

DISCOVERY OF STONE COFFINS,
Leaden Sepulchral Chest, Skeletons, and Incised Slab,
OF THE THIRTEENTH CENTURY,
At Drayton, Norfolk.

COMMUNICATED BY
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HAVING been present with other members of the Norfolk and Norwich Archæological Association at the examination of the stone coffins, leaden cist, skeletons, and incised sepulchral slab, found beneath the pavement of Drayton church, I comply with much pleasure to a request made by the committee, that I should prepare a description of these objects for publication in the Transactions of the Society.

On Monday, May 7th, 1860, during the progress of restorations in the parish church of Drayton, near Norwich, the discovery of three stone coffins was made, all containing human remains, but one having within it a case of lead shaped generally like the human form, and preserving a nearly perfect skeleton. In addition to these coffins, several sepulchral slabs were also found; one very imperfect, and another bearing an inscription in old Norman French, commemorative of two persons, but unfortunately so much mutilated as to afford no knowledge of the individuals. All were found beneath the floor of the church, the area of

depositure extending nearly from the centre to the north wall. The feet of the skeletons lay towards the east.

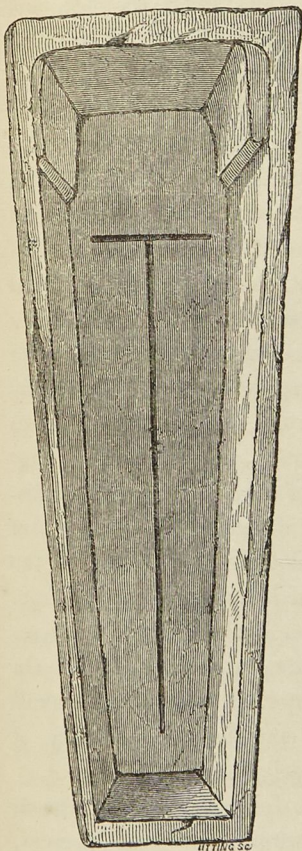
The stone coffin found on the north was without a lid, and its contents had been sadly disturbed, nothing but a confused mass of earth and bones being found within. When disencumbered of what it contained, the usual T channel was found to be slightly cut on the bottom, with two apertures,

one at the juncture at the top lines, and the other at the termination; by which any moisture coming from the decaying body might drain away.

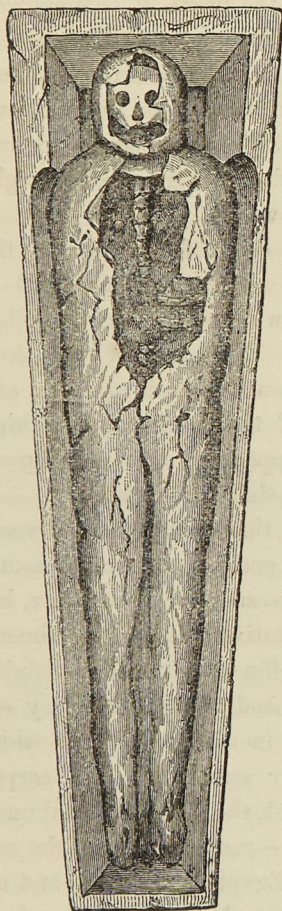
The coffin found nearer the centre of the church held a skeleton more perfect in character. The face of the skull had been turned downwards, and one of the bones of the thigh lay uppermost on a heap of human debris and earth.

