

Village Horror Story

The Brutal Folklore of Civil War Bagnall



In a peaceful, rural corner of North Staffordshire famed for its well dressings and idyllic atmosphere, two distinct memories of true human horror have found themselves handed down through the years in local folklore. But far from being a product of gruesome embellishment, it could well prove to be the case that these stories of massacre, bloodlust and revenge are completely, horrifically true.

A Beautiful Neighbourhood

As hidden histories go, there is one quaint and quiet spot on the edge of the Moorlands that appears to have more feathers in its cap than most. It is a place where the events of both the English Civil War and those of the Jacobite rebellion 100 years later, seem to have seeped into the DNA of the local landscape to leave traces of some extraordinary savage folk tales, whilst also somehow conspiring to ensure their factual details remain frustratingly elusive to us today.

Centred on the village of Bagnall, one such tale tells of how, when Parliamentary troops were billeted in the village, a skirmish took place nearby that was so ferocious in its violence that the area would henceforth be named - and there's no delicate way of saying this - after the sheer volume of severed body parts that were left strewn across the site in the wake of the encounter. Another, perhaps even darker tale, tells of how a young drummer boy was murdered in an act of retaliation against his military masters, before having his skin removed and tanned in order to be used as a drum covering.

However strange the stories, and no matter how transient local beliefs in these events might be, time and time again, it is local knowledge that comes up trumps when researching such topics. As such, folk tales like these found around this region of the moorland borders made up by the villages of Bagnall, Endon and Stanley, should not easily be dismissed. In fact, research may well suggest quite the opposite. It is with this in - an open - mind that we begin our journey back in hope of understanding more about these curious, if disturbing stories from of an area that may yet prove to be the custodian of a unique, if brutal, local history.

Just a couple of miles away from that key North Staffordshire thoroughfare of the A53 between Leek and the city of Stoke-On-Trent, the scattered collection of villages around Bagnall provide a picturesque rural lilt to the post-industrial reach of the nearby urban centre of Stoke. This is a garden-world of meandering lanes, country pubs and village greens that can offer the history lover a tangible opportunity to consider what life was like in the area long before the pot bank boom of the 1800's. The last time I personally visited, I had to wait to cross a brook as a family of geese trotted across rather nonchalantly without a care in the world. Less than ten minutes later, I was in the heart of the city, sat amongst the gridlocked afternoon traffic waiting to access the A500.

Local activity in around the villages, for which Bagnall is the central point for our purposes here, extends back to at least the later Anglo-Saxon period of the 10th century; but most importantly in relation the stories that have been left with us from the

sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, we know that there were a number of important buildings and institutions established in the local vicinity by the time in which the events of local folklore are believed to have take place. The churches, farms, manor houses and pubs, many of which survive to this day and which act as anchors in attempts to grasp the local past; keystone in the chain being Bagnall Hall itself, built in 1603 and to which the tales of both the massacre and the flayed boy are intrinsically bound.

Tightrope of the Times

Established houses such as Bagnall Hall often found themselves treading a thin line during the Civil Wars. Their loyalties were naturally divided between the Crown and Parliament, which meant that during the ebb and flow of the conflict they were at various times victims of circumstance that would see them both classed as safe houses and attacked for their colours depending on which force had the upper hand and influence locally at any particular time. As such, as we consider firstly the folklore of the massacre at the nearby village now known rather fittingly as Armshead, Bagnall Hall's place in the tale is a natural fit.

At the outbreak of hostilities in 1642 between the King and Parliament, there was no instant polarisation for many parts of England. Rather, such divisions of loyalties would be more steadily developed over the following year, with many landowners initially seeking to simply stay out of the way; the memories of similar conflicts in the centuries gone by, and the damage to local order and economy that came hand in hand with them, still painfully clear.

