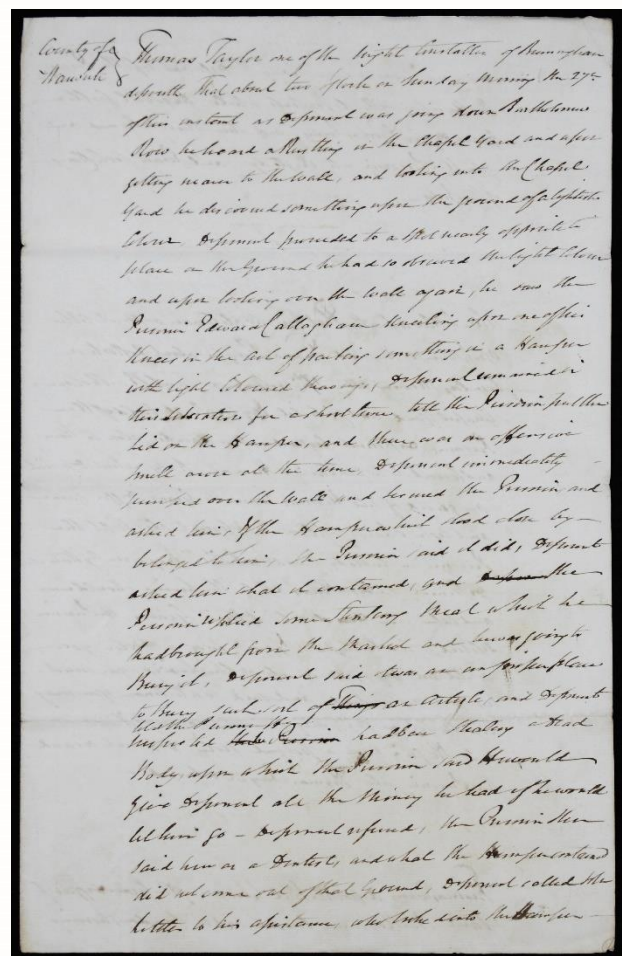


**Grave Robbing from St Bartholomew's Chapel in Birmingham.**

**QS30/4/3/58**

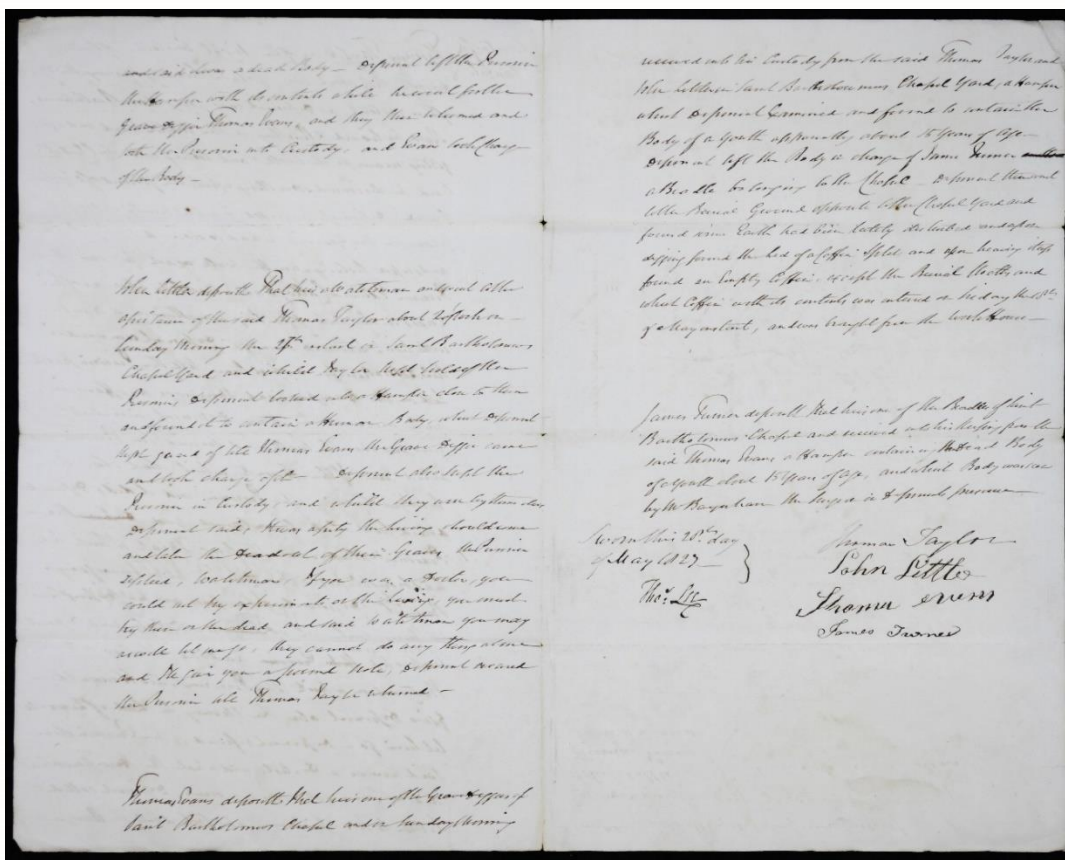
The Document of the Month chosen for March 2025 is a deposition from our Quarter Sessions collection, concerning a charge of grave robbery at St Bartholomew's Chapel, Birmingham in 1827. The defendant was one Edward Callaghan who, on the 27<sup>th</sup> of May, was discovered by night Constable Thomas Taylor acting suspiciously in the Chapel Yard. Upon the constable's investigation, Callaghan was found kneeling on the ground whilst putting something into a hamper. When he shut the lid an "offensive smell"<sup>1</sup> was produced, prompting Taylor to confront the accused and inquire about the nature of his activities, including whether the hamper belonged to him.

