

## **Notes on 'Danes' skins' / by H. St. George Gray.**

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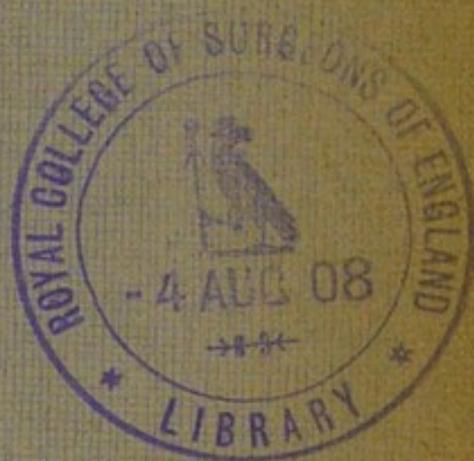


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NOTES ON "DANES' SKINS."

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BY  
H. ST. GEORGE GRAY,  
HON. CORRESPONDING MEMBER.



# Viking Club.

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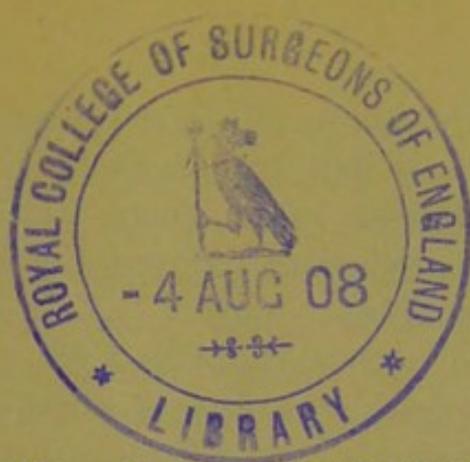
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## NOTES ON "DANES' SKINS."

By H. ST. GEORGE GRAY,

Hon. Corresponding Member.

IT is perhaps a little surprising that in the twelve parts of the SAGA-BOOK already published there is only one reference to a "Dane's skin."<sup>1</sup> This fact induces me to bring together several instances which have come to my notice from time to time, the majority having been previously recorded, scattered, however, in various periodicals and transactions of societies.

It cannot be expected that such an account as the following is by any means exhaustive, but it will doubtless be the means of bringing to light other examples unknown to the writer of these notes.

The average mind generally regards flaying alive as extremely gruesome. "There is an ancient legend of Apollo having flayed Marysas alive for his presumption in challenging the god to a musical contest." An engraving is known of Marysas tied to a tree, head downwards, whilst Apollo was stripping off his skin.<sup>2</sup>

Some accounts state that the Emperor Valerian was flayed *alive*; others that he was skinned after death. As the captive of Sapor, King of the Persians, in the middle of the third century, Valerian, arrayed in his imperial robes, is stated to have been dragged about from town to town at the wheels of a chariot, and when Sapor

<sup>1</sup> SAGA-BOOK, IV., 117.

<sup>2</sup> *Notes and Queries*, 10th ser., I, 352. In the Bible there is a hint of similar proceedings (and dismemberment) in Micah iii. 3

desired to mount his horse, Valerian was made to lie down as a footstool. When at length he died, not even then could the Persians loose their hold upon him. "They had his body skinned, painted the hide red, and hung it up in their chief temple."

According to the generally received tradition, the apostle St. Bartholomew was flayed alive and crucified with his head downwards, at Albanopolis in Armenia, or, according to Nicephorus, at Urbanopolis in Cilicia.

A figure, on the tower of West Cranmore Church, Somerset, having indications on the legs of the skin being stript off, is almost certainly that of the patron saint, St. Bartholomew.<sup>1</sup>

From Geoffrey of Monmouth we learn that in the days of King Morvid a certain king of the Moranians landed with a great force on the shore of Northumberland. Morvid won the victory, and after having glutted his blood-thirst by putting his foes to death, he, becoming weary, ordered others "*to be skinned alive and burned after they were skinned.*"<sup>2</sup>

With what mixed feelings of horror and interest we, as children, learnt in our earliest text-books of history of the skilful bowman, who shot Richard, Cœur de Lion, when laying siege to the Castle of Chaluz, being flayed alive by one Merchadeus, in spite of the "Lion-hearted's" dying orders that his life should be spared.

