Bawtry Heritage Group

Preserving our Past for the Future

Registered Charity No. 1188945

TALL TALES & HORRID HISTORIES FROM BAWTRY'S PAST

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INTRODUCTION

Bawtry - Tall Tales & Horrid Histories

This paper explores a rather different side of the history of the town and is intended to be amusing and entertaining as well as informative. It covers stories, some of which are fanciful and, maybe, difficult to believe as well as the funniest, yuckiest and most gruesome aspects of the Bawtry's history. There are also a few stories which are just interesting and normally factual.

The curious village name is from Old English Baltry, a tree rounded like a ball.

This paper is based on some initial research so please let us know if you are aware of any other stories to add to the list.

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1 The Saddler of Bawtry

A legendary figure of folklore, whose demise is used for an excuse to never turn down an offer of a drink

"Don't be like the saddler of Bawtry" is an eighteenth-century phrase warning never to refuse the offer of a drink.

According to the tale behind this particular expression, a saddler from Bawtry fell foul of the law and found himself sentenced to be hanged at the nearby Knavemire gallows in York.

At that time, a tradition was in place that allowed anyone condemned to die at the York gallows the chance of one final fortifying drink of ale at a tavern on the outskirts of the city. But, being abstemious, the saddler of Bawtry turned down the offer and so the grim procession continued from the jail to the gallows, where he was duly hanged. But within a minute or two of the noose tightening, a messenger arrived with a last-minute reprieve from the local justice of the peace – alas too late. Had he accepted the offer, and had only paused to quaff his 'one for the road', then the horseman would have arrived in time to save his life. As it was, by turning down the drink, the saddler was somewhat unceremoniously killed.

Whether true or not, this tale has ultimately been used as a proverbial warning not to turn down a drink since the mid-eighteenth century at least.

A slightly different version of this tale of a saddler of Bawtry who was hanged for leaving his liquor is told in a note left by a native of Bawtry who was born in 1732.

The note says:

"A traveller, who had a good deal of cash in his saddle-bags, was robbed soon after leaving Bawtry on his way to Doncaster, viz. near the King's Wood in Bawtry Lane, a place at that time noted for robberies and even murders. He had had the saddler at Bawtry to stuff his saddle, which hurt his horse's back. Returning to Bawtry with his pitiable tale, he asked for the saddler; but lo! no saddler was to be found. The traveller had given him part of a tankard of ale, which was untouched standing in a manger in the stable. Now the saddler being a well-known thirsty blade, it was thought surprising that he forsook the friendly draught, and the sagacity of the multitude immediately suspected him to be the guilty person, and on this circumstance the poor saddler was immediately taken into custody, detained, and sent to York Castle, where he lay till the following assizes, when he was tried and acquitted." Seeing that the saddler was acquitted and not hanged, it would hardly seem as if the old inhabitant of Bawtry had "put the saddle on the right horse".

According to an online list of those from Bawtry executed at York since the 14th century, none were indicated as being a saddler. However, the records are poor and don't always record the place of abode or occupation. We also don't know the crime the saddler committed. The only one recorded as either from Bawtry, and/or a saddler, is:

Wednesday 29th August 1797 at Tyburn gallows, without Micklegate Bar (Robert Dyson – aged 35) native of Bawtry who worked in the Post Office – crime Embezzling. His body is buried in Bawtry.

