This Is The Ghostly Face Of A 'Ordinary' Man Who Lived 700 Years Ago

Dr Chris Rynn University of Dundee

New facial reconstruction techniques have allowed us, for the first time, to stare into the eyes of a man who lived a staggering 700 years ago.

Unlike previous reconstructions this man was not a noble, nor was he important, instead he is the quintessential 'ordinary man' of the 13th Century. He was found buried alongside some 400 other people at a medieval hospital in Cambridge.

Known only as Context 958, researchers from both the University of Cambridge and the University of Dundee pieced together his facial features by analysing his bones and teeth.

"Context 958 was over 40 when he died, and had quite a robust skeleton with a lot of wear and tear from a hard working life. We can't say what job specifically he did, but he was a working class person, perhaps with a specialised trade of some kind," said Professor John Robb, from the University's Division of Archaeology.

The burial ground where he was found included bodies spanning from the 13th and 15th Centuries and come from the Hospital of St John the Evangelist which existed until 1511.
The hospital was an Augustinian charitable building that was created to provide care to members of the public.

"Most historical records are about well-off people and especially their financial and legal transactions – the less
money and property you had, the less likely anybody was to ever write down anything about you. So skeletons like this are really our chance to learn about how the ordinary poor lived," says Robb.

In examining Context 958's skull and body the teams were able to make some rudimentary assumptions about his life.

It appeared as though his life of poverty was not one that started at birth. Instead evidence suggests that early on in his life he had been able to enjoy a relatively rich diet of meat and fish.

However it looks as though he had fallen on harder times later in life, with evidence of illness and blunt-force trauma to the back of the head.

"The After the Plague project is also about humanising people in the past, getting beyond the scientific facts to see them as individuals with life stories and experiences," said Robb.