

Physical descriptions of the Beechey Island headboards

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ABSTRACT. In August 2016, the author was able to personally examine the five Beechey Island Franklin era gravesite headboards, in the collections of the Government of Nunavut and currently preserved at the Prince of Wales Northern Heritage Center in Yellowknife, NT, Canada. Except for the inscriptions, there appears to be relatively little physical description actually published in the literature, and this article summarises those observations and some conclusions drawn from this examination.

Introduction

The Franklin expedition wintered at Beechey Island in 1845–1846 and left three graves with headboards of John Torrington (d. 1 January 1846), John Hartnell (d. 4 January 1846) and William Braine (d. 3 April 1846). Two more headboards were added on either side of these three during the Franklin Search era, one a memorial to Frenchman Joseph René Bellot (d. 18 August 1853) and the other the grave marker for Thomas Morgan of the HMS *Investigator* (d. 22 May 1854). Recent discussions that included various points and issues on these headboards are by Brian Powell (Powell, 2006) and this author (Hansen, 2010; 2012).

Powell (2006) and Forestier-Blazart & Forestier-Blazart (2011, plates between pp. 144–145) reproduced photos of these five headboards at the Prince of Wales Northern Heritage Center (PWNHC), which clearly show their distinctively different physical structure and therefore are diagnostic in comparing with earlier images. Powell raises the relevant question about whether these are the actual Franklin era headboards and cautiously refers to them as ‘presumed originals’ without drawing a final conclusion. He also presents the recent history that these ‘presumed originals’ were removed from Beechey Island in 1976, epoxy replicas were then made and installed on site, but due to excessive weathering were then again replaced in 1993 by the markers (not replicas) currently at Beechey Island (his references are S. Irving, see PWNHC accession files). Here, the author argues that the PWNHC headboards are original.

Hansen (2010; 2012) draws two conclusions of further relevance here. First, the marker furthest inland (west) was the memorial to Bellot rather than the position furthest shoreward (east), based especially on the map of W.P.S. Pullen (Pullen 1855, opposite 794). This is different than the modern attribution, and the current location, of the Morgan marker being in this inland position. Second, the original inscriptions, mostly now weathered off, are probably most accurately presented by M’Dougall (1857). Both of these conclusions were based on external published evidence; here, the author will present some observations from the headboards themselves that reinforce these conclusions.

General discussion

Powell (2006, p. 330, fig. 10) presents photos of the five headboards as follows: his far left is the marker called here the ‘Tablet’, second is Hartnell’s, third is Torrington’s, fourth is called here the ‘Door’ and far right is Braine’s. From shoreward (east) to inland (west), their original positions were ‘Door’, Torrington, Hartnell, Braine and ‘Tablet’. The reason for the quotes on the outboard markers is the recent attribution that the ‘Tablet’ is Morgan’s rather than this author’s conclusion as Bellot’s, while ‘Tablet’ and ‘Door’ are reasonable choices to describe their shape independent of who’s is who’s (the quotes will be dropped henceforth).

In Hansen (2010, p. 195), I state that no document cited by Powell or known to this author clearly indicates the placement of the Morgan headboard prior to the replacements of 1975–1976. The modern attribution of Morgan’s being the Tablet apparently was made at that time of the acquisition of the originals, but I did not find documentation or discussion in the PWNHC accession files that gives a background justification for this attribution. Clearly, this attribution could not have been based on the actual headboards as any inscription had disappeared long before. The important overviews of Bellot’s career in Forestier-Blazart & Forestier-Blazart (2011, pp. 180–182) and Barr, Forestier-Blazart, & Forestier-Blazart (2014, p. 28) also follows the modern attribution, but no further documentation is cited in these either. Thus it appears that these four authors were basing their statements on the undocumented 1976 attribution.

Addressing the question of whether these artefacts are the originals or not, the crucial evidence comes from examining the shapes and sizes from the images published in *The Illustrated London News (ILL)* (1875), Young (1876) and Hobson (1993). The first two are an illustration and a blurry photo (unfortunately difficult to clearly reproduce) from the visit of the ship *Pandora* to Beechey Island in 1875, the third is a photo taken in 1974 prior to the removal of the existing headboards. Earlier illustrations of the three headboards from the Franklin Search era are generic figures and give no evidence of true shapes.

The headboards of Hartnell and Braine are the smaller of the five in the Young photo, and their shapes (a somewhat pyramidal and a rounded top) also apparent and a match to those in Hobson and now in PWNHC. The shapes of these two are clear but are reversed in the *ILL*, which must be the illustrator's error. The Torrington headboard is of a similar height while its sides are definitely straight and continuous down to the ground.

