

RESEARCH NOTE: FOOTNOTES TO THE CHASE VAULT MYSTERY AT CHRIST CHURCH, BARBADOS

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INTRODUCTION

In 2018, a review of the Barbados Chase Vault mystery, concerning coffins that were repeatedly thrown around in a sealed vault, allegedly by supernatural activity, was published in the *JSPR* (Ridout, 2018).

The latest contribution to the mystery is an academic study published in the journal *Folklore*, which attempts to explain the story in a socio-cultural context (Finneran & Welch, 2020). These authors conclude that the story was most likely fabricated or embellished by Lord Combermere, governor of the island, to justify anti-Obeah legislation and increased internal surveillance. If the disturbances did occur as described, then they would either have been deliberately undertaken as an expression of hatred by the enslaved population against the ruling planter class, or desecration by Combermere's own people to reinforce his actions.

The conclusion that the coffins story is fictitious was previously reached by the American professional paranormal investigator, sceptic, and prolific author Joe Nickell, after a 2-year investigation (Nickell, 1982). He believed that there were only two potential explanations for the mystery. These were floodwater, which he showed to be hydrologically impossible with the aid of the senior engineer from the Barbados Waterworks Department, or the story was an invention. He concluded that the tale was an "allegory relating to the 'secret vault' of Freemasonry" (Nickell, 1982, p. 86). His reasoning for the story being a myth was strongly influenced by various inconsistencies in the early accounts. He found it "a challenge to find two accounts of the tale that agree" (Nickell, 1982, p. 51).

These notes are intended to consider whether such inconsistencies can be explained and removed to leave a consistent account. If this is possible, then does the original evidence support dismissing the mystery as a myth or a hoax? If it can be demonstrated that the events did occur, and without human intervention, then the explanation must either be paranormal or some physical cause not considered by the earlier investigators.

Belief in poltergeist activity has always centred on the supposedly cruel Thomas Chase and his suicidal daughter. It is therefore relevant to ask what contemporary newspapers and archives can tell us about this man's character.

Ridout (2018) provided a physical explanation based on two phenomena, one of which was only recognized in the late 1950s. The first of these was the instability of lead-encased coffins because of bulging caused by generated gases. However, two coffins with slightly bowed surfaces, one on top of the other, would not move unless there was an applied force. The force suggested in the 2018 paper was a lightning-induced magnetic field.

This current paper contributes a detailed account of a lightning strike as an example of the power generated and its potential magnetic consequences.

ORIGINAL DOCUMENTS AND TRANSCRIPTION ERRORS

The first task must be to retrieve the original story from the errors and extravagancies accrued by frequent retelling.

The original written account was a note by Nathan Lucas, who was Chief Justice of the Court of Common Pleas in Barbados, and the parish priest, the Reverend Thomas Orderson. Both were present on 18 April 1820 at the last opening of the vault at the instigation of Lord Combermere, the governor of Barbados, when the vault entrance was found to be undisturbed, but the lead-encased coffins it contained were in disarray, with one nearly upright against the back wall.

Lucas asked Orderson for the history of the various disturbances, which he supplied as a written document, with a sketch showing the position of the coffins at the last internment in 1819 and the scene when the vault was opened in 1820. Lucas copied the Orderson account into his journal and incorporated the drawings.

The Lucas journal, containing the eyewitness accounts, is one of 35 volumes written by Lucas that were eventually deposited in the Barbados Public Library. However, the deteriorated condition of the volumes means that they have been unavailable to researchers for many decades. A transcription was published (Lucas, 1945), but copying was apparently a difficult task because the handwriting was badly faded (Handler, 2019), and it is possible that the original is now no longer legible. However, the volumes were microfilmed by a mobile unit from the University of the West Indies in 1960, and the film may still be available in the reference section of the library. This has not been viewed, and enquiries have not been answered, but research for these notes has now located an earlier transcription, and examination of the original is no longer necessary. These two transcriptions, made 40 years apart, confirm the existence and wording of the original account.

The earlier transcription was made by the Honourable Forster M. Alleyne of Porters, Barbados (Alleyne, 1908), who first found the Lucas journal account of the story.

Alleyne had heard about the mystery from Sir Robert Boucher Clarke, who had been an eyewitness in 1820, and he also found a reference in family correspondence. He became determined to prove that the events had occurred.

He searched the church burial register, church records, and contemporary newspapers, but found no reference, although he made the following useful comment (Alleyne, 1908, p. 30):

for I had only discovered several old copies of lists of the internments, evidently furnished by Dr Orderson, with comments on the disturbances among the coffins.

This refers to copies of the Orderson account that was incorporated into the Lucas manuscript (Lucas, 1945). We know this because Alleyne sent two of the copies to Andrew Lang, the folklorist, in England, who compared them with a third published copy in a paper he read to the Folklore Society in 1907. He found inconsistencies and errors (Lang, 1907), which subsequently led Gould (1928) to conclude that Orderson had grown weary of providing copies for the curious, and made mistakes. Nickell (1982) suggested that the available accounts of the story now had to be treated with caution, probably because they were an invention.