Edward Callaghan confirmed the hamper was his but stated that it contained some meat purchased from the market that he was to bury. Unsurprisingly, Taylor did not believe such a strange contention and said to the accused that he suspected him of stealing a corpse. After a failed attempt to bribe the constable to leave him alone, Callaghan said he was a dentist and that the contents of the hamper did not come from the ground. Despite this, Taylor called for the assistance of the Watchman John Littler, who broke the hamper open only to discover a body inside. Littler then secured the accused as the constable left to retrieve the Grave Digger Thomas Evans, who took charge of the body. Callaghan was then arrested.



QS30/4/3/58, Image courtesy of Warwickshire County Record Office

Constable Taylor's testimony has been corroborated by both John Littler and Thomas Evans, who also testify in this case and provide more detail within the deposition. For instance, Littler stated that Callaghan told Taylor "if you was a doctor, you could not try experiments on the living, you must try this on the dead"<sup>ii</sup> which alludes to the defendants' purposes behind the crime. Evans goes further, saying that after he took the body he went to the burial ground opposite the Chapel Yard and found some disturbed earth. He then dug into the ground, finding the lid of an empty coffin lifted and only burial clothes remaining within.



QS30/4/3/58, Image courtesy of Warwickshire County Record Office

**The History of Body snatching**

The Industrial Revolution brought about significant medical advances through scientific examination. In the field of anatomy, dissection was very much restricted, up until the 1751 Murder Act. Firstly, it prevented the burial of executed murderers, but more importantly the Act imposed post-mortem dissection as the primary punishment for those convicted of murder.<sup>iii</sup> Therefore, the bodies were taken to the

Company of Surgeons in London for study and teaching, leading to an increased supply of cadavers for clinical research.<sup>iv</sup>

However, with the opening of new medical schools in the 18<sup>th</sup> Century, this reserve of subjects was no longer adequate, causing surgeons and physicians to find alternative ways of getting hold of cadavers. Due to this increased demand, a lucrative black market formed, and body snatching became more common across the UK. The same applies for 'notorious cases of murder' with the singular aim of selling the victim's corpse, often to medical institutions.<sup>v</sup>

Most infamous of these were the resurrectionists Burke and Hare, who committed a string of sixteen murders over the period of around 10 months in 1828, supplying the bodies to Edinburgh's College of Medicine.<sup>vi</sup> Additionally, London had its fair share of body snatching with the 'Bethnal Green gang', who supposedly shaped their crimes around those of Burke and Hare.<sup>vii</sup> The actions of these groups, alongside others, led to the Anatomy Act of 1832, which legally recognised the rights of corpses. Not only did the Act help to stem the illegal trade by allowing medical professionals to dissect unclaimed bodies from hospitals, prisons, and workhouses, but it also facilitated the donation of deceased relatives for study.<sup>viii</sup>

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<sup>i</sup> Quarter Sessions Deposition, Warwickshire County Record Office, document reference: QS30/4/3/58.

<sup>ii</sup> Ibid

<sup>iii</sup> Cambridge University Press – Execution, State and Society in England, 1660–1900, Chapter 5: The Murder Act: Anatomization, 1752–1832 (accessed on 14/02/2025). Access at: <https://www.cambridge.org/core/books/abs/execution-state-and-society-in-england-16601900/murder-act-anatomization-17521832/0B417E58A29A753239A271679A4FE5CF>

<sup>iv</sup> UK Parliament – Body Snatching (accessed on 13/02/2025). Access at:

<https://www.parliament.uk/about/living-heritage/transformingsociety/private-lives/death-dying/dying-and-death/bodysnatching/>

<sup>v</sup> National Archives – Body Snatchers (last accessed on 13/02/2025). Access at:

<https://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/education/resources/body-snatchers/>

<sup>vi</sup> Wikipedia – Burke and Hare Murders (accessed on 13/02/2025). Access at:

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Burke\\_and\\_Hare\\_murders](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Burke_and_Hare_murders) (last edited on 30/01/2025)

<sup>vii</sup> Wikipedia – London Burkers (accessed on 13/02/2025). Access at:

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/London\\_Burkers](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/London_Burkers)

<sup>viii</sup> UK Parliament – Body Snatching (accessed on 13/02/2025). Access at:

<https://www.parliament.uk/about/living-heritage/transformingsociety/private-lives/death-dying/dying-and-death/bodysnatching/>