The third coffin, which occupied a position nearer the south, had also suffered disturbance, but comparatively little despoilment. The coffin was in itself tolerably clean, and the skeleton lay enclosed in a case of lead, which entirely enwrapped the corpse, and took the form of the inhumed person—cumbrously, like the case of an Egyptian mummy, and not following closely the shape of the

limbs, although tapering downwards and enclosing the legs and feet. The metal cist at the head was rotund like the skull, and the shoulders branched broadly away from the



neck. The coffin was nearly filled with the leaden receptacle, but in the spaces between the outer walls and lid neither earth nor other substance had been used. This skeleton had, like the others, been previously examined, and without much delicacy, for the lead covering the face, neck, and a portion



of the breast, was cut away and turned aside, disclosing the *os frontis*, the upper *vertebra*, and the cavity of the chest through the broken ribs. No flesh remained on the parts shewn. The jaw had fallen downwards. The cavity of the body was filled with a substance like fine mould, and it was at first supposed this might have contained the remains of gums used in embalmment, but a portion having been removed for the purposes of analisation by Mr. Fitch, no such substances were found, nor were any fragments of cere or waxed cloth discovered adhering to any parts of the skeleton. The bones of the left arm had been removed from the side, but the right arm retained its original position. On the posterior part of the skull was a considerable quantity of hair closely matted together.¹

J. G. Johnson, Esq., surgeon, of Norwich, who was present,

¹ The growth of hair after death is sometimes extraordinary; and presuming the corpse to be of the date *circa* 1300, examples are not wanting to prove the preservation of human hair from that period to the present in profuseness and

and took part in the examination, declared the skeleton to be that of a male of middle age, and of athletic form. No ring, an ornament frequently left on the hand of a deceased person, was found. Most probably, if such an object had been inhumed with the body, it had been removed by those persons who had first discovered the interment and brought the skeleton originally to view.

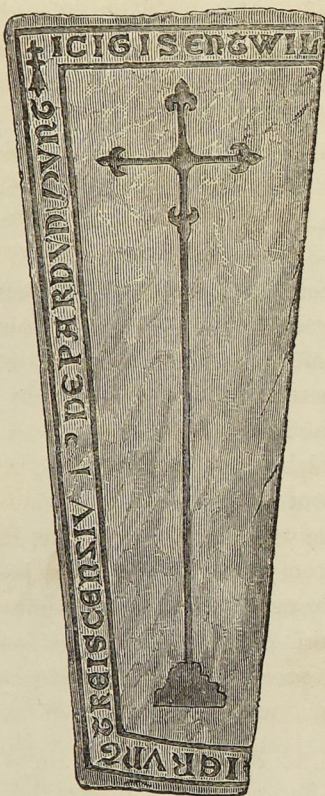
It is most generally found in stone coffins, that the part designed for the accommodation of the head and shoulders is thicker in its substance than that enclosing the lower portion of the body, and very nearly a half circle is formed in the thickness of the stone for the accommodation of the skull. The Drayton coffins were of the usual substance, but without the *rounded* cavity for the head of the corpse, although they expanded at the shoulders so as to afford an extra width for the breadth of the body.

The inscribed slab found, was of a blue-grey colour, while the coffins were of a yellow stone. The inscription was incised, occupying the top, the left side, and the bottom; but the right side of the stone had either been broken away in a straight line, or cut from its counterpart for some unexplained purpose. At the upper corner on the left hand, and immediately preceding the commencement of the inscription, was an incised cross, known as the Jerusalem

even beauty. Some few years since a *square* box or coffin, containing a skeleton, was found in the Lady Chapel of Hereford Cathedral. The body had been enveloped in a sheet of woollen fabric. The hair was perfect and in the form of a wig, the bones of the skull having fallen away from it. The colour was a yellow-red, and so profuse in quantity as certainly to have grown considerably after death.—See *Archæologia*, xxxii. p. 60.

Such growth is frequently attested, but an extraordinary anecdote on the same subject is worthy notice here, if only for the singularity of the statement. Douglas says that John Pitt assured him, that on visiting a vault of his ancestors in Farley chapel, Somerset, he saw the hair of the young Lady Chandos, which had in a most extraordinary manner grown out of the coffin, and *hung down from it*, while by the inscription it appeared she had been buried at that time, he says, considerably more than an hundred years.

cross,² denoting that the person or persons interred had made a pilgrimage to that city, or were brethren of a certain religious order.



