

#### IV.

#### RELICS OF THE BODY - SNATCHERS: SUPPLEMENTARY NOTES ON MORTSAFE TACKLE, MORTSAFES, WATCH-HOUSES, AND PUBLIC VAULTS, MOSTLY IN ABERDEENSHIRE. BY JAMES RITCHIE, F.E.I.S., CORRESPONDING MEMBER.

In volume xlvi. of the *Proceedings of the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland* there appeared "An Account of the Watch-houses, Mortsafes, and Public Vaults in Aberdeenshire Churchyards, formerly used for the protection of the dead from the Resurrectionists." The following notes are supplementary to that paper, containing information which has become available since its publication. They describe mortsafe tackle at Inverurie, mortsafes at Oyne and Auchlossan, watch-houses at Nigg and Dyce, and public vaults at Culsalmond and Marnoch.

#### INVERURIE MORTSAFE TACKLE.

The mortsafes which were so frequently in use about a century ago were intentionally made very heavy to prevent their removal or destruction by unauthorised persons who might wish to gain access to the bodies they protected. Therefore for lowering them into position in the grave at the time of burial, and for lifting them out again when all danger of body-snatching was past, strong tackle was required. This tackle, when not in use, required to be carefully stored in some safe place, where it would not be liable to be seized by the body-snatchers and used by them for their evil purposes during the hours of darkness. In the paper referred to above no illustration of this mortsafe tackle was given, because no existing specimen was known to the writer. But the publication of the paper brought forth the information that the mortsafe tackle formerly used in the churchyard of Inverurie was still in existence and in good order. It had been stored on the premises of Mr Gray, baker, Inverurie, whose shop and dwelling-house were at the south end of the town, not far from the churchyard. This was a very suitable place for its safekeeping, not

only because it was convenient for the churchyard, but because, on the premises of a baker, it would be under observation both by day and night.

After the Inverurie mortsafes ceased to be used, the iron ones which

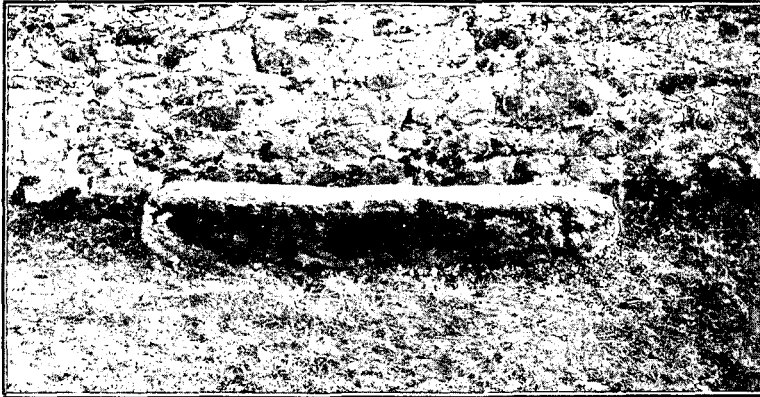


Fig. 1. Stone Mortsafe at Inverurie Churchyard.

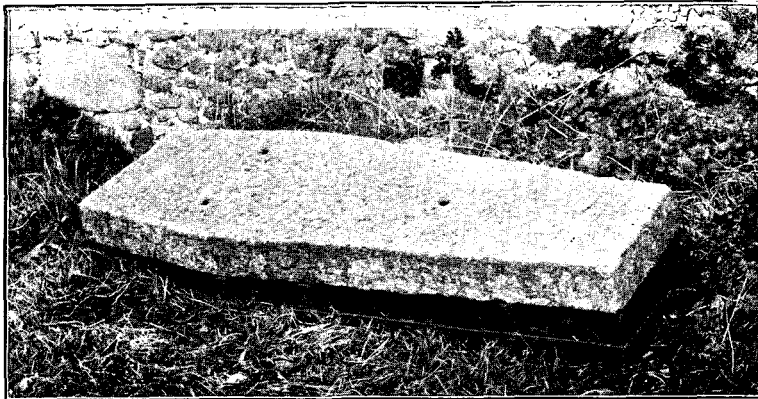


Fig. 2. Mortsafe in Skene Churchyard.

lay in the churchyard disappeared, having probably been sold for old iron, as has happened in many other instances; but the stone one still remains (fig. 1), and is at present lying in the churchyard. This example may be compared with another stone mortsafe at Skene churchyard (fig. 2). For some reason the iron tackle was not disposed of, but continued to lie on the premises of Mr Gray, till gradually its very existence became forgotten except by those who had it in charge. It

is very much to the credit of Mr Gray and his descendants that they still preserved this interesting example of mortsafe tackle long after its usefulness had departed, and finally secured its permanent preservation by presenting it to the Inverurie Museum, where it may now be seen by anyone interested in the subject.

