

## DISCOVERY OF A STONE COFFIN IN TURVILLE CHURCH.

THE Parish Church of S. Mary, Turville, was restored between June and November, 1900, from the plans of W. A. Forsyth, Esq., A.R.I.B.A. (Messrs. Forsyth and Maule, 16, Great Marlborough Street, London). During the progress of the work (on August 30) a stone coffin was found some six inches below the floor at the S.E. corner of the nave. On the lid, which is coped only to the extent of  $\frac{1\frac{1}{2}}$  of an inch, with the edges very slightly chamfered, there is a full-length cross in low relief ( $\frac{1}{2}$  inch) standing on three steps; the head of the cross consists of four limbs of equal length, broadened at the ends. The sinister arm of the cross is nearly obliterated, showing, no doubt, that the surface of the slab coincided more or less with the level of the floor, and that that portion of it was trodden on.

The coffin is, as usual, formed from a single block of stone, which Mr. Forsyth considers exactly similar to that used in the 13th century part of the fabric, and to have come almost certainly from an Oxfordshire oolite quarry. In the interior of the coffin there is a curved recess for the head, the matrix between which and the outer walls of the coffin is sunk  $\frac{1}{4}$  inch lower than the outer walls. Measurements are shown in the plate. A chip on one edge of the coffin shows where it had previously been prized open, and the lid is broken into two nearly equal portions. The date may, with little hesitation, be placed approximately, at early in the 13th century.

The bones contained were much disarranged, and the coffin had evidently been opened at least twice previously. An interment, which was probably the original one (particularly from the positions of the smaller bones, such as metacarpals, metatarsals, and phalanges), was that of an old man, whose femur measured  $18\frac{3}{4}$  inches, and whose height\* was, therefore, about 5ft.  $8\frac{1}{2}$  in.; not less than 75 years old, and pro-

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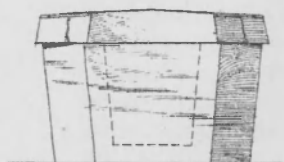
\* See *British Barrows*, by Canon Greenwell, and the late Professor Rolleston, p. 564.

# STONE COFFIN AND SLAB.

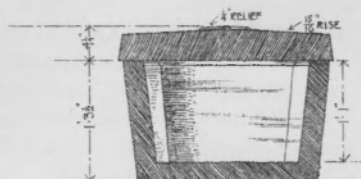
FOUND IN S-E. ANGLE OF NAVE OF ST. MARY'S CHVRCH, TURVILLE, BUCKS. AVG. 30<sup>th</sup> 1900



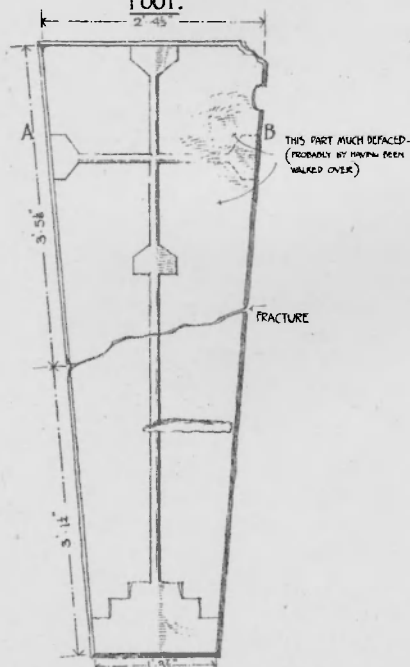
SIDE ELEVATION.



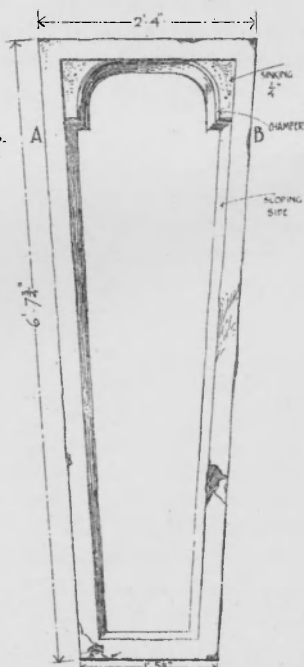
ELEVATION AT  
FOOT.



SECTION A-B.



PLAN OF  
SEPULCHRAL SLAB.



PLAN OF  
COFFIN.

INCHES SCALE OF FEET. FEET

bably ten years or so more than that extreme minimum. The skull was conspicuously well-shaped; extreme length,  $7\frac{5}{16}$  inches; extreme breadth (across temporal bones),  $6\frac{1}{2}$  inches; extremely short posteriorly (in the occipital region); and broad in the base.

The forehead was remarkably good, and the nose prominent. The sutures were fairly obliterated. The remains of the second incisor, and the stump of the first premolar, both on the right side, were the only teeth remaining, there being none left in the lower jaw, which was broken in halves, and the alveolars of the right molars were all closed over.

