

# Chapter 5: Coffins and Coffin Fittings

## INTRODUCTION

The remains of 86 coffins were recovered during excavation, largely represented by surviving metal fixing nails and coffin furniture or fittings, and by slight darkening of the grave backfill around the skeleton. From better preserved sand shadows (Plate 29), it was evident that coffins were of the single break variety ubiquitous in this time period (Litten 1991).

Overall, the coffins were simply furnished with all but one being made of iron, the most inexpensive metal in use for this purpose. Due to corrosion, most coffin fittings were poorly preserved, and although there were at least 22 breastplates, it was not possible to identify the names of any of the deceased. Results of the analysis of the coffin fittings are discussed below, and are summarised by context in Appendix 4.

## HISTORIC BACKGROUND

### 18th- to 19th-century funerary practices

The later 18th and early 19th centuries are remarkable for the profound social significance attached to giving the dead 'a good send off'. Contemporary literature again and again reflects the yearning for a decent funeral and respectable burial, that was felt by all classes, and reiterates the attitude that social status should be expressed in funeral and memorials (Curl 2000, 197). During this period, funerals became a vehicle for social display with funerals of the well-to-do frequently involved processions of black draped hearses, black plumed horses, mutes and chief mourners, a complex symbolism surrounding appropriate mourning dress and behaviour, grand memorials and, of course, the heavily decorated coffin itself.

Financial investment in funerary panoply grew over the course of the 18th century, reaching its zenith in the 1840s. Even amongst the poor, the importance of providing a decent burial was keenly felt (May 2003; Curl 2000, 197). Writing in 1843, Edwin Chadwick estimated that whilst persons of rank or title might expend between £500 and £1500 on a funeral, the middle classes spent between £60 to £100, tradesmen between £10 to £12, whilst a adult 'of the labouring classes' could be decently put to rest for £5, and a child for 30 shillings (May 2003, 7-8). To those on low incomes, however, this comparatively modest sum was often ruinous (Curl 2000, 197), and many families were plunged in considerable financial distress in their attempt to 'do right' by their dead. Amongst the poor, many put aside a nest egg they could ill afford for this purpose, whilst others contributed weekly to friendly or other societies, which often included a funeral benefit paid out on

the death of a member (May 2003, 11). This guaranteed that the individual was not subjected to the shame of 'dying on the parish' and thereby avoided the ignominious and dreaded fate of their remains being used for dissection in an anatomy hall (*ibid.*).

By 1700-20, the funeral furnishing trade was a firmly established business, providing wooden coffins and fittings for all classes of people and at various costs, depending on the status and wealth of the deceased (Litten 1991). Grips were produced by casting, but the rest of coffin fittings comprised thin sheets of metal stamped using dies (*ibid.*). Between 1720-30, these were produced by hand-operated die stamping machines, but after this such machines became power-assisted. Coffin fittings could then be produced en masse and were financially accessible to all but the most indigent by the mid- to late Georgian period (*ibid.*).

In the early Victorian period, this excessive expenditure and ostentation of funerals began to be regarded as vulgar and in poor taste. From the 1840s onwards simplicity in funerary display once again became the vogue, a practice that persists to this day (May 2003, 7). The coffins from the Royal Hospital burial ground date to the heyday of the Georgian/early Victorian funerary tradition, but in keeping with their modest incomes and social status, the coffins excavated at Greenwich were relatively simple. What is unclear is whether these coffins were issued by the Hospital or whether they were purchased by surviving relatives and fellow veterans keen to give the deceased the best possible 'send off' that they could afford.

## COFFIN CONSTRUCTION AND DECORATION

### Coffin

In the later post-medieval period, coffins were of the flat lidded single-break type, and those recovered from the Royal Hospital burial ground were no exception. Little of the original wood of these coffins had survived, being almost exclusively fragments preserved on the reverse of metal coffin fittings, particularly upholstery studs, and on the shafts of coffin nails. Burial 6098 (grave 6069) was slightly better preserved, with small fragments of wood overlying the chest and arm regions (Plate 30). The limit of the coffins showed up as a darkening of the grave fill surrounding the skeleton, and in some cases, for example coffin 6147 (skeleton 6146, grave 6084: Plate 29), the single break coffin shape could be discerned. Often the presence of coffins was attested by coffin fixing nails and fittings alone.

No analysis of the taxa of surviving coffin wood was undertaken. Historically, elm is known to have

been the most popular coffin wood in this period, being valued for its quality of water resistance (Litten 1991) and it is probable that most of the coffins were constructed of this wood.

