

Two Roman coffins from near St Mary's church, Beddington

The two coffins discussed below have been mentioned in various articles, but have never been adequately recorded.¹ The lead coffin (fig 1) was found *c* 1870 on the western border of the churchyard of St Mary's Church, Beddington (approx TQ 2951 6523). It was placed in the church choir vestry and apparently received rough treatment from the choirboys, until it was moved to a specially constructed cupboard,² where it can still be seen today.

The lid of the coffin has a border formed by a linear bead and double reel moulding,³ with a similar central Y-shaped design. There are seven large scallop-shells (*pectines*) asymmetrically placed. The coffin base is manufactured from one piece of lead, with the sides bent up to form a rectangular box. One piece of lead has also been used for the lid, which is bent down over the sides of the coffin to a depth of 4.5cm. The coffin lid⁴ is 1.33m long (4' 4½"), and varies in width from 36cm (1' 3") to 23cm (9"), and so the coffin may have contained the body of a young person. The average thickness of the lid is 0.5cm, and that of the coffin base 0.7cm.

Scallop shells on Roman lead coffins are not known to have had a Christian significance,⁵ and so this is likely to have been a pagan burial. A smaller lead coffin with a similar design on the lid found at Holborough, Kent, was dated to the early 3rd century.⁶

Roman lead coffins are found widely in lowland Britain, although mostly in urban centres; the only other instances of lead coffins in Surrey come from Croydon and Battersea.⁷ Coffins found in rural areas are generally associated with villas.⁸ In Britain they fall into two main groups — rectangular or tapering⁹; the Beddington coffin belongs to the latter group.

A second coffin (fig 2), made of stone, was found on 10th March 1930,¹⁰ very close to the site of the lead coffin, in Church Path (TQ 2954 6513) during the laying of drains. It is 1.96m long internally (6' 6"), and 47cm wide internally (1' 6½"). It is slightly asymmetrical in shape, particularly in the interior.¹¹ It weighs approximately two tons.¹² The coffin and coffin lid were found intact, but were subsequently broken when lifted. The coffin is made of oolitic limestone, and has tooling marks on the interior. The nearest source of limestone is the Cotswolds, but this particular limestone does not appear to be from that source, and is more likely to be from either northern France or northern England.¹³

The contents of the coffin were scattered on discovery,¹⁴ and there is a hint in one report that some parts of the coffin or its contents were removed as souvenirs at this stage.¹⁵ Council minutes show that the contents consisted of a human skeleton and fragments of three glass vessels.¹⁶ The glass vessels were given to Mortimer Wheeler of the London Museum for a report,¹⁷ but it is not known if they were ever returned, and they are now lost.¹⁸ The rector at that time described them in one newspaper report as 'two small drinking cups, not candlesticks as stated, somewhat the same shape as champagne glasses, only with shorter and thicker stems, say 3½" high. In addition to these, a small oil or water bottle or cruse, about the same height'.¹⁹ These may possibly represent two unguent bottles and an oil flask, but it is difficult to be precise without the glass surviving; Mortimer Wheeler certainly identified these glass vessels as Roman.²⁰

The report by the rector²¹ describes the skeleton as that of a woman 5' 9½" high, and the bones in excellent condition 'due probably, to a dust which covered them, and which seems to possess a large quantity of lime or some preservative'. This would therefore seem to be an instance of a plaster burial, which often had Christian associations,²² and is often of an early 4th century date. The Beddington coffin was apparently found in a north-south orientation,²³ but this does not preclude it from being a Christian burial, although an east-west orientation is more usual.²⁴ Nor does the presence of grave goods prove the burial to be pagan.²⁵

Stone coffins are found fairly widely in Roman Britain, but the majority occur around walled

