

IV.

AN ACCOUNT OF THE WATCH-HOUSES, MORTSAFES, AND PUBLIC VAULTS IN ABERDEENSHIRE CHURCHYARDS, FORMERLY USED FOR THE PROTECTION OF THE DEAD FROM THE RESURRECTIONISTS. BY JAMES RITCHIE, F.E.I.S., CORR. MEM. S.A. SCOT.

It is difficult for those of the present generation to realise the feelings of horror with which body-snatching was regarded about a century ago. Nowadays we have no fear that the graves of our friends will be desecrated and their bodies carried off; even the possibility of such an event never occurs to anyone. But it was different once upon a time. Stories are still current amongst the older folks in some country districts which show how deep and widespread was the feeling against the Resurrectionists, as those who raised the bodies from the grave were aptly called. These men were in the habit of coming in the dead of night to some lonely churchyard where a recent interment

had taken place. They brought with them implements with which they opened the grave, broke open the coffin, and removed the corpse ; and this they afterwards sold to those who wished to use it for anatomical purposes. Suspicion was not wanting that in many cases some local person, often the gravedigger, was in league with the body-snatchers, giving them notice of the interments, and sharing in their ill-gotten gains.

There is an interesting tradition bearing on this point, connected with a burial in the churchyard of Inverurie in the early part of the seventeenth century. Merjorie Elphinstone, wife of Walter Innes of Ardtannes, a small estate on the banks of the Don about a mile from Inverurie, died, and was buried in the churchyard. During the night the gravedigger re-opened the grave, and lifted out the body for the purpose of taking some rings off the buried woman's fingers. In doing so he wakened the sleeper out of the trance into which she had fallen, and which had been mistaken for death. Merjorie recovered, and, proceeding to Ardtannes, where she arrived towards midnight, knocked at the door. Her husband, sitting up with some sympathetic friends, heard the sound, and remarked that if his Merjorie had not been dead and buried, that knock would have been hers. On opening the door he found that the visitor was indeed his Merjorie, who was said to have lived for several years thereafter. Her tombstone (fig. 1), with its quaint figures and fine lettering, was originally inside the old church pulled down in 1775, but it now stands in the graveyard beside the four sculptured stones there. The date of her death is given as 1622, but there is no mention of the previous burial on the stone. Somewhat similar stories are current in other districts, and though many may be simply floating traditions which have become localised, some have probably a basis of fact ; for when doctors were few and far between, and medical science had not advanced as at the present day, a state of coma might easily have been mistaken for death.

Edinburgh obtained an unenviable notoriety in connection with body-snatching, owing to the revelations made at the trial of Burke and Hare in 1828. The feeling against those body-snatchers and murderers, as well as against those to whom they sold the bodies,



Fig. 1. Tombstone of Merjorie Elphinstone in Inverurie Churchyard.

was so great that even the school children at their play sang the refrain :—

“ Hang Burke, banish Hare,
Burn Knox in Surgeon Square.”

But the feeling against the Resurrectionists was not confined to Edinburgh and its neighbourhood : it spread far and wide. The

whole country was moved, and in most of the churchyards precautions were adopted to protect the graves from desecration.

The most natural means of preventing the lifting of the corpse was that the relatives of the deceased should watch the grave during the night for a length of time sufficient to render the body useless to those who wanted it. And this was the method commonly adopted, but it could never have been a very popular method, and was only undertaken under a strong sense of duty and a feeling of deep love for the deceased. It was generally the male relatives or friends upon whom fell the work of taking turns in watching in the churchyard. But occasionally a woman, inspired by an intense desire to protect the remains of some loved one, took part in what must have been to her a particularly trying duty. In one instance known to me a widow took her share in watching the grave of her husband. The Resurrectionists had visited the churchyard a short time before her husband's death, and had by mistake in the darkness opened the wrong grave. Something had then apparently alarmed them, for they fled, leaving the grave open, and the corpse exposed. The wind blew a portion of the grave-clothes into the branches of a neighbouring tree, where the white cloth, flapping in the wind, greatly alarmed some workmen passing by in the early morning, until one, braver than the others, entered the churchyard and discovered the cause of their alarm. This event naturally created a sensation in the district, and led to the widow's resolution to prevent, as far as lay in her power, any interference with her husband's grave.

In some districts it is said that alarm guns were so fixed in the churchyard that anyone moving about there at night would be sure to stumble against the wires attached to them, and thus set off the alarm. This plan, however, does not seem to have been adopted, at least to any extent, in Aberdeenshire, for no instance of its use there has come under my notice. Those who watched in the churchyards were, however, generally armed, for they knew they might have

desperate characters to encounter. The watchers needed to be brave men, for it was an eerie occupation watching in the stillness of the night among the dead, and doubtless their nerves were often highly strung. In one case the minister's white pony, straying into the churchyard from the neighbouring field, was the cause of unnecessary alarm. On another occasion a pig which had by some means got into a churchyard lost its life through its inability to answer the challenge of the alarmed watchers, who therefore fired in the direction whence the sound proceeded. An amusing incident occurred in a lonely churchyard in Aberdeenshire along the side of which passes a little-frequented farm road. Late in the evening, one of a party engaged in protecting a grave happened to see one of his friends trudging homewards along this road, and just as he was passing the churchyard, the watcher called out to him, inviting him by name to come into the churchyard beside him. The startled man fled with all speed, and on reaching home told his friends that he knew he had not long to live, for a voice from the grave had called on him to enter the churchyard. Next day the incident was satisfactorily explained, and apologies made, for the watcher himself felt that he was much to blame for his thoughtless invitation.

WATCH-HOUSES.

To spend the night in the churchyard was a trying ordeal, for even in summer the nights became wonderfully cold, and in stormy winter weather some kind of shelter became absolutely necessary. In some places use was made of a dwelling-house close to the churchyard, from the window of which a good view of the place could be had. In other places a small building in the churchyard itself was used as a shelter, and the watchers spent the night there, occasionally coming out and taking a walk round to see that everything was safe. If all stories be true, the comforts of these shelters, and perhaps also the potency of the refreshments used, led in some cases to the watchers

neglecting their duty, only to find in the morning that their labour had been in vain and the body had been lifted while they were reposing snugly in the shelter room.

Newhills.—One of these watch-houses (fig. 2) is still in existence in



Fig. 2. Watch-house in Newhills Churchyard.

the churchyard of Newhills, fully a mile from Bucksburn station on the Great North of Scotland Railway, and about five miles from Aberdeen. It is built just at the entrance to the churchyard, and is now used as a toolhouse by the gravedigger. There was once a similar building in the churchyard of Kintore, but it was removed several years ago

when the churchyard was enlarged. A similar watch-house stood at the churchyard of Alford; but, having become somewhat dilapidated, it was taken down a few years since.

Banchory Devenick.—A watch-house (fig. 3), very similar to that at Newhills, stands in the churchyard of Banchory Devenick, near the south side of the Dee, and about a mile and a half beyond the



Fig. 3. Watch-house in Banchory Devenick Churchyard.

boundary of Aberdeen at Bridge of Dee. It is built close to the southern wall of the churchyard, and has a window on its northern side, from which the watchers could overlook the graves. Like that at Newhills also, it has a fireplace, so that those using it might be kept as comfortable as possible during the dreary watches of the cold nights of winter. Near it lies the iron mortsafe afterwards described and illustrated (fig. 17).

Banchory Ternan.—Another watch-house stands in the graveyard at Banchory Ternan (fig. 4), about 17 miles from Aberdeen, and close to Banchory station on the Deeside railway. It is a two-storied building, the lower portion being used as a toolhouse and storeroom, while the

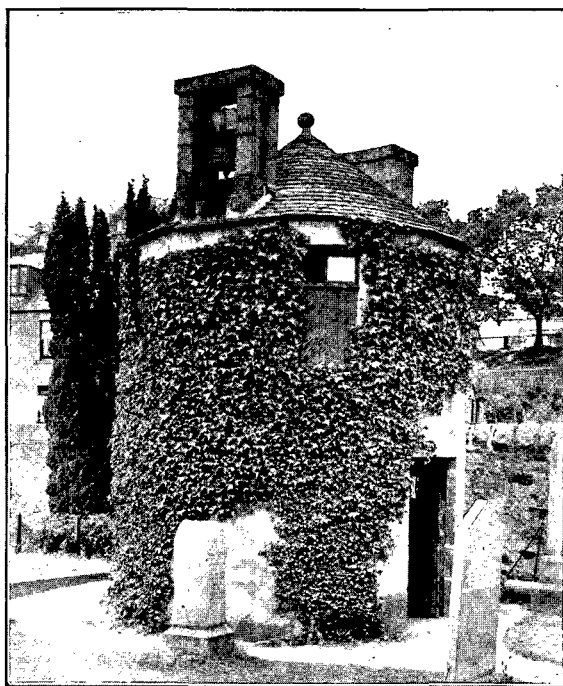


Fig. 4. Watch-house in Banchory Ternan Churchyard.

upper part was used as an outlook tower, from which the watchers could obtain a view of the churchyard. The small window from which they looked is still to be seen, and just beneath it there is a round hole in the woodwork through which, it is said, the custom was to thrust the muzzle of a gun, which was fired occasionally to

alarm any would-be depredators. The date 1829 is cut on the stone above the bell.

