

II.—*Some Account of Ancient Oaken Coffins discovered on the lands adjoining Featherstone Castle, near Haltwhistle, Northumberland.* By THOMAS WILLIAM SNAGGE, Esq. M.A.

Read Feb. 3rd, 1870.

IN the year 1825 some labourers who were employed in draining a swampy field upon a farm belonging to the Featherstone Castle estate came upon what seemed to be part of the trunk of an oak-tree. Finding that it impeded the progress of their work they endeavoured to cut it out with an axe, when to their surprise they discovered that the trunk was hollowed and contained some human bones, which, however, speedily became dust when exposed to the air. Proceeding with their work they found the remains of four more coffins of the same kind, in one of which was part of a skull.

The workmen are said to have passed several coffins lying north and south, very near each other, and about 5 feet below the surface of the ground.

At the instance of Mr. Wallace,^a the owner of Featherstone, a letter describing the discovery was written to the Society of Antiquaries of Newcastle by his land-steward, Mr. Hutton. This letter gave but an imperfect account of the coffins. It was followed by another letter addressed to the same Society by Colonel Blenkinsopp Coulson, a gentleman who happened to be on the spot when the discovery was made. This letter adds nothing to our information except that it describes the coffin as “formed from the bole of an oak-tree which has been split by the wedge and hollowed out in a very rough manner to admit the body, the lid secured at the head and feet by wooden pins. Few bones were found, and those after being exposed to the air shortly became dust.”^b

It does not appear that the communication led to any discussion in the Society, or that any theory was raised respecting the date or origin of the coffins. One of them, which was sent as a specimen, was placed in the museum of the Society, where I believe it still remains.

^a Afterwards Lord Wallace, Master of the Mint.

^b Both letters will be found printed in *Archæologia Æliana*, ii. 177. The discovery is also noticed in Hodgson's *History of Northumberland*, iii. 350.

Nothing more was done in the matter, and the subject was almost forgotten when in 1859 a coffin exactly similar to those above mentioned was discovered in the same field by Mr. Clark, the present land-steward at Featherstone.

In 1863 a search was made at the instance of the Rev. Canon Greenwell of Durham, and another coffin was found which contained a skull in fair preservation. By the permission of Mr. Hope Wallace, the present owner of the Featherstone estate, Mr. Greenwell took the skull away, but I am not aware that he has since published any particulars of his discovery.

In 1864 I happened to be at Featherstone Castle, when I saw the coffin which Mr. Greenwell had exhumed in the previous year. Feeling interested in the discovery, I concluded that a further and more careful search would be very desirable, when an accurate note of all obtainable facts might be made, and the subject brought to the notice of competent archæologists, who might have leisure to deal with it.

In the month of August in the present year (1869) I was again at Featherstone, and, at my request, Mr. Hope Wallace kindly directed that a careful exploration should be made of the field in which the coffins were found. This was done under the very intelligent superintendence of his land-steward, Mr. Clark. A boring-rod was driven down in several parts of the field, and touched many times what seemed to be coffin-lids. In one place, where it was plain that a number of coffins lay together, a trench was made (about 15 feet by 4), and at a depth of from 5 to 6 feet the workmen came upon the coffins, one of which, a very perfect specimen, was laid completely bare.^a It was not considered necessary to disturb more than one, although no less than four others were reached in digging this and an adjoining trench, and the boring-rod touched the hollow lids almost in every place where it was driven.

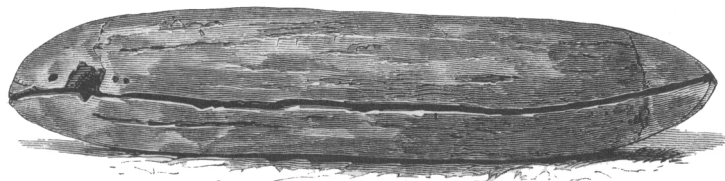


Fig. 1. External view of Oak Coffin.

The coffin (like those found in 1825) consisted of the trunk or bole of an oak-tree (see fig. 1) rudely split from end to end. No attempt appears to have been

^a It lay nearly east and west, but several others lay in different directions.

made to reduce the huge log to "shapeliness." The ends were roughly dubbed to a rounded point, but evidently more with the object of severing the trunk at that place by successive strokes at an acute angle—as a woodman lays an axe to a tree—than for the purpose of shaping the coffin. The outer bark and sap-wood had indeed been removed or possibly decayed by time; but the coarse grain of the oak was untouched and was filled with grains of the sand or silt in which the relic had been imbedded.

