

= Resurrectionists in the United Kingdom =

Resurrectionists were commonly employed by anatomists in the United Kingdom during the 18th and 19th centuries to exhume the bodies of the recently dead . Between 1506 and 1752 only a very few cadavers were available each year for anatomical research . The supply was increased when , in an attempt to intensify the deterrent effect of the death penalty , Parliament passed the Murder Act 1752 . By allowing judges to substitute the public display of executed criminals with dissection (a fate generally viewed with horror) , the new law significantly increased the number of bodies anatomists could legally access . This proved insufficient to meet the needs of the hospitals and teaching centres that opened during the 18th century . Corpses and their component parts became a commodity , but although the practice of disinterment was hated by the general public , bodies were not legally anyone 's property . The resurrectionists therefore operated in a legal grey area .

Nevertheless , resurrectionists caught plying their trade ran the risk of physical attack . Measures taken to stop them included the use of increased security at graveyards . Night watches patrolled grave sites , the rich placed their dead in secure coffins , and physical barriers such as mortsafes and heavy stone slabs made extraction of corpses more difficult . Body snatchers were not the only people to come under attack ; in the public 's view , the 1752 Act made anatomists agents of the law , enforcers of the death penalty . Riots at execution sites , from where anatomists collected legal corpses , were commonplace .

Matters came to a head following the Burke and Hare murders of 1828 . Parliament responded by setting up the 1828 Select Committee on anatomy , whose report emphasised the importance of anatomical science and recommended that the bodies of paupers be given over for dissection . In response to the discovery in 1831 of a gang known as the London Burkers , who apparently modelled their activities on those of Burke and Hare , Parliament debated a bill submitted by Henry Warburton , author of the Select Committee 's report . Although it did not make body snatching illegal , the resulting Act of Parliament effectively put an end to the work of the resurrectionists by allowing anatomists access to the workhouse dead .

= = Legal background = =

Human cadavers have been dissected by physicians since at least the 3rd century BC , but throughout history , prevailing religious views on the desecration of corpses often meant that such work was performed in secrecy . The Christian church forbade human dissection until the 14th century , when the first recorded anatomisation of a cadaver took place in Bologna . Until then , anatomical research was limited to the dissection of animals . In Britain , human dissection was proscribed by law until 1506 , when King James IV of Scotland gave royal patronage to the Barber @-@ Surgeons of Edinburgh , allowing them to dissect the " bodies of certain executed criminals " . England followed in 1540 , when Henry VIII gave patronage to the Company of Barber @-@ Surgeons , allowing them access to four executed felons each year (Charles II later increased this to six felons each year) . Elizabeth I granted the College of Physicians the right to anatomise four felons annually in 1564 .

Several major hospitals and teaching centres were established in Britain during the 18th century , but with only a very few corpses legally available for dissection , these institutions suffered from severe shortages . Some local authorities had already attempted to alleviate the problem , with limited success ; in 1694 , Edinburgh allowed anatomists to dissect corpses " found dead in the streets , and the bodies of such as die violent deaths ... who shall have nobody to own them " . Suicide victims were given over , as were infants who had died while being born and also the unclaimed bodies of abandoned children . But even though they were supported by the common law , anatomists occasionally found it difficult to collect what was granted to them . Fuelled by resentment of how readily the death penalty was used , and imbued with superstitious beliefs , crowds sometimes sought to keep the bodies of executed felons away from the authorities . Riots at execution sites were commonplace ; worried about possible disorder , in 1749 the Sheriff of London ignored the surgeons and gave the dead to their relatives .

These problems , together with a desire to enhance the deterrent effect of the death penalty , resulted in the passage of the Murder Act 1752 . It required that " every murderer shall , after execution , either be dissected or hung in chains " . Dissection was generally viewed as " a fate worse than death " ; giving judges the ability to substitute gibbeting with dissection was an attempt to invoke that horror . While the Act gave anatomists statutory access to many more cadavers than were previously available , it proved insufficient . Attempting to bolster the supply , some surgeons offered money to pay the prison expenses and funeral clothing costs of condemned prisoners , while bribes were paid to officials present at the gallows , sometimes leading to an unfortunate situation in which corpses not legally given over for dissection were taken anyway .