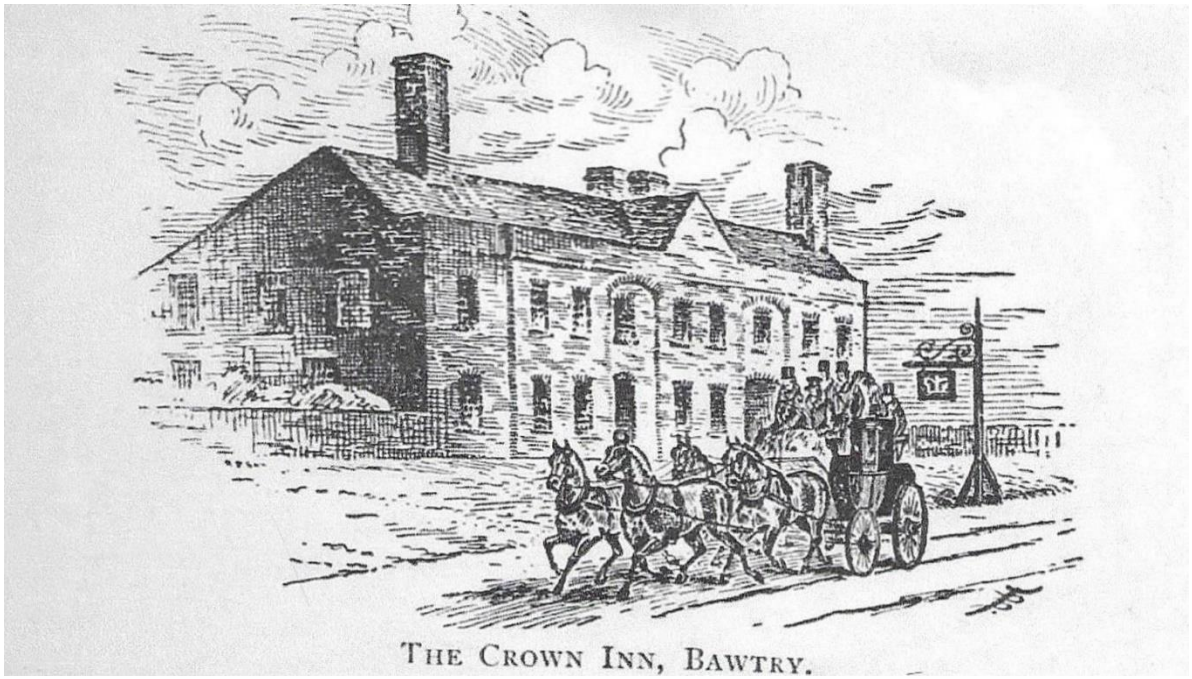
Regardless of which story you choose to believe this should be a fearful moral for teetotallers to ponder.

Make what you will of the tale but certainly never turn down a drink in Bawtry!

2 The Crown Hotel, Market Place

One of the most frightening haunted places in Doncaster being home to quite a bevy of ghosts.

The Crown Hotel is a Grade II listed mid to late 18th century building with extensive 19th and 20th century additions. It was built for the heavy coaching traffic and as a Posting House, has reported a ghostly apparition of a woman in the upper corridors and a figure of a young child lurking hungry in the restaurant. It became Bawtry's main coaching inn after Thomas Fisher moved his business from the Swan, across the road, to Scrooby Top around 1780.



THE CROWN INN, BAWTRY.

An aged monk, in a belted habit, witnesses see haunting the stables where he died many years ago.

Wandering the corridors and dining room crying is the ghost of a serving girl, recognised by her uniform. She worked at the hotel over a century ago. After she cheated on him, her jealous lover (the chef) murdered her in a fit of pique and rage.

In 2004, a ghost hunting group were called in by the manager to investigate a paranormal phenomenon. They confirmed the reported findings of a woman walking along the upper corridor, with a ghostly young child sitting in the corner of the restaurant. One regular resident was often woken by the ghost of this little girl sitting on her bed.

There is also the Crinoline Lady, who died in a fire many years ago, and haunts the old wing. She is also often spotted in reception, where she may well greet you, when plates go flying and temperatures drop dramatically.

The Hotel additionally has associations with Robin Hood and Dick Turpin. The latter, or at least his horse's hooves, can be heard on the gravel outside. However, it is not

explained how Dick's horse, Black Bess, is distinguishable from others. Dick certainly gets about in spirit form!

3 Bawtry and Black Bess the Wonder Horse

You don't have to come from Bawtry to know the legend that is Black Bess and the role she played in the great escape of the notorious highwayman Dick Turpin.

Bawtry certainly stakes a claim to the escapade captured so eloquently in the novel Rookwood by William Ainsworth. Today in advertising literature for the Crown Hotel in Bawtry there is mention that residents whilst lying in their beds can hear the sound of Black Bess on the cobbles outside. Although, as the Bawtry Heritage Group website repeats, "It is not explained how Dick's horse is distinguishable from others".

The real problem is that none of it is true. But why let the truth get in the way of a ripping yarn and a little hyped advertising.

Major Mowbray and Mr Paterson pursued the highwayman as he hurtled on Bess over the Yorkshire border and through the first settlement in the county, heading north on the Great North Road into "Bawtry". Ainsworth writes with much descriptive panache as the epic pursuit towards York gathers pace and excitement. Mowbray and Patterson, the latter being Turpin's most feared assailant, according to Ainsworth, stop in Bawtry. "Holding a council of war for a few minutes, being doubtful which course he had taken". The low road to Thorne was where Ainsworth had sent him, the tension mounting as Bess tired, but maintained her speed with super powers worthy of any mythical creature gone before her. Turpin, Ainsworth notes, "did not dare to check her, fearing that, if she stopped she might lose her force, or, if she fell she would rise no more".

