

II.

THE COMMON COFFINS AT ABERCORN AND LINLITHGOW.

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Before describing the various coffins as they exist (and so far as I know at present the three at Abercorn and one at Linlithgow are all that are known to remain), I will draw attention to the supposed use of them. In the very interesting work on *Old Church Life in Scotland*, by the late Rev. Andrew Edgar, D.D., there is a chapter devoted to "Baptisms and Burials in Olden Times," and at page 243 he draws attention to a curious entry in the Session Records of Mauchline, of date 28th December 1675. This resolution or ordinance records "that none hereafter shall take upon them to buy a cofine to any poore that shall die heirafter in this Paroch without consent of the session." Dr Edgar assumes that what the session meant to say was, "that no coffin should, without consent of the session, be purchased at the session's cost for the interment of any poor person who should die in the parish." He then proceeds to say, "There is another construction, however, that may be put on the Mauchline resolution of 1675. The session may have meant that the poor were to be buried without coffins, and this construction is, to some extent, supported by other entries in the Session Records." These entries show that various sums were allowed for coffins with winding sheets, and for winding sheets without coffins. Considerable

grumbling seems to have taken place at the expense of coffins, hence the ordinance of 28th December 1675. In early times we know that it was usual in all countries to inter the dead uncoffined. Bede tells us that the common people, both in the Roman and subsequent Saxon and English eras, were simply wrapped in cloth, and so put into the ground. But it would seem that, "both in towns and rural parishes in Scotland, the custom continued among the poor long after the Reformation." It is certain that, in 1675, burials without coffins were customary in Galston, and in that year the kirk-session ordered two common coffins for the poor to be made for £11, 5s. 2d.

A minister in Sutherland writes to Dr Edgar that at Rogart, so late as in the beginning of this century, local paupers were still occasionally interred without coffins.

How then were such uncoffined corpses conveyed to the place of burial? In the year 1563 the General Assembly ordained that "a bier should be made in every country parish to carry the dead corpse of the poor to the burial place, and that those of the villages or houses next adjacent to the house where the dead corpse lieth, or a certain number out of every house, shall convey the dead corpse to the burial place, and bury it 6 feet under the earth." This bier was sometimes called the parish coffin. In 1596 a bier was ordered by the kirk-session of Glasgow "to be made for funeralls," and in 1598, another bier was ordered to be made, "and the old one mended." The kirk-session of Perth in 1602 ordered that "the Master" of the hospital, with all diligence, cause make ane common mort-kist, whereby the dead corpses of the poor ones may be honestly carried unto the burial."

Dr Edgar says, "the traditionary account in some places is that they were closed boxes—like modern coffins—that the lid or one of the sides was hung on hinges, and that the corpse, when lifted out, was lowered into the grave by ropes." At Galston, we find the cost of "a common burial kist" was, in 1641, £4, and in 1675, £6; the cost of coffins when allowed to the poor being much less, the kirk-session of Galston granting about 30s. for each, and the Mauchline kirk-session in 1747 ordained "that 40s. Scots should be given for the largest coffin paid for out of the poor's money."

I will now describe the existing examples of parish coffins known to me. There are three common coffins of different sizes still preserved at Abercorn, and one at Linlithgow. I am indebted to the courtesy of Rev.

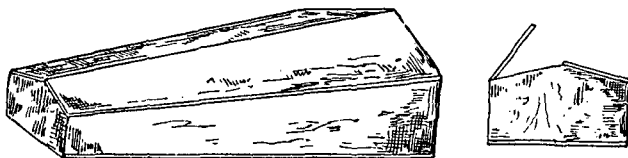


Fig. 1. Large size Common Coffin, Abercorn.

J. H. Crawford, F.S.A. Scot., for access to those preserved under the loft of the church there. The largest one at Abercorn (fig. 1) measures 6 feet 1 inch inside, $22\frac{3}{8}$ inches over at the head, and $11\frac{1}{4}$ inches over at the foot. The ends are coped in form, and the depth at the point of cope

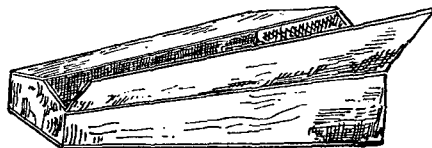


Fig. 2. Medium size Common Coffin, Abercorn.

at the head measures 12 inches, and at the sides $9\frac{1}{2}$ inches, at the foot $9\frac{3}{4}$ inches from point of cope, and $8\frac{1}{4}$ inches at sides. The sides are perfectly straight, and on each side are two wrought-iron hinges securing the lid, which is in two leaves, meeting in the centre. The next in size



Fig. 3. Small Common Coffin, Abercorn.

(fig. 2) measures 4 feet $8\frac{1}{2}$ inches inside, 1 foot 4 inches at the head, and 10 inches at the foot. It is coped in the same way, with a similar hinged lid. The third (fig. 3) is a small one, 2 feet 6 inches in length, $7\frac{1}{2}$ inches

at the head, and $4\frac{1}{2}$ inches at the foot. It is coped, and has an unhinged lid, but in form the sides take the shape of the wooden coffin, and across the shoulders the measurement is $9\frac{1}{2}$ inches, the side depth at the head being 8 inches, and at the foot $4\frac{1}{2}$ inches.

The Linlithgow example (fig. 4) is somewhat different in one notable

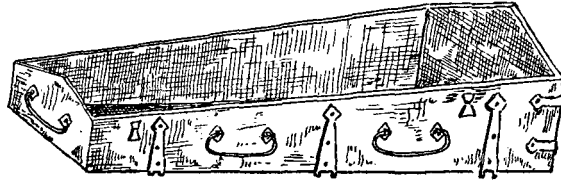


Fig. 4. Common Coffin, Linlithgow.

particular, viz., the bottom is hinged instead of the top; it measures 6 feet 5 inches in length inside, 20 inches wide at the head, and $7\frac{1}{2}$ inches at the foot, and at the side 9 inches deep; the sides are straight and the

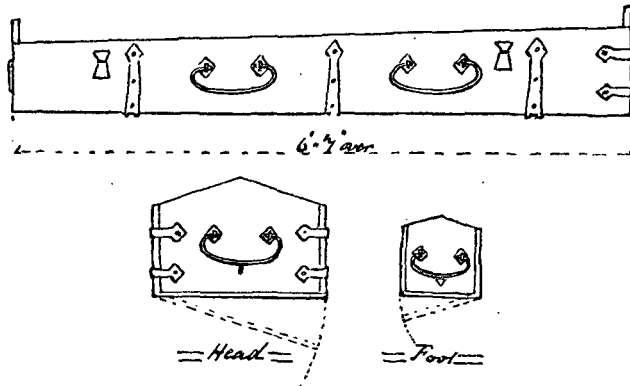


Fig. 5. Common Coffin, Linlithgow (1 inch scale).

ends coped, the corners being strengthened with ornamental wrought-iron corner bands. On each side there are two strong iron grip handles, and at the foot a common staple is driven into the board. There are three hinges for the bottom on the right side, and on the left three iron pins or hooks to hold the bottom in position. There does not seem to have been a lid, possibly a mortcloth was used.

All the coffins are made of "Scots Fir," roughly dressed, and are not painted, with the exception of the small one at Abercorn; the thickness of the material averages a full inch. It will be observed that the two largest at Abercorn, and the one at Linlithgow, are exactly the shape of the early coped memorial stones.