Hugo de Cressyngham, Chief Justice Itinerant in the North of England in the reign of Edward I., was flayed by the exasperated Scots at Strivelyn, A.D. 1296.

Sir Walter Raleigh feared being flayed alive by the Spaniards, and they perhaps learnt the atrocity from the Moors.<sup>3</sup>

There is evidence of flaying having been practised at quite a late date. Throsby, in his "History of Leicestershire," published in 1790, related the circumstances of

<sup>1</sup> Proc. Som. Arch. Soc., LIII., pt. I., p. 40.

<sup>2</sup> Notes and Queries, 10th ser., I, 15.

<sup>3</sup> Op. cit., 9th ser., XII., 489. For Oriental instances of flaying see Grote's "History of Greece," IV., notes.

a shepherd boy, of Sharnford, *circa.* 1700, folding sheep in a field near High Cross, who was threatened by some villains that they would skin him alive. This was actually carried into effect in a hollow in the field near High Cross, his skin being hung on a thorn. The boy, of course, died in great agony.

It is affirmed that flaying was practised at Lyons during the French Revolution, and that the skins of the "aristocrats" were tanned and made into boots. "At Meudon," says Montgalliard, with considerable calmness, "there was a tannery of human skins; such of the guillotined as seemed worth flaying: of which perfectly good wash-leather was made." Thomas Carlyle states that the skin was used for breeches and other purposes; that the skin of the men was superior in toughness (*consistance*) and quality to shamoy; and that of the women was good for almost nothing, being so soft in texture.

The operation of flaying alive is shown in a remarkable picture in the Bruges Gallery, the victim being a judge who had collected large sums of money for the poor, but had appropriated them.

In Taunton Castle Museum a large piece of skin is shown which was removed from the body of a man hanged at Ilchester Gaol; and in the Library of Trinity College, Cambridge, is a piece of the skin of a man hanged for killing his wife.<sup>1</sup>

These are but a few of many instances of flaying that are on record.

Flaying, although apparently not of rare occurrence, was probably not a punishment for any particular kind of offence, but an arbitrary mode of inflicting the penalty of death on pillaging Danes and others, where the excitement of the moment could not be appeased by any ordinary modes of punishment: or when summary vengeance was stimulated at a time of great popular indignation, especially in distant places where the administration of the law might be imperfectly maintained.

<sup>1</sup> *Notes and Queries*, 10th ser., I, 352.

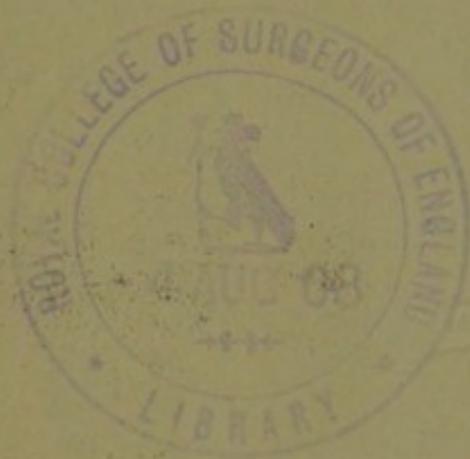
We cannot trace any English enactment which inflicts the penalty of flaying on any offender; and it is not likely that it was inflicted with the sanction of the ecclesiastical authorities.<sup>1</sup> The penalty for sacrilegious theft, always considered to be a most heinous crime, was in any case of unusual severity. By the laws of Alfred it was punishable not only by fine, but the guilty hand, unless redeemed, was also to be struck off. This would tend to show what was the extreme penalty according to law: but the invading Dane would hardly be considered otherwise than an "outlaw," in the sense that the regular course of justice did not apply to him when caught *in flagrante delicto*. It remains as a fact that whether inflicted at the bidding of some powerful thane, or ecclesiastic, or by popular fury, we have tangible evidence that the dread punishment of flaying was actually inflicted in certain cases on foreign pillagers of churches.

