

By Ian Read

A BRITISH adventurer believes he has solved the 89-year-old mystery of the murder of Russia's royal children.

Amateur historian Michael Buchanan-Smith has unearthed a pile of bones which he is convinced are the remains of Crown Prince Alexei and his sister Maria.

The children of the last Tsar were murdered by a Communist death squad in 1918 but no trace of their bodies has never been found.

But Kent-based Mr Buchanan-Smith believes he stumbled on the solution to the puzzle while digging in a forest near the Siberian city of Ekaterinburg in the Ural mountains.

Yesterday he revealed that his discovery led to a serious brush with the local authorities and he was told in no uncertain terms that failure to co-operate with local archaeologists could see him languishing in prison.

Last week vital information he passed on to scientists led to the discovery of two bodies close to where he was digging. Local archaeologists are convinced the charred remains - now identified as belonging to a 10 to 13-year-old boy and a girl aged between 18 and 20 - are those of Alexei, 13 and Maria, 19.

The Russian establishment is angry because 64-year-old Mr Buchanan-Smith, from Canterbury removed bone fragments from the forest near where Tsar Nicholas II and his family were murdered.

They were herded into a cellar and shot along with their servants and their bodies burned before being buried in the forest near Ekaterinburg, 900 miles east of Moscow.

The bodies of Nicholas, his wife and three of their daughters were discovered in 1991 and now rest in a splendid tomb in St Petersburg.

Yesterday Mr Buchanan-Smith said: "I was told I could face prison if I didn't co-operate with the archaeologists. I think noses have been put out of joint because a foreigner made

The eccentric Englishman Russians believe has solved the riddle of its lost royals



discoveries which they believe should have been made by a Russian."

But he now fears information about his find has leaked out to illegal diggers who are now excavating in the area hunting for hoards of gems which went missing along with the family in 1918.

He said: "It is a bit of a coincidence that shortly after I gave information to the local authorities these diggers got in. I'm worried that the site will be disturbed and relics will be sold on the black market.

"My friends have seen signs of digging close to where I found the bone fragments the first time. They saw

signs of people camping there and signs of filled in trenches."

He said: "These illegal diggers are looking for anything that will turn into a profit. I was accused of not being professional because I didn't log and measure my finds. I'm a complete amateur but I succeeded where professionals failed. They've used the information I have given them to hopefully solve the mystery.

"I have been fascinated by the story for years. To find out what really happened has always been my aim.

"I'm not out for any glory. I just want to see the mystery solved but the illegal digging could remove

vital clues needed to identify them if we are not careful." The bones removed last week from the remote forest site have been sent for DNA testing. Ten years ago the Russians took samples from surviving relatives including Prince Philip and Prince Michael of Kent.

The remains were found within 100 square metres of Mr Buchanan-Smith's dig, together with wooden boxes and glass jars used to carry sulphuric acid which was used in an attempt to disfigure the bodies.

Sergei Pogerlov, head of the Archaeological Research Department at Ekaterinburg Regional Centre for Historical and Cultural Monuments, said scientists had con-

sulted newly discovered documents left by execution squad leader Yakov Yurovsky.

Mr Pogerlov said: "In the course of searches in July and August the remains of two persons were found with traces of numerous injuries.

"Ural archaeologists surmise they are the bodies of Tsarevich Alexei and Grand Duchess Maria.

"An anthropologist has determined that the bones belong to two individuals, a male aged roughly between 10 and 13 and a young woman between 18 and 20."

One mystery is likely to remain. Scientists have never been sure whether the missing female was 17-year-old Anastasia or her sister Maria, 19. Because their ages are so close DNA tests still cannot distinguish between them.

Are the bones royal? Have your say at www.sundayexpress.co.uk