The headboard to the far right shoreward of both 1875 images appears to be the taller of the five and distinctly white in the photo, while the illustration has some horizontal hash marks. The headboard to the far left inland is ambiguous (not distinctly different in size and shape) in the *ILL*, while it is somewhat visible at extreme left in the Young photo. There it is also whitish and similar in size and shape to the other outboard marker. An observation to give pause is that both of these appear to have some sort of shoulder, similar to the three Franklin headboards, which is not consistent with those in Hobson or PWNHC. Hobson (1993) reproduces the *ILL* directly above his photo of 1974, where the similarities are apparent to this author. In Hobson, the different shades of the aboveground portion of the Torrington headboard is obvious, as is the fact that the Door was on the far right and the Tablet on the far left. More accessible and detailed photos from the 1980s of the four replicas (the Door was not replaced), which clearly were also of the same shapes and sizes, and placed in the same positions, can be reviewed in Sutherland (1985, p. 154), Beattie & Geiger (1988, plates) and Delgado (1999, pp. 164–165). The similarities of the two outboard markers seem stronger than the one discrepancy of the possible shoulders in the 1875 photo, which perhaps could be due to some sort of shadowing or staining.

Powell (2006, pp. 330–331) discusses the uncertainties of the PWNHC headboards based on tests that the wood of two headboards are not oak as described by earlier accounts, and there is limited spacing available for the cited inscriptions. Forestier-Blazart & Forestier-Blazart (2011, p. 180) note that Miertsching (Neatby, 1967, p. 228) described the middle three as oak and painted black, as well as reiterating Powell's point about the wood composition and available space. I find these points unconvincing. It is obvious that no early source could do an analysis of the wood (the actual test results are given below) and they – to this eye at least – look very much like oak. Miertsching's statement of the three being painted black is not supported by any other source and is inconsistent with two of them in the photo in Young (1876). The Braine headboard is black in that image, while Harnell's and Torrington's are a dark shade. I submit Braine's could well be due to shadowing (the sun's direction is not clear in the blurred image), while the other two are consistent with the PWNHC wood, but not black like Braine's. The issue of the allowable spacing will also be discussed below.

From this comparison and discussion, I submit the existing artefacts at the PWNHC are of the same basic

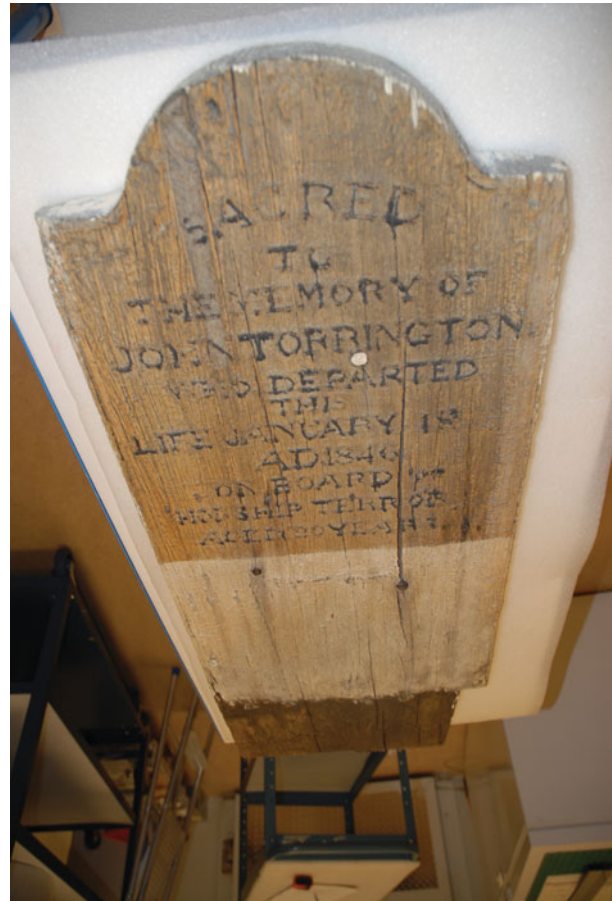


Fig. 1. Torrington's headboard, front.

size and shape as those of 1875. Then, if these are not the originals, who could and would have made the significant effort to replace the headboards with ones *substantially* similar? And in which case, why wasn't that activity reported and the originals also preserved? It is very difficult to imagine someone doing such a significant effort and yet tossing the originals away. Therefore I have no doubt the three Franklin headboards are original, and quite likely the outboard ones are as well.