Dick Turpin and Black Bess

Nice that it is for Bawtry to have a small part to play in the epic novel of 1834; nothing is mentioned of Turpin stopping and although his pursuers did for a "few minutes" that was it! How therefore did the Crown Posting House get involved? Ainsworth by the time he wrote the novel would surely have known the Crown which by that time had become the leading Inn and Post House servicing travellers and distributing mail on the Great North Road and adjacent turnpikes that ran out of Bawtry. But mention it, he does not.

It is true that Turpin, an Essex man by birth, fled to Yorkshire having committed two murders in the south. He was eventually arrested under the pseudonym John Palmer for horse theft and hanged at York Tyburn on the 7th April 1739. There is no evidence that he ever came through Bawtry at all, let alone on the back of a wonder horse. Harper in his 1901 book celebrating the Great North Road before the motor car really

brings the fantastical tale of Turpin's overnight ride from London to York crashing down. He cites the ride of Cooper Thornhill, landlord of the Bell at Stilton, who for a bet rode non-stop to London and back again, in 1740. "The distance, 154 miles in all, was done in eleven hours thirty-three minutes and forty-six seconds. He had nineteen horses to carry him, and so is no rival of Turpin's mythical exploit in riding to York on his equally mythical Black Bess".

If the wonder horse never was, our tale struggles to maintain any good measure of credence. However, perhaps its real demise is nailed when one examines the dates. All the records the Bawtry Heritage Group have to hand is that the Crown Posting House was built in the Mid to late 18th century. Turpin was hanged in 1739, before, it would seem, the building came to be. Shame!

4 Arthur Thistlewood and the Cato Street Conspiracy

Arthur Thistlewood (1774 – 1 May 1820) was an English radical activist and conspirator who resided for 2 years in Bawtry. In 1820, a time of economic distress and radical unrest in England, he organised the Cato Street Conspiracy to assassinate all the members of the British Cabinet. Britain was hideously undemocratic in the early 19th century. A very, very small amount of the population had the vote. People were very angry about this and were inspired by the rhetoric of the French Revolution to try and get a situation where they believed they could redress the serious economic problems, poverty and corruption by getting universal male suffrage in. Initially this was by peaceful means but then, as time went on, things changed!

Arthur Thistlewood

Arthur was born in Tupholme in Lincolnshire, the extramarital son of a successful farmer and stockbreeder. He attended Horncastle Grammar School and was trained as a land surveyor but never seemed to have followed that business. He is said to have become unsettled in mind through reading the works of Thomas Paine who was an English-American writer and political pamphleteer. He travelled to America and then France and returned to England in 1794 obsessed with revolutionary ideas – that the first duty of a patriot was to massacre the government and overturn all existing institutions. Unsatisfied with his job, he obtained a commission in the army at the age of 21. He was appointed ensign in the first regiment of West Riding militia on 1 July 1798 and on the raising of the supplementary militia he obtained a lieutenant's commission in the 3rd Lincolnshire regiment, commanded by Lord Buckinghamshire.

In January 1804 Arthur married Jane Worsley, a lady older than himself, living in Lincoln, and who possessed a considerable fortune. After his marriage he resided in Bawtry, living in one of the Pilgrim Cottages on Church Street, formerly Low Street. After some 2 years or so he then moved to Lincoln. It is uncertain whether this happened in Bawtry or Lincoln, but Jane died two years after their marriage whilst giving birth to their first child. Her fortune reverted to her own family, by whom Arthur was granted a small annuity.

In 1808 he married Susan Wilkinson. Apparently, he was a doting husband and father and she was supportive of him and probably supported him politically as well. He then quit his commission in the army and, with the help of his father, bought a farm. The farm was not a success and in 1811, being obliged to leave Lincoln owing to some gambling transaction which left him unable to meet his creditors, he drifted rather aimlessly to London. It was here that, due to being thoroughly discontented with his own condition, he became an active member of the Spencean Society. The Society of Spencean Philanthropists in London took their name from the British radical speaker Thomas Spence. In 1814 Arthur resided for some time in Paris, returning to England around the end of the year.

