

XVII. Notice of a leaden Coffin, of early fabric, discovered at Bow, as communicated in a Letter from CHARLES ROACH SMITH, Esq. F.S.A., to NICHOLAS CARLISLE, Esq. K.H., F.S.A. Secretary.

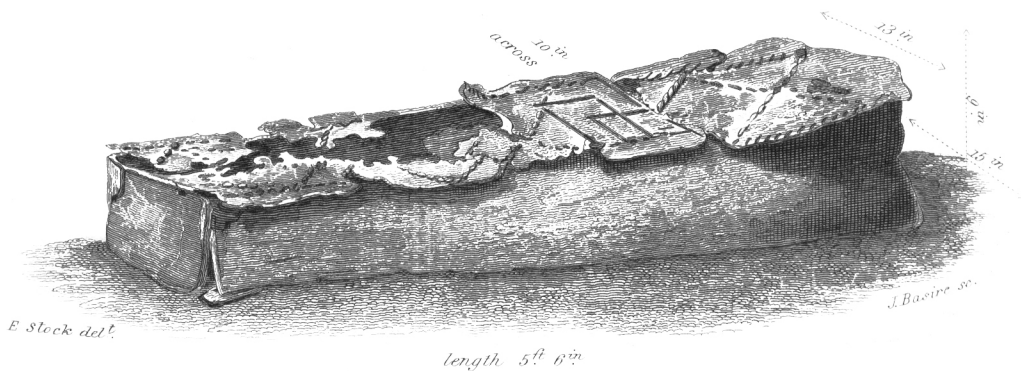
Read 12th December 1844.

5, Liverpool Street, City,
Oct. 28, 1844.

MY DEAR SIR,

IMMEDIATELY after I had replied to your letter, inclosing a communication from Mr. Forster of Bow, respecting a leaden coffin recently discovered by his workmen, I was favoured with a visit from Mr. E. Stock, of Poplar, for the express purpose of inviting me to accompany him to inspect the relic.

Accordingly we met this morning at Mr. Farnes's, of the Bombay Grab, where the coffin is deposited, and, by the kindness of Mr. Stock, I am enabled to present to the Society a coloured drawing executed by that gentleman, together with a few notes, the result of our joint examination of the locality where the object of our investigation was discovered.



Leaden Coffin found in Oct. 1844, near the old ford at Stratford.

The coffin, in form a parallelogram, is made of a sheet of lead, five feet six inches in length, bent upwards, with a square piece soldered to each end. The lid, which in parts is much decomposed, laps over the sides about two inches, and is ornamented with a sort of cable moulding down the sides and across the centre in diamonds; in the middle is a kind of monogram, or more probably, a fanciful decoration. It contained the remains of a skeleton of a young person, and a large quantity of lime.

The construction of this coffin, or sarcophagus, is analogous to that of some which are without doubt of Romano-British origin. It resembles two discovered in 1809 at Southfleet, in a tomb, accompanied by remains which leave no doubt as to their parentage. These are described (*Archæologia*, vol. XIV. p. 38) as being of most simple construction, consisting of two pieces of lead; the bottom pieces being turned up formed the sides of each, and the upper pieces by being turned down at each end, and a little over at the sides, formed the top step and ends of the coffins.

Another analogous specimen was discovered last year in Mansell Street, Whitechapel, on the site of a very extensive Roman burial-ground, on the same level with skeletons, Roman urns with burnt bones, coins, bracelets, beads, and other ornaments. It contained the remains of a child, was thirty inches long, twelve in depth, and nine wide; the cover lapped over the sides, but was void of ornament; a neat bead moulding, however, ran round the bottom of the coffin.