Physical descriptions

These artefacts are physically substantial. Their measurements will be given below in the individual descriptions. With the exception of the Door they are thick and made of dense wood, and are heavy. The Hartnell and Braine headboards have posts still very securely attached with large nails or spikes, while the Door is much lighter and fragile. Because of the weights or fragility, they all require two people to handle them with the necessary care.

Worth noting is the account given in Bernier (1909). The CGS *Arctic* visited Beechey Island 1906 and gives a description of documents relating to a visit by A.P. Low in the CGS *Northern Star* in



Fig. 2. Torrington's headboard, back.



Fig. 3. Torrington's inscription (detail).

1904, as well as a report on Captain Joseph-Elzéar Bernier's activities as well. During the Low visit, the 'headstone' was painted, while Bernier (1909, p. 24) adds:

...we have painted the names of the crew who died in different ships, on their headstones.

Thus the names of the three Franklin men can now still be read on the headboards. Bernier also quotes the inscriptions for the three Franklin headboards (not the outboards), though unfortunately it is not clear from his description whether his quotes are direct from the originals rather than copied from previous literature. His do closely match the M'Dougall inscriptions.

Preservatives have been used on the headboards, which might have added to the weight and affected the colour of chips different from the original surfaces. Results of wood identification, performed in 1976 by the Canadian Conservation Institute in Ottawa, were bulletwood (*Manikara* sp.) and elm (*Ulmus* sp.) for the Torrington and the Tablet headboards respectively, with no results for the others (PWNHC accession files). All dimensions given below were estimated, often of irregular shapes or boundaries, with a simple tape measure and could be off by up to 0.6 cm.

Torrington (catalogue number 979.7.101a, Figs 1–3)

Total length 121 cm (47 3/4"), top inscription section 55cm (21 3/4") of a tannish brown, lower exposed portion ~38 cm (~15") painted whitish, bottom (buried) portion 27 cm (10 3/4") of a raw and much darker brown wood. It averages ~5 cm (~1 7/8") thick. The width of the top two (exposed) sections are 44 cm (17 1/4"), the bottom (buried) section is cut to 40 cm (15 5/8") width and then tapered to 36 cm (14") with the bottom thickness cut down as well. Total weight is 19.7 kg (43.5 lbs). The inscription is near 100% legible thanks to the blackening of letters by Bernier. It reads:

SACRED / TO / THE MEMORY OF / JOHN TORRINGTON, / WHO DEPARTED / THIS / LIFE JANUARY 1[?], A.D. 1846. / ON BOARD [OF] / HM SHIP TERROR, / AGED 20 YEARS

M'Dougall (1857, p. 80, quoted in Powell, 2006, p. 329) is nearly an exact match, only giving a period after 'LIFE', and giving 'H.M.S.' rather than 'HM SHIP'. The letters 'OF' bracketed above are not clear on the original but spacing is consistent with M'Dougall's word. The only real discrepancy is the date of death appears to be '18', but all sources agree the original was 'January 1' and so the current blackening may be accidental from the time of Bernier (or less likely be a weathered 'st'). There



Fig. 4. Hartnell's headboard, front.



Fig. 5. Hartnell's headboard, back.

are six holes – three with nails (cut off at back), one plugged (under name) and two added ones including one nail and one empty at very bottom. The backside was also painted white on the top and down the sides leaving a rectangular unpainted/ raw wood section of over most of the overall height and width. The two cut nails in the middle go through to back and thus appear that a supporting board was attached behind the headboard itself when the back was painted. This paint does not go down into the bottom (buried) portion and so appears was applied when the headboard was installed at the

grave-site, consistent with it being done by Low. The edges of the paint are irregular as if some of the paint dripped in between the headboard and whatever was backing it. Beattie & Geiger (1988, plates) has an *in situ* photo of the backside of the replica headboard, with a second board still in place that is mirrored (even to two cracks in the second board) by the whitewash on the back of the headboard in the PWNHC. I suggest it might have been added by Low to stabilise the original headboard. This supporting board was no longer in place at a visit in 2008. The whitewash appearing paint is not chipped on the surfaces, does not



Fig. 6. Hartnell's inscription (detail).

appear be very deep into the wood, and thus implying there has not been much damage or change in the surfaces since the white was applied. There are a few small chip marks at the bottom, in appearance as if left perhaps by a shovel, and the resultant exposed wood is a lighter shade.