The inscription, as already mentioned, is imperfect. What is left may be read as follows:—

ICI GISENT WILL

. RIERVNT

TREIS CENS JURS DE PARDVN AVERTVT

² The form of this symbol is very plainly shewn on a seal found some years since embedded in a wall at Dunwich, in Suffolk. The matrix was of the oblong form, and bore the inscription *Sigillum Penitentiari Ierosol* surrounding the cross, with a key, the symbol of a Confessor, on each side.

That is: Here lies William —, and then, most probably, followed the name of the second person buried, with the conclusion, that whoever prayed for the repose of their souls, should have three hundred days of pardon or indulgence. Down the centre of the stone runs a cross foliated at the upper terminations, and stepped at the base.

The letters on the slab are far from legible, and in some instances entirely obliterated. The inscription has been engraved from a rubbing made for the purpose. It is due, however, to the Very Rev. Provost Husenbeth to say that he was the first who perfectly deciphered the words remaining on the label, and shewed that the slab recorded the sepulture of two persons, most probably man and wife.

Some discussion took place after the discovery, on the question whether the missing portion of the stone was or was not a counterpart in size of that which had been found, and if the absent portion had not borne a second cross and a much extended sentence. The Very Rev. Provost Husenbeth, however, in a letter published in the *Norwich Mercury*, considered that the portion missing consisted of a strip only, which bore the remainder of the inscription, and that only one cross had been incised on the slab; but other persons, who also examined the stone with great care, believe that the part not found was of equal size with that discovered, and bore most probably a second cross and a lengthy label.

Examples of the double cross appearing on one stone are not of rare occurrence. At Lincoln a stone exists on which the cross is *three* times repeated; and at Gainford, Durham, is another with the same number of crosses, the central cross being larger and its ornamental part more elaborate. Two crosses are found on slabs at Ribchester, Yorkshire; Goosnargh, Lancashire; Ayclyffe, Durham; East Shaftoe and Newbigging, Northumberland.

Examples of inscriptions being continued round the margin of a slab and *also down the centre*, completely dividing it, may be seen in the incised stone commemorative of Adam de Clitheroe and his wife at Ribchester, and the well-known memorial of similar character at Lewes, dedicated to the memory of Gundrada, Countess de Warrenne. Other examples might be cited, but those now mentioned are perhaps sufficient³ for the purpose.

Reverting to the Drayton slab, its date is most likely about the middle or the close of the 13th century.

As respects the coffins, had they contained any ecclesiastical indication, it might reasonably have been supposed that, as Norwich Priory held possessions in Drayton, some of the monks of the establishment had been conveyed there for interment, or that the Cell at Cossey, which possessed a small community connected with the Abbey of Bon Repos at Mur in Brittany, founded in 1184, had buried some of the inmates in its neighbouring parish. But nothing tending to shew connection with a monastery or the church was found, and therefore the presumption that other than the skeletons of civil persons had been brought to light, becomes greatly weakened or destroyed. The coffin in which the leaden case was found evidently contained the remains of no inferior individual. This was proved by the existence of the metal cist. The inscribed slab also points to the interment of no common persons.

Such are the particulars of the discovery and a description of the objects exhumed.

A few notes upon the history of early interments in lead and stone, may assist us as regards the age of the remains found in the coffins, and of the leaden cist.

During the 11th and 12th centuries bodies were preserved

³ All the examples here mentioned may be found in Boutell's *Christian Monuments*.

by salting and enclosing them in leather or hides. This appears to be discontinued at the commencement of the 13th century.

From this time the bodies of the nobility and higher ranks were either embalmed or covered with cerecloth, and deposited in coffins of stone, wood, or *lead*.

Stone coffins were most common during the 13th century. In the 14th century they gradually declined in use.

