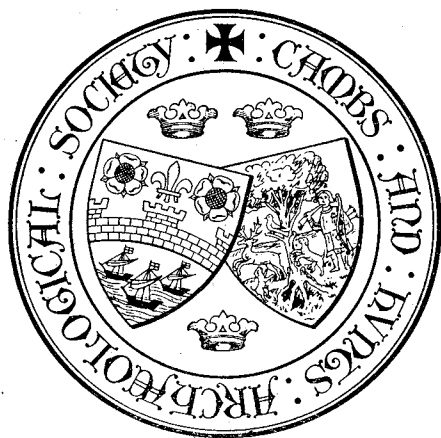


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DISCOVERY OF HUMAN BONES AT GREAT PAXTON.

BY C. F. TEBBUTT.

In the History, Gazetteer and Directory of Huntingdonshire, 1854, page 708 under a description of Great Paxton, appears an account of human bones being found in 1820 in Backside Field, 150 yards west of the church*, and many entire skeletons at a depth of 18 inches when the railway was made in 1849. The field now known as Backside or Sandpit Field (No. 159, sheet XXV. N.E. 4 Hunts. 25 inch Ordnance, 1901) is west of the railway and south of the green lane that leads straight across the level crossing towards the river, at the passage over to Boughton known as Bell Ford. 150 yards west of the church is the middle of the level crossing. Backside Field rises steeply from the crossing gates to the south, owing, perhaps, to gravel digging; and this probably is the site of the discoveries in 1820. Further south the railway makes a slight cutting into the high ground and it was here, I suppose, that the skeletons were found in 1849.

Thinking these facts worth investigation, in 1931 I started 125 yards south of the crossing gate, and probed with an iron bar (to detect any disturbance in the gravelly subsoil) for 55 yards southward along the railway fence and 12 feet out into the field, without result.

Later in the same year human bones were found nearer the crossing gates in ploughing. A trench was dug at right angles to the railway fence, 78 feet south of the crossing gate and 36 feet long. 12 feet from the fence, at a depth of 18 inches, part of a human skeleton was found consisting only of pelvis, collar bone, and ribs and arm bones of one side.

It lay with the head end to the N.E. Odd bones lay all along the trench at the depth of a foot, but at the west end was an assorted mass of bones including parts of at least three skulls. 8 feet north of the skeleton described above was found another with the head at the S.W., the skull was

* Since writing the above I have found the following in the Huntingdon, Bedford, and Peterborough Weekly Gazette of May 7th, 1854 (in the Norris Library, St. Ives). "A few days ago as Mr. Pain's men of Great Paxton were levelling a hill upon his premises, about two feet below the surface they discovered a number of human bones, amongst which were 20 perfect skulls." This may refer to a tumulus.

badly crushed, the lower jaw and all the lower part of the body was missing. Nothing was found to give a clue to their date. A trench dug parallel and close to the railway fence from the crossing gates north, in the field north of the lane (No. 161, Ordnance sheet as above), produced nothing.

Conclusions: The odd bones found had been removed from another place or very much disturbed when they were old; possibly in 1820 or 1849. The incomplete skeletons were original burials much disturbed, or had been moved when recent enough to partly hold together. Two explanations may be suggested. The area of the churchyard is only three-quarters of an acre and calculations makes it obvious that it could not hold all the inhabitants of Great Paxton since Saxon times, and the bones dug up may have been re-buried here. The Rev. A. G. Cane, in an article on this village in Vol. II. of these Transactions, provides evidence that previous to the keeping of parish registers, Abbotsley and Little Paxton brought their dead to Great Paxton for burial. Village jealousy being what we know it to be, it is not impossible that a separate cemetery for one or both of these villages was situated west of the present churchyard.

I am especially grateful to Mr. H. Cardell for reporting discoveries, and giving leave to dig; and to Messrs. Lethbridge, Leaf and Collings for their help in excavation.