

# Ever Present Ghosts

## The Chronovisor of Local History



A knowledge of local history can fundamentally alter your sense of time and place, no matter how modern the setting is. Here we take an isolated example from each county of Cheshire, Derbyshire & Staffordshire and discover how even the most cursory of historical inquiries can lead to the discovery of remarkable local stories.

## Building a Time Machine

Back in 2002, a book was published by the French Catholic priest Father Francois Brune entitled *The Vatican's New Mystery*. It told the story of how in the early 1960's Brune, together with Italian scientist Pellegrino Ernetti and team that included the Nobel prize winner Enrico Fermi and V2 rocket developer Wernher von Braun, had created a time machine that was capable of transmitting the events of the past directly into the into the modern world via a system of electromagnetic engineering.

This machine was known as the *Chronovisor*, and through it, Berne claimed to have witnessed both the crucifixion of Christ and life in ancient Rome. The machine, rather predictably, was reportedly seized by The Vatican; its secrets and mysteries hidden from the world ever since. Speculation on the existence of the time machine has been a constant feature of conspiracy forums ever since, but no matter which side of the fence you come down on, as a history enthusiast, it's hard not to at least marvel at the idea of some such device. Ultimately, bringing the past to life in some way is the simple truth of what we're all looking to do.

History should be about so much more than textbooks and timelines. The study and contextual placement of characters and events are naturally vital to the thorough understanding of any historical topic but for me, learning about history contains an inherent magic to it at every turn that is waiting to be discovered and enjoyed. It is that magic which comes as the gift we get in

return for the time we spend learning; and nowhere does it more readily flow than in the seams of our unique, regional local histories.

Across the length and breadth of the British isles we have so many icons of our collective cultural history that it can at times feel all too easy to accept the headline acts of our past as the primary guardians of learning. Yet beyond the Norman castles, great country houses and the Roman ruins, there is a whole other world to be discovered. It is a world that walks beside us in the snickleways of our market towns and waits patiently to greet us along our winding country lanes. Most of all, it is a world of story and intrigue that holds out the potential for genuine personal connection. Everyday people have been making their mark on the land around us for thousands of years; its just that for the most part, the wider-world never has never paid all that much attention.

When we do pay closer attention though - when we invest ourselves in the pursuit of those people and the local events that their lives were witness to - we can be rewarded far and beyond the level of nourishment offered to us by any of these *super-subjects* we all know so well. This living book of local history is not just to be found filled within the folklore and mystery that fascinates us so much, but often incredible truths that are genuinely stranger than any work of fiction.

In this piece, I'll be illustrating just how ever present and readily accessible this hidden world of local history really is, sharing an example from each county of Cheshire, Staffordshire & Derbyshire of instances when little more

than basic historical curiosity has helped lead me to the discovery of stories that have changed my perspective of those locations forever. For me, that is the pure alchemy of history in action. An interest in history is akin to the gift of a prism. In many ways, the gift of a personal *Chronovisor*; through which our view of the present intrinsically contains the events and characters of the past.

## The Stories of St. Michaels

There are few better ways to uncover the little known threads of local history than by spending time in and around our ancient country churchyards. While the castles and the old manorial halls may be more obvious examples of man-made structures that have played host to the events of the past, it's our churches that have been most entwined with the continual evolution of local life through the centuries; and courtesy of their burial grounds, home to the most human of stories.

Depending on where you are, wander amongst the headstones for long enough and sooner or later you are bound to find yourself stumbling across personalised memorials for those who have perished at sea, succumbed during times of plague and even on occasion, fallen victim to the conspiracy of a mysterious local murder. Yet it doesn't end there. Hidden amongst the more obvious fascinations of any burial ground are those headstones which bare inscriptions that tend to lean more gently towards to the curious eye; and it is in these instances that you may discover something genuinely unique.

St. Michael's Church in Horton, a hamlet of the Staffordshire Moorlands, is a building of tangible legacy. With its roots in the twelfth century and additions made at various points through to the 1600s, it is one of the most picture perfect English country churches in the region and has been the centre of Horton's local life for the better part of 1000 years. Like many similar settlements, Horton itself has its fair share of wider historical connections from its Saxon roots right through to the English Civil Wars and beyond, simply by virtue of its age.

It is against this backdrop that I want to place the story that I share now, where it seems to me that the seemingly prosaic conspires to meet the truly remarkable, and all because I took a wrong turn on a country road and took the chance to look around a church yard I had never come across before. Unassuming and weather-beaten, the headstone of Mary Brookes blends into the general patter of the churchyard with ease. As such, the inscription upon it is easy to miss. At a glance, it is little more than the last testament of a common local life. But when we look more closely...