= = Commodification = =

Documented cases of grave robbery for medical purposes can be found as far back as 1319 . The 15th @-@ century polymath Leonardo da Vinci may have secretly dissected around 30 corpses , although their provenance remains unknown . In Britain , the practice appears to have been common early in the 17th century . For example , William Shakespeare 's epitaph reads " Good friend , for Jesus ' sake forbear , To dig the dust enclosed here . Blessed be the man that spares these stones , And cursed be he that moves my bones " and in 1678 , anatomists were suspected of being involved in the disappearance of an executed gypsy 's body . Contracts issued in 1721 by the Edinburgh College of Surgeons include a clause directing students not to become involved in exhumation , suggesting , according to historian Ruth Richardson , that students had already done the exact opposite . Pupils accompanied professional body snatchers as observers , and were reported to have obtained and paid for their studies with human corpses , perhaps indicating that their tutors were complicit . The unauthorised removal of bodies from London graveyards became commonplace and by the 1720s , probably as a direct result of the lack of legally available bodies for anatomical research , fresh corpses had likely undergone commodification .

Corpses and parts thereof were traded like any other merchandise : packed into suitable containers , salted and preserved , stored in cellars and quays and transported in carts , waggons and boats . Encouraged by fierce competition , anatomy schools usually paid more promptly than their peers , who included individual surgeons , artists and others with an interest in human anatomy . As one body snatcher testified , " a man may make a good living at it , if he is a sober man , and acts with judgement , and supplies the schools " .

In London , late 18th @-@ century anatomists may have delegated their grave @-@ robbing almost entirely to body snatchers , or , as they were commonly known , resurrectionists . A fifteen @-@ strong gang of such men , exposed in Lambeth in 1795 , supplied " eight surgeons of public repute , and a man who calls himself an Articulator " . The report into their activities lists a price of two guineas and a crown for a dead body , six shillings for the first foot , and nine pence per inch " for all it measures more in length " . These prices were by no means fixed ; the black market value of corpses varied considerably . Giving evidence to the 1828 Select Committee on Anatomy , the surgeon Astley Cooper testified that in 1828 the price for a corpse was about eight guineas , but also that he had paid anything from two to fourteen guineas previously ; others claimed they had paid up to twenty guineas per corpse . Compared to the five shillings an East End silk weaver could earn each week , or the single guinea a manservant to a wealthy household was paid , these were considerable sums of money and body snatching was therefore a highly profitable business . Surgeons at the Royal College in Edinburgh complained that resurrectionists were profiteering , particularly when local shortages forced prices up . One surgeon told the Select Committee that he thought the body snatchers were manipulating the market for their own benefit , though no criticism was made of the " Anatomy Club " , an attempt by anatomists to control the price of corpses for their benefit .

Prices also varied depending on what type of corpse was for sale . With greater opportunity for the study of musculature , males were preferable to females , while freaks were more highly valued . The body of Charles Byrne , the so @-@ called " Irish Giant " , fetched about £ 500 when it was bought by John Hunter . Byrne 's skeleton remains on display at the Royal College of Surgeons of

England . Children 's bodies were also traded , as " big smalls " , " smalls " or foetuses . Parts of corpses , such as a scalp with long hair attached , or good quality teeth , also fetched good prices ? not because they held any intrinsic value to the anatomist , but rather because they were used to refurbish the living .

