How did you get to where you are today?

**SB** – My background is in human anatomy and that was my preparatory training ground. I have found that having the ‘edge’ of understanding the holistic body rather than just the limited remit of the skeleton has been an invaluable skills set. Hard work and perseverance are essential along with a determination to pick yourself up and get on with the job every time someone tries to knock you down. This line of work will not come to you if you sit and wait for it and work will not come back to you if you do not do a thorough job in the first place. We should not underestimate the importance of really hard work and attention to detail.

**JM** – Can you tell us a little about the work that you do?

**SB** – The work that I do is very variable. Like all academics I have a work load of student teaching, supervision and administration, a large department to run and casework has to be fitted in alongside all the other commitments. The trouble is that there is no predictability to casework and so flexibility of approach is the most important characteristic if you want to succeed. Our centre provides forensic anthropology support both nationally and internationally and our teaching is genuinely led by the research that is being undertaken by the Centre. The forensic casework comes with a requirement to provide a service to the courts and so we have frequent meetings with prosecution and defence council, Fiscals and Coroners as well as police. With accreditation and professionalisation of the discipline gathering some momentum, consultation with stakeholders is also a fairly large component of my current activities.

**JM** – As well as being a well-known forensic anthropologist, people also know your work on the BBC's *History Cold Case* series. What is the most memorable case you have worked on and why?

**SB** – With the greatest of respect, it really is not a true reflection on what we do at all. Our memorable cases are really very much more recent but this is not something that makes for easy-to-make television because of issues of sub-judice. We are not historians, we are not archaeologists and so our involvement was with reluctance but it was a very rewarding experience at times. We were only given eight cases and we had no prior information about the case to be investigated. I suppose the most memorable, because it caused real nervousness in our presentation, was the case of the bodies in the well from Medieval Norwich. The DNA work undertaken by Dr Ian Barnes indicated that the remains were most likely to be of Jewish origin. We knew this would be met with some consternation and it was akin to handling forensic expectations as we were addressing an emotional response to our findings from the audience. It was quite harrowing.

**JM** – Can you tell us about the projects you are working on now?

**SB** – Our on-going cases are of course sub-judice and so these cannot be disclosed. We have most recently witnessed an accused change his plea to guilty regarding the rape of a child, largely on the basis of our evidence and he will be sentenced later this year. We also have two child deaths coming to court within the next six months which are obviously very distressing but it is essential that the truth be investigated and we have an age estimation in the living coming to court in relation to the slave trade. We have fifteen PhD students in the Centre and so we have a lot of research on-going both in relation to forensic and anatomical investigations including the work on faces carried out by Professor Wilkinson and her team.

**JM** – Do you think forensic anthropology is accurately represented in the media, for example, in the TV show *Bones* and most recently *The Body Farm*?

**SB** – There is limited accuracy in these types of shows because the unpredictability of our job does not make for good TV. I remember having a BBC crew who wanted to follow me for six months and record my daily activities. They were persuaded it was not a good idea when I told them they may have to sit in my office for a month or more with no cases for investigation but they were welcome to film me typing and doing admin. No surprises that they did not follow up on the offer. The subject can be reasonably well portrayed in some factual programmes but it is almost unrecognisable when it turns to popular fiction.

**JM** – I find it incredible how much information there is to find on even the most fragmented of bones. How difficult is it take to make an accurate identification and can you describe some of the processes?

**SB** – There is no such thing as an absolute positive identification in forensic identification, the only certainty is in exclusion. Every technique we use, whether DNA, fingerprinting or anything else, is based on probability. There is always something that can be said about even the smallest fragment of bone but it may not be enough to be of value to the identification process. For example a case from a few years ago involved the identification of a fragment of bone that was 4mm wide by less than 1cm long. We identified it as the left greater wing of the sphenoid and this was vital for the prosecution's case as the remainder of the body was never found. Identification was confirmed by DNA

but the likelihood that the person was still alive was addressed through the unlikely survivability of the victim if that part of the skull was fragmented. As the forensic anthropologist, ours was the strongest evidence to support the manslaughter charge being brought against the accused and I was cross examined for over an hour on the development of the sphenoid, its fracturing patterns and its anatomy in both the adult and the child. If the defence could discredit the anthropologist then the case would have taken a different turn. The accused was found guilty of manslaughter and was incarcerated for 12 years and his subsequent appeal against his conviction was rejected. Attention to detail is the core of the success of the whole process along with a realistic understanding of the boundaries of our own knowledge and experience. Most forensic experts get into difficulty when they stray into areas in which they do not have credibility.

**JM** – What do you love about your job the most?

**SB** – I love the unpredictability, the challenge and the thought that we can have a positive impact on society via justice.

**JM** – Finally, what advice would you give to current undergraduate and postgraduate students who wanted to pursue an osteology-related career?

**SB** – I may not be very popular with this statement but osteology without anatomy is a like a bicycle without wheels. It may still look like a bicycle but it is not the most efficient means of locomotion. We run the risk when we only look at bone of becoming myopic and it is crucial that there is a full understanding of human soft tissue anatomy. Having taught anatomy now for 25 years, every time we teach some soft tissue anatomy to a person who has only an osteology background – they always say, ‘now I understand’! It is a really hard subject; it is a vast subject but what better way than to spend your study time looking inside the most marvellous creation which is the human body. There is also a global shortage of gross anatomists and so it enhances job prospects if you have that extra string to your bow. All of our forensic anthropology students learn human anatomy first through dissection and we have found time after time that it makes their skills sets invaluable and gives them a significant advantage at job interview.

With thanks to Professor Sue Black for her time.