

Resurrectionists

Turn down the lights and pull your chair up close to a roaring fire. I have a Halloween (ish) story to relate.

It is a dark night in March 1828, and a figure creeps stealthily through the graveyard of St Edburgh's church at Yardley. He carries with him a large sack, a length of rope and a spade. In little time the man has located the grave he is looking for and gets down to work. Mrs Hopkins was buried only yesterday; she is still fresh. A mound of earth piles up beside the grave as he digs.

Luckily for Mrs Hopkins, the intruder does not have Yardley churchyard entirely to himself. A passer-by happens to see what is in progress and calls the vicar. The man runs off, leaving his equipment behind.

If this was a one-off incident of grave-robbing, we might dismiss it, but it was not. In October 1826 John Foxley, the gravedigger (no less) of St Bartholomew's church in Birmingham, had been convicted of robbing the grave of John Bedford. And in November of the following year a similar attempt had been made at Aston church. On this occasion the churchwardens had been tipped off and were watching from the belfry as four men made their way through the churchyard just after 1.00 o'clock in the morning. Again, the grave they were after had only been filled the previous day. A dramatic arrest ensued. The wardens hit one man over the head with a sword (where on earth had they got that from ?), but the other three made off. The man they seized, however, could not be taken to court, since no robbery had actually taken place.

The dead, it seems, were not resting peacefully in 19th-century Birmingham. The kind of practices we associate with Messrs Burke and Hare in Edinburgh were taking place here too. They called the culprits 'resurrectionists', but body-snatchers is easier to say.

There were two good reasons why this macabre activity was going on.

For one thing, there was a highly lucrative trade in second-hand teeth. Dental technology had not yet advanced very far, and the best thing to replace a lost tooth with, was someone else's. Preferably this was from someone who wouldn't miss it (or them) all that much. This was what John Foxley had been up to at St Bartholomew's.

But the pickings to be made from a whole body were greater still. A corpse which was still 'fresh' could fetch twelve shillings (60p), the equivalent of a week's wages for an unskilled labourer. Such bodies were needed for anatomy classes. How were medical students supposed to learn how to perform operations, asked their teachers, unless they had practised on someone beforehand ?

Prior to the passing of the Anatomy Act in 1832 the only legal means to obtain bodies was from the gallows. The Murder Act of 1752 allowed to judge in a murder trial to ordain that the body of an executed murderer be handed to the surgeons for anatomy. It amounted to posthumous punishment for the most heinous of crimes.

But the fact that the assizes were held in Warwick meant that few corpses found their way back to Birmingham. Nor was there yet a branch of the Body Shop in the town.

And since insufficient bodies could be acquired by legitimate means, anatomists were obtaining their specimens by other methods. If Birmingham was to become a major centre for the study of medicine, then nocturnal activities in the town's graveyards were bound to continue. It was no coincidence that Burke and Hare operated out of Edinburgh, the foremost medical centre in Europe.

The tale of Burke and Hare was perfect for the penny dreadfuls and the travelling shows, who played up the horror for all they were worth. As a result, the impact (and sense of panic) was felt by everyone. For the people of Birmingham, a Burkite might be lurking just around every dark corner, knife and sack at the ready. Unlit streets (and there were plenty of those) were best avoided.

To be fair, I can't lay the blame at the door of any of the Birmingham surgeons. Although a number of them practised dissection, there is no evidence that they obtained their corpses illegally. Dr Sands Cox had been holding anatomy classes in the town since 1825, attracting large audiences, first at his father's surgery, and then at the medical school in Snow Hill. And from time to time a generous judge supplied him with a subject.

Nevertheless, there is strong evidence that Birmingham was certainly becoming at least a clearing-house for body-trafficking. In December 1831 a coach office on Constitution Hill was raided by the police, who found there a female body, neatly packaged and ready for despatch to an address in Edinburgh. The coach station records revealed that five similar parcels had previously been delivered to addresses in Edinburgh and London. And all had been brought in by the same shady customers (who were, of course, never seen again).

The 1832 Anatomy Act put a stop to this practice, allowing surgeons to obtain unclaimed bodies from workhouses, prisons and hospitals. But in the meantime the criminals involved probably wondered

what all the fuss was about. If the body-snatchers were tidy in their work, and back-filled the graves, who was there to know or to worry ?