

The Hope Street Bodysnatchers

Bodysnatching in Britain reached its heights in the 1820s. Medical colleges needed to teach practical anatomy, but until the Anatomy Act of 1832, only the bodies of executed criminals could legally be used for dissection, so demand far outstripped supply, leading to the growth of illicit trade in corpses, and even to the Burke and Hare murders of 1828.

In Liverpool in 1824, Robert Armstrong and Thomas Stewart had been convicted of bodysnatching, and it's notable that William Rathbone had proposed that the Liverpool Literary & Philosophical Society should pay their fines, and, after the 1826 case, petitioned for a change in the law.

The Liverpool bodysnatching scandal of 1826 centred on a cellar at the back of 8 Hope Street, by the street-numbering of that time. Marie McQuade (2006) finds that Council lease registers conclusively place the building at the corner of the lane that would become the western end of Back Canning Street: that is, the present 47 Hope Street, on the north side of Back Canning Street. Here, the Rev. James MacGowan lived and worked, having set up a boys' school – around 1822 – in a purpose-built schoolroom at the rear of the property, with its entrance on the lane. In January 1826, MacGowan began renting the large cellar beneath the schoolroom to fellow Scotsman John Henderson, as a cooperage for his fish-oil exporting business. Apart from the occasional unpleasant smell from the cellar, all seemed well for some months.

In the early evening of Monday 9 October 1826, three large casks were delivered by cart from this cellar to the smack *Latona* in George's Dock, for shipping to Edinburgh. They were labelled as 'Bitter Salts' (that is, Epsom salts), but when the sailors went to stow the casks the next morning, the stench from them was so bad that they reported it to Captain Walker, the ship's master. When a body was discovered in one of the casks, the matter was turned over to the police, and the casks taken to the Dead House on Chapel Street, where they were found to contain eleven bodies packed in salt.

Having found out the address from the carter who'd delivered the casks, police Detective Robert Boughey and others went to 8 Hope Street. Here, the Rev. MacGowan told them he had no key to the schoolhouse cellar. Over MacGowan's objections, the police forced the door, and within they discovered the bodies of 22 adults and children, variously in sacks and casks. The police surgeon, examining them, concluded they had all died of natural causes, variously from two days to over a week before. A thread around the toe of one woman suggested she had been legitimately buried, as it was a common custom to keep the feet of the body together by tying the toes.

The cemetery from which the bodies had apparently come, and to which they were returned, was that of St. Mary's, on the west side of Mulberry Street, with its chapel on the south side of Cambridge Street. Marie McQuade (2006) finds that of the 20 bodies buried there in the first week of October 1826 – that is, the ones the gang had presumably taken – ten had died in the Workhouse, just across Mount Pleasant. The frequent practice in this cemetery was to dig a communal grave, large enough to take about 30 bodies, and to backfill it only when its quota had been reached. Meanwhile, the grave would be temporarily covered by a fixed heavy wooden frame with locked doors – but in this case, the gang had somehow acquired a key.

The Rev. MacGowan was cleared of any involvement in the bodysnatching, and John Henderson was never caught. However, one witness, William Gillespie, was remanded; and though charges against him were dismissed, the three men who lodged with him at Caroline Court, off Watkinson Street (just below St. James Street), disappeared immediately after the discovery of the bodies, and were sought by police as the gang responsible.

One, James Donaldson, was seen by a neighbour on the following Saturday and caught by police. The other two, surprisingly, stayed in Liverpool and tried to carry on

their trade, making two attempts to send bodies to Edinburgh by coach from Dale Street, on 4 and 7 November. Peter MacGregor was caught as a direct result of this second attempt; and John Ross was caught on 10 November, having been recognized on Pool Lane (by Castle Street) by George Leech, the carter who had made the delivery to the *Latona* a month earlier.

Bodysnatching, if not accompanied by any looting, was a misdemeanour rather than a felony, but the three gang-members were each sentenced to 12 months and hefty fines of £25 to £50. On 14 November 1826, St. Mary's was authorized to raise its cemetery walls, put up railings and take any other steps needed to discourage bodysnatching; and with the Anatomy Act of 1832, allowing medical schools to dissect donated bodies, the practice of bodysnatching from graveyards largely died out.

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Note on the typography of Scottish names beginning with 'Mac', 'Mc' or 'M'. In this essay, I've made spellings consistent; but for anyone doing any further research, it's worth noticing that 19th Century renderings of the surname-prefix 'Mac' vary widely, even in referring to the same individual. For example, 'MacGregor' may also appear as 'Macgregor', 'McGregor' or 'M'Gregor'.

Main Sources

Peter Delliuss, undated. 'Liverpool Body Snatchers', in 'Articles' section, Liverpool City Police website. Accessed 22 March 2017.

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