However, Orderson left Barbados in 1833, decades before the story was widely publicized. More convincingly, one of the copies, which also contained the additional information that the vault was finally opened because of noises heard in the night, was accompanied by a sketch showing all the coffins reversed when the vault was opened in 1820. This is the arrangement of the coffins frequently found in publications, but it is an impossible elaboration, added in later accounts by the dramatist Robert Reece, and dates the drawing to the 1860s (see the section ‘Early accounts and “improvements”’).

Orderson’s notes on the burials were certainly copied and circulated by the Reece family. The published versions (De Morgan, 1860; Redding, 1860; Reece, 1864, 1865) all began with the same statement: “the following details are copied from the original document, now in my possession under the hand of my reverend friend the late Rector- the Reverend Thomas Harrison Orderson” (Redding, 1860, p. 10). Redding stated that the copy she used was in the form of a pamphlet privately printed some years earlier by Robert Reece (there were three generations of sons called Robert).

Alleyne apparently despaired of finding an authentic account, but then heard that Nathan Lucas had been present in 1820 and that some of his manuscript volumes were in the possession of Mr Edward Racker, proprietor of the *Agricultural Reporter*. Racker lent him the volume containing the coffin mystery, which he confirms was in the handwriting of Nathan Lucas.

Alleyne announced his finding of an authentic contemporary account in the *Barbados Agricultural Reporter* for 8 September 1907. He then made a transcription that appeared as a *West India Committee Circular* on 21 January 1908 (Alleyne, 1908) and was repeated in *The Mirror (Trinidad and Tobago)* for 6 February 1908.

The two transcriptions of the Lucas account (i.e., Alleyne, 1908; Lucas, 1945) are identically worded, but the 1908 one contains an important omission that has added to the confusion in subsequent accounts.

The 1908 version states (Alleyne, 1908, p. 31):

Jul 6th 1812, Dorcas Chase, daughter of the Honble Thomas Chase was buried in the same vault. Upon the vault being opened for her reception, the two leaden coffins where evidently removed from the situation in which they had been placed.

The problem with this is that there had only been two burials up to that date, and one was without a lead covering. The presence or absence of more than one lead-covered coffin is central to the only practical explanation for the mystery.

The 1945 transcription reads (Lucas, 1945, p. 57):

Jul 6th 1812, Dorcas Chase, daughter of the Honble Thomas Chase was buried in the same vault; *and the two other coffins were in their proper places. August 9th 1812 the Honble Thomas Chase was buried in the same vault.* Upon the vault being opened for his reception, the two leaden coffins where evidently removed from the situation in which they had been placed.

The section in italics was accidentally omitted from the 1908 transcription, thus missing out the burial of Thomas Chase. This version, published in a *West India Committee Circular*, was used by Sir Algenon Aspinall, who was secretary to the committee, in his accounts of the story (Aspinall 1912, 1914, 1945) and Conan Doyle (1919) in his 'Law of the Ghost'. The latter also contained imaginative but unsubstantiated details that the story had accrued through popular retelling. 'Law of the Ghost' was published in *The Strand Magazine*, which Conan Doyle's various stories (particularly about Sherlock Holmes) helped make one of the most popular and widely read magazines in the Britain, thus helping to spread a muddled coffin mystery.

EARLY ACCOUNTS AND 'IMPROVEMENTS'

The first mention (rather than transcription) of the coffins mystery in print is in Sir James Alexander's (1833) *Transatlantic Sketches*. His introduction to volume one informed us that, being temporarily without a regiment in 1831, he embarked on a journey from England to British Guiana (now Guyana), then across the West Indies to North America. The purpose was to undertake commissions for the Royal Geographical Society and other bodies.

He stated that he stayed for 2 weeks in Barbados, which was probably towards the end of 1831. His account of the coffins story contained correct dates for the various internments, and has therefore come from a written source and not an entirely verbal one. Lucas had died in 1828, but Orderson remained at Christ Church until June 1833 (Shilstone, 1958), and seems to have retained a copy of the notes he sent to Lucas. If, as seems probable, Alexander consulted Orderson, then we can probably accept the conclusion repeated by later authors (starting with Schomburgk, 1844) that sand was scattered on the floor of the vault to detect footprints. Nickell (1982) doubted this because he notes that Alexander's wording is "the floor was of sand" (Alexander, 1833, p. 96) rather

than ‘sanded’. However, the floor is cut down into limestone, and so if it was sand, then this must have been added.

Unfortunately, Alexander (1833, p. 96) concluded: “the last time the vault was opened was in 1819, Lord Combermere was then present”. This should have been 1820, and the mistaken date confuses the last internment (in 1819, which he lists) with Combermere’s visit, which was prompted by his being informed of the events at a local lunch party (Lucas, 1945). This mistake has muddled the story in many subsequent accounts by suggesting that Combermere was present on both occasions.

