

Exhumation of remains of John Hampden.

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Publication/Creation

[London] : [publisher not identified], [1828]

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Narrative of the disinterment of the body of John Hampden, Esq. (commonly called the "Patriot") in Hampden church, Bucks, on the 21st of July, 1828, to ascertain the cause of his death; some historians supposing that he was wounded in the shoulder by a shot from the enemy at the battle of Chalgrove-field (June, 1643); others supposing that he was killed by the bursting of his own pistol, with which his son-in-law, Sir Robert Pye, had presented him—Present on the occasion—The Right Hon. Lord Nugent, Counsellor Denman, the Rev. Mr. Brookes, Mr. Heron, Mr. Grace (teward to the Earl of Buckinghamshire), George Coventry, six other young gentlemen, with whose names I was not acquainted, 12 grave-diggers and assistants, with the clerk of the parish.

On the morning of the 21st of July, we all assembled in the Church, and commenced the operation of opening the ground.

The parish plumber descended, and commenced cutting across the coffin, then longitudinally, until the whole was sufficiently loosened to roll back, in order to lift off the wooden lid beneath, which was found in such good preservation, that it came off nearly entire. Beneath this was another lid of the same material, which was raised without materially giving way.

The coffin had originally been filled up with saw-dust, which was found undisturbed, except the centre, where the abdomen had fallen in. The saw-dust was then removed, and the process of examination commenced. Silence reigned. Not a whisper or breath was heard. Each stood on the tiptoe of expectation, awaiting the result as to what appearance the face would present when divested of its covering.

Lord Nugent descended into the grave, and first removed the outer cloth, which was firmly wrapped around the body—then the second, and a third—such care having been extended to preserve the body from the worm of corruption.

Here a very singular scene presented itself. No regular features were apparent, although the face retained a death like whiteness, and showed the various windings of the blood vessels beneath the skin. The upper row of teeth were perfect, and those that remained in the under jaw, on being taken out and examined, were quite sound.

A little beard remained on the lower part of the chin, and the whiskers were strong, and somewhat lighter than his hair, which was a full auburn brown. The upper part of the bridge of the nose still remained elevated, the remainder had given way to the pressure of the cloths, which had been firmly bound round the head. The eyes were but slightly sunk in, and were covered with the same white film which characterised the general appearance of the face.

Finding that a difference of opinion existed as to the indentation in the left shoulder, where it was supposed he had been wounded, it was unanimously agreed upon to raise up the coffin altogether, and place it in the centre of the Church, where a more accurate examination might take place.

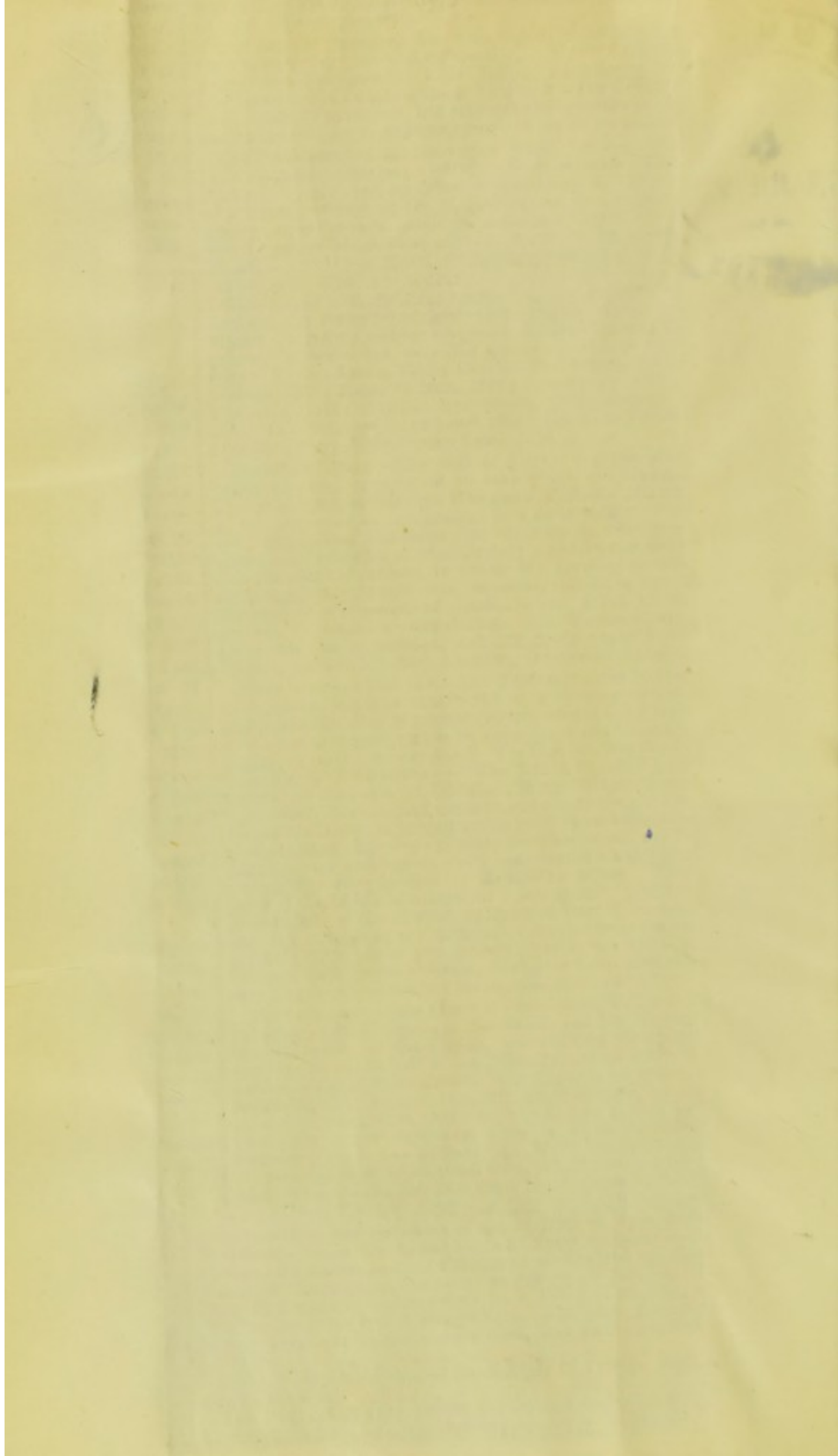
The coffin was extremely heavy, but by elevating one end with a crow-bar, two strong ropes were adjusted under either end; and thus drawn up by twelve men in the most careful manner possible.

