

# Roman Burial and other Remains at Wickhouse Farm, Saltford, Keynsham Manor Estate<sup>1</sup>

BY F. W. JEFFERIES

## *Discovery of the Coffin.*

On 15 September 1948, whilst trenching around the stump of an elm tree preparatory to blasting it out, my son and workmen exposed the cover of a stone coffin. Further digging was carried out until part of the cover stone could be lifted off and a skeleton within the coffin exposed to view.

The roots of a big elm tree had grown over the foot end of the coffin, but these were chopped and chiselled away piecemeal to avoid damage to the coffin, after the skeleton had been removed.

The police, the Somerset Archæological Society and the Bristol Speleological Society were informed of the find and photographs were taken by the Press and myself.

On 17 September, Dr. Marjorie Crook visited the site of the grave. All the bones were carefully lifted out, packed into receptacles and taken away by her for expert examination and report. During the following days the whole coffin was unearthed, conveyed to and set up on the lawn at Wickhouse Farm where it still remains.

This burial was sited at just under the 300' contour in field No. 794, 25" O.S. Map Somerset, Sheet No. XIII. 2 (1931 Edition). Co-ordinates: Lat. 51° 23' 42" approx. Long. 2° 28' 14". A discovery of a stone coffin was made in 1922, at about the same altitude, a thousand yards to the south-west of this spot.

## *Description of the Burial.*

The sub-soil over the whole area of this hillside, sloping to the north, consists of strata of limestone a few inches thick,

<sup>1</sup> Before the coffin was removed, the site was visited by Mr. H. St. George Gray at the invitation of the writer, who promised to prepare this paper for the *Proc. Som. Arch. Soc.*

PLATE VII



(a) Skeleton in Coffin, Wickhouse Farm, Keynsham,  
September, 1948.



(b) The Empty Coffin.

separated by thin deposits of sandy loam. The first stratum is 12 in. or less below the surface, and all over this area in winter and wet seasons the sandy deposits between the second, third and successive strata yield water very freely.

The area originally excavated for the burial was about 11 ft. by 8 ft., much larger than the size of the coffin. This is the easiest way to excavate into this form of rock, since any hole immediately gets filled with water. This, however, could be drained off during the preparations as the surface slopes away. The matter is of importance, since there is some evidence to show that the burial took place in the winter. The excavation extended through three strata, to a depth of about 2 ft. 6 in. from the surface. A roughly paved bottom was formed by stones, more or less flat-surfaced, embedded in puddled clay. On to this pavement was lowered the coffin. It possessed a boat or barrel-shaped bottom which enabled it, in spite of its weight, to be easily manipulated by rocking movements into its resting-place. Rough walls of big stones, also embedded in clay, were built up all round the coffin and about 12 in. away from it, reaching nearly to the level of its top edge. The irregular surrounding hole had been filled up with rubble leaving a tidy-looking shallow grave.

The coffin was shaped out of a block of Bath oolite stone, probably from near Box or Corsham. It was set in position lying due north and south, the head to the north. The corpse was brought to the graveside and there laid in the coffin, no doubt with ceremonial rites. The grave would have remained dry because the clay (foreign to the area) kept the water out. The coverstone, in two pieces with a rebated joint, had afterwards been placed in position on a thin bed of yellow sand mortar. The space between the coffin and the grave walls had been filled in with rubble and soil left over for the purpose; the lid covered over with mould and turf, was found to be no more than 10 in. below the surface.

The pressure of the roots of the tree had fractured the foot-end of the coverstone into three pieces, but these fortunately had not fallen in and the skeleton was found intact. A small fragment of blue-grey pottery was dug up near the side of the coffin.

*Evidence of Roman Occupation in the Vicinity.*

The discovery of the burial led to a close observation of this and the surrounding fields. First was noticed a pronounced ridge crossing field 794, running north and south and continuing at both ends at right angles to the west, thus indicating three sides of a square, enclosing an area of 50 to 60 acres. Outside this was another ridge roughly following the 300 ft. contour line. These ridges may however have nothing to do with the Roman occupation. The field of about 20 acres in which the coffin was found was ploughed up from pasture in 1948, for the first time perhaps in centuries. Walking over it afterwards we picked up numerous sherds of pottery, fragments of Pennant stone tiles, rusted parts of large iron nails, bits of glass of several varieties, oyster shells beyond count and a great many stones from 4 to 8 in. long, all similarly shaped like hammer heads.

