

THE
LEGENDS
OF
THORNE

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The Legends of Thorne by F H Dallas

Thorne Local History Society

Occasional Paper No 18: 1995

Fact, embellished by fiction to spin a more sentimental tale, is the stuff of legend. When the half-truth, turned into legend, appears in print, it may well be taken as fact by the reader.

So, in recounting some of the more curious episodes in Thorne's history, few writers have been able to document their stories with specific facts. It is not surprising that we are left to wonder where fact ends and fiction begins.

Take the story of Conkey Jem in Harrison Ainsworth's *Rookwood: Dick Turpin, Highwayman*. Ainsworth's book shows some knowledge of Thorne, but at this distance in time, how can we establish the truth of his hut on Thorne Waste? Perhaps there was such a man, but who he was and where he came from remains a mystery. Without direct historical evidence from Ainsworth, the intelligent reader half suspects that here is a good story handed down by word of mouth and constantly embroidered in re-telling.

ROOKWOOD Book v: Chapter I The Hut on Thorne Waste

The hut on Thorne Waste, to which we have before incidentally alluded, and whither we are now about to repair, was a low, lone hovel, situate on the banks of the deep and oozy Don, at the eastern extremity of that extensive moor. Ostensibly its owner fulfilled the duties of ferryman to that part of the river; but as the road, which skirted his tenement, was little frequented, his craft was, for the most part, allowed to sleep undisturbed in her moorings.

In reality, however, he was the inland agent of a horde of smugglers who infested the neighbouring coast; his cabin was their rendezvous; and not unfrequently, it was said, the depository of their contraband goods. Conkey Jem (so was he called by his associates, on account of the Slawkenbergian promontory which decorated his countenance) had been an old hand at the same trade; but having returned from a seven years' leave of absence from his own country, procured by his lawless life, now managed matters

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with more circumspection and prudence, and have never since been detected in his former illicit traffic; nor, though so marvellously gifted in that particular himself, was he ever known to 'nose' upon any of his accomplices; or, in other words, to betray them.

Nowhere on the far east of Thorne Waste can I find a possible site for Conkey Jem's hut or his ferry. In the novel, Jem helps Dick Turpin in his flight from the law by ferrying him over the river. So long afterwards, the only sure fact is that Turpin the malefactor received sentence of death at York, carried out in that city on April 10th 1739. As for Conkey Jem, his hut and his ferry – both have gone into legend with him, thanks to William Harrison Ainsworth.

In the case of Eugene Aram, we even have an example of how stories from the past could be woven into an ingenious defence at law by someone at the time.

Eugene Aram of North Yorkshire was schooled at Ripon in Latin and Greek and also Hebrew. One of his ancestors had been High Sheriff of Yorkshire, but the

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status of the family had been reduced over the years. Commission of a crime was to cost him his life.

A shoemaker of Knaresborough, one Daniel Clarke, had the good fortune to marry a local heiress, entitled to a considerable fortune which she would soon receive. Thereupon Aram and Richard Houseman ‘did persuade Daniel Clarke to obtain on the strength of his wife’s fortune a large quantity of silver plate, jewels, rings and watches, on credit.’ He disappeared, when, possessed of the goods, he attended a meeting on the 8th of February to discuss the best method of disposing of the effects. Clarke was presumed murdered, and buried at or near St. Robert’s Cave in 1745.

In 1758 a man digging in the area for limestone found bones, which were then supposed to have been Daniel Clarke’s. In his plea to the Court, Aram cited instances of human remains being found in strange places, including the story of the hermit of Lindholme, in order to try to explain away the embarrassing appearance of the corpse.

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An account of Aram's defence is contained in the *New Newgate and Tyburn Calendar*.

Suffer me then, my lord, to produce a few of many evidences, that these cells were used as repositories of the dead, and to enumerate a few, in which human bones have been found, as it happened in this case in question; lest to some, that accident might seem extraordinary, and consequently, occasion prejudice.

