MURDER AT TAVIDGE?



by
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INTRODUCTION

In 1655, the Great Plague that decimated large parts of London, reached the small village of Tavidge in the Forest of Dean, Gloucestershire. In a brave act of sacrificial isolation, similar to that shown in the Derbyshire village of Eyam in the same year, the villagers cut off all contact with the outside world to avoid spreading the disease to neighbouring villages. At least that is what most of the history books tell us. However, the villagers may not have been quite as God-fearing as those history books make out, if a contemporary account of the events in Tavidge are to believed. A parchment written by a tax collector from Tewkesbury and recently discovery in the archives of the Bodleian Library in Oxford claims that there was murder afoot in the small village, although there is no further evidence to corroborate his claims.

HISTORY OF TAVIDGE

The village was founded in the late 11th or early 12th century, possibly by William Fit Norman or his son, Thurstan. According to the Domesday Book, William owned much of the Forest of Dean and the surrounding area, including the villages of Mitcheldean (*Dene*), Longhope (*Hope*), and Ruardean (*Ruuirdin*), and by around AD1130, Thurstan was also lord of the manor of Tavidge. As with the Forest of Dean area in general, Tavidge prospered from its iron production and in the summer of 1280 it supplied King Edward I's army with weapons and armour for its war against the Welsh.

During the Black Death the number of burgage plots in the village dropped from twenty-four to just seven and it seemed that Tavidge would go the way of many other small communities in the country. However, it clung on to its existence thanks to the market that was perpetuated by consecutive manorial lords. By the end of the 15th century there were thirteen burgage plots, but this increased dramatically to thirty-two after the Dissolution, when Guy of Monmouth bought church land and property and obtained a Charter for Tavidge, increasing its status from a village to a town, albeit the smallest in the county. Unfortunately for Guy, one of the relics he obtained from Gloucester Abbey was reputed to be haunted, and when his wife died suddenly in 1553, a peculiar mass fear spread through the town and led to many inhabitants fleeing. The town Charter was quickly revoked by Queen Mary, who regarded it as having been bought with money stolen from the Catholic Church, and by the beginning of the 17th century the number of burgage plots had fallen once again to thirteen.

THE BLACK DEATH

In September 1665, the Great Plague struck Tavidge. How it arrived is uncertain, but a tailor in the village took a delivery of flax from London shortly before the disease spread and it is possible that the flax was infested with fleas carrying the infection. By the end of October, half of the villagers were dead or dying, and the history books record that the villagers took the decision to cut off all contact with other communities to prevent the pestilence from spreading. This selfless act worked and no other town or village in Gloucestershire was effected by the plague, although everyone in Tavidge perished. The village and the area around it cordoned off by the surrounding communities and its existence slowly faded from memory. In recent years the history books have resurrected that memory, although the precise location of Tavidge has long been forgotten.

Isolation – Pious Act or Cover-up?

In February 1996, whilst researching 17th and 18th century tax records in the Bodleian Library in Oxford, I chanced upon a note written by a tax collector named Isaiah Purlond. The piece of parchment was bundled up with the Tewkesbury Account Rolls for 1715, although the note itself was undated. Isaiah Purlond is not a name that has appeared in any other historical document, and so the authenticity of what is written in the note should be regarded as unverified. The parchment, however, has been analysed and is confirmed as being of an early 18th century origin. It has yet to be fully transcribed, but the author of the note clearly refers to a murder committed at Tavidge in October 1665. He claims that the tale he relates was passed down to him by his father, Jacob, who in turn got the story from his sister, an inhabitant of Tavidge who died in the Great Plague. How his father came to hear the story from someone in the village is unrecorded – the village was under self-quarantine at the time of the supposed murder, which throws serious doubt on the accuracy of the claim.

The story told by Isaiah Purlond revolves around a young woman living alone in the woods on the outskirts of the village. She rarely bothered with the other villagers, although she was regarded by them as a good healer. When the plague arrived in Tavidge, the villagers sought out the woman's help, but when she was unable to stop the spread of the pestilence they shunned her and accused her of bringing the disease upon them. One night, an angry mob turned up at her house and dragged her back to the village where she was summarily tried and convicted of witch-craft. The head of the village, a man named Obadiah, was charged with taking her into the woods and executing her. The man returned at dawn, after killing the woman and burying her body in the woods, and it was only after this murder that the villagers cut off any contact with the outside world. It was the killer's wife who supposedly informed Isaiah's father of the murder, adding that it was in order to cover up the unlawful murder that the villagers had imposed a quarantine on themselves, not to protect others from the spread of the disease.

The story is not unlike the tales that circulated during the Black Death in the 14th century, but whether there is any truth in it may never be known for certain. Plagues were commonly blamed on outsiders, particularly women, and executing so-called witches was often seen as a solution to pestilence. How the story was passed on to someone outside the village, and why it was never reported to the authorities by either Jacob or Isaiah throw doubt on its authenticity, but it just might be true!



Note: The parchment referred to in this article is currently undergoing restoration, but it is the intention of this journal to publish a transcript as soon as it is available.