Popular dramatic details that thousands congregated when the vault was opened on a pre-arranged date, and the immense coffin of Thomas Chase was leaning on end against the door so that entry was nearly impossible, are provided in Lord Combermere’s memoirs (Combermere, 1866). This might have been an important eyewitness account, but the memoirs were compiled by his third wife after his death in 1865. In September 1873, an extract from these, concerning the Chase vault, was published in *The Spiritualist*, and prompted an angry response from S. L. Cussons (1873), who stated that the story had been lifted from her published pamphlet *Death Deeds* without her permission. This pamphlet had been published under the initials of her previous name, K. R. (Redding, 1860).

The mystery had been told to Cussons by a “medical gentleman, a native of Barbados then residing in England” (Redding, 1860, p. 12), and the details had been corroborated directly by Lord Combermere, to whom she had sent a copy of the pamphlet.

The “medical gentleman” who told her the story may have been the younger Robert Reece, who studied medicine in England before becoming a successful dramatist. She was certainly told an interesting tale. Her detailed description of the vault is imaginary, and her description of the scene in 1820 is picturesque. For example (Redding, 1860, p. 10):

The old church standing forth in sombre relief, as if a connecting link between the living and the dead, made the scene altogether one that beggared description, while, perhaps, its peculiar interest was in the death-like silence of mute anxiety and superstitious awe.

Combermere’s involvement in this pamphlet is interesting. Redding notes in *Death Deeds* that she wrote to him seeking permission to quote him as an authority for the story, also probably for his recollections. He responded by sending her a copy of the short account from Schomburgk’s (1844) *History of Barbados*, which he presumably thought was an accurate summary of events. His name is on Schomburgk’s list of subscribers to the book, and so it is possible that Combermere provided the original information if Schomburgk had asked for recollections from his time as governor of the island. Redding appended this account to her pamphlet, but because it didn’t corroborate her exotic story,

she notes “but we regret the historian was not better acquainted with many of the most important facts before submitting them to public criticism” (Redding, 1860, p. 15).

Schomburgk mentions the events that prompted the 1820 visit to the vault, which agrees with that of Nathan Lucas (see below). Schomburgk (1844, p. 220) writes: “Lord Combermere was residing in 1820 in the neighbourhood of the church, and having been told of the mysterious circumstances, he made unexpectedly an application to the Rector to have the vault re-opened”. So, no prearranged date and time for thousands of onlookers to assemble, and there is no mention of a visit by Combermere in 1819. He only heard about the problem in 1820.

Schomburgk stated that one of the larger coffins had turned around and was blocking the entrance, which is consistent with the Reece drawing from *Death Deeds* (Figure 1). That drawing also shows an upright coffin, and Lucas (1945, p. 58) asks, “how could one of the leaden coffins be set up on end against the wall?” The drawing identifies the coffin as that of Thomas Chase, but this is highly unlikely because of the vault height (Ridout, 2018), and it was probably one of the children. However, *Death Deeds* combined Schomburgk’s statement with the Reece drawing in a dramatic account of how the ‘massive’ coffin of Thomas Chase stood on end against the entrance door, and this detail will be found in most versions of the mystery. The story is impossible because the vault was closed at the top of the entrance steps with a horizontal marble slab and at the bottom with a double brick wall. The entrance is also on the east side of the vault, which in Christian tradition is the direction the feet should face, so that the deceased can rise up and face towards Christ at the Second Coming. This means that the upright coffin must be against the back wall.

An important ‘improvement’ found in most accounts of the mystery from 1860 to the present day is the reversal of all the coffins (Figure 2). This commences in accounts attributable to Robert Reece junior, the popular Victorian dramatist (De Morgan, 1860, Redding, 1860, Reece, 1864, 1865). There is no obvious reason for this except to make the story more dramatic. The space available in the vault makes the reversal impossible, and certainly not without causing considerable damage to the brick vault lining, which is still in good condition (Ridout, 2018).

In the decades that followed, the story continued to accrue imagination. Conan Doyle, whose influence in spreading a story must have been considerable, had the “whole island convulsed” with the story and Combermere, on his 1820 visit, accompanied by “a formidable official party” (Conan Doyle, 1919, pp. 553–554).

