



Miscellanea.

MEDIÆVAL OAK COFFINS AT NANTWICH.

In January, 1925, during the cutting of a trench for water mains in Churchyard Side, Nantwich, the workmen employed by the Urban District Council discovered human remains and two coffins, together with other relics. Mr. Frank Simpson, F.S.A., accompanied by Mr. W. W. Tasker, visited the scene, and has been good enough to furnish the Council of the Society with a full description of the more interesting of these finds. The "other relics" consisted of wooden water mains and clay pipes. Of the latter Mr. Simpson disposes in a few words. They are, he says, "the usual Elizabethan pipes found in large numbers in all old towns, and have no connection with the burials." The wooden waterpipes Mr. Simpson ascribes to the year 1584, when they were laid down by one William Sands, after the great fire which destroyed nearly the whole of the town in December, 1583. Specimens of such wooden piping may be seen in the Grosvenor Museum.

To turn to the more interesting of the discoveries, these consisted of six skulls, portions of a coffin unearthed on Monday, January 19th, and a whole coffin, containing a perfect skeleton, which was found four days later. "On the Thursday evening," writes Mr. Simpson, "one of the men caught his pick in some unusual substance. When the ground was cleared this was found to be a piece of oak twelve inches wide and four inches deep. It was much decayed. On further clearance the piece of oak was found to be lying horizontally north to south across the centre of the lid of a coffin, with the ends extending beyond the coffin on either side and firmly secured in the adjoining ground. The oak plank had to be sawn through on each

side to allow of the removal of the coffin. This burial, when found, was situated opposite to the north door of the nave of the church, and faced due east. The lid of the coffin was 2ft 6in. below the paved surface of the road, and 1ft. 9in. from the kerb of the parapet. On the removal of the coffin to the churchyard, it fell, and so was broken just below the shoulders, and the lid was split vertically.

“ This coffin was formed out of the trunk of an oak tree. The full length is 6ft. 11in. The breadth across the shoulders outside is 1ft. 3in., inside 1ft. 0in. At the foot it measures 11in. outside and 7in. inside. The sides of the coffin near the foot had been trimmed, slightly tapering towards the foot. The interior of the coffin was 7½in. deep, with a circular cavity for the head. This cavity showed pronounced marks of tooling with an instrument probably 1in. wide. In the lid of the coffin were the remains of four iron nails.

“ The skeleton, which appeared to be that of a male person as the pelvis bones are small, lay in perfect position when found, but prior to my seeing it had been much disturbed. This made it impossible to say how the arms were placed, and not one of the people present when the lid was removed from the coffin appeared to have noticed the position. On either side of the body was a hazel stick about three feet in length, and pointed at the lower end. The body was extremely narrow, which, no doubt, was responsible for the report in the Press that it had been placed in the coffin sideways. But this was not the case, as the head rested on the base of the skull, which was very small. The teeth were complete and in perfect condition, although showing signs of having been worn down. No doubt the interior of the coffin looked narrower owing to the top of the sides having warped inwards. The body had been wrapped in cerecloth of coarse plaited work, resembling style, but not so soft in texture as that found covering the body of Ralph Higden, the famous monk of St. Werburgh's Abbey, whose grave was discovered partly under the wall of the South Choir Aisle of Chester Cathedral during Dean

Howson's restoration, February 16th, 1874. A hazel stick was also found in Higden's grave, but in this case it crossed the legs. Higden became a monk at the abbey about 1299, and died in 1363. During the same restoration at the Cathedral another grave was opened (March 18th of the same year) and this also contained a hazel stick. When the grave of Abbot de Burchelles was discovered in the Lady-chapel it, too, contained a hazel stick. He was elected abbot in 1291, and died in 1323. These coffins were of stone, with a part specially cut for the head.

“ Why hazel sticks were placed in the graves is only conjectured. Some writers refer to it as a preservative against witchcraft; a somewhat similar idea is the placing of lighted candles around a corpse, which was thought to keep away demons. Others, of the Roman Church, say hazel rods were buried with persons who had done penance in lifetime; *i.e.*, they were symbols of Penance, Absolution, and Indulgence.

“ Bodies were generally buried in cerecloth, that is, cloth dipped in, or smeared with, hot wax or some other preparation, and wrapped round the body. The commoner people were covered with the prepared cloth and laid in the earth without coffins. The covering was said to save the earth from pollution. It also rendered the body waterproof. The better class people were generally placed in coffins of stone or wood.

“ The other oak coffin found at Nantwich was discovered a little further west. It is similar in design, but in a very decayed state, the sides and parts of the head and foot having disappeared. It is similar in length but wider across the shoulders, where the outside measurement is 1ft. 9in., slanting to 1ft. 6in. at the extreme end of the head. This coffin had a one inch circular hole bored through the bottom near the foot to allow of the escape of moisture. There were no remains in this coffin when it was found.

“ Taking all the facts into consideration, the trimming of the coffin on the outside; the special cavity inside for the head; and the hole for allowing the escape of moisture (a

custom which commenced in stone coffins about the end of the twelfth century, and in wood a little later) I am of opinion that these coffins are of the thirteenth century.

“The coffin was saturated with water, as also were its contents. The cerecloth was simply pulp. This is not to be wondered at, as we are told that ‘the church was built on a bed of sand that is saturated with water’ and that ‘the graves are not very eligible ones, for scarce are they got a foot below the surface but the coffins are immerst in water.’”

In a later page of his report Mr. Simpson writes:—
 “Several thirteenth and early fourteenth century stone coffins have been found in Chester, but I can find no record of a trunk coffin being found here.” The wooden coffin which “may be seen fixed high up in the ruins of St. John’s, Chester,” is no exception. Mr. Simpson goes very fully into the later history of this coffin, but space for the interesting story cannot be afforded in the present issue of the *Journal*. What concerns the purpose now on hand is this, that the St. John’s coffin was brought from Nantwich, as Mr. Simpson clearly shows, in or about the year 1780.

Of earlier finds Mr. Simpson writes as follows:—

“A gentleman writing from Tushingam Hall to the *Cheshire Sheaf* in 1878 says:—‘At the time of the Restoration of the [Nantwich] church [1855] there were existing several coffins cut out of solid oak trees, black with age.’ We are not told in what position they were found, and I cannot trace what has become of them.”

And again:—“Mr. James Hall (a resident of Nantwich, and a very careful writer) in his *History of Nantwich*, published and printed in Nantwich, 1883, informs us that ‘In digging for the foundations of the District Bank, coffins and remains were unearthed.’ Mr. Hall, unfortunately, does not describe the coffins. The District Bank is at the extreme south end of Churchyard Side and was erected in 1863.”

