

## The Tutbury Hoard

“Radix malorum est cupiditas,” proclaimed Chaucer’s Pardoner at the conclusion of his tale. The root of all evil is greed. The story itself, one of the best in the Canterbury Tales, tells how the discovery of a chest of treasure ends in the demise of four young friends. The gold is owned by Death himself, and he returns to claim his own.

The story has become the model for many a film over the years, included The Treasure of the Sierra Madre, starring Humphrey Bogart, and (more recently) Shallow Grave. There must be a grain of truth in it.

There’s no better demonstration of the Pardoner’s message than the saga of the Staffordshire Hoard. Throw more than £3 million into a relationship, and it’s bound to do strange things to it. The finder of the Mercian gold and the landowner on whose farm it was discovered - Terry Herbert and - are now the worst of foes, in spite of the money they shared. Had Mr Herbert found nothing, they would still be the best of friends.

But what happened in Hammerwich is as nothing compared to the extraordinary find made in Tutbury back in 1831, and the ugly repercussions that followed. If the Staffordshire Hoard is priceless, then the Tutbury Hoard is more priceless still.

It was while some workmen were repairing the mill-race on the River Dove that the coins first came to light. What they found, all caked in mud and crushed together, was a hoard of silver coins, from England, Ireland, Scotland and Continental Europe, and all dating from the 13th and 14th Century.

That first discovery led to others, and more and more coins turned up. In total they amounted to some 360,000 coins, the largest haul ever found in the British Isles. This kind of quantity is almost impossible to value with any real accuracy. When 26 of the coins were sold at auction in 2010, they were expected to fetch around £3,000. You do the math. In medieval terms they probably amounted to £1,500.

As with the other Staffordshire Hoard, the first questions we want answering about the Tutbury find are who, why and when. And luckily we are in a rather better position to offer some answers.

Back in the early 14th Century Tutbury Castle was one of the many strongholds of Thomas Plantagenet, Earl of Lancaster. Thomas was arguably the richest and most powerful nobleman in England, not only a grandson of King Henry III and Earl of Lancaster, Leicester and Derby, but by marriage (to Alice de Lucy) Earl of Lincoln and Salisbury too.

Born in c1278, Thomas rapidly became one of Edward Longshanks’ most trusted officers, an ever-present in the Scottish wars. With more major castles at Pontefract and Dunstanburgh, he was not far from the action.

With the arrival of Edward II, however, Thomas’s loyalty was not quite so secure. Under weak kings English barons plot. Thomas was one of the judges who

sentenced Edward's buddy Piers Gaveston to death. After the disastrous Battle of Bannockburn, Thomas was virtually the ruler of England for four years, before another faction of barons ousted him.

In time Thomas of Lancaster's disaffection from the King turned into outright rebellion. He joined forces with the Scots, and raised troops to confront Edward, but failed to detach enough barons from the King to turn a rebellion into a revolution. Thomas's army was routed at the Battle of Boroughbridge in 1321, and then at Burton Bridge in March the following year.

Thomas's trial was just as brief as Gaveston's, though King Edward commuted his sentence to a mere beheading outside his castle at Pontefract.

Yet, within a few years, Thomas was being hailed as a saint and martyr, especially after the rise to power of his grandson, Henry Bolingbroke. Repeated calls for Thomas's canonisation failed to win over the Pope.

So, you might still be asking, why did all that silver come from ? The likeliest explanation was that the money was destined for Thomas's troops and his Scottish allies. Perhaps the barrels of coins capsized into the River Dove while his convoy was attempting to ford it.

Allegations have also been made against the monks of nearby Tutbury priory. It has been suggested that the cash was due to taken to the priory church for safe-keeping, or that it was spirited away by the monks for their own purposes. As with the Staffordshire Hoard, we will probably never know the truth.

But for the people of Tutbury in 1831, this looked like a present that had taken 500 years to arrive. The first coins were gratefully pocketed by the workmen on the Dove, but as more and more coins were dug out on the river bank, so the numbers of prospectors willing to wade into the water with shovels grew. There were, said a contemporary newspaper, up to 300 men in the river at any one time.

Eventually the Duchy of Lancaster itself stepped in to protect the site, and the hoard was designated Crown property. The holes were back-filled, and the order prohibiting further digging in the area, issued by William IV, remains in force to this day.

Of the 360,000 coins thought to have been found, only 100,000 or so was recovered for the Crown. In the meantime, the opportunity to get rich quick transformed the town of Tutbury into a place of plunder, theft and murder.

More of that next week.