By 1816, Thistlewood had become a leader in the Spencean Society, and came under the observation of the government as a dangerous character. The group being known for being a revolutionary organisation, involved in unrest and propaganda and the plotting for the overthrow of the government. Thistlewood's second in command in the group was George Edwards, who was actually a police spy. The group were silly enough to let this man into their ranks and tell him everything quite quickly.

In December 1816 Arthur helped plan an uprising (the Spa Fields Riot) in which the Bank of England and the Tower of London were to be seized. After the rioters were dispersed, Thistlewood and another conspirator were arrested but were eventually acquitted. Thistlewood was imprisoned (1818-19), however, for issuing a challenge to a duel to the 1st Viscount Sidmouth, a former prime minister. As home Secretary, Sidmouth had been chiefly responsible for the Six Acts of 1819, which were intended to suppress radical movements.

Most of the Spencean group members were angered by the Six Acts and the Peterloo Massacre, as well as the economic depression and political conditions of the time. The Peterloo Massacre took place in Manchester on Monday 16 August 1819. Eighteen people died and 400-700 were injured when cavalry charged into the crowd of around 60,000 people who had gathered to demand the reform of parliamentary representation.

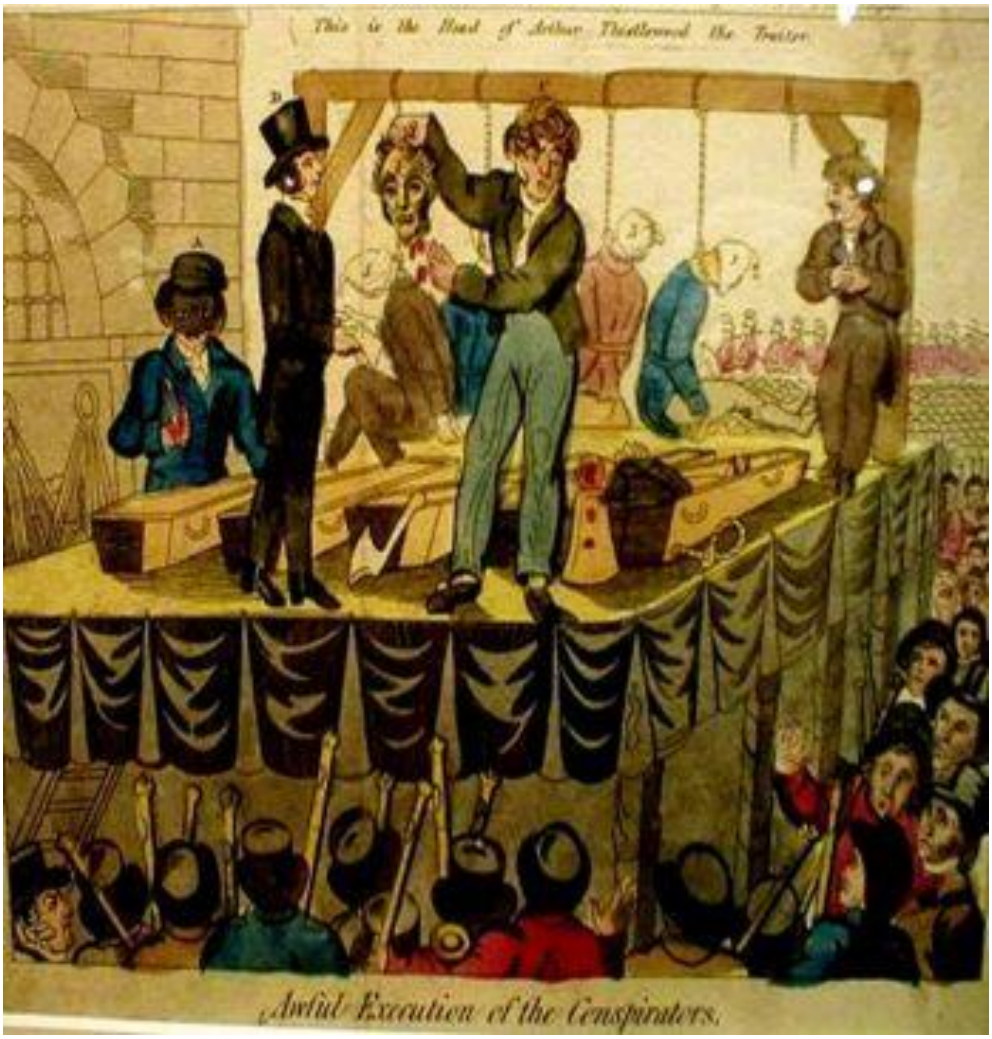
Released from prison, Thistlewood learned that the Cabinet ministers had arranged to dine at the Earl of Harrowby's house in Grosvenor Square, London, on February 23, 1820 but, however, this was pure fiction as part of a police trap. So, on the evening of the 23rd, as Thistlewood and several armed accomplices were preparing to leave a room in Cato Street for Grosvenor Square, they fell into the trap as police officers appeared and arrested thirteen of them. Arthur killed one policeman during the scuffle. Thistlewood himself escaped but was captured the next day. Found guilty of high treason, he and four others were hanged outside Newgate prison in London. Five others were transported to Australia.