Peterculter.—The churchyard of Peterculter lies about 8 miles west of Aberdeen, and within a stone's-throw of the railway station. On the south side of it there is a small watch-house (fig. 5), very

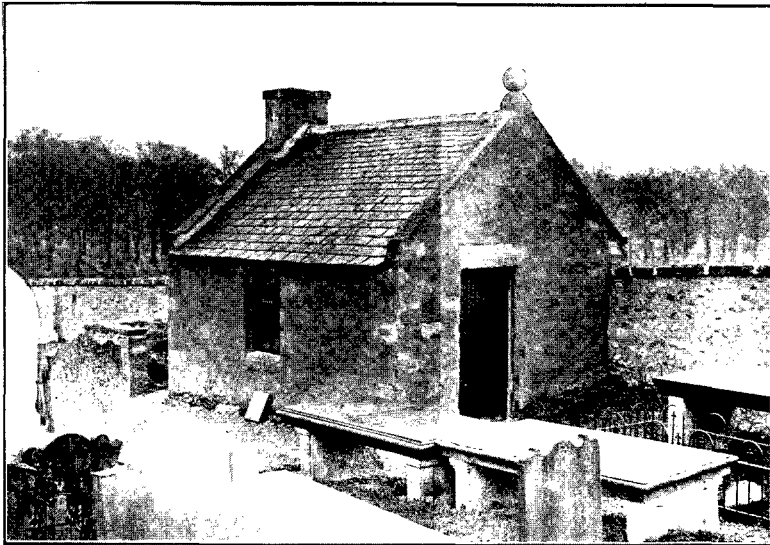


Fig. 5. Watch-house in Peterculter Churchyard.

similar in appearance to those at Newhills and Banchory Devenick. On the outside it measures 16 feet in length, 13 feet 6 inches in breadth, and 12 feet in height. It has a fireplace at the east end, and the north side is provided with a window placed conveniently for viewing that portion of the churchyard which was in use before the recent enlargement took place. There is no date on the building, but its appearance indicates that, like most of the other watch-houses, it was erected nearly a century ago.

Lumphanan.—There is a watch-house at the churchyard of Lumphanan, considerably larger in size than the average (fig. 6). It is situated outside the eastern boundary of the churchyard and is two stories high, so that a watchman looking out of the upper windows



Fig. 6. Watch-house at Churchyard of Lumphanan.

could overlook the churchyard. Since it ceased to be used as a watch-house considerable alterations have been made on the building. Formerly it stood alone, but now it seems to be part of the outhouses connected with the manse, other buildings having been built up against it. The outside stair by which access was got to the upper room has been removed, and some alterations have been made in the

doorways. The windows in the upper room remain, but the glass has been removed and wooden louvres inserted to fit the place as a drying loft for the manse laundry, into which the lower flat has been converted. A chimney has also been recently added.

MORTSAFES.

But there were other methods of protecting the dead, which did not entail so much hardship on the living. One of the simplest of these was to dig the grave very deep, place the coffin at the bottom, and fill in some earth which was trodden firmly down. More earth was then added, and again trodden down, and this process went on till the grave was filled up. The intention, of course, was to make the penetration of the grave down to the body a matter of the greatest possible difficulty. But it was soon found that this plan was not a great success. A skilled Resurrectionist could open an ordinary grave in about an hour, and even if his task was rendered more difficult by the firmness of the soil, he had ample time during the night to carry out his evil deed.

Then the plan of placing above the coffin a heavy stone, which one, or even two, men would be unable to lift, was adopted. Thus arose the simplest form of mortsafe. It was certainly a better plan than that of simply treading down the earth, and often frustrated the designs of the body-snatchers.

Kemnay.—It was in use in the churchyard of Kemnay before the erection of the vault. On one occasion, early in last century, a burial took place in the churchyard, the stone was placed in position above the coffin, and the earth filled in. Some weeks afterwards, when all danger of desecration was over, the grave was opened, to allow of the stone being lifted for use at another interment, and it was found that a large quantity of withered leaves lay above the stone. At first the onlookers were puzzled to account for the presence of the leaves, as they had not been put into the grave at the time of

the funeral. It was recollected, however, that on the night following the interment there had been a violent storm of wind, and the conclusion was arrived at that an unsuccessful attempt had been made to lift the coffin, and that while the body-snatchers had been at work, the wind had blown the leaves into the hole they had made.

Inverurie.—The Kemnay stone has disappeared, but one is still to be seen at Inverurie (fig. 7), lying outside the north wall of the churchyard. It measures 6 feet long, 1 foot 6 inches broad at the head end,

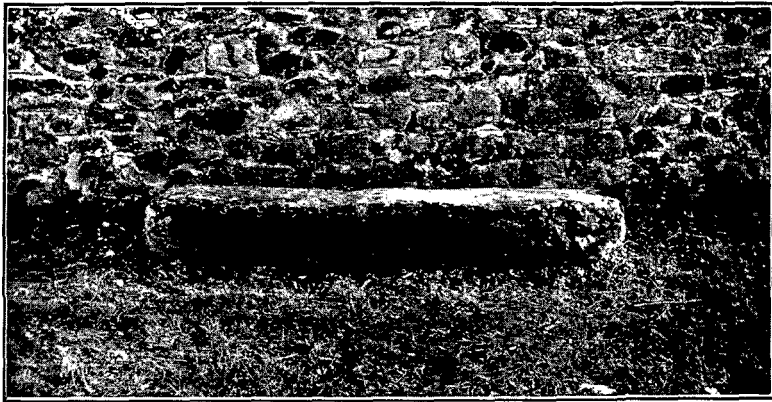


Fig. 7. Stone Mortsafe at Inverurie Churchyard.

1 foot 9 inches at the shoulders, and 1 foot 7 inches at the other end. The stone is from 9 to 10 inches thick, and the whole block of granite has been roughly formed into the shape of a coffin, such as it was intended to cover. Several mortsafes made of bar iron were also in use at Inverurie Churchyard, but they were broken up many years ago. Experience showed that it was necessary to have some means of protecting the graves at Inverurie, for the town lies only some 16 miles from Aberdeen with its University, and the graveyard, lying outside the town, afforded a tempting means of procuring the specimens required by the students.

On one occasion a death had occurred somewhat suddenly at a farmhouse on Donside, a few miles from Inverurie, and, as there was something mysterious about the disease which caused the death, the farm folks thought that an attempt would likely be made to lift the body for examination. Accordingly, the farmer and two or three of his farm servants and neighbours repaired to the churchyard as the evening shadows fell, and concealed themselves on the Bass, a conical mound which stands beside the churchyard, and from which a good view of the grave could be obtained. Shortly after midnight the watchers heard the silence broken by the sound of a wheeled vehicle coming along the Aberdeen road. It stopped at a short distance from the churchyard, and two men dismounted and approached the gate, leaving the trap in charge of a third person. When the men reached the gate, they stopped and turned back, having, as they afterwards confessed, caught sight of a light-coloured overcoat worn by one of the watchers. These watchers, guessing that they had been seen, rushed forward, and on the men attempting to escape, seized them. The prisoners, who proved to be two medical students from Aberdeen, were conveyed to the "lock-up," and early next morning brought before one of the magistrates. It was soon found, however, that it would have been a difficult matter to convict them, as they had really done nothing, and their companion had driven off the vehicle in which presumably their implements had been concealed. They were finally told that they would be set free provided they revealed the name of the local correspondent who had informed them of the burial. This they were naturally unwilling to do, but at last, probably terrified by the threatening appearance of the gathering crowd, one of the prisoners produced a letter which he threw down on the table. This showed that their informant was a fellow-student residing in the burgh, who had heard of the death, and thought it would afford a good opportunity of procuring an interesting subject at little expense. The prisoners were released, but public opinion

turned so strongly against their informant that he had to leave the district.

On another occasion, in the same churchyard, a man was caught in the very act of opening a grave. He was lodged for the night in a small thatched house, and an armed watchman was employed to guard the building lest he should escape. Guessing that the watchman would not refuse some refreshment, for which he had a weakness, one of the friends of the prisoner supplied him freely, and kept his attention engaged, while another cut his way through the thatch and released the culprit, who immediately decamped unnoticed. The guard watched the empty building till the prisoner was sent for in the morning, and great was his surprise when he opened the door and found the room empty, the hole in the roof showing how the prisoner had escaped.

The heavy stone placed above the coffin proved also to be an insufficient protection, for the Resurrectionists soon found means of getting out the corpse without removing the stone. This they did by digging down to the coffin and removing its end. They then fastened a rope round the neck of the corpse and dragged it out, afterwards filling up the hole and removing, as far as possible, all traces of their work. To prevent this method of operation, a form of mortsafe was devised consisting of a coffin-shaped stone, similar to that already described, but having iron lattice-work to a depth of about 18 inches all round it on the lower side, which effectually prevented interference with the coffin. This apparatus was placed over the coffin in the grave, and was allowed to remain there for several weeks till all danger of removing the body was past. This is the commonest form of mortsafe found in the Aberdeenshire churchyards.

