

XI.

SOME ACCOUNT OF THE ENCAUSTIC TILES
AND STONE COFFINS EXCAVATED ON THE
SITE OF CHERTSEY ABBEY IN 1855.

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ASSISTED BY NOTES CONTRIBUTED BY M. SHURLOCK, ESQ., LOCAL HONORARY
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IN the course of the excavations undertaken by the present owner of the site of Chertsey Abbey, the workmen met with portions of ornamental encaustic tiles, the body being of red or black clay, varying in tone in different examples, and the relief formed by a buff-coloured clay burnt into a depressed cavity. Upon arriving at about the same level as the lowest fair masonry of the exterior, and in the part of the building supposed, in the plan attached to the preceding Paper, to have formed the south transept of the church, a considerable quantity of these fragments was found, in a loose and confused mass resting on a stratum of concrete, though it was not possible to say whether they had ever been bedded upon it. Pains had apparently been taken to destroy the designs; unless we prefer the conclusion that, upon the destruction of the pavement or other work of which these fragments were the elements, the unbroken tiles, and those that could be refitted, were carefully selected and removed, and the obviously useless portions only left behind. The former notion seems, in great part, negatived by the absolute impos-

sibility of adjusting the broken parts; for whilst the same portions of the design occurred repeatedly, others were altogether wanting; or where the various parts of a design could be traced, they had to be deduced from fragments, not of one, but of many different tiles, the remaining portions of which could not be found.

The forms of the tiles vary, but are mostly square or circular, or combinations of these two figures; but of the designs, by far the greater part are circular, consisting of medallions occupying a single rectangular or round tile, or else four tiles, constituting together the square or circular form. These larger circles have apparently been surrounded by inscriptions, portions of many of which still remain. The centres are mostly figures or groups, such as, a harper in a boat on the water, grotesques, the signs of the zodiac, a king or ecclesiastic seated and holding a sceptre or crozier, warriors or knights on horse or on foot, and the like; and the spandrils or spaces between these circles are filled with foliage and arabesques of elaborate and elegant design. The drawing is remarkably spirited, the proportions and outlines good, and considerable skill manifested in giving the effect of light and shade.

One portion of the tiles appear designed to stand vertically, and probably formed a reredos or other wall ornament; they represent a series of niches flanked by panelled buttresses and crocketed pinnacles, surmounted by foliated canopies, in which the ogee arch occurs. The design of each niche occupies one tile in width and four in height; one is filled by an archbishop, another by a queen with a sceptre in her right, and a squirrel in her left hand, and the third by a king, having in his right hand an oak or olive branch, and a figure under his feet whom he seems to be crushing to the earth;

portions of a similar figure under the archbishop's feet can be traced, but the corresponding tile for the queen's compartment is wanting. The king's canopy contains a hare and a dog, at the lower corners, and the full moon and a star or sun above. Nearly the same symbols appear in the archbishop's canopy, but a rugged cross supplies the places of the hare and dog. The whole has evidently some undiscovered significance.

Other tiles were designed for borders of geometric or flowing patterns, and others again were plain, but of various shapes and sizes, forming indeed a never-ending diversity; but no clue remains for determining the general arrangements. Illustrations of many of these very beautiful and interesting remains, have been published by Mr. Shaw, F.S.A., whose work on the "Tile Pavements from Chertsey Abbey," the curious will do well to consult.

At no great depth below the concrete, alluded to as existing under the broken tiles, the workmen struck upon a slab of Purbeck marble, which proved to be the lid of a coffin hewn out of a single block of similar material, with a hole bored through the bottom. The entire length of this was 6 feet 7 inches by a width of 2 feet $3\frac{1}{2}$ inches at the head, and 1 foot 2 inches at the foot and $11\frac{1}{2}$ inches deep exclusive of the lid. The interior was hollowed to the depth of 9 inches, leaving the sides $2\frac{1}{2}$ inches thick, the place for the head being irregularly shaped so as to accurately accord with a deformity in the neck of the occupant proved by the vertebræ. These, together with the whole of the skeleton, were found as complete as when originally deposited, but a waist-buckle was the only vestige of apparel that could be traced. Of the lid only about one third, the middle portion, remained; the centre of this was occupied by a beaded fillet, from which

sprang, on either side, a tendril and foliage, consisting of three lobes or trefoils of early English character.

