

THE ROTHWELL CRYPT AND BONES.¹

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The Crypt and Bones at Rothwell, (or Rowell, as it is popularly called), because of the extravagant notions entertained and the exaggerated statements made with regard to them, have for many generations been classed among the marvels of Northamptonshire.

It is now many years since I first heard of the "Rowell Bones"; and the statements which had at one time or another reached me (and doubtless many other persons) amounted to this—That, in a crypt, much more ancient than the existing church, and co-extensive with a considerable proportion of its area, (which crypt had been discovered, a little subsequently to 1700 by the breaking in of a vault in digging a grave), there were human skulls and thigh bones, all of adult males, and some of a size unknown in this latter day, in such number as to indicate that they were remains of no less than 40,000 individuals: that these skulls and bones were symmetrically stacked, in ghastly order, in the murky recesses of that extended vault; which, for unknown ages, had been sealed to the prying eyes of human curiosity, and from which, during all that time, had been excluded the purifying light and air of our upper world: that these bones had been assigned to various races of men, and reasons as various offered why they had been thus deposited in this vault; and that it had been suggested severally that they were the remains of Saxons, of Danes, of the slain in battles during the wars of the Roses or the Cromwellian civil wars, and lastly of the victims of a plague which had decimated the population of the locality in the seventeenth century.

¹ Read in the Section of Antiquities at the Northampton Meeting, August 2nd, 1878.

Never having seen the crypt and bones, like many others, probably, I accepted the general fact of the occurrence of the latter in the crypt as described; but, recognising the incongruity of the various suggestions as to the number of bodies represented, the races of men to whom they had belonged, and the cause of their being thus deposited, I suspended my judgment upon these points, leaving the solution of the questions involved to some future time.

My information and my impressions as to the crypt and its bones remained at this point until the publication, in the local papers, some years ago, of a then recently-delivered lecture upon the subject by a brilliant living writer then resident in this county.¹ This lecture, the substance of which had previously appeared in *Blackwood's Magazine*, possessed great literary merit, was surprisingly imaginative, and contained many most extraordinary statements and suggestions:—The size of the crypt was about 12 yards by 10 yards; the number of skeletons it contained was “some 30,000”; all were of male adults of the most stalwart size (some gigantic), including even one at least of the negro, and many, as demonstrated by “ghastly shattering wounds,” which had been “hacked and hewed and stabbed” by “sword and spear”: the vault was Saxon; and the bones, it was surmised, were those of Danes slain in battle, which the Saxon conquerors had deposited here, “in order to visit at intervals and in triumph these trophies of their prowess”—and so on.

The popular rumours had been sufficiently remarkable, but this lecture was so startling that I determined to endeavour to obtain correct information upon a subject which had been so fertile of the marvellous, and upon which, as I believed, I had entertained very erroneous impressions. Accordingly, I twice visited Rowell, each time accompanied by gentlemen of the medical profession, and on the latter occasion by Mr. Irvine (at that time the superintendent, for the late Sir Gilbert Scott, of the restoration of St. Sepulchre's round church, in Northampton).

At each visit, considerable time was bestowed upon a

¹ Major Whyte-Melville, who, since the Northampton Meeting, has unhappily lost his life in the hunting-field.

close examination of the church, the crypt, and the bones. The church is very extensive, very interesting, and very beautiful. We found no Saxon work : the earliest work we detected was in the south wall of the spacious chancel, the clerestory windows of which are Norman. The remainder of the chancel, the nave, and the lower stages of the tower are Transitional or Semi-Norman, as are also (if not Early English) the north and south aisles. The tower arch and the Lady Chapel are Early Decorated, as was the south transept (said to have been taken down in 1673). The clerestory of the nave, the inserted east window, and the Saunders chantry (now the vestry) are Perpendicular.

But for the crypt itself. This underlies the south aisle. Mr. Irvine considered it to be either of the Semi-Norman or Early English periods, and of the same date as the aisle above ; but Mr. Bloxam has pronounced it to be Early Decorated : at any rate, it is not older than the 13th century, and probably dates from the early part of the 14th century.