Cluny.—Four of this type occur in the churchyard of Cluny (fig. 8), nearly 2 miles from Monymusk station, on the Alford branch of the Great North of Scotland Railway. They are all of the same size and appearance, and are in a good state of preservation. The length of

each is 7 feet, breadth at head 1 foot 10 inches, at shoulder 2 feet 4 inches, and at foot 1 foot 6 inches. The stone tops, which are of grey granite, are 6 inches thick, and the iron lattice-work descends to a depth of 1 foot 6 inches below the lower side of the stone to which it is attached. Each stone is pierced by three holes, two at the shoulder and one about 2 feet distant from the narrowest end. On the underside of each hole there is some ironwork attached to the stone, evidently the remains of bolts which passed through the holes, and which were

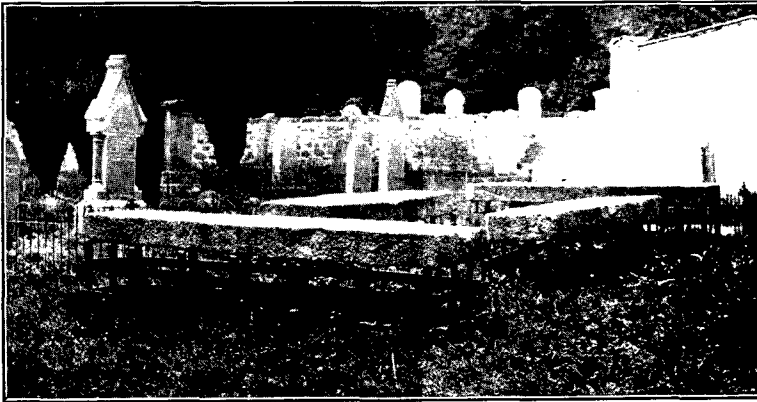


Fig. 8. Mortsafes in Cluny Churchyard.

used to assist in lowering the mortsafe into the grave and raising it again when it was no longer needed.

Skene.—In the churchyard of Skene, about 9 miles west of Aberdeen, there is a mortsafe (fig. 9), closely resembling those at Cluny, both in appearance and size. It lies at the foot of the eastern wall of the churchyard in such a position that the bolt holes, which are similar to the Cluny ones, are better seen than in those examples.

Towie.—Another mortsafe of exactly similar design lies in the churchyard of Towie on Donside (fig. 10). It measures 7 feet 2 inches in length, 2 feet in breadth at the top, 2 feet 4 inches at the shoulder,

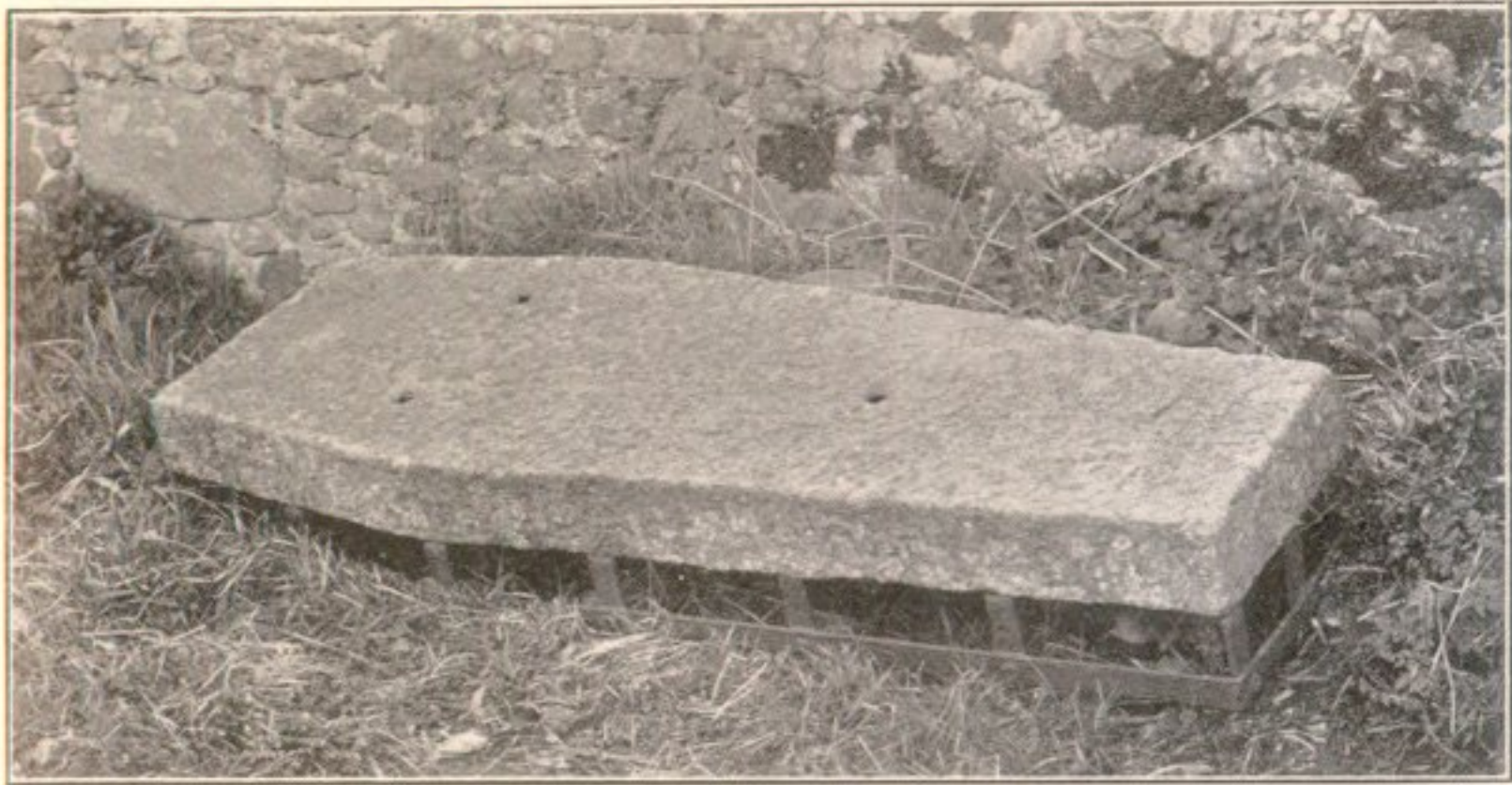


Fig. 9. Mortsafe in Skene Churchyard.

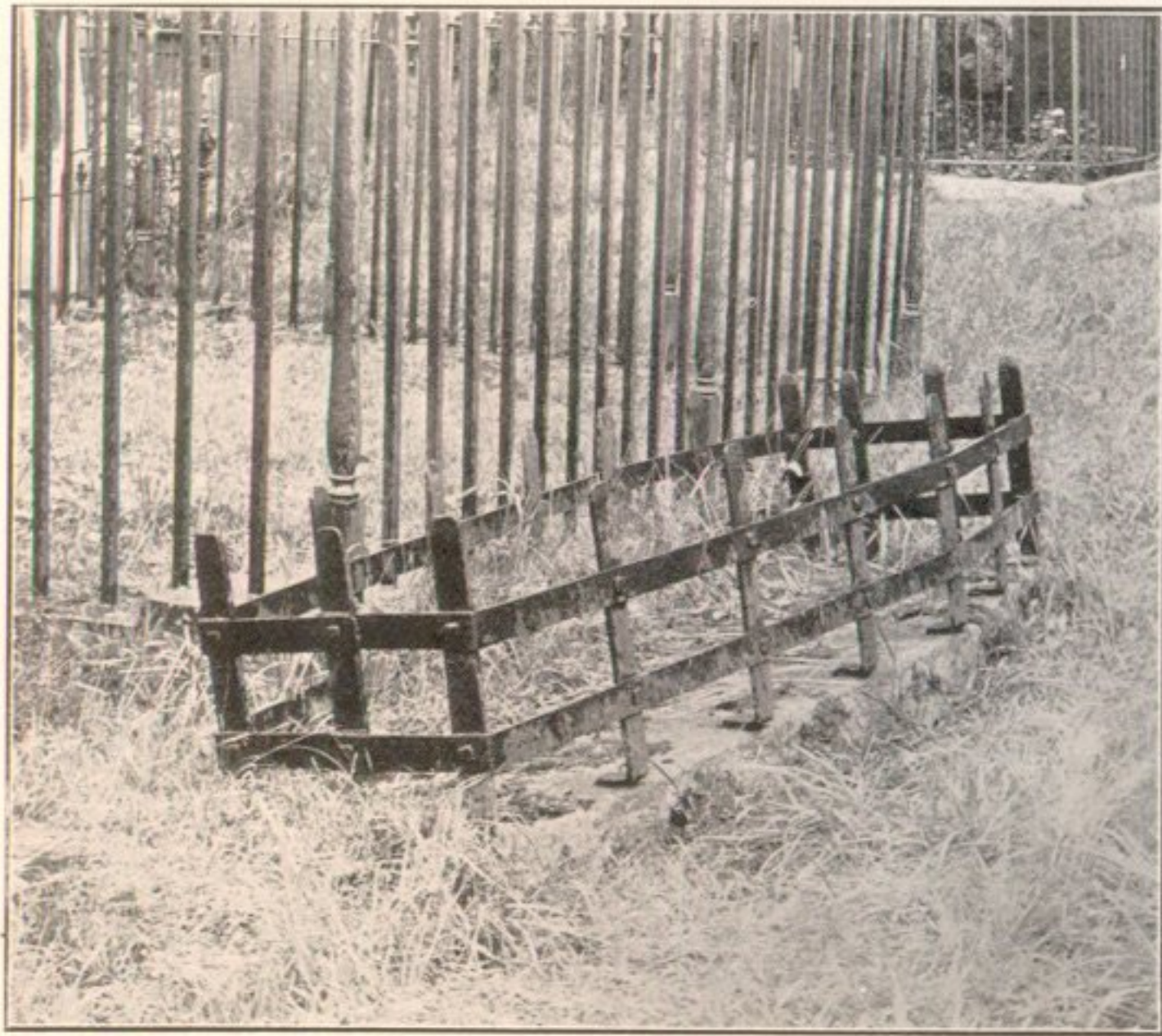


Fig. 10. Mortsafe in Towie Churchyard.

and 1 foot 7 inches at the foot or narrow end. The stone, which is of grey granite, is 5 inches thick, and the iron lattice-work is 1 foot 6 inches deep. As this mortsafe is at present upside down, a better view of the lattice-work can be got than is possible in those cases where the safes stand in their proper position.

