

The Missing Head of Bacon



The burial and disappearance of the head and body of Sir Francis Bacon, Baron Verulam of Verulam, Viscount St Alban.

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Sir Francis Bacon, Baron Verulam of Verulam, Viscount St Alban, died aged 65 (i.e. in his 66th year) on 9 April 1626, which that year was Easter Day. Dr William Rawley, Bacon's personal secretary and chaplain, wrote in his *Resuscitatio* (1657) that: "He [Bacon] died on the ninth day of April in the year 1626, in the early morning of the day then celebrated for our Saviour's resurrection, in the sixty-sixth year of his age, at the Earl of Arundel's house in Highgate, near London, to which place he casually repaired about a week before; God so ordaining that he should die there of a gentle fever, accidentally accompanied with a great cold, whereby the defluxion of rheum fell so plentifully upon his breast, that he died by suffocation."¹

In fulfilment of Bacon's wishes, his body was placed in a coffin and interred in a vault beneath the chancel of St Michael's Church, Gorhambury, St Albans. His funeral was discreet and went unreported. In his will Bacon had requested that: "For my burial, I desire it may be in St. Michael's Church, near St. Alban's: there was my mother buried, and it is the parish church of my mansion house of Gorhambury, and it is the only Christian church within the walls of old Verulam. I would have the charge of my funeral not to exceed three hundred pounds at the most." A few years later, in 1630, a marble monument was erected in the chancel of the church, over the vault, by Sir Thomas Meautys, Bacon's private secretary, as a memorial to Bacon.

Sir Thomas Meautys was granted Gorhambury by Bacon's executors, who conveyed to him a lifetime interest (presumably in accordance with Bacon's wishes), but because of protracted proceedings he was only able to finally acquire it in 1632. In 1639 he married Anne Bacon, daughter of Jane Meautys and her husband, the Rev. Sir Nathaniel Bacon of Culford, son of Francis Bacon's half-brother, Sir Nicholas Bacon of Redgrave, Suffolk. Sir Thomas moved into Gorhambury with his wife and daughter in 1646.

Sir Thomas Meautys died in 1649, and during his funeral in St Michael's Church the Bacon vault was opened and Francis Bacon's remains were inadvertently exposed. According to Thomas Fuller in his *The History of the Worthies of England* (1662), Bacon's skull was found and made "the object of scorn and contempt" by Dr John King, a medical doctor and Justice of the Peace (and from 1646 to 1649 a governor of St Albans School), who was present at the funeral and who was presumably Meautys' family doctor:-

"He [Francis Bacon, Viscount St Alban] died *Anno Domini* 1626 in the house of the Earl of *Arundel* at *High-gate*, and was buried in *Saint Michaels* Church in *Saint Albans*, Master *Mutis* his grateful servant erecting a Monument for him. Since I have read that his grave being occasionally opened, his scull, (the relique of civil veneration) was by one *King a Doctor of Physick* made the object of scorn and

contempt, but he, who then derided the dead, is since become the laughing stock of the living.”²

Whether Dr King removed Bacon’s skull, or whether he simply made fun of it *in situ*, we will probably never know. But what the incident does confirm, if the report is true, is that Francis Bacon’s body was indeed laid in a coffin interred in the crypt of St Michael’s Church, St Albans, the parish church of Gorhambury.

In 1651 Meautys’ widow, Anne Meautys, married Sir Harbottle Grimston, 2nd baronet, who purchased the reversion of Gorhambury. Anne died in 1680 and, in 1681, according to John Aubrey in his *Brief Lives*, Sir Harbottle removed Bacon’s coffin to make room for his own in readiness for his own death: “This October 1681, it rang over all of St. Albans that Sir Harbottle Grimston, Master of the Rolles, had removed the coffin of this most renowned Lord Chancellour to make room for his owne to lie in the vault there at St. Michael's Church.” Sir Harbottle actually lived on for another four years, eventually dying on 2 January 1685.

What Sir Harbottle Grimston did with Bacon’s coffin and the remains within it has not been recorded. Normally the Church would ensure that such remains were honourably reburied elsewhere within the same sacred precincts (i.e. within the church or the surrounding churchyard), unless a special dispensation had been granted to remove the remains in order to reinter them in some other properly consecrated place. Like the mystery of the head, this leaves another open question.

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Endnotes

¹ Rawley, William, *Resuscitatio, or, Bringing into Publick Light Several Pieces of the Works, Civil, Historical, Philosophical, & Theological, Hitherto Sleeping; of the Right Honourable Francis Bacon* (1657).

² Fuller, Thomas, *The History of the Worthies of England* (1662), p.242.