

Tutan-Alan of Torquay: A Review of Channel 4's *Mummifying Alan*

The fascination with Ancient Egyptian mummies dates back centuries, long before the discovery of Tutankhamun's tomb in 1922. Channel 4's 2011 documentary *Mummifying Alan: Egypt's Last Secret*¹ follows the journey of Dr Stephen Buckley, an archaeological chemist, as he pursues his lifelong goal of understanding how the Ancient Egyptians preserved their dead. Together with Egyptologist Dr Joann Fletcher, with whom he has spent years researching ancient Egyptian preservation techniques, Buckley puts their combined expertise to the test. Step forward Alan Billis, a terminally ill taxi driver from Torquay, who donated his body to the project. What follows is a captivating and unflinching depiction of the mummification process. Initially broadcast at 9pm on Monday, 24th October 2011, on Channel 4, the documentary is aimed at a broad adult audience.

Mummified people have been dehumanised throughout history: subjects of horror in cinema and literature, mishandled and ridiculed by private owners and institutions, and even ground into medicines. Given this history, can a project documenting a scientific process genuinely balance respect for the deceased with rigorous forensic investigation? Moreover, can it navigate the ethical issues of informed consent and the broadcast something modern society usually avoids, namely, the sight of a dead body?

The Ancient Egyptians did not record the formula for mummification. The pinnacle of body preservation occurred during the 18th dynasty, producing mummies of extraordinary quality that have survived for three millennia. Yet the exact chemistry behind this achievement died with the embalmers who practised it, leaving modern scholars with physical evidence but not the method. It is this mystery that Dr Stephen Buckley has spent the better part of two decades trying to solve.

After years of experimenting on pigs' trotters in his home, Buckley was ready to move on to a human volunteer. With the assistance of the pathology team at Sheffield's Medico-Legal Centre, he proceeded to mummify Alan through several stages: removing his internal organs and coating the body in a protective layer of resins, beeswax, and sesame oil, before submerging him in a natron solution bath for 35 days. Alan was then removed, allowed to dry, and wrapped in linen using traditional methods. Pine resin was also applied to address an unfortunate maggot infestation discovered during the drying process.

In a brief talk and Q&A session held as part of our module, Buckley and Fletcher noted that, although every effort was made to replicate ancient Egyptian practices as accurately as possible, the laboratory conditions imposed certain limitations. The inability to burn incense, for instance, which Buckley believes helped prevent insect infestations, may explain the maggot issue encountered during the process. They also confirmed that

¹ *Mummifying Alan: Egypt's Last Secret*, 2011

informed consent was rigorously observed throughout, a process involving the British Medical Association and the Human Tissue Authority, with the full support of Alan's family.

The ethical implications of the documentary extend beyond informed consent.

Broadcasting the treatment of a human body to a mainstream audience raises legitimate questions about the boundary between education and spectacle. That said, the dignity afforded to Alan and the rigorous consent process overseen by the Human Tissue Authority suggest the production was acutely aware of its responsibilities. Alan's excitement about participating in this historic experiment, evident in his voiceovers throughout, reminds us that this was, above all else, his deliberate and enthusiastic decision.

The documentary places the process in context with insights from Professor Bill Bass, founder of the Body Farm in Tennessee, whose evaluations of Alan's preservation add genuine forensic credibility to the experiment. The result is a captivating piece of filmmaking that presents science and archaeology in an intelligent and engaging manner, intentionally shot to showcase scientific detail without feeling exploitative. An essential element of that balance, and what gives the documentary its emotional core, is the human aspect. Buckley's enthusiasm, bordering on obsession, is immediately contagious - you find yourself rooting for him. Dr Fletcher explains Ancient Egyptian practices in a way that is both accessible and entertaining. Pathology technician Maxine Coe treats Alan with quiet respect and profound empathy.

However, the true star of the show was the modern-day Pharaoh himself, Alan. Charming and self-deprecating from the start, accompanied by his loving and patient wife Jan, you immediately felt a connection to this man. Although it was jarring to see his lifeless body on the mortuary slab, the warmth of his initial interview filmed while he was still living, combined with his voice-overs throughout the programme, prevented you from ever viewing him as merely an experiment. He was treated with kindness and respect throughout. The organ removal, though blurred, was difficult to watch - the forceful, physical nature of extracting organs through a small abdominal incision was viscerally apparent even without seeing the detail. The team's visible disappointment upon discovering the maggots was telling; it felt less like a scientific setback and more like a personal failing towards Alan.

The footage from the Body Farm was less comfortable to watch. The bodies in various stages of decomposition, left exposed or covered by tarpaulin on open ground, created a stark and necessary contrast to the preservation of Alan's body, highlighting the effectiveness of the mummification process. However, the footage was dehumanising towards those nameless and faceless individuals, prompting reflection on whether the same respect given to Alan was owed to them. There's also a suspicion that shock value was a factor; this is, after all, Channel 4. Personally, I would have preferred less focus on the footage of the body farm and more on Dr Fletcher, exploring how the Ancient Egyptians themselves understood and memorialised their dead.

The programme concluded with the unwrapping of Alan to assess the process, and the results were impressive. His body was beautifully preserved and still recognisable, confirming Buckley's decades of research and marking an important milestone not only for Egyptological research but also for the science of body preservation in general. It was, unexpectedly, an emotional moment for everyone involved, seeing Alan's face and knowing that the mummification had honoured him as he deserved. Yet, despite its scientific success, this was not, for me, the most memorable part of the documentary.

Jan's visit to see Alan after the mummification was complete is a poignant scene. Entering the room to see 'his lordship', she touched his head and held his hands through the bandages. The moment is tender and sad, yet there is something quietly joyful in it too: the process had given her something most bereaved people are denied, a chance to be with her husband again, months after his death. One cannot help but imagine a similar scene playing out in ancient Egypt, and despite vast geographical, temporal and cultural differences, the grief and the tenderness would be the same. Perhaps, in the multilayered way the Egyptians approached matters, the many statues and depictions of the dead in tombs were not solely religious; they also served a gentler purpose, comforting the grieving.

Mummifying Alan is a rare documentary that manages to be scientifically rigorous and deeply human in equal measure. It is not always comfortable viewing, but it is never gratuitous. It succeeds in honouring Alan and his family's wishes.

Reference List

Mummifying Alan: Egypt's Last Secret (2011) Directed by Kenny Scott [Documentary]. UK: Blink Films. Broadcast 24 October 2011, Channel 4.