

## SOME ACCOUNT OF THE DISCOVERY OF THE ROMAN COFFIN IN THE NORTH GREEN OF WESTMINSTER ABBEY.

By HENRY POOLE, the Abbey Mason.

THE Dean and Chapter of Westminster, in their desire to improve and, as far as possible, to restore the architectural features of the Abbey, determined, in the autumn of 1869, under the advice of their architect, Mr. G. G. Scott, R.A., to remove from the North Green the earth and rubbish which had there accumulated for several centuries. A similar work had just before been successfully effected in the green of the great cloister, whereby nearly three feet of earth, which had gradually risen against the bases of the buttresses, as well as against the beautifully moulded seats of the windows, was cleared away. The architectural proportions of the four sides were developed, and for the first time seen after three or four centuries of gradual concealment. These and other like discoveries excited the hope that similar operations on the North Green would lead to analogous results.

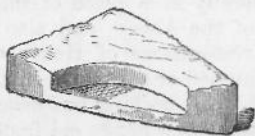
These operations began at the western end, towards the gates. As it was known that two canons' houses had stood here up to 1737,<sup>1</sup> and that since that period the area had been used generally as a place of interment for the bedesmen and inferior officers of the Abbey, and also as a mason's yard during many years of the restorations of Henry the Seventh's Chapel, little was expected to be exhumed or displayed by the clearance. Indeed, westward of the north aisle door, nothing but masses of early brickwork and loose brick rubbish—the *débris* of the old houses—were found; but, on approaching the Early English portion of the nave, ancient stone and rubble walls began to show themselves. Some portions of these had been cut away by the excavators, but this destruction was arrested, and it is hoped that what has thereby disappeared was only the upper part, which would now have been a little above the present turfed surface. A careful examination of the ground towards the north transept was now made under the direction of Mr. G. G. Scott; the surfaces of the tops of the walls were gradually displayed as shown on the accompanying plan; and holes were dug in various parts to ascertain the depths.

<sup>1</sup> These two houses were situate against the four buttresses towards the tower, the statues in the niches of which they are said to have preserved from the effects of the north winds. There is a tradition, and perhaps a record, that the gardens of

these two houses were eastward. Perhaps therefore the houses may have faced the west; and as the north door of the nave was the means of communication with these houses and the Abbey, it would open into the back gardens.

It was in the digging one of these holes that the Roman coffin was first accidentally exposed to view. (See F, in the accompanying ground-plan.) It might otherwise have escaped notice. The lid was of course first seen; and in digging down lower to ascertain the depth, those employed were astonished to find the indubitable marks of its Roman date. The lid had previously been much shattered, and there was an opening under the end of the lid at the head sufficiently wide to put in a lamp, and thus perceive that the coffin contained a skeleton. The Dean and the other authorities were at once apprised of the discovery, and arrangements were made for a formal opening and examination. On removing the broken parts of the lid the skeleton was displayed. It had evidently been subjected to violence by a previous examination. The skull had been removed from its place, being found towards the feet; and the whole skeleton had been reversed, the back being upward. All the parts, however, it is believed, were present; the whole was in tolerable preservation, especially the teeth, which were fixed in large and powerful jaws, and much worn. The opinion immediately formed was, that the remains were those of a skeleton of a man below middle age, of powerful make, and rather above middle size. The anatomical and ethnological details will be found in other notices of the discovery.

The coffin contained nothing to indicate the rank or occupation of the deceased. There was found in the coffin a quantity of loose rubbish, which may have fallen in at the previous examination, to which allusion has been made, and perhaps through cracks in the broken lid, which had been very roughly bedded on thick mortar on the coffin. There was also found a quantity of slacked lime in a pasty state, as though lumps of quick-lime had been thrown in, and the moisture of the surrounding damp earth had gradually slacked it; and there was also found a piece of volcanic slag, of great hardness, and of a brownish colour, measuring about 7 in. by 4 in., varying from 1 in. to  $1\frac{1}{2}$  in. in thickness. It had a



flat depression on one surface, bounded by a circular margin, and, as well as can be remembered, of something like the annexed form. In testing the hardness of this fragment it broke in twain. The form immediately suggested the idea that it was

part of a quern or early hand-mill, and that its existence in the coffin might furnish some clue to ascertain the date of the deposit or identify the occupant. Professor Huxley, Professor Rolleston, and Dr. Thurnam have, however, made minute inspections of the skeleton; and the coffin has been very carefully examined by the Rev. J. G. Joyce, and others. The information that will be derived from their observations will render any further remarks unnecessary.

