



A depiction of Boulter on his horse Black Bess

The Flying Highwayman of Wiltshire By Maureen Jolliffe

HIGHWAY ROBBERY

Whereas Thomas Fowle of Devizes in the County of Wilts was attacked on Monday afternoon on the Plain near the 11 mile stone by tow highwaymen, who robbed rim of five guineas and a half and his watch (maker's name – Grand, London, the dial plate is remarkable by having dots of gold between the hours; and the outside case has a small squat). The two men were well mounted on dark-brown horses, one of the horses has both hinder heels white; they both had surtout coats on and appeared to by lusty men. He who robbed Mr. Fowle was about five feet ten inches high and was booted and spurred. Whoever will give notice so as one or more of the above highwaymen may be apprehended, shall on conviction receive five guineas reward over and above the £40 allowed by Act of Parliament, to be paid by me: THOMAS FOWLE.

That advertisement appeared in the Salisbury Journal on Christmas Eve in the year 1777. The robbers were certainly making sure of their own Christmas fare. According to an account in the same issue of the Journal, on the same day, on which they relieved Mr. Fowle of his fine watch – Monday, December 22nd – eight other “citizens of substance” were robbed by the same pair, in broad daylight, between Salisbury and Devizes. Only one of their victims disobeyed the strong command to “Stand and Deliver! Your money or your life!” He was a butcher and well accustomed to the knife he used with such force to parry the highwayman’s cutlass. It is true that he lost a fair amount of dignity by creeping through a hedge with the sound of pistol shots ringing in his ears, but he died escape. And he was able to furnish a fair description of his attackers.

The writer in the Salisbury Journal had no doubt as to the identity of the highwayman of whom Mr. Fowle was at such pains to mention the height. "It is astonishing that such a villain as Boulter should so long escape the hand of Justice" was the blunt phrasing.

But perhaps it was not so astonishing. Thomas Boulter was a fine judge of horseflesh, and it was often thanks to gallant little mare – usually stolen – that he evaded capture after some audacious coup and "lived to rob another day."

TRANSPORTATION

This judgement of horseflesh ran in the family, actually, for Boulter's father was serving a term of fourteen years' transportation, convicted of horse-stealing. When he crossed the seas in convict's chains he left his son little in the way of legacy except the ability to know horses and a deliberate contempt for the law of the land.

Whilst Boulter, senior, was aboard a convict hulk bound for a life of degradation in a penal settlement, young Thomas had been running a grocery business at Newport on the Isle of Wight and living with his sister, who was a milliner. He was young, high-spirited, and the grocery business – which was making a loss – bored him "to tears".

STAND AND DELIVER

It was on a visit to his mother at Poulshot – riding a horse he'd hired at Southampton – that Thomas Boulter began his career of crime. Complete with a brace of pistols and a powder horn, he held up the Salisbury coach on a lonely deserted stretch of the Exeter road. There were only two passengers, and Thomas laughed and joked with them as he helped himself to the valuables. Between then and the time he reached home at Poulshot, his deep-voiced demand:

"Stand and Deliver!" shattered the air at frequent intervals.

That was in the year 1775. And he took to his newly discovered career as a duck to water. Being such a superb rider and knowing which horses to "borrow" helped in no small measure. Besides, he prided himself on being a Gentleman of the Road, with the emphasis on "Gentleman".

GALLANT

He liked to play the gallant with the ladies and was not above returning some trifle of sentimental value to the menfolk, providing he was asked in the right tone of voice. Once he was well established in the profession, he dressed the dandy, too, showing off a tall, well-built figure and a pair of broad shoulders.

Pride can well be a man's enemy. By the end of the year there was a reward of £40 on Thomas Boulter's head. Dead or alive.

In the spring of 1776 he stole a horse, undoubtedly the best he ever rode, either as an honest man or as a highwayman. Black Bess, she was called – named after the famous horse of that other notorious "Gentleman", Dick Turpin. She was a beauty, all right. In one day alone the scene of his operations stretched from Maidenhead, Hurley, Workingham, Hartley Row, Whitchurch, Eversley, to Devizes.

The Flying Highwayman, they called him – and before long he was being blamed not only for the crimes he did commit, but for everything and anything of a criminal nature in five counties. Taking responsibility for the misdeeds of others irked the Flying Highwayman. He began assuring poor labourers and rich victims alike that "Boulter is your friend".

Then the "home ground" grew too hot for comfort. Remembering the tales of rich pickings in the North he travelled up to Yorkshire to try his luck there. But his luck ran out. He was arrested, lodged in York Prison, and sentenced to death.

PARDON

Boulter's career in Yorkshire had been of short duration. Perhaps the authorities were not aware of his previous record. At any rate, a full pardon was offered to a batch of condemned prisoners, providing they'd take the King's Shilling. Tom Boulter was one of the men concerned.

Oh, he was willing, and eager to join the army in exchange for his life. This was an established method of recruiting in those days and led to many abuses. Boulter, always larger than life, and ever willing to act a part, cheerfully played the role of the penitent sinner.

