

The Mystery of the miniature coffins

Museum trail

In late June 1836, a group of boys headed out to Edinburgh's Arthur's Seat to hunt for rabbits. What they found there has remained a mystery ever since. Follow the trail of the Arthur's Seat coffins, and uncover their secrets at www.nms.ac.uk/arthurseatcoffins.

Start your journey on Level 3 of the Scottish galleries, in the 'Spirit of the Age' section of Scotland Transformed:



1 Deacon Brodie's cabinet

By day a respectable tradesman, by night a notorious criminal: the grisly story of William Brodie (1741-1788) shows how in Edinburgh, things are not always what they seem. This mahogany clothes press was originally thought to be made by William Brodie, though it is more likely to have been made by Francis Brodie, his father.



2 Coffin collar and elegy on William Burke

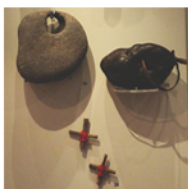
200 years ago, 'Bodysnatchers' or 'resurrectionists' made money by digging up dead bodies and selling them to Edinburgh's thriving medical schools. An iron collar was bolted round the neck of a corpse and through the bottom of the coffin, to prevent it from being stolen. William Burke wasn't technically a bodysnatcher at all – he didn't like all that digging, so he murdered people instead and sold them on for dissection.

Continue up to Level 4, to the 'Daith Comes In' section of the Industry and Empire gallery:



3 Mortsafe

This heavy iron mortsafe was another way to protect deceased loved ones from the bodysnatchers. People who couldn't afford one would watch over the grave instead.



4 Scottish charms

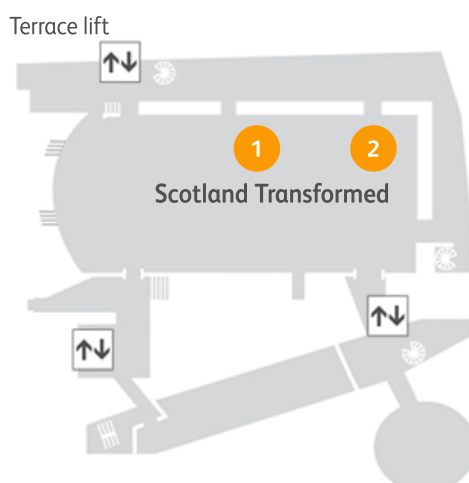
People in the 18th and early 19th centuries still used charms to protect themselves from evil. When the Arthur's Seat coffins were first discovered, *The Scotsman* newspaper wondered if they had been used for witchcraft.



5 Arthur's Seat coffins

These tiny coffins are among the museum's most treasured objects. Nobody knows for sure why they were buried, but they may be linked to the murders carried out by Burke and Hare in 1828. You can discover more about the Arthur's Seat coffins and the theories surrounding them at www.nms.ac.uk/arthurseatcoffins.

Level 3



Level 4