An examination was made of the strata through which the trench was cut. For about a foot below the surface of the meadow there was a deposit of fine loam. Then came a singular layer of fibrous compost to the depth of about two feet, in which were innumerable twigs and bits of branches of trees, chiefly birch, in excellent preservation, and with the bark whole and silvery as when living. The shells of hazel-nuts were also found in great abundance in this compost. At some former period a forest must have existed on this spot. Next below the fibrous and woody compost we came upon river-sand of a dark bluish grey colour, and so fine in grain that it might at first sight have been mistaken for blue clay, as indeed it was by Mr. Hutton in 1825. This stratum of sand lay below the level of the neighbouring river, the South Tyne, and was very wet, the labourers being obliged to bale out the water as they proceeded with the trench. In this silt, 3 or 4 feet down, the coffins were found, and below them the sand became gradually coarser in grain, and river-stones were found.

As the workmen excavated the sand below the level of the upper half or lid of the coffin, clear water ran out through a small knot-hole in the lower end. When it ceased to flow we raised the lid carefully.

The upper and lower portions of the coffin had been fastened together by means of two oaken pegs an inch and a half or so in diameter, driven into holes which had been bored at each end for the purpose. These pegs had been decayed by time; we found but a fragment of one of them about one inch in diameter, which we knocked out of the hole into which it had been originally driven. The position of these peg-holes and the general appearance of the interior of both halves of the coffin are shown in fig. 2.

Before disturbing the coffin we made a careful search for any bones or other relics which it might contain; nothing however was found except one femoral bone and some fragments of those of the pelvis. The former was almost entire, but very dark in colour and reduced to a pulpy consistency. I may add that this bone was found in the part of the coffin it would have originally occupied, from which circumstance we may reasonably assume that the ground had been undis-

turbed since the time of sepulture. No traces remained of the skull or teeth. The coffin was then lifted carefully from the trench for the purpose of closer examination, and the trench was filled up again.

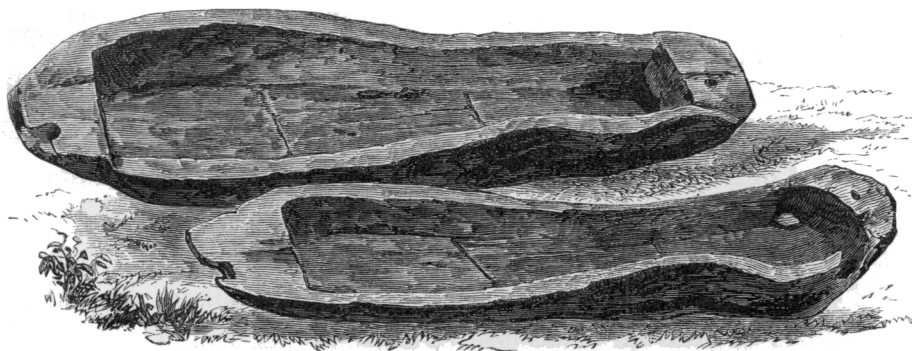


Fig. 2. Interior view of Oak Coffin.

On measuring the coffin we found the dimensions to be :—

	Ft.	In.
Outside length	7	4
Inside	5	10½
Girth	5	4
Open diameter (about)	1	7
Inner depth (including lid)	1	1
Thickness of “gunwale,” ^a (about)	0	1½

To form the coffin the trunk or log had been split from end to end, seemingly by means of a wedge, the split taking the direction of the grain of the wood; the upper and lower halves therefore fitted with an almost imperceptible joining. At a distance of 9 or 10 inches from the rounded extremities of the log the ends of the inner opening were squared off, and the inside had been hollowed by means of the rudest implements, and evidently at a considerable expenditure of labour. Transverse cuts had been made at intervals of about one-third of the distance, from end to end, and the wood torn or wedged away in the direction of the grain, from cut to cut.

The marks of the tools used were very plainly visible, and seemingly no attempt had been made to conceal or efface them, or, as one might express it, to “finish” the work in any way. At the narrower end of the coffin deep indent-

^a For want of a better expression I am obliged to borrow a word describing part of a canoe or boat, which indeed the halves much resembled.

ations had been made in the interior of the upper half or lid, apparently to make room for the feet of the corpse.

Some of the marks were those of a flat-edged, but very rude, tool, about 4 inches broad; but the greater number appeared to have been made by an instrument of an arrow-head shape, and all the tool impressions to have been caused by *striking*. Here and there imperfect marks were found, as if the workman had missed his aim. Of *cutting* we could detect no trace. From a slight difference in the size and shape of the tool-marks in the upper and lower halves of the coffin, it was not difficult to infer that they were hollowed by different hands, possibly simultaneously, in order to save time.