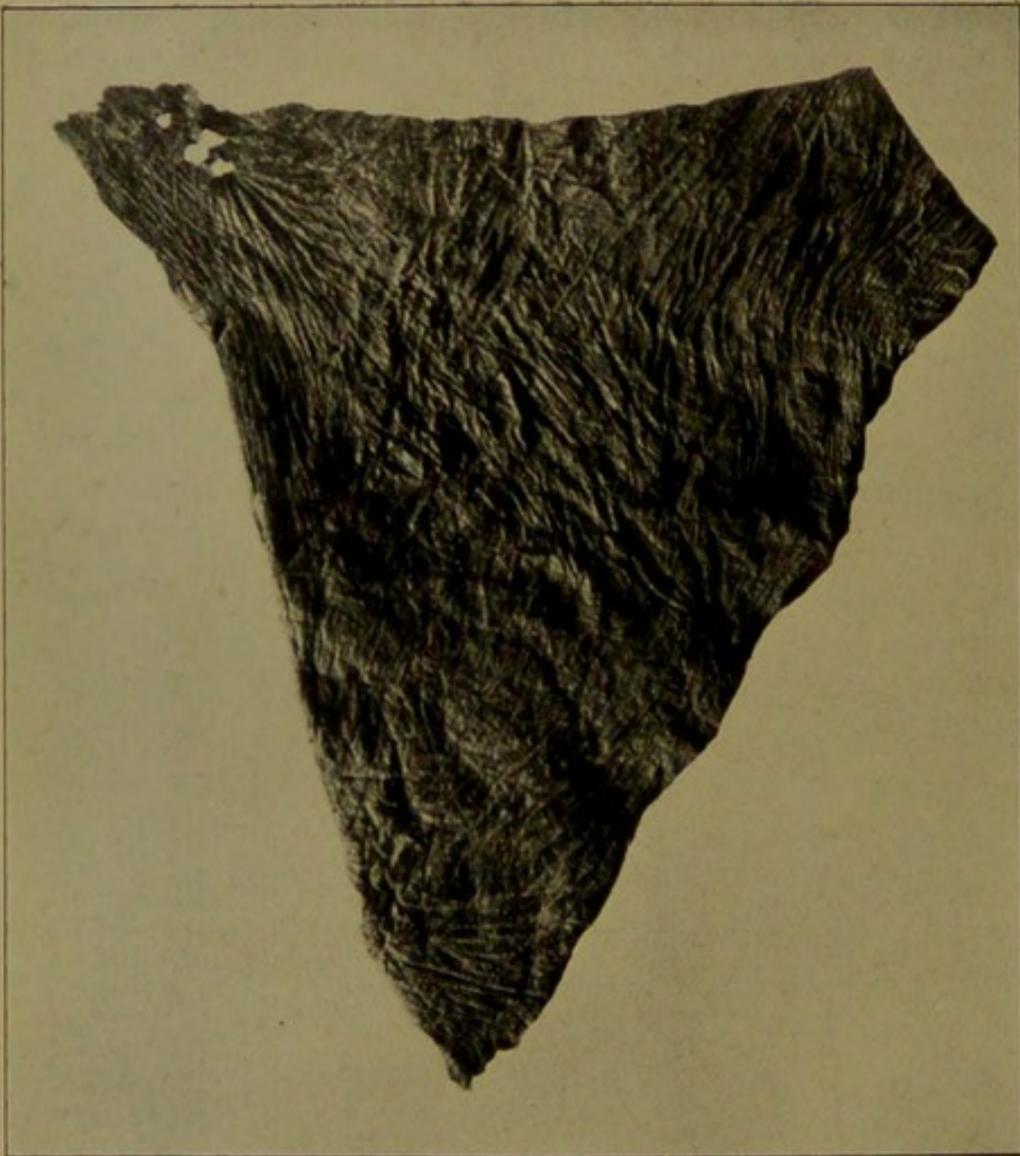
Popular tradition exists in several parts of England, and especially in the eastern counties, of Danes, who, having been caught in the act of pillaging churches, were flayed. As a warning to all who might approach churches with unhallowed and evil intentions, as a terrible memento of the villains who dared to raise their sacrilegious hands against the house of God, and as a ghastly memorial of ecclesiastical vengeance, these so-called "Danes' skins" were nailed to church doors!