These mortsafes at Cluny, Skene, and Towie are so similar in size

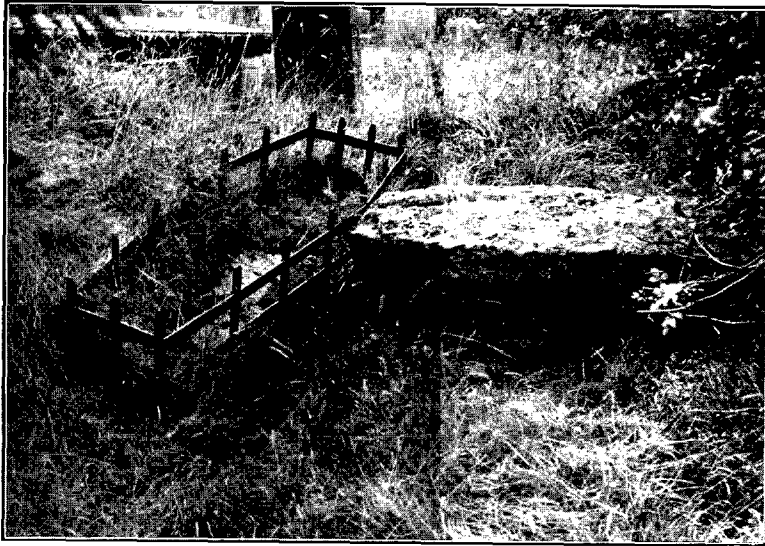


Fig. 11. Mortsafes in Old Churchyard of Kinnernie.

and design as to lead to the conclusion that they have either been made by the same workman, or have been copied from the same original pattern.

Kinnernie.—Near the centre of the churchyard of Kinnernie, in the parish of Midmar, there are two mortsafes (fig. 11), similar to those already described, except that the stone tops are not quite so well finished as in the other examples. One of them stands in its proper position, with the ironwork resting on the ground; the other lies

upside down. Both are in rather a neglected condition, almost overgrown by shrubs and tall grass.

Kinmuck.—In the churchyard belonging to the Society of Friends at Kinmuck, nearly 4 miles from Inverurie, there is a mortsafe of a different pattern (fig. 12). It is entirely made of iron lattice-work, and consists of an upper and a lower portion, between which the coffin



Fig. 12. Mortsafe in Society of Friends' Burial Ground, Kinmuck

was placed. The halves were bolted together so as to form a sort of cage round the coffin. This was lowered into the grave, where it was allowed to remain as long as was necessary for the body to decay. Tradition says that the safe originally cost £10, and was so heavy when loaded that it required ten men to lower it into the grave, and to raise it again. The upper portion lies in the churchyard at the foot of the west wall near the gate, but the lower half was unfortunately broken up several years ago, and now only the top

part of the frame remains, stored in a shed near the Meeting House of the Society.

In that Meeting House is still preserved the iron nut-key, used for turning the bolts which fastened the two parts of the mortsafe together, after the coffin had been placed between them. It measures $14\frac{1}{2}$ inches in length, and $3\frac{1}{2}$ inches in breadth from corner to corner at the widest part (outside measure).

Beside it is kept a very curious padlock (fig. 13), which is said to

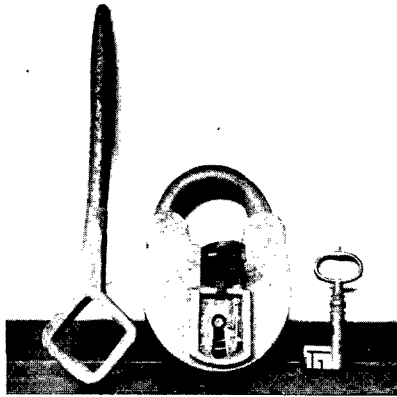


Fig. 13. Mortsafe Nut-key and Padlock with Key at Society of Friends' Meeting House, Kinmuck.

have been also used in connection with the mortsafe. The keyhole of the padlock has a brass cover over it from which two knobs project. These are apparently intended to assist in moving the cover, but all attempts to get them to move in any direction fail, for they are mere dummies placed there for the purpose of leading astray the uninitiated. The only way of uncovering the keyhole is to press a small knob seen on the top of the handle of the key against a corresponding small spot concealed on the side of the cover. This releases a spring, and the cover immediately flies open, so that the padlock may be unlocked.

The arrangement is a very ingenious one, likely to puzzle anyone unacquainted with the mode of operation. The metal work and spring of this padlock are still in good working order, too good for the article ever to have been buried underground with the safe. If used with the mortsafe, it must have been only while it lay above ground; but perhaps it may have been used for the door of the Meeting House,

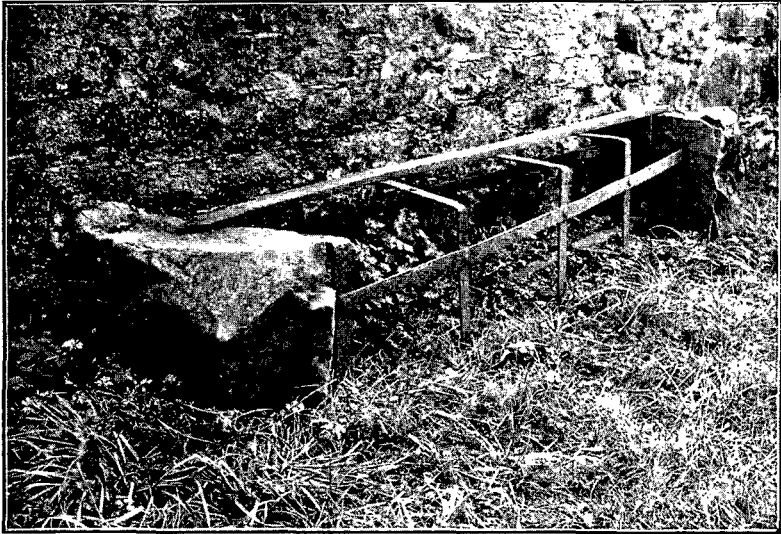


Fig. 14. Mortsafe in Churchyard of Tough.

rather than for the mortsafe. The padlock measures $8\frac{1}{4}$ inches in height and $5\frac{5}{8}$ inches in width, while the key is $4\frac{3}{4}$ inches high and $1\frac{5}{8}$ inches wide, the knob on the top being about $\frac{1}{4}$ inch high.

Tough.—Fully a mile south-west of Whitehouse railway station, and about 3 miles from Alford, lies the churchyard of Tough, in which there is a mortsafe of somewhat peculiar construction (fig. 14). It rests at the foot of the western wall of the churchyard, a few yards from the door of the church. It was discovered about six years ago,

when the gravedigger was making preparations for an interment. While digging the grave he came upon some ironwork which stopped his progress. With the help of several men the mortsafe was unearthed, and after a great deal of trouble was raised to the surface. It consists of an iron cage, 6 feet 8 inches long, and 1 foot 3 inches deep, formed of four rectangles of bar iron, varying in width from 1 foot 10 inches at head of safe to 1 foot at foot of it, the bars of which the rectangles are formed being $1\frac{1}{4}$ inches wide and $\frac{1}{4}$ inch thick. These rectangles are joined together by four iron rods running from end to end, one along each side. The upper bar, which is considerably stronger than the others, is 7 feet 3 inches long, $2\frac{3}{4}$ inches wide, and $\frac{1}{2}$ inch thick, and is bolted into a heavy stone at each end for the purpose of rendering the mortsafe too heavy for the Resurrectionists to lift out of the grave. The iron head of the mortsafe is made somewhat stronger than the other parts, and is closed by two upright bars. The coffin was inserted by being pushed into its place within the cage, after the removal of these bars, which were then replaced, and riveted into their setting. Then the long bar across the top of the mortsafe was bolted into the stone at either end, and the whole was ready for depositing in the grave.

The burial of the mortsafe in the churchyard seems to have been entirely forgotten in the neighbourhood, but the raising of it to the surface brought the occasion of its use to the memory of an old lady. She said that it was specially made to protect the coffin of a man who in his lifetime greatly feared the Resurrectionists, and took this effective means of circumventing them. The construction of the mortsafe supports the old lady's story, for it is evidently made to be used for one interment only.

At the time of its discovery it had lain for some sixty or seventy years underground, and its contents had decayed to such an extent that they must have dropped through the open cage work during the struggle to raise it to the surface, so that it appeared to be empty

when finally raised. That the body had not been stolen was evident, for the mortsafe was, and still is, intact.

