

ANCIENT SEPULCHRAL SHAFT AT BEKESBOURN.

BY JOHN BRENT, JUN., ESQ., F.S.A.

TOWARDS the end of October last, the workmen of the "London, Chatham, and Dover Railway," in forming a cutting upon Bekesbourn Hill, three miles from Canterbury, came upon a large wooden structure, about thirteen feet below the surface of the soil.

Oaken beams, a foot square, first appeared, and then the planking of a quadrilateral oaken shaft, to the depth of six feet; then heavy crossbeams, then planking again, terminated by four crossbeams as at the top. These lay twenty-five feet below the surface.

The crossbeams were six feet six inches in length, firmly mortised together; the planks were mortised or rabbeted together, and let into the beams, each plank being pierced by transverse ties, crossing the corners of the shaft inside, and giving to the entire structure the appearance of having a flight of steps or stays within.

The ties projected two or three inches on the outside, as shown in the illustration.

There was no appearance of iron, or any other metal, having been used in the construction of the shaft, but the whole fabric was closely and skilfully knit together by the mortises and ties, while the weight of the materials themselves, and the pressure of the soil around, prevented any of the parts becoming displaced.

The entire fabric was of oak; the crossbeams evidencing by their grain that they were the product of

large trees. The wood had become jet-black by age; but, although somewhat soft on the surface, was hard and compact at a short distance within.

The interior quadrature of the shaft was three feet three inches, the cross ties about a foot long, the beams six feet six inches, and twelve inches square.

The soil where the fabric was found was gravelly at the surface; lower down of a sandy loam.

The beams and planks were probably all hewn by the axe, yet were as neatly fitted and as well proportioned as if done by a skilful artisan in the present day, each mortised plank exactly corresponding with the alternate one above it.

We have been thus minute in detail, as we know of no other example of carpentry ever having been found so perfect, of the undoubted antiquity of the fabric we have described.

As it was cleared away from the soil, it loomed out against the dark earthen bed from which it had been excavated, like a mysterious record of a past and unknown age, exhibiting in some respects features new and strange.

The top of the shaft, when found, was covered with oaken planks, the structure being entirely filled with large flints. The workmen speedily broke down one side, and threw out the stones. As they approached the base, they came upon a single urn, about ten inches in height, and formed of bluish-black clay. It was protected by large flints, in some manner arched over it; beneath it was a layer of flints; then five urns, one central, and one in each corner of the shaft. Among the latter was an urn with a large piece of baked clay placed over its mouth.

The author of this paper was on the spot shortly after the contents were removed from the shaft, and found fragments in the soil taken out of it, and from the

pieces he obtained, concludes there had been seven or eight urns included in the entombment.

The workmen having acted with the precipitancy usual upon such occasions, as soon as the urns were discovered, in their eagerness to obtain what they deemed the valuable contents of the jars, partially or wholly destroyed all of them but three.

Nothing but a soft white clayey matter was found within them. This might be burnt bones in a deliquescent state, for the shaft was very wet, having either acted as a drain to the soil in which it was placed, or having a small spring percolating through it. To this cause doubtless we may assign the perfect preservation of the oaken structure.

Some substance of a fibrous texture was found. This might have been yarn which went round the necks of the urns, or matting or woollen cloth laid over their mouths. Upon exposure to the air it speedily dissolved, as did for the most part some walnut or filbert shells.

Beneath the last deposit of urns was a flat piece of stone, over a concavity in the earth at the bottom of the shaft. It was kept in its place by six pegs, apparently of chestnut-wood, pinned round it.

On the stone imbedded in the soil was arranged a circle of horses' teeth.

Although every effort was made by the writer to preserve the shaft, it was soon partially destroyed by the workmen; while the continued rains, and the excavations going on in the cutting, undermined it and completed its destruction. Some of the timber however has been preserved.

In contemplating this strange resurrection from the past, we are reminded by its form and design of the Roman Columbarium; yet, composed of oak and buried at such a depth in the earth, where shall we find another example?