Thus, the problem of finding two versions of the story that agree can be traced to a few early transcription errors and several imaginative additions. If the sources of these are demonstrated and they are removed, then the story cannot be dismissed because of inconsistency. The version that emerges, shorn

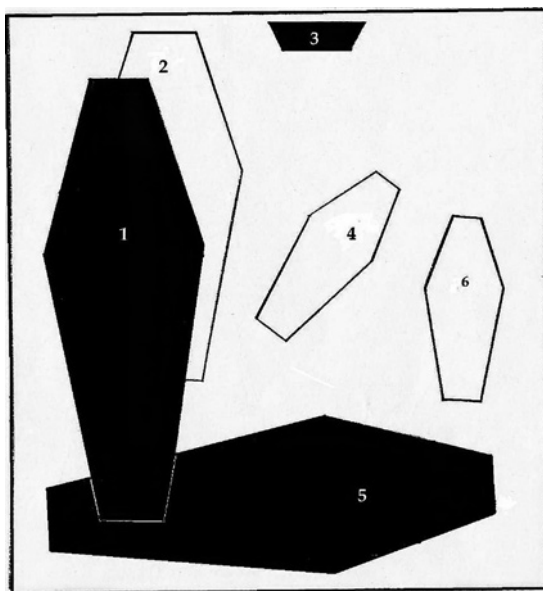
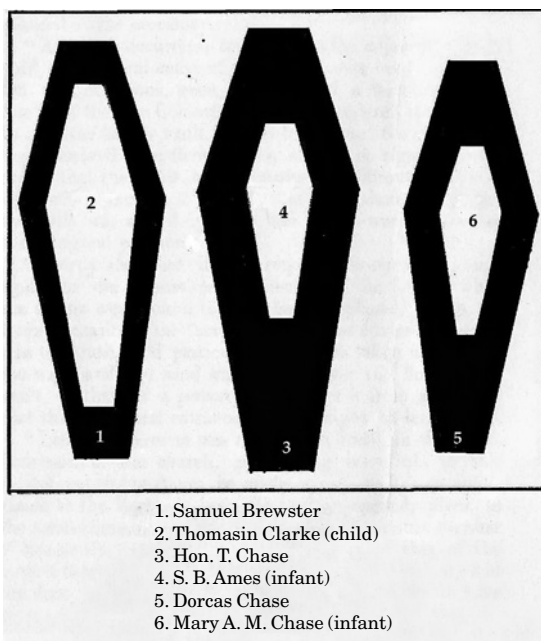
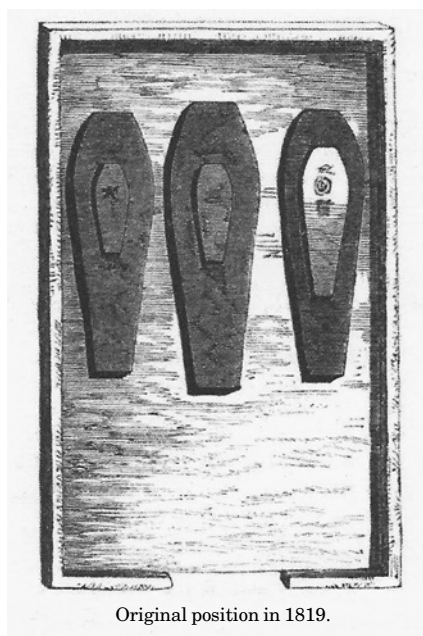
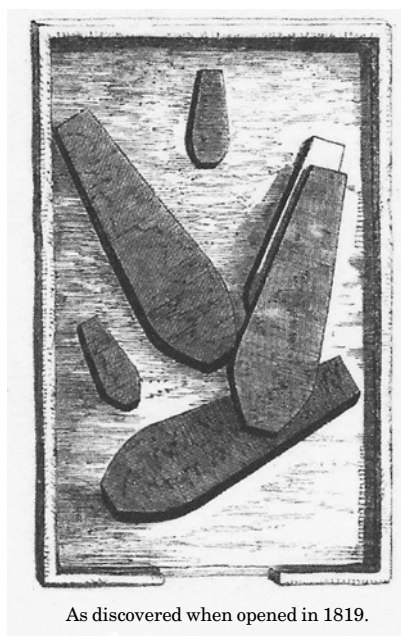


Figure 1. The first Reece drawings from Death Deeds, showing the positions of the coffins as left at the last internment in 1819 and as found during Lord Combermere's impromptu inspection in 1820. These seem to have been copied or adapted from the original Finch drawing by Robert Reece the barrister.



Original position in 1819.



As discovered when opened in 1819.

Figure 2. 'Original' and 'as discovered' drawings (Reece, 1865) by Robert Reece the dramatist (son of Robert Reece the barrister) showing the impossible reversed coffins, which have become the usual way of illustrating the Chase vault mystery.

of its inaccuracies and trimmings, is the account assembled from the two transcriptions of the inaccessible Lucas (1945) volume. The following account provides a summary.

In 1807, the Chase family applied to the Rector of Christ Church to use an empty vault that had belonged to the Elliot family, and the remains of Thomasina Goddard were interred in a wooden coffin. An infant, Mary Chase, was then added in February 1808, followed by Dorcas Chase in July 2012. These coffins were encased in lead, which would be typical for a vault burial. The massive coffin of Thomas Chase was added 1 month later, and the lead coffins had been disturbed—the infant's coffin having been tossed from the northeast corner to the opposite angle where it was head down. They were replaced in their proper positions.