Being placed on a trestle, the first operation was to examine the arms, which nearly retained their original size, and presented a very muscular appearance.

On lifting up the right arm, we found that it was dispossessed of its hand. We might, therefore, naturally conjecture that it had been amputated, as the bone presented a perfectly flat appearance, as if sawn off by some sharp instrument. On searching under the cloths, to our no small astonishment, we found the hand, or rather a number of small bones, inclosed in a separate cloth.

For about six inches up the arm, the flesh had wasted away, being evidently smaller than the lower part of the left arm, to which the hand was very firmly united, and which presented no symptoms of decay further than the two bones of the fore finger loose. Even the nails remained entire, of which we saw no appearance in the cloth containing the remains of the right hand.

At this process of the investigation, we were perfectly satisfied that, independently of the result of any further examination, such a striking coincidence as the loss of the right hand would justify our belief in Sir Robert Pye's statement to the Harleys, that his presentation pistol was the innocent cause of a wound which afterwards proved mortal. It was, however, possible that, at the same moment, in the heat of the action at



Chalgrave, when Colonel Hampden discharged his pistol at his adversary, that his adversary's ball might wound him in the shoulder; for he was soon after observed, as stated by Sir Philip Warwick, "with his head hanging down, and his hands leaning upon his horse's neck."

In order to corroborate or disprove the different statements relative to his having been wounded in the shoulder, a close examination of each took place.

The clavicle of the right shoulder was firmly united to the scapula, nor did there appear any contusion or indentation that evinced symptoms of any wound ever having been inflicted. The left shoulder, on the contrary, was smaller and sunken in, as if the clavicle had been displaced. To remove all doubts, it was adjudged necessary to remove the arms, which were amputated with a penknife.

The socket of the left arm was perfectly white and healthy, and the clavicle firmly united to the scapula, nor was there the least appearance of contusion or wound.

The socket of the right shoulder, on the contrary, was of a brownish cast, and the clavicle being found quite loose and disunited from the scapula, proved that dislocation had taken place. The bones, however, were quite perfect. Such dislocation, therefore, must have arisen either from the force of a ball, or from Colonel Hampden having fallen from his horse, when he lost the power of holding the reins by reason of his hand having been so dreadfully shattered. The latter, in all probability, was the case, as it would be barely possible for a ball to pass through the shoulder without some fracture.

In order to examine the head and hair, the body was raised up and supported with a shovel; on removing the cloths which adhered firmly to the back of the head, we found the hair in a complete state of preservation. It was a dark auburn colour, and, according to the custom of the times, was very long—from five to six inches. It was drawn up and tied round at the top of the head with black thread or silk. The ends had the appearance of having been cut off. On taking hold of the topknot, it soon gave way, and came off like a wig.

Here a singular scene presented itself. The worm of corruption was busily employed, the skull in some places being perfectly bare, whilst in others the skin remained nearly entire, upon which we discovered a number of maggots and small red worms on the feed with great activity. This was the only spot where any symptom of life was apparent, as if the brain contained a vital principle within it, which engendered its own destruction; otherwise, how can we account, after a lapse of near two centuries, in finding living creatures preying upon the seat of intellect, when they were nowhere else to be found, in no other part of the body. He was five feet nine inches in height, apparently of great muscular strength, of a vigorous and robust frame; forehead broad and high; the skull altogether well formed, such an one as the imagination would conceive capable of great exploits.

Here I close the narrative—one of singular interest to those who were eye-witnesses of the examination, which presented a scene so novel, so ghastly, but at the same time so full of moment, that it will ever prove a memorable event in the short era of our lives. We recalled to mind the virtuous actions of the deceased; his manly defence against the tyranny of the Star Chamber; his abandonment of every social and domestic tie for the glorious cause of freedom; and whilst we gazed upon his remains, remembered, that that voice which was once raised on behalf of his country, had contributed in no small measure to pave the way for the blessings of liberty, which, but for his warning, might to this day have been withheld from an enlightened people.

As one of the reports of the day, we may mention, that it is said Lord Nugent will occupy his leisure during the Parliamentary recess, by drawing up an account of the famous Hampden from authentic papers never before published.

The battle of Chalgrave-field was fought on the 18th of June, 1643. Mr. Hampden died on the 24th, and was buried on the 25th, as stated in the parish register. Sir W. Dugdale mentions several instances where persons of rank were interred the day after their decease.

[Notwithstanding the circumstantial nature of the above relation, which evidently came from a person present at the exhumation, some doubt is entertained whether the remains examined were those of the great John Hampden, or of some member of his family.]