With no reliable figures for the number of dissections that took place in 18th @-@ century Britain , the true scale of body snatching can only be estimated . Richardson suggests that nationally , several thousand bodies were robbed each year . The 1828 Select Committee reported that in 1826 , 592 bodies were dissected by 701 students . In 1831 , only 52 of 1 @,@ 601 death penalties handed down were enacted , a number far too small to meet demand . Since corpses were not viewed as property and could neither be owned nor stolen , body snatching remained quasi @-@ legal , the crime being committed against the grave rather than the body . On the rare occasions they were caught , resurrectionists might have received a public whipping , or a sentence for crimes against public mores , but generally the practice was treated by the authorities as an open secret and ignored . A notable exception occurred in Great Yarmouth in 1827 , with the capture of three resurrectionists . At a time when thieves were regularly transported for theft , two of the body snatchers were discharged and the third , sent to London for trial , was imprisoned for only six months . Resurrectionists were also aided by the corpse 's anatomisation ; since the process also destroyed the evidence , a successful prosecution was unlikely .

= = Resurrection = =

= = = Method = = =

Resurrectionists usually found corpses through a network of informers . Sextons , gravediggers , undertakers , local officials ; each connived to take a cut of the proceeds . Working mostly in small gangs at night with a " dark lanthorn " , their modus operandi was to dig a hole ? sometimes using a quieter , wooden spade ? down to one end of the coffin . To disguise this activity , the spoil was sometimes thrown onto a piece of canvas at the side of the grave . A sound @-@ deadening sack was placed over the lid , which was then lifted . The weight of soil on the remainder of the lid snapped the wood , enabling the robbers to hoist the body out . The corpse was then stripped of its clothing , tied up , and placed into a sack . The entire process could be completed within 30 minutes . Moving the corpse of a pauper was less troublesome , as their bodies were often kept in mass graves , left open to the environment until filled ? which often took weeks .

If caught in the act , body snatchers could find themselves at the mercy of the local population . A violent confrontation took place in a Dublin churchyard in 1828 , when a party of mourners confronted a group of resurrectionists . The would @-@ be body snatchers withdrew , only to return several hours later with more men . The mourners had also added to their number , and both groups had brought firearms . A " volley of bullets , slugs , and swan @-@ shot from the resurrectionists " prompted a " discharge of fire @-@ arms from the defenders " . Close @-@ quarters fighting included the use of pick axes , until the resurrectionists retreated . In the same city , a man caught removing a corpse from a graveyard in Hollywood was shot and killed in 1832 . In the same year , three men were apprehended while transporting the bodies of two elderly men , near Deptford in London . As rumours spread that the two corpses were murder victims , a large crowd assembled outside the station house . When the suspects were brought out to be transported to the local magistrates , the approximately 40 @-@ strong force of police officers found it difficult to " prevent their prisoners being sacrificed by the indignant multitude , which was most anxious to inflict such punishment upon them as it thought they deserved . "

= = = Gangs = = =

As many as seven gangs of resurrectionists may have been at work in 1831 . The 1828 Select Committee on Anatomy believed that there were about 200 London resurrectionists , most of them

working part @-@ time . The London Borough Gang , which operated from about 1802 to 1825 , at its peak consisted of at least six men , led first by a former hospital porter named Ben Crouch , and later by a man called Patrick Murphy . Under the protection of Astley Cooper , Crouch 's gang supplied some of London 's biggest anatomical schools , but relations were not always amicable . In 1816 the gang cut off supplies to the St Thomas Hospital School , demanding an increase of two guineas per corpse . When the school responded by using freelancers , members of the gang burst into the dissecting rooms , threatened the students and attacked the corpses . The police were called , but worried about adverse publicity , the school paid their attackers ' bail and opened negotiations . The gang also attempted to put rivals out of business , sometimes by desecrating a graveyard (thereby rendering it unsafe to rob graves from for weeks thereafter) and other times by reporting freelance resurrectionists to the police , recruiting them once freed from prison . Joshua Naples , who wrote *The Diary of a Resurrectionist* , a list of his activities from 1811 ? 1812 , was one such individual . Among entries detailing the graveyards he plundered , the institutions he delivered to , how much he was paid and his drunkenness , Naples diary mentions his gang 's inability to work under a full Moon , being unable to sell a body deemed " putrid " , and leaving a body thought to be infected with smallpox .