In September 1816, the vault was opened again for another infant, and in November 1816 for Samuel Brewster. Both were in lead-covered coffins, and on both occasions the other lead coffins had moved.

The final interment was the wooden coffin containing Thomasina Clarke in July 1819. There was considerable confusion within the vault, and the wooden coffin of Mrs Goddard (which was probably partially decayed after 12 years) had fallen apart and was tied together between Miss Clarke's coffin and the wall.

In April 1820, Stapelton Cotton, First Viscount Combermere, accompanied by Roland Cotton (probably his young cousin Roland Edward) and Nathan Lucas, visited Elridge's Plantation near the church, to have lunch with Robert Boucher Clarke. The coffins mystery came up in conversation, and Combermere evidently thought, as governor, that it was appropriate to investigate. He sent for the Reverend Orderson, who met them at the vault together with Combermere's aide-de-camp, Major Finch. Lucas (1945, p. 56) adds the following:

On our arrival at the vault every outward appearance was perfect; not a blade of grass or stone touched; indeed collusion or deception was impossible; for neither ourselves nor the [workmen, they had taken '8 or 10'] knew anything of the matter; for the subject had hardly started in conversation before we set out for the inspection and the Church Yard cannot exceed half a mile from Eldridge's.

'Private marks' had been made in the mortar around the entrance slab to detect interference, and these had not been disturbed, but the coffins were in disarray. There were no footprints on the sand that had been scattered on the floor. Major Finch was instructed to make a drawing of the coffin positions, and then they were buried elsewhere.

The Lucas account, a section within a contemporary manuscript book in the handwriting of one of the witnesses to the event, demonstrates that the disturbances in the vault occurred. The two nearly identically worded transcriptions, made nearly 40 years apart, confirm the wording of the account, which (though the volume is extant) is no longer available for study. The omitted text in the first transcription that was replaced in the second demonstrates that the 1945 transcription was not just a copy of the 1908.

DID THE EVENTS REALLY HAPPEN?

The view discussed by Nickell (1982) and Finneran and Welch (2020), that the events never happened, would imply that Judge Lucas and the Reverend Orderson (who both provided the account) were inventive or deceived.

If the story was fabricated, then the other material within the thirty-five manuscript volumes requires consideration. Much of this concerns government administration and legislation. For example, Lucas transcribed all the surviving minutes of council meetings from the 17th and 18th centuries, material that has proved invaluable to historians (Handler, 2019). Judge Lucas seems to have been a meticulous man. Why would he and the parish priest invent a story, with a drawing, for his personal journal? It is unlikely that both Lucas and Orderson were deceived or colluded to fabricate such a story. Hence, it is more likely that the events occurred as they were reported.

If, unknown to Lucas and Orderson, the burials were deliberately disturbed, then the problem is still complicated. A team of men with a cask of cement for reinstatement would have to remove a large and heavy marble slab (1 m × 2 m) at the top of the stairs to the vault and a double brick wall at the bottom. Orderson notes the following in the Lucas (1945, p. 57) manuscript:

the descent into it [the vault] is covered with a large block of blue Devonshire marble, which will take some hours to be removed and replaced in its proper situation. It will take at least four able men to move the stone.

This task would have to be repeated four times between 1812 and 1820 without anyone noticing—particularly the Reverend Orderson, who presumably visited his church every day. It would also have been a very random statement, either by the enslaved people or Combermere's men, because its discovery relied on somebody dying, which might not have happened again for 10 years.

If the events actually happened and there was no human interference, then the only possibilities are a metaphysical cause, or a physical cause that earlier investigators did not think of.

THOMAS CHASE AND POLTERGEISTS

Thomas Chase, buried in 1812, became the central figure in the alleged poltergeist activity that has been the popular explanation for the coffin disturbances over the last 200 years.

His alleged involvement was explained by the Victorian dramatist Robert Reece, who suggested that Chase's eldest daughter Dorcas had starved herself to death because of her father's cruelty and that he had then killed himself. Reece (1864, p. 137) describes him as "of evil disposition, violent and intemperate". Contemporary opinion was, he informs us, that those who died of natural causes cannot tolerate the coffins of suicides in their vault, and there must be vigorous attempts at expulsion. Subsequent accounts have all accepted this assessment of Thomas Chase. The account provided by Curran (2013) and used by Finneran and Welch (2020) adds that he was the most hated man on the island.

One of the 'Laws of the Ghost' that Conan Doyle (1919, p. 547) deduced was that "a physical basis is needed for every physical manifestation". The physical basis he inferred for the coffin mystery was the "trapped effluvia" of the men struggling fearfully to open, rearrange, and re-seal the vault. He then discussed, although with no particular reference to the vault, how another form might be unused vitality from a life cut short by murder or suicide. Gould (1928), having applied the Sherlock Holmes dictum of removing all other possibilities, considered that Conan Doyle's residual life force theory needed to be taken seriously as an explanation for the Chase vault mystery. He seemed less attracted to the effluvia theory.