A relative of the gentleman whose coffin was enclosed in the Tough mortsafe lies buried in the churchyard of Alford. It is said that his body also was protected by an iron mortsafe similar to the one at Tough, and that it still remains in the grave. Both of these gentlemen were related to a local doctor, and it seems likely to have been his knowledge of the practices of the Resurrectionists in his student days that caused them to have their own bodies protected so carefully.

The valley of the Don seems to have been a favourite hunting-ground for the Resurrectionists, probably from its proximity to the medical school of the University of Aberdeen. This doubtless accounts for the number of mortsafes still existing within its bounds; but there must have been many more originally, for in recent years a considerable number have been broken up, and the iron of which they were made utilised for other purposes.

The following is a sample of the Resurrectionist stories once current in this district, the very frequency of which is striking evidence of the generality and commonness of the practice of body-snatching. A poacher was passing one of these Donside churchyards late one night, when he thought that he heard sounds proceeding from within its walls. He challenged the supposed workers, and the sounds immediately ceased. His suspicions being aroused, he went forward to the churchyard dyke and, looking over, perceived at first nothing in the darkness. Soon, however, a white figure became apparent standing near the other side of the churchyard. Thinking that the ghostly figure was simply some practical joker clothed in a white sheet attempting to frighten him, he called, "Ye canna frichten me," and, leaping over the dyke, he advanced towards it. The figure did not run off, as he had expected, so, gripping his stick firmly, he rushed forward and seized it by the throat. The poor poacher's experience was appalling, for he had gripped the throat of a corpse. The Resurrec-

tionists had rested the body, still clothed in its winding-sheet, against the churchyard dyke while they were filling up the grave again, and it was the noise they had made in their final operations that had attracted the attention of the unfortunate poacher.



Fig. 15. Mortsafe from Durriss Churchyard, used as Drinking Trough for Cattle.

But Deeside also has its share of those contrivances designed for the protection of the bodies of the dead.

Crathes.—On the farm of Upper Mills, about half a mile from Crathes station on the Deeside railway, there is an iron mortsafe (fig. 15), which is at present used as a drinking trough to supply water to the cattle pasturing on two neighbouring fields. The wall separating

the two fields is built across the middle of the safe, thus allowing either end of it to project into a different field. The safe is shaped exactly like a coffin, without the lid. It measures 7 feet 3 inches in length, 1 foot 10 inches at the top end, 2 feet 4 inches at the widest part, and 1 foot 6 inches at the lower or narrow end, and weighs $15\frac{1}{2}$ cwts. Its sides are 15 inches in depth, and the iron of which it is formed is $\frac{1}{2}$ inch thick. It is strengthened by an iron bar, $1\frac{1}{2}$ inches in thickness, running from end to end, with three cross-pieces from side to side, along what is now the bottom of the trough, but which was originally the top of the mortsafe. There are several holes through the sides just under the original top, through which the tackling for lifting the mortsafe was fixed. These are now used for emptying the trough when it is to be cleaned or the water is to be renewed. This mortsafe originally belonged to the churchyard of Durris, on the opposite side of the Dee, but about seventy years ago it was sold as a useless encumbrance, and was purchased for a small sum by the then tenant of Upper Mills, who thought he saw a use to which it could be put. There is some prospect of its being rescued from its present position and being preserved as an interesting relic of a bygone time.¹

Maryculter.—On the farm of Back Mains of Altries, on the south side of the Dee in the parish of Maryculter, and about $1\frac{1}{2}$ miles from Mill-timber railway station, there is another iron mortsafe used as a watering trough for cattle (fig. 16). Its measurements are exactly the same as those of the Durris (Crathes) safe, and it has the central longitudinal bar and the three crossbars for strengthening purposes, and also the holes for the lifting tackle. It is so similar in every way to the Durris (Crathes) mortsafe that it seems likely they were both cast from the same mould. It now lies just within the dyke close to the roadside, and is so placed underneath the boundary fence that the cattle in two neighbouring fields can drink out of it. It is known locally as “The

¹ Since the above was written this mortsafe has been removed from Upper Mills to Durris House.

Coffin," and is said to have been brought from Park in the parish of Drumoak about fifty years ago.

Lumphanan.—Still another mortsafe of the coffin-shaped variety has been used for some years as a water trough at the farm of Auchlossan, close to the Deeside railway, and about half-way between Lumphanan and Dess stations.



Fig. 16. Iron Coffin-shaped Mortsafe used as Watering Trough at Back Mains of Altries, Maryculter.

Banchory Devenick.—(1) In addition to the watch-house at Banchory Devenick already described (p. 291), there lies in the churchyard an iron mortsafe of the coffin-shaped type (fig. 17), very similar to that formerly at Durris. It lies on its side at the foot of the southern wall of the churchyard between the gate and the watch-house. It measures 7 feet 3 inches in length, 1 foot 10 inches in breadth at the top, fully 2 feet at the shoulders, and 1 foot 5 inches at the foot

outside dimensions). Its depth is 1 foot 4 inches, and the iron sides are $\frac{1}{2}$ inch thick. There are two circular holes, $1\frac{1}{2}$ inches in diameter, on each side, just under the closed top, one of them being 11 inches from the top, and the other 1 foot 8 inches from the foot of the safe. To these the tackling for raising and lowering the mortsafe was attached. There are no longitudinal or cross bars to strengthen the top of the

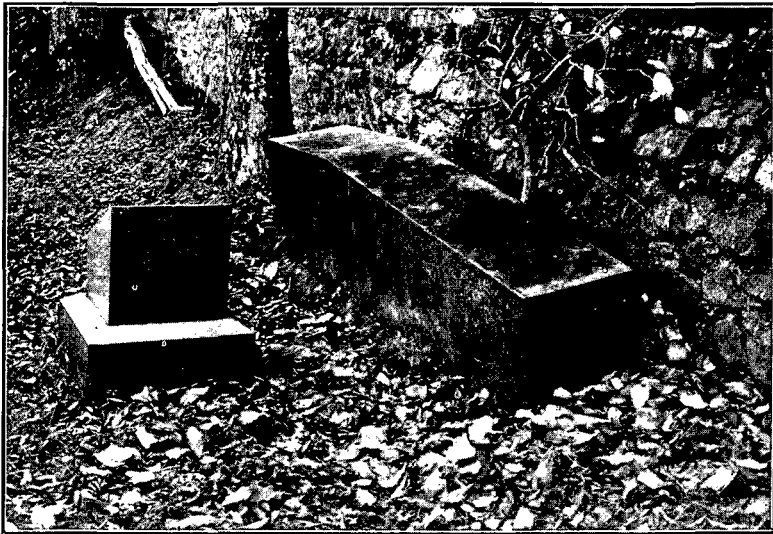


Fig. 17. Mortsafe in Banchory Devenick Churchyard.

safe as in the Durris specimen ; but instead, the iron appears to have been cast rather thicker there than at the sides.

(2) During the present year (1911) another mortsafe was discovered at Banchory Devenick, while a grave was being dug in the churchyard attached to the United Free Church. It measured 7 feet long, 2 feet wide, and fully 1 foot thick, and was formed of two large stone slabs, which had been placed over the coffin of a young man interred there in 1854. His father in his early years had been engaged as a

watcher in the Parish Churchyard, and entertained so lively a fear of the Resurrectionists that he thought it necessary, even as late as 1854, to take this means of protecting his son's remains. It is almost needless to say that the coffin was found untouched underneath the stones.

VAULTS.

The mortsafes of stone or iron, or a combination of the two, were doubtless very efficient protectors of the dead, but they were at the same time very troublesome to the living. They were heavy and cumbersome; indeed their efficiency depended largely upon these qualities, for had they been easily removed they would have afforded little protection against the Resurrectionists. Their great weight rendered them difficult to place over the coffin in the grave, and still more difficult to get out again. Some kind of tackling had to be employed, and many men were required for these operations. These difficulties led to the building of strong vaults in some of the churchyards, where the coffins could be stored until it would be safe to lay them in their final resting-place in the churchyard.

Fintray.—At Fintray, about 10 miles from Aberdeen, and about 1 mile from Kinaldie station on the Great North of Scotland Railway, there is one of these vaults, built in 1830 (fig. 18). It is an underground arched stone chamber, covered with turf, and it is entered by a descending flight of stairs. There were shelves within, upon which the coffins could be placed, and the vault was lined with sheet metal, not for the purpose of rendering it stronger, but to prevent the moisture which might percolate through the roof from dropping on the coffins. The door was of iron, strongly made to prevent any attempt to break it open.

Kemnay.—Another vault, somewhat similar to the Fintray one in size and shape, exists at Kemnay (fig. 19). It was built by public subscription in 1831, a year later than that at Fintray, upon which in



Fig. 18. Vault in Fintray Churchyard.



Fig. 19. Vault in Kemnay Churchyard.

one respect at least it is an improvement. At Fintray the coffins had to be carried down a flight of stairs before they could be placed in the vault, and doubtless the inconvenience of this method led to the entrance of the Kemnay vault being made at the level of the surface of the churchyard. The iron shelving upon which the coffins rested can still be



Fig. 20. Iron Door of Vault in Kemnay Churchyard.

seen within the vault, which is lined with sheet lead to prevent the moisture from dripping from the roof. The vault, though built nearly on the surface, is banked over with soil, and covered with turf, so as to give it the appearance of an underground chamber. Its iron door (fig. 20) is strong and massive, and has a thick iron bar passing from top to bottom, and completely concealing the keyhole. This bar was fastened with a chain and padlock, and formed an additional protection against unauthorised interference with the vault. It is

said that, even after this vault was built, an armed guard was sometimes stationed in the churchyard to render assurance doubly sure. Both the vaults at Kemnay and Fintray are now used as toolhouses.