Violent mobs were not the only problems body snatchers faced . Naples also wrote of how he met " patrols " and how " dogs flew at us " , references to some of the measures taken to secure graves against his ilk . The aristocracy and very rich placed their dead in triple coffins , vaults and private chapels , sometimes guarded by servants . For the less wealthy , double coffins were available , buried on private land in deep graves . More basic defences included the placing of heavy weights over the coffin , or simply filling the grave with stones rather than soil . Such deterrents were sometimes deployed in vain ; at least one London graveyard was owned by an anatomist who , it was reported , " obtained a famous supply [of cadavers] ... and he could charge pretty handsomely for burying a body there , and afterwards get from his pupils from eight to twelve guineas for taking it up again ! " Ever more elaborate creations included The Patent Coffin , an iron contraption with concealed springs to prevent any levering of its lid . Corpses were sometimes secured inside their caskets by iron straps , while other designs used special screws to reinforce metal bands placed around the coffin . In Scotland , iron cages called mortsafes either encased buried coffins , or were set in a concrete foundation and covered the whole grave . Some covered more than one coffin , while others took the form of iron lattices fixed beneath large stone slabs , buried with the coffin . They may not have been secure enough ; as one 20th @-@ century writer observed , an empty coffin found beneath a buried mortsafe in Aberlour had probably been " opened during the night succeeding the funeral , and carefully closed again , so that the disturbance of the soil had escaped notice or had been attributed to the original burial . "

= = = Other methods = = =

Occasionally , resurrectionists paid women to pose as grieving relatives , so that they might claim a body from a workhouse . Some parishes did little to stop this practice , as it reduced their funeral expenditure . Bodies were also taken from dead houses ; Astley Cooper 's servant was once forced to return three bodies , worth £ 34 2s , to a dead house in Newington parish . Bribes were also paid , usually to servants of recently deceased employers then lying in state , although this method carried its own risks as corpses were often placed on public display before they were buried . Some were taken from private homes ; in 1831 *The Times* reported that " a party of resurrectionists " burst into a house in Bow Lane and took the body of an elderly woman , who was being " ' waked ' by her friends and neighbours " . The thieves apparently " acted with the most revolting indecency , dragging the corpse in its death clothes after them through the mud in the street " . Bodies were even removed ? with no legal authority ? from prisons and naval and military hospitals .

While some surgeons eschewed human cadavers in favour of artificial facsimiles , plaster casts , wax models and animals , bodies were also taken from hospital burial grounds . Recent excavations at the Royal London Hospital appear to support claims made almost 200 years earlier that the hospital 's school was " entirely supplied by subjects , which have been their own patients " .

= = Dissection and anatomy = =

= = = Public view = = =

The moving in 1783 of London 's executions , from Tyburn to Newgate Prison , reduced the likelihood of public interference and strengthened the authorities ' hold over felons . However , society 's view of dissection remained unequivocal ; most preferred gibbeting to the laying open of a corpse . Martin Gray , sentenced to death in 1721 for returning early from transportation , was " greatly frightened , least his Body should be cut , and torn , and mangled after Death , and had sent his Wife to his Uncle to obtain some money to prevent it . " Vincent Davis , convicted in 1725 of murdering his wife , said he would rather be " hang 'd in Chains " than " anatomiz 'd " , and to that effect had " sent many Letters to all his former Friends and Acquaintance to form a Company , and prevent the Surgeons in their Designs upon his Body " . There are cases of criminals who survived the short drop , but dissecting the body removed any hope of escape from death 's embrace . Anatomists were popularly thought to be interested in dissection only as enactors of the law , a relationship first established by kings James IV and Henry VIII . Thomas Wakley , editor of The Lancet , wrote that this lowered " the character of the profession in the public mind . " It was also thought that the anatomists ' work made the body 's owner unrecognisable in the afterlife . Therefore , while less hated than the resurrectionists they employed , anatomists remained at risk of attack . Relatives of a man executed in 1820 killed one anatomist and shot another in the face , while in 1831 , following the discovery of buried human flesh and three dissected bodies , a mob burnt down an anatomy theatre in Aberdeen . The theatre 's proprietor , Andrew Moir , escaped through a window , while two of his students were chased through the streets .

