

Report of Lecture to Dunse History Society

22nd November 2023

'Bodysnatching in Lauderdale' was the subject of a most interesting talk by local doctor Sandy Sutherland to the Dunse History Society on 22 November. First discovered in the Borders when a farmer found the bodies of 2 children down a drain which he recovered and buried properly. While bodysnatching occurred in Lauderdale it was in fact a worldwide practice as a consequence of the wish to find out how the body works. In Ancient Greece 300 BC all anatomy teaching was done by dissecting bodies which led them to identify all the body structures and parts. Leonardo da Vinci made drawings of anatomical dissections. In more recent times Padua and Leiden were the centres of anatomical training taught by dissection and during the Enlightenment, Edinburgh became a centre for medicine and by 1720 was world famous. Supplied initially by the bodies of executed criminals much of the dissections were done by barbers as they had sharp cutting instruments. Private anatomy schools were also set up in addition to those in universities. Consequently there was much demand for bodies and therefore people to supply them and the schools were not seriously concerned about the sources of bodies. They might arise, for example, from funerals where the body was removed and only the coffin buried. Legally, a body was of no value and disturbing a grave was a misdemeanor, a shroud however, was of value and stealing a body with a shroud was theft and a criminal offence. The main driver for bodysnatching was money, a body could fetch £7 - £10, almost the annual wage of a worker. A common method was to dig out the head end of the grave, pull out the body from the end of the coffin thus leaving the shroud and the ground largely undisturbed. To prevent bodysnatching graveyards were initially fitted with watchtowers. Subsequently, railings all around a grave were used to protect the grave, as were heavy stones on the grave or iron coffins. These were expensive treatments but after 4 weeks burial when decomposition made the body of no anatomical use they could be removed and re-used. The names of Burke and Hare are well-known as bodysnatchers around Edinburgh. In fact, they were not bodysnatchers as they acquired the bodies before burial. They were known to have killed 16 people. Hare turned King's evidence and Burke was hanged in public. Their identity was discovered when a body of an ill man suffocated by them and hidden under a bed was discovered but when the police arrived the body had been removed. Also 2 murdered female prostitutes were identified by students when brought to the medical school for dissection. The 1832 Anatomy Act, which lasted 40 years, permitted people to leave their bodies for dissection and this led to the popularity of embalming for preservation. There was not a churchyard within 20 miles of Edinburgh that was not snatched.

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