*Here lieth the body of Mary Brookes*

*Wife of George Brookes*

*Who departed this life*

*January 8th 1787*

*Aged 119 Years*

*The villagers of the parish erected this stone At their own expense to perpetuate this Extraordinary instance of longevity*

Whilst Mary's great age is undoubtedly worthy of remark, what is truly amazing is the consideration of just what the span of her life time represents. When Mary was born in 1668, the communities of the Staffordshire Moorlands were only just beginning to emerge from both the spectre of the great plague of the mid-1660's and the socio-economic fall out which came to bear during the English Civil War. The monarchy had been restored the throne just eight years prior - and there is every chance that members of Mary's immediate family would have be able to recall the events that had led to the destruction of Horton Hall (rebuilt 1653) during the conflict.

Eventually witness to no less than seven monarchs in her lifetime, Mary would have already have been in her late 70's when Bonnie Prince Charlie came through the area in 1745 on his intended route to London before retreating back through the moorlands towards Scotland, and before the end of her life she would have seen the first signs of the industrial revolution rumbling through the valleys below the village.

I'd love to tell a story of how Mary achieved her great age with some mysterious suggestions of eternal youth, witchcraft perhaps, but in truth there are no suggestions to be made. Mary's magic however, is surely very real, and lies in the life she lived across a period of remarkable change in British history; the apparent readiness with which her fellow parishioners were

willing to have given up what little money they had in order to remember her in stone, testament to the fact they too recognised something special in the story of her life.

But Mary's life is not alone in its noteworthiness at St. Michael's. For just a few meters away lie the remains of another Horton legend, albeit one with a far sadder story. Born in the adjoining settlement of Gratton in March 1844, George Heath's life would be remarkably short lived by Mary's standards but in its absence of longevity, George left a legacy of romance and melancholy that in many ways brings to mind the story of the late, doomed English songwriter Nick Drake.

Educated at the local village school in Horton before working as a farm labourer, in his late teens George became ill following work he undertook in restoration of St. Michael's Church, and so began a steady period of decline that would ultimately lead to his death, aged just 25. However, in the years before his untimely departure from the world, George had become aware of the beauty surrounding him in his local landscape to the point of inspiration; as it is in this period of this life that he began to write poetry. Key themes of his work include a sense of precognition around his forthcoming death and an assumption that with it, his creative ability would be forgotten. A verse of his poetry found inscribed upon the base of his fine Celtic burial cross in the churchyard today speaks directly to this matter, the memorial - like that of Mary Brookes - being the result of local donations.

*His life is a fragment a broken clue  
His harp had a musical string or two  
The tension was great, and they sprang and flew,  
And a few brief strains a scattered few  
Are all that remain to mortal view  
Of the marvellous song the young man knew*

George was published just twice in his lifetime, with the small collections of *Preludes* arriving in 1865 and *Heart Strains* following in 1866. In the years following his death however, memorial collections followed and he did achieve some semblance of wider fame as a result. His work is the perfect accompaniment to any venture out into the area of the Moorlands, and perhaps one day George's work will reach the fitting station it undoubtedly deserves throughout the local regions. His story and that of Mary's life serve to illustrate just how deep the wealth of history connected to our local churchyards can prove to be. In that respect, they are not unique at all. This is just one location and the discoveries are the results of just one grave-wandering afternoon. Wherever you are, there will be the remnants of lives as just as fascinating remembered in your local Church too.



## The Last Battle

The search for markers of local history is of course far from confined to rural settings, and those with keen eyes will find plenty of signposts to the past around their local towns and cities that can open new windows into events of the past. One such plaque is located halfway across the bridge at Winnington, Cheshire, a curious glance at which while stuck in traffic one day enlightened me to a remarkable story.

There is a dark statistic often employed when a writer is trying to show the impact of the English Civil War - or rather Wars, as to reflect the three distinct phases of conflict that took place between 1642 and 1651 - which is that per head of relative population, more lives were lost in England and Wales during that period than in the whole of the First World War. While the impact of a conflict may have many measures, the macabre meter of death toll is unfortunately as insightful as any other - and sadly, often the most relevant. No more evident is this than in the example of the civil wars, where an estimated 4% of the population of England, both military and civilian alike, met their end through violence, starvation and disease. At its eventual conclusion, with King Charles I executed and his son, the future King Charles II in exile on the continent, it was only natural that Oliver Cromwell himself would become the figurehead of the nation, as he duly did with the title of Lord Protector.