The late Mr. Albert Way, F.S.A., investigated these matters to a considerable extent,<sup>2</sup> and obtained for microscopical examination, between the years 1840 and 1850, pieces of these leather-like and shrivelled skins from three localities where the traditions were extant,

<sup>1</sup> Mr. W. Winters has concluded (*Notes and Queries*, 4th ser., V, 311) that "punishments of this kind appear to have had the sanction of the law in the Anglo-Saxon period, when money was often paid by the offender to save his skin, called *hyd-gyld* (hide-gelt), a ransom for one's hide"; but it is more likely that this is a phrase for escape from corporal punishment, or lesser mutilation.

<sup>2</sup> *Archæol. Journ.*, V. 185-192.





PIECE OF "DANE'S SKIN," FROM COPFORD (?)  
NOW IN TAUNTON CASTLE MUSEUM, SOMERSET.

*From a Photograph by H. St. George Gray.*

viz., Worcester Cathedral, and the Churches of Hadstock and Copford in Essex. These were all pronounced by the late Mr. John T. Quekett, who was Professor of Histology at the Royal College of Surgeons, to be undoubtedly human skin, and he said that the examination of a hair alone, without the skin, would have enabled him to form a conclusion, and that the hair presented the characters of those light-haired people.<sup>1</sup>

The Taunton Museum specimen here figured was bequeathed to the Somersetshire Archæological Society, together with a miscellaneous collection of antiquities, some thirty years ago, by the late Professor Quekett, and is, moreover, probably one of the specimens sent to him for examination from Copford, Essex<sup>2</sup>. Fragments had been taken from underneath the iron-work of the south door by a carpenter in the parish, about the year 1843, when the church was under repair. He gave at least one piece to a miller, named Eley, at Copford, from whom a fragment was procured by the then incumbent, the Rev. K. C. Bayley, who had in his possession a short manuscript account of the parish, written during the incumbency of John Dane, 1689-1714, in which the following is found:—

The doors of this Church are much adorned with flourished iron-work, underneath which is a sort of skin, taken notice of in the year 1690, when an old man of Colchester, hearing Copford mentioned, said that in his young time he heard his master say that he had read in an old history that the Church was robbed by Danes, and their skins nailed to the doors; under which, some gentlemen, being curious, went thither and found a sort of tanned skin, thicker than parchment, which is supposed to be human skin, nailed to the door of the said Church, underneath the said iron-work, some of which skin is still to be seen.

A piece of "Dane's skin" from Copford, measuring about 1½ in. by 1¾ in., is shown in Colchester Museum.

<sup>1</sup> Professor Quekett read a paper on the subject before the Microscopical Society in 1848.

<sup>2</sup> *Notes and Queries*, 4th ser., V, 310; 10th ser., I, 155. D. W. Collier's "People's History of Essex," 1861, p. 555. "The Family Topographer," by S. Tymms, I, 22.

In the manuscript catalogue of the Museum, made by the late Mr. J. E. Price, it is stated that up to 1878 there existed an

ancient door in the porch of Copford Church which several years previously to that date had pieces of skin attached to it. These fragments had gradually disappeared when the Rev. P. A. L. Wood first became rector of the parish. Theobald, the clerk, presented him with a fragment, which he said had been taken from beneath the iron-work of the door.

This is the piece which is now in Colchester Museum. A succeeding rector, the Rev. B. Ruck Keene, had also obtained another piece.<sup>1</sup> The present rector, the Rev. E. R. Ruck Keene, informs me that the last piece of "Dane's skin" removed from the door was found under the lock in 1881, and is preserved in a glass frame in the vestry.

Sir Harry Englefield laid before the Society of Antiquaries, in 1789, a plate of iron taken from the door of Hadstock Church, Essex, with a portion of human skin found beneath the iron.

When the north door of Hadstock Church<sup>2</sup> was removed, in 1846, a part of it came into the possession of the Hon. Richard Neville, bearing ancient iron-work and massive nails which served to secure some "Dane's skin," which was considered to have been tanned previously to its being laid on the wood. At that time the strange tradition still existed among the peasantry in the locality, dating, as it is recorded, probably from times anterior to the invasion of the Normans. On an example from this place Professor Quekett found three hairs, and he was able to state that the skin was in all probability removed from the back of the Dane, who was a fair-haired person.

