

CUS417/4.38

THE SKULL OF SIR THOMAS BROWNE.

ON several occasions reference has been made in the BRITISH MEDICAL JOURNAL to the skull which is preserved in the Museum of the Norfolk and Norwich Hospital as that of Sir Thomas Browne. It has been suggested by more than one admirer of the author of the *Religio Medici* that it is fitting that the skull should be restored to the tomb in the church of St. Peter Mancroft, from which it is said to have been taken, and this proposal has been strongly supported in these columns. Some time ago we announced that the authorities of the Norfolk and Norwich Hospital had intimated their willingness, under certain conditions, to deliver up the relic which they have in their keeping to the vicar and churchwardens of St. Peter Mancroft in order that it might be replaced in the grave from which it was "knave'd." Doubts were, however, felt by some as to the genuineness of the relic, and, owing probably to this circumstance, the Church Council has not come to a decision in the matter. Quite recently a discovery has, we learn from the *Eastern Daily Press*, been made which seems to strengthen the case against the relic. The following entry has been found in the manuscripts of John Mackerell, a Norwich antiquary of the eighteenth century, under the heading of St. Peter Mancroft: "The late Dr. Jeffery gave notice to Sir Thos. Browne's nearest relative that his Vault wanted Reparation, who sent him word it might be filled up, which when the Dr. knew, desired that he might be interred therein, who shortly after Dying His corps was deposited in the Vault and afterward filled up with Earth and over the Doctor on a Stone in this Ins.:- M.S. Johannis Jeffery S.T.P., &c., &c., &c., 1720, Anno aet. suae 73." The entry is somewhat cryptically worded, but it certainly suggests that Archdeacon Jeffery was buried in the vault containing the remains of Sir Thomas Browne, which the representative of the great writer's family neglected to keep in repair. An investigation is to be held with the object of clearing up, if possible, the mystery of the skull. There never was more than a presumption that the skull was that of Sir Thomas Browne. All that is known is that more than sixty years ago, during a burial in the chancel of St. Peter Mancroft, a coffin supposed to hold Browne's remains was accidentally broken open by the pick of a workman, and that Dr. Edward Lubbock secured the skull which was said to have been taken therefrom. Dr. Lubbock did not, it appears, see the skull taken from the coffin, and the relic may have passed through several hands before coming into his. The question of genuineness is a stone of stumbling which always lies in the path of relic worshippers. Many step over it with the light-hearted indifference to difficulties that comes from the wish to believe, but in minds of a critical turn the doubt must seriously abate, or at any rate hold in suspense, the natural feeling of veneration. The result of the inquiry as to the identity of the Norwich skull is sure to be interesting, and for sentimental reasons we venture to hope that it may be conclusive in favour of the skull now enclosed in the crystal casket which is the tribute of Professor Osler.