

## Notes on a Pre-historic Burial-Place at Megdale, near Matlock Bridge.

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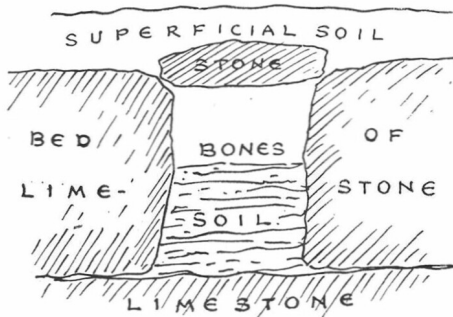


ABOUT the middle of April, 1893, a sensational story went the round of the local press. The heading of the version as given in the *Derbyshire Times*—"Horrible Discoveries at Matlock: Human Bones found in Rock Crevasse"—will at once indicate its nature and recall the event to the reader's memory. This "horrible discovery" was made at the Cawdor Quarries, opposite the gas works, near Matlock Bridge Station; and the circumstances that attended it were as follows:—The proprietors, Messrs. Constable and Co., had decided to extend their workings in the direction of Megdale Farm, and this necessitated, as a first step, the removal of the superficial soil. In doing this, the men (to quote the above newspaper account) "came to an excavation in the rock, probably naturally formed, and one which ran a distance of several yards, but this was filled with loose stones, believed to have been placed there. On removing a large stone, it was found that there was a number of human remains underneath," which proved to belong to four skeletons. The firm immediately reported the matter to the police, who in their turn submitted the best-preserved skull to a medical gentleman. The opinion given was that it was the skull of a middle-aged man; that a fracture, not of recent date, on the left temple was proof of a violent death; and that the skeletons had been buried some thirty or forty years.

Naturally, the discovery caused much excitement, particularly so when it was learned that the quarrymen had previously found a knife and a coin in the vicinity of the skeletons. There was no longer doubt in the public mind that a horrible murder had been perpetrated, and that somehow the knife and the coin would turn out to be important links in the solution of the mystery. *Then* it was remembered, that "years ago, men were missed in a peculiar way in a wood which runs near to the quarry, and that these disappearances were never solved at the time." The coin "had nothing on it" to indicate its date; and as the knife was fifteen feet away from the skeletons, its connection with the "horrible find" will not appeal to the readers as very cogent. Nor is what follows conclusive,— "Thirty years ago, the rock at the quarry extended right up to the railway, and the site where this cave has been discovered would then be on the top of a barren waste and far away from any human dwelling, this place being severed from the main road leading to Bakewell by the River Derwent." Murderers, surely, would not drag their victims from the cover of a wood to an open and conspicuous waste to dispose of them. But apart from this, the statement is not correct. The old village of Matlock is hardly half-a-mile away; while the Ordnance Survey of 1836—64 years ago—shows the Bridge as already surrounded with houses, with Megdale Farm close to the spot, as at present. The pressman, however, consolingly assures his readers that "there will in no case be any necessity to raise a hue and cry for the perpetrators of the old-time murders, as the whole of them have probably followed their victims and paid the debt of nature."

The fact is, the "horrible find" was a pre-historic interment. Dr. Moxon, of Matlock, kindly sent the writer some particulars, a few days after the discovery, which go far to prove this. The rough diagram which he appended by way of illustration is here reproduced. "The bones," he stated, "were not found in a cave, but simply about two or three feet below the surface, between two vertical beds of limestone, and

resting on some soil. . . . The soil for some distance below the bones and the limestone on each side, had a distinct *red* tinge, quite different from any other soil in any other part of the quarry or the neighbourhood." The space occupied by the bones was about two feet square, and was covered by a