Belhelvie.—The old churchyard of Belhelvie lies about half a mile beyond the eighth milestone on the road from Aberdeen to Newburgh. It contains two vaults, one considerably larger than the other.



Fig. 21. Larger Vault in Belhelvie Churchyard.

(1) The larger one (fig. 21) stands at the south-west corner of the churchyard, with its entrance from the road outside. It measures 20 feet in length, 17 feet 6 inches in breadth, and 12 feet in height. The roof is formed of a stone arch slated on the outside, and the outer door, made of strong oak and studded with iron bolts, is reached by descending three steps. The door is 5 feet high and 2 feet 10 inches broad, and has two keyholes. Each of these is protected by a hinged

iron bar, 2 feet long and $1\frac{1}{2}$ inches broad, the portion covering the key-hole being 3 inches in breadth. One of the bars is hinged at the top, and the other at the bottom, so that they may meet at the centre over an iron loop, which passes through both bars, and through which a padlock was fastened to make all secure. Just above the outer doorway there is a small slit in the stonework for ventilating the vault. The inner doorway is made of iron to render more difficult any illegal attempt to enter the building. The inside of the vault contains two shelves on each side, fitted with rollers so arranged that the coffins could be easily made to slide into the positions they were intended to occupy on the shelves.

This vault was erected about 1835, the cost being defrayed by public subscription. After it ceased to be used for its original purpose it was utilised for the temporary reception of the bodies of seamen drowned on the neighbouring coast. Fortunately, it has not been required for this purpose for many years past.

(2) The smaller vault (fig. 22) stands in the centre of the churchyard, partly underground. Like the larger it is built of stone with an arched roof, but instead of being slated it is covered with a considerable depth of soil overgrown with grass and ivy. The length inside is 8 feet 3 inches, the breadth 6 feet 6 inches, and the height at the top of the arch 5 feet 6 inches. It has a small, neatly shaped, arched doorway of dressed stone, 2 feet 3 inches wide and 4 feet 3 inches in height at the centre, but the door itself has long since disappeared. The doorway is reached by a descent of five rather steep steps, and it must have been a difficult operation to carry the coffin down these steps and through the small doorway. No one seems to know when or why this vault was erected, but it is evidently older than the larger one. Probably its small size, and the inconvenience attending its use, may have furnished reasons which led to the erection of the more modern one at the corner of the churchyard. It seems hardly likely that it was a private burial vault, which has fallen into disrepair ; for



Fig. 22. Smaller Vault in Belhelvie Churchyard.

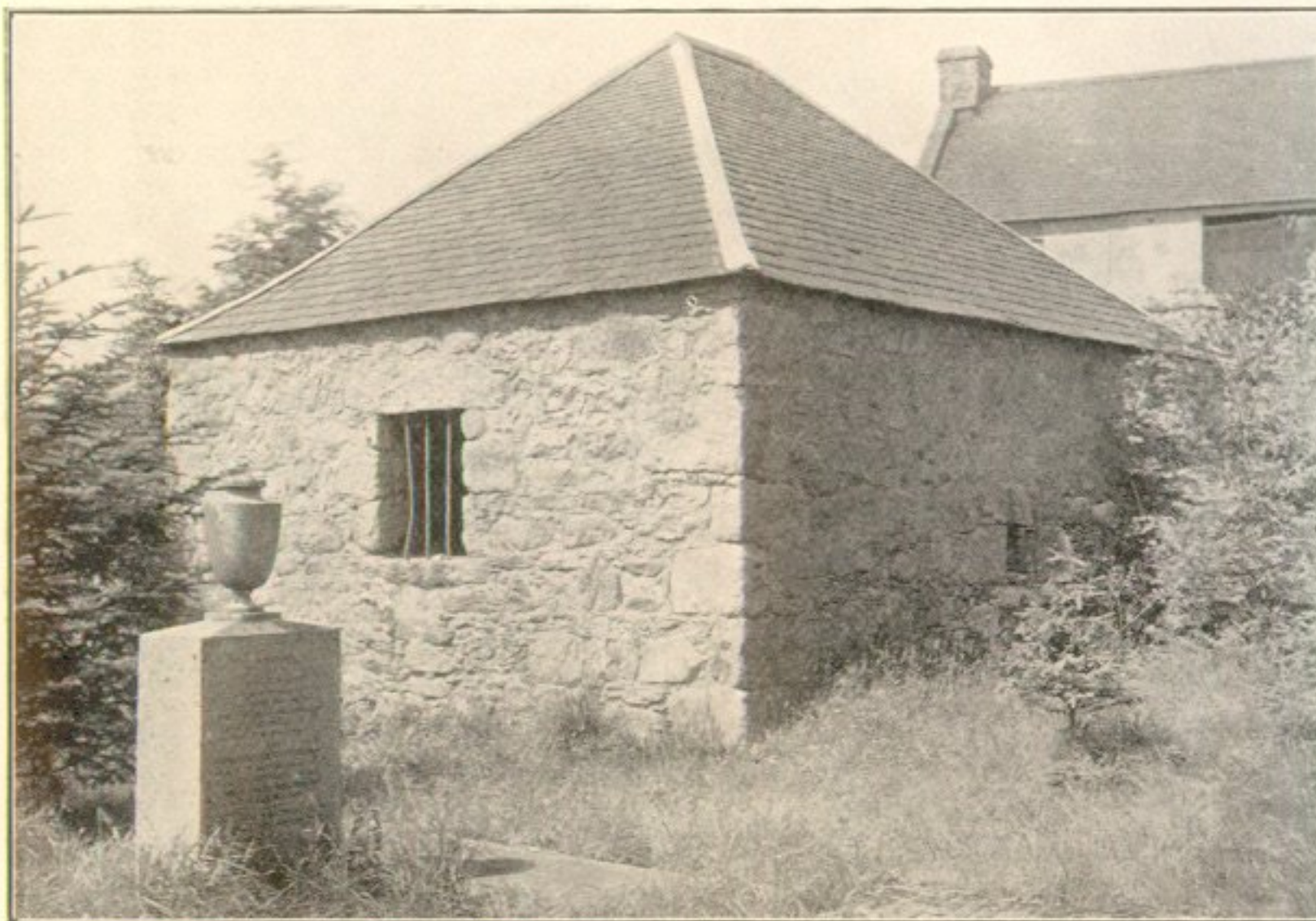


Fig. 23. Vault in Old Churchyard of Leochel.

in that case it would have been necessary to remove the coffins it contained, before using it for its present purpose as a lumber room for the storage of the implements used in the churchyard.

Leochel.—In the old churchyard of Leochel, about 6 miles from Alford, there is a stone arched vault underneath a room used as a toolhouse or store (fig. 23). The entrance to the vault is on the east side of the building, and is reached by a descent of seven steps. The vault is 13 feet 6 inches long, 12 feet broad, and 8 feet 3 inches high at the centre of the arch. Three stone platforms for resting the coffins upon are built within the vault: a long one stretching from end to end along the back, and a shorter one at each side of the doorway. The longest one is 13 feet 6 inches long by 4 feet 9 inches broad, and the smaller ones are each about 5 feet long by 4 feet broad. The passages between the platforms are about 3 feet wide. The doorway (fig. 24), now almost concealed by the growth of tall grasses and shrubs, is 5 feet high, by 2 feet 9 inches broad. This vault has no inside lining to prevent the drip of water from the roof, as the upper story kept the rain from reaching the arch, and thus rendered further protection unnecessary.

Coull.—The churchyard of Coull lies about 3 miles north of Aboyne station on the Deeside railway, and contains an arched stone vault measuring inside 12 feet 6 inches in length, 8 feet broad, 5 feet high at the sides, and 7 feet 6 inches high at the centre of the arch (fig. 25). The walls are 2 feet thick, and the roof is banked over with turf, in a manner similar to those at Fintray and Kenmay. The doorway is 5 feet high and 3 feet broad, and the door itself is made of two thicknesses of 1-inch wood lined with iron $\frac{1}{4}$ inch thick and studded with iron bolts. The keyhole, like that at Kemnay, is protected by an iron cover, 2 feet 6 inches long and 5 inches broad, hinged at the top and fastened at the lower end by a padlock. There are three smaller holes drilled through a stone above the doorway, which communicate with a passage leading to the inside of the vault. In the building of