The position of the coffin was, in depth, about two ft. from the level of the nave floor to the top of the lid; it was nearly 38 ft. north of the nave wall; 46 ft. west of the transept wall; and opposite to the third bay of the northern buttress. Its direction was due east and west. It was surrounded with the fine red river-sand, which is found everywhere around, a few feet below the ordinary surface, and covered with earth and rubbish. From observations previously made with regard to the more ancient levels, it may be presumed that the coffin lid, at some former period, was exposed its whole thickness, and that the chest of

the coffin had in its then position always been surrounded and protected by the sand. This was, no doubt, the ordinary position of such coffin lids of early date, as shown in those of the south cloister walk, and in that lately found in the earth at what, doubtless, was the ancient level of the cemetery, adjacent to the chapter-house, and possibly the resting-place of *Algeric*, Bishop of Durham, who died in 1072. The sand around the Roman coffin contained many bones, which had been thrown in. From the position of the wall (C, C, in the plan) close to the coffin, it is probable that it was built subsequently, for the lower edge of the wall was near the upper edge of the coffin. If this conjecture is right, it is probable also that those who built the wall exposed the coffin, and that at the same time they may have opened it and disturbed the skeleton. Considerable pains were taken, at the suggestion of Mr. Black, the eminent antiquary, in digging deep trenches in order to discover, if possible, the vestiges of a Roman road, but without result. Nor has any Roman relic of any kind, either brick, tile, coin, &c., been found either on this, or, as far is known, on any former occasion.

The stone of the coffin is a shelly oolite, very much like that found on the banks of the Windrush in Oxfordshire. The lid is of a material similar in quality, with the slight difference found in adjacent strata or blocks of the same kind of stone.<sup>2</sup> The workmanship on the front of the coffin is beautifully executed; its character, as well as that of the design, would indicate a period of peace and refinement. The high state of preservation of the lower part of the coffin, which has hardly lost a grain of its substance by decay, may be attributed to its having been protected under cover from rain and frost during the early period of its existence; and since then the earth in which it has been concealed and protected has maintained it intact. Judging from experience, a stone of this friable nature, and one so absorptive of moisture, would not retain the delicate markings and smooth surface which it now presents after a few years' (say ten or twenty) exposure to driving rains and frost.

The Oxfordshire oolite, it may here be observed, is found to have been in use at every period of the construction of the Abbey, from that of the Confessor to the time of Sir Christopher Wren, who largely used the stone for outside repairs, displacing thereby the old Godstone and Reigate freestone, which no doubt was then extensively decayed. Two other coffins of this stone were also found about the same time. One was in the earth, not many feet west of the Roman coffin. It was shaped for the head and shoulders, and was nearly complete there; but the foot was broken, and the sides had been cut away. It appeared to have been utilized as a bottom for a drain. The other is a coffin of the same shape, covered with a Purbeck marble lid, forming part of the pavement of the ambulatory, and closely adjacent to the tomb of Queen Eleanor.

The lid of the Roman coffin, which may have been wrought many centuries after the coffin, must have been exposed, as before suggested, to the corroding action of the weather, as well as to the abrasion, from

<sup>2</sup> A chip of both chest and lid has been kept, and the examination will prove the similarity, but with difference

enough to show that the pieces are from different blocks.