Some aspects of the popular view of dissection were exemplified by the final panel of William Hogarth 's The Four Stages of Cruelty , a series of engravings that depict a felon 's journey to the anatomical theatre . The chief surgeon (John Freke) appears as a magistrate , watching over the examination of the murderer Tom Nero 's body by the Company of Surgeons . According to author Fiona Haslam , the scene reflects a popular view that surgeons were " on the whole , disreputable , insensitive to human suffering and prone to victimis [ing] people in the same way that criminals victimised their prey . " Another popular belief alluded to by Hogarth was that surgeons were so ignorant of the respect due to their subjects , that they allowed the remains to become offal . In reality , the rough treatment exacted by body snatchers on corpses continued on the premises they delivered to . Joshua Brookes once admitted that he had kicked a corpse in a sack down a flight of stairs , while Robert Christison complained of the " shocking indecency without any qualifying wit " demonstrated by a male lecturer who dissected a woman . Pranks were also common ; a London student who jokingly dropped an amputated leg down a household chimney , into a housewife 's stewpot , caused a riot .

= = = Anatomy Act 1832 = = =

In March 1828 , in Liverpool , three defendants charged with conspiracy and unlawfully procuring and receiving a corpse buried in Warrington were acquitted , while the remaining two were found guilty of possession . The presiding judge 's comment , that " the disinterment of bodies for dissection was an offence liable to punishment " , prompted Parliament to establish the 1828 Select Committee on Anatomy . The committee took evidence from 40 witnesses : 25 members of the medical profession , 12 public servants and 3 resurrectionists , who remained anonymous . Discussed were the importance of anatomy , the supply of subjects for dissection and the relationship between anatomists and resurrectionists . The committee concluded that dissection was essential to the study of human anatomy and recommended that anatomists be allowed to appropriate the bodies of paupers .

The first bill was presented to Parliament in 1829 by Henry Warburton , author of the Select

Committee 's report . Following a spirited defence of the poor by peers in the House of Lords , it was withdrawn , but almost two years later Warburton introduced a second bill , shortly after the execution of John Bishop and Thomas Williams . The London Burkers , as the two men were known , were inspired by a series of murders committed by William Burke and William Hare , two Irishmen who sold their victims ' bodies to Robert Knox , a Scottish surgeon . Even though Burke and Hare never robbed graves , their case lowered the public 's view of resurrectionists from desecraters to potential murderers . The resulting wave of social anxiety helped speed Warburton 's bill through Parliament , and despite much public opprobrium , with little Parliamentary opposition the Anatomy Act 1832 became law on 1 August 1832 . It abolished that part of the 1752 Act that allowed murderers to be dissected , ending the centuries @-@ old tradition of anatomising felons , although it neither discouraged nor prohibited body snatching , or the sale of corpses (whose legal status remained uncertain) . Another clause allowed a person 's body to be given up for " anatomical examination " , provided that the person concerned had not objected . As the poor were often barely literate and therefore unable to leave written directions in the event of their death , this meant that masters of charitable institutions such as workhouses decided who went to the anatomist 's table . A stipulation that witnesses could intervene was also abused , as such witnesses might be fellow inmates who were powerless to object , or workhouse staff who stood to gain money through wilful ignorance .

Despite the passage of the Anatomy Act , resurrection remained commonplace , the supply of unclaimed paupers ' bodies at first proving inadequate to fulfil the demand . Reports of body snatching persisted for some years ; in 1838 , Poor Law Commissioners reported on two dead resurrectionists who had contracted an illness from a putrid corpse they had unearthed . By 1844 , the trade no longer existed .