In March, 1904, Alderman Deck exhibited to the Cambridge Antiquarian Society a piece of human skin, being that of a Dane who had committed sacrilege at the Church of Hadstock.

<sup>1</sup>*Trans. Essex Archaeol. Soc.*, n.s., Vol. III., 94.

<sup>2</sup>*SAGA-BOOK*, IV., 117. *Notes and Queries*, 4th ser., V, 310; 10th ser., I, 155.

About seventy years ago the door needed repair, and under an iron bar nailed across the outside were found pieces of skin. The door is rounded at the top, fitting the early Norman arch, and the black oak boards are evidently cut with a hatchet instead of smoothed with a plane.<sup>1</sup>

This piece of skin was given by the then rector (the Rev. C. Townley) to Mr. Deck's father. In the middle of the skin is seen a hole, which was made by the nail in fastening it to the door. Other pieces of the skin can be seen at Audley End, and also in Saffron Walden Museum; which also has part of the door-hinge under which the skin was found.

On January 10th, 1905, at Stevens's auction rooms, London, a square inch of "Dane's skin" from Hadstock Church fetched the sum of three guineas!

Traditions of the cruel vengeance supposed to have been inflicted on sacrilegious Danes are said to have existed in the little neighbouring town of Linton, Cambs., but the vicar has recently told me that any such traditions must have originated at Hadstock, which is only  $1\frac{1}{2}$  miles distant. Linton and Hadstock may, however, have both been overhauled for plunder at the same time.

Quite recently an article,<sup>2</sup> written by Mr. Robert Pierpoint, of Warrington, has come to my notice, giving another Essex parish for these skins, viz., East Thurrock. This interesting account is here given *in extenso*:—

There is an interesting story about the skin of a robber in "My Sayings and Doings, with Reminiscences of my Life; an autobiography of the Rev. William Quekett, Rector of Warrington." Mr. Quekett was one day (presumably before 1854 when he was appointed Rector of Warrington) with his brother, Prof. Quekett, at the College of Surgeons. Whilst they were together the latter received a letter which contained an enclosure "which looked like part of the bottom of an old shoe, of the thickness of half-a-crown, of a dark colour, elastic, and with the markings of wood upon it." The letter was from a churchwarden of the parish of East Thurrock, in Essex, who wanted the professor to tell him, if possible, what the substance was without having any particulars of its history. Having washed it, and cut a thin slice, he discovered under the microscope

<sup>1</sup> *Proc. Camb. Antiq. Soc.*, Vol. XI., 179.

<sup>2</sup> *Notes and Queries*, 10th ser., Vol. I., 73-4.

that it had all the structure of human skin, and on more minute examination that it was the "skin of a light haired man, having the hair of a sandy colour." He wrote to the churchwarden telling him of the result of his examination. The latter replied that he (the professor) had "proved the truth of a great tradition which had existed for years in East Thurrock."

The churchwarden went on to say that "on the west door of the church there had been for ages an iron plate of a foot square, under which they said was the skin of a man who had come up the river and robbed the church. The people had flayed him alive, and bolted his skin under an iron plate on the church door as a terror to all other marauders. At the restoration of the church, which was then going on, this door had been removed, and hence he had been able to send the specimen."

It appears to have been assumed that the marauder who had been skinned was a Dane. Mr. W. Quekett had a bit of the skin fixed as a specimen for the microscope, and wrote on the slide, "This is the skin of a Dane, who, with many others, came up the river Thames and pillaged churches. Caught in the act at East Thurrock, Essex, and flayed alive."

The fate of the specimen on the slide is interesting. Mr. Quekett lost it, and knew nothing for many years of what had become of it. In or about 1884, apparently, he was reading aloud to some gentlemen in the hall of the "Palace Hotel," Buxton, an account of a meeting of the British Association at Penzance. In this account he came across the fact that at the meeting a microscopic object, among others of special interest, had been exhibited by a gentleman in the neighbourhood, viz., a "Dane's skin" and that the specimen at Penzance had on it, word for word, what he had written on his lost treasure.

