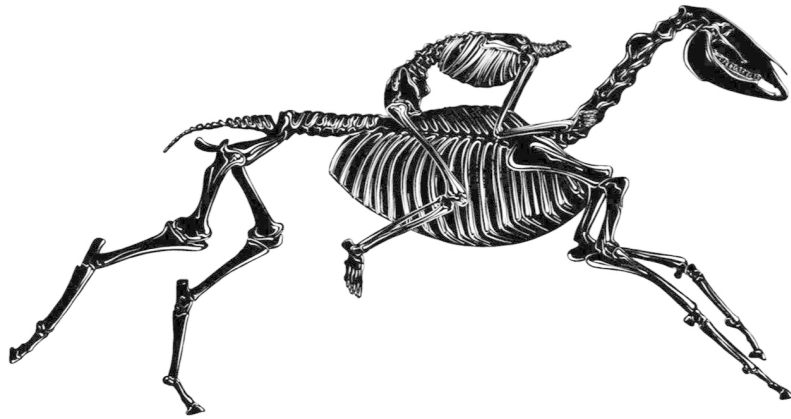


The Phantom Rebel

In Search of the Headless Horseman of the Staffordshire Moorlands



The Headless Horseman of the Staffordshire Moorlands is one of the best known pieces of folklore in the region, but where did it come from? Tracing the story of the horseman back through 650 years of local history by way of Victorian ghost sightings and Arthurian literature, we uncover the shocking true story of murder that lies at the heart of the spectres inspiration.

Origins

All of our local myths and legends have their origins. Travelling from distant parts on the roads of social migration, some will have morphed away from their original state into new regional variations. Others, born from the morality tales of our common past, have survived the erosion of the centuries primarily due to their ability to adapt into popular tropes of the fireside, providing us with all manner of haunted ruins and bogey men in the process.

Yet there are sometimes to be found other, altogether more opaque entries in our collections of folklore. These are stories that may initially present themselves in such a fantastically supernatural light that the idea of them belonging to actual history at first appears incredulous; and yet upon closer inspection, we may well discover that the details contained within them are so remarkably local that they conspire to suggest something else entirely. The remnants of long-lost folk memories. One such tale, and the one that had captivated me personally ever since I first heard it in the Roebuck pub in Leek in late 2006, is that of the Headless Horseman; the demonic jewel in the crown of Moorlands folklore.

Stories concerning the spectre that has been reputed to ride the old roads between Leek and Warslow to the abject terror of the locals have everything you could want from a local legend; horror, haunting and even eyewitness accounts. For me though, the real draw of the legend has always been the suspicion that it contained within it traces of something *more*.

Today, it is without doubt the most well-known legend of the Moorlands. This is largely thanks to the regularity with which it appears in the local press around Halloween, but also too perhaps due to the profile of the wider horseman tradition having found itself raised in recent years courtesy of its appearances in popular entertainment. From Tim Burton's Hollywood blockbuster *Sleepy Hollow* to a fondness for the character in the video game industry and Japanese Anime, as characters of legend go, the headless horseman has most definitely been enjoying something of a day in the sun.

No matter where such examples of the horseman appear however, be them in folklore or entertainment, the vast majority will owe their aesthetic to a single figure of Irish mythology. With its black horse, skull encrusted carriage and whip made of human spine, the *Dullaban* has inspired a plethora sympathetic kin. Yet however trivial some of those characters may seem to be, their most striking trait - the missing head - is a

signpost to the truly ancient nature age of the figure's origin.

A commonly held belief amongst many ancient cultures was that the head was a cradle of the soul; the vessel in which the spirit of the individual resides. The Dullahan therefore represents a creature of the otherworld, wandering the earth in a kind of pre-Christian purgatory; its appearance said to forewarn ill fortune for all who see it.

Now at first, I totally understand that all this talk of ancient mythology may seem quite far removed from our headless rider of the moors, but on consideration, it provides an integral part in understanding what makes our own phantom so unusual. In almost all stories associated with the horsemen tradition, wherever they are found across the British Isles, the severed head is either carried beneath an arm or is in the process of being searched for; yet it does not receive a single mention in relation to the Moorlands legend. The weapon too, variously a whip, sword or axe, is typically carried aloft as the spectre charges about the landscape. But again, with the Moorlands phantom, the weapon it is not noted upon at all. Even the death carriage, a central feature in so many horseman tales that were doing the rounds throughout the nineteenth century - the time in which our own tale was at the height of its popularity - is found to be absent.

In reality, beyond its general association as a harbinger of doom, there is really nothing to connect our legend with the wider horseman tradition at all.

Whilst this lack of traditional motif is intriguing, it is the nature of the details that appear in place of the tradition that really serves to strengthen suspicions as to the nature of our own phantom's origin; specific, colloquial details that point towards the creation of a legend entirely contained within the Moorlands itself. Details that we can study, courtesy of them having been recorded for posterity thanks to the diligent reporting of one local man more than 160 years ago.