To describe the period of Cromwell's tenure as a calm would be a bit much, but nonetheless compared with the war torn world that had preceded it, a period of relief did begin edge its way across the land - but it was not to last. Upon his death in 1658 the mantle of Lord Protector passed to his son Richard. However, tensions were high and amidst growing skepticism and pressure from politicians and military commanders alike - pertaining to Richard's ability to deliver their varied needs and demands - he was ultimately forced to resign less than a year after taking office. It is this stage onto which the protagonists of our tale arrive.

Sir George Booth (of the Dunham Massey *Baronet* Booths) had seen an active civil war as a Parliamentarian courtesy of his grandfather's allegiance - to whom he was heir - and come the end of hostilities had found himself elected to parliament as MP for Cheshire before being appointed military commissioner for the county too. Despite his war time allegiance to the parliamentarian cause, Booth had for sometime been known to have deep personal sympathy with the Royalist cause - a cause that, following the resignation of Richard Cromwell as Lord Protector, had found a new lease of life amongst the nobility as the idea of returning to a rule of kingship became a viable option in the figure of the exiled Charles Stuart, son of King Charles I.

Charles Stuart was actively moving for such a return and during the spring of 1659 had begun to seek out potential supporters for his return. In a matter of months, Booth became one of the most trusted figures in this new support base - named the *Great Trust and Commission* - and come August, had

received word from Charles to assume command of his would-be revolutionary forces throughout Cheshire, North Wales and Lancashire ahead of a planned revolt designed to pave way for Charles' return. The uprising was planned for August 1st, with Booth set to secure key positions throughout Cheshire. The rebels however, in their overall sense, were both under prepared and insecure, with details of their plans having being reported back to parliament and the revolt was postponed. Booth however seems not to have been informed of the change of plan, and having mustered around 500 men at Warrington, marched into the city of Chester in early August.

The city's garrison retreated to the safety of Chester castle and refused to capitulate. Booth chose to press on with the overall plan regardless, making way for York before realising the uprising had already effectively failed - and so, having turned back towards Chester, on August 19th he came face to face with the parliamentarian force under Colonel John Lambert that had been sent to confront him at the bridge that crossed the River Weaver at Winnington, Northwich.

Booth's forces had swollen by this point, with around 4000 men stood with him on the high ground to the north of the bridge, whilst even more were present under Lambert's command with an estimated 5000 troops ready to take the Royalist position. Lambert's force were made up of experienced troops and in reality far too strong for Booth's Royalist militia. A cavalry charge across the river was quickly followed with short bout of hand to hand combat on the north banks before Booth's rebels scattered and fled.

30 men lay dead in the mud, but the number would have been in the hundreds were it not for the mercy of Lambert, who ordered his troops not to peruse them in the interest of preventing a massacre.

Lambert would go on to relieve Chester without resistance just two days later and come the end of August the whole region was back firmly within parliamentary control. Sir George Booth though, was still on the run. His intentions were to head to London and then to France, as was the way of such escape lines, but it was not to be. Whilst staying at an Inn at Newport Pagnall, his disguise as a woman was blown when the innkeeper noticed the distinctly masculine tone of Booth's feminine character. He was arrested, it is said, whilst shaving...still dressed in female character.

A period of imprisonment in the tower followed but ultimately Booth was allowed his freedom and had by 1660, had returned to parliament. As to why Booth was so quickly reprieved is likely to be found in the tone of events that would follow the uprising, which ultimately resulted in Charles Stuart being crowned King Charles II in April 1661. Parliament had already decided that a King was needed as head of state, and perhaps the idea of punishing his supporters prior to his arrival was deemed understandably short sighted. Booth lived out his days in opposition to many policies of the Restoration government and died in 1684, buried in Bowdon Church, Manchester, his time at the forefront of the Cheshire uprising long since put behind him.

## The Slaughtering of the Lambs

I'm not entirely sure that you can ever become truly "lost" in Peak District Derbyshire, as there is something of interest to be found in virtually every twist and turn of its winding country roads. *Diverted*, I think, is a better term. And indeed, my happening upon the Tideswell church of St. John the Baptist, and therefore the wonderfully odd story from its history that I share here, was a directly result of once getting... ahem...*diverted*, on a journey between Buxton and Castleton.