1. *The bones, as was supposed, of the Saxon St Dubritius were discovered buried in his cell at Guy's cliff near Warwick, as appears from the authority of Sir William Dugdale.*

2. *The bones, thought to be those of the anchoress Rosia were but lately discovered in a cell at Royston, entire, fair, and undecayed, though they must have lain interred for several centuries, as is proved by Dr Stukely.*

3. *But my own country, nay, almost this neighbourhood, supplies another instance, for in January 1747, were found by Mr Stovin, accompanied by a reverend gentleman, the bones, in part, of some*

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recluse, in the cell at Lindholm, near Hatfield. They were believed to be those of William of Lindholm, a hermit who had long made this cave his habitation.

The jury were not impressed; Aram's partner turned King's evidence. Aram was found guilty and was sent to the gallows.

The following verses on the Hermit are by the Revd. Abraham de la Pryme, F.R.S.

WILLIAM OF LINDHOLM

*Within a humble lonesome cell
He free from care and noise does dwell,
No pomp, no pride, no cursed strife,
Disturbs the quiet of his life.
A truss or two of straw's his bed,
His arms, the pillow for his head.
His hunger makes his bread go down,
Although it be both stale and brown.
A purling brook that runs hard by
Affords him drink whene'er he's dry,
In short, a garden and a spring
Does all life's necessaries bring.*

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*What is 't the foolish world calls poor,
He has enough; he needs no more.
No anxious thoughts corrode his breast,
No passions interrupt his rest,
No chilling fear, no hot desire
Freezes or sets his blood on fire,
No tempest is engender'd there,
All does serene and calm appear.
And 'tis his comfort when alone,
Seeing no ill, to think of none,
And spends each moment of his breath
In preparations for his death,
He patiently expects his doom,
When fate shall order it to come.
He sees the winged lightening fly
Through the tempestuous angry sky,
And unconcerned its thunder hears,
Who knows no guilt can feel no fears.*

Abraham de la Pryme was born in January 1671 at his father's residence halfway between Hatfield and Epworth. He gained a B.A. degree at Cambridge in 1694, and then served as Curate in Lincolnshire and Hull, before being appointed Vicar of Thorne in 1701. He died aged 33yrs.

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So we come to the most romantic of all Thorne's legends, if that is what it is – the history of the hermit William of Lindholm, described by Abraham de La Pryme in his diary for 1700 as a Saint.

Having been in Yorkshire this last week, I mett with diversed learned and ingenious gentlemen, who told me a great many observable things.

It was upon Hanson's house at Hale's Hill, in Woodhouse, that St. W[illiam] a' Lindholm set his wagon. One Hanson lived there then. Look and see when the Hansons lived, and then you may find perhaps when W[illiam] a' L[indholm] lived.

The Oxford Dictionary of Saints (D H Farmer 1978) contains no reference to a Saint William of Lindholm, and this must cast doubt that he was a canonised saint. When De La Pryme used the term, was he implying that he was a Saint, a Hermit, a Priest or just an eccentric recluse, a religious devotee living his own way of life? Is the legend fact or fiction?

In his *History of the Isle of Axholme* (1858), W Read writes of 'a hermitage or cell in sixty acres of land on

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firm sand ground; also a well four or five yards deep with good spring water. The hermit's grave was covered by a large freestone, that measured in length eight and a half feet, in the breadth three feet. The cover being removed, Mr Stovin and the Rev S Wesley did find a tooth, a skull, the thigh and shin bones of a human body'.

The account presents problems. Where in the area do rocks of this size outcrop to make a burial chamber? What ever made them sure that the few bones found in 1747 were the bones of the hermit? Nevertheless, the find and its finders have gone into the legend of the hermit, along with the story *The Hermit's Revenge*.

THE HERMIT'S REVENGE

In the middle of Hatfield Chase, many years ago, stood the remains of an ancient hermitage, formed out of a vast rock. An altar of hewn stone stood at its eastern extremity and a freestone slab covered what was designated the Hermit's Cave at the west end. From the centre of the floor a clear spring of water had its source, and flowed through a fissure in the rock-bound wall, falling with a musical sound over the shelving

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stone without; from thence it took a winding course over the Chase.