Hartnell (#979.7.47, Figs 4–6)

This consists of a head and two posts. The head is 70 cm (27 1/2") high, width below the rounded top ranges from 41 cm (16 1/4") to 52 cm (20 1/2") on the front and 55 cm (21 3/4") in back, and 25 cm (9 7/8") deep on left and 16 cm (6 1/4") right. One post is 94 cm (37") long by 13 cm (5") maximum width by 6 cm (2 1/2") maximum thickness; the second is 91 cm (36") long by 10 cm (4 1/8") maximum width by 9 cm (3 1/2") maximum thickness. Weight is 31.8 kg (70 lbs). The maximum thicknesses are at the bottom of the head where the posts were notched for the head to sit. In other words, all three were made out of irregular pieces of wood, the head from a somewhat trapezoidal-shaped block. The posts are firmly secured with five nails/spikes each. There is a significant chip leaving a lighter colour at top side of the right (viewed from front, left from back) post, though it is weathered and so happened some time back, and suggests that most of the exposed surfaces are

not the natural wood colour. The M'Dougall (1857, p. 80) inscription of Hartnell's headboard was:

SACRED / [TO THE /] MEMORY OF / JOHN
HARTNEL[L] / [A.B.] OF H.M.S. / EREBUS. / DIED
JAN. 4, 1846. / AGED 25 YEARS. / Haggai, c. 1,
v. 7. Thus saith the Lord of hosts, Consider your
ways.

Most of the black lettering in top portion of the inscription is still readable. However, the date of death, age and the Biblical quotation were not painted and are not apparent. Noteworthy is that there is no blackening or obvious space on the headboard for the letters or words given above in the brackets, for example there is no space available for the second 'L' in Hartnell. There is space for an unblackened 'A.B.' in front of 'OF', or the somewhat weathered two letters themselves might be 'A.B.'. There are hints of unblackened lettering below 'EREBUS'. Using a flashlight at a shallow angle, there is space for two unreadable lines, while the next line clearly ends with '... Lord of hosts' and the following line ends '... your ways.' M'Dougall has 'Lord of hosts,' while Miertsching (Neatby 1967, p. 228, also quoted in Powell, 2006, p. 329) does not, and only has one of the two additional lines below 'EREBUS' – only an age and not the line with the date of death.

Braine (#979.7.99, Figs 7–9)

This also consists of a head and two posts. The head is 47 cm (18 1/2") by 45 cm (17 3/4") wide (below rounded top at shoulder and bottom) by 7 cm (2 3/4") thick at top to 8 cm (3") at bottom. The left (from back) post is 119 cm (47") long by 12 cm (4 3/4") wide at base of head by 9 cm (3 5/8") thick; the maximum cross-section is at the ground level discoloration of 12 cm (4 7/8") by 10 cm (3 7/8"). The right post is 117 cm (47") long by 12 cm (4 5/8") wide by 9 cm (3 5/8") thick at bottom of head, and the same cross-section 12 cm (4 5/8") by 9 cm (3 5/8") at the ground discoloration. Weight is 15.4 kg (34 lbs). The posts were cut also to fit the head into the resulting notches. On the back, the posts are firmly secured to the head with five and seven nails respectively and are not evenly squared off. M'Dougall's (1857, p. 80) inscription was:

SACRED / TO THE / MEMORY OF / W. BRAINE, R.
M. / H. M. S. EREBUS. / DIED APRIL 3RD, 1846. /
32 YEARS. / Choose you this day whom ye will serve.
Joshua, c. 24, part of 15 ver.

What is directly readable is 'PE', that is certainly the 'RE' in SACRED, 'MEM_RY' in second line, with no spacing for 'TO THE' line, third line has blackened 'W.BRAINE' with maybe two/three letters after that could well be 'RM' (Royal Marine), and the fourth is 'HM_EREBUS' with the EREBUS quite clear. The fifth has something there, but no letters clear though length is consistent with M'Dougall's date of death inscription. The sixth has 'AGE__Y_ARS', that is also consistent with M'Dougall's line. There are definitely two more lines consistent with length of the Biblical quote, but no letters



Fig. 7. Braine's headboard, front.



Fig. 8. Braine's headboard, back.

are readable. The front surface of the head is rougher than Hartnell's and much rougher than Torrington's, and the use of a flashlight at shallow angle was no help in attempting to read additional lettering.