The Accounts

During the mid-eighteenth century, John Sleight had enjoyed a successful legal career. Registered at the Inner Temple, London, his life as a Barrister would afford him the opportunity in later life to indulge his passions, one of which included local history. Still available today, although likely to set you back up to £1000.00 for an original edition, Sleight's 1862 *History of the Ancient Parish of Leek* is a vast work touching on every topic relevant to the area from geological speculations of the landscape to the origins of its historical buildings. As such, it provides a goldmine of material for anyone looking to

inquire into the region's past.

The creation of such comprehensive regional tomes was very much in vogue during the period, and alongside the more prosaic details contained within them, a section on the more curious traditions of the local population was often a highlight. Thankfully Sleight's work is no exception, and it is his reportage on the rural customs of the Staffordshire Moorlands that provide us with a number of accounts concerning the local folklore of the time. It is in his introduction that the horseman gets its first specific mention in print;

*Ghostly legends and superstitions, still retain their sway
over the minds of the denizens of those moorland wilds,
more especially, the headless rider, who haunted the moors
between Leek and Warslow...attested by so many credible
living witnesses, that to doubt them would be worse
than heterodoxy.*

Sleight's use of the word heterodoxy sets a firm foundation for the accounts that follow, as it implies that whatever the reality of the legend, he found that the manner of the witnesses he encountered to be sincere.

Three distinct accounts are then provided, drawn from Sleight's research around the area, the first of which being a formal recording of the most popular local tale concerning the horseman; and perhaps the one still best known in the Moorlands today;

*A man returning from Leek, perhaps somewhat market
fresh sees before him, a little beyond Leek Edge, a
neighbour on horseback, whom he hails for a request for a
'lift' homewards. No sooner, however, has he mounted
behind him than to his horror finds that his companion is
the goblin horseman. The discovery comes too late for
away springs the horse, covering at a bound, fields, trees,
hedges and ditches...the luckless wight at one moment
feeling his feet brushing through the topmost twigs, and
the next borne with whirlwind swiftness over the heath. In
the upshot, he is found deposited at his own door, helpless
and groaning, and so maimed and bruised that death in a*

few days puts an end to his sufferings.

In this initial report, a farmer is returning home from the market in Leek, drunk, when he mistakes a figure on the road ahead for a neighbour. Alas, it is in fact the horseman, who then sweeps the farmer across the countryside in a rollercoaster ride of over hedges and bushes before dropping him, dazed and confused, at his front door. The injuries inflicted upon him in the process are gravely serious, and he dies from them just a few days later. The account sets a tone, from which we will see, those that follow take their central themes of journey and surprise; details that will prove vital in connecting the dots later on.

The second telling concerns the story of a young man who seems to have had repeated encounters with the phantom during return trips from a neighbouring village; which I reproduce here in its totality due to the sheer joy of the antiquity of language contained within;

Again a young swain from the neighbourhood of Waterhouses, visiting his sweetheart some three to four miles away, is so frequently joined in his expeditions with the phantom as to become familiarised with it to such a degree that, to adopt our informants expression, 'they used to walk, agen' one another.' Mentioning to a friend what he was in the habit of encountering, he was induced to consent to his accompanying one night. By and by the horseman makes his appearance: 'He's here!' 'Where?' whisper's the friend, not having the gift of double sight - 'Gi's thee hand,' and as soon as palm touched palm, the young man shrank back, affrighted on perceiving the ghastly stranger at his side.

The third and final account in Sleigh's work is an entry that is found to have a number of local variations; the story of a husband trying to deny his knowledge of the phantom to his wife, before conceding and confessing all;

On another occasion, a rustic having to fetch the howdy wife from Warslow was unceremoniously joined on the road

by the apparition. His horse trembled violently, the dog yowled and he himself broke out into such profuse perspiration that it settled in the shape of a heavy dew on the outside of his overcoat. On his arrival, the woman perceiving by his wild and disordered looks that he had had no ordinary journey, closely questioned him as to the nature of it, which at first he was unwilling to admit. She, however, consented to return with him, and they reached home without further molestation. On the following day the horse dropped down dead between the plough-sticks, and the dog, too, sickened and died. Ultimately seven clergymen, headed by the Rev John Reed, an old 'familiar,' were called in 'to speak to and lay' this betenoir of the moors; when he confessed that he was one of the four evil spirits cast out of Heaven and condemned to roam over the face of the earth, until the crack of doom release him from his terrestrial wanderings.

However fanciful these retellings may seem at face value, as mentioned earlier, it is in the context of such tales that the noted lack of embellishment or traditional paraphernalia is most striking - and again, I reinforce the point - it is an exception that sits in sharp contrast to the detail that are then found to be present; names, places and the clear metre of the local landscape.