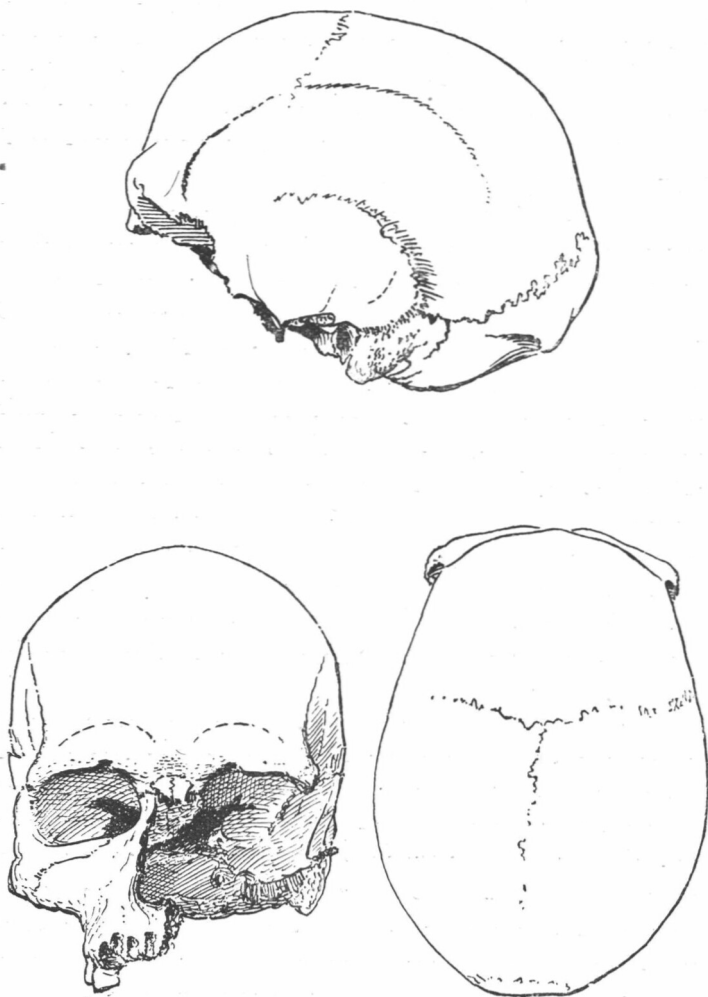
large stone weighing about two cwt., which was not fashioned in any way. The superficial soil was of "a peaty character," about eighteen inches thick. When the Doctor saw the bones, "there were portions of four different skulls, together with some of the long bones."

Burial in natural clefts or fissures in the rock was common among the primitive folk of the Peak. For example, I refer the reader to Mr. Salt's exploration of barrows on Grinlow and Stoop High-edge, near Buxton (*Proceedings Soc. Antiq.* New Series. XV., p. 422, and XVI., p. 262), the only difference being that the graves of these were not covered with slabs of stone, but simply filled and covered with the materials of the mounds. No mound, it is true, was observed at Megdale, but these ancient mounds have often been removed in modern times for the sake of their stone. Such a mound seems to be implied in the newspaper account, which states that the fissure beyond the limits of the grave was filled with large stones, "believed to have been placed there." If a cairn had been raised over the site, its stones would of course fill the fissure; and it is likely enough that those who removed it

would stop short with the natural surface, and not go below it. The interstices of these ancient cairns are often filled with black vegetable mould, and the removal of the stones might well leave behind on the spot a thick deposit of this mould, such as Dr. Moxon observed over the grave. The red tinge mentioned by the Doctor, was perhaps the effect of fire. The presence of charcoal and other signs of fire have frequently been noticed in pre-historic graves.

Apparently no implement or other object of human manufacture accompanied the skeletons; evidence, therefore, from this source as to their antiquity is denied us. The pressman, indeed, made *this* a strong point against these skeletons being ancient, but pre-historic interments are frequently found to lack such accompaniments. He also attempted to throw doubt upon their orderly burial in consequence of their muddled condition. It is obvious, however, that in a space only two feet square, the bodies must have been buried in a contracted attitude, which is the usual attitude in ancient British interments; and the bones of such interments always present a mixed-up appearance to the inexperienced observer. The position of the skeletons, on the brow of an eminence, was a favourite one for burial purposes with the ancient Britons.

With data so slender, it is hardly safe to attempt to assign a narrower period for this sepulchre than that just broadly expressed as pre-historic. All the skeletons appear to have been together. It would help us if we could know whether they were all buried *at one time*, or *successively*. If the former, we should have good grounds for attributing them to the Bronze Age; if the latter, we might be inclined to suggest the preceding era of the chambered tumuli. But the half-natural recess in which the skeletons were found was so small compared with the grand chambers of these tumuli, that we may well hesitate to associate it with them. It is safer to assign it to the Bronze Age, to which the great majority of our Derbyshire pre-historic burial-places belong.



SKULL A., MEGDALE.

*One-third full size.*

The interments of this period usually consist of one individual each; less frequently, of a man and wife, or a parent and infant; and rarely, of more than two adults. It is difficult to understand the occasional instances of several adult skeletons occupying the same cist or grave, unless we suppose that the receptacle was re-opened for later burials. To speculate whether this was the case or no at Megdale would be a mere waste of time.