The angle of the lower jaw (between body and condyle) was very obtuse (about 37 degrees), a sure indication of advanced age. The right tibia measured 1ft.  $3\frac{1}{2}$  in. in length,\* while the left tibia had been fractured during life, at a point  $10\frac{1}{4}$  inches from the proximal end, and, in the absence of skilled surgery, had reunited with the ends overlapping for a length of four inches, the diameter of the bone at that point being  $2\frac{1}{8}$  inches. The fibula, which had been likewise fractured, had also reunited, with its ends overlapping for  $2\frac{1}{4}$  inches. The large majority of the bones were decayed, and very brittle.

Much mixed up with the above skeleton was another one, in an even more tender and decayed condition; though from the—apparently unmistakeable—cause of death, and other indications (to be mentioned directly), probably four or five centuries later in date than the first, if we are correct in considering that one as the original occupant of the coffin. This second skeleton was, judging both by the skull, and by such long bones as appeared to belong, that of a woman. The skull measured  $7\frac{1}{4}$  inches in extreme length, and  $5\frac{5}{8}$  inches in extreme breadth (across temporal bones). The nose was again prominent, and all sutures nearly obliterated. The external occipital crest was remarkably prominent—a full  $\frac{1}{4}$  inch high. Age probably

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\* This was the *extreme* length, and not that between the two articular-surfaces, and therefore the second method mentioned by Professor Rolleston for arriving at a stature-estimate (*loc. cit.*) would give a result probably fully one inch too great (5ft.  $9\frac{1}{2}$  in.).

somewhere about 60. This skull lay by the left shoulder of the first skeleton, but had most likely been so placed at the last opening of the coffin. On the right side of the skull was a clean circular hole through the parietal bone; while on the left side, through the posterior margin of the parietal and the upper margin of the occipital, was a much larger circular hole, the edge of which, forming a regular lip, projected to a very pronounced degree, *outwards*. The conclusion was at once forced upon me that there was only one possible explanation of these holes; and that is, that the unfortunate woman (?) had met with a violent death by a bullet. This is one reason for considering this skeleton several centuries later than the age of the coffin; but unless the casualty took place during some skirmish in the civil war, what forgotten tragedy had we raked up? There was a murder committed in the parish in the 18th century, and we at first had hopes that these remains might fit in as those of the victim; but on reference to the *Newgate Calendar* (kindly furnished me by a lady!) it turned out that that was the murder of an old gentleman by his daughter, and that poison, and not a bullet, had been the instrument.

The bones of the two skeletons were so much mixed, from previous disturbances, that many of them could only be assigned to the respective skulls by inference. There were, however, of certain bones more than belonged to two persons; for instance, there was a portion of a left parietal bone belonging to neither of the above skulls. There were (more or less perfect) 2 pairs femora, 2 ditto tibiæ, 5 humeri, and 2 odd ulnæ—one of which was 2 inches longer than the other; the remaining long bones were fragmentary.

Though it is not impossible that these extra bones represented the original occupant of the coffin, it is far more probable that no third person had been buried in it, but that a few loose bones had found their way in, at one or more of the previous openings.

The coffin also contained five common pins of old make, the heads formed by twisting metal round the end of the stem, and which are, therefore, longer than they are broad—the contrary to the head of a pin at the present time. It is possible these had pinned

the grave-clothes of the second body (forming another point in favour of a comparatively recent date for this skeleton). Very many of the bones were stained a dark purple, in some instances nearly black, perhaps caused by the dye out of "woollen" which may have wrapped the woman's body (forming another suggestion as to approximate date); the left side of her skull, upon which side it lay, was deeply so stained. Many of the bones were covered with small elongated white crystals, nearly or quite insoluble in water.

There were also in the coffin two brass-headed tacks, which had no doubt helped to nail cloth on a wooden coffin; and which, together with minute particles of wood fibre, and three small fragments of (window ?) glass, had no doubt slipped in at one of the aforesaid openings. Several bones of mice, and a couple of snail-shells (kindly identified by Mr. W. M. Webb, as the Cellar Snail, *Vitrea cellaria*) showed the amount of space between the lid and the coffin after it had originally been opened.

The church possesses a plain Norman font; and the restoration has shown that the blocked north door, whose circular head was so covered with plaster, that it looked suspiciously like the adjoining 18th century work, is in reality a Norman doorway, with an Early English doorway built inside it; and a very small Norman window, without any ashlar work in it, was discovered just to the east of the Early English south door which also seems to have been built inside a pre-existing Norman arch. These features are now shown.

I have to express my best thanks to the Rev. M. Graves, Vicar (who acted as a most careful clerk of the works throughout the restoration operations), for sending for me directly the stone coffin was found, and not allowing the contents to be touched until my arrival; and to Messrs. Forsyth and Maule for most kind and painstaking assistance in the investigation; and to Mr. Forsyth for the drawings reproduced as plate.

ALFRED HENEAGE COCKS.