At two feet nine inches to the south of this, and six inches lower in the ground, was found another coffin, of Caen or other similar stone, 1 foot $3\frac{1}{2}$ inches deep externally, and internally 6 feet 6 inches long, 2 feet wide at the shoulders, and $12\frac{1}{2}$ inches deep, two holes being bored through the bottom. This was also shaped to receive the head, the walls of the sides being left 4 inches thick. The lid was entire, and consisted of one huge and rough slab of a material similar to the coffin itself. The skeleton, which was of large proportions, was entire and undisturbed. As in the previous case, a waist-buckle of bronze was the only evidence of any apparel.

At a further depth of about eight inches, and six feet to the west of the Purbeck marble one, was discovered a grave or tomb, formed of fourteen roughly hewn pieces of chalk, of which three formed the head, five the one side and six the other, the foot-stone being altogether wanting. The extreme internal dimensions were 6 feet 1 inch in length by 1 foot 6 inches wide and 11 inches deep. This skeleton was also entire, though no trace of any lid or covering, or of any clothing could be found. The soil formed the floor of this, as of all the other coffins not hewn out of solid stone.

A little to the south and west of this, was another one of an oolitic stone, and corresponding most closely to the second one described above.

At a similar distance to the north and west, was another grave of roughly hewn chalk-stones, enclosing a leaden coffin composed of two sheets folded together, and nailed about a wooden shell which had entirely gone to decay; contrary to the general rule, the bones composing this skeleton were in a state of confusion.

On the centre of the top of the leaden coffin, was nailed a Maltese cross cut out of lead, but no inscription was discoverable. The whole was covered with mortar.

Almost touching the north face of the foundations of the supposed south wall of the transept, at three feet from the second coffin described above, and two feet six inches deeper in the soil, was discovered what was in many respects, the most singular of all the tombs, especially on account of its dimensions. These were, internally, 6 feet 6 inches in length, and 2 feet 6 inches in width, and the depth nearly 2 feet. The sides, internally slightly concave in the direction of the length, were composed of roughly hewn chalk stones, and the whole was covered by five slabs of unequal size, cemented together. A recess was formed for the head, and a slab placed obliquely to receive it, and the inner faces of the head and foot stones, were ornamented by plain crosses in slender relief, occupying nearly the whole surface, that at the foot being a regular Greek cross, and the other a Latin one, the arms increasing somewhat in width towards the extremities, and the lower one terminating with a protuberance resembling a tenon. The bones were unusually large, and in a confused state, partially imbedded in a wet loam, so as to suggest the idea of their having been floated by water finding access to the interior. No remains of clothing or metal of any kind, could be detected, though every care was taken to discover whatever might exist.

Five other coffins without lids, and all formed of loose blocks of chalk or stone, were found immediately contiguous to those already described : in one, the recess for the head was formed of a single block hollowed out ; in another occurred a stone having some mouldings and carving, apparently of the early English or transitional

character; and the feet of the occupant of a third, had rested upon an encaustic tile decorated with a griffin in very good style. The walls of these two had been levelled up, with tiles exactly resembling our plain roofing tiles, with the two holes for the pegs, set in mortar as though to receive a lid or covering, but none such could be traced. Indeed, the whole of the uncovered coffins were filled with soil, if not concrete; and yet the bones were perfectly undisturbed, the ribs retained their rotundity, the feet bones their vertical position, and the hands and other portions their exact places and relations; leading almost irresistibly, to the conclusion that the soil was compacted around the corpse, before decomposition had ensued.

Immediately under and between the coffins were the remains of many skeletons, and though no other evidence of coffins remained, the frequent occurrence of a black substance, might be considered to prove, that the sepulture took place in wood.

The whole of the skeletons that were not disturbed, lay on their backs, with their feet to the east, their arms and hands not crossed or joined, but lying straight by their sides; the bones were sound and firm, except those without coffins, which soon crumbled into dust.

Excepting the small portions of sculpture already enumerated, nothing whatever was found to assist in determining the dates, or in otherwise identifying the interments: and therefore without indulging in vain speculations, I content myself with recording the above facts, simply adding, that we are mainly indebted to the persevering diligence and untiring watchfulness of Mr. Shurlock, for the discovery of these interesting remains, and the preservation of the details here enumerated.

Common justice however, both to amateur and artist, requires me to invite attention to the beautifully engraved representation of the excavations by which this volume is embellished ; and which Mr. Le Keux has executed, from the even more beautiful photographs, taken by Captain Oakes, and by him handsomely presented to the Society.