The solitary inhabitant of this gloomy hermitage was called 'William of Lindholm', and was as remarkable for his severe monastic discipline, as for his rigid adherence to seclusion. Seldom was he visited by the neighbouring people. On a marriage celebration, however, a visit to the priest was deemed indispensable. The bridegroom invariably, on the morning of wedlock, led his fair bride to the hermitage, to drink water from the 'well of happiness' – as the priest was supposed to have endowed the water with divine excellences – and to receive the blessing of 'William of Lindholm'.

Three miles north of Hatfield lies the rustic town of Thorne. At the time to which our legend refers, an old baronial hall stood in this vicinity, belonging to the Loveleigh family. The wars of the Roses had scattered and decreased the numbers, and levelled much of the grandeur of those possessors, and now, the only representative of the family was a young man who had been restored to a part of the estates, along with the titled dignity of his ancestors.

One autumnal evening, returning from hunting, accompanied by a number of his friends and retainers, Sir Walter Loveleigh had occasion to pass by the dwelling of the priest. The measured tones of the bell had but just ceased, by which the hunting party knew that the devoted man had but just commenced his vesper duties. Sir Walter ordered his men to halt at the threshold of the cell, and driving his spear against the rough oaken door, demanded speech with the hermit. No attention being paid to various summonses, he applied the head of his hunting spear to the green sward, cut a square piece of turf, which he gathered carefully into his hands, and with it filled the hole through which the stream flowed from the interior of the cell. He waited the result with pleased complacency. Presently the water inundated the cave, and the priest was heard inside, drawing the huge fastenings of the door with an impatient hand. Through the gloomy doorway stalked the tall figure of the monk, his face betokening a consciousness of unprovoked wrong. He fixed his large black eyes upon Sir Walter, uttering at the same time a malediction on his untimely sport. He then released the waters from their troubled

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hold, and with a look of rage re-entered his dwelling place.

As Sir Walter vaulted lightly into his saddle he shouted aloud to the priest:- 'I have heard thy much vaunted waters designated 'waters of happiness', methinks they may henceforth be better recognised as the troubled waters of Hatfield Chase.' The hunters away, the waters flowed peaceably as before, and the priest closed the door of his dismal abode, to resume his vesper duties.

Years passes away. There was revelry in the halls of Sir Walter Loveleigh; for that day he had brought a bride to add fresh lustre to the home of his fathers. The noble friends of the happy pair were gathered in all their glittering array; knights and ladies, retainers and serving men. Many were the sports which were to be performed in honour of the day; and every face beamed with hilarity while anticipating the scene before them. One ceremony, however, was still to be effected to make perfect the harmony of the present occasion. The usual visit to the abode of the hermit was yet to be performed.

Sir Walter had forgotten his prank years before, and now he and the fair Rosa, with a gay cavalcade proceeded to the hermitage. William of Lindholm received them in silence, proceeded to the extremity of the vaulted dwelling, and from its dark recesses produced a large drinking horn; and applying it where the stream fell into an artificial basin of the rock, he gave it into the hands of the lady, filled with water. Rosa drank freely of the contents, and then gave the drinking cup into the hands of Sir Walter. The vessel being partially emptied, the priest commanded them to kneel. Supposing he was about to invoke a blessing on their heads, the bridal pair immediately complied. 'The insults and injuries that we receive never grow too old for retribution' spoke the monk in a deep sepulchral voice, 'Sir Walter Loveleigh once broke upon the devotions of an unoffending brother of St. Benedict; he desecrated the threshold of his dwelling with revilings and untimely jests; by his sacrilegious pastimes did he subject himself to the malediction of one whose curse, once pronounced, no soul can avert, no prayer retract, no penance annul! He dared to pollute our consecrated waters – to dally with virtues that do wash away the loathsome corruption of mortality; and from this hour, a fearful retribution awaits him. Ye have drank of the

troubled waters of Hatfield Chase. The curse of William of Lindholm attend you to your castle hall.'

Sir Walter, partly through rage, and partly through fear, started to his feet, and for the first time became conscious of the state of insensibility into which his young bride had been driven by the awful words and gestures of the priest. Turning from the latter, with eyes starting with passion, he raised the lady in his arms, and bore her through the rude doorway of the cell into the open air – where he laved her pale cheek with the waters flowing through the rock. As soon as animation was restored, Sir Walter lifted her into the saddle of his horse, and holding her before him, rode with haster home. The air and the ride seemed to have given a re-action to her fainting frame, and by the time they reached their destination, the fair Rosa declared herself well enough to join in the festivities of the day. The music began; and soon, in the gaiety of the dance, the sinister words of the hermit were forgotten.

