

## Opening the Tomb

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Barrows had been investigated in England from medieval times, but the interest of the early investigators was stimulated either by financial motives (a search for illusory treasure) or idle curiosity. The first explorer to dig into burial mounds for the purpose of providing information on the past was William Stukeley, sometime doctor, cleric and first secretary of the Society of Antiquaries of London. Beset by wild imaginings (mainly relating to Druidism and primitive religions), he carried out the first objective delvings into barrows in Wessex, proving that they predated the Roman period, and commenting on their diverse shapes and composition. He produced one sketch of a section through a mound near Stonehenge, and was the first antiquary to record his presence by the deposition of tokens in the form of coins.

The two most influential barrow diggers of the eighteenth century were the Revd Bryan Faussett (1720–1776) and the Revd James Douglas (1753–1819). Both concerned themselves with opening large numbers of pagan Anglo-Saxon tumuli in Kent and elsewhere. Faussett explored over 700 examples, and, as his field diaries (cat. 61) show, provided a wealth of detail and illustration that was exemplary for the times, though his digging was often hasty, and he failed to date the period of his discoveries accurately. He referred to those buried within the barrows as 'Britons Romanised', though he did realise that they did not represent battle casualties, but were simply 'the peaceable inhabitants' of nearby settlements. Faussett's great collection of Anglo-Saxon material from Kent was sold in the 1850s and is now housed at the World Museum Liverpool. In 1856 his diaries were published as *Inventorium Sepulchrale*, some 80 years after his death (cat. 61).

James Douglas was a soldier who first came across barrow clusters when, as a military engineer, he helped to remodel the defensive earthworks protecting the Medway and Chatham Docks in Kent. Many barrows were disturbed during these operations, and from them Douglas amassed a collection of Saxon relics, which he carefully recorded. He produced perhaps the earliest ground plan of an excavated tumulus known to English archaeology. He later took holy orders, and in the 1780s began a general illustrated history of the 'Ancient Britons', *Nenia Britannica* (1793), based mainly on the results of his own excavations. Sadly, this work was not well received at the time. It was only after his death that its pioneering importance was recognised (cat. 60).

In the early nineteenth century, people gradually began to take more interest in barrows and their contents, probably because of the influence of the Romantic movement. In the case of Sir

Richard Colt Hoare (1758–1838), a wealthy Wiltshire baronet, when Continental wars prevented him from travelling abroad to study the ancient monuments of Classical Europe, he decided to concentrate on the landscape antiquities of his own county. He employed William Cunnington (1754–1810), an ‘ingenious tradesman’, to conduct the searches and scrutiny of local field monuments, organised as seasonal military campaigns, with a corps of diggers to accompany him. The eventual idea was to publish a survey and analysis of the ancient antiquities of Wiltshire, using the carefully (for the times) recorded results of their plunderings. In the first decade of the nineteenth century, Colt Hoare’s workforce dug over 400 burial mounds, mainly dating from the prehistoric period.

Colt Hoare’s two landmark volumes, *The History of Ancient Wiltshire* (1812–19), were pioneering by any standards. Replete with illustrations, particularly of artefacts, they detailed barrows by shape and form, and benefited from the inclusion of large-scale maps and plans of barrow groups. However, they lacked any indication of how the barrows were constructed and failed to separate primary from subsequent deposits, thus ignoring sequence. Indeed, the tumuli were usually opened by sinking a central shaft, to preserve the outer shape of the tumulus, which left many secondary interments undiscovered. In addition, Cunnington’s men totally neglected human skeletal remains, which were simply left where they were found. Indeed, later nineteenth-century diggers, such as John Thurnam, reopened a number of Colt Hoare’s barrows to salvage the interments he had described but left *in situ*. All the relics exhumed from the tumuli remained in Cunnington’s possession until after his death, when Colt Hoare purchased them. In 1878 they were loaned to the Wiltshire Archaeological Museum in Devizes, which bought them outright five years later. They remain a vital part of its collection of material from the culture of pre-Roman Wessex, derived primarily from rich Bronze Age burials of southern England.

The field of barrow study remained fallow for over twenty years after Hoare’s operations ceased, apart from isolated digs that led to literary curiosities such as William Miles’s *A Description of the Deverel Barrow* (1826) and Charles Woolls’s *The Barrow Diggers* (1839), both dealing with single openings of individual barrows.