Tantalisingly, the figure of Rev. John Reed that appears in relation to the apparent exorcism in the third account appears to be a genuine historical reference, with records attesting to a Reverend Reed being present at St. Lukes in the nearby village of Onecote during the 1830's. It is an inclusion made all the more noteworthy when we see that a Reverend Reed is also mentioned in a secondary report concerning the horseman and what appears to be some form of similar exorcism.

Published in October 1880 by local newspaper The Sentinel as part of an article entitled *Up and Down The County*, a man named as William Hambleton - stated to be a member of Butterton Parish Council - gives his own take on the exorcism story and places it specifically to a farm on Douse Lane in the village of Onecote. Having first confessed to how he is "sure there's something in it" due to how many people he has met that claim to have seen the horseman, Hambleton tells of how the Reverend and his

band of clergy were called to a farm on Douse Lane following sightings of the spectre and reports that in their wake, a deceased farmers cart had taken to veering around the farm yard by means of “unseen propulsion.”

Douse Lane sits perfectly within the geography covered by the reports in Sleigh's work - namely the villages of Warslow and Waterhouses - a rural area in the east of the Staffordshire Moorlands where the county's boundaries weave betwixt with those of the neighbouring county of Derbyshire. This area, whilst giving an initial focal point for the horseman reports, also firmly places the legend within the rural community, away from the growing metropolitan transformation of Leek in the mid-nineteenth century. This is important, as it gives real substance to the hypothesis that the horseman legend is not migratory and is genuinely local in its inspiration.

Historical Equations

Throughout human history stories have been shared between people. Originally, no doubt most of these stories will have been specifically designed to keep people safe, passed on between generations and often told in very linear terms. Over time however, as mentioned at the start of this piece, when different communities have had cause to meet or migrate these tales would find new audiences. As they did, details would change, locations alter and whole new legends would arise quite removed from the root of their original tale. It is the process by which much folklore survives, adapting to new environments. It is, for example, how there has come to be so many “grey ladies” reported to haunt our castle ruins across different regions where the living version of the spectre actually had no historical connection at all to the location in question.

In the Moorlands, key movements of people, and therefore their associated folk stories and traditions, have found sponsorship on numerous occasions across its history; but two major instances stand-out. Although markets had been in existence during the eleventh century, between 1200 and 1349 their number exploded across England from around 50 to over 2000 in acknowledgement of the access they gave to a substantial and consistent revenue source for the authorities of the towns in which they appeared. Leek benefited early in the boom thanks to King John granting the town its charter in 1207, where the establishment of such an officially sanctioned market meant that for the first time, interactions between communities otherwise relatively distant to one another became a regular occurrence. With the exchange of gossip likely to have been as much of an attraction to those that visited the market as the trade itself, stories would have

been shared and new relationships fostered as they did, the old tales of one region would find a route to becoming the new tales of another.

A further and more long-lasting period of socio-economic migration would hit the local area as part and parcel of the changes brought by the arrival of the Industrial Revolution over five hundred years on from the market charters, and with it would come established folk stories and legends from areas much further afield than anything that had reached the Moorlands before. That in either instance the horseman legend should not leave any trace of itself in the lore of the surrounding regions, further suggests the idea that it has *always* belonged to the Moorlands alone.

There are a number of additional accounts concerning tales of the horseman in existence locally and whilst they all offer their own fascinations, they are either variations on those already recounted here or origin stories for which there is no basis at all. Most popular among them is that of William Ferm of Bottomhouse, who is said to have dressed as the horseman to aid his work as a highwayman in the area before being hanged at Stafford. Whilst this isn't impossible, if true it clearly demonstrates that the horseman legend was already firmly established in the region before Ferm's exploits took shape however, there is no historical record of his life, nor his hanging.

By comparison, in Sleigh's work we have definitive evidence that there is something more to the Moorlands legend than pure myth making. I am not suggesting the reports should be taken as real eyewitness testament to the existence of an actual phantom rider, but their ability to qualify the depth of the horseman legend locally is surely beyond doubt. So, with such observations made, we are left to ponder the core question of just where did our horseman legend come from? Apologies in advance, but it's unavoidable I'm afraid. In order to move back through time as we look for clues as to the origin of the Moorlands horseman, we're going to need a little maths!

Given that the accounts included within Sleigh's work were likely collected in the field sometime shortly before its publication 1862, we can say with some certainty that by the year 1860 not only was the legend long since cemented in local folklore but that all traces of origin myth had long since faded away. Therefore, assuming that a local person of 70 years old in 1860 could have conceivably heard the horseman legend from a grandparent, it is perhaps acceptable to assume that in the years of their grandparent's youth, say around the year 1770, any sense of origin myth was *still* missing; as surely if it were present in the tale at that point it would have made it to the years of Sleigh's work relatively intact.

From circa 1770 then, we move back again, and as we do we come across a period of

political turmoil that would have been packed full of opportunities for potential myth-making around the image of a phantom rider and yet seems to have completely bypassed horseman legend entirely.

