

From The Modern Antiquarian

Posted by Chance

15th July 2010

The Black Legend

The black legend is the tale of forbidden love, a femme fatale, exposed passion and a multiple murder.

Crafted by a Hollywood icon into a 1940's silent black and white movie, the story told by a young John Schlesinger and Alan Cooke contains the same sinful mix of ingredients found in such film noir classics like *The postman always knocks twice*.

Unlike the pulp fiction penned by Raymond Chandler, this eternal triangle of temptation, lust and homicide, was not played out on the backstreets of some depression hit U.S. city, but on top of the highest and most sacred hill on the Wiltshire Berkshire border.

After 333 years of damnation, have the murdered or murderers' found peace in this ancient landscape?

As with any tale that has become legend, sorting fact from fiction is not straight forward. Many variations on the same theme have grown up and with the script writers hand at work, aspects may have been lost in the mix, added to or completely created. The tale I will now tell may not be the whole story but I shall attempt to be as honest and direct as can be construed.

Travel back in time to a cold winters day in the year 1676, the 23rd of February 1676 to be precise. The place is Winchester Assizes where a farm labourer named George Bromham and a widow named Dorothy Newman are standing trial for murder. The record of the trial is to be found in the Western Circuit Gaol Book for the period XXII-XXIX Charles II, the exact chapter XXVIII Ch.II, is retained in Winchester Library. George Bromham was a farm labourer living in the tiny village of Combe, just below Walbury Hillfort on the edge of Berkshire. He was married to Mrs. Martha Bromham and had a young son, Robert. It would appear that George Bromham had formed some kind of illicit association with the widow Dorothy Newman who lived in the larger village of Inkpen, a few miles over the other side of Walbury Hillfort, in the valley below.

It is not stated how long this relationship had been formed or what brought the two together or even if the relationship was "village gossip". What is clear is that one dark day in the weeks leading up to the trial, Martha and her son Robert were walking the ancient Wigmoreash Drove which connects Inkpen and Woodhay to the top of Inkpen Beacon and Combe. Either George or both George and Dorothy were lying in wait, and beat Martha and Robert to death with a "staffe". Whether both committed murder or not, the beaten bodies of Martha and Robert were dumped into the dew pond known as Wigmoreash Pond or as it became known "Murders' pool".

The tale now twists with the addition of a character called "Mad Thomas". Thomas is said to have been the village idiot and either deaf, dumb or both. It was Thomas who is said to have witnessed the dastardly deed and altered the authorities to the bodies and the culprit(s). Indeed Thomas is said to have been called as a witness at the Assizes. Whether this was fact or fiction is unclear, it may have been written into the film's script for convenience, the guilty party(s) may have been brought down by other factors such as tracks in the snow or mud, the murder weapon(s), blood stained clothing, village gossip or a guilty confession.

Whatever or whoever it was that pointed the finger of suspicion at George Bromham and Dorothy Newman, both were haled off to the Assizes at Winchester, both stood trial for the murder of Martha and her son Robert, both were convicted and found guilty of murder and both were ordered to be hanged "in chaynes near the place of the murder". Their public hanging took place on 3rd March 1676 in Winchester.

Records suggest that some dispute arose as to who would be liable for the cost of the "hanging in chaynes", which would involve the building and erection of a considerable sized double gibbet, together with two sets of iron "chaynes". As the crime was neither committed, or planned in either the parish of Combe or Inkpen, but on their borders. This was settled by the cost being equally split between both parishes and the place that neither parish had claim to as the boundary stopped at the side ditches, the Long Barrow itself. Records indicate that the two dead bodies were then brought back to Inkpen and laid out in the barn at the back of the Crown and Garter Inn, where they were measured up by the local blacksmith and fitted in their chaynes. This barn is reputed to have become a tourist attraction, probably initiated by the landlord, and was renamed 'Gibbet Barn'. It would appear that the final hanging of the bodies of George and Dorothy, now bound in their chaynes, took place each side of their double gibbet on the 6th day of March 1676.

The original gibbet lasted an unknown length of time, but the second gibbet was erected in 1850 to replace the rotted original. This was struck by lightning, and was replaced by number three in 1949. It is unclear if this was a 'prop' used in the film. However, that one lasted only one year, and number four was erected in 1950. Since then the gibbet has been sawn down by vandals on two occasions, in 1965 and 1969, both events believed to have been in protest against hanging. The fourth gibbet blew down in gales during the winter of 1977-78, where the stump had rotted away. The current gibbet was re-erected on May Day, Beltane, 1st May 1979.