

## Thieving and Armed Robbery in Ewelme

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The Archive's earliest newspaper report of how petty larceny was tackled is from March 1771. Richard Peck was accused of stealing a lead pump. For his apprehension and commitment, a reward was offered of 5 guineas – a fortune to humble village folk in those days. Thirty-year-old Peck was distinguishable by his speech impediment and pockmarked face, and surely, he would be eagerly pursued. Another substantial reward on conviction of the '*Offender or Offenders*', this time of £10, was offered in by the Parish Church Wardens in October