DICK TURPIN

Dick Turpin, who is much romanticised through legend, was in fact an infamous highwayman, murderer and convicted horse-thief. His daring and violent antics have assured him a place in British history.

**Early Life**

Richard (Dick) Turpin was born in 1705 in Hempstead, Essex. His father, John, was an innkeeper and a butcher. As a teenager, Turpin became an apprentice butcher. He married at twenty-years-old and five years later, then with his own butcher’s shop, he helped the the deer-poaching ‘Gregory Gang’, in disposing of carcasses.

**Landlord in Gangland London**

By 1734 (at the age of 29) Turpin had become landlord of a pub at Clay Hill. His association with the gang was such that he joined them in brutal attacks and robberies in the outer London area. In 1735 Turpin was named by The London Gazette as a member of this criminal gang. Foolishly Turpin and the gang immediately committed further shocking assaults in the Essex area with three of his fellow gang members being arrested and executed at Tyburn.

**Wanted Man**

Turpin turned to highway robbery from April 1735. He plagued Epping Forest, Southwark and other London areas. On 10 July he was nicknamed ‘Turpin the butcher’ and had a bounty of £100 on his head. His crimes continued throughout 1735. In February 1737 Turpin reportedly sent a letter to his colleagues arranging a meeting (for horse stealing) but it was intercepted by the authorities. Turpin escaped while the others were arrested and imprisoned.

**Undeterred Highwayman**

The following month Turpin took up with highwaymen Matthew King and Stephen Potter, committing a series of robberies, culminating in an incident at Whitechapel where Mr King ended up dying of gunshot wounds. Reports stated that Turpin may have shot Matthew King. Turpin fled into Epping Forest and on being spotted by Thomas Morris, shot and killed him on 4 May with a carbine. ‘The Gentleman’s Magazine’ named Turpin as the suspect – a £200 reward was offered.

**Turpin (a.k.a John Palmer) comes to Yorkshire**

In June 1737, Turpin (under the alias John Palmer) lodged in Brough, East Yorkshire, posing as a horse trader. He regularly crossed the Humber committing crimes. He once stole a horse from Pinchbeck, Lincolnshire, and rode it to his father’s at Hempstead. He left the horse behind and his father was sent to gaol for the crime. Turpin returned to Brough having stolen three more horses from Thomas Creasy. Creasy finally tracked down and recovered his horses in autumn 1738, thefts for which Turpin was eventually tried.

**Locked up in York Castle**

In October 1738 Turpin (still pretending to be called Palmer) threatened to shoot someone. He was arrested and sent to York Castle to await trial. Turpin’s final undoing came when he wrote a letter to his brother-in-law. A man called James Smith, who had taught Turpin to write, was delivering the letter and recognised the handwriting. Smith travelled to York Castle to identify Turpin on 23 February 1739 and he received the £200 reward originally offered following Morris’s murder.

**Found Guilty**

On 22 March, York Assizes declared Turpin guilty on two charges of horse theft and he was given the death sentence. Turpin bought a new frock coat and shoes, and hired five paid mourners. On 7 April 1739, Turpin and John Stead (also a horse-thief) were paraded through York, by open cart, to Knavesmire. Following the hanging, Turpin’s body was taken to an inn in Castlegate and buried the next day in the graveyard of St George’s Church, Fishergate. It was shortly reportedly as stolen, however, the body-snatchers (together with Turpin’s corpse) were soon apprehended. The body was reburied, possibly with quicklime, and is said to lie in St George’s graveyard, York.

**Black Bess and the Legendary Journey to York**

In legend, Dick Turpin and Black Bess, his faithful mare, are synonymous for their supposed 200-mile ride from London to York, a tale originating in Rookwood (a novel by William Harrison Ainsworth). It was in fact highwayman John ‘Swift Nick’ Nevison who, in 1676, after committing a robbery in Kent and urgently needing an alibi set off on the ride of his life reaching York in around 15 hours.

**Dick Turpin, Remembered**

Through folklore, Turpin’s violent character has become that of a romantic and dashing highwayman, which is far away from the truth that he was a dangerous and merciless thief. What cannot be disputed though, is that Dick Turpin has cemented his place in British history and will always be remember as one of the most infamous highwaymen in history.