

The Miniature Coffins of Arthur's Seat



In 1836, while hunting rabbits on the slopes of "Arthur's Seat" (left) a group of boys are said to have discovered a small cave that was hidden behind three slabs of slate when their dog disappeared into a hollow. Within the cave they found a cache of seventeen toy-sized coffins measuring about 9.5 centimeters (3.75 inches) in length. They were carved from pine and decorated with tinned iron fittings. Each coffin contained a carved wooden figure that was dressed in what appeared to be male clothing that had been stitched around and glued to the figure along with painted-on black boots.

Some of the figures appear to have missing arms and that their coffin was carved to fit them as-is without the missing limbs -suggesting that they may not have originally been carved with the intension of being entombed in the coffins. Their eyes are also open, suggesting they were not originally designed as corpses.



There are only eight examples that have survived to the present day. Some of the missing ones were originally said to have been "*destroyed by the boys pelting them at each other as unmeaning and contemptible trifles*" according to an article in The Scotsman, 16 July 1836. Others seem to have simply fallen apart and disintegrated over the decades while they were held in private hands. The figures appear to be the work of one or two people based on the style.

The Scotsman article speculated that they had a magical meaning: "Our own opinion would be – *had we not some years ago abjured witchcraft and demonology – that there are still some of the weird sisters hovering about Mushat's Cairn [sic] or the Windy Gowl, who retain their ancient power to work the spells of death by entombing the likenesses of those they wish to destroy.*"

There is a theory that they were part of a tradition to give a form of symbolic "proper burial" for sailors whose bodies were lost at sea, or for loved ones who died abroad. But there doesn't seem to be evidence that these were practices known in Scotland at the time.

The type of cotton thread used in the clothing has been dated from no earlier than the 1830's, so it's likely the surviving examples were not made too long before they were discovered. So this adds to some speculation that perhaps they represent some recent contemporary event. It is true the body snatchers Burke and Hare had been killing people in Edinburgh only a few years earlier. But twelve of their victims were women.

A contemporary London Times article describing them also included an interesting additional detail about the original find:

"That the coffins had been deposited singly, in the little cave, and at intervals of many years. In the first tier, the coffins were quite decayed, and the wrappings had moldered away. In the second tier, the effects of age had not advanced so far. And the top coffin was quite recent looking."

If accurate, this would seem to refute any speculation that the seventeen original examples all represent a single event.

To deepen the intrigue, in 1906, The Scotsman published a new story about the coffins. A 'lady residing in Edinburgh' had told the paper that a local 'daft man' would occasionally visit "Mr. B", her father. One time, the man had drawn on a piece of paper a picture of three small coffins, with the dates 1837, 1838 and 1840. The article claimed:

"In the autumn of 1837, a near relative of Mr. B's died; in the following year a cousin died and in 1840 his own brother died. After the funeral, the daft deaf mute appeared again, walked into Mr. B's office and "glowering" at him vanished never to return."

This has led to the theory that perhaps this "daft man" had been creating effigies of his lost relatives and entombing them in a kind of tiny mausoleum on the slope of Arthur's Seat.

In the end, unless similar artifacts are discovered to provide additional clues, the true answer to the puzzle will probably never be known.