As the county began to tear itself apart in a conflict that would eventually come to be remembered as, per head of the population, the most devastating in England's history, and the armies of each side became increasingly active, staying out of the way naturally became increasingly difficult. Such was the fractious nature of the conflict at its outset, prominent Catholic families who would be in favour of the King often found themselves living - sometimes literally - next door to those supporting Parliament. Come 1642, Bagnall Hall was in the possession of William Adams, the younger son of John Adams, a powerful local landowner who had died in 1641, leaving William properties in Bagnall, Sneyd Green and Tunstall.

We do not know if the Adams family were catholic or protestant, but we should perhaps edge on the side of the King when we consider a find made at the rectory

house of St.Chads church during nineteenth century renovations, where an inscription was made on the fireplace that read, quite explicitly, “Fear God, Honour Your King.”

That being said, the tale of the massacre is predicated on the village of Bagnall having provided a base for Parliamentary troops, not Royalist. With such locations sometimes changing hands several times during the course of the war, this doesn't rule out Bagnall having begun the war in favour of the crown.

Either way, by the time of the event that has remained in memory, Bagnall was said to have been playing host to a Parliamentary garrison that were using the rectory itself as an armoury, from which they rode out to join battle around three miles away and left the field with a scattered mass of severed heads and arms of their enemy. Exactly when and why this confrontation took place has long been perceived as lost to history, and when placed against an historical view that there were no major encounters within twenty miles of the village during the Civil War, the whole event has come to be viewed as little more than a spurious folk story. My research however, will suggest otherwise.

At the site of the rectory, there are a number of blade marks to be found on the contemporary fireplace of the kind commonly found in local churches and associated buildings from billeted troops passing the time by sharpening their weapons. In the case of Bagnall, this provides a logical pointer to troops having indeed been stationed at the village for a time; however, the story really finds its shape when we consider the details of a little discussed but significant event that took place near to the village in the summer of 1643, and one that may well join the bloody dots in our pursuit of the real tale of the Armshead slaughter.

The House at Cheddleton

Key movements in Staffordshire began in the south of the county in 1642 with the Parliamentary seizure of Tamworth, whilst 1643 would see Lichfield change sides no less than three times courtesy of a series of bloody encounters in the Cathedral close. The year also saw an event take place that is often seen as the key moment in the history of Civil War Staffordshire; the Battle of Hopton Heath.

March 1643, and the Civil War is raging throughout England and in the south of Staffordshire, Parliamentary commander Sir John Gell is making progress. On the 6th he had successfully taken Lichfield and immediately turned his attention to the town of Stafford, a key Royalist point on the route between their ports on the Yorkshire coast and new de-facto capital at Oxford. Joined by Cheshire commander, Sir William

Brereton, they convene at Hopton Heath just outside the town on the 19th and join battle Royalist forces under command of the Earl of Northampton. Charging the parliamentarians lines, Northampton is thrown from his horse, but refuses to yield and is killed in the melee. Yet come nightfall, the day belonged to the Royalists, with around 500 Parliamentarian casualties on the field compared to the Royalists 50. Although both sides claimed victory, it would have likely been scored a draw if it were a boxing match, with the loss of Royalist commander Northampton being balanced against the greater casualties of the Parliamentarian force.

Following the battle, Gell would parade Northampton's embalmed body through the streets of Derby as a trophy. But it was not the only token he had of the day. In the confusion of the battle, he had also managed to capture a key piece of Royalist artillery; the monstrous machine of war that was the cannon known as *Roaring Meg*.

One of the Royalists killed alongside Northampton at Hopton Heath was John Biddulph of Biddulph Hall and we know that come February 1644, Gell's man in the north of the county, Sir William Brereton, would use Roaring Meg to assist him in the siege and subsequent destruction of Biddulph Hall. It as an event that has lived long in the memory of Biddulph, if often in the most curious of spaces. Cannon balls dating from the time of the siege are often found in the pond of the Talbot Inn, presumably as a result of Meg finding her range across the valley as she fired on the hall. There is even a local pub named after her. But by the time of the siege at Biddulph, it is possible Meg had been in the area for several months already, and possibly played a big part in a largely forgotten piece of local history that may relate directly to the story of the Armshead massacre and the soldiers of Bagnall; the destruction of Cheddleton House.