The town today is a real gem of the Peak District and is firmly in that picture postcard territory that tourists and hikers so enjoy, but its peaceful setting and aura of quaint Britishness betray the fact that during the Middle Ages, Tideswell was one of Derbyshire's most bustling and - on occasion - troublesome towns. Be it the towns medieval lead miners being noted for their strength and aptitude for fighting (they are reputed to have featured in military bands present during the Hundred Years War - and indeed the altar tomb of Sir Samson Meverill, who served in the chain of command during the Siege of Orleans, is present within the church today) or the towns attraction of direct Royal interest - King Edward I visited several times during the thirteenth century and King Edward III too was fond of a visit - Tideswell was very much a headline maker of it's day. All of this noteworthiness I discovered later, and it helped make sense of the main thing that struck me that day; it is beautiful yes, but it's small. Why then does it have a Church so great that is

known as the *Cathedral of the Peak*? It was while inquiring for an answer to that very question that I came across the story which I want to share here.

During the eleventh century, the church had been granted to Lenton Priory in Nottinghamshire by the local landholders, the Peverels, only to find itself caught up in the subsequent drama that came with William Peverel “the Younger” being found to be on the wrong side of history during the civil war known as The Anarchy, when claimants to the succession of Henry I fought across England. The fallout from the war saw the Peverel’s lands seized by the crown and then handed to the Dean of Lichfield Cathedral. As a result, a dispute between Lenton Priory and Lichfield Cathedral began that would rage on for 300 years.

It was during this period, in 1250, that dispute turned nasty at the local level when a band of armed monks from Lenton Priory are recorded as storming into Tideswell with the intention of stealing the towns wool and lambs; big business in the thirteenth century and hence why the rights to church land were so hotly contested. However, the Dean of Lichfield was a wily character, and his spies had informed him that such an attack would be forthcoming and as a result, ordered to towns wool supplies and lamb stock to be kept safe inside the church. Nonetheless, the monks of Lenton were undeterred by any sense of sanctuary rights and they broke in, slaughtering most of the Lamb inside and carrying off the rest back to the priory. Tideswell made international headlines as a result, with Pope Innocent IV himself having cause to directly intervene. The building in which all this took place was the

earlier, far smaller Norman church, and was replaced during the 1300's with the inspiring work of stone that we see today.

The building of the "cathedral" in the fourteenth century is a period that directly corresponds with the timeline of crown interest in the town; it is tempting to conclude therefore that it was event such as the slaughtering of the lambs that, rather than impacting the towns burgeoning economy, actually served to put Tideswell firmly on the radar of the medieval powers that be.

The slaughter lambs of Tideswell may well be little more than a curious aside in the overall scheme of Derbyshire history but it's a story I wouldn't have come across at all unless the scale of the Church into town struck me as odd. In itself, this was reminder of a basic lesson for me, showing how historical buildings of grandeur that at first seem somewhat out of place can often signpost the prominence once bestowed onto their surrounding settlements. And *grandeur* is a fitting noun for St. Johns, something which I think is attested to best in a work created by Rev. Richard Randell during the early nineteenth century in his *Churches and Chapels in The County of Derby*;

*...without exception, the most perfect and beautiful specimen of pointed architecture to be found in the county...or perhaps in any other parish church in the entire Kingdom.*

Undoubtedly, it is a fair assessment of a lasting testament to a hidden aspect of Derbyshire heritage.

## Back to the Future

Just three examples there, from my own personal experience of local history enquiry that, for me, have changed the way I see the places connected to them forever. The beauty of these kind of discoveries, whether they lead to brand new observations like in the case of Mary Brookes or bring better light to half-remembered events such as the Battle of Winnington Bridge, is the impact their finding has on the mind of the individual.

Any time I drive by Horton in Staffordshire, I find myself picturing Mary and George, wondering if their homes are still standing and sensing the presence of their lives in the surrounding fields and hills. Much the same with Winnington Bridge, those soldiers are very much in my peripheral vision any time I'm in the centre of Northwich, as they and indeed any time I'm walking by the River Weaver...hearing the pound of their boots against the older course that the river took before the alterations to facilitate later ship canal. I'm sure you have your own versions and experiences too. Those learnings that serve to fuel your imagination any time you find yourself near to their origins.

The events and characters of local history are as real as we make them. Sharing their stories with like minded souls is not only fun, it is sometimes



akin to a duty; not only does it keep the memory burning, but by sharing, it breaths such memories a-new with life. In the absence of an actual time machine, an understanding of history and the encouragement to visualise it is the best Chronovisor anyone can have; that we each have our very own, and each one unique, is really quite a wonderful thing.

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