He exclaimed "Why this is my Dane's skin! I lost it twenty years ago." After telling those present how he had obtained the specimen, he said aloud, "I wonder who that man is." Immediately afterwards the porter, who had heard the conversation, said, "Please, Mr. Quekett, I can tell you who that gentleman is; I was his footman and valet for four years; it is Mr. ———, who lives at ——— Castle, near Penzance." Mr. Quekett wrote at once to the gentleman, whose name he does not give, claiming the specimen, and asking him how he had come in possession of it. The gentleman replied that the description of the specimen and the account of the inscription were perfectly correct; that it had been given to him by a lady in London; that he greatly valued it; and that should Mr. Quekett ever be in his part of the country, and should wish to see it, he would have great pleasure in showing it to him. *Beati possidentes.*

Mr. Quekett died at the Rectory, Warrington, on Good Friday, 1888.

Yet another instance. Dried skin was, at one time, to be seen on the great northern doorway of Worcester

Cathedral, which the late Dr. Prattinton, of Bewdley, carefully noted in his extensive collections for a history of Worcestershire.<sup>1</sup> These are his words:—

A portion of skin, supposed to be human, according to the tradition that a man, who had stolen the sanctus-bell from the high-altar in Worcester Cathedral, had been flayed, and his skin affixed to the north doors, as a punishment for such sacrilege. The doors having been removed, are now to be seen in the crypt of the cathedral, and small fragments of skin may still be seen beneath the iron-work with which they are strengthened.

These doors were considered by Mr. Harvey Eginton, F.S.A., to be fourteenth century, and probably coeval with the work completed during the time of Bishop Wakefield, *circa*. 1386; and if of that date the human skin was probably not affixed to the doors until the reign of Richard II., when civilization was rapidly advancing. But, of course, the skin might be a vestige of a punishment inflicted long previously, and may have been transferred from an old door to a newer one. Mr. Quekett examined a piece of the skin from Worcester, and was perfectly satisfied that it was human skin taken from some part of the body of a light-haired person, where little hair grows.

A specimen of the Worcester skin may be seen in the Museum of the Royal College of Surgeons; this museum also contains examples from Hadstock and Copford, but has not had any further specimens added to the collection since Professor Quekett's death. The piece of skin from Worcester Cathedral, formerly in the collection of the late Dr. Prattinton, is now preserved by the Society of Antiquaries of London at Burlington House.

Another example is recorded by the minutely-accurate Pepys, in his Diary, April 10th, 1661, relating how he visited Rochester Cathedral, and "then away thence, observing the great doors of the Church, as they say, covered with the skins of the Danes."<sup>2</sup> This is only

<sup>1</sup> For further information see Allies's "Antiquities of Worcestershire," 2nd edit., pp. 40-51.

<sup>2</sup> Diary, edited by Lord Braybrooke, 1851, vol. I., 208.

what would be expected, seeing that the Thames had been frequently the resort of the Danes, and the men of Kent were continually harassed by their rapacious cruelty. In the year 999 they went up the Medway to Rochester, according to the Saxon Chronicle, and made a most fatal foray, overrunning nearly all West Kent, and committing fearful ravages.

Traces of like barbarous punishment inflicted upon Danes have been recorded as formerly existing at Westminster Abbey. Dart, in 1723, said:—

This Revestry (which is called the Chapel of Henry VIII., for what reason I know not, unless for that he stripped it of its furniture) is inclosed with three doors, the inner cancelled; the middle, which is very thick, lined with skins like parchment and driven full of nails. These skins, they by tradition tell us, were some skins of the Danes, tann'd, and given here as a memorial of our delivery from them. The doors are very strong, but here were notwithstanding broken open lately and the place robbed.<sup>1</sup>

The door in question led from the vestibule of the Chapter House to the space under the dormitory stairs.