The suicide story, reported by Reece and considered by Gould, has the basic problem that suicide was a crime (i.e., *felo de se* = felon of himself), and both Dorcas and Thomas would have been denied burial in consecrated ground. This denial was not repealed until the Burial of Suicides Act of 1823. Nevertheless, it could be argued that his evil temperament, even if there were no suicides involved, induced some form of paranormal energy in the sealed vault. It is therefore necessary to consider the character of the Hon. Colonel Thomas Chase.

Various contemporary mentions of him in the National Archives at Kew, and surviving copies of the *Barbados Mercury and Bridge-Town Gazette (BMBTG)* provide some information about his life.

Thomas Chase was a member of the House of Assembly, and at a general assembly at the town hall on 5 April 1803 he took the oath as an elected representative for Christ Church Parish (Privy Council Office, 1803).

Later that year, a vacancy occurred in His Majesty's seven-man Legislative Council of Barbados, and Thomas Chase was proposed by the other council members (Letterbook, 1803a). This was accepted by the king on the 27 June 1803 "At the Court at the Queen's Palace", where he was judged to be a "fit person to fulfil the vacancy" (Letterbook, 1803b). He could now call himself The Honourable Thomas Chase.

There was considerable concern during the early years of the 19th century that the war with France, which had spread to some of the Caribbean Islands, might lead to an invasion of Barbados. The *BMBTG* for 19 April 1808 reports on a meeting of freeholders and parishioners at Christ Church Parish Church on 12 April (Volunteer Association of Christ Church Parish, 1808). They agreed that it was necessary to establish an Association of Volunteer Military Corps, and it was unanimously agreed that Thomas Chase should be Colonel of the Militia. The resolution was signed by all one hundred and sixty-five people present.

On 3 October 1807, a notice appeared that creditors and debtors of the estates of Thomazin Goddard and Richard Nurse should apply to the chambers of Thomas Chase, who was the qualified executor (Chase, 1807).

In December of that year, he presided as Chief Justice at the Court of Grand Session. The *BMBTG* for 17 December 1808 quoted his address to the grand jury verbatim (Court of Grand Session, 1808). He then presided over a long calendar of murders and lesser crimes.

The *BMBTG* for 10 October 1809 carried an invitation from him in his role as Chairman of the Charitable English Society. This invited all members, Englishmen, and their dependents, together with other loyal British subjects, to a dinner at Free-Mason's Hall to celebrate the fiftieth year of the king's reign (Chase, 1809).

Finally, on 24 June 1812, a note was sent to the Earl of Liverpool at the Privy Council, reporting that Mr Chase had retired from the Legislative Council because of "exceeding ill health which unfits him from all business" (Letterbook, 1812).

This is the period when, according to Reece, he was behaving so cruelly to his daughter Dorcas that she killed herself the following month. He died later that year, and there are no reasons to suppose that either of them killed themselves.

So, instead of a hated evil man, steeped in debauchery, who drove his daughter to suicide and then killed himself, we have a different person. This one was a respected member of the Legislative Council, lawyer and high court

judge, whom his local community turned to for leadership of their militia at a time of potential crisis. His treatment of his enslaved African people is not indicated, but it is probable that it was no better or worse than that of his other contemporary plantation owners.

His reputation seems to have been traduced to make the story more ‘gothic’, and this version continued to expand to support supposed poltergeist activity as an explanation for the mystery.

MODERN PHYSICS OFFERS AN EXPLANATION

The conviction that the Chase vault events did not happen also developed because of the difficulty in finding a rational cause and a disinclination to believe in evil forces capable of moving very heavy lead-encased coffins. However, the physical forces they considered were only those familiar to them—i.e., floodwater or earthquake.

But in the late 1950s a new discipline, the magnetic survey, using a magnetometer to detect variations in Earth’s magnetic field, was developed (Fassbinder, 2016). This allowed archaeologists to map buried features such as kilns, hearths, ditches, and wall foundations, which possessed different magnetic properties from the surrounding soil. Soon, anomalies were found, and further investigation showed many of these to be caused by lightning-induced magnetic fields. A lightning strike generates a colossal amount of energy, which spreads out as it dissipates, generating a massive magnetic field. This causes permanent magnetization in soils and rocks containing magnetic minerals, which is known as lightning-induced remanent magnetism (Bevan, 2009).

Subterranean damage caused by lightning is now a well-established phenomenon. For example, there has been considerable concern in recent decades about damage to underground pipes carrying oil and gas. Electromagnetic fields from nearby lightning strikes create voltage differences between the pipes and the surrounding soil. The consequences are complex, but can include the breakdown of protective coatings, meltdown, pinhole damage, and explosions (Rabbani, 2021).

