



# The Twickenham Museum Archive

## The Question of Alexander Pope's Skull

*A dubious legend laid to rest?*

It has been suggested for many years that Alexander Pope's grave was opened and his skull removed during the early part of the 19th century. The written evidence is fragmentary, possibly conflated and somewhat contradictory; nevertheless it is clear that a skull, claimed to be of the man, was displayed and circulated in collections later in the century. Following scholarly appraisal in 1927, it disappeared, probably for all time.

The place of his burial, in the centre aisle of the nave, near the chancel and in view of the monument to his parents, is marked by a square stone, incised with the letter P. The Churchwardens Accounts for that year note: "to Mr Popes being buried in the church £1-0-0". The stone is adjacent to the ledgerstone commemorating the burial of Countess Drogheda in 1735.

Pope's father, also Alexander, had died in 1717 while the family were living in Chiswick. He has a memorial in the churchyard of the parish church of St Nicholas.

Pope's mother died on 7 June 1733, probably just before her ninety-first birthday (she had been baptised on 18 June, 1642). Her funeral took place in St Mary's during the night of 11 June and she was probably buried inside the church. If so, it is likely that Pope was buried next to her later, both of them possibly in a pre-existing vault.

On 20 January 1927 Sir Arthur Keith (1856-1955), Professor and conservator of the Hunterian Museum of the Royal College of Surgeons in London wrote to Dr J R Leeson, Charter Mayor of Twickenham. They were known to each other through membership of the Athenaeum. Keith sought information concerning the possible removal of Pope's skull from his place of burial, in 1818, by the phrenologist Johann Gaspar Spurzheim (1776-1832). He had apparently been shown a skull by "a man in a very good position" who stated that it was Pope's skull. However, he said that the skull was "intensely feminine", that he had compared it with Rysbrack's head of Pope in the Athenaeum, that it "probably came from Twickenham" (from documentary evidence?) and might have been the skull of Pope's mother. As suggested below, this was an actual skull, not a plaster cast.

### The grave opened in 1818?

Dr Leeson lent Keith his copy of R S Cobbett's *Memorials of Twickenham*, published in 1872. Cobbett was a curate at St Mary's from 1866 until 1872 and so in a position to consult the church archives. On pages 278-280 he wrote the following:

*Pope was buried, as he directed, in Twickenham church, in a vault in the middle aisle, under the second pew from the east end, A stone, inscribed with the letter P, marks the spot, which is now hidden by the flooring of the seats.....*

*By some writers it is denied that Pope's whole body is in its coffin: they declare that the head was abstracted during some repairs of the church. Mr Howitt in his Homes and Haunts of the British Poets [1847] writes thus in his article on Pope:- "by one of those acts which neither science nor curiosity can excuse, the skull of Pope is now in the private collection of a phrenologist. The manner in which it was obtained is said to have been this:- On some occasion of alteration in the church, or burial of someone in the same spot, the coffin of Pope was disinterred, and opened to see the state of the remains. By a bribe to the sexton of the time, possession of the skull was obtained for a night and another skull returned instead of it. I have heard that fifty pounds were paid to carry through this transaction. Be that as it may, the undoubted skull of Pope now figures in the phrenological collection of Mr Holm of Highgate, and was frequently exhibited by him, in his lectures, as demonstrating by its not large but well balanced proportions its affinity to the intellectual character of the poet." Such statements are hard to disprove, more especially when motives of interest support them. It is fair, however, to the Rev Charles Proby (the vicar, during whose time the alleged theft was committed), and to the then officials of the church, to give, as he communicated it to Mr Powell, his churchwarden, his unqualified denial of each and every part of the story. Mr Proby had seen Mr Howitt's paragraph, and desired, as he was too old to enter into a paper war, that the real facts which gave rise to the report should be published, if a new history of Twickenham were written. Mr Proby's statement is as follows:- "Upon opening a vault some years ago in the middle aisle of the church, adjoining Pope's, the latter fell in, the coffin was broken, and disclosed the skeleton, which was very short, with a large skull. I was immediately informed of it, when I directed my curate, Mr Fletcher, to remain in the church and not to leave until the whole was restored and built up. A cast of the skull was taken, with my permission, by the mason employed, who well knew how to accomplish it. I am quite sure that Mr Fletcher, rightly carried out my instructions. No such abstraction could have been made.*