During my first visit, I took measurements of the crypt and of the stacks of bones ; and these measurements were verified and corrected by fresh measurements, carefully taken during my second visit, with the aid of Mr. Irvine, who took also a ground plan of the crypt.

The crypt is not 36 feet by 30 feet, as had been stated. Its extreme length is 30 feet 3 inches, and its width is 15 feet. It is divided by vaulting into two portions or bays, each about 15 feet square. The vaulting is supported by four piers at the angles, and two intermediate piers ; from which it springs at the height of only two feet from the floor.

The greatest height of the crypt (at the crown of the vaulting) is, as near as may be, 8 feet 6 inches. In the eastern division, on the south side, are two windows (walled up) corresponding with a string course remaining on the exterior wall ; which string course acted as a hood moulding or dripstone. On the eastern wall, in a recess 6 inches deep, are traces of fresco painting (indicative of an altar having formerly been here placed) ; which fresco Mr. Irvine assigned to the close of the 13th or the beginning of the 14th century. It is said to represent the resurrection.

The bones are stacked along the north and south sides and at the eastern end of the crypt, to an average height of not more than 5 feet—not of 9 feet as alleged. The bones are thrown up to the greatest height at the back of the stack abutting upon the south wall ; their height here may reach, but does not exceed 5 feet 6 inches. The bones are stacked with the most level front at the east end ; and here the width of the stack is four feet 6 inches from back to front. The stack on the south side is very irregular, ranging in width from 5 feet to 6 feet 6 inches : an average of 6 feet will be amply sufficient to represent the width of the stack on this side. The width of the stack in the eastern division of the north side is 2 feet 6 inches, and that of the stack in the western division of the same side is 2 feet only. It will thus be seen that the width of these stacks is *not* from 3 feet to 5 yards, as has been asserted. And I may here state, that Mr. Irvine and I, in taking our measurements, were careful not to be within the mark, but to give every advantage in favour of dimensions ; our object having been to arrive, not at the smallest, but at the greatest possible number of bodies represented by these bones—at their maximum and not at their minimum number.

Being influenced by the same desire in making my calculations upon the basis of these measurements, I believe that these calculations, if exposed to any rigid and practical test, would be found to err rather on the side of excess than in the opposite direction.

To arrive at the cubical contents of the whole mass of bones, the superficies of the area which they cover must be ascertained, and this multiplied by the average height. As for the superficies—to begin at the eastern end, the stack here extends the whole width of the crypt, and is, therefore, 15 feet in length : this must be multiplied by 4 feet 6 inches, the width of the stack at this end. From the front line of this stack on the south side to the western wall is 25 feet 9 inches, and this must be multiplied by its average width of 6 feet. From the same front line on the north side to the middle pier is 10 feet, to be multiplied by 2 feet 6 inches ; and from this middle pier to the pier of the north-west angle is 12 feet, to be multiplied by 2 feet. The sum of all these

dimensions (after deducting 16 feet for the area of four of the piers included in the stacks) gives the total superficies of the area of the bone-stacks as 255 square feet. Multiply 255 by 5 feet (the average height of the stacks), and the product gives the contents of the whole mass of bones as 1,275 cubic feet. Thus:—

		FT.	IN.		FT.	IN.	FEET.
Eastern end	-	15	0	×	4	6	= 67 $\frac{1}{2}$
Southern side	-	25	9	×	6	0	= 154 $\frac{1}{2}$
Northern side, east division-		10	0	×	2	6	= 25
Northern side, west division		12	0	×	2	0	= 24
							<hr/> 271
Deduct for area of 4 piers	-						= 16
							<hr/>
Superficies in square feet	-						= 255
Multiply by 5, for average height in feet	-						= 5
							<hr/>
Contents of whole mass of bones in cubic feet	-						= 1275

The bones on the south side range into the window openings, but the window sills probably would be found a little way beneath the surface of the bones; and if not, this additional space would be more than compensated by the spread of the vaulting, for which no deduction has been made.