Then, at the very first opportunity, he deserted.

Highwayman and army deserter, already one within an inch of the gallows, it could be understood if the humour of Thomas Boulter turned sour. After escaping from the confines of army life, he beat a hasty path to the port of Bristol. It was easier to lose oneself, and so avoid prying eyes, amid the ever-changing population of the dockside.

He even toyed with the idea of taking ship for the Americas. But there was trouble enough already the other side of the Atlantic, and wasn't there an expression "Better the De'il you know than the De'il you don't know?"

COLD-BLOODED

It was meeting a man in an alehouse that finally decided Boulter on his course of action. James Caldwell. Although Boulter did not know it then, this James Caldwell already had a reputation as a cold-blooded killer. The two men talked, and decided – on the strength of their talking – to form a partnership.

Caldwell was the second man mentioned in Thomas Fowle's reward notice in the Salisbury Journal. He was 25 years of age, some four years Boulter's junior. A strong man with a vicious streak in him and not of Thomas Boulter's little illusions about being a gentleman.

A traditional story – which may, or may not, have a vestige of truth in it – relates to Tom Boulter carrying his delusions of grandeur to the stage where he could ride with the Badminton Hunt, and even find himself next to one of his own victims! He carried off the situation so cockily that his hunting companion would have laughed in the face of anyone who suggested that this was the infamous Thomas Boulter, the Flying Highwayman.

In his first career as a highwayman, before the death sentence at York, Tom Boulter had enjoyed a certain amount of sympathy from the more poverty-stricken element of the population. It had suited his book to be friendly, generous in respect of information supplied, and willing to have a hand in re-distributing the wealth of the rich and middle-class in the direction of the poor. He like to boast that he never robbed a poor man, not bothering to add that the poor had little with which to furnish him, anyway.

PARTNERSHIP

Jim Caldwell had not such scruples. From Boulter's point of view, the decision to form a partnership, taken so light-heartedly that day in Bristol was a complete disaster. It succeeded in alienating even the few friends Boulter had trusted. The Hue and Cry was up.

Caldwell showed his disapproval in no uncertain manner at his partner's attempts at humour with their victims, and not even the prettiest pair of blue eyes would restrain him from demanding their owner's jewels.

In the circumstances, it was understandable that the Flying Highwayman and Jim Caldwell should decide to move north. But Thomas Boulter should have remembered what happened the last time. They only reached Birmingham.

ARRESTED

And there- trying to dispose of a watch – they were arrested.

Arrested and taken to London. The authorities obviously thought that these two were better apart, even in the confines of the darkest prison. Thomas Boulter found himself in the miserable squalor of Clerkenwell, with no news of the location of his fellow-highwayman.

Money talks. And Boulter had sufficient on his person to be able to resort to bribery. An escape was arranged. With that spectacular sense of dramatic that he could have used to make an honest living on the London stage, Thomas Boulter took lodgings only two doors away from Clerkenwell Prison. He reasoned that this was the last place anyone was likely to look for an escaped convict. It was sound reasoning.

At which he judged the right moment, and in disguise, he boarded the coach for Dover. Across the Channel lay France and freedom.

It took a war to spoil that plan. All ships were confined to port. England and France were on the eve of war. As an escape route, Dover was blocked.

Portsmouth was his next thought. There were reward notices posted up for his capture on trees and in market squares. Perhaps this threat of war would take their minds off the disappearance of one poor highwayman? It was a forlorn hope. The name of Thomas Boulter had been bandied too far and too long. And too many people knew the face and figure.

No ships were leaving Portsmouth either. Or Bristol, as he found after reaching that city. He had one more hope. Portland, Isle of Refuge. If he could reach Portland he could appeal for sanctuary. He'd never killed a man, not in his whole career. He was rather proud of the fact. And his ready tongue and charm of manner would be a strong point in his favour. Yes, Portland was his last hope.

It was at Bridport in Dorset that his luck ran out for the last time. Just the length of Chesil Beach between him and freedom.

He was recognised at the Castle Inn and overpowered by four men, one of whom was the landlord. Protesting in his usual convincing manner that he was a Londoner by the name of White, Thomas Boulter was taken to Dorchester Gaol. No one was interested in his carefully-told story. And this time there would be no escape.

SENTENCED

With Jim Caldwell, he was sentenced at Winchester Assizes on the 31st July, 1778. Four men shared the reward money – the four men of the Bridport inn – but the ordinary people of Dorset seemed to think that the men who divided the awarded gold deserved even less praise than the dreaded highwayman.

Thomas Boulter, the Flying Highwayman of Wiltshire, and his partner in death, James Caldwell, stepped from the gallows on the 19th of August of that year. Boulter even managed to find something humorous to say to the crowd gathered for the hanging.

Within two months a strange rumour was heard to the effect that on a moonlight night a figure was seen riding at break-neck speed over Salisbury Plain – a figure that disappeared into the mist. Witnesses swore that this was the ghost of Thomas Boulter, the Flying Highwayman, and of Black Bess. It was a story that was to be repeated many times over the years.