Cobbett was almost certainly mistaken in saying that Pope's ledgerstone lay below the floor of a pew because William Howitt, writing in 1847, not entirely accurately, went on to state that: "The remains of Pope rest, with those of his parents, in Twickenham church. In the middle aisle, the sexton shows you a P in one of the stones, which marks the place of their interment." Cobbett may perhaps be excused because, at some date after 1847, the aisles were covered with linoleum which was only removed in the middle of the 20th century. No ledgerstones were visible during this period.

The phrenologist mentioned by William Howitt was probably the son of I D Holm of Highgate. Holm senior was the executor and administrator of Johann Gaspar Spurzheim (1776-1832), a German physician who became one of the chief proponents of phrenology, the now discredited invention of Franz Joseph Gall (1758-1828). Spurzheim bequeathed to Holm's son his collection of busts, skulls and books. It is not clear just how Spurzheim acquired possession of the skull, always assuming that it was a part of his collection.

## The Reverend Canon Charles James Proby

Charles James Proby (1771-1859), Canon of Windsor and a pluralist, was installed as vicar of St Mary's on 30 January 1818 and served until his death in 1859 at the age of 88. His statement to George Powell must have been made between 1856 and 1859 when Powell

was the vicar's warden. There is no record of this in the church archives, but it can be assumed that Cobbett was given a written copy, for inclusion in his book. It had been Proby's suggestion that his statement be included in a later history of St Mary's.

Henry Fletcher was a curate at St Mary's from 1802 and still in post on 27 January 1818 when he attended a vestry meeting, described as "Minister", probably in the absence of a vicar. He was still in Twickenham on 25 March when he was elected a member of the parish management committee, but probably no longer the curate as, among other members of the committee were to be "the vicar and curate of the time". Richard Baker, the next curate is first mentioned on 20 May 1818 when he chaired the vestry meeting.

Thus, if Charles Proby's memory was correct, the opening of the floor took place in February or March 1818, but for an unstated purpose. With the passage of 40 years Proby's memory may have been faulty. Mr Fletcher was required to remain by the grave while a cast was made of the skull. Even with the fortunate presence of a competent stonemason this would have taken time to achieve. Removed first to a suitable workshop, a sectional plaster case (known as a piece mould) would have been made; a delicate process not to be rushed. Then, removed in sections from the skull, the case, reassembled, would be filled with plaster to form the cast. With a successful outcome the skull could then be returned and Mr Fletcher's long vigil terminated.

## An Event in 1826

Eight years later, in June 1826, a visitor to Twickenham, Richard Burnett died, and was buried beneath the floor of the nave, adjacent to Pope. A ledgerstone incised only with his coat of arms marks the place and is matched by a memorial on the south wall of the chancel nearby. The event was described in a letter to *The Gentleman's Magazine* for 10 July (XCVI, 1826, part II, p134):

*About a fortnight ago, on opening a new vault for the remains of Mr Burnett, the distiller (who died at Twickenham at a villa rented from Sir George Pocock, Bart.), a coffin in a very decayed state was discovered, which, from its being some inches higher than those usually made, attracted the attention of the sexton and masons employed in the vault. A very old inhabitant declared it to be the coffin of "Pope", who died in the year 1744. What renders the assertion more probable are the circumstances of the roof of the coffin being strewed with ashes (a ceremony customary with Roman Catholics, I believe), and it being well known that Pope's personal infirmity required a coffin of peculiar shape.*

*Pope in his will, I believe, directed that he should be interred near the remains of his parents, to whom he was remarkably attached. His wishes do not appear to have been attended to, as they are buried towards the north-east end, and the coffin in question is exactly in the middle aisle. The coffin of the Countess of Drogheda appears to lie near it.*

This description suggests that the coffin, though of unusual shape, had not been moved or opened before; its ashes remaining strewn over the top. Nor was there any suggestion that it was opened on this occasion.