The maximum cubical contents of the bone stacks having been thus ascertained, the next thing is to calculate how many skeletons (or skulls or bones representing skeletons) are contained in the space thus defined. I have adopted two methods in endeavouring to arrive at a satisfactory result as to this question.

The first is as follows: I assume the average dimensions of a skull (without the lower jaw attached) to be 6 inches high, 6 inches wide, and eight inches deep (from front to back): this is very near the truth for adult male skulls. Taking then as granted these dimensions, a cubic foot would hold six skulls. A mere cursory glance at these bone stacks, however, would convince any one that much more than half the contents of the stacks consist of other bones than skulls: I therefore assume that each skull represents at least its own bulk of other bones; so that

each cubic foot would contain skulls and bones which on an average could not possibly represent more than three human skeletons.

Multiplying 1275 (the number of cubic feet contained in the whole mass of bones) by 3 (the number of skeletons thus assigned to each cubic foot), the product is 3825—the maximum number of skeletons which, according to this calculation, are represented by the bones at Rowell.

The second method :—I measured on the vertical face of the eastern stack (where the skulls are most closely packed) a square yard superficial and counted the skulls which it exposed—all arranged, be it remembered, with the faces outward, the smallest surface of the skulls, the lower jaw being absent. In this square yard, I found 31 skulls. In some parts of the other stacks, where other bones bear a larger proportion, not more than half this number of skulls were to be found in the same space. If, therefore, an average of 25 skulls to the vertical square yard superficial be assumed, a very liberal proportion is adopted. The skulls thus arranged have all their longer dimension directed inwards, and there is a large admixture of other bones : we cannot, therefore, assume that there are more than three skulls in the horizontal yard lineal of the width of the stacks—that is, from the front to the back. Multiplying 25 by 3, we arrive at 75 as the maximum average number of skulls contained in the cubic yard. Each skull represents a skeleton ; and upon this calculation 75 skeletons are represented in every cubic yard of space. The stacks of bones contain 1275 cubic feet in the whole, as already shown, or 47 cubic yards and 6 cubic feet. Multiplying 47 (the number of cubic yards) by 75 (the average number of skulls in a cubic yard), and adding 18 skulls for the odd 6 cubic feet, the result gives 3543 as the maximum number of skeletons represented by these fragmentary remains, as arrived at by this method of calculation.

Comparing this number of 3543 with 3825, the number arrived at by the former process, a sufficient coincidence is exhibited to indicate, I think, that the actual number of skeletons at Rowell does not exceed the larger of these amounts ; but my belief is, after considering the marginal allowances that I have made, both in measurements and

calculations, and the manner in which the bones are disposed in the crypt, that, if some positive way of ascertaining the truth (such as counting, for instance), could be adopted, the number of skulls actually found would more likely be under 2,000 than near to 4,000.

To show the impossibility of the supposition that 30,000 skeletons were ever deposited in this crypt, as has been alleged, I have only to state its cubical contents, and to compare this with the cubical contents severally of the space which would be occupied by 30,000 skeletons, upon the datum of three to the cubic foot, and of the space which would be occupied by the same number of skeletons upon the datum of 75 to the cubic yard. By multiplying the length ($30\frac{1}{4}$ feet) by the breadth (15 feet), and by the height ($8\frac{1}{2}$ feet), deducting one-third of their sum for the piers and vaulting, I find that the crypt contains space equal to 2,573 cubic feet, or 95 cubic yards 8 cubic feet.

30,000 skeletons divided by 3, (the almost absurd number of skeletons I have hypothetically assigned to each cubic foot), would give 10,000 cubic feet, or a little less than *four times the whole space in the present crypt*.

30,000 skeletons divided by 75, (the like hypothetical number of skeletons which I have assumed as being contained in each cubic yard), would give 400 cubic yards, or a little *more than four times the whole space in the crypt*.

Thirty-thousand male adults! Why this number exceeds twice that of the entire male adult population of Northampton! Imagine the skeletons of such a host, (merely disjointed, be it remembered, and not crushed into dust like agricultural bones in a mill), contained in 47 cubic yards, the space occupied by the stacks of bones in this crypt.