Four trial-holes were cut into and through the ridges at different places, disclosing that the core of each is of rough stone work, here and there showing on the surface of the soil. In one of the cuttings the stones were found to be closely set in stiff clay of two different varieties. The excavations yielded numerous sherds of pottery, cooking pots and other utensils, bone fragments, large nails, small lumps of metal and a few Roman coins, found at about 2 ft. down. One cutting was extended eastwards, and about 12 in. down traces of what appeared to be an old road were revealed. Indeed the white limestone dust and grit from this surface has worked up to the top, and in dry weather when the ground has been harrowed and worked down for seeding the soil alongside this ridge shows a distinctly whitened colouring. It was close to here that the stone coffin was found.

These further investigations which I made did not immediately follow the discovery of the coffin since the season was advanced and the ground had to be ploughed and prepared for seeding. The following summer of 1949 was dry and the harvest early and it was after this that the cuttings into the ridge were made. I had hoped to try for further discoveries this summer (1950) but the wet season made such work impossible, so here the matter must remain for the present. I have prepared a plan of the area and have marked on it

the exact position of the burial and the excavations which we made.

The site lies near the top of the hill a little north of Burnett, at an altitude of just under 300 ft. It commands a wide view of the Avon valley towards Bristol and Avonmouth to the west and towards and beyond Bath on the east. On the opposite side the fortified hills of Kelston and Lansdown rise up steeply away from the river and behind these the Cotswold range opens the way into Wales and the Midlands. A few steps to the south of this site brings into view a wide expanse of Somerset, away to and beyond Mendip on the east and towards Bristol and the mouth of the Avon on the west.

#### REPORT ON THE COFFIN AND SKELETON

The coffin was bath-shaped and both it and the covering slab were of Bath Stone.

The cover was originally formed of two slabs, rebated on their adjoining edges. The length of the upper one was 2 ft. 7 in. and of the lower one 4 ft. 2 in. The width at the head end was 1 ft. 8 in. tapering slightly towards the feet and the average thickness was 5 ins.

#### *Dimensions of Coffin.*

At rim.	Ext. length	6 ft. 9 in.
	Int. „	6 ft. 2½ in.
	Ext. breadth	1 ft. 10 in. (at widest part)
	Int. „	1 ft. 5½ in. „ „ „
	Ext. „	12 in. at foot
	Int. „	8 in. „ „
At bottom.	Int. length	5 ft 9¼ in.
	„ breadth	1 ft. 3 in. (at widest part)
Int. depth at head		7-8 in.
„ „ „	hips	9 in.
„ „ „	feet	10½ in.

The coffin which lay north to south, contained a human skeleton in an excellent state of preservation, and apparently undisturbed. The skull was facing east (see Pl. VII). A thin film of greyish material covered the floor of the coffin and upper part of the skeleton, but from the level of the hips towards the

feet the skeleton was embedded in a deepening layer of earth, presumably washed in through a small hole near the foot of the coffin. Apart from the skeleton, the coffin contained a few scraps of indeterminate pottery, whilst at the foot was a quantity of clinched-over iron nails, probably from sandals, and a piece of iron measuring 2 in.  $\times$  1½ in.  $\times$  ¾ in.

STONE COFFIN, WICKHOUSE FM., SALTFOED: PLAN.

