

PONTARCH



Pontefract & District Archaeological Society:

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THE ENIGMA OF THE GYPSUM BURIALS.

By Eric Houlder, and
illustrated by Ron Wilson.

A recent chance meeting with Mr Ray Bake at Willow Park, Pontefract, brought to mind the two, possibly three discoveries of *gypsum burials* in and around Pontefract since 1822. Mr Bake was, in fact, one of the discoverers of what was probably one of these burials in a liquorice field between Wilkinson's factory and the Three-Arched Bridge during the last war.

Gypsum burials are late Roman, and are considered by scholarly opinion to be a Christian rite usually dating from the decades after 390 AD. A standard *sarcophagus* (Greek flesh-eater) was used. The deceased was placed inside and liquid plaster poured in until the corpse was covered. The lid was then replaced, and the coffin left on the ground surface, usually close to a road. The pouring in of the plaster is the only difference between these burials and normal pagan ones of the same era. The sarcophagi are easily distinguished from medieval stone coffins for the Roman ones do not taper to one end, they are not shaped inside, they often have decorative panels on the sides and ends, and often have a peaked lid. The plaster forms a mould of the body,



and grips any object associated with it.

Mr Bake reports that the coffin that he saw had an iron band around it which effectively sealed it. Rather than waste time lifting it, they left it in situ about five feet down. Since then two houses have been built in the field, but as far as the writer knows, the coffin is still there.

Of the other two recorded burials, only one was investigated in recent times. This was found on Holywell Hill, Glasshoughton, just after Christmas 1986. The original discovery was made by Ron Jefferies, a building worker. The investigation was conducted by Jeff Radley of the RCHM York, with Charles Baines of the P&DAS and the Editor. The body of an elderly female was inside the plaster, which had preserved some of her hair and a bone comb of Anglian type. Though the JCB had broken the coffin, it has now been reconstructed in Castleford Museum.

The best-known of the plaster burials was the enigmatic stone coffin which for many years sat in the chapel at Pontefract Castle. It was discovered on March 25th 1822 by labourers, also trenching for liquorice! The

Continued on page 4.....

Behind the Scenes on Meeting Night.

After yet another very successful lecture season, we felt that members might be interested in reading about the behind-the-scenes work that goes into preparing for a lecture.

Undoubtedly the hardest job is that of the Secretary, and Pauline deserves all our thanks for her efforts in providing us with a programme to suit every taste and level of interest. She begins well before each season by writing to the speakers who have been suggested, giving them a choice of dates. Then, she contacts each one shortly before his/her lecture to ensure that the engagement has not been forgotten. It is at this stage that the speakers request odd items of equipment that the Society must borrow or hire.

The task of setting up the projector may seem quite easy to the uninitiated, but in fact there are several points to remember, any one of which will prevent the proper projection of the speaker's slides. Did you know, for example, that the *Carousel* must stand exactly in line with the centre of the screen? That in fact there is one specific floor-tile which is the perfect spot for it? That the *Carousel* must stand on 24 pence, twelve per side (one ten pence piece and one two pence!) to exactly reach the centre? That each slide tray must be correctly zeroed before use, or it just does not work? That the Society made-up and owns the long extension to the projector hand-set which enables the speaker to control his/her own pace? All these points, plus the correct levelling of the stand, are in the capable hands of Peter Lockett, who begins his setting-up well before anyone else arrives.

If the speaker requests an overhead projector, as many do nowadays, then one of our members in the Education service must be contacted in plenty of time to arrange a loan. Even this is not quite as straightforward as you would imagine, for a spare bulb must be borrowed too, and a screen.

What about the raffle-prize, the ticket-sales, the refreshments? The briefing of the Chairperson before the start? The paying of the speaker's expenses or fee? So many different people are involved that it is a wonder that our meetings run so smoothly!

oOo

The C.B.A.(4) Symposium.

The Annual Symposium was held in Leeds City Art Gallery for the first time in over twenty five years. Your Editor attended as the representative of the Society, and was disappointed to find not a single member there other than himself!