After the coffin had been raised from the trench, the workmen found lying in the sand below it a flat piece of wood (oak) of irregular shape, about half an inch thick, and pierced at unequal distances with five or six round holes half an inch or so in diameter. This piece or plate of wood, of which an accurate drawing is given in fig. 3, measured 10 inches in length by about 7 broad. The holes

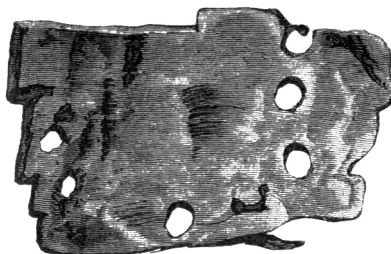


Fig. 3. Reparation-plate found with Oak Coffin.

had apparently been made by burning, and in one place a hole had been begun but left unfinished. The fabrication of this oaken plate must have cost much labour, as the tools at the command of the maker were evidently of the rudest kind. We were for some time puzzled to conjecture the purpose for which this wooden plate had been intended; but, upon examining the coffin when closed, we found that there was a gap, probably a knot-hole, in one side near the head (see fig. 1), and round it were small holes bored or burnt and corresponding in size and position to those in the oaken plate. It was plain that the plate was simply a patch made to cover or repair the gap. The pegs with which it had been fastened were not to be found: possibly they had decayed away,^a and the patch had slipped down to the place where it was found.

^a The pegs which fastened the lid of the coffin were merely bits of the smaller branches of the tree, which the workmen doubtless found conveniently rounded. The pegs fastening the patch were probably of the same kind but smaller, and the finer quality of their fibre would account for their earlier decay.

Lastly, as to the locality of the discovery. The field, which forms part of a farm called Wyden, Wydon, or Wythen Eals, lies within 200 yards of the south branch of the River Tyne, and about two miles south-west of the town of Haltwhistle. (See the Index Map of the Ordnance Survey and also the six-inch map of the locality.) From the lie of the land it must have been at one time a back-reach of the river, and continually under water. It is also known as part of what was called, in a deed dated A.D. 1223, the "Temple Land;" and it is not a little remarkable that a charge of 19s. per annum was payable from time immemorial by the owner of Featherstone to the Dean and Chapter of Carlisle in respect of this very field, being, as I was informed, the only property in the county of Northumberland possessed by that corporation. Upon this charge being redeemed about a year and a half ago, it was ascertained that those entitled could show no other title than prescription.

There are in the field traces of the foundations of some building, but they have not been explored. The "Maiden Way" is about a mile to the west of the field or "haugh," and a small farm-house close by still bears the name of the Peat Gate or Pict Yett.

Similar discoveries of oaken coffins of uncertain date have occasionally but not frequently occurred both in England and in Scotland.

One of the best known instances is the interment at Gristhorpe between Scarborough and Filey, brought to light in the year 1834. Here the whole skeleton of a tall man was found lying in a coffin formed, as in the Haltwhistle examples, of a single trunk of oak, split into two portions and hollowed by rude tools, probably flint chisels. The body, which had evidently been wrapped in the skin of an animal having soft hair, was accompanied by objects in flint, bronze, and bone.

A full account of this discovery illustrated by woodcuts was given by Thomas Wright, Esq. F.S.A. in the *Gentleman's Magazine*.^a This communication includes notices of a similar coffin found at Great Driffield in Yorkshire, in 1856, and of another at Beverley in the same county in 1848. Besides these instances Mr. Wright records the finding in 1857 of fourteen tree coffins near the surface of the ground, on a spot understood to be the site of the old parish church of Selby, also in Yorkshire. These wooden chests lay parallel to each other in a direction nearly east and west.

A distinction is noticed in the workmanship of these coffins and those of Gristhorpe and Beverley, for in these latter the cavity for the reception of the body

^a August, 1857, vol. iii. New Series, p. 114; also previously, with an engraving, by Mr. William Williamson, in the *Gentleman's Magazine* for Dec. 1834.

must have been finished, says Mr. Wright, internally with the chisel, as their ends stand at right angles or nearly so to the bottom, which is flat in the whole length, while in the Selby coffin the cavity has been formed by an adze or similar instrument. The Selby and Beverley coffins agreed in the fastening down of the lid by wooden pegs, which, as before stated, were used also at Haltwhistle.

From the circumstances of the locality, and from the absence of *insignia*, it was considered that the Selby interments were Christian. Mr. Wright was disposed to refer the Gristhorpe and other tumuli in the maritime district of Yorkshire to the south of Scarborough, to the later Roman period. Dr. Thurnam, however, who has figured the skull from the Gristhorpe coffin, and gone at some length into the matter,^a concludes that that interment is British, probably not earlier than two or three centuries before, nor later than the first century of our era.

He agrees in thinking the Selby coffins, as well as some others of similar character, found, at great depth, in the centre of the city of York, thirty or forty years ago, to be probably Christian and early Saxon.