The arrest of the Cato Street conspirators

The intention of the Cato Street Conspiracy, after assassinating the cabinet, was to seize key buildings, overthrow the government and establish a “Committee of Public Safety” to oversee a radical revolution. According to the prosecution at the trial, the group had intended to form a provisional government headquartered in the Mansion House. The audacious plan was scandalous, and as such occupied a large portion of newspapers across the country for some time up until the executions. The conspirators became vilified and infamous in the country.

Beheading, usually by axe, was the customary method of executing traitors in England at the time. The victim was drawn (dragged by a horse to the place of execution, hanged (not to death), disemboweled, beheaded, and then quartered sometimes by trying each of the four limbs to a different horse and spurring them in different directions.

Arthur, and the other Cato Street conspirators, were the last to suffer judicial decapitation by axe in England. After drawing and hanging, Arthur and the other four members, were publicly decapitated. The execution was considered to be so traumatic that the quartering of their bodies was not proceeded with. The execution of these men highlighting the barbaric nature of a legal system that these men sought to overthrow.



The execution of the Cato Street conspirators

How Arthur conducted himself in his last moments before his execution shows the character of the man. On the gallows, in front of a jeering crowd, Arthur Thistlewood recited the words from his Old Bailey speech: “Albion is still in chains of slavery. I quit it without regret….I hope the world will be convinced that I have been sincere in my endeavours and that I die a friend to liberty…My motives, I doubt not, will hereafter be justly appreciated.”

Thistlewood was convinced that the future would exonerate him of the charges levied against him, much as it has throughout the course of history to revolutionary figures. He remained steadfast in his beliefs, principally in his Deist faith; he refused repeatedly the offers of the Ordinary of Newgate Horace Cotton to pray, like the majority of men presented to the scaffold that day. Thistlewood refused a hood, and was reportedly sucking an orange until the moment when the trapdoor beneath him swung open, killing him in short order.

The impact of these deaths on the families was massive. Arthur’s wife, Susan, along with family members of the other conspirators petitioned the King and the Home Office to “alleviate their acute sufferings and return the mutilated remains”, but they received no response. Their graves remained unmarked inside the walls of a prison and they did not really have a way to say goodbye to them.

5 The Haunting of the Phoenix Theatre

The Phoenix Theatre in Bawtry was formerly a Primitive Methodist Chapel built in 1862. The present seating area in the auditorium was the main area for the congregation.

What was the Primitive Methodist Chapel & is now the Phoenix Theatre

Strange events in the theatre may indicate that it might be haunted by the spirit of a former Pastor who is appalled at the performance of plays, the drinking of alcohol and singing and the frequent raffles which constitute gambling. It is rumored that the Pastor hung himself in the south-west corner of the 'now' theatre auditorium because of being accused of misdemeanors with a couple of young women – although no evidence of this has been found.

During psychic presentations at the theatre several mediums have described an angry 'presence' trying to block their activity. One psychic said that the source was from a particular point in the theatre - probably where the pulpit was originally located.

A member of the Dramatic Society was alone in the theatre painting a set. She described how she was taken by the throat and pushed against the wall. She resisted and told the 'presence' to leave her alone and that she wasn't frightened. At that point the seats in the theatre started going 'up and down' on their own.

Some people claim they have been pushed going down the stairs from the upper dressing room.

Another member was working in the control room upstairs. Being alone in the theatre he locked himself in. Suddenly he heard angry, raised voices in the building. He searched the building but there was nobody there and the door was still locked.

Lighting cables have mysteriously been pulled out. They are designed so that they can't be pulled out accidentally. Is the Pastor sabotaging the productions?

Many people do not like being alone in theatre, especially at night. Are they right to worry or is this all a load of hokum? You must decide. Would you spend the night alone in the auditorium in the dark?

