

The Strange Case of Henry Holm.

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I do a great deal of public speaking (and writing), on the history of medicine and surgery to societies, schools, colleges, universities, historical events... etc. The question I am repeatedly asked is: “*What is the weirdest /strangest thing you have come across?*”. There are many contenders for this title: The Everlasting – or Perpetual – Pill, for example. A pill made from the toxic metal Antimony and used for purging. When taken it would cause a bowel movement and the pill would be passed out, recovered from the faeces, washed, and used over and over¹. And cases of inserting inappropriate objects in inappropriate parts of the body (and vice versa) abound through history². But the case I regard as the strangest involves Henry Haley Holm (1806-1846), a surgeon of Hendon, Middlesex, (today in the borough of Barnet), and a passionate phrenologist. Phrenology was the study of the shape and structure of the skull which indicated mental faculties and character traits; while popular into the 20th century, it has been discredited by science.³

One Sunday morning in September 1828, three men, John Armitage, a smith and farrier, James Birch, a servant, and John Connelly, a hairdresser, passed through St. Mary’s Churchyard, Hendon, between 7 and 8 o’clock in the morning. All three saw one of the vaults had been opened, and three men were inside. Armitage and Connelly saw two of them force open the lid of a coffin, and the third, remove the shroud from the head of a corpse, cut its head off and place it in a blue bag, while Birch saw a second coffin being opened and another head taken⁴.

The three men were apprehended, and brought before the magistrates at Bow Street, London. They were identified as Henry Holm, Surgeon, Charles Charsley, labourer, and W.Wood, Master Bricklayer, all of Hendon, charged with:

*... having, on the 13th of September instant, unlawfully, willingly, knowingly, and indecently, broken and forced open one leaden coffin, and also one other coffin, then being in a certain vault in the church-yard of the parish of Hendon, in the country of Middlesex, and with having severed two heads from two dead bodies, then being in the said coffins, and there interred; and taking and carrying away the said heads from the said coffins and the said churchyard, against the peace.*⁵

¹ McCallum, R.I. (1977). President's address. Observations upon antimony. *Proceedings of the Royal Society of Medicine*. 70 (11): 756–63.

² Morris, T. (2018) *The Mystery of the Exploding Teeth: And Other Curiosities from the History of Medicine*. E.P. Dutton.

Sprankle, E. (2024) *DIY: The Wonderfully Weird History and Science of Masturbation*. Union Square & Co.

³ Hughes, W. (2022) *The dome of thought: Phrenology and the nineteenth-century popular imagination*. Manchester University Press.

⁴ p.4, *London Courier and Evening Gazette*, Wednesday 17th September 1828.

⁵ *London Courier and Evening Gazette* op cit.

It was not unusual for medical men to actively participate in grave robbing for the purposes of obtaining cadavers for dissection and medical research. For example:

*Mr. Gill, surgeon, at Liverpool, was last week held to bail charged as an accessory in disinterring the body of a young woman from Walton church-yard, the body being found on his premises...*⁶

*Mr. Cooke, a surgeon, at Exeter, for disinterring and carrying away a dead body from St. David's church-yard – to pay a fine to the King of £100. And be imprisoned till such fine be paid.*⁷

Holm had brought Wood along to break into the vault and to seal it up when he had extracted the body, to hide signs of his activity. However, there was a peculiarity about this case. The vault Holm and his accomplices had broken into was Holm's family vault, and one of the skulls Holm had removed belonged to his mother, Hannah Maria, who had died aged 36 in 1809; the other, a relative of the Holm family, John Lee Haley.⁸

Holm declared the other two defendants “... were quite unconscious of what he had intended to do.” As for his motive, Mr. Harmer, representing Holm, stated “*Mr. Holm was a medical man, possessing great scientific knowledge, and has been stated, he was an enthusiast in his profession, and ever ardent in the pursuit of scientific acquirements. It was true that he had actually taken the head of his deceased mother (who died in 1809) from her coffin, and when the reason of his having done so was explained, he felt convinced that all the world would acquit him of any criminal act; and, in fact, of any thing like a crime. The family of Mr. Holm had, unfortunately, been habitually subjected to a disorder in the head. It was well known to many of the friends of Mr. Holm, that such a disorder was inherent in the family, and the object Mr. Holm had in view, in getting possession of the head of the deceased, was to enable him to ascertain the cause of the family malady, which he believed he should not only be able to do, by the applications of his knowledge of phrenological science, but that he should be able to find some remedy for the disease, and eradicate it from the system of his surviving relations. He could not mean any thing like disrespect to the dead, but it was to serve the living, and to extend the benefits of science to mankind...*”⁹

The prosecution described Holm's behaviour as “...unnatural, disgusting, and heinous.”¹⁰

Upon sentencing the Chairman of the magistrates declared it to be a “gross outrage upon public decency”, however, as Holm had committed the offence under the idea, he was furthering scientific knowledge “*he would not ruin him by sending him to prison*”. Instead, Holm was fined fifty shillings and Wood and Charsley five shillings each.¹¹

⁶ p.2, *Aris's Birmingham Gazette* - Monday 05 November 1827

⁷ p.1, *Birmingham Journal* - Saturday 26 May 1827

⁸ *London Courier and Evening Gazette* op cit.

⁹ *London Courier and Evening Gazette* op cit.

¹⁰ *London Courier and Evening Gazette* op cit.

¹¹ p4 *London Courier and Evening Gazette* Tuesday 02 December 1828

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The incident did little to hinder Holm's career. He became a member of the Royal College of Surgeons, was acknowledged as a talented Cerebral anatomist, and in 1852 – 1853 delivered the first course on Phrenology at the London Hospital medical school, which contained lectures on the brain and the nervous system.¹²

¹² The Late Mr. Henry Haley Holm (1846), *Phrenological Journal*, 19: 286-289.