The ancient leaden coffins were fitted to the *shape of the person*, and much resembled a mummy case. They were often chested in an outer coffin of wood, sometimes in one of *stone*, and have been found to contain the liquid in which the body was preserved.⁴

Very frequently the leaden cists which followed the human form were buried without coffins. It might therefore happen that the leaden cist at Drayton was originally deposited in the earth, and afterwards, on being discovered, placed in a stone receptacle which had been previously found and emptied of its contents. Nevertheless the stone coffin might have been its original resting-place, and a conclusion drawn that the stone coffins and the leaden cist are, collectively, as ancient as the 13th century.

It must, however, be also stated that this particular form of leaden coffin was sometimes used in interments as late as 1579. In 1851 a leaden cist of precisely the Drayton form was discovered beneath the Holy Trinity chapel in the parish church of Arundel, and, by a rude inscription scratched on the exterior, was found to contain the body of Mary Countess of Arundel, who died 20th Oct., 1559. This noble lady was originally interred in the church of St. Clement Danes, and removed in mistake by the will of Thomas Earl of Arundel (1641) for the body of his grandmother, the Duchess, also named Mary. In the same chapel was also discovered a

⁴ See Gough's *Sepulchral Monuments*, Stothard's *Monumental Effigies*, and Bloxam's *Glimpse of Monumental Architecture*.

leaden coffin, of similar shape with that of the lady, enclosing the remains of Henry Earl Fitzalan. Across the breast was inscribed Hen. Fitzalan, 1579. ⁵

To these examples might be added the discovery of the body of Humphrey Duke of Gloucester, at Bury St. Edmund's, enclosed in lead, so that both the head and limbs might be traced in outline. ⁶

Before concluding these remarks, I am anxious to transcribe the substance of a letter received from the Rev. James Bulwer, in reply to my inquiries relative to leaden coffins of the human form lying many years since exposed above ground in the chapel at Farley Hungerford in Somersetshire. Mr. Bulwer, who took sketches of these objects, tells me "there were no less than six coffins, lying on the floor of a vault, supported on short stone bearers. One, and perhaps others, had the *features* raised in the lid, and a second, through which a hole had been broken, was found half full of a dark-coloured fluid, certainly not aromatic in its nature, but most probably either rain or snow water received through the dilapidations of the roof of the chapel." To name a near example of the Farley type, he adds, that he remembers two leaden chests adapted to the shape of the body preserved in the vault at Blickling, Norfolk. They stand in niches, and their age is probably not earlier than the 16th century. One, from the size, encloses a male corpse,—probably of a Clere.

I do not, however, coincide with this opinion relative to the liquid in the Farley coffin. Water might have found an entrance into one of the leaden cists; but that the liquid within was aromatic to the organs both of taste and smell, I can personally vouch, both from tests more than once repeated by myself, and by others in my presence.

⁵ *Gentleman's Magazine*, July, 1851, p. 42, where an outline of the leaden cist is given.

⁶ See *Philosophical Transactions* for 1772.

The little church of Drayton appears to have been rich in relics of ancient interments. In the year 1850, when the church tower fell, the writer of this paper examined the ruins in company with Mr. Fitch, and the fragments of a coped sepulchral stone, with a fine foliated cross raised upon it, was then lying in the churchyard, brought, it was stated, from the floor of the old tower, where it had lain with its face downwards for an unknown period. There are at the present time several plain coffin lids of stone inserted in the floor of the building: one occupies a position on the south side within the communion rails, in which has been fixed a small brass inscription; another lies in the chancel, also with a brass inscription; a third, of beautiful form, has been placed in the floor of the new tower, and a fourth is embedded in the pavement of the south porch.

The Rev. Hinds Howell, the incumbent, after the examination had taken place, caused the skeletons to be carefully replaced in the coffins, and re-interred in the spots where found. The incised slab, however, is kept above ground, and so preserved that it may be examined by any person sufficiently interested in such matters to pay a visit to Drayton for the purpose.

I. W.