6 The Spooks of Bawtry's & Little Bawtry's

Bawtry's

Bawtry's public house on High Street, Bawtry was formerly called the Marquis of Granby and subsequently The Penny Farthing in 2008, then renamed the Cooper & Griffin in 2012 when Andy Longworth became the landlord. It is now called Bawtry's. Next door, on Wharf Street, is Little Bawtry's. Being situated near to the site of Bawtry wharf, the building displays, on its frontage, reference to the 12th century port.

The Marquis of Granby was a popular historic name for coaching inns, probably to commemorate Lieutenant General John Manners, the Marquis of Granby (Nottinghamshire), a celebrated military figure from the Seven Years' War. He was known for his compassion for his soldiers and helped retiring soldiers set up public houses after their service. He was certainly a popular figure and many establishments adopted his name, the Bawtry Marquis of Granby being one of them. The original building dates to the late 18th century and was certainly serving as a coaching inn in 1791 as listed in a Directory at the time. It later evolved into The Granby Inn and then The Granby Hotel.

Bawtry's location on the Great North Road, a major north-south route, was crucial for the town's development as a coaching centre especially during the 19th century. Given the pub's location and its history, a number of interesting stories have become associated with it although they are not widely known.

Andy, who is still the landlord, recalls that after a great Saturday night, leaning against the bar as the landlord in his own pub, a black shadow figure (which was caught on CCTV) came behind him and lifted the tail of his jacket. He said that the figure quickly ran off and passed through the wall rather than the door itself. What he later realised was that the part of the wall it passed through was once, many years ago, where the front door used to be.

In another instance, he recalled being in the cellar with a colleague who was stood close, about eight feet away. From behind him flew a champagne cooler bucket, hitting his colleague. Andy confirmed that they were the only people in the cellar. On another occasion, a spirit bottle that sat on the right hand side of the bar, firmly on the shelf, launched itself far across the bar, in a completely inexplicable way. Andy suggests, this was either due to the spirit in the bottle or the spirit in the sky, but either way it felt supernatural!

Izzy, one of the supervisors says that she was alone in the bar after closing time and spotted a figure. The front door had slammed shut causing the interior glass door to become mirror-like and reflective. She said she was stood at the bar and saw in the reflection a sailor or fisherman-like figure stood behind her in the hallway, wearing waders and boots. He had a long dark beard. She said the image was incredibly clear in the reflection, and she wondered if it could be connected with the history of the town

as an inland port. She also said that there have been several other occurrences experienced by other staff members, these being of different ghost sightings and unexplained, supernatural occurrences in both Bawtry's and Little Bawtry's. These have occurred at all times of the day, but mainly at night when all the customers are gone. She commented that maybe they are just shy!

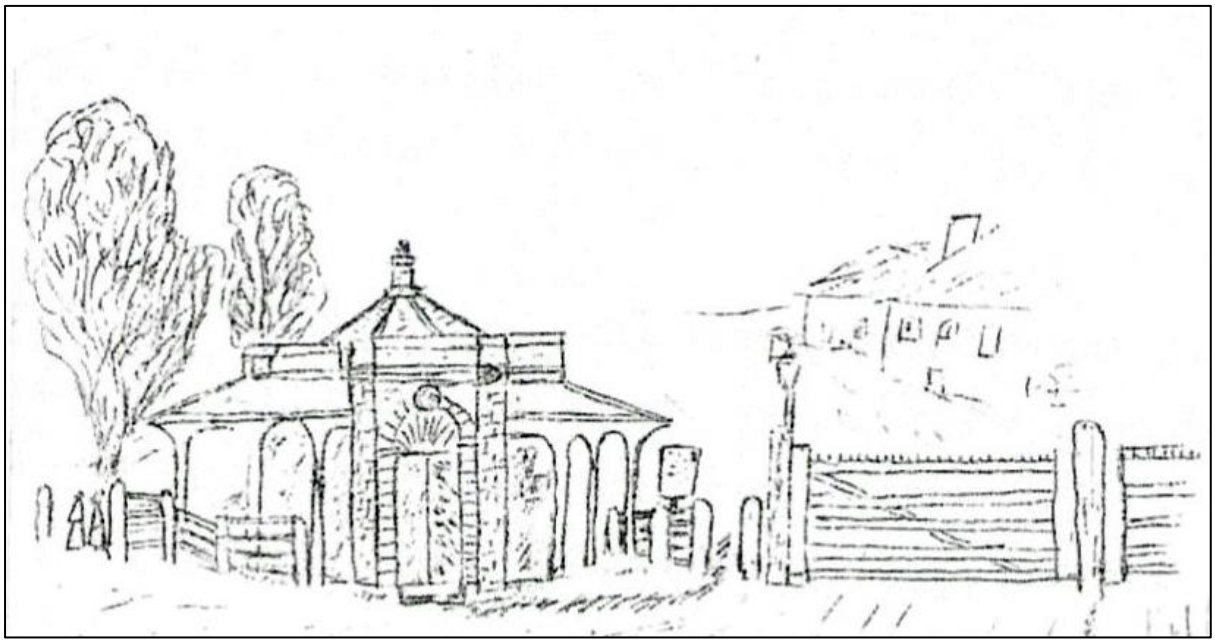
Very recently, one of the bar staff (Paul) was painting the cellar and, when he was in the area where there had previously been the flying ice bucket, he kept hearing his name being whispered. He thought it was another member of staff but when he realised that it wasn't the hairs on his arm stood up!