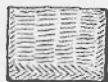
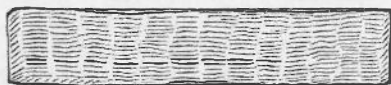
various causes, in its position just above or perhaps, even, after a time, level with the ordinary surface of the ground.

This natural history of the coffin will not suffice to satisfy the inquirer as to the time and other circumstances of its workmanship; but the marks of the craftsman, if duly investigated, will suggest reflections which may tend to throw light on this subject.

The finished front of the coffin which, as before indicated, is the design of an artist of cultivated taste, and, if not his workmanship also, is that of an accomplished and skilful mason.



As the other parts of the coffin were concealed from observation, they are wrought accordingly, but yet with accuracy and neatness consistent with the delicacy of the front. The ordinary axe, or a tool producing such an effect, appears to have been used all over the secondary surfaces. The markings of this tool are somewhat faint, especially in the present position of the coffin, and the partial and broken light of that part of the Abbey; but with the aid of a bright lamp the tool-markings will be easily perceived, especially at the back and head. This tool or axe would seem to have been about  $2\frac{1}{2}$  in. in width, and of the ordinary shape, with its long wooden handle. To such a tool as this would be due the strokes now visible, about  $\frac{1}{2}$  in. or  $\frac{3}{4}$  in. apart. They present at the side and end this appearance. (See woodcut.) The end is marked, towards the bottom, with two courses of

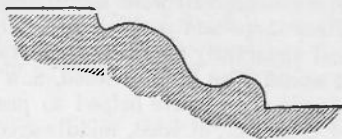


herring-bone tooling, due perhaps to the position of the workman when operating thereon. The inside, if rightly remembered, is marked with the chisel, in succession to a pointed tool, and then scraped.

Comparing the ordinary parts of the lid, their workmanship is of a very inferior and even rude character. The plan of the outline of the coffin is true and symmetrical; (fig. 2) that of the lid is comparatively irregular and carelessly shaped to the coffin beneath. The straight lines in the diagram (fig. 3) represent pretty nearly the form of the plan of the coffin; the somewhat crooked lines beyond show the ruder edges of the lid. The front of the coffin is slightly rounded in its length, but so gently and truly as to be imperceptible to ordinary inspection. It is of the nature of an *entasis*, and was doubtless done intentionally. The corresponding edge of the lid is wrought in utter disregard of this delicate feature.

And now to describe and, at the same time, to compare the workmanship of the front of the coffin with that of the top of the lid. The front is divided into three compartments; the middle, containing the inscription, is about 4 ft. 6 in. long and  $14\frac{1}{2}$  in. high, and is surrounded by a slight but tastefully effective ogive moulding, about  $\frac{7}{8}$  in. wide and only  $\frac{1}{2}$  in. deep. (See woodcut.) The two end compartments measure 13 in. in height and 8 in. in width; they are cut in square at the edges, about  $\frac{1}{4}$  in. deep, and in each is a carefully carved, conventional ornament, usually designated the *pelta* or "the Amazon

shield." All the three compartments are bounded by a plain border, about  $1\frac{1}{2}$  in. wide. The letters of the inscription are beautifully formed, and are evidently the work of a skilful engraver, but they show some signs of haste in their arrangement; for, while the letters in the first two lines are bold and somewhat scattered, those of the third are irregularly crowded, and in one place there occurs an abbreviation or ligature in the manner frequently found in Roman inscriptions where space was deficient. It may have been that the coffin was "ready-made"<sup>3</sup> at the time of the decease, and that the inscription was afterwards engraved *in situ* and somewhat hastily, or at least without the consideration and adjustment which a modern engraver would give to it.



Ogive moulding. Orig. size.

The top of the lid is slightly coped, and thereon is wrought a long cross, its three upper limbs shaped as those of the cross termed, heraldically, "*pattee*," and its long shaft terminating in what appears to have been a trefoiled ornament, but is so bruised and worn that its original form is hardly definable. The setting out or drawing of the cross, though bold and effective, is not truly central nor symmetrical; and the conception of the form could hardly be assigned either to the same artist or to the same period, and certainly not to the same workman. The surfaces sunk down to give the cross relief are unequal in depth; and the inequality in the arms of the cross betoken a workmanship incompatible with that of the panels in front. It is true that the chipping and wearing on the lid contribute to give the whole surface an appearance of irregularity, but the eye of the workman can easily detect original imperfections quite incongruous with the coffin front.