The medical gentlemen who accompanied me to Rowell considered that these skulls presented no peculiarities having any ethnological significance: in fact, they are ordinary skulls, such as might be obtained from any churchyard—looking very much alike when viewed collectively, but separately examined exhibiting considerable individual character and distinctive expression. My medical friends found no reason for concluding that the skulls were all of individuals of the male sex—a question,

in fact, very difficult if not impossible to determine. Neither is the assertion justifiable that these are all skulls of adults. Indeed, the fact that there is very great variation in their size, (some being decidedly small) would seem to lead to the contrary inference; and it must be remembered that the difference in the size of the skull is in no way commensurate with the difference of stature between the adult and the juvenile human creature. The skulls and bones of very young children, from their being more cartilaginous, are much more perishable than those of maturer individuals; and, besides, any that might have been turned up would be hidden, on account of their smallness, among the miscellaneous bones in the insides of the stacks.

We found some skulls much distorted and misshapen, and I have heard of others with the sutures unclosed. These effects might have been produced in either case by simple crushing in the earth; it is, however, probable that, in any large number of unselected skulls, a certain small percentage will be found having the sutures open.

The "ghastly shattering wounds" were not inflicted by "sword or spear" upon living bodies, nor even upon dead bodies: they are injuries sustained by the *dry bones* from mattock and spade, in their exhumation previous to their final deposition in this crypt. In two instances only, could we find that the skull had been damaged during life: in one probably, in the other certainly, the injuries had been the result of disease. In the latter case, a large perforation was evidently the effect of ulceration; the walls of the opening being bevelled, and, as it were, cicatrised over, while other traces of the same eroding disease were observable around the main injury.

Head diseases of this kind were rife in the olden time. We have all heard of that scourge the "King's Evil," so called from the universal belief (from the time of Edward the Confessor to that of Queen Anne) in the efficacy for cure of the king's touch upon such as were thus afflicted. So prevalent was this terrible disorder, and so frequent the use of the royal remedy, that, in the seventeenth century, coins or medalets were purposely struck for suspension from the necks of the patients, to act as a kind of charm for the confirmation or completion of the cures

to be thus effected. During the reign of Charles II., the enormous number of 92,107 persons were thus "touched" by the king. These so-called "Touch-pieces" bear upon the obverse a ship in full sail and the king's name and titles, and upon the reverse the Archangel Michael transfixing the Great Dragon and the legend "*Soli Deo Gloria.*" I have one of these "Touch-pieces" of the elder Pretender, with the usual inscription on the obverse, "Jac. III," &c., &c., the ship in full sail; but the sails are significantly reversed. The old gold coin, the "Angel," on the reverse of which is the same device of the Archangel and Dragon, was also frequently used as a "Touch-piece." This coin in the reigns of Mary, Elizabeth, and James I., bore in abbreviated Latin the legend (so appropriate for such a purpose), "*A Domino factum est istud, et est mirabile in oculis nostris.*" "It is the work of the Lord, and wonderful in our eyes."

The London bills of mortality, as published in the "*Stamford Mercury*"¹ some 180 years ago, give, as sources of fatality, among many other quaintly styled and to us unknown diseases, the extraordinary names of "Head-mouldshot" and "Horseshoe Head."

We found no evidences of gigantic or unusual stature in the Rowell bones, excepting that our attention was directed to one large thigh bone, which may have belonged to a man of the height of 6 feet 3 or 4 inches, or even of 6 feet 6 inches; but, among so many, this would not be considered very extraordinary, even in the present day. A thigh bone was shown to us as having been fractured: it did seem so, indeed; but, in such case, it exhibited a skill in surgery, in the reduction of the fracture and the perfection of the cure, which we should hardly attribute to a very remote age.

The fresco at the east end and the windows in the south wall indicate that at some time the crypt was used as a chapel and for the holding of services. Crypts, in the old times, were often used as chapels (sometimes mortuary), and occasionally as places of sepulture; and in them, various rites were performed and masses said for the repose of the souls of the founders and of those whose

¹ The *Stamford Mercury* is the oldest newspaper in England.

remains were deposited therein. It is not likely, I think, that this crypt, having been so used, would be appropriated to the general purposes of a charnel-house, until the original uses had died out, possibly not before (or much before) the time of the Reformation.