In the autumn of 1745 the Moorlands famously played host to Bonnie Prince Charlie and an estimated 7000 Jacobite soldiers who passed through the region as the “Young Pretender” marched towards London from Scotland with the intent of claiming the crown for the House of Stuart. I say *famously* as it is an event that has left a lasting imprint on the area, particularly in the town of Leek itself, and a topic that will feature in other tales in this collection.

After leaving the Moorlands, and deciding to turn back when they reached Derby and their anticipated additional support being absent, the Jacobites would retreat back to Scotland, again passing through the Moorlands, on a journey that would eventually lead to their slaughter at the Battle of Culloden the following spring. There are various accounts of local militia forces having come into conflict with the Jacobite army as they made their way through the area, yet none of them have resulted in a headless horseman myth; for which there would have undoubtedly been ample opportunity.

The same can be said too of the period in the mid 1600’s when the English Civil Wars caused significant upheaval across the area. Plenty of local legends were born from the conflict, including massacres, sieges and those peculiar recollections resulting from all manner of small scale skirmishes, yet again, a headless horseman is not one of them. This absence is all the more significant when considering that the most common *raison d’être* associated with such figures is the search for a head severed in battle.

And so, as the timeline aligns we must arrive at the notion suggesting the roots of our legend may well predate the Civil Wars and more specifically the year 1643; that being the date of the first major action in the region. It was after reaching this point in my research, and whilst considering the next steps on the time timeline that something hit me out of the blue. There was of course another headless horseman connected to the area, albeit one firmly associated with fiction; a character that had come into existence almost five hundred years before Sleigh’s collected accounts were first published. However unlikely it may have appeared to me, it was a connection that I simply could not ignore. What it would go on to suggest would provide something akin to a hyper-drive in my search for the Moorlands phantom.

An Arthurian Possibility

Written in the late-fourteenth century, recent years have seen the Middle English poem *Sir Gawain and The Green Knight* become one of the most studied literary works associated with King Arthur and his court. In the piece, we learn of how on one New Year's Day at Camelot, before the feast, King Arthur asks his knights to entertain him with tales of adventure. No sooner as he asked this, when a large figure clad in green suddenly appears on horseback and rides into the palace. He wears no armour but carries aloft an axe in one hand and a spring of holly in the other, offering the King and his nobles the chance to take part in a game which seems impossible for them to lose. If any man is brave enough, he states, he will allow them to strike him once without retaliation; on the condition that a year and a day later, he will be allowed to return the favour.

Sir Gawain, the nephew of the King and the most eager of the group, asks for the honour of striking the "Green Knight" and subsequently decapitates him.

The Green Knight however is none plussed, and responds by picking up his own severed head before then reminding Gawain that he will see him again a year and a day later; the location of their rematch being a location known as the *Green Chapel*. A great journey is undertaken by Gawain in his search for the location of the rematch, and plenty of adventures are had along the way before the story concludes. Seriously, its a monster piece of work, whole books have been written in its study, but the primary significance of this poem in relation to the Moorlands horsemen legend is in both the locality of the Green Chapel and the distinct regionality of the poems authorship.

Experts in the field of medieval literature - including Poet Laurette, Simon Armitage - unanimously agree to the poem having being written in a variation of Middle English known as *North West Midlands*. It is a dialect that was in use almost exclusively across the region of the Moorlands and its neighbouring Cheshire borders. Furthermore, consensus on the location of the Green Chapel itself, the intended site of the beheaded knights chance of revenge, is that its real world location is in fact near the modern Cheshire-Staffordshire border at Swythamley; specifically the mystical moss-covered chasm of earth known as *Ludsburch*.

A very real contention is therefore presented that irrespective of however famous the poem of Sir Gawain and The Green Knight may be today, it's origins and inspiration come from the very same area as that of which our horseman legend calls home; almost to the same postcode. As such, we arrive at a point from which it appears that two separate stories featuring a headless rider have found themselves connected to the very same landscape. In fact, presuming the working hypothesis that it would take several

centuries for the horseman legend to embed within the folklore of the Moorlands whilst also shedding any associated foundation myth was correct, the two legends may even have been created at a similar time.

Upon this realisation I suddenly found myself working pieces of a jigsaw I didn't even realise I had. Pieces may I add, that were seemingly conspiring to fall into place. If there was a genuine connection to be found though, something solid beyond circumstance, it could only emerge from considering the identity of the poem's author. After all, at that period of time there could not be too many people in the local area capable of writing to a professional standard, let alone to do so whilst also having a sufficient knowledge of the Arthurian tradition. With the poem having been penned in the late fourteenth century, to my mind there was only one vocation at that time that could have provided an author with the requisite levels of education, free time and means to create such a work; the author was surely connected to a local religious institution and the major religious centre of the time connected to the area was Dieulacres Abbey.