It will be observed that the foot of the coffin is beveled on each side, about 6 in. in length and about 2 in. in depth. These bevels were evidently hidden at first; perhaps the foot went so far into a cavity of some sort; and, if so, the foot of the lid should have the same bevels and the same allowance for concealment, whereas the lid is very roughly wrought at the foot, and the foliated foot of the cross reaches to the very extremity.

All these circumstances seem to lead to the conclusion that the workmanship of the coffin and that of the lid are not only by different hands, but also of different periods. It is possible that the lid may have pertained to the coffin originally, that the original mouldings and ornaments of the lid may have been rudely cut away, and the present shape produced. Then the original skeleton might have been ejected from the coffin, the lid reshaped somewhat in haste, and the more modern inhumation effected. But it is perhaps more probable that the original lid had been wholly thrown aside, and the present cover formed hurriedly when the old Roman coffin was appropriated for a secondary occupant.

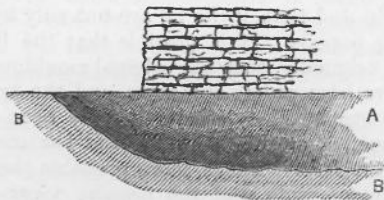
As akin to the subject may be mentioned the discovery of two remarkable interments only a few feet west of the spot where the Roman

<sup>3</sup> Probably the advantage of portability would lead to all coffin blocks being

dished out and shaped in the quarry before sending them to any great distances.

coffin lay, and at a depth of about 4 ft. below the present surface. These are evidently very primitive interments, and probably of ecclesiastics. The skeletons were perfect, not a bone being out of place. The two exposed were surrounded with blocks of roughly-formed chalk. Their shape and position are shown on the plan (G, G). The skeletons had apparently not been protected by any covering; if any ever existed it would have been of wood, now entirely gone. Perhaps this suggested covering may have helped to preserve the skeletons. They were those of young, or, at least, middle-aged persons, the teeth in both cases being perfect and bright. Traces of other similar coffins were seen, but these two only were exposed. The direction of the coffins, a little to south of east, is very singular. It seemed to point to the shrine of the Confessor. If the interments could be assigned to the period of the building of the church of Henry III., when the shrine of the saint was in the highest estimation, it would perhaps account for the direction towards the shrine being given to these interments, and the application of chalk to form, as it were, the walls of a coffin, that material being then in abundance on the spot.

Attention must now be turned to the immediate object of the excavations on the North Green—the examination of the ancient walls which began to be visible—with a view also to the probable repair and restoration of the north porch. Mr. Scott was very desirous to ascertain the precise nature of the footings, and their form and extent. The results were as follows:—1. The baring of the footing (D, D, D, D,) of the west wall of the transept from buttress to buttress, and the discovery of the continuation of that footing 8 or 10 feet into the adjacent churchyard. 2. The discovery of a long wall (A, A, in the plan) running from near the corner of the transept westward as far the fifth buttress next beyond the little north doorway, where the wall spreads out to a large area and then (at E, E,) seems to have returned up to that fifth buttress. 3. The discovery of the two walls (B, B,) of a building which once existed opposite and next to the bay of the two western buttresses of the transept formed by the first-named wall, the bay of the buttresses, and two walls to the south and west now exposed. 4. The discovery of a wall (C, C, C, C,) in a line westward of the south side of this building, and returning southward to the fourth buttress, forming thereby an L-shaped enclosure terminating at the little north door.



Footing, North Transept.