Included in his work *Memorials of the Civil War In Cheshire and the Adjacent Counties* of 1889, Thomas Melborn shares an account of how on Thursday 10th August 1643, Colonel Brereton marched his forces on the manor house at Cheddleton, which was at that time in the possession of the Jefford family, who are duly referred to as "great papists" or catholics, complete with "three great pieces of ordinance" in his arsenal; one of which could have well been Roaring Meg. Used against the house for the better part two days straight, the house finally surrendered around 4pm on Friday the 11th, with details of what was found inside potentially providing significant clues as to the missing details of the Armshead massacre.

Upon entering the house, it was recorded that Brereton took around 60 men as prisoners from the garrison, and further discovered arms for the provision of 200 soldiers. It is quite something that such an account should exist. In the destruction of

Cheddleton House we reach a point at the height of the Civil War, with a significant operation taking place less than half an hours ride away from Bagnall, at which a huge cache of ammunition is discovered and more than sixty men taken prisoner. The arms would have instantly required safe lock up, which entirely fits with the rumours of an armoury being created at the rectory in Bagnall. The prisoners, I should add, were reportedly ordered to march south following their capture to the Parliamentary headquarters at Stafford; the route of which took them directly to the spot on the Stafford road that is now known to us in legend as the scene of the massacre.

There is a conclusion presenting itself here in which there was a Parliamentary force stationed at Bagnall as both local lore and evidence suggests, the village likely being seen as the secure location in a tempestuous and dangerous landscape. Even without the question of arms at Cheddleton, an armoury would be needed, but a safe location after their procurement was an absolute must.

In immediate aftermath of the fall of Cheddleton House, be it a counter attack on the march that was swiftly put down, or simply a cut-throat decision of war whereby it made more sense to Brereton to dispatch his captives rather than continue south, there is a perfect match of numbers, location, motive and means for an event that would take the shape of a massacre. We know for a fact that Brereton didn't travel to Stafford following the attack at Cheddleton, as records attest to his presence in Nantwich in the days after. Surely if this is all a coincidence, it is a very great one. I would therefore suggest that in Melborn's account we have stumbled upon the very events that have been remembered to history in local lore as the battle at Armshead.

Rebels in the Moorlands

The second piece of the lore connected to the regions wartime events comes in the legend of a drummer boy. Again, it is a piece of lore that has held strong in local story telling over the years, but one which has received little by way of research, despite there actually being a comparative wealth of recorded evidence. In some instances, the tale is told against the setting of the Civil War, but all viable historical accounts point with absolute clarity to the matter taking place 102 years later during the Jacobite rebellion. Either way, it is a grisly tale not for the faint hearted, the young boy being flayed in vengeance for a suffering previously imposed upon a local figure of authority by the boys accompanying military brethren.

As referenced earlier in this collection, Bonnie Prince Charlie had entered England

from Scotland in September of 1745 intent on marching to London in an attempt to regain the crown for the house of Stuart, who had been bereft of the throne since William of Orange had been awarded it in 1688 in a move designed to ensure protestant rule of England known now to history as the Glorious Revolution.

By the time the Bonnie Prince Charles Stuart reached the Staffordshire Moorlands that November his army had swollen to over 7000 troops. Both on their passage toward London, which would ultimately be stopped at Derby when their expected, and their subsequent retreat back towards Scotland, Stuarts rebel forces spent considerable time in and around the moorlands, leaving a large number of tales in their wake. Some of which, particularly on their return trip when they were not so concerned with encouraging local support, are reported to have involved looting, rape and murder. Safe to say, the locals didn't take the actions of the Scotch rebels lightly, and there are numerous accounts across the region of local men taking vengeance against the Scots.