The night was advanced – the tide of mirth bore the hours along – midnight was proclaimed from the turret walls. Hushed were the music and the laugh, the measured dance and the joyous song. Silence was in the hall, and soft feet moved around the couch of Rosa

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Loveleigh. A tremor was over her whole frame – her face was pale – her eyes were shut, or did but at intervals open, when a deathly languishment was in their expression.

The frantic husband watched the intermittent breathings of his wife – he felt her tremors become more violent, until convulsions ensued – he saw her beautiful features writhing into most fearful contortions. The fever, the laboured perspiration, the deathly pallor, the agony, struck terror into his soul, he uttered a wild exclamation, and fell senseless into the arms of his attendants. That night, bride and bridegroom lay side by side, locked in the sleep of death!

Suspicious were busy in the minds of the bridal guests. No time was lost – they repaired to the hermitage on the Chase. The door was fastened; and on admission being demanded, no reply was returned, the door was broken open. There lay the nefarious priest, in the last struggle between life and death; a drinking horn was by his side, toward which he pointed; and with his last breath he confessed having administered a poisonous drug to the bride and bridegroom, when they had

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visited him for the purpose of receiving the blessing, and afterwards, by mistake, he had drank of the fatal draught, and that the throes of death were already convulsing his system.

Read's History is a reputable source for the period. I almost believed that what I was reading was some old history, but the highly coloured story of how the solitary priest brought retribution to Sir Walter Loveleigh for past sins by first cursing and then poisoning his illustrious communicant and his bride before dying from the same fatal draught himself, would have done credit to the most lurid fiction writer of the day.

There could have been a Hermit of Lindholm; Aram, an independent source, certainly thought so, but Read's story seems a rattling good yarn, mixing fact and fiction. After reading the story, I wanted to know more – where he came from, some of his life style, the whereabouts of his home where he lived his lonesome life.

What, then, of Sir Walter? *The History and Antiquities of Thorne*, printed in 1829 by S Whaley covers a long

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history the town, its local life and people. It is a worthwhile book. Some of the older people of the town – some alive, some passed out of this world – have told me that the author, whose name is not given in the book, was William Casson. In it, the man Sir William Loveleigh, his baronial mansion, or his family, his death at the hermit's revenge, do not even rate a mention.

Did Thorne ever have such a mansion? In Whaley's book, *The History and Antiquities of Thorne* there is a footnote on page 68. It records a 'tradition frequently recited by an elderly female of the name of Sheppard, who died a few years ago, aged upwards of 90, 'that king Charles I passed through Thorne, on his route to Hull, the time that he was refused admittance into that place; and that the king, when at Thorne, stayed a short time before the door of an old mansion that was then standing near the entrance of the Marshland road, where he had some refreshment. The old mansion above alluded to was taken down about 50 years ago, and modern erections, on or near the same site, at present belong to Mr. J Mason'. Whaley (or Casson) also quotes De La Pryme who says 'that his majesty

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stopped at an alehouse at the north end of the town where he refreshed himself, with a cup of ale’.

Was the mansion the ale house? The present writer would like to hear from anyone who knows of the site or size of the mansion demolished around 1779, or indeed the truth behind any of Thorne’s legends.

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I must acknowledge my obligation to the authors whose work is quoted in this paper:

William Harrison Ainsworth, Rookwood

The Newgate and Tyburn Calendar (Folio Society 1951)

Surtees Society, The Diary of A De La Pryme

W Read, History & Topography of the Isle of Axholme, its Manors & Parishes, 1858

S Whaley, The History and Antiquities of Thorne 1829

D H Farmer, Oxford Dictionary of Saints, 1978

My thanks are due to the Librarian and his staff at the Thorne Library for help in locating the books.

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Published by Thorne History Society

Supported by Thorne Moorends Regeneration Project

2013