Another interment of a body wrapped in skins and placed in an oak coffin was discovered in 1767 in a barrow at Stowborough near Wareham in Dorsetshire.^b This, says Dr. Thurnam, nearly approaches the Gristhorpe example, although it is doubtful whether in this case there was a lid to the coffin.

While on the subject it may be well to notice the discovery at a great depth in the blue silt of Beeding Level, Sussex, of a rude coffin formed of four hewn trunks of oak tree, fastened together by oaken pegs, although the construction of this chest does not exactly agree with that of the specimens more particularly in question.

This coffin contained a skull and bones, the former stained blue, the latter filled with blue phosphate of iron.^c

Dr. Wilson in his *Prehistoric Annals of Scotland*^d has noticed the few instances known to him of the discovery of tree-coffins in that country. He remarks that "such examples are less rare than is supposed, though they are little calculated to excite interest in the minds of those under whose observation unfortunately such discoveries most frequently come."

^a *Crania Britannica*. Description of plate lii.

^b *Crania Britannica*, *ubi supra*, and plate xlv. page 2. See also Hutchins's *Dorset*, ed. 1774, vol. i. p. 25; edit. 1861, vol. i. p. 100.

^c Mantell's *Wonders of Geology*, page 47, paragraph 34, Third edition, 1839. The author mentions that for the skull and bones alluded to he is indebted to Warren Lee, Esq. of Lewes.

^d Second edition (1863), pp. 160-164.

He proceeds to notice the following instances :

1. At Cairngall, Longside, Aberdeenshire, where on the removal of a tumulus two coffins were exposed lying east and west, neither of them containing bones. They had parallel sides and rounded ends, with two projecting knobs to facilitate carriage.

2. At Culsalmond, Aberdeenshire, in 1812, on the spot whence a cairn had been removed. The coffin, if indeed it can so be called, was of a different construction, again, from those at Haltwhistle, being apparently made of six separate pieces from the trunk of an oak, with a rude attempt at fitting the bottom to the sides by a groove. The wooden cists appeared to have been surrounded by a wall of unhewn stones. An urn was found in the cist, and there were strong traces of the action of fire in the grave, so that this would seem to have been an interment by cremation, and of a class different from that with which we are now dealing.

3. Dr. Wilson narrates his own experience of the discovery in 1850 of two more examples of the oaken cist. The locality was the Castle Hill at Edinburgh. At a depth of about 25 feet, immediately below a layer of vegetable matter, in which was found a coin of the Emperor Constantius, the excavators came upon two rough coffins of oak-tree, split and hollowed, with a circular recess for the head. They lay nearly east and west, with the head to the west.

To these British examples we may add one from Denmark, to which Dr. Wilson, citing Worsaae,^a refers. In a barrow at the village of Vollersten a cist was discovered hollowed out of a very thick oaken trunk about ten feet in length, in which were found the remains of a woollen mantle, a sword, dagger, palstave, and brooch of bronze, a horn comb, and a round wooden vessel with two handles.

Lastly may be mentioned the occurrence of oaken coffins of very similar construction to that of the Haltwhistle examples, and discovered not many years ago in the graves of a tribe of Alamanni at Oberflacht in Suabia,^b where "the

^a *Primæval Antiquities of Denmark.*

^b *Archæologia*, xxxvi. 129, *et seq.* where a very full account of the Oberflacht discoveries is given by W. M. Wylie, Esq. F.S.A. The author observes that it is not improbable that this mode of burial was tolerably general among the Teutonic tribes of the continent at a very early period, especially in the wooded districts. He seems however to have considered the Gristhorpe discovery to be the only one of the kind in England, as he refers to it as the "sole example of a *Todten-baum* in our own country." He notices instances of similar modes of burial among the Laplanders, mentioned by Scheffer, *Lapponia*, c. xxvii. p. 314, ed. Franc. 1673; and among the Circassians, as described by an old French writer of the sixteenth century, "*Funerailles et diverses manières d'ensevelir, descrites par Charles Guichard.* Lyon, 1583, livre iii. pp. 408-9."

more prevailing mode seems to have been to fell a massive oak, cleave the bole into nearly equal parts, and hollow out the interior to serve as a sarcophagus. After the body and the various accompanying relics were placed in the tree-coffin (*totten-baum*) the two parts were refitted and firmly pegged together. In the whole of this process no trace of the saw appears. It was managed with the axe or adze alone, whence it follows that the stems are frequently found unevenly divided."

To return to the Haltwhistle coffins. I have endeavoured in this short paper to detail as simply as I can the noticeable facts connected with this interesting discovery, leaving it for those who are conversant with such subjects to theorize respecting them. I may add that my friend Mr. Hope Wallace, whilst he is reluctant to allow the field and its contents to be needlessly disturbed for the gratification of mere curiosity, is most willing to afford every facility for proper scientific investigation.