An interesting example of the potential power and magnetic consequences of a lightning strike was described by a passenger onboard the packet ship *New York*, from New York to Liverpool in April 1827. Details were recorded because it was hoped that they might be useful in understanding lightning and reinforce the advisability of lightning rods on ships. These observations were published in the *Evening Mail* for 21 May 1827 (‘Tremendous Storm at Sea’, 1827):

The lightning, having struck the main-royal mast head, shattered the mast head and descending thence penetrated the deck into one of the store rooms, the bulkheads and fittings of which were completely demolished. Then separating, one section was conducted by a leaden tube to the side of the ship through which it passed out between wind and water starting [igniting] the ends of three five-inch planks. Another portion from the store room penetrating into the lady’s cabin shivered to

atoms the plate of a large mirror leaving the frame untouched. From the looking glass to the piano forte was an easy transition; it touched the instrument with no delicate impulse dismounting it and leaving it out of tune. Thence it passed through the entire length of the after- cabin and out through the stern window.

Fortunately, this lightning strike occurred at 5 a.m. No one was injured, but the ship was on fire. However, the rain was falling so heavily that they had no difficulty bringing the fire under control.

The captain was worried about further storms, and had a lightning conductor on board that he had not installed. This consisted of a 1.2 m “well-polished and pointed” rod of iron 1.25 cm in thickness. It was attached to an iron chain of similar thickness with 0.6 m links hooked together. The rod protruded 0.6 m above the main mast, and the other end was propped out on an oar over the stern of the ship by about 3 m and down into the sea. This conductor was hauled to the masthead, and lightning struck again at 2 p.m. (‘Tremendous Storm at Sea’, 1827):

A ball of fire seemed to dart down before us. Those on deck agreed that the whole ship seemed to be in a blaze from the vividness of the principal flash which they distinctly saw darting down the conductor and agitating the water. All parts of the ship, as before, were filled with smoke and smelling of sulphur.

The ship survived and no one was injured, but the chain conductor was in pieces, scattered over the deck. “The pointed rod was found to be fused, shortened by several inches and covered over with a dark coating; some of the links had been snapped off and others melted” (‘Tremendous Storm at Sea’, 1827).

The correspondent also noted (‘Tremendous Storm at Sea’, 1827):

It affected the polarity of all the compasses causing them to vary from the true point and between each other. They gradually resumed a bearing which we have steered, although still three points out as we have discovered.

All the steel parts of the ship’s chronometers and passengers’ pocket watches were found to have been magnetized.

The piano is a good example of the power generated by the lightning strike. The considerable weight and instability of upright pianos made them a significant potential hazard in rough seas, and they had to be firmly secured. Use of the word ‘dismounted’ by the correspondent indicates that the instrument could still be detached and was not bolted to the ship’s structure. It may have been fastened with metal hooks and eye plates, as commonly used for other maritime applications, but whatever the arrangement, it should have been immovable. Nevertheless, the lightning strike managed to detach it from its fastenings.

On 21 February 1828, T. Trail Stewart MD, whose sentence construction suggests was probably the original correspondent, read a detailed account of the incident to the Royal Society that was subsequently published in the *Journal*

of the *Franklyn Society*. Amongst the extra information he provides, he notes that the piano was “thrown down, its top torn off and broken in pieces” (Trail Stewart, 1828, p. 64).

However, the most useful additional information in his report concerns the ship’s damage inspection when it docked at Liverpool. There, it was found that a colossal magnetic field had been induced by the lightning strikes (Trail Stewart, 1828, p. 65):

Every instrument made of steel, such as the carpenter’s tools and the knives and forks; and also, those made of soft iron, even to the very nails in every part of the ship, had been rendered permanently magnetic. All the watches and chronometers, were either stopped or rendered useless.

In the Barbados coffin problem, if there was a lightning rod attached to a thick wire or chain running down the wall of the tower to an earthing rod in the soil, then this would be analogous to the metal fittings on the ship’s main mast yard (main-top-sail tie) and the ‘iron chain’ tie running down from the mast head to the deck. This, Trail Stewart found, had transmitted the lightning.

A lightning rod on the church tower unfortunately cannot be demonstrated, and so it is pertinent to set this uncertainty into context by enquiring how much lightning contributed to natural disasters in Barbados during the last half of the 18th century and the first half of the 19th century. Schomburgk (1844) provides some information in his *The History of Barbados*. He quotes a witness account containing the following description of a hurricane that destroyed the Parish Church in Christchurch on 10 October 1780: “The howling of the tempest; the noise of descending torrents from clouds supercharged with rain; the incessant flashing of lightning; the roaring of thunder; the continual crash of falling houses” (Schomburgk, 1844, p. 46).

The church was rebuilt with the one which concerns this story, but this was destroyed in 1831. His witness account of that storm reads: “The upper regions were from this time illuminated by incessant lightning, but the quivering sheet of blaze was surpassed in brilliancy by the darting of electric fire which exploded in every direction” (Schomburgk, 1844, p. 57).