The lecture room has comfortable seating and there is a cafe in the same building with some excellent value dishes on the menu. Because the room had to be vacated by 4-00 pm, the programme was somewhat shorter than usual, but in spite of this the Society was allowed fifteen minutes to report on the investigations in the Swales' Yard complex. Other reports were fairly divided between amateur W and the professionals.

Several old friends of ours were in evidence, including Doreen Roberts, Past Chairman, who was controlling admission, Donald Haigh, Roman Road Expert who has visited our sites, and Steve Moorhouse. Your Editor owes Steve his thanks for untangling his slides during the reading of the paper.

The general consensus of opinion regarding the new venue was most favourable, and the present writer for one, hopes that the organiser, Mary Kershaw of the Harrogate Museum, uses this venue next year. It is to be hoped that our members respond better; this is the regional archaeology event of the year and there is no excuse when details and even a booking form were printed in *PontArch* in plenty time.

GOODBYE!

By the time that you read this, we shall have said goodbye to David Heslop and Denise. David joined the Society when he initiated the excavation at Wood Hall, Womersley for NYCC and the C.E.G.B. When the Society was asked to investigate and report on the Swales' Yard complex, David was the obvious person to direct the work, which he did with flair and quiet humour. David is taking over urban archaeology in Newcastle Upon Tyne. We wish David and Denise every success in the North East, and express the hope that he will contact this Society if ever he needs diggers!

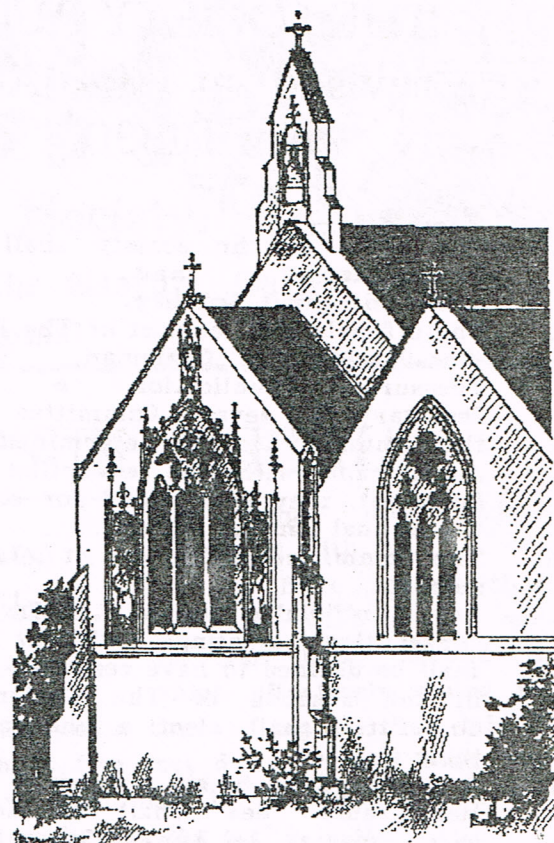
from Newsletter 52, Monumental Brass Society,
dated Oct.1989.

AN UNDIGNIFIED END FOR A GRAND VICTORIAN LADY.

Ed Archer, whom readers will perhaps remember is organising the Lanark Conference of the CIA, lived in Ackworth until going to University. He sends us this clipping relating to another ex-Ackworth resident. We acknowledge the copyright of the Monumental Brass Society.

Elizabeth Tempest, daughter and co-heiress of Henry Blundell from Ince Blundell in Lancashire died in 1845. In the late eighteenth century she had married into the Tempest family, one of Yorkshire's oldest Catholic families, who reside at Broughton Hall, just outside Skipton in North Yorkshire. Her wealth was a secure prop to a somewhat impoverished landed, but untitled, gentry. During her lifetime the hall was refurbished with Gillow furniture, and the wings built.