The urns are mostly of a fine dark material, very hard, some with a slight polish. Their height varies from nine to eleven inches; diameters eight inches; most of them with narrow necks and small mouths, some with marks of wickerwork pattern. One or two are of a coarser fabric. They have the character of Roman.

The 'Archæologia,' vol. xxvii. p. 148, contains an account of a planked pit or well, found in Lothbury, London, communicated in a paper by C. R. Smith, Esq. In this well were found earthen Roman vessels in considerable numbers. "Vases placed longitudinally on their sides, as if packed, and imbedded in the mud or sand. A coin of Allectus, and a small Samian patera of the ivy-leaf pattern border," were also found.

The character of the above discovery admitted of no doubt but that its contents were Roman. The place of deposit formed a pit "about three feet square, boarded on each side with narrow planks about two feet long," and exhibited all the character of being a well or pit, into which the relics had either been thrown or hastily deposited for security; the presence among them of two iron implements, one representing a boat-hook and the other a bucket-handle, the latter of no very ancient construction, seems to indicate the uses to which the place of deposit had been applied.

Pits and upright shafts have from time to time been found on our chalk hills and in other localities, but, devoid of woodwork as far as we know, they do not seem to offer any resemblance to the shaft at Bekesbourn.

What then is the nature of this singular relic, and by what people or tribe was it constructed?

We may answer the first query by assuming it to be sepulchral, and that the urns, one or more of them at least, from the contents found therein, contained the remains of burnt bones; the confined area of the shaft.

rendering untenable any idea that it was devoted to funeral rites by inhumation.

Was the fabric the funeral vault of a chief or leader and his family, or devoted to the burial of one individual? The urns being deposited in two or more layers, seem almost to favour the first hypothesis; yet we can hardly judge from circumstances so inconclusive, the Roman modes of sepulture being various.

The presence of the horses' teeth seems to refer to the rites or superstitions of a northern nation; but the flat stone at the foot of the shaft, which has been pronounced by some authorities to be a portion of a Roman millstone, seems to favour a different conclusion. Some of the urns doubtless were stored with such articles of food as the affection of survivors contributed for the use of the departed on his long and unrecorded journey.

The depth at which the shaft was buried in the earth, its entrance being about thirteen feet from the surface, is one remarkable character in the discovery; the elaborate nature of its construction is another.

We have not, that we are aware of, elsewhere, any similar example of a Roman interment. The Danes, who were sometimes in possession for months of this part of Kent, used much timber in their graves, and Worsaae's description of the barrow of Thyre Danebod at Jellinge, in Jutland, has some remarkable features in common with the shaft at Bekesbourn. The former is described as "being a burial-chamber, formed of wood, twenty-four feet long, four and a half feet high, and covered with beams of oak. The walls, which had been covered with woollen cloth, were formed of oak planks, behind which was a bed of clay, trodden down, in which the beams of the ceiling rested."

This oaken structure, unlike our example however, was horizontal, and, besides containing costly relics, was devoted to the practice of burial by inhumation. The

carpentry was inferior ; in fact, the planks, so far from being mortised and uniformly shaped and fitted, were merely placed together, resting on each other.

The ships of the Danes, however, their elaborately carved heads and sterns, and their dimensions, such as those of the ship recorded to have been built by Haco at Bergen, do not render the construction of the shaft by the artisans of this people a matter of impossibility.

The preponderating evidence favours the supposition that the structure was a Roman sepulchre ; yet a strange and isolated example, exhibiting, after the lapse of ages, another phase of the rites and customs of a people : the silent exhumation of a single relic, or the resurrection of a buried city, alike attesting the dominating genius and the mighty energies which at one time subjugated half the world.

Note.—Since the above was written, additional remains have been discovered near the same spot. A shaft, but without timber, filled with flint stones ; and, at the distance of about fifteen feet below the surface, two or three urns, and a vessel (for the writer has not seen it) answering in description to a large Roman amphora.