It is evident from the fresco, the windows, and the difficult interior means of access for such a purpose, that the crypt was not originally constructed as a charnel-house; nor do I think, though it has frequently been suggested, that it was ever used as an ordinary charnel-house, in which bones had gradually accumulated: had this been so, as plenty of space is left unoccupied, it would probably have been continued in that use until now. Nevertheless, I do not think that there were any very remarkable circumstances connected with the deposit of these bones: had there been, surely some record or tradition would remain to us. The number of individuals they represent is probably less than the existing population of Rowell, and not greater than those which would be represented by bones which might be exhumed from any well filled churchyard, the soil of which is adapted for osseous preservation.

At this point, I will direct attention to the aspect of these piles of bones at the time of my former visits, and endeavour to infer therefrom the probable order and *modus operandi* adopted in stacking them. It is at the eastern end of the crypt, especially near the north wall, that the bones appeared to have been most carefully packed; a better front line having been preserved here than in any other place, and the proportion of skulls to other bones being greater than anywhere else. Along the south wall, the front line of the stack was very irregular; this stack, at its junction with the eastern stack, commencing with a width of five feet six inches, bowing out westward of the medial pier to six feet six inches, and contracting towards the door at the west end to little more than five feet. The stacks on the north side were also irregular; and in some places thick layers of other bones separated the layers of skulls, the proportionate quantity of the latter being much smaller than in the other stacks.

The bones on the tops of the stacks were everywhere irregularly heaped; and there was nowhere anything to

show that the bones had been regularly packed throughout the whole mass, or that the packing as seen on the vertical front surfaces was carried back to the wall on every side. On the contrary, indications supported the supposition that the front walls had been built up of selected skulls and thigh bones, and the back filled in, as the work proceeded, with the other bones thrown in indiscriminately. If we think of the diverse forms of skulls and thigh bones, we shall understand at once how that, by being placed alternately—the faces of the skulls directed outwards and the length of the thigh bones inwards, the swelling joints of the latter overlapping the rounded angles of the former—the two would dovetail, and make a firm front wall; which, being backed up with loose bones, would form a compact stack, without the necessity of carefully packing through to the back. We may frequently see a similar plan adopted in stone quarries, in piles of excavated stone stacked in squares, the outsides roughly walled, and the insides filled with rough stones indiscriminately thrown in, as I have described.

After considering the several stacks of bones and the variation in care and neatness exhibited, I have provisionally adopted the following theory; which I offer simply for what it is worth. That, before the deposit of any bones in this vault, some quantity (from whatever source derived) had been accumulated; that the man or men who were employed to deposit and stack them commenced at the north-east corner, with a determination to make a very good job of it; and hence the close and careful packing at that part. The stacking was continued in a very workmanlike manner along the east end; and the stacking along the south side was then proceeded with, commencing with a width of 5 feet 6 inches. At this point, the supply of bones was perhaps more rapid than the progress of the stackers; and the latter, being urged, gradually increased the width of the stack to 6 feet 6 inches, and abandoned the carefulness they had hitherto bestowed on their work. As the stacking on this side approached the western end, the supply of bones would seem to have diminished, as the width here again contracts; and, when the stacking was

continued along the north side, we find in the eastern bay the width reduced to 2 feet 6 inches, and in the western bay to 2 feet only— that being sufficient to dispose of all the bones which remained to be deposited. The crypt was then sealed up, and there an end.

I think I am warranted in the conclusion that the bones were all deposited at once, and the place then walled up; and I would suggest, as the most rational way to account for all the facts, that perhaps some old and unused burial ground, or some portion of the existing burial ground being required for other purposes, or possibly an ancient charnel-house in consequence of dilapidation, having been cleared of human remains, these, with reverential regard, were carefully bestowed in this consecrated receptacle, which was ready at hand, and which had outlasted its ancient uses.