I would need to access a history of the Abbey in order to search for a connection. Given that such religious houses were the keepers of record for events during the period in question, I held a hope that if such a connection existed, it may actually prove possible to find. I would be looking for a figure whose life and death contained specific characteristics connected to the horseman, my feeling being that both the legend and the poem may have been inspired by a single event or character. Giving serious thought to the specific criteria what I would be searching for, I would need not only a victim that was beheaded but also a perpetrator who could carry out such an act with impunity; a detail that would account for the absence of any antagonist having remained connected to the legend.

A tether to some kind of journey across the landscape would also be advantageous, it being both a central theme of the nineteenth century accounts of the legend collated by Sleigh and a prominent feature of the poem in the lead up to Sir Gawain's rematch with the Green Knight.

Additionally, the lack of detailed back story to the horseman legend would suggest that any suitable victim would likely not be lifted from the nobility of the area. Rather, they would likely be a figure connected to the day to day lives of its peasantry and common-folk. Most importantly of all however, I would be looking for an event of such seismic impact to both the rural and ecclesiastical population of the era that the idea it would *not* inspire a powerful local legend would be incredulous in the context of the times. And finally, if such an event was to have also have connection to the poem, it

must have taken place before the year 1400. Criteria drawn, it was time to dive in.

Dieulacres Abbey

Throughout the Middle Ages, religious houses and their brethren were hugely influential characters in the lives of those that lived alongside them. From agriculture to education, healthcare to justice, their shadow was to be found cast over virtually every aspect of day-to-day life and the Staffordshire Moorlands was no exception. It can prove difficult to picture now, as all that remains of Dieulacres Abbey is the repurposed masonry of a nearby farmhouse and a few lonely lumps of stone in a field beside the suitably named Abbey Inn restaurant, but the Moorlands was once home to one of the most powerful religious houses in all of England.

Founded around the year 1214, Dieulacres had an unusual beginning even by the standards of the thirteenth century. Cistercian monks, originally located at Poulton in Cheshire, had been relocated to Leek following a ghostly dream of a man that we will examine in some detail later in this book, Ranulph de Blundville, Earl of Chester. In his dream, the Earl was said to have been visited by his grandfather, who told him that moving the Poulton monks to a new site at Leek would provide a lasting solution to the increasing threat posed by raiders streaming into their current lands from the other side of the Welsh border.

Translating as "*may God prosper it*" Dieulacres soon proved very aptly named. Ranulph himself was a leading adviser to King John - the very man who had granted a market charter to Leek in 1207 - and therefore a figure of considerable power; power which he busily got to work putting to use with ruthless efficiency on behalf of the religious house. The Abbey lands were vast, taking in not only its share of Staffordshire and Cheshire but reaching far beyond with estates in Lancashire too, and they soon provided Dieulacres with a seriously healthy economic bandwidth.

With the whole enterprise overseen by its Abbot, backed by the influence afforded by its closely knit royal relationship, the successes of its endeavours within the industries of wool, timber and general farming served to feed an increasing ambition for expansion over the following century. This system, enabled via a series of outlying religious sub-centres or granges, was in turn marshalled by the brethren that worked from them known as the *Conversi*. They were an organisation that would manage the holy resources of the land in practical terms and held a ruthless dedication to their cause that could not help but ruffle feathers as they continually looked to push for further opportunities.

Such an appetite for expansion was always bound to cause conflict, not least amongst the areas where the interests of other similarly inclined religious lands bordered its estates; the abbeys at Croxden and Hulton being two particularly recurrent examples according to Dieulacres own records. It is thanks to one such recorded dispute between the neighbouring granges of Wincle and Swythamley on the Cheshire border that we find our first definitive connection to the poem of Sir Gawain. A large area of woodland known as Back Forest (still there today) was an integral part of the Swythamley estate, and it is within this woodland that Ludschurch, the reputed location of the Green Knight's rematch that I mentioned earlier, is to be found.

The picture painted in both legal and ecclesiastical records as the years progress is one of a landscape dominated by the affairs and whims of Dieulacres and its partners, with locals having to bend to their will while a continuing disgruntlement grew in response. In fact, such was the combustibility of the touch paper seemingly ready to be lit at Dieulacres come the 1300s that a number of Royal allowances were granted to its Abbot by way of assistance in management of the local population and alongside the more direct methods of control granted to the Abbey by the King, such as the right to administer the death penalty, was the formal passage of the right to hold fairs and markets within the town of Leek to the Abbot's direct stewardship.

Within one hundred years of its foundation, Dieulacres had become an economic powerhouse that dominated the world around it, it's only serious competition being provided by the similarly ambitious, but relevantly distant, Burton Abbey in the south of Staffordshire. Yet the continual growth of Dieulacres could not go on forever, and like so many similar institutions throughout Europe, it would find its ambitions heavily checked by the destruction laid bare to the country during the Black Death of the fourteenth century.