When she died, she was living at Ackworth Grange, another property once owned by the family in West Yorkshire. This property had its own private chapel designed by Pugin, and there she was commemorated by a brass depicting her in long flowing robes under a single canopy turning into a cross at the top, and foot inscription; this latter also commemorates her husband, Stephen, who had died in 1824. In 1966, Ackworth Grange and its chapel were demolished, and furniture and



Harry Battye's drawing of the Pugin Chapel

fittings spread far and wide. The brass in its now broken slab ended up for some unexplained reason at Ampleforth College, in North Yorkshire. There it was spotted by a son of a family friend who was being educated there, and was brought to Broughton Hall in the 1970s to rest in an outhouse. This was where I first saw it in 1979. When I went back this year I found that the slab has now been disposed of because of its broken condition. The brass itself, now in eight separate pieces, resides in the loft of the outhouse and there, I'm afraid, it seems likely to remain despite my pleas to have it mounted on a wooden board and placed in the family chapel attached to the Hall. Money, it seems, cannot be found for this sort of thing when the Hall has to be looked after and estate managed. Could this be a case for the Society (Monumental Brass Society - Ed.) to help from the workshop fund?

THE SOCIETY RULES

revised at the AGM
April 1990.

1. The name of the society shall be the **Pontefract and District Archaeological Society.**
2. The officials shall consist of The President, Vice-President, Chairman, Secretary, Treasurer, Publication & Publicity Secretary, and several Committee Members, their number to be determined by the A.G.M., and with the exception of The President, they shall stand for election at the Annual General Meeting.
3. The Committee shall meet at least once a month.
4. Any official absent from three consecutive meetings without apology shall be deemed to have resigned.
5. In the absence of The Chairman, the Committee shall elect a chairman from their number.
6. A quorum shall be six members.
7. Membership fees shall be determined each year at the Annual General Meeting. The Financial Year shall begin, and Fees shall become due, on the First of April each year. Membership shall be deemed lapsed if the Fee has not been paid within three months of the A.G.M.
8. No member shall be entitled to a vote at any general meeting unless all moneys presently payable by him/her to the Society shall have been paid.
9. All members shall be admitted to all normal Society functions free of charge.
10. The Annual General Meeting shall be held within the month of April each year.
11. Functions shall not take place under the Society's name without prior approval of the Committee. Members working on Society projects shall at all times remain within the direction of the person appointed as Director. Any member not doing so shall be subject to disciplinary proceedings, and if the offence be repeated, to termination of membership.
12. The Society shall not be responsible for any loss or injury incurred whilst taking part in Society functions, excavation for example; members participate in Society functions at their own risk.
13. Notice of any proposed amendment to the rules should be given to the Secretary in writing at least fourteen days prior to the Annual General Meeting.

RULES FOR THE COMMITTEE.

1. Every Committee Member shall have paid their Society Fee for the current session within the first quarter.
2. If a Committee Member is absent for three consecutive meetings of the Committee without proper reason or apology, then their membership of the Committee shall be deemed to have lapsed.
3. Every Committee Member shall attend a minimum of six Committee Meetings per year.
4. No Committee Member shall make any public statement which could be construed as controversial or derogatory to the Society. Any Committee Member committing such acts shall have their membership terminated by a majority decision of the whole Committee.
5. Any Committee Member undertaking any research in the field of Archaeology History should, as an act of courtesy, report to the Committee on a regular basis.

Gypsum Burials continued....

location was *Paper Mill Field*, which is somewhere beneath Holmfield Close today! At that time there was little knowledge of archaeology and no knowledge of late Roman religion, so the 'experts' concluded that the coffin contained the remains of Thomas, Earl of Lancaster, who was executed nearby in March 1322! The coffin was removed to Fryston Hall, the home of Richard Monkton Milnes (one-time fiancé of Florence Nightingale). When the Hall was demolished before the war the coffin found its way to Pontefract castle where the lead lining very quickly liberated by the locals. Finally, a falling tree smashed it during the last clearance work in the castle.

These burials are quite rare in total, and though not unique to our area have mostly been discovered within a thirty mile radius of York. Gypsum is still quarried near Hillam and this may account for the local prevalence. However, the really important question the burials pose is related to the spread of Christianity in this area in Roman times, presumably following the conversion of Constantine in the early fourth century. Where did these people live and worship? Only time, and further discoveries will answer this question, and until then, the gypsum burials will remain a fascinating enigma.