In fact, the first glimmerings of any sort of scientific approach to the pursuit were provided by the Derbyshire collector and antiquary Thomas Bateman (1821–1861), who, inspired by Colt Hoare’s works, commenced barrow-digging in his native county of Derbyshire and in north Staffordshire in 1843. During his short lifetime he personally opened some 200 burial mounds. Bateman’s work is important in many respects. He drew the first consistent plans and sections of the mounds he opened, revealing their makeup, and scrupulously collected every relic, which was duly enshrined in his purpose-built museum at his mansion, Lomberdale House. He was the first antiquary to study skeletal remains, especially skulls and long bones, and was the first of his breed to note the differences between the dolichocephalic crania (long-headed) from the long

barrows, and the brachycephalic (round-headed) examples from the later, round ones. He was usually careful to isolate primary burials from later intrusions, and was the first barrow student to attempt a classification of the pottery he disinterred. He also commented on the variety of animal bones and mineral substances he unearthed in the cairns of the Derbyshire Peak District. He even exhibited grave finds in individual groupings, and illustrated every item found in his excavations in a series of journals. He also ensured fairly swift publication of his researches in his *Vestiges of the Antiquities of Derbyshire* (1848) and *Ten Years' Diggings in Celtic and Saxon Grave Hills* (1861).

Although Bateman's great collection was dispersed at the end of the nineteenth century, his archaeological items were purchased by Sheffield City Museum and remain an important part of its collection. Though the work of these early activists was surpassed by those who followed them, they remain pioneers; whatever their motives, they were forerunners and adventurers who opened up a whole new area of archaeological study.

While antiquaries with an interest in the prehistory of the British Isles were exploring the countryside in search of burial mounds, others with an interest in the medieval period were looking at churches, especially tombs and monuments. From the sixteenth century, antiquaries regarded memorials as a source of information about family history. Richard Gough (1735–1809), Director of the Society of Antiquaries from 1771 to 1797, took a particular and active interest in researching funeral monuments as a way of finding out more about the manners and customs of earlier times; he was keen to open tombs where possible. His series of folio volumes entitled *Sepulchral Monuments in Great Britain*, published between 1786 and 1796, contains a large number of invaluable illustrations. The date of artefacts interred with the deceased could be gleaned from the date of burial, and burial practices could be observed. In particular, there was the potential with royal burials for significant finds to be made. Permission was given in 1774 to open the tomb of Edward I (d. 1307) at Westminster Abbey, revealing the body in a good state of preservation, accompanied by royal sceptres and vestments (cat. 70). The tomb of Edward IV (d. 1483) at St George's Chapel, Windsor, was opened in 1789 and some of the contents removed (cats 71, 72). King John's body was discovered at Worcester Cathedral in 1797, and Charles I's at Windsor in 1813<sup>1</sup>.

Bishops were also of interest because of the church plate that was often buried with them. Richard Kaye, when Dean of Lincoln, and Richard Gough were able to open several tombs and remove silver plate found when the paving was being relaid at Lincoln Cathedral in 1791. Members of the Royal Society were interested in the science of how the bodies were preserved. At the opening of the tomb of Bishop Grosseteste at Lincoln in 1782, Sir Joseph Banks, President of the Royal Society and an influential member of the Society of Antiquaries, was present and

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<sup>1</sup> Dodson 2004

took a sample of liquid found in the coffin for chemical analysis. He was not able to interpret the results and no scientific analysis could be carried out on skeletons at this time. It was only later, in the nineteenth century, as with the tomb of Archbishop Walter, that care was taken to preserve fragile clothing (see pp. 203 and 209), and later, in the twentieth century, that forensic archaeology developed.

Early antiquaries seemed to devote more attention to burials than settlements. In the period around 1800 when Romanticism was flourishing, contemporaries had mixed reactions to their activities, vividly demonstrated in Rowlandson's celebrated print *Death and the Antiquaries* (cat. 69). Whereas Rowlandson depicts the figure of Death striking at antiquaries for disturbing his victims, William Combe, the author of the accompanying poem, is more sympathetic. He recognised perhaps that antiquaries were Romantics at heart; they could be commended for resisting Death's sway and attempting to draw deeper understanding of humanity from decay and ruins<sup>2</sup>.

#### Selected References:

Aidan Dodson, *The Royal Tombs of Great Britain: An Illustrated History*, London, 2004

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Christopher Scalia, 'The Grave Scholarship of the Antiquaries', *Literature Compass* 2, 2005, pp. 1–13, RO 166

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<sup>2</sup> Christopher Scalia, 'The Grave Scholarship of Antiquaries', in *Literature Compass*, 2, part 1, RO, 166, 2005, pp. 1–13 (online journal).