## Later Correspondence

Sir Arthur Keith wrote twice more to Leeson in 1927. First on 26 January, having received and read Cobbett's account. He gave his firm opinion that the skull he had seen was not that of Pope, but, possibly his mother's. His second letter, of 27 January, returning Cobbett, enclosed a note written by his assistant, a Miss Tildesley, about the visibility, or otherwise, of the ledgerstone in relation to the pew, as described in Cobbett's account.

There does not appear to have been any further correspondence until, in 1957, the vicar, the Reverend John Davies recounted what he believed to be the history of the matter in the Richmond and Twickenham Times for 14 September 1957. This engaged the interest of Professor D V Davies FRCS (1911-1969), then professor of anatomy at St Thomas's Hospital. He passed the article to A J E Cave (1900-2001), then professor of anatomy at St Bartholomew's Hospital. Cave wrote to Davies, enclosing a useful report on the matter, including the following extract:

*It is certain however that a human skull, alleged to be that of Alexander Pope, was in successive phrenological collections during the last century: it had been in Spurzheim's collection and came finally into the keeping of Mr E W Wetherell, who, in 1927, presented it to the Royal College of Surgeons Museum. The then conservator of the Museum, Sir Arthur Keith, made a critical examination of the specimen and concluded that 'it is impossible to harmonise the profile of this skull with the facial outline of authentic busts and drawings of Pope's head'. He also remarked that this skull 'has very decisively marked female characters' (Roy. Coll. Surgs. England, Annual Rept. on Museum by the Conservator, 18 June 1928, p24).*

The alleged Pope skull was apparently added to the Museum's collections of human osteology, with this attribution:

*'Skull bearing the history of being that of Pope the poet. It came into the possession of the donor from the collection Spurzheim the phrenologist. The history alleges that it was obtained from Twickenham Church on an occasion when the poet's tomb was opened. E W Wetherell, Esq.'*

Cave went on to say that the skull was never given a catalogue number and that between 1935 and 1946, as assistant conservator of the Museum he had neither seen nor known of the skull.

## Summary

The early records are incomplete and will probably remain so. At the advanced age of 88 Canon Proby may have conflated two openings of the nave floor. Either in 1818 or in 1826 a skull was removed from either the coffin of Alexander Pope, or his mother. These coffins may have shared an open-topped brick built vault. However, not all burials below the nave of the church (198 recorded in the 17th century alone) may have been in "vaults", probably unroofed, their size and position today unrecorded. Adventitious references on memorials and in the church archives mention 25 vaults beneath the church floor. There are probably a greater number.

Given the work involved, the suggestion that a cast was made overnight, is questionable: there are no known references to a plaster cast of Pope's skull.

Featuring in phrenological collections during the 19th century, a skull was, in 1927, donated to the Hunterian Museum at the Royal College of Surgeons. Following examination it was held to be the skull of a female. However, it was never accessioned on account of its dubious history and, in 1946, could not be found having been, apparently, disposed of. It is likely to have been the skull of Pope's mother, or even another female burial in or near their vault.

Disposal may have been the act of Sir Arthur Keith, a man whose reputation has suffered from the exposure of the Piltdown Man skull as a fake. His powerful support for its authenticity is well recorded.

**It is to be hoped that, beneath this stone, the body of Alexander Pope will remain at rest undisturbed, protected for all time from any further archaeological curiosity or intervention, whatever the nature of future work in St Mary's Church, Twickenham.**



References:

St Mary's Churchwardens' Accounts & Minutes of Vestry meetings

R S Cobbett, *Memorials of Twickenham*, 1872

*The Gentleman's Magazine*, 10 July (XCVI, 1826, part II, p134

William Howitt, *Homes and Haunts of the Most Eminent British Poets*, 1847

Correspondence in St Mary's Church archives, 1927-1957

©Tony Beckles Willson, B.Arch, MCD, ARIBA, FSA  
44 Popes Avenue  
Twickenham  
TW2 5TL

[ynotbw@globalnet.co.uk](mailto:ynotbw@globalnet.co.uk)

October 2013