The tackle (fig. 3) consists of an iron ring,  $6\frac{1}{2}$  inches in diameter, from which depend three jointed rods made of rounded iron,  $\frac{3}{4}$  of an inch thick. Two of these rods are of equal length, each measuring 3 feet 4 inches, while the third is exactly 2 feet longer. The lower member of each rod is flattened, and has its end turned up into a hook to which the mortsafe could be attached. Some mortsafes were provided with three rings, two at the shoulders and one near the foot, to which the tackle could be hooked, while others had a couple of chains passed round them for the same purpose. For lowering the mortsafe into the grave, sheer poles were erected to which the tackle was attached. The original poles have disappeared; those seen in the photograph are merely temporary erections showing how the tackle was used.



Fig. 3. Mortsafe Tackle at Inverurie.

The two shorter rods were attached to the shoulders of the mortsafe, while the longer one was fixed near its foot. The short wooden rod shown in the photograph, inserted between the two shoulder-rods, has been placed there merely to keep them apart in the position they occupied when in use.

#### OYNE MORTSAFE.

About seven years ago, when the gravedigger was making preparations for a burial in the churchyard of Oyne, his spade came in contact with some ironwork, which proved to be a mortsafe (fig. 4) still in position in the grave. With considerable difficulty it was dug out and raised to the surface, when it was seen to be one of the type constructed entirely of iron bars without any heavy stone attached to them. It

measured 6 feet in length, 16 inches in breadth at the head, 22 inches at the shoulders, and 17½ inches at the foot, and was of a depth just sufficient fully to enclose the coffin. It was rather more slimly constructed than is usually the case, and because of this and of its age suffered some damage during the lifting operations. The discovery awakened much interest in the neighbourhood, and rekindled memories of the time when it had been deposited in the grave. It had not been constructed for the use of the public, but was made for a single private burial, and this accounted for its somewhat weak construction, and its

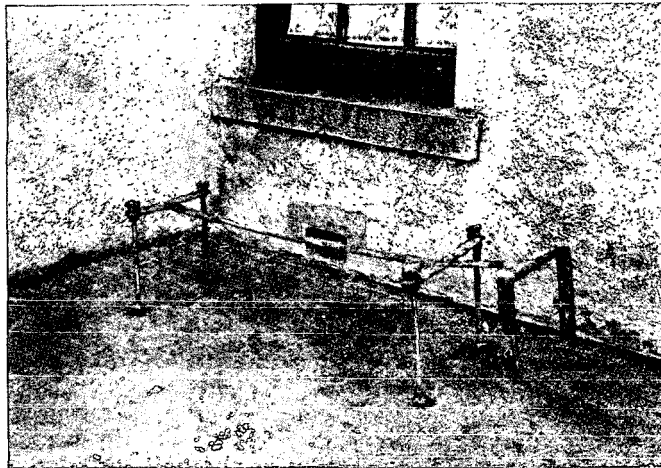


Fig. 4. Mortsafe at Oyne.

having been left in the grave instead of lifted after a few weeks' interval for further use when occasion required.

In this instance the mortsafe had been a sufficient protection, for there had been no interference with the interment. But it was not always so, for early in March 1915, in the churchyard of Aberlour, a mortsafe was unearthed under which lay a coffin, apparently intact and in remarkably good order. On its being opened, however, no remains of any kind were found within it. It is hardly likely that the body was removed before interment, for had that been done the light weight of the coffin would surely have aroused suspicion when it was being carried to the grave. It seems more probable that the grave was opened during the night succeeding the funeral, and carefully closed again, so that the disturbance of the soil had escaped notice or had been attributed to the original burial.

## AUCHLOSSAN MORTSAFES.

The farm of Auchlossan lies on both sides of the Deeside railway, about midway between Lumphanan and Dess. It possesses two mortsafes, both of the iron, coffin-shaped variety, similar to those at Durris, Mains of Altries (fig. 5), and Banchory-Devenick, and both are in use as watering-troughs for the farm stock. One of them stands in a corner of the farmyard within a few yards of the railway. It measures 7 feet 2 inches in length, 1 foot 10 inches in breadth at the

