

Tutbury Hoard II

In 1831 the largest hoard of coins ever discovered in the British Isles came to light in the River Dove at Tutbury. In all the cache amounted to some 360,000 silver pieces, all from the 13th and 14th Century, and believed to have been lost by Thomas, Plantagenet, Earl of Lancaster, the one-time owner of Tutbury Castle. As I described in last week's Post, Thomas did not have long to lament his missing millions; he was beheaded for treason in March 1322.

We have never had a proper gold rush in England, the kind that transformed California, but Tutbury in 1831 was the nearest equivalent. Once rumours of treasure spread abroad, carpetbaggers piled into the town, filling their days with time in the local hostelrys and a spell in the middle of the river. It was as if the mere smell of silver was enough to undermine the usual social niceties. Fights broke out, fuelled by drink. Whisky Galore and Lord of the Flies had come together in a quiet corner of Staffordshire.

But the curse of the Tutbury Hoard had a long reach, and it did not end when the coins were declared treasure trove and the site sealed off. More than 20 years later the smell of loot lived on.

In October 1852 a couple called John and Jane Blackburn were found murdered in their burning house at Ash Flats Farm. Once a little farming hamlet, today Ash Flats is a suburb to the south of Stafford.

Two decades earlier John Blackburn and his neighbour, Hugh Barber, were among the many who had been drawn to Tutbury by the lure of money. In those days the rumour mill at Tutbury was turning faster than the real mill, in whose stream the silver had been discovered. Workmen, it said, had recovered the coins which had been carried downstream by the water, but Blackburn and Barber had located the main hoard.

At any rate, Hugh Barber elected to cash in on his cache immediately, and returned to Ash Flats £100 the richer. As for John Blackburn, he spent only enough to hire himself a horse and trap, along with a gun to guard it with.

Sudden wealth can do strange things to people. Certainly it transformed John and Jane Blackburn. They became reclusive and uneasy, not allowing anyone near to their increasingly derelict farm, not even their two sons. And thus they hid themselves away until the night of their murder.

Acting mainly on guesswork, the Staffordshire police immediately arrested the couple's two sons, Thomas and Henry Blackburn, though they probably knew little more about secret treasure than anyone else in Ash Flats. With nothing in the way of evidence, the arrival of a badly scrawled anonymous letter transformed the situation. Whoever had written it clearly knew more about the circumstances of the killings than had been divulged in official channels. The letter accused Henry Blackburn of being the murderer.

The letter was traced to a semi-literate Irishman by the name of Charles Moore, who had once been employed as a farm labourer by John Blackburn. Moore was one of many who had been overheard talking about the treasure said to be hidden in the Blackburns' home. The man claimed that he had been recruited by Henry Blackburn to kill the Blackburns and recover the silver, with a promise of a share of the loot.

In the end four men were taken to Stafford Crown Court in April 1843 to stand trial for murder. Henry Blackburn was one, Charles Moore a second, along with two fellow Irishmen, Edward Walsh and Peter Kirwan. Over the three days of the trial the men were cross-questioned, along with witnesses, one of whom claimed he had heard Moore discussing how to obtain resin and pitch with which start the fire.

The involvement of Henry Blackburn in the crime was shown to be a deliberate attempt to mislead the police, and the jury found Peter Kirwan innocent as well. The other two men - Moore and Walsh - they found guilty, though the latter's sentence was later commuted to transportation for life.

Only Charles Moore, then, went to the gallows. He was hanged in front of the country gaol on April 9 1853. None of the Blackburns' silver was recovered, if there had been any at Ash Flats at all.

Today, what remains of the Tutbury Hoard is scattered far and wide. In 2010 an exhibition of some of the silver was staged at the British Museum, and some pieces have also been on show in Tutbury Castle. A small collection of 26 coins was sold at auction in the same year and snapped up by the Duchy of Lancaster, thus finding its way back to the estate that lost it almost 700 years ago. Less than a third of the hoard is now in public hands.

But for those tempted to go treasure hunting in Tutbury today, the order prohibiting digging on the banks of the River Dove remains in force. And finding more of the lost silver may come with a far higher price than what it makes at auction.