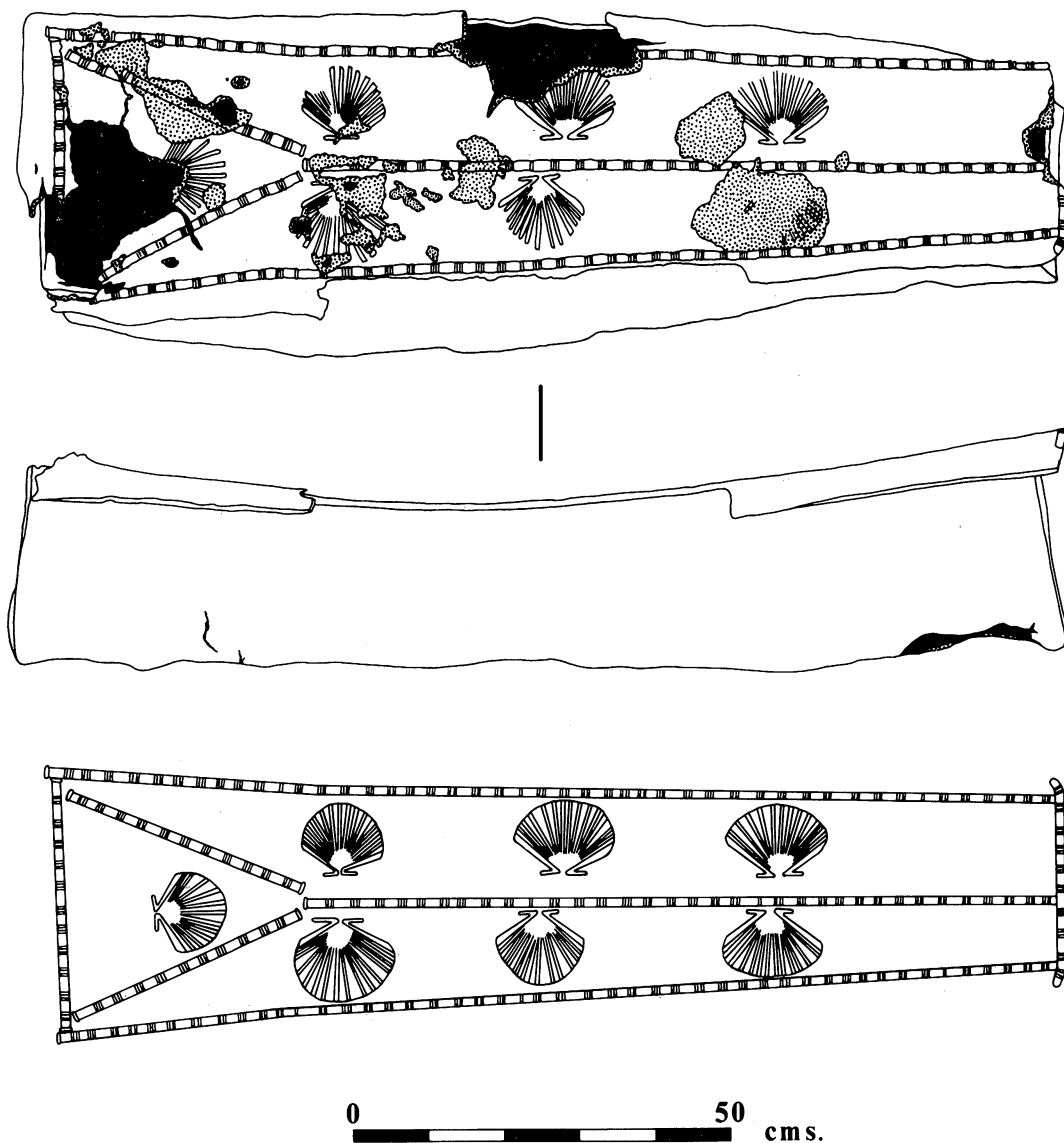


Fig 1. The lead coffin from Beddington with a reconstruction of the pattern on the lid.

urban centres or along roads, and are rarely associated with villas. There are six basic coffin shapes, and the Beddington coffin falls into the rectangular class. The two basic coffin lid shapes are tabular or gabled; the Beddington example is tabular but with a convex top.²⁶ No other stone coffins are known to have been found in Surrey, although there are several findspots in north-west Kent and in London. In examples where the stone has been identified, it is apparent that the coffins in these areas were usually made of Kentish ragstone or of limestone.²⁷ The limestone is usually assumed to be from the most local source, but in view of the identification of the Beddington coffin limestone, it is obvious that petrological analysis of the limestone coffins is desirable to establish the precise origin.