During the Georgian and Victorian periods, coffins varied considerably in construction and material. They ranged from the simplest unadorned wooden coffins used in pauper funerals, to the triple layered affairs heavily adorned with velvet and encrusted with elaborate metal fittings used in the burial of the wealthy. The cheapest coffins were simple constructions of a single layer of wooden planks, nailed together with iron nails at the corners and along the coffin length. Planks could also be held together by joinery (especially mortice and tenon joints), as seen in the Baptist coffins from the Vancouver Centre excavations, Kings Lynn (Boston 2004).

Iron fixing nails were recovered from 73 coffins (84.88%) at Greenwich. Most were complete but some were corroded and fragmented. Wood adhered to a high proportion of the shafts. Nails were counted by the number of heads so as to avoid duplication. The number of nails per coffin ranged from one to 75, a mean of approximately 16 per coffin. It is highly probable, however, that recovery of nails during excavation was not complete, and may account for the wide variation between the nails found in different graves. It is possible, of course, that joinery rather than nailing was used to secure the planks of the coffin instead.

More expensive coffins also included a metal shell, most commonly of lead, but occasionally of zinc or iron (Litten 1991). This shell usually encased an inner wooden coffin. No such shells were found within the ratings burial ground, but probably were used in many officers' burials in the adjoining cemetery.

From the late 17th century onwards, it became customary to cover the exterior of the coffin with upholstery of baize or velvet, and to decorate the lid and side panels of coffins with studs and metal coffin fittings. A full suite of fittings comprised one to four departum plates (an inner and outer breastplate, a headplate and a footplate), lid motifs, escutcheons, grips and grip plates. In addition, brass or iron studs, originally used to secure the upholstery to the wooden case, became a decorative device, being arranged to create complex patterns on the lid and side panels of the coffin. More humble coffins sported some but not all of the above furnishings. The most common fittings found in poorer coffins were grips and grip plates, then breastplates and simple upholstery stud decoration.

Excavations of the 18th- to 19th-century churchyard and crypt of Christ Church, Spitalfields, London, undertaken in the 1980s, revealed large numbers of coffin fittings. The taxonomy compiled from these fittings (Reeve and Adams 1993) forms the basis for identification of the styles in vogue throughout this period. The coffin fittings from the ratings burial ground were compared to this catalogue wherever preservation was sufficiently good to identify a style. No parallels could be made in any fittings, bar grips from nine coffins.

### **Upholstery stud-work**

18th- to 19th-century wooden coffins were usually upholstered in either velvet or baize (depending on cost), and secured with iron or brass upholstery studs. Once purely functional, by the Georgian period upholstery studs had become a decorative device. Complex patterns were created using studs on the lid and side panels of coffins. Single or double rows of studs commonly delimited the margins of the lid and side panels and often divided up these surfaces into smaller panels. At Greenwich, unlike examples from St George's crypt, Bloomsbury (Boston 2006) and St Luke's church, Islington (Boston 2005), the studs comprising these rows were often widely spaced (2-3 cm apart). Studs were also arranged together in circles or triangles, often in the corners of panels. Eight coffins appeared to have been decorated in this simple way.

At Greenwich, upholstery studs were made exclusively of iron, and like all the furnishings had suffered considerable corrosion (Appendix 4). Wood adhered to the reverse of the studs in many cases. Upholstery studs were recovered from 46 coffins (53.49%), and ranged in number from two studs (coffin 6015, skeleton 6014, grave 6002), three studs (coffin 3121, skeleton 3119, grave 3118) and five studs (coffin 3228, skeleton 3107, grave 3074; and coffin 3153, skeleton 3152, grave 3131) to over 500 studs (coffin 3043). At least 3,346 studs were present, an average of 72 or 73 studs per coffin. Given their small size and the extent of corrosion and concretion onto pebbles and soil of the grave fill, however, many studs were probably missed during excavation, and the true number was probably much higher.

The studs of two coffins (3043, skeleton 3044, grave 3041; and 3111, skeleton 3102, grave 3091) were painted black, tentatively suggesting that the upholstery baize was another colour. Unfortunately, textile survival was very poor, and one only example of upholstery cloth was recovered attached to the reverse of a stud. This was a fairly loose weave, but was very fragmentary.

### **Breastplates**

Breastplates are commonly found overlying the chest area of post-medieval skeletons. These plates, originally attached to the coffin lid, identified the deceased, commonly displaying the name, age-at-death and date of death of the deceased. They occasionally provide additional biographical information, such as titles, professions and family affiliations. As such, they are a vital resource in reconstructing the identity of the deceased, on both an individual and a community scale. The breastplates, or fragments of breastplates, recovered during the excavation could be identified with 25 or 27 coffins; three plates were from multiple burials and could not be ascribed to a specific coffin with confidence (Appendix 4). Unfortunately, none of the plates were sufficiently well preserved to be legible.