The shortage of labour that came in the wake of the Black Death meant that the level of wages that workers could demand grew unprecedentedly, and as the those governing the country made attempts to restrict earnings as a result via punitive legislation, resentment amongst the common-folk began to build. It was as Dieulacres looked to repair its own infrastructure in line with such measures that circumstances conspired to see the appointment of a man who would go on to become the most feared and unscrupulous leader in the abbey's history; the Abbot William Lichfield.

It is impossible to discover much by way of detail as to Lichfield's life and history prior to his appointment at the Abbey, but it is safe to say both his temperament and outlook appear more than in keeping with the nature of the client-kingdom the Abbey had come

to represent. It is not, I should point out, my deliberate intention to paint these holy houses in a negative light, but the facts of the record attest that these were as much institutions of business as they were houses of God. This was an age where men of means could rule with little worry of recourse and the King, at this point the teenage Richard II, was in little place to bring any sense of order to proceeding for a range of reasons; not least the continuing difficulties of the Hundred Years War. As such, the power in the hands of the barons and abbots was effectively absolute.

It should surprise none that in the mire of this upheaval, a scent of rebellion was in the air right across the country and it was something that Abbot Lichfield was acutely aware of locally. So much so, that he would find justifiable cause to take an extraordinary decision; the employment of his own private army to be stationed at Dieulacres. By this point, the brethren at Dieulacres had effectively become a kind of monastic-mafia and their chosen means of doing business would only go from bad to worse. Abbot Litchfield wasted little time in putting his new men to work, and records show that sometime in 1379, Hugh, Earl of Stafford was appointed by Royal Commission to specifically investigate the conduct of the Abbot Litchfield following a plethora of reports concerning him and his retinue. The Royal Commission reads;

One William, Abbot of Dieulacres, desiring to perpetrate maintenance in his marches and oppress the people', had kept a band of 21 retainers 'to stay with him . . . to do all the mischief they can to the people in the county of Stafford and that they have lain in wait for them, assaulted, maimed, and killed some, and driven others from place to place until they made a fine with them.

How the Earl of Stafford came to hear of these crimes is, I believe, connected to the sheer scale of outrage that followed one particular event during 1379 that cuts to the very heart of our quest; the murder of John de Warton.

The Rebel and the Abbott

From the records of Decularces and the local court plea-rolls, details suggest that de

Warton was a Yeoman and as such, as a farmer holding their own land, was regraded with that little bit more respect than the majority of the lower classes of the time. Come 1379, a feud appears to have been brewing for some time between de Warton and the abbot, which reached its climax with an attack on the Abbot's men by de Warton and a group of his supporters. According to the Abbot's own testimony in a legal proceeding issued at the time, de Warton's attack had succeeded in subduing the Abbot's men, with him noting how de Warton had been able to "*disable their ability to be of service for a period of time.*"

Although we can read between the lines relatively easily here, I think it worth a brief pause to consider just how big an event this must have been. An armed band stationed at the Abbey, as we have seen from the Royal Commission, would have been a genuine source of terror for the local population. For men like John de Warton, whose comparatively independent status would have made him a difficult issue for the Abbott, news of the crimes being committed against the people of the Moorlands would have arrived at his door complete with an expectation that he could do something to help.

To be clear, we're not only talking about instances of theft here, we're likely also talking about violence and rape. Perhaps de Warton's actions were due to a more personal, direct slight from the Abbot; but his decision to take action and attack the Abbot's men would not have been taken lightly. If there wasn't judged to be a sound basis for such an assault, de Warton would undoubtedly lose everything he had. Things must have been getting increasingly desperate for armed conflict to seem the most viable option.

Despite the impression of respect for law-abiding process that Abbot Lichfield gave in his perusing of legal recompense again de Warton, he was most definitely not content to leave resolution of the matter in the hands of the court. What follows is a story of murder, litigation and manipulation of such extraordinary impact that not only does it provide us with an incredible piece of local history, it also shines a light across the wider political state concerns of late-fourteenth century England.

Thanks to the preservation of the Staffordshire plea-rolls, transcribed for the William Salt Archaeological Society and their 1893 work *Collections For A History of Staffordshire*, we have a vital source of information when it comes to those local matters from Staffordshire that were deemed serious enough to require adjudication by the high court; cases which were to be heard directly under the travelling Assize system. In the case of de Warton, the bounty these records have left to us really is something special.

