

BANDITS, FOOTPADS AND HIGHWAYMEN!

By "BEORCHAM"

Nearly all schoolboys—and not a few grown-ups—have a sneaking regard for highwaymen. How dashing and chivalrous were the masked, becloaked knights of the road portrayed by period novelists! One almost feels that they deserved a kinder fate than a hanging in the last chapter.

But the grim truth is that most highwaymen were uncouth desperadoes with no more sense of chivalry than the common thugs of any age. Occasionally they may have pleased the crowd by relieving some affluent villain of his ill-gotten gains; but in the main they were dangerous outcasts who stopped at nothing—not even murder. Days when travellers ran the risk of having to "stand and deliver" now seem so remote as to be legendary, but there still exists a local organisation—the Berkhamsted and Northchurch Property Protection Association—which once offered a reward of five guineas "for the apprehension of footpads and highway robbers."

The Chiltern Hills had a particularly evil name for lawlessness. So many bands of robbers infested the vast beech forests that Stewards were appointed by the Crown to check the menace. That was how the famous Stewardship of the Chiltern Hundreds came into being—an office still preserved in name only for the convenience of retiring M.P.'s. Parliamentary procedure does not permit resignation unless members accept an office of honour and profit under the Crown, and this Stewardship is held to be such an office, although for 200 years its powers, duties and remuneration have been nil. In other words, M.P.'s who now "apply for the Chiltern Hundreds" do not have to round up bandits!

Armed guard to cross the Common

Rightly or wrongly, Berkhamsted Common was considered a haunt of footpads. Even in Victoria's reign it was a brave man and a still braver woman who crossed the Common unaccompanied. Well-to-do folk had armed guards to ensure their safety, as we learn from this letter written by Lady Marian Alford at Ashridge in 1841: "When we first visited Lady Bridgewater, she took us to a ball at Berkhamsted, and we were guarded by outriders with loaded pistols in their holsters, for fear of our being attacked and robbed as we passed over the Common. As the woods and forests of Italy were usually the refuge of brigands and outlaws, so in a greatly modified degree the unenclosed commons had become the resort of the unfortunate and least respectable members of the community. Few took their pleasure there except on horseback."

Even in the town few ventured out alone after dark. There was no street lighting other than a solitary lantern outside the King's Arms Inn, provided not so much for the convenience of patrons as a guide for mail-coach drivers. Back Lane, Water Lane, The Wilderness and nearby lanes and alleys were especially feared. Two grave-

yards in the vicinity gave rise to bloodcurdling tales of body-snatchers who exhumed the dead under cover of darkness. A name such as The Wilderness did not help matters.

The County Sessions Rolls give no hint of trouble in Berkhamsted to confirm these suspicions. But mention of highwaymen and footpads elsewhere in Hertfordshire is made at various periods. In 1697, for instance, it was reported at Hertford that "the roads are so infested with robbers that it is highly dangerous for persons to travel with any quantity or sum of money." Men "with muscats, carbines or gunes" were ordered to round up the outlaws.

Snooks the Highwayman

In this district we have only one authentic story of highway robbery—and it has little of the glamour of a Dick Turpin adventure. Robert Snooks appears to have been nothing more than an amateur, if temporarily successful, highwayman. Early one morning, when a postman was jogging on horseback along the lonely highway between Bourne End and Boxmoor, Snooks stopped him at the pistol's point and ordered him to "stand and deliver" the mailbags. How Snooks knew that valuable banknotes were being carried that day is a mystery; but he promptly rifled the bags and escaped with hundreds of pounds.

The postman was at first too scared to report the incident, and the alarm was not raised until labourers found the empty receptacles on their way to work. Before a hue and cry could be raised, the district postmaster at Berkhamsted had to be consulted. He at once set out for London on his fastest horse, taking the rifled mailbags.

Snooks, given time to cover up his tracks, also made his way to London and lived quietly in a Southwark boarding house. But for all his cunning, he made an error which was to cost him his life. Handing the servant girl a banknote, Snooks told her to purchase a length of cloth for him and bring back the balance of the "five pounds"—but on examining the note the cloth merchant discovered that its value was £50. Curious!

In the girl's absence Snooks left the lodging house on the pretext that he had been called away on urgent business. Days passed without his returning, and, suspicions aroused, enquiries were made about the £50 banknote. It was proved to be one of those missing from the Boxmoor mailbags.

Little remains to be added. When Snooks was eventually arrested, he knew that nothing could save him from the fate meted out to all highwaymen. In accordance with custom, he was hanged on a tree near the scene of his crime, and thousands from Berkhamsted, Boxmoor and neighbouring villages made a Roman holiday of the occasion. In a bleak field just off the main road, half a mile from Boxmoor station, you can still see the two tiny stones which mark the grave of Highwayman Snooks.

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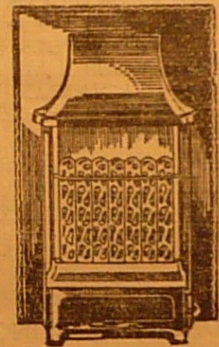
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