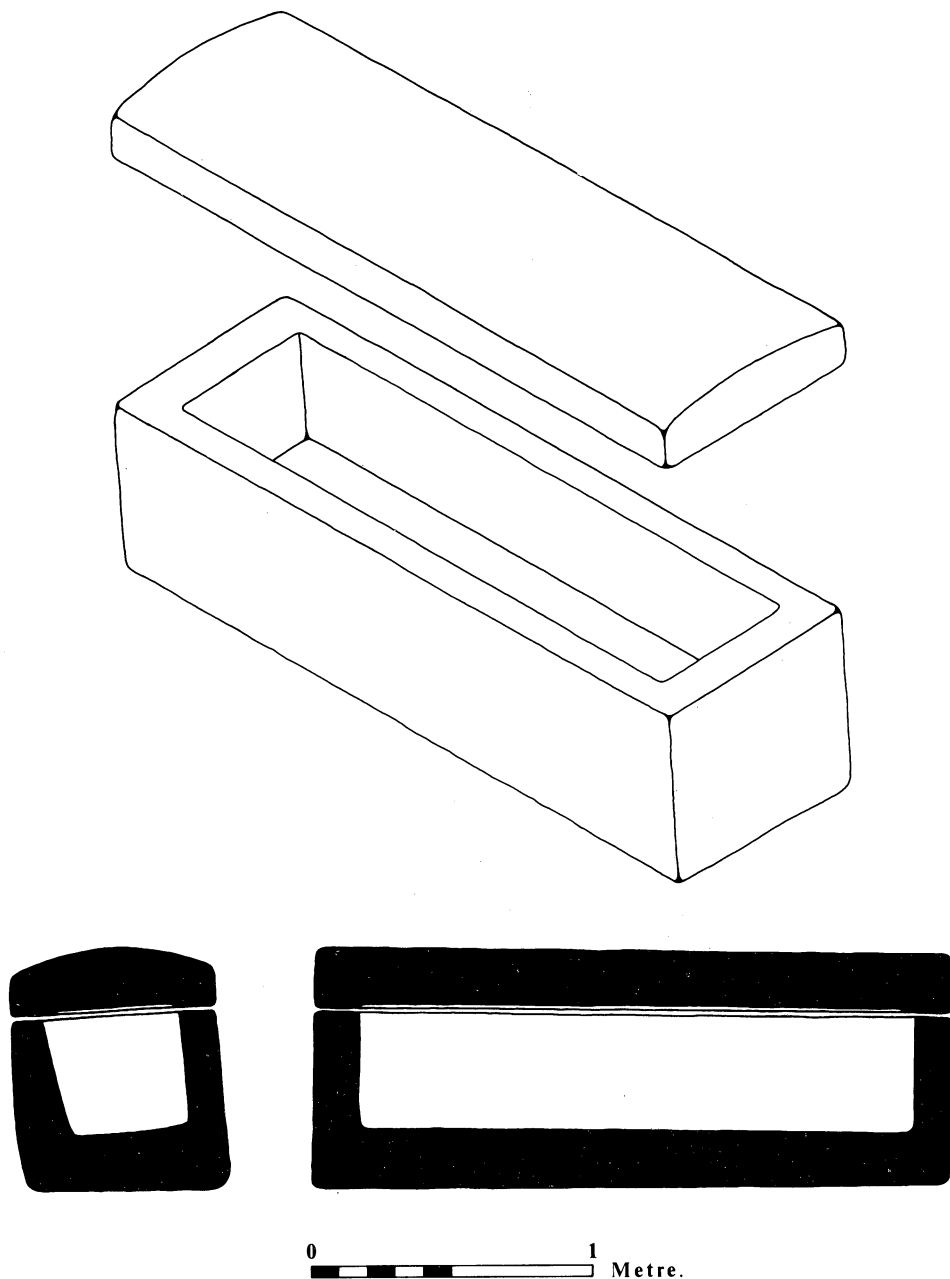


Fig 2. A diagrammatic reconstruction and cross-sections of the stone coffin from Beddington.

The two burials may be associated with the nearby Roman villa on Beddington Sewage Works, 700m away on the north side of the River Wandle. However, it is possible that the two burials are associated with a settlement, as yet undiscovered, on the south side of the River Wandle, and could form part of a large cemetery.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We are grateful to Doug Cluett (Sutton Public Library), Mrs G Moir and Miss A Barford (Carshalton Public Library), Martyn Owen (Institute of Geological Sciences), and Rev David Richardson, for their assistance in the research for this paper.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

- 1 The only published drawing is of the lead coffin, and this shows only five shells, labelled 'cockle shells': Rev Thomas Bentham, *A History of Beddington* (1923), plate opp p 69
- 2 P M Johnston, Surrey and Sussex, 1932-3, *J Brit Archaeol Assoc. new ser.*, **39**, 1934, 228-31
- 3 H F Toller, *Roman Lead Coffins and Ossuaria in Britain* (1977), 74
- 4 Owing to the coffin being in a cupboard, it was only possible to examine one side of the coffin and the lid in any detail
- 5 J M C Toynbee, *Death and Burial in the Roman World* (1971), 276
- 6 J M C Toynbee, The lead sarcophagus, in R J Jessup, Excavation of a Roman barrow at Holborough, Snodland *Archaeol Cantiana*, 68, 1954 (1955), 34-46
- 7 Toller loc cit in note 3 (where Battersea is placed under Middlesex)
- 8 Toller op cit in note 3, 2-4
- 9 Toynbee loc cit in note 5
- 10 Beddington and Wallington UDC Minutes and Reports, vol 15, 1930, 829
- 11 As the coffin is in two pieces, and the lid in three pieces, a reconstruction of the coffin is shown in fig 2
- 12 Information from D Cluett, who states that the weight was recently assessed by contractors when the coffin was moved to a new store. At present Sutton Public Library has possession of the coffin, and it is stored at Carshalton Public Library
- 13 Identification of the stone by Martyn Owen of the Institute of Geological Sciences
- 14 Johnston op cit in note 2, 230
- 15 Wallington and Carshalton Times, 10 April 1930
- 16 Beddington and Wallington UDC Minutes, vol 15, 1930, 831
- 17 Ibid vol 16, 1930, 368, and 1931, 720
- 18 K Pryer pers comm
- 19 Loc cit in note 15
- 20 In a letter of 14 March 1930 to the council, as detailed in Beddington and Wallington UDC Minutes vol 15, 1930, 830
- 21 Loc cit in note 15
- 22 C Green, The significance of plaster burials for the recognition of Christian cemeteries, in *Burial in the Roman World* (ed R Reece, 1977), 46-53, especially 48
- 23 Loc cit in note 15
- 24 Green op cit in note 22, 51
- 25 Ibid
- 26 For information on stone coffins, see A G Harrison, *Romano-British Stone Coffins in England*, unpublished B A dissertation, Univ London (1979)
- 27 Ibid

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