The following is taken from the Easter plea rolls for Staffordshire in 1380, recorded by one Geoffrey Martin, Clerk of the Crown;

Here follows a special commission...commanding them to return on the oath of a jury, what malefactors and disturbers of the peace had killed John de Warton at Leek, in co.Stafford...on the Tuesday the Feast of the Apostles... that Henry de Bradeshawe of Leek, Thomas Page of Leek, Robert le Wright of Leek, Robert Tuppebeved, Richard de Bradeschawe of Leek and Thomas le Coke of Leek, came to the town of Leek on the Saturday after the Close of Easter and laid in wait for John de Warton in order to kill him... and they struck the said John de Warton in the body with an arrow, and called upon him to surrender to the peace, and the said John had surrendered, and the said Henry de Bradeschawe and the others named above, had kept him a prisoner at Leek for the space of four days, and afterwards had taken him to a place called Leekmore in the parish of Leek and had cut off his head and they had feloniously killed the said John de Warton, and that William de Lichefeld, the Abbot of the church of St. Mary of Dieulacres, had afterwards received the said Henry and the others named, and had received them up to this date knowing that they had committed the felony.

It is a remarkable entry, directly naming the accused perpetrators of John de Warton's murder, not to mention its accusation that Abbot Lichfield had subsequently harboured the killers himself. John's widow Almarica would also give testimony to the court in person, the details of which I'm sure you'll agree, are utterly fascinating;

Almarica, formerly wife of John de Warton, appeared in person and appealed Henry de Bradeschawe of Leek, Thomas Page of Leek, Robert le Wryght of Leek the younger, Richard del Kychen of Leek, Richard de Bradeshawe of Leek, Richard del Fernihalgh of Leek, Thomas le Cook of Leek, Nicholas le Hunte of Leek, William Balle of Leek, John le Sompter of Leek, and

Thomas Plonte of Snythomle Graunge, for the death of her husband, all as principals, except John le Sompter and Thomas Plonte, whom she appealed as accessories...came armed to Leek, on the Saturday after the Close of Easter with swords, bows and arrows, and killed John de Warton in a place called Leekmore, and had cut off his head by the command of William de Lichefeld, the Abbot of the church of St.Mary of Dieulacres, and that the said Henry de Bradeshawe and the others named had afterwards feloniously despoiled the said John de Warton...and had taken a Jacke of black fustian (de nigro fustian) worth 20s, a bow and arrows, and a sword with a belt, perno, and a brayselle of silver worth 138.4d, a horse with a saddle worth 108 and other necessaries from the chambers of the said John at Leek to the value of 40d. And that William de Lichefeld, the Abbot of Dieulacres, Edmund de Draycote, a monk and cellarer of the abbey, Robert de Beresford, William Dyke of Leek, and William del Brugge, the vicar of the church of Leek, had received the said Henry and the others named, continually and many times nip to the date of the Inquisition at Leek, knowing that they had committed the said felony.

There are two apparent versions of events here. In the first, de Warton is attacked and wounded by the group before being taken to Leek as a prisoner of the Abbot, his beheading coming four days later. This version may give the impression of judicial process in line with the Abbot's authority to wield the death penalty, however, it is a version contradicted in detail by Almarica's own take on events. Rather, she tells of how her husband was killed in the attack itself, beheaded there and then, before being robbed. Items listed as stolen include de Warton's clothes, weapons and crucially for us, his horse, before the gang then went on to de Warton's home and continued their plunder.

Almarica's strength of character comes across well in the document. This was a woman who, no matter the trauma of witnessing her husband's murder, somehow still found it in herself to take charge of a quest for justice, fully aware that the odds were resoundingly stacked against her. Accounts from the court roll's go on to comment on the result of

this plea, the wording of which suggests the murder of de Warton and the apprehension of the perpetrators was, on face value at least, taken seriously by the presiding authorities. It notes that while “*none of the defendants appeared, and the Sheriff returned they could not be found*” an order was made to place the whole group at risk of being outlawed should they continue to remain at large.

It was the threat of this order that seems to have motivated the Abbot himself to come forward later in the year at the subsequent summer Assize, the consequences of which are noted in the records by the following;

Afterwards the said William Lychefeld, the Abbot of Dieulacres, surrendered himself in Court at this Term, on the Quindene of Holy Trinity, and was committed to the Marshalsea, but as the said Henry de Bradeschawe and the others indicted as principals had not been convicted or outlawed he was admitted to bail and found security himself at £,100 and four sureties each at £,40 for his good behaviour.

Almarica’s petition of court had landed Abbot Lichfield, the most powerful man in the Moorlands, a stay in the Marshalsea prison. It was quite a feat. An institution originally founded in 1373 to house, amongst others, political prisoners charged with sedition, the Marshalsea was no soft option. Although the amount required to secure his release represents a considerable burden - approximately £155,000 in modern currency according to the national archives - his ability to pay it clearly demonstrates the level of financial clout that the Abbot had at his disposal. Returning to the Abbey, Lichfield was keen to return to business as normal and soon got to work with initiating a curious project of stage-managed surrender on the behalf for the other men involved in the attack. Over the next two years, each would come forward and give themselves up voluntarily to the courts and as they did, each would miraculously present a Royal pardon specifying nullifying any crimes they may have committed prior to 1381. Suddenly, the justice that Almarica may have thought underway evaporated into the air like the illusion that it was ultimately always destined to be.