Although there is not any clear evidence it is rumoured that the original Granby pub was linked to the famous local expression: "don't be like the Saddler of Bawtry", which warns against refusing a drink and stemming from a local legend about a saddler who was hanged after refusing a final drink. (See separate paper in this section). It is certainly feasible that he might have frequented this location but the saddler's last drink refusal would most likely have been at a location on the outskirts of York. Whether you choose to believe this or not, this local expression adds a layer of historical and folkloric interest to the pub's history.

Date written: 06/07/25

7 The Toll Gate Murders

Today at the location we know as Hawksnest you can buy fish for your aquarium and all the extras you need to keep them healthy, whilst having your car washed by hand. However, during the late 1770's the most prominent feature at this site on the southern extremity of Bawtry, as the Great North Road leaves the environs of Yorkshire heading for Retford in Nottinghamshire, was a Toll Gate. This one came into being with the emergence of the Bawtry and East Markham Turnpike Trust in 1766. Its manager William Yeadon was responsible for the control of traffic flowing north and south through the toll, ensuring the correct charge was requested and paid and the property, which was also home, was maintained.



William lived on the premises with his mother Mary. Saturday 3rd July 1779 would be the last day William undertook his duties as the Toll Gate Keeper; before that day was out he and his mother would be savagely bludgeoned to death with a farming implement known as a hedgestake.

Since the event a number of varied scenarios have been passed down describing the motivation for the events that took place that late Saturday afternoon. Central in all of those stories is robbery and whether it was to recoup lost gambling debts or maximising a moment of opportunity. Whichever, the outcome for the Yeadons remained the same.

The culprit's identity was in no doubt and due to his own missteps and increasing panic after the deed he was captured with lightning speed. His name was John Spencer.

Whatever John's motivation it seems likely that he was disturbed whilst attempting to relieve William of his day's takings. In a state of uncontrolled panic at the prospect of being caught Spencer attacked William and used the makeshift weapon to beat him to death. It seems very unlikely that Spencer came armed with the weapon used; a