Tablet (#979.7.100, Figs 10–12)

This is 130 cm (51") long by 42 cm (16 1/2") wide at top (below rounded portion) to 43 cm (17") near bottom by 9 cm (3 5/8") to 9 cm (3 1/2") thick at top to 10 cm (4") at bottom. It has a whitish painted section at top, similar to Torrington's, that is ~74–81 cm (~29–32")

with the bottom edge a very irregular coverage. Weight is 22.7 kg (50 lbs). On the reverse side, the paint or whitewash covers ~77 cm (~30 1/2") to 91 cm (36") and it has a much smoother overall surface than the front. There are carved letters 'JT RK(?) FW' with possibly something (FF?) below, apparently graffiti. On the front, there may be hints of lettering ~1 cm (~1/2") high where there is a blacker and higher surface. If so, ~80–90% of that surface has eroded down flat to raw wood. There is plenty of vertical space for M'Dougall's 17 lines of inscription for Bellot or 12 for Morgan (M'Dougall, 1857,



Fig. 9. Braine's inscription (detail).



Fig. 10. Tablet, front.

p. 434, quoted in Powell, 2006, p. 330). The 'hints' means no single letter on this surface was discernible (Fig. 12).

Door (#994.13.1, Figs 13–15)

This is of significantly different construction than the previous four headboards, made of four vertical boards rounded at the top and was held together by two horizontal thicker boards. It is a maximum of 130 cm (51") long by 46 cm (18") wide and 4 cm (1 1/2") thick. The lower horizontal support is 46 cm (18") long by 11 cm (4 1/4") wide by 3 cm (1 1/4") thick, and the ends are bevelled matching the width of the four main pieces side-by-side. The top horizontal board (now separated) is very different, 79 cm (31 1/8") by 10 cm (3 3/4") by 4 cm (1 1/2"), which protruded well off to the sides of the Door, a feature obvious in the photos in Hobson (1993) and Powell (2006). The entire top portion, including the horizontal pieces, also has whitish paint of ~91 cm (~36") length with lower raw wood of ~38 cm (~15"). No weight was available for this artefact, but it is much lighter than the other four. There are numerous nails and nail holes, some nails are driven through and bent over, and there is a metal handle still attached on the right side. There are no holes on the sides that could be attributed to hinges. There is, however, a dark horizontal marking in the unpainted (buried) portion of the bottom that could mark the prior existence of another horizontal supporting board. I believe the ill sized top horizontal piece was a quick replacement, perhaps by Low when he painted the headboard(s), because an original piece matching the still existing lower one was loose or fallen off and the Door would have fallen apart. Hinges could have been mounted on the original top and speculated bottom horizontal supporting boards, which is why there is no longer any evidence of their mounting holes. Therefore the appearance is as if this was a real access door pressed into quick service for the different purpose of a gravesite headboard. There is no sign of any engraving or inscription



Fig. 11. Tablet, back.



Fig. 12. Tablet, area of original inscription(?).

on any of the surfaces. There are some raised nail heads between the two horizontal supports (Fig. 15), that could well have been the attachment for holding a separate engraved plaque that has long since fallen off. The total vertical space available between these two pieces is no more than ~28–30 cm (~11–12”).

Additional discussion

If M’Dougall’s reproduction of the Bellot memorial headboard inscription is anywhere close to accurate, there is simply no vertical space on the Door for the length necessary to make a readable size carving or engraving of that text. There is plenty of space on the Tablet. Furthermore, the Tablet represents a more workmanlike

and careful preparation of a headboard consistent with the desire of leaving a worthwhile memorial to the honoured Frenchman. The lack of nail holes in the Tablet also indicates any inscription was carved on the headboard itself (as had been done on the earlier three Franklin headboards). The Door appears to be a quick makeshift solution of both the headboard itself, and the evidence of nails strongly implies a simpler and smaller 12 line engraved plate or wooden plaque carried the inscription. I also suggest there was more time available for ship carpenters to prepare a headboard after August 1853 for Bellot than May 1854 for Morgan considering the summer activities leading to the closing down of the Franklin Search in the latter year. Hence, I maintain



Fig. 13. Door, front.



Fig. 14. Door, back.

my earlier conclusion that the Tablet (inland, west) was the Bellot memorial and the Door (shoreward, east) was Morgan's.

A review of the various published inscriptions (see Hansen 2010; 2012 for a more complete list), in comparison to the readable portions of the headboards as well as the allowable spacing's as discussed above, also reinforces my belief M'Dougall gives the best rendering of all inscriptions.

Acknowledgements

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Fig. 15. Door, area of original inscription(?).

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