Schomburgk’s descriptions of storms between those dates are peppered with lightning and, whilst most of the destruction to buildings was undoubtedly caused by the hurricane force winds, a contribution from the lightning cannot be excluded. He notes: “there is perhaps no other island in the West Indian Archipelago where thunderstorms are so frequent and attended by so much damage, as Barbados” (Schomburgk, 1844, p. 63).

So, there was certainly justification for installing one of Benjamin Franklin’s lightning rods, which had been available since 1752. However, their use on some churches was delayed because there was initially ecclesiastical concern that protecting churches against lightning was blasphemous, being contrary to

God's will (Ridout, 2018). The prevailing opinion in Barbados by the end of the 18th century is unknown.

Whilst the presence of a lightning rod, either installed when the church was constructed or as a later addition, cannot be confirmed, such a possibility is certainly plausible and provides a potentially more parsimonious interpretation of events.

The rod, together with its connecting chain and earthing rod, would conduct the vast current generated by lightning strikes into the ground. The current would radiate out until it reached the brick-lined vault and the lead-encased coffins.

A massive magnetic field would have been induced in the ground and vault, as it was in the ship, but lead does not become permanently magnetized like steel and iron. However, in the fraction of a second that the current flowed, the lead-encased coffins would become magnets. Because they were all orientated in the same direction, the charge at either end of each coffin would be the same, and like charges repel. However, a second mechanism is required before the larger coffins can move.

Gould (1928) emphatically rejected lightning and the gases generated by decomposition as possible solutions to the mystery. However, Captain Milner, who was in Barbados in 1856 and dined with "one of the witnesses" to the 1820 vault opening (who could only be Sir Robert Boucher Clarke, who introduced the story to Foster Alleyne), wrote that "the general idea was, that the gases generated in the coffins were the moving cause" (Milner, 1865, p. 196). This suggests that the potential problem was familiar.

Gases generated in lead-encased coffins certainly could cause instability by bowing the surfaces, so that they could easily swivel, particularly if one distorted coffin was placed upon another. Walker (1839, p. 58) noted in his *Gatherings from Churchyards*, that the 'bulging out' of the surface might mean that "the coffin may be turned around on its axis by the slightest touch of the finger". Sometimes, in Britain, coffins had to be tapped to prevent them from bursting, but this was not part of the Barbados burial practice, where the coffins were encased in lead at the graveside (Lucas, 1945).

Gould was probably correct that, under normal circumstances, gases generated inside the coffins should not cause them to move. However, the coffins, placed in three slightly unstable pairs, with a smaller one on top of a larger, could dislodge or swivel under the influence of an induced magnetic field. The consequences would vary with their weight, amount of distortion, and the space available. Thus, an external force would move the coffins around without disturbing private marks around the entrance slab to the vault, or leaving more than scuff marks on the sanded floor.

DISCUSSION

Nickell (1982), having examined all the documentation he could obtain, and considering all possible explanations, concluded that the story was a Masonic

analogy. His determination that the events did not occur was helped both by the discrepancies in the various accounts and by the lack of contemporary records, as previously noted by Alleyne (1908) in the introduction to his Lucas manuscript transcription.

However, Nickell missed the alternative conclusion, that the impact of the events at the vault on the people of Barbados has been greatly exaggerated by subsequent storytellers. There were not thousands of anxious spectators at the 1820 vault opening; there were the four members of a local lunch party, the parish priest, and the governor's aide-de-camp.

Similarly, Finneran and Welch (2020) were led astray by this storytelling, choosing a modern, inaccurate account as their basis for deducing a gothic, political explanation. However, if Combermere had designed the story to reinforce his anti-Obeah legislation, as they suggest, then he surely would have ensured that it was better disseminated. The events at the vault did not achieve much publicity until the 1860s, years after they would have served any useful purpose. The moving coffins presumably created a little local disquiet, but the notion that the population was panicked by the mystery is not supported by any evidence.

CONCLUSIONS

The strange events at the Chase vault, during the second decade of the 19th century, were documented by Judge Lucas and the Reverend Orderson, who were both witnesses at the final opening in 1820. There are no reasons to question the accuracy of their account, but it became so exaggerated that its veracity has been doubted. Similarly, the most important witness in 1820 was probably Lord Combermere, Governor of Barbados, and he endorsed Robert Schomburgk's version of events, rather than the dramatic story incorporated into his posthumous memoirs by his wife in 1866. Schomburgk's version was the same, though abridged, as the story recorded by Lucas and Orderson.

When all the transcription errors and embellishments are removed, the basic story is still extraordinary—coffins were thrown about in a sealed vault without any indications of human involvement.

The possible explanation for the Chase vault mystery offered here (as in Ridout, 2018) is a combination of physical causes that earlier commentators did not think of or dismissed. That is, an induced magnetic field, resulting from the earthing of lightning strikes on the adjacent church tower, acting on lead-encased coffins that were slightly unstable because of surface distortion caused by gases generated inside them.

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