

III.

NOTICE OF THE DISCOVERY OF STONE COFFINS AT AUCHTERHOUSE. By ALEXANDER HUTCHESON, F.S.A. Scot., BROUGHTY FERRY.

The recently erected Dundee Sanatorium for Consumptives, the munificent gift of Ex-Provost Moncur, occupies an elevated plateau on the south front of Auchterhouse Hill.

Here on 14th January 1903, while excavations were in progress, two stone coffins were discovered. The coffins were rudely formed of thin skelbs of undressed stone, such as are found on the hill, having from three to six stones in the length of each side, each end being closed by a single stone, while five and six slabs respectively formed the covers. The coffins had no other bottom than the rocky material of the hill. That farthest east lay at a depth of 15 inches from the surface. It was 15 inches wide at the head or western end, diminishing gradually to 9 inches at foot, and was about 9 inches in depth. In it lay the remains of a human skeleton, much decayed except the skull, which was in a good state of preservation and lay leaning to the right. The teeth were well preserved, the summits of the crowns exhibiting the natural rugous surfaces unworn.

No relics of burial were found in the other coffin, which lay ten yards farther to the west, and at a depth of 2 feet 3 inches from the surface, and measured only 9 inches in width throughout by 9 inches in depth.

The burials must be regarded as of the "full length" variety, and, as both were approximately orientated, presumably assignable to the Christian period.

There exists no record of there having been on the site any place of Christian burial. I had no opportunity at the time of the discovery to visit the site, but on doing so in the course of the succeeding summer, I made a discovery of local traditions still existing which may indicate an origin for the burials. To explain these it is necessary to revert to the condition of the site before the operations were commenced for the erection of the new hospital.

Here, then, and occupying a small knoll known locally as "Greenfield Knowe," towards the western end of the plateau already noticed, two upright standing stones of boulder character formed a conspicuous feature. They were, if tradition be accepted, the survivors of a larger group.¹ The same tradition records that the farmer of Greenfield farm, requiring stones for the erection of dykes, removed some of the standing stones from Greenfield Knowe. He, however, speedily found unexpected difficulty in carrying out his intentions. The dykers whom he had employed absolutely refused to use the stones, alleging they would thereby bring misfortune upon themselves and families, and threatened, rather than risk such calamities, to throw up the job.

While in this quandary the farmer, it is said, had a vision; a ghostly figure appeared to him, and in a hollow voice warned him against interference with the stones on Greenfield Knowe, and concluded by the adjuration, "Gang ower the howe t' anither knowe." Needless to say, the farmer lost no time in obeying his ghostly visitor. Next morning

¹ The writer of the account of the parish in the *The New Statistical Account of Scotland* says, "Near the bottom of the Hill of Sidla stands a Druidical Altar in a very entire state." This is expressed in the usual vague style of the period. It would have been more to the point, and might have helped to an identification with the Greenfield group, had the writer told us in what he reckoned the complete state of a Druidical Altar to consist. We are further informed that in other places of the parish stone coffins containing human bones have been disinterred in the prosecution of agricultural improvements.

he carted back the stones he had removed, and sought material for his dykes elsewhere. I am indebted to Mr John Bryson, builder, Auchterhouse (corroborated, however, by others) for this tradition. It is here given exactly as received from Mr Bryson, the only liberty taken with it being to translate into modern English Mr Bryson's expressive Doric—all but the concluding command of the ghost (who must have been a poet), too precious for translation, and therefore given in the original form.¹

Whether there be any truth in the Greenfield story, and that the farmer had broken up some of the stones for ease of conveyance and subsequently carted back the fragments, the fact remains that only two stones of the alleged group stood upright on the knoll immediately previous to the operations which led to their removal and the discovery of the coffins. The stones stood some fifteen yards to the westward of the westmost of the two coffins. Unfortunately, in the operation no care was taken to retain the stones in their original position. Both were thrown down. One of them has been buried under the debris, so that its whereabouts is now unknown. The sole remaining stone has been shifted some twenty-five yards from its original position, and now marks the site originally occupied by the first-named coffin. This coffin, with its contents, has been removed, and under the care and supervision of Mr John Maclauchlan, curator of the Dundee Museum and Public Library, reconstructed, with skull and remaining bones, as nearly as possible in position, under a glass case in the Dudhope Museum, Dundee, where it forms an object of much interest—a praiseworthy and possibly as yet unique instance of an attempt to preserve for public instruction one of the early modes of interment in Scotland.

Furthermore, I learned from Mr Bryson that the group of stones, two or more, were locally known in his young days as "The Spittal Stanes." This is important, as perhaps casting a light on the interments.

¹ Variants of this story apply to many other districts in Scotland, and point to the universality of the superstitious reverence with which circles and groups of stones are popularly regarded.

The term "spittal" as a place-name in Scotland is generally regarded as a contracted form of "hospital," and if indeed a hospital, leper-house,¹ or other house of refuge stood here in mediæval times, it must surely be regarded as a singular coincidence, that while the old "spittal" survives only in a traditional term applied to the relics of a still older foundation, the designation should now receive a fresh stability from the dedication of the site to a sanatorium in modern times.

It is proper, in conclusion, to add, that to the Rev. W. Mason Inglis, M.A., F.S.A. Scot., Auchterhouse, is due in no small degree the attention which the discovery received, and which has led to the preservation of the remains.

¹ An apparently clear connection between the place-name "Spittale land" and the disease of leprosy is afforded by the following extract relating to a tack of lands at Dumbarton, anno 1494. "In presens of ye lordis auditouris Walter Watsone for him self his wyf & sone grantit to gif owr ye tak of ye landis of Spittale land to ye toun of Dumbertane quhat tyme yae wald get a discharge of ye lepir man of quham he haid ye said tak" (*Records of the Parl. of Scot.*, vol. i. 1804, p. 434).