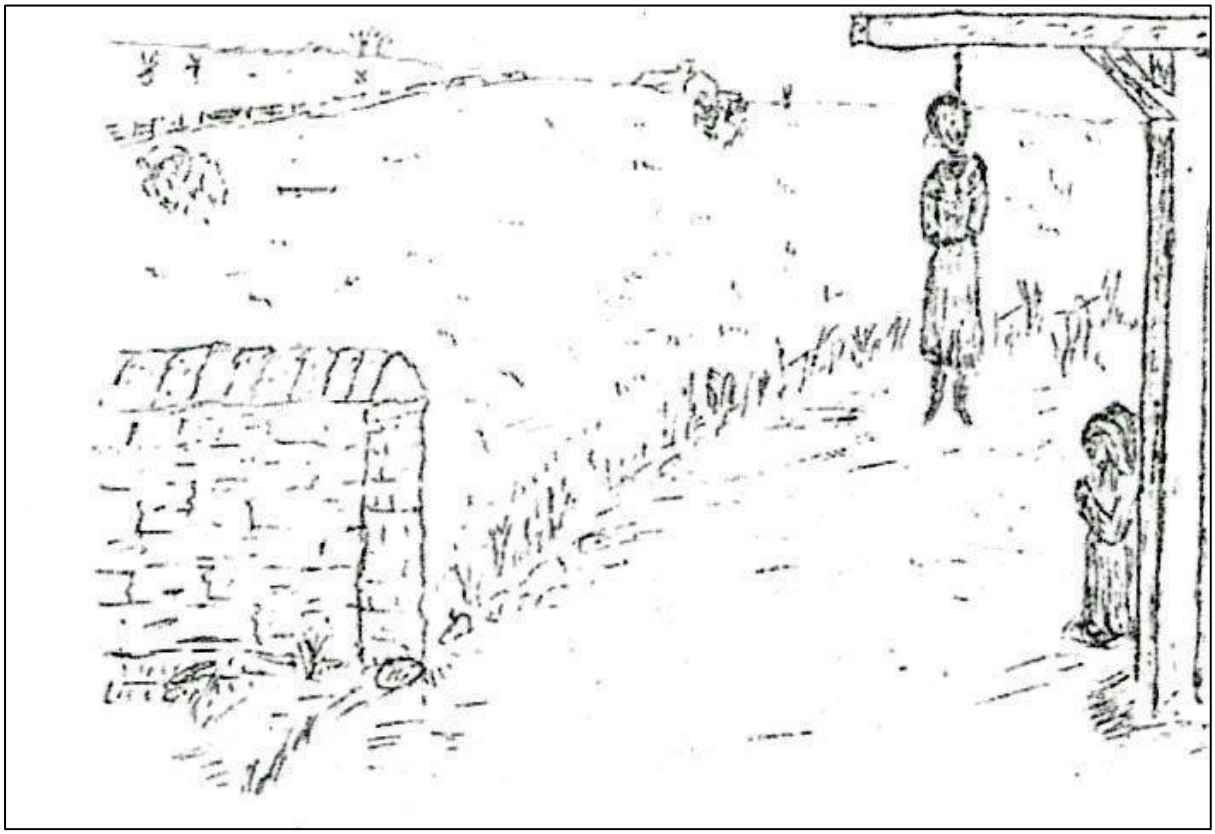
hedgestake is an implement some five to six feet in length, sporting a sharpened point; hardly a convenient thing to go burgling with!

What makes this event even more chilling is that after killing William, Spencer did not flee; he took time to venture upstairs where he found Mary and inflicted upon her the same fate that had befallen her son. Perhaps Spencer thought he needed to deal with Mary in case she had witnessed the events downstairs and recognised him as the perpetrator.

With two bodies at a location where it would not be too long before they were found Spencer dragged them from the scene and dumped them in the nearby River Ryton. He then fled.

Soon after all these events had taken place a company of soldiers arrived at the Toll Gate and discovered the place in disarray and with blood everywhere. The officer in charge ordered a search of the area and in a short space of time the bodies of the Yeadons were discovered floating in the river. The pitiful wretch that was Spencer was also soon found apprehended and taken into custody to face his fate.

Spencer was found guilty and was hanged in Nottingham for his crimes before the year was out. As was still common then his rotting body was gibbetted and displayed for all to see close to the spot where he committed his evil deeds; Gibbet Hill Lane 250 years later still remains.



It is however the closing chapter of this tale that is the most grisly. Either by truthful recollection or misty legend Spencer's body, it is said, remained on display until 1833 some 54 years later. The gibbet post, when finally removed, is said to still exist in the

Doncaster Museum archives.

You can read more about this tale via bawtryheritagegroup.co.uk or in the Bawtry Heritage Centre, within the community library. Two papers, The Toll Gate Keeper by W J Scott and Bawtry in the Coaching Era by M P Maguire can be explored.

Sketch drawings by W J Scott.

M P Maguire
1st September 2026.

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Paper 2 - The Crown Hotel, Market Place

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Paper 3 - Bawtry and Black Bess the Wonder Horse

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Paper 4 - Arthur Thistlewood and the Cato Street Conspiracy

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ii. Britannica
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iv. The Cato Street Conspiracy – *Celebrating the bicentenary of the West End job*
v. Treason: Betrayal and Deception – The National Archives

Paper 5 - The Haunting of the Phoenix Theatre

Paper by Tony Jones, a Bawtry resident and involved with the Phoenix Theatre – based on actual recorded events - August 2023

Paper 6 – The Spooks of Bawtry's & Little Bawtry's

Sources - Andy Longworth – current landlord & Wikipedia

Paper 7 – The Toll Gate Murders

Paper by Mick Maguire, based on account previously wriiten & illustrated by W J Scott.

Bawtry Heritage Group website: https//www.bawtryheritagegroup.co.uk