Breastplates of more opulent coffins were commonly of lead or brass, with biographical details inscribed onto the surface of the plate. Inscription was not possible on the cheaper iron breastplates. Instead, the plate was often painted black, and the name and details were painted on in a contrasting colour, usually white. In the working class burials from St Hilda's churchyard, South Shields, Northumberland, three such breastplates were discovered (Brian Dean pers. comm.), whilst a number were recovered during excavation of a post-medieval burial ground at the Salisbury Art Centre site by AC Archaeology (Sharon Clough pers. comm.). In the Greenwich Hospital assemblage, flecks of black paint were identified on a few breastplate and grip plate fragments, but no contrasting paint for lettering was identified.

All the breastplates from Greenwich were composed of stamped iron sheets. The thinness of the sheets made the fittings very vulnerable to corrosion and disintegration. Breastplates were often largely whole when revealed during excavation, but fragmented on lifting. Due to this poor preservation, it was not possible to match these stylistically to the Christ Church Spitalfields taxonomy. Some details, such as borders and motifs of drapery and foliage were identified, and are noted in Appendix 4.

### Grips and grip plates

Once solely functional, the grips with which mourners supported and steadied the coffin, became stylistically elaborate during this period, as did the grip plates by which the grips were attached to the coffin. Needing to be robust, the metals used for grips were restricted to iron and brass, whereas a greater variety of materials was used for grip plates.

Grips were recovered from 42 coffins in the ratings' burial ground, but only 22 coffins had grip plates. This difference is almost certainly a factor of preservation. Like breastplates, grip plates comprised thin sheets of stamped iron, and were very vulnerable to corrosion and disintegration. Grips were more solidly constructed, and hence survived better. They were, however, still vulnerable to rusting, and preservation varied from very poor to moderate. In the former, no recognition of styles was possible, but nine better preserved grips could be matched to the Christ Church Spitalfields' (CCS) taxonomy. Three examples of CCS type 1; three examples of CCS type 2a, and three of CCS type 3b were identified. All three of these styles are very simple, lacking motifs, such as flowers, cherubim and swirling foliage, so popular for grip styles of this period. Due to the longevity of use of the three styles, it was not possible to date these interments from the grip styles other than that they were loosely 18th- or 19th-century in date.

Grip plates were too fragmentary to discern many motifs or design details. One sunburst motif was identified (coffin 3087, skeleton 3086, grave 3028), but no further details were evident. Iron grip bolts were recovered from five graves.

### Lid motifs and escutcheons

Lid motifs and escutcheons are thin sheets of metal stamped with a range of motifs, and used to decorate the upholstery on the lid and side panels of the wooden case. Lid motifs are larger than escutcheons and tend to be located centrally in the chest and knee areas of the coffin lid. Escutcheons are most commonly found in the corners and along the margin of the upholstery stud-work panels of the coffin lid and side panels of the outer wooden case. Several grave fills contained the fragmented remains of stamped iron sheets, but it was unclear whether they originated from breastplates, grip plates or lid motifs. None showed the small-scale detail common to escutcheons.

### DISCUSSION

The coffins and coffin furnishings discovered within the graves in the ratings' burial ground were very simple, with a complete lack of ostentation that characterised more wealthy burials of this period. Although little wood survived, it is reasonable to assume that all of the single break coffins were constructed of single thickness wooden planks. The exterior of some had been upholstered, although too little survived to identify the textile. All of the coffin fittings were made of iron, which was the cheapest material available. It is difficult to confidently ascertain how many coffins originally had coffin fittings, particularly breast plates and grip plates as iron preservation was exceedingly poor. Three different styles of grips were identified - all of very simple design. The assemblage is typical of a working class population of this period.

It is unclear whether coffins were issued by the Hospital on the death of one its inmates, or whether they were independently procured by the deceased before his death or by surviving well wishers. Certainly, they appeared more ornate than the Royal Navy coffins recovered from the Paddock of Haslar Hospital, which were almost entirely lacking in coffin furniture (Boston 2005). Further documentary research may shed more light on this issue, but is beyond the scope of this report.

### CONCLUSION

Although this assemblage comprised only a tiny sample of the estimated 20,000 Greenwich pensioners buried within the ratings' burial ground of the Hospital, it has nevertheless provided a unique window into the lives of 18th- and early 19th-century seamen and marines that comprised the Navy in the 'Age of Sail'. In bringing together the diverse but related disciplines of archaeology, osteology and history it has been possible to interpret this group more holistically than is possible for most archaeological assemblages, and in so doing has suggested many new avenues of research that may be explored. The richness of this data is such that this report can only be viewed as an overview or preliminary report from which considerably more research may be undertaken.