In the Saunders chantry, now used as the vestry room, is the tomb of the munificent and pious Owen Ragsdale, who died, as his monument states, December the 1st, 1591, having founded the hospital of Jesus. This is an almshouse (still existing) for 26 aged widowers, who are clothed and allowed each a weekly stipend. The buildings are extensive, and cover a large piece of ground: they are situated to the south-east of the church-yard. An important monastic establishment was formerly attached to this church. It is not unlikely that the old limits of the churchyard were not coincident with its present limits—that, when the old monastic buildings were pulled down, or when Owen Ragsdale's hospital was built, some exchange was effected, by which a part of the churchyard, or perhaps the old monastic burial-ground, was taken for the purposes of the new buildings. If this were so, what more likely than that the pious Ragsdale should deposit reverentially in this consecrated crypt the human remains from the site he had appropriated, having purposely exhumed them to avoid desecration.

But since my former visits to the Rowell crypt, a circumstance has occurred which seems remarkably to support my view as to the probable time of the deposit of these bones. Previously to the former occasions, a portion of the stack on the south side, which I have already described as having been less carefully piled, had

fallen down, and the bones had been put back by the sexton, and secured with planks. A few years afterwards, another portion of the stack fell forward on to the floor, and among these bones thus displaced was found a fragment of a vessel of glazed black ware. This fragment Mr. Franks, of the British Museum, Director of the Society of Antiquaries, has kindly examined, and he has confirmed my previous conclusion that such ware was not manufactured earlier than the sixteenth century. It is, in fact, such ware as was in common use at about the time at which the Ragsdale hospital was founded, and it would seem to indicate that it was at about that time that the bones were deposited: indeed, it is possible that it is part of a beer jug used by the very men who stacked the bones. This fragment is in my possession, having been presented to me by the late Rev. Christopher Cookson, vicar of Dallington, who obtained it from the sexton in the vault itself.

It may be asked how the exaggerated statements which have had currency could have originated and obtained credence. I do not think this is very remarkable when are taken into consideration the popular love of the marvellous, and the tendency on the part of the many, unconsciously perhaps, to exaggerate and to believe exaggeration. The crypt having been walled up (no record having been kept of this fact), and requiring no repairs, it speedily passed from memory; so that, in the interval between its being so closed and its discovery (less than 200 years), its existence became altogether unknown.

It is said that, about 170 years ago, the sexton in attempting to dig a grave in the south aisle of the church broke through the vaulting and thus discovered the crypt. Fancy the sexton of 170 years ago—something of the type perhaps of the old Hamlet grave-diggers: fancy him digging the grave in the solitary church; his surprise when his pick strikes all unexpectedly upon the hollow-sounding vault; and his superstitious feelings, partly of terror, perhaps more of cupidity in anticipating hidden treasure to be secured all for himself. Alone and in silence, he works at the old hard stone: at last, under stealthy and repeated blows, the vaulting is penetrated, and

fragments fall to an unknown depth, (exaggerated by his fancy and his fears) with a reverberating rattle upon the slabbed floor beneath. Then, perhaps, a gust of the long imprisoned air, loaded with the corruption of decayed mortality, chokes in his throat, and half obscures his little sense. He rests and thinks ; and then, with string and candle-end let down, he peers with frightened wonderment into the abyss he has opened. The candle, all burning blue, glimmers upon skulls and bones, and bones and skulls, to his frightened eyes innumerable.

No treasure here ! So away he hies, with whitened face and open mouth, to spread the news. Soon the church is filled with wonder-gaping neighbours. The hole is enlarged, a ladder brought, and some of the boldest try to descend with cautious fear, but not at first successfully—foul air beats them back ; at length, this is dispelled, and down they go—to find in their imagination thus excited, and in the darkness made visible by the dim glimmer of their one dip-candle, a vault four times its real size, and skulls, with their accompanying bones, in thousands upon thousands. The number of skulls multiplies as time progresses, until it reaches 40,000. That number becomes conventional, and has been, and I believe is even now, complacently affirmed to every casual visitor. But, perchance, the use of tape and rod, and the discovery of this humble potsherd, may serve to clear away accumulated romance, and unveil the simple truth.