In the *Memoires of the Society of Antiquaries of Normandy*, vol. iv. p. 236, mention is made of the discovery at Rouen of the lower part of a leaden coffin, containing a skeleton, a bronze coin of Postumus, and two small vases, one of very thin glass of goblet form, adorned with parallel zones; the other of a light bronze-colour earth, having a handle ornamented with two wavy bands, between which were the letters AVE and some simple ornaments, all of a dull white colour. In the same locality at Rouen many other coffins, both of lead and of stone, have been previously and since discovered; in some of them were Roman coins, chiefly of Tetricus. One, containing the skeleton

of a child, was 2 feet 10 inches long, by 9 wide, and 8 deep ; in it was a bronze ring of elliptic form, to which were suspended, like the pater-nosters of a rosary, two boar's tusks, a plain bronze ring, and four bronze Roman coins of Vespasian, Domitian, Pius, and Julia Mammea, together with a little quadrangular bell.

In the Gallo-Roman burial places leaden coffins appear to be of no uncommon occurrence. On a previous occasion I mentioned the discovery of several near Boulogne, and Monsieur De Gerville, Hon. F.S.A., records ^a the exhumation of one at Saint-Cosme, near the site of the Roman station Cro-tiatonum, which contained a coin of Postumus, and of another near Coutances, in which was a small vase of green glass.

In this country discoveries of Roman leaden sarcophagi, with the exception of those at Southfleet, and the specimen from Mansell Street, do not seem to have been noticed. Leaden coffins are often spoken of by antiquarian writers, but without those minute details which are so essential to satisfactory appropriation. In the *Archæologia*, vol. VII. p. 376, a leaden coffin is stated to have been found at a spot of ground called King'sholm, near Gloucester ; no description of the coffin is given ; but large quantities of Roman and Saxon coins are said to have been found in the same field.

Returning to my report upon the coffin found at Bow, we ascertained that the site of its discovery is a spot about 150 yards to the south of the old ford over the river at Stratford-le-Bow. It lay five feet deep, unaccompanied by any other remains except some vestiges of decayed wood. The field was a few years ago an open pasture, but is now being built upon. It is adjacent to the village of Old Ford, where, in the centre of the present high road, opposite the White Hart Inn, a few years since, were discovered some Roman urns, ^b containing burnt bones ; it is also contiguous to fields and gardens in which Roman urns have occasionally been found, and Roman coins in great abundance. The tenant of one of the gardens, the property of the Rev. John Stock, Rector of Finchfield, Essex, told us he had dug up, within the last few years, at least five hundred Roman coins. Some speci-

^a *Memoires de la Société des Antiquaires de l'Ouest*, tome ii. p. 177.

^b Now in the possession of Mr. Baker, Three Colts Street, Old Ford.

mens recently found Mr. E. Stock procured, and has requested me to present them to the Society. They are a denarius of Valentinian, and small brass of Tetricus, Carausius (?), Magnentius, and Constantine.

These remains go far, I think, towards shewing the site of the coffin, or at least its immediate neighbourhood, to have been that of a Romano-British burial-place ; which, coupled with the analogy existing between the coffin and others of unquestionable Romano-British fabric, affords strong evidence for our assigning that under consideration to about the fourth or fifth century. At the same time it may be observed, that as public burial grounds were often used through successive centuries, there is a possibility that this coffin may be of a later date. As we seem to possess but few types of ancient leaden coffins, it will be desirable to record such as may in future be discovered, and the exhibition on the present occasion of a drawing of a lid of one found in Battersea fields in 1794 may not be useless for comparison, although it is probably of a more recent period,^c bearing, like those discovered in the Temple church, more elaborate ornamentation.

I am, my dear Sir,

Yours very truly,

C. ROACH SMITH.

NICHOLAS CARLISLE, Esq. Sec. S.A.

^c This drawing is in the possession of Mr. J. Burn. Beneath is written :

“ There were 4 skeletons dug up in Battersea Fields, 2 feet deep, one of which was in this lead coffin full of lime, Jan. 15th, 1794. Sir Joseph Banks says that they were in the time of the Saxons, before there were any kings in England.”