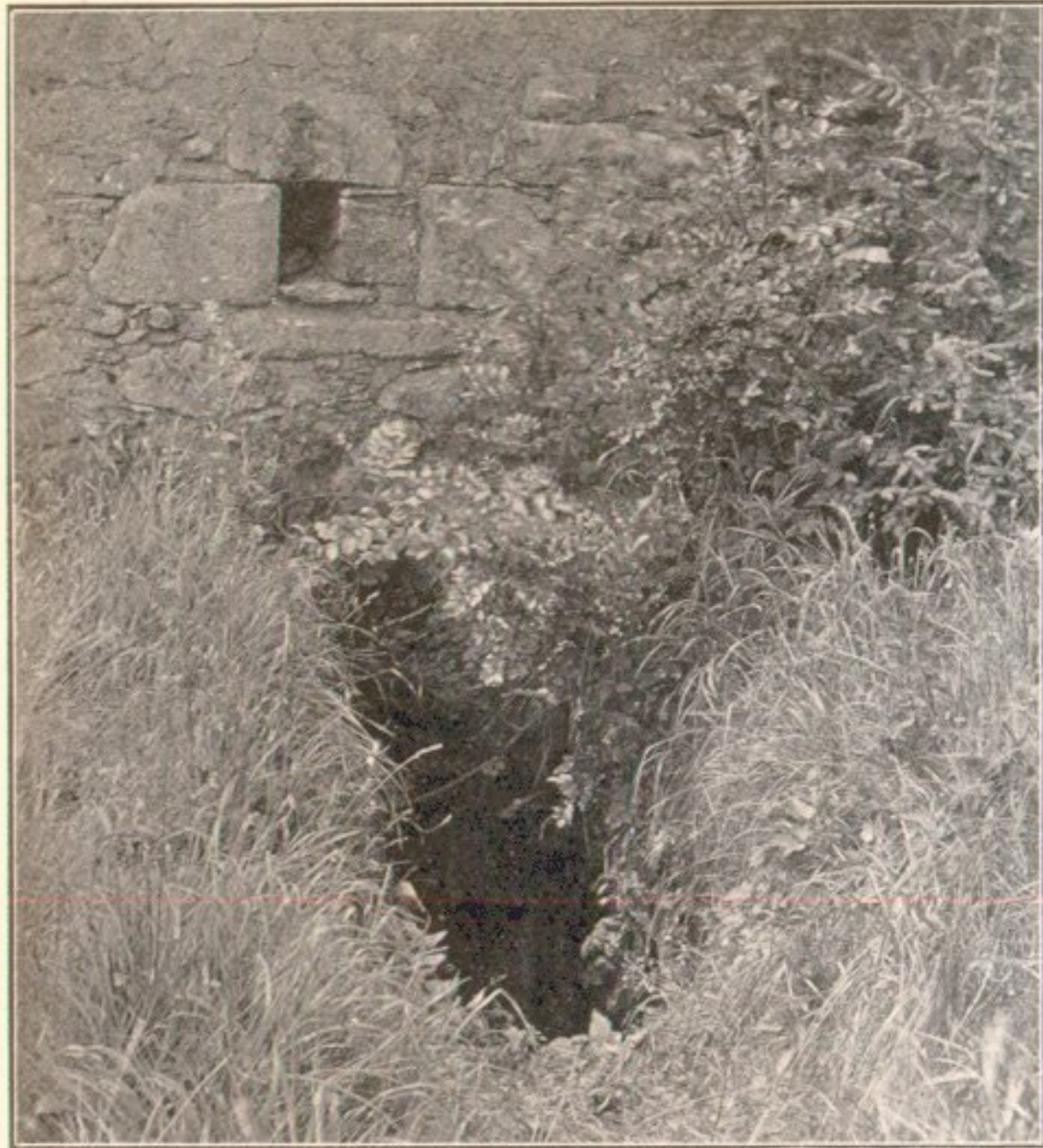


Fig. 24. Entrance to the Vault in the Old Churchyard of Leochel.



Fig. 25. Vault in the Churchyard of Coull.

the vault the masons evidently utilised what material they could get lying about in the churchyard, for in the inside wall a stone with a partly obliterated date, 1660, may be observed.

There is an interesting story connected with this churchyard. Owing to strong suspicions arising that some of the graves were being tampered with, a number of men resolved to watch immediately after a burial. Without allowing their intention to become known, they met in the churchyard, and after concealing themselves waited patiently. Sure enough a party of Resurrectionists appeared, and were allowed to proceed with their work till they had thoroughly compromised themselves. The watchers then rushed forward and attempted to arrest them. A fight ensued, in which the Resurrectionists were badly mauled, and fled, leaving their implements behind them. One of them, a young doctor, was so badly hurt that he never fully recovered; and the gravedigger is said to have disappeared from the district. The implements left behind included a pickaxe, spade, and screwdriver, together with an instrument having a telescopic handle with a hook at the end, probably intended either to assist in lifting the coffin or dragging out the body. These implements were preserved for a time, but they have now disappeared, and all efforts to trace them have failed. It is unfortunate that such interesting relics should have been lost, and it surely emphasises the desirability of depositing such articles in some Museum, where they would be carefully preserved, and be available for the inspection of those interested in such things.

Udny.—Perhaps the most interesting of these vaults, as well as the one about which we have the fullest information, is that which stands in the churchyard of Udny (fig. 26). It differs from all the others in several ways. It is circular in form instead of rectangular; the roof is slated instead of being covered with turf; it has two doors, an inner and an outer one; and the platform on which the coffins rested is a revolving one.

The outer door (fig. 27) is made of a double thickness of stout oak,

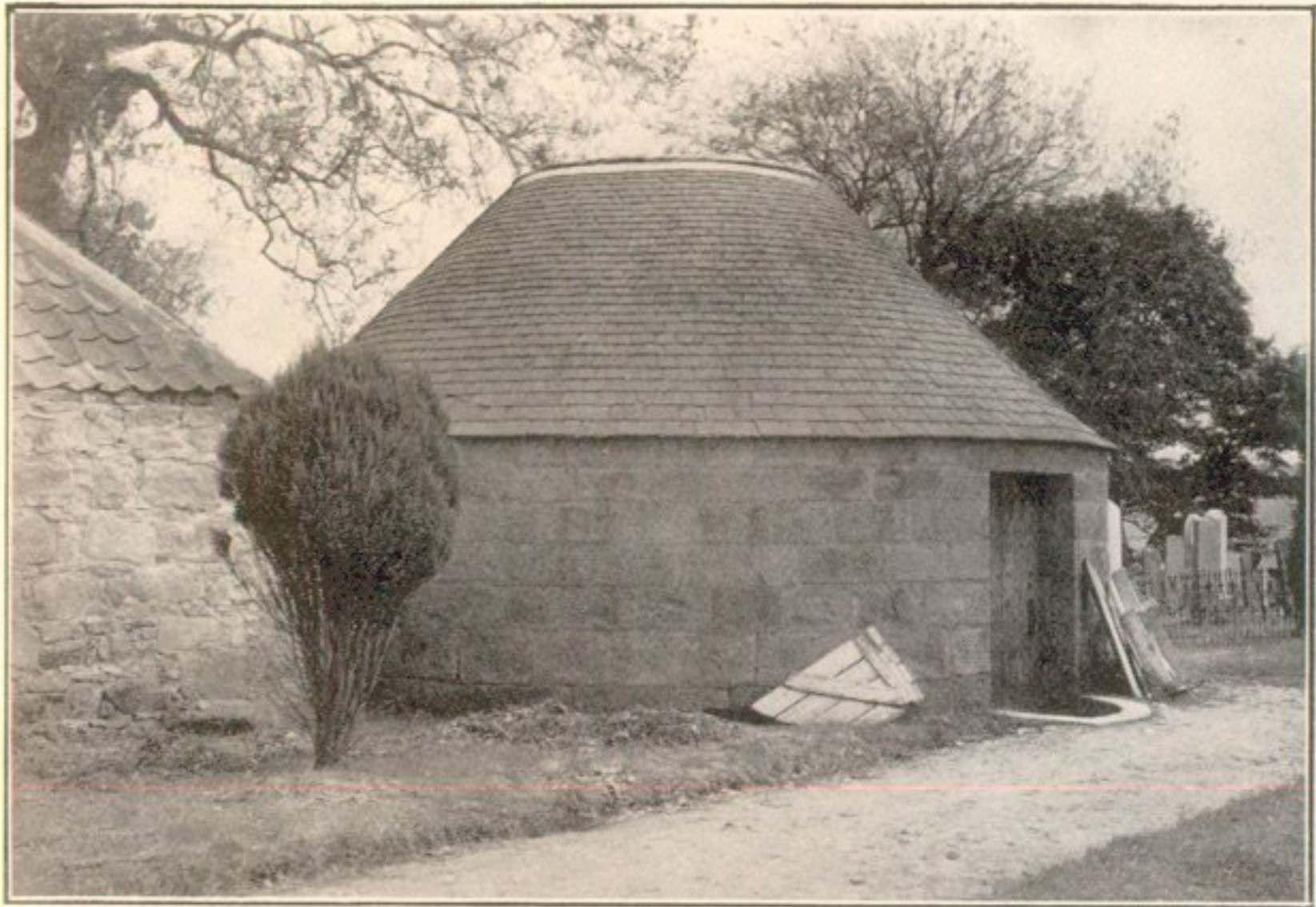


Fig. 26. Vault in Udny Churchyard.



Fig 27. Outer Oaken Door of Vault in Udny Churchyard.

studded with iron bolts, and the keyhole is protected by a hinged iron bar, which folds over the hole, and is fastened by a padlock in a way similar to those already described. The inner door is of iron, and is made to slide up and down in grooves, instead of opening and shutting in the ordinary way. The inside of the building is lined with plaster instead of sheet metal, as in some of the other vaults. But



Fig. 28. Interior of Vault in Udney Churchyard, showing Inner Iron Door (partly raised) and Circular Revolving Platform.

the most interesting part of the structure is the platform on which the coffins were laid (fig. 28). It is made of strong oak, is circular in form, and is so arranged that it can be made to revolve round its centre when required. Thus, after a coffin had been placed in the vault it was only necessary to move the circular platform round a few feet, and it was ready for the reception of the next coffin. As more coffins were deposited, the platform was moved further and further round,

until the first coffin again came opposite the doorway, when it could be removed and buried in the churchyard.

