



Turpin's Oak illustration from the Local History Collection

Dick Turpin, the Man, the Myth, the Oak Tree

By David Hobbs

In April 1739, Richard Turpin, a pockmarked Essex Butcher, was hanged at York for crimes against His Majesty's Highways. He smiled, swaggered, gave keepsakes to the crowd and caused a stir by giving a married lady a gold ring before throwing himself off the hanging platform and dying immediately. It was the way a highwayman was meant to behave. However, as James Sharpe shows in his book *Dick Turpin: The Myth of the English Highwayman*, it is probably the only time that reality matches the myth.

Gregory gang

Born in 1705, the son of an Essex butcher and innkeeper, Turpin was a member of the Gregory Gang and progressed from poaching deer to raiding farmhouses around London, stealing valuables and terrorising the occupants. Justice moved fast and, by late 1735, all but Turpin and a coin clipper called Thomas Rowland had been caught.

The pair now turned their attentions to highway robbery, staging hold-ups on the main coaching routes out of London, concentrating on the rich pickings of Barnes, Putney and Richmond. These were not the glamorous encounters, but scrappy, violent ambushes where you could lose far more than just your dignity.

Little evidence

According to Sharpe, there is little evidence that Turpin even owned a horse called Black Bess let alone made an epic overnight ride from London to York. Instead he drifted north in search of fresh areas for his criminal activities. Despite using the pseudonym, John Palmer, his pocketfuls of cash

and careless boasting attracted attention and by February 1739 he had been arrested.

Revival

Turpin was all but forgotten until 1834 when William Harrison Ainsworth published *Rookwood*. Ainsworth relocated Turpin's story to Yorkshire, adding a gypsy lover, spooky mansion and disputed inheritance as well as Black Bess and the epic ride to York. This Dick Turpin was a handsome gentleman, not the pockmarked Essex butcher of reality.

The success of *Rookwood* and the growth of the Turpin myth was all about timing. By the 1830s, with highwaymen a thing of the past, it was becoming safe and fun to read about a time when jaunty young men ruled the road and the Dick Turpin myth fitted perfectly.

What then of Turpin's Oak? Although in the eighteenth century Finchley Common was a highwayman's haunt and highwaymen probably did hide behind the tree while waiting to ambush travellers, there is very little to link Turpin himself to Finchley. The tree, like much else popularly associated with

Dick Turpin, probably owes at least as much to myth as it does to history.

(Dick Turpin: The Myth of the English Highwayman, by James Sharpe, published by Profile, £15.99)

Good Food, Good Company

Park House's future may be uncertain but in the past it had a valuable function for local elderly people. In November 1975, the forerunner of *THE ARCHER*, then published by East Finchley Neighbourhood Association, carried the following article and letter:

"Park House has opened its doors to the senior citizens of E.F. The atmosphere is congenial with the attraction of food, television and good company. Lunch is available for 25p but they can only cater for 15 people at a time. Obviously we need somewhere larger to cater for more people. Here is a letter from George and Lily Jarman."

"It is now three weeks since Park House has been available to senior citizens of East Finchley: comfortable surroundings, excellent food and relaxation from 10 till 4, Monday to Friday. . . The cheerfulness of all the staff here has to be seen to be believed. Our humble thanks to the warden, Amos Santalaya. . . The needs of the elderly in East Finchley far exceed the number of meals available. I look forward to the time when we will have a dining hall somewhere in the High Road where 40 or 50 dinners could be served. Old people's welfare is priority no. 1 in East Finchley."

The Gift*

I
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a field called Temple Croft,
haunted by wolves and wild
boar.

II
A modern place,
in a borough called Barnet,
home to societies and
university.

Owned by a bishop,
and Knights Templars.
Taken by Henry

"Discovered" by my children,
its gardens a refuge.
Gifted by Henry.

Epilogue

Two Henrys:
one crowned,
the other, "the uncrowned King of Finchley".

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*Avenue House & grounds, bequeathed to the people of Finchley by Henry C. "Inky" Stevens 1841-1918

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