

Thieves Grave, Horwich Forest, Lancashire

Notes by Paul Lacey 2009

Barons of Manchester

The sixth Baron of Manchester gained free warren from Henry III in 1249. The barony which almost filled the north-western corner of the hundred of Salford was a large area. It included twenty townships and stretched from Pilkington through Kearsley, Farnworth and the Hultons to Aspull, and northwards through Lostock and Rumworth to Anglezarke, Longworth and Turton. The bulk of it was held of the lord of Manchester by military and socage tenants, but within its bounds was the baron's forest of Horwich or Hopeworth as it was sometimes called

The forest of Horwich, one of whose valleys bore the significant name of Wildboarsclough, had a circumference of some 16 miles. Its open spaces were let as pasture for cattle. The care of the forest was entrusted to three foresters, who were responsible to the lord for the beasts and birds, and the income derived from the pasture, pannage of swine and honey. Its open spaces were let as pasture for cattle. They were kept in meat, drink and victuals by the neighbouring villages.

When the hawks began to nest the villagers were further bound by custom to go into the forest with the foresters and ascertain on oath the number of nests which the foresters had then to watch night and day until the feast of St. Barnabas (11th June). When the eggs were hatched the villagers had to go again, take the hawk-chickens from the nests and hand them to the foresters. If they failed in any article of these customs they could be cited by the foresters before the lord's court at Manchester.

Tragic Tale Of Horwich Forest

The 20th century built road by Leverhulme, known as Lever Park Avenue leads us in a nice regular curve away from Horwich, and from where it begins to straighten out and on up to the crossing of the River Douglas is the line of the Old Robber's Pad and the rising ground on the Horwich side of the road is the Thieve's Grave, a name which has come from an old tragic legend of Horwich Forest as told by Thomas Hampson in his "History of Horwich" published in 1883.

A short account of the legend woven around this district is that: Very shortly after the Norman Conquest the Forest of Horwich was placed by the Baron of Manchester under a "Lord of the Manor" who was passionately fond of the chase, cruel and niggardly to his dependants, severe on his tenants, and he denied his foresters all the perquisites and emoluments of their position. In retaliation to this treatment the local inhabitants and the disgruntled foresters combined in practising organised poaching, which led to a diminution of the available venison, fowl and honey, to the great anger of the lord, where upon he dismissed some of his foresters and replaced them with men from afar off. The cruel Baron summoned some of the local inhabitants to appear before him, but they, afraid of being made scapegoats for the offenders, refused to comply. Instead they joined forces with the dismissed foresters and took to the hills and made a camp on the heather. The locals afterwards organised a very efficient spy and look-out system and raided the lord's preserves more than ever. This only increased the determination of the lord to bring some of the offenders to account. The first prisoner to be taken was the leader of the outlaws, as the inmates of the camp on the heather were now termed.

After a farce of a trial the unfortunate captive was hung from a tall oak tree and his body was left to swing as a warning to all the other outlaws. Five of the late leader's more intimate comrades came one night in the dark of the moon and standing under the fateful gallows, together swore a terrible oath of revenge. Their opportunity soon came.

The lord of the manor was called away for service with his superior and he had to take most of his men with him, leaving only a skeleton staff to guard his home and lands. This depleted guard was decoyed away from the manor house to the farthest limit of the forest while the five desperate outlaws forced their way into the lord's house, slew his wife and took his three children and hung them from the same tall oak tree which still carried the bones of their late leader. After the hanging the bodies of the poor unfortunate children were buried somewhere near the gallows and all traces of their burial erased. When the lord of the manor returned he vowed never to rest until the five cruel outlaws were captured and punished for their terrible crime. Summoning more aid he had the uplands surrounded by armed patrols and conducted combing out operations from several points at once, until the miscreants were brought to retribution and five more corpses swung from the tall oak tree. The Lord of the Manor whose stern, cruel, and tyrannical nature towards the natives was responsible for this tragic chapter of our local history, died soon afterwards and never knew the location of his children's graves.

As time passed on the remains of the executed outlaws decayed and only a few whitened bones swung in the breeze from the tall oak tree. But nightly the ghosts of these murderers walked restlessly around the spot. The inhabitants of the neighbourhood terrified of these nightly perambulations met to discuss methods of ending this hair-raising situation and decided that it was caused by the fact that all the victims of the barbarous episode had been denied the rites of Christian burial and that the three unfortunate children were buried in ground not consecrated. Ultimately the Parish Priest from Deane was consulted and he came to conduct a belated burial service over the area where the three poor children were thought to be buried.

Hampson states that the legend was a local tradition when he was younger, he was born in 1839 and he got his account from an aged native who told of it being handed down from previous generations.

====References====

* About Rivington, John Rawlinson, 1969

* History of Horwich Its Legends and Its Church, Thomas Hampson, 1883

* Mediaeval Manchester and the Beginnings of Lancashire, James Tait M.A, Manchester, 1904, pg 16 and 31-32