All the bones which were recovered have been lent me by Mr. R. Parker, of Buxton, the owner of the property in which the Cawdor Quarries are situated. In condition and outward appearance they exactly agree with barrow bones generally, and thus further prove the pre-historic age of the burial place. They consist of one skull *minus* its face bones; fragments of three other skulls; two perfect mandibles and one fragment; portions of three maxilæ; several long bones, and sundry other fragments.

The most perfect skull (skull A)\* is shown on page 44, one-third full size, in the usual *normæ*, and drawn as described in Vol. XII., p. 131. This skull presents, horizontally, a symmetrical oval outline. In the side view, the supraciliary ridges are seen to be bold, the forehead tolerably full, the calvarial vault lofty, and the occiput protuberant. The sides

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\* The following measurements and indices of this skull accord with those given in the JOURNAL for other skulls. Measurements in inches:—

Extreme length .. ..	7·4	Measurements from the	
Do. from glabella .. ..	7·45	auditory meati—	
Extreme breadth .. ..	5·3	Radius to nasal suture ...	3·84
Vertical height .. ..	5·7	Bregmal radius .. ..	4·9
Basi-cranial axis .. ..	4·1	Parietal radius .. ..	4·78
Circumference .. ..	20·4	Bregmal arc .. ..	13·05
Frontal arc., .. ..	5·15	Parietal arc.. ..	12·9
Parietal arc.. ..	5·4	Cephalic index .. ..	71·61
Occipital arc .. ..	4·65	Do. from glabella .. ..	71·14
Total longitudinal arc ..	15·2	Measurements of face—nasio-	
Least frontal width .. ..	3·62	alveolar line .. ..	2·74
Greatest frontal width ..	4·53	Height of orbit .. ..	1·5
Greatest occipital width ..	4·35	Width of do. .. ..	1·08
		(Other measurements not possible).	

are upright and parallel, and the points of greatest breadth are low down, abutting upon the temporal sutures. The sutures are partially obliterated. A loose right maxillary, with its malar bone, evidently belongs to this skull, and is shown replaced in the front view on the plate, from which it will be seen that the face was long and narrow. The teeth are moderately worn. I hesitate to venture an opinion as to sex and age, but it seems to me that a man in early middle life and of small and slender build is indicated.

Skull B is less perfect, lacking both base and temporal regions. Like the preceding it is dolichocephalic, but the forehead and vault are low, and the supraciliary ridges moderately developed. Of Skull C, only the frontal remains. It appears to have closely resembled A. Its supraciliary ridges are confluent and very pronounced (a strong male characteristic), and the nasal bones spring forward in such a way as to suggest a "Roman" nose. Of D, only the vault is left, and this indicates a thick, dolichocephalic skull, with unusually intricate sutures.

One of the perfect mandibles is strongly built, and has a bold and deep chin. The other is slight, and its wisdom teeth have not appeared. Both of these jaws are too wide for Skull A. The teeth of the various upper and lower jaws are free from decay, and exhibit varying degrees of wear, some, as those which certainly belonged to the last-mentioned skull, exhibit a degree of wear which, while only moderate for a pre-historic individual, would be deemed excessive or impossible in the case of a modern Englishman.

Among the long bones, is one perfect femur and portions of several others, relating in all to four individuals. The perfect bone is somewhat slender, and in consequence of the great projection of the *linea aspera*, the shaft has an ill-filled appearance. It is 17.6 in. in length, which, taken as 27.5 per cent. of the stature in life, give 5 ft. 4 in. for the latter. With the exception of one shaft, which has a very youthful look, the other fragments closely resemble the above. There is one

imperfect tibia, and it has the flattening of the shin (platycnemism) frequently noticed in these ancient remains.

So far as we can judge from these imperfect skeletons, the people buried in this Megdale vault were dolichocephalic, slight in build and short in stature. None, certainly, attained to old age; it is doubtful whether we can say that any of them even reached the later half of middle life. One—the owner of Skull D, the jaw without wisdom-teeth, and the juvenile femur—appears to have died in early youth.

With these human bones, as sent by Mr. Parker, were a few teeth and fragments of bones of various animals, among which the boar, the ox, a young deer, and possibly the horse, were represented. Presumably these teeth and bones were found on the site more or less associated with the human bones, in which case we may regard them as relics of the funeral feast or of food offered to the dead.

So far from being the victims of a direful tragedy half a century ago or less, these skeletons, if they were still living among us in their dotage, would be garrulous in reminiscences of the Roman legions, and would date their first grey hairs from the Battle of Hastings.