Very full information is fortunately available concerning the building of this vault, and the regulations for its use ; for, some time ago, on the death of an old parishioner, the Minutes of the Proceedings of the Committee of Management of the Vault came into the possession of the Rev. Alex. Spence, M.A., minister of the parish. With his kind permission I have been allowed to examine these minutes, which afford some very interesting reading, and from which I have extracted the following information, for the purpose of indicating how these vaults were built and managed.

On the 21st of January 1832 a number of gentlemen met at the Green of Udny "for the purpose of taking into consideration the propriety of erecting a vault in the churchyard for depositing the bodies of the dead previous to interment." There were fifteen gentlemen present, including the Rev. John Leslie, minister of the parish, and they elected a committee of six members, any three to be a quorum. They then approved of a plan submitted to them by Mr Marr of Cairn Brogie, and authorised the Committee to carry the same, or any other plan they might adopt, into effect. The next meeting was held a week later, when the proposed plan was adopted, and it was resolved to advertise in the *Aberdeen Journal* for estimates, and to invite subscriptions for its erection. Draft resolutions for regulating the use of the vault were also drawn up, but as these were afterwards embodied in the final regulations, subsequently quoted in detail, their insertion here would be superfluous. However, a curious one of a temporary nature may be noted : "The amount of subscription which shall entitle the subscriber to a right to the said vault shall be indefinite, but in cases where the Committee regard such sum as trifling, or not nearly in proportion to others, according to circumstances, the Committee will not accept of such, and shall intimate the same to the person or persons offering such trifling or

unequal subscription, that, unless they subscribe a sum to be named by the Committee, they shall not have any right to the use of the vault." That this regulation was necessary, and was not intended merely as a threat, is shown by what took place at a meeting held exactly a month later, when objection was taken to the amount given by several subscribers, who were ordered to be informed that they were each to pay the sum of ten shillings or be excluded from the use of the vault. On the 17th of March the estimates of Messrs Alexander Wallace, mason, Smiddyhole, and Thomas Simpson, wright, Oldmeldrum, for the erection of the vault were accepted. Intimation was also received from one of those whose subscriptions had been considered inadequate, that, provided it were certified to him that the surplus, if any, should be applied to charitable purposes, he was disposed to give the ten shillings claimed, but not till such time as the above should be certified to him. Several persons not having paid the subscriptions promised by them, it was resolved to intimate to those who refused to pay that their names should be erased from the lists, and that they should be held to be non-subscribers, that their names should be recorded, and that if afterwards their friends should be put into the vault, they should pay higher than others; and that those who were to pay within a short time, but had not money, should grant their bills to be paid on demand.

The Committee evidently found some difficulty in collecting the money needed, for they met again on 20th April, for the purpose of making several alterations in the specifications, with the view of reducing the expense of the structure. This was done, and the contractors were then informed that their estimates as modified were accepted, and that the work was to be finished by the first day of September 1832. This was not accomplished, however, for on the 22nd of November an application by the contractors for an advance of part of the price of the work was refused owing to the unfinished state of the vault. Then a dispute arose with the mason, whose work was

said to be disconform to contract, and after some discussion this was settled by a deduction of £5 being made from his contract price. On the 26th of January the sum of £85 was paid to the contractors; Thomas Simpson received £5, 7s. 11d. for the outer door, and Thomas Rae 10s. 11d., and the treasurer was authorised to pay the smith for the iron door. Several small accounts were afterwards paid, and the whole amount of the subscriptions, £114, 17s., seems to have been expended on the vault and its subsequent improvement.

On the 23rd of February 1833, regulations for the management of the vault were adopted. These are given in full, as they are interesting in themselves and serve to indicate how other vaults, the rules of which have been lost, were in all probability conducted.

REGULATIONS FOR THE MANAGEMENT OF THE VAULT AT UDNY.

I. Subscribers and their families to have the gratis use of the vault for themselves and their descendants in all time coming, excepting such of their sons and daughters as are married, and are householders on their own account at the present time, and who have not subscribed for themselves, also the poor aged parents of subscribers to be entitled to the use of the vault.

II. In every case the coffins to be made of good fir boards, well seasoned, $\frac{7}{8}$ of an inch thick, the joints to be ploughed, the head and foot to be checked into the sides, the whole ploughing, jointing, and saw carves to be properly filled with white lead, ground in oil, and a piece of tow cloth to be plastered on the saw carves with hot pitch—the whole of the inside to be pitched and covered with strong paper—the lid and bottom to be double checked, the checks to be filled with putty or lead as above, and properly nailed, so as to make the coffin perfectly air-tight. And in cases that might be deemed infectious or otherwise dangerous, the body to be enclosed in lead or tin plate, besides the wooden coffin.

III. All those persons bringing bodies to the vault will be required to answer such questions as the Committee may think necessary to put to them regarding the coffin and body, also to bring a written attestation from the maker of the coffin, binding himself under a penalty of £2 sterling that it is made in exact conformity to the above regulation for making the coffins; and if the above regulation for making the coffins shall be carelessly or insufficiently executed, so that any nuisance shall proceed from them during the time they remain in the vault, the maker of any such coffin shall not only be liable in the above-mentioned penalty, but it shall be in the power of the Committee to prevent any coffin made by such person being put into the vault, although employed by a subscriber.

IV. No body to be allowed to be longer than three months in the vault, and in cases that may be thought dangerous, only for such a period as the Committee shall think proper ; but bodies may be removed at an earlier period if it is the desire of their friends ; and if any insufficiency shall be found in the coffin, the Committee shall have power to refuse admittance until such insufficiency be remedied, or to cause the friends of the deceased to remove the body at any time such insufficiency may be found out.

V. Those who are not subscribers may obtain the use of the vault on paying a sum not less than 5s. and not exceeding 20s., at the option of the Committee, for each body they may deposit in the vault, and conforming themselves to the same regulations as the subscribers. Any money that may be received on this account to be applied, in the first instance, to liquidate any debt that may be upon the vault, and afterwards to complete such repairs as may be necessary. The Committee shall also have power to give out of the money received from non-subscribers towards enabling the poor to get coffins made agreeably to the foregoing regulations, and to permit those who are not able to pay to deposit the bodies of their deceased relatives in the vault gratis. Also that it shall be necessary for such poor persons as come from a distance to be put into the vault to bring a certificate of their circumstances from the session or minister of the parish, to be security to have the body removed in due time, and likewise if it appear (necessary) to the Committee the friends of such persons as are to be deposited in the vault shall be obliged to deposit in the hands of the gravedigger a sum of money equal to the expense of interment, in case they should fail to remove the body at the proper time.

VI. A Committee of seven persons shall be chosen at a general meeting of the subscribers to be held annually on the first Saturday of July (whereof three shall be a quorum), also four extra managers, the said eleven persons to be a standing committee for the management of the affairs of the concern, and to have power to enforce the strict observance of the regulations, and, on the resignation or death of any of them, the remaining members to have power to elect a person or persons in their room until next annual meeting.

VII. There shall be four key-bearers, members of the Committee, who must attend to open and shut the vault at all times necessary ; but it will be desirable that those wishing admission will give the key-bearers at least twenty-four hours' previous warning—the key-bearers to reside as near the church as can be got.

Thereafter, four key-bearers, including the parish minister, were appointed, and it was resolved to give those who had not yet paid their subscriptions another opportunity of doing so, before striking their names off the list, and holding them to be non-subscribers. At a meeting held on 14th December 1833 two applicants to become subscribers were informed that they would each have to pay 2s. 6d. in addition to their subscriptions, "as they had not become subscribers

till they were forced." It was also resolved to print 250 copies of the Regulations, for which the sum of 8s. was subsequently paid. It was arranged that the gravedigger should receive for every body lodged in the vault, and not interred in the churchyard, the sum of 1s. when put in and 1s. when taken out, and 1s. was to be charged to subscribers at the time of interment.

As time went on and the excitement arising from the stories current about the Resurrectionists died away, it appears that the key-bearers began to neglect their duties, for nearly three years later, on the 4th of July 1836, it was resolved that it be a strict injunction upon the key-bearers that at least one of them shall regularly attend the opening of the doors, otherwise that they be at the mercy of the Committee, and be fined according as they think proper. This threat, however, does not seem to have had much effect, for the minutes come to an end shortly afterwards, probably owing to the disuse of the vault for its original purpose.

An Act of Parliament was passed in 1832, which was intended to provide for the supply of the bodies necessary for the proper study of anatomy, and this rendered the trade of body-snatching unnecessary and unprofitable. So gradually the watch-houses, mortsafes, and vaults fell into disuse. Some of the watch-houses and vaults have been removed, while others still in existence are preserved mostly as storehouses for the tools used in the churchyards. Many of the mortsafes have been broken up or otherwise disposed of, while those still in the churchyards are, in many cases, lying apparently forgotten and neglected. Yet they are interesting as memorials of a time now rapidly passing into oblivion, when the feelings of the people were deeply stirred, and they were willing to suffer much inconvenience and to make many sacrifices to preserve the bodies of their dead friends from shameful desecration.