It is against the backdrop of this partisan fever that the events that lead to the drummer boy legend took place. There is little doubt that elements of the Jacobite force quartered themselves in the village of Bagnall area during their campaign. In a letter written by Mr. James Middleton at the time, a friend of Lord Gower, a local MP and cabinet minister from Hanley who had asked Middleton to make observations on the rebels on their entering Leek, he points to the very actions that would ultimately find their return in the brutal treatment of the young boy of our legend. Amongst various fascinating points of observation, he notes how;

About thirty of their horse came to Bagnall and kept Justice Murhall for three days. It is said he gave them three hundred pounds to be released.

Justice William Murhall was a key authority figure in the Moorlands at the time, a county magistrate living at Bagnall Hall who had served as High Sheriff of Staffordshire just three years earlier in 1742. Being held prisoner in his own home and having to pay a ransom to be released, was not something that he was ever going to let go.

War Drum

When the rebels passed back through the moorlands in December, Murhall was intent on revenge, with various sources being left to us that detail the shape that revenge ultimately took. John Ward's work *The Borough of Stoke on Trent* from 1843 is a real gem when it comes to accounts of events that took place locally in the 1700's and has

consistently proven its value to me in researching local history.

One section of the book recounts a conversation that took place in 1810 at the Turks Head pub in Burslem in an 82 year old Ralph Leigh and his friend, the 70 year old John Telwright discuss various memories from Leigh's youth; part of which is a recollection of the time that the rebels came through the area;

Leigh: *Remember when them Scotch rebels come as far as Bagnall and went to old Justice Murballs? I remember it well but I was only about 5 or 6 years old.*

Telwright: *The justice didn't like them I've heard.*

Leigh: *I think not. The young Pretender and his officers stayed and breakfasted at the Squires, and afterwards the Scotch soldiers robbed his arms and money, an made him shew them the road to Derby.*

Telwright: *But they came back when they found their way blocked by the Duke.*

Leigh: *They did, and the Squire thought he'd maim one for robbing him, so he caught a Scotch rogue that had been lagging behind at a sign post at Leek and flayed him like a calf, and sent his hide to the tanners yard to make it into a drum head.*

The memory of Murhall taking his vengeance on a young straggler in the rebels returning party, capturing him in Leek and flaying him to make his skin into the drum, is also recorded in the parish records of the time;

William Murhall, at the time of the '45 rebellion, inflicted upon one of the Scottish stragglers who fell into his hands...the punishment out of revenge for injuries he received from a detachment of horse which came to Bagnall and then retreated avoid encountering the Duke of Cumberlands army encamped on Stone field.

It appears that, not only is the tale of the flaying true, but it was widely known throughout the region at the time. In all probability, it would have been celebrated as a retaliation against some of the more nefarious acts committed by the rebels during their passage through. The drum made of the young boys skin is believed to have been on

display at St.Lukes in Endon village until the twentieth century. One might suspect, although undoubtedly now tucked away from view, it may well still be there.

The Skulls Beneath the Rose Bush

In the tale of Armshead we can find probable and plausible means relating to the circumstances surrounding the destruction of Cheddleton Hall which allow us to reach a position whereby the local stories of the armoury and the slaughter on the Stafford road fit together in a way that feels remarkably close to history. It is entirely likely therefore that the local stories associated with the legend really do find themselves born out in the events of August 1643. In the legend of the drummer boy, we have to acknowledge that this horrific event really did take place, with the actions of William Murhall likely having been viewed through the brutal, colloquial prism of the times as fair - if savage - recompense for both the experience he personally had with the rebels in Bagnall and the wider troubles brought with their presence in the region.

The village of Bagnall and its surrounding settlements are undoubtedly a jewel in the crown of North Staffordshire both aesthetically and due to their representation of living history. But also, when considering their folk memories and the darker history to which they elude, the area is a genuine font of that sense of eerie Englishness...where the skulls beneath the flower beds are ever present, no matter how idyllic the view above the ground may be.

Eli Lewis-Lycett 2021