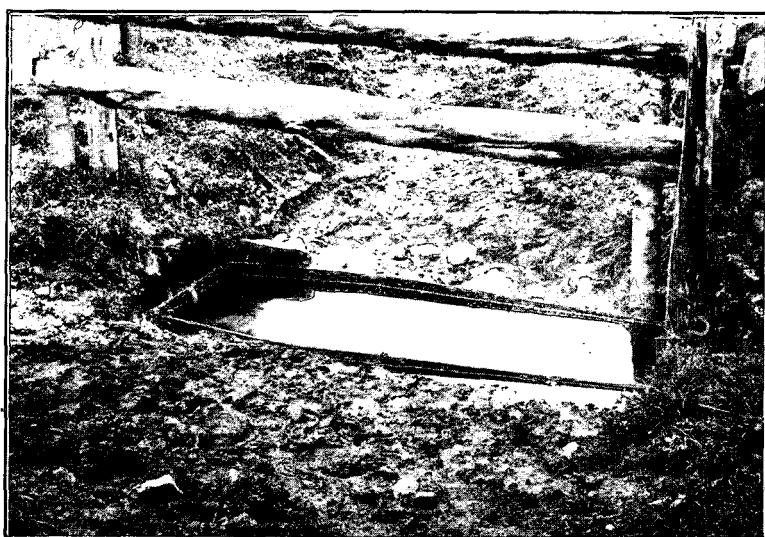


Fig. 5. Iron Coffin-shaped Mortsafe used as Watering Trough at Back Mains of Altries, Maryculter.

head, 2 feet 3 inches at the shoulders, and 1 foot 6 inches at the foot, while its depth is 1 foot 3 inches. To render it serviceable as a watering-trough, it has been turned upside down and the tackle-holes have been plugged with pieces of wood, which can be removed when the interior requires cleaning.

The other mortsafe is situated on the boundary between Auchlossan and a neighbouring farm, so as to afford a water-supply to two fields. It varies but slightly in size from that within the farm-steading, being 7 feet 3 inches long, 1 foot 10 inches broad at the head, 2 feet  $4\frac{1}{2}$  inches at the shoulders, and 1 foot 7 inches at the foot, while the depth is  $14\frac{1}{2}$  inches, half an inch less than the other. These mortsafes have been in their present positions for many years, and it does not

appear to be now known from what churchyard they were removed, owing to several changes having taken place in the tenancy of the farm since they were brought to it.

#### NIGG WATCH-HOUSE, NEAR ABERDEEN.

The old church of Nigg, in Kincardineshire, is situated near the bay of Nigg, a short distance from Torry, on the south side of the Dee, close to Aberdeen. In the corner of the churchyard there is a small building formerly used as a watch-house, but now kept as a storeroom for the tools required by the gravedigger. It is similar in size and construction to many of the watch-houses found in Aberdeenshire churchyards, being 15 feet long, 11 feet 6 inches broad, and 7 feet high at the side. It has a small window through which the greater part of the churchyard could be kept under the view of those stationed within the building. It is also provided with a fireplace, to mitigate in some degree the hardships of those engaged in the lonely and unpleasant task of watching the graves during the long winter nights.

#### DYCE WATCH-HOUSE.

The old and now ruined church of Dyce is situated about 2 miles north of Dyce railway station, and is well known to antiquaries because of the two sculptured stones and four small crosses which are preserved in a recess at its eastern gable. The church is surrounded by a graveyard which, being within 8 miles of Aberdeen, ran a considerable risk of having its graves occasionally raided on behalf of the students attending the medical classes at the University there. To prevent such desecration, a watch-house was erected in the south-east corner of the churchyard. It is of a type common to Aberdeenshire churchyards, being about 14 feet long, 11 feet broad, and 6 feet 9 inches high at the sides. The door is placed in the south gable near the south-east corner of the building. On the west side, overlooking the churchyard, two small windows were so placed that the watchers within the building could keep the graves under observation without being themselves seen. The northern window was built up many years ago, when it ceased to be required for watching purposes, but the southern one has been retained to lighten the interior of the building. Both windows are of the same size, 2 feet 3 inches high, and 1 foot 3 inches broad. The fireplace usual in such buildings is situated at the north end. Since it ceased to be required for its original purpose the building has been adapted for use as a gravedigger's office and storeroom.

