

II.

NOTE OF HUMAN REMAINS IN WOODEN COFFINS, FOUND IN THE EAST LINKS OF LEITH. BY ROBERT PATERSON, M.D., F.S.A. Scot.

In October last, whilst workmen were digging for sand in the East Links of Leith, they came upon some wooden coffins, containing human remains. The top of these coffins was about 30 inches from the present surface, and they occupied two rows or lines, with an intervening space of from 4 to 5 feet. There were thirteen of them disinterred. The trenches in which they had been placed ran directly from east to west, and the foot of the coffin was always to the east. They were made of straight boards of white fir, tapering from the head to the foot, with no appearance of any substance having ever covered them. The wood in some of them was remarkably preserved, several of them having been taken out of the ground quite entire; this is probably attributable to the ground being saturated with moisture, with a small proportion of common salt in it. These coffins were from $4\frac{1}{2}$ to 7 feet long, and of proportional breadth; the lids had a central elevated ridge, like a house-top, through their whole length.

When the two boards which constituted the lid were removed, they were found to be filled with water, which, from its transparency, enabled the objects at the bottom of the coffin to be seen. These consisted of the various parts of a human skeleton, resting on a reddish kind of mud, there being no appearance of cloth, or anything within the coffin to mark the person or period at which they were interred. The different parts of the skeleton occupied their proper position; the thigh bones were in all cases turned outwards—a circumstance which anatomists know to take place upon the decay of the soft textures; the skull, often

with the lower jaw attached, was in its proper place, but the bones of the forearm and hands lay upon the bones of the chest, sometimes being crossed over them, and this position was nearly the same in all. These bones seemed very perfect when looked at through the water which covered them, but many of them crumbled to pieces upon being touched or exposed to the air. One skeleton only was found without a coffin, and around it was the debris of some portions of cloth, which doubtless had been wrapped round the body at burial. The skeletons bore evidence of different sexes and ages.

I have but a few passing remarks to make on these remains. *First*, They are obviously relics of the inhabitants of Leith, who died of the plague in 1645-6,¹ most of whom, as we know by the South Leith Kirk Register, were buried in the Links; and, if anything else were wanting to show this, it would be found in the superficial method of interment, and the long trenches or lines in which the bodies had been placed. *Second*, The shape of the coffins is somewhat peculiar, all of them having the high-peaked ridge of the coffin lid. Dr Wilson tells us that stone coffins of this shape were commonly used in the thirteenth century, and I have been told that wooden coffins of this form are still used in Orkney and Shetland at the present day, while those used in Norway, Denmark, &c., have a rounded or arched lid. Whether coffins of this shape were commonly used at the time, or were only thus made for convenience and cheapness, for the emergency, I have not been able to trace. We know that the coffin in which Charles I. was interred some few years later, was like those in use at the present day, with a flat top or lid. *Third*, The position of the hands and forearms of these skeletons is somewhat peculiar, and it could only have been produced by the position they occupied at burial. No disturbing cause inside the coffin could have produced this, and produced this in all. But it can be readily explained, if we suppose that they were interred with their hands arranged on their breasts, in the form of the cross, or in the attitude of supplication. It appears from a writer on funeral customs in Roman Catholic times, that such was the usual practice.

“When the bell has tolled,” says he, “to signify that the soul has

¹ See Notes of the Pestilence, by Dr David H. Robertson.—*Proceedings Soc. Ant.* vol. iv. p. 392.

passed away, and to ask a prayer for the departed, the body is then reverently washed and laid out; a small cross is placed upon the breast, between the hands of the deceased, or, if a cross cannot be procured, *the hands are arranged in the form of a cross.*"—(*Rom. Rit.*)

In such a much-dreaded pestilence as the plague, it is not at all unlikely that this practice was adopted by those laying out the dead; and we further know, that a red cross was painted on the doors of infected houses, during the plague of London.