How the Abbot managed to provide such pardon for his collaborators must have appeared a complete mystery at the time, but the distance of history can help us make better sense of it today. At the time of the feud between de Warton and Lichfield, the

power balance of England was under genuine review due to the aforementioned fall-out of the Black Death and the Crown's responding policies.

Uprisings in the provenances were common and they were growing increasingly dangerous. This is the time of the infamous Peasants Revolt, the most famous of the uprisings that took place in the period, its path taking the rebel leader Walter "Wat" Tyler to the eyes of King Richard himself. The event was something of a wake up call for the King, and in the aftermath it appears a great number of Royal pardons were issued to figures such as Abbott Lichfield in a move that suggests the King, now in realisation as to the level of disquiet in his Kingdom, felt he needed to retrospectively condone the brutalities that had taken place at local level under the banner of maintaining control across the preceding years.

It was an opportunity Lichfield would have been prime-placed to seize upon for himself and all connected. And so it came to pass that despite all the eye witness testimony, the oaths and the initial imprisonment of the Abbot himself, by the summer of 1381 every man implicated in the murder of John de Warton was lawfully acquitted of culpability.

Memory as Legend

The impact that de Warton's death would have had on the common population of the Staffordshire Moorlands is hard to overstate. He would have already been a well known figure locally prior to his feud with Lichfield, but his attack on Lichfield's men would have ensured his name reached every corner of the region. It is not without reason that the medieval hero Robin Hood is more often thought to be amalgamation of different protective figures from the Middle Ages rather than a specific historical individual of the time; a cannon into which the story of de Warton is ripe for inclusion. Given the depth of the shadow that was being cast across the lives of those living through Lichfield's tenure as abbot, de Warton's rise to influence would come to provide more than comfort. He would have come to represent something akin to hope itself.

From the evidence of the record, I feel it safe to assume that the years following de Warton's murder would have brought countless further moments of injustice from the Abbey, and with each one, the story of the man who once stood against the tyranny of Dieulacres would further imbed itself in the collective consciousness of the locals.

As the years passed by, it would be only natural that the story would turn into legend. It is almost inconceivable that it would not; and it is at this point that the details of de Warton's death really bare through onto the matter of the horseman.

On the day of his murder, as a yeoman, John de Warton would likely have been present at the market fair; and indeed April 24th 1379 would have been a market day.

Furthermore, in order to be able to lie in wait for de Warton, the Abbot and his men would have needed prior knowledge of his movements, which would make such a day ideal. He was, as shown in Almarica's testimony, travelling on horseback, and the matter of his actual beheading is well beyond doubt. Meanwhile, the Abbot Lichfield is a perfect fit for the contention that the perpetrator of de Warton's murder must have been someone of sufficient power to forgo prosecution. As we see from the record, no matter the impression first given, Lichfield ultimately got off with little more than a fine.

On the issue of the poem, the locality of the Sir Gawain and The Green Knight author, as a man of literary education and means, is most clearly and logically suggested to be the Dieulacres grange at Swythamley; and as we have seen, a "*Thomas Plonte of Snythomle Graunge*" is in fact named in Almarica's court pleas. Yet what is more striking still is the connection made on the timeline. Warton's death in 1379 is followed by the poem's creation at some point in the early 1380's. It is a piece that, at its core, is the story of the warrior in green - itself the colour of the Yeoman - arriving on horseback, daring to challenge the powerful leader before having his head severed from his body. That the poem's creation could well be the result of ecclesiastical in-joke, is an hypothesis of serious consideration.

As time moved forward, the actions of those in charge of Dieulacres would grow no more palatable. Just over 100 years on from de Warton's death, the monks of the Abbey were found to be amongst a group had been involved in a raid on a property in Cheddleton and similar events are found to litter the history of the Abbey right up to the point dissolution in 1568; the instance in which the Abbot William Albion used a longbow during a Leek riot of 1517 being a particular personal highlight of mine.

The story of de Warton not only completely satisfies the criteria imperative for any serious contenders for the horseman origin myth, but his story is *the* example of fitting circumstance recorded in the region during the entire period. The lack of justice following his murder would have undoubtedly served to ensure his legend continued to grow, the story of his rebellion and death seeing his memory re-cast as a symbol of popular resistance. As time passed, and names and places became lost from the narrative; the process by which his story became transferred to that of the restless spirit

is perfectly in keeping with the mechanisms of folklore.

John de Warton was many things. He was a man of the Moorlands. He was a husband. He was a yeoman. He was a local rebel leader with the courage to stand up in the face of the regime at Dieulacres. He may, genuinely, even have been the inspiration for the Green Knight. All of these things and more, I suggest that his memory endures still, throughout the region he once called home, in the legend of the headless horseman of the Staffordshire Moorlands.

Eli Lewis-Lycett 2021