

The Baronet and the bodysnatchers

Sir Astley Cooper collected fat fees, many honours
– and quite a few cadavers

NORFOLK HAS PRODUCED MANY NOTABLE doctors and surgeons over the years, but few could have had such a bizarre background as the parson's son who died 160 years ago, in February 1841. He was the most distinguished and certainly the highest-paid surgeon of his time, a practitioner and lecturer of international repute, held in high esteem at Court and honoured with a baronetcy. But in the course of his profession he became involved with all manner of unsavoury characters in a macabre trade that prospered, with his active support, during the first 30 years of the nineteenth century.

Eventually there was such a public outcry that the House of Commons appointed a Select Committee to investigate, and they put a stop to the nefarious activities of the Resurrectionists, the euphemistic name for the bodysnatchers who robbed graves to sell the corpses for medical dissection. One of the Resurrectionists' principal customers and a key witness at the enquiry, was Sir Astley Paston Cooper, Professor of Comparative Anatomy to the Royal College of Surgeons, originally of Brooke in South Norfolk.

Now and again you will come across a grave in a Norfolk country churchyard that is covered by some sort of iron cage. I used to think they were put there just to fend off grazing sheep; these days their only function is to buckle the blades of lawnmowers. But of course they served a very different purpose, to protect the deceased's remains from the bodysnatchers.

The practice was particularly rife in areas within range of anatomy lecturers. Here in Norfolk, happily, the problem was not so great. The

Norfolk and Norwich was not primarily a teaching hospital and in those early days its main speciality was removing stones from bladders, using rum and opium as an anaesthetic. The patients finished up, one might say, completely stoned...

Anyway, there was no need for caged graves in the little churchyard at Brooke when Astley Cooper was born at the Vicarage in 1768, of a well-placed family – his mother was a Paston, of Paston Letters fame. They moved to Yarmouth when his father was made Rector and young Astley developed into something of a tearaway. His most spectacular exploit was to climb the spire of St Nicholas' Church carrying two of his mother's feather pillows, which he emptied over the bewildered populace below. This was not quite the behaviour expected of the Rector's son, and his father apprenticed him to a local surgeon and apothecary in the hope of sobering him up.



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The legendary bodysnatchers

It was an inspired move. Astley had always had an interest in medicine. When a young friend had fallen off a cart and cut an artery in his leg he had displayed an instinctive knowledge of first aid by binding up the lad's thigh with his kerchief to stop the blood flow. His apprenticeship soon took him to London where his uncle was conveniently a surgeon at Guy's and, at the age of only 21, he was appointed a demonstrator at St Thomas's Hospital.

It was the start of a dazzling career. His class increased to 400 students, the largest in London. When he was 24 he went into practice and built up his annual income from five guineas in the first year to a peak of £21,000, easily a record. It is said that one rich patient threw him a cheque for 1,000 guineas in his nightcap after a successful operation. Another patient, who happened to be George IV, threw him a baronetcy.

The royal operation was a comparatively minor one, removing a small tumour from the scalp, but for once the great surgeon was nervous; he had not cut open a king's cranium before. Lord Liverpool, one of the Cabinet ministers waiting outside, observed this and took him by the hand. 'You ought to recollect,' he said helpfully, 'that this operation either makes you or ruins you. Courage, Cooper!' This would have unnerved most doctors, but it did the trick with Astley Cooper – and he became Sir Astley as a result.

Yet throughout this spectacular rise to fame and riches, the former teenage tearaway from Yarmouth was doing surreptitious deals at the back door with the Resurrectionists, to ensure a steady supply of cadavers for his students. It was a regular practice for lecturers to make a down payment of £50 in advance, perhaps to cover the initial investment in picks and shovels, then nine guineas per body on delivery – and Sir Astley Cooper, Bart., was in there bidding with the rest of them.

Giving evidence to the Select Committee he made his position clear, and he was reflecting the views of his profession.

‘The law does not prevent us from obtaining the body of an individual if we think proper; for there is no person, let his situation in life be what it may, whom, if I was disposed to dissect, I could not obtain. Nobody is secured by the law; it only adds to the price...’

That may sound a little extreme these days, but it did him no harm at all, even after the law was changed and new controls were introduced. In his declining years he was Surgeon-Sergeant to Queen Victoria, and when he died, he left a substantial fortune. His body was buried, with due ceremony, in the chapel of Guy’s Hospital. I trust it remains there, undisturbed...