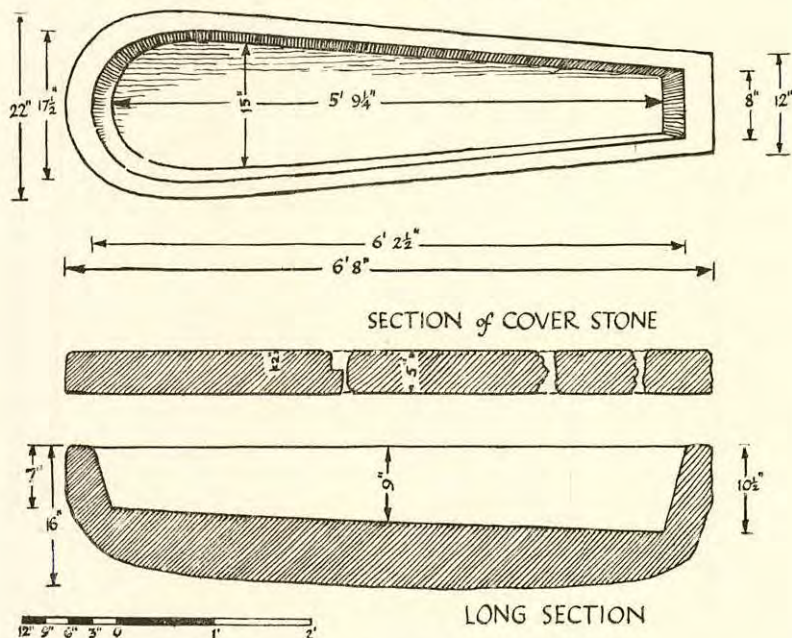


Fig. 1.

The following notes on the interment have been supplied by Mr. and Mrs. Martin A. C. Hinton.

The skeleton is that of a young man. The wisdom teeth have not all erupted, and the age might well be about twenty years.

The cephalic index is 75, and the cubic capacity 1582 c.c. which is above the average of to-day, or at any rate at least equal to it.

The femurs measure 17½ in., so the stature was about 5ft. 6 in. or a little less.

The bones are well preserved, and show the man to have

been healthy and vigorous. The teeth are very little worn and in perfect condition.

MARJORIE CROOK, M.B., CH.B.

NOTES ON OTHER STONE COFFINS FOUND IN SOMERSET

Numerous stone coffins of the Saltford type have been found in N. Somerset, mostly in the vicinity of Bath,<sup>1</sup> but in 1922 three were discovered in the neighbourhood of Keynsham itself, two at Somerdale during excavations for the new factory of Messrs. J. S. Fry & Sons, Ltd.,<sup>2</sup> the third at Burnett whilst widening the Keynsham Road, 300 yards north of the cross-roads and about 1,000 yards south-west of that described in this report. One of the Somerdale coffins and that at Burnett were round-headed, as indeed were others found at Priston (1917) and at Midford Hill Farm (1917).<sup>3</sup>

Other finds of round-headed coffins in N. Somerset during this century have been made at Batheaston (1947),<sup>4</sup> Kelston, Bath (1945),<sup>5</sup> at Englishcombe Lane, Bath (1942)<sup>6</sup> (both described by Mrs. Marjorie Crook), at Henrietta Gardens, Bath (1931),<sup>7</sup> St. John's Road, Bath (1923),<sup>8</sup> at Walcot Parade, Bath (1922),<sup>9</sup> at Hodshill, Southstoke (1914)<sup>10</sup> and (1911),<sup>11</sup> at Sydney Gardens, Bath (1914),<sup>12</sup> Englishcombe Lane (1911)<sup>13</sup> and a number found during excavations at Lansdown, near Bath (1905-8).<sup>14</sup>

Finds associated with these burials are meagre and vary in date, but the round-headed coffin was almost certainly in use from the second half of the second century until well into the fourth century. Wherever recorded in N. Somerset the material used for the coffins is oolitic Bath Stone.

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<sup>1</sup> Preb. H. M. Scarth, *Aquae Solis*, (1864), 97-105; *Proc. Som. Arch. Soc.* lv (1854), ii, 49-72.

<sup>2</sup> *Ant. Journ.*, ii (1922), 371-5; *Proc. Som. Arch. Soc.*, lxxviii (1922), ii, 87-92.

<sup>3</sup> *Ant. Journ.*, ii, 380-1; *Proc. Som. Arch. Soc.*, *Bath Branch* (1914-18), 249-52.

<sup>4</sup> *Proc. Spel. Soc.*, Univ. Bristol, vi, No. 1 (1946-8), 55-6.

<sup>5</sup> *ibid.*, v, No. 3 (1944-6), 188-9.

<sup>6</sup> *ibid.*, v, No. 2 (1943), 145-7.

<sup>7</sup> *Proc. Som. Arch. Soc.*, *Bath Branch* (1929-33), 374.

<sup>8</sup> *ibid.* (1919-23), 214.

<sup>9</sup> *ibid.* (1919-23), 169.

<sup>10</sup> *ibid.* (1914-18), 51-2.

<sup>11</sup> *ibid.* (1909-13), 112-13.

<sup>12</sup> *ibid.* (1914-18), 53-4.

<sup>13</sup> *ibid.* (1909-13), 111-12.

<sup>14</sup> *ibid.* (1904-8), 57, 69, 110, 152, 164, 204 *et seq.* and various plates.