Professor Quekett is stated to have also examined a piece of skin from Westminster Abbey, finding several hairs which he pronounced to be human, and asserting that the skin belonged to a fair-haired person.<sup>2</sup>

Stillingfleet Church, Yorks, has a south door of the eleventh century<sup>3</sup> covered with ornamental ironwork which includes a ship, and is said to have had a "Dane's skin" on it.<sup>4</sup>

Other examples were probably to be found on church doors in the eastern counties, long infested by the cruel plunderers from the North. It would be interesting to hear of any other existing examples of "Danes' skins."

<sup>1</sup> Dart's "History of Westminster Abbey," Vol. I., Book I., p. 64. Albert Way, in the *Archæol. Journ.*, Vol. X., 167.

<sup>2</sup> *Notes and Queries*, 6th ser., I., 261. "Curiosities of Natural History," by Frank Buckland, 1st ser., p. 84.

<sup>3</sup> See pp. 247-250, and *Yorks. Arch. Journ.*, xii. 440, footnote ii.

<sup>4</sup> *The Treasury Magazine*, vol. x., p. 417. Jan, 1908.

In a note-book, two or three years ago, I made the following entry:—"Dane's skin was attached with large flat-headed nails to church door at Bosham, Sussex." Not having kept a record of the source of my information, I communicated with the vicar (the Rev. K. H. Macdermott), who writes: "I have made enquiries of the oldest inhabitants, and also of several old parishioners who have all been regular church-goers, about the 'Dane's skin,' but regret to say that none of them can remember any such thing." As all Sussex archæologists know, Bosham had an interesting early history; Canute had a home there, and his little daughter, aged about eight years, appears to have been buried in Bosham Church. No more likely place could there be for the finding of a "Dane's skin," and it is surprising that no tradition concerning the Danes is known there among the older inhabitants.

In some parts of Sussex the term "Dane's skin" appears to have been synonymous with "freckles." The Rev. W. D. Parish, of Selmeston, made the following statement in *Notes and Queries*<sup>1</sup>:—

A few days ago I was speaking to a man here about his little boy, who looked pale and delicate. He said, "Ah, you'll see a difference in him in a few weeks' time, when the warm weather comes, and brings the Danish blood out of him. When he puts on his *Dane's skin* he'll look very different. You'll always notice these Danes look rather peekish in winter time." On enquiry, I found that by "*Dane's skin*" he meant freckled skin. His grandmother had told him that freckles were a sign of Danish blood. A woman informed me that she had always understood that red-haired people were Danes. Our Sussex ancestors disliked the Danes, and considered a "Dane's skin" an appropriate ornament for a church door; and I was interested to find that Danish blood and Danish skins still haunt the Sussex dialect.

In West Cornwall there appears to have been great aversion to red hair, where the expression "Red-headed Dane" was considered a fearful term of reproach. Mr. W. Noye records in *Notes and Queries*<sup>2</sup> that

<sup>1</sup> 7th ser., III, 451.

<sup>2</sup> 7th ser., VI, 253-4.

In 1867 a case of assault was heard at the Penzance Town Hall, when it came out in evidence that the defendant had called the complainant a "Red-headed Dane." In Sennen Cove, about nine or ten miles west of Penzance, there was for a long time a colony of red-haired people, with whom the other inhabitants of the district refused to marry. In fact, in many of the parishes west of Penzance there has existed time out of mind a great antipathy to families with red hair, which manifested itself in the expression, "Oh, he (or she) is a red-haired Dane."

In Kingston Deverill, Wilts, there was an old man who called red-haired people "Danes" or "Daners," as "Thee bist a Dane." About Calne and Chippenham it was frequently said of a red-haired man that he was "crossed wi' the Danes." In Somerset red-haired men were often said to be "a bit touched with the Danes."

Somewhat analogous to the nailing of human skin to the doors of churches is the occurrence of human skulls sometimes found built into church walls. Worsaae, the Danish antiquary, in "The Danes and Norwegians in England," mentions one or two cases both in Morayshire and in his native land.

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NOTE.—At the last moment it has been reported to me that the ancient iron-clad oak door, formerly belonging to the Church of Stoke Courcy, Somerset, now preserved at "The Priory," Chilton-super-Polden, near Bridgwater, had a Dane's skin nailed to it; but I have been unable to verify this statement at present. If this report can be corroborated, a note to that effect will appear in the next number of the SAGA-BOOK.

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