## CULSALMOND VAULT.

The parish church and churchyard of Culsalmond are about 5 miles north of the railway station at Inch. The place has been a hallowed spot from very ancient times, for church and churchyard occupy the site of a prehistoric stone circle, which has now disappeared, though some of the stones are said to be still buried beneath the soil of the churchyard. A two-storied building stands in the north-west corner of the churchyard. Its lower portion consists of a vault which was built for the purpose of storing coffins in safety till the bodies they contained were useless for anatomical purposes. The walls of the vault are 3 feet 6 inches thick at the back and sides, but 4 feet at the front where the entrance is situated. As the vault is partly underground, the entrance is reached by a short flight of descending steps. There are two doors, an outer of wood and an inner of iron. The outer one, which fits into an iron framework, is 6 feet high and 3 feet wide, and is formed of three layers of wood with a total thickness of  $3\frac{1}{2}$  inches. It is provided with two locks, each 1 foot 7 inches long, 11 inches broad, and  $2\frac{1}{2}$  inches thick, and is further protected by an iron rod 3 feet 6 inches long,  $2\frac{1}{2}$  inches broad, and  $\frac{1}{2}$  inch thick, which slipped over and completely covered the key-holes, and was then fastened down with a massive padlock. The inner door is 6 feet high and 3 feet 4 inches broad, and is formed of iron 1 inch thick. It also is provided with two locks, the upper of which is now missing, though the lower remains in good working order, and is similar in size to those on the outer door.

The interior of the vault is arched with stone, the height from the floor to the top of the arch being 8 feet 6 inches. The vault is 12 feet wide, and was originally fitted up with three tiers of shelves on which the coffins were placed. These shelves were 6 feet wide and 12 feet long, so that they provided space for storing about a dozen coffins, a number amply sufficient for the needs of the district. However, this vault was taken advantage of by a wide area, coffins being brought from districts even so far away as Buchan. There was therefore no necessity for removing any of the coffins for burial in the churchyard until at least six weeks had elapsed and all danger of the bodies being stolen was past. These shelves have been removed, and the interior of the vault is now used as a store for the gravedigger's tools. The room above the vault, which forms the upper story of the building, is said to have been used occasionally as a watch-house in cases where the corpse was buried in the churchyard without having been previously stored in the vault. That some such precaution was necessary is shown by an attempt which

was made long ago to lift a body from this churchyard. A young man had arranged to meet the manse servant on a certain evening at the gate of the garden which adjoins the churchyard. He arrived a little before the appointed time, and shortly afterwards heard a conveyance approaching, so, not wishing to be seen, he stepped behind some bushes which effectively concealed him. The conveyance stopped, two men descended and, after looking round, entered the churchyard, and proceeded to open a recently made grave. The man in hiding not being able to see them, but suspecting what they were doing, crept cautiously out of his place of refuge and proceeded to investigate. In doing so he accidentally made some noise which alarmed the body-snatchers, who fled immediately, but were so closely pursued that they had not time to mount their conveyance. The body-snatchers escaped, but left behind them their tools, and a horse and gig, which were never claimed by the owners.

About sixty years ago a Sunday school was held in the room above the vault, but the meeting-place was not liked by the children, and the school was soon removed to more suitable premises. The room has also been used by the parish church choir and the minister's bible class, and in more recent times the Parochial Board and the Parish Council have held their meetings therein.

#### MARNOCH VAULT.

In the churchyard of Marnoch, Banffshire, there is a vault, almost entirely underground, over which a second story has been built like that at Culsalmond. A flight of ten steps leads down to the entrance, just above which a stone tablet has been built into the wall, bearing the words "Built by Subscription in the year 1832. Addition 1877." The front wall is 4 feet 9 inches thick, and is pierced by the entrance passage, which is protected by an outer and an inner door similar to those at the Culsalmond vault. The interior is an arched chamber now used as a storeroom for the implements used in the graveyard, and the upper room now forms part of the dwelling-house occupied by the keeper of the graveyard. The chamber above the vault was at one time put to a very peculiar use, for it was occupied as a schoolroom. Many of the old-time Scottish schools were held in small and in many ways unsuitable buildings, but surely no stranger place was ever chosen than just above a vault built for the safe-keeping of corpses till they were ready for burial in the graveyard!

A strange and somewhat improbable story is associated with this place: Late one evening many years ago three men were passing along the road near the churchyard when their suspicions were aroused by



some sounds proceeding from within it. Approaching cautiously, they discovered some body-snatchers at work opening a grave. They saw them raise the coffin, unscrew the lid, and then go to a conveyance they had in waiting outside the churchyard for the purpose of getting the cloths in which to wrap up the body. While they were away, the three men, it is said, removed the corpse, and one of them, in a spirit of mischief, lay down in its place while the others again concealed themselves. On their return the body-snatchers proceeded to lift up the supposed corpse, when it cried out, "Let be, and I'll rise mysel!" Needless to say they did not wait for that event, but at once fled in terror and escaped.

At several other places in Aberdeenshire, such as New Deer and Slains, there are watch-houses, etc., but as they are similar to those already described, it seems unnecessary to refer to them more particularly.

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