

THE OLD GIBBET TREE (or Not any Tom, Dick or Harry!)

ABOUT A MILE AND A HALF from Shipton, on the A361 towards Burford, there stand two stone cottages, one on either side of the road. About 300 yards before the cottage on the left, if you pause to look you will see an old oak tree standing by itself on the edge of the wood, its upper, spiky, dead branches sticking out above its lower foliage. This is the Gibbet Tree.

But to start at the beginning of the story. About the middle of the 18th century, around 1740, there was a family living in Fulbrook by the name of Dunstun. By all accounts, the parents were quite respectable. They had three sons, Tom, Dick and Harry. It seems these three brothers grew up together but, as far as I know, their ages weren't recorded. As they grew up all three turned to crime.

The crimes laid against them were theft, robbery with violence and, eventually, murder.

If you travel a little further towards Burford, on the left again, you will see Copps Hedge Farm amongst the trees. Where the present farm house now stands, back in the early 1700s there stood a very old Inn. It was called The New Inn also called Rough Inn, the haunt of rogues, thieves, gamblers and the like. There is still an old building standing there from that period referred to as "The game hoarder", probably a cold store. Also, there is a pit or ring used for cock fighting that was once visible in the turf by the front gate.

The Dunstun brothers were frequent visitors to The New Inn, they being fond of their ale and gambling.

All three left their home at Fulbrook to live in a cottage at Icomb over the boundary in Gloucestershire. About three miles or so from The New Inn to the west, is Tangley Hall a large country house.

Tangley is quite isolated, situated half a mile or so down a track off the road to Stow.

One evening at the Inn, the Dunstun brothers (probably after too much ale) were overheard plotting and planning to rob Tangley Hall. They had heard that the family of the house were away and they therefore hoped for rich pickings. The staff that remained at Tangley were tipped off about the Dunstun's plans and were on the alert and prepared for what might happen.

The three brothers went to Tangley under cover of darkness and intent on robbery. All was quiet on their arrival.

Harry put his hand through the latch hole to try the latch. The door was bolted. The male staff were alerted and slipped a noose over Harry's hand, pulled it inside and held it firm. There was much shouting and cursing from the brothers outside and one of them was heard to say "Cut, Cut".

There followed more shouting and loud screams and the severed arm fell inside the door on the noose.

Amid more shouting they were heard to ride off, leaving a blood trail to where their horses had been tethered. After this, Harry was never seen again. Some said he died which wouldn't be surprising. It was also said he turned recluse.

Sometime afterwards, Tom and Dick were drinking at The New Inn apparently bragging about their achievements no doubt, once again, after much ale. The Inn it seems was very busy at the time. Amidst the din, the Landlord was heard to say he would like to "Take care of those two brothers and that he was capable of doing so on his own". Tom, one of the brothers, heard this remark and pulled out his pistol and shot at the Landlord.

Now the Landlord at that time wore a thick leather apron with a large pocket at the front for money and giving change. The bullet from the pistol hit the coins in the apron without causing serious injury. There is, however, another variation to the story which says the Landlord was seriously wounded. Anyway, in the resulting confusion the two brothers were overpowered and tied up.

The Police were sent for and, eventually, Tom and Dick were taken to Gloucester Gaol.

At this time this part of the county was under the Courts of Gloucester Judiciary. They were tried there, found guilty and hung in Gloucester Gaol. A covered cart brought the two corpses back to Fulbrook to be gibbeted near the scene of the crimes.

The driver of the cart stopped at the Old George Inn at Burford for refreshments and people gathered to look at the feet of the corpses sticking out from under the sheet that covered them.

To return to the Gibbet Tree, where they were finally hung in chains, someone at the time carved on the tree trunk "RD and TD 1784".

In my younger days these letters and date could be seen quite clearly but now, owing to the age of the tree, everything is distorted. But it is still there if you know where to look.

There is a track to the tree just past the cottage on the left. The remains of the brothers are said to have been buried under the tree.

Harry Everett

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