A. Concrete on a quicksand. B, B. Sand.

The footings (D, D,) of the north transept spread out to an extent of 5 feet beyond the face of the buttresses, and 16 feet beyond the external face of the wall between, descending by a series of steps to a depth of 9 feet



below the floor of the Abbey. Besides this stonework of ashlar and rubble, there is still lower a concrete footing about 3 feet wider. The formation of this footing at the part exposed is remarkable, for towards the outer edge it is but a few inches thick, but inwards its thickness is increased by the formation of the trench, the section of which is concave downwards, as though the trench had been dug when the sand was full of water, and the workmen were unable to make one of a rectangular section.

The footing of this wall, with its steps, returns eastward in front of the north porch to a distance of 10 feet, measuring from the face of the buttresses or the centre of the iron railing. Two feet within this there is an ashlar wall face and return looking west, so wrought as to appear to have been once in sight. This peculiar formation, and the great extent of the footings northward, suggest that these footings may have been those of an earlier building, especially when the long wall abutting longitudinally against the buttress at the angle is found to be of the same depth as the lowest part of the wall of the church. Hollar's print of the north front gives the same form to the angles at each side of Solomon's Porch as at present; and why the footings below are not conformable with the superstructure is noteworthy and well deserving of investigation.

The longitudinal wall (A, A), its massy termination westward, and the probability that it continued up to the fifth buttress (for at E, E, was found a line of loose rubble and concrete), together with its coinciding in depth with the deepest part of the main footings of the Abbey, make its original purpose obscure and well worth inquiry. Its position gives the idea of a boundary wall, but against this its great depth militates; and, moreover, there is a map extant, drawn by Henry Keene, the surveyor of the Abbey in 1755, showing the Precinct, in which the boundary line is partly coincident with the present curb and iron railing. The line is thus described:—"The red line is the ancient stone wall which bounded the Close or Precinct where the Ditch did not." This curb with its iron railing was probably placed there about 1737, at which time the canons' houses in the North Green were taken down; shortly before Solomon's Porch also was destroyed; but this could not have been the original and true boundary line, seeing that the original footings extend about 10 feet further north.

The eastern end of this longitudinal wall (A, A) and the wall opposite, connected by a return wall westward, enclosed a space about 15 feet wide, and, (presuming that a fourth wall completing the enclosure was built on the ancient step footing, partly cut away to form a level,) about 20 feet long; but this eastern wall was not found. The walls of the south and west sides go down about 5 feet below the level of the Abbey floor. In the south wall are the remains of two flights of steps (B, B), descending towards the bottom of the walls, that eastward being earlier and better formed than the other.

When this enclosure was discovered it was remembered that Dart mentions the old chapel of St. Edmund near the north door, which, becoming decayed, was taken down. This may have been the lower part of the walls of that chapel, but there is no feature in the walls themselves to show what may have been the superstructure, except the two doorways on the south side. That eastward may have been original, or, at any rate, an early formation; but that westward appears to be much



later, and may have been made when the area was used for some ordinary purpose, for on the west side of the area were found the remains of what had the appearance of a fire-place (H), formed of thin brickwork, and in front was a floor or hearth, about 3 feet wide, formed of blocks of fire-stone. The remainder of the floor was of earth.

The remaining wall is that which runs from the south-west angle of this enclosure, and then returns to the fourth buttress (C, C, in the plan). Its depth is only half that of the south and west walls of the enclosure eastward, being about  $2\frac{1}{2}$  feet deep.

It was thought so desirable to retain all these vestiges exposed, that means were at once adopted. The long walls, being pretty near the surface generally, were either made up to the level of the new turf surface with concrete, or piers were carried up to indicate the line. The enclosure has been converted into a store-cellar (which was much wanted here) by excavating to the top of the concrete footing of the transept wall, underpinning the south and west walls to the same depth, completing the tops of the three walls to the level of their highest point, and then covering the whole with a light Dennett's arch, groined, and supported in the centre by a stone pillar. The whole is covered with slabs of stone, forming a level in the centre, and dripping all four ways, so that the structure, at its highest point, being only about 18 inches above the ground is quite unobtrusive. There is a descending access at the southern side, and the space formed northward to expose the extreme end of the ancient foundation there is easily approached between walls with an arch over them. Thereby every feature is distinctly and permanently indicated, and the more important parts actually exposed, while the space is fairly utilized.

ROMAN COFFIN DISCOVERED AT WESTMINSTER.

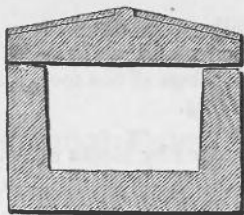


Fig. 1.

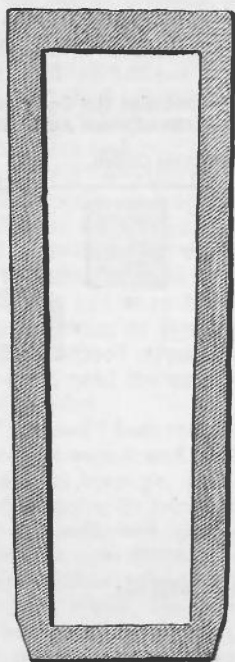


Fig. 2.

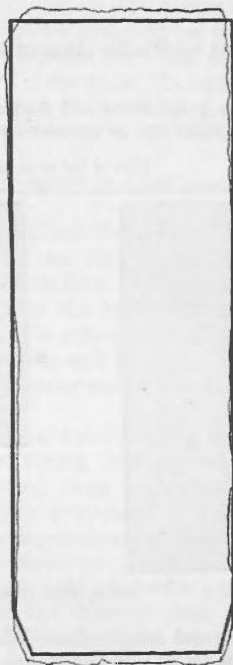


Fig. 3.

Fig. 1. Section of the coffin, showing the proportions of the lid.

Fig. 2. Plan, showing the interior; measuring, in length, 6 ft. 0  $\frac{1}{4}$  in.; width, 1 ft. 7  $\frac{1}{4}$  in.

Fig. 3. Diagram showing the irregularity of the lid as indicated by the faint line.

EXPLANATORY REFERENCES. SEE THE ACCOMPANYING GROUND-PLAN.

A, A, A, A. Rubble foundation-wall of the same depth as those of the fabric of the church.

B, B, B, B. Rubble walls of less depth.

C, C, C, C. Other shallow walls.

D, D, D, D. Stepped footings of the more ancient Porch.

E, E. Loose rubble footing.

F. The Roman Coffin.

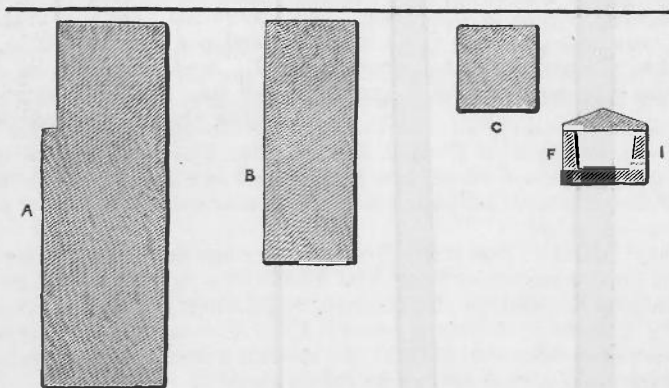
G, G. Skeletons surrounded by blocks of chalk.

H. Piers and back wall, as supposed, of a fire-place, built of thin bricks. This has been removed.

SECTIONS OF WALLS DISCOVERED IN THE NORTH GREEN, WESTMINSTER ABBEY ;

Showing the proportions and depths, respectively, and also the depth at which the Roman coffin lay, as compared with the level of the adjacent Abbey Church.

Line of the level of the floor of the Abbey Church.



Scale, three sixteenths of an inch to the foot.

A. The great longitudinal Wall (A, A.).

B. Walls (B, B.) on the South and West sides of the enclosure adjacent to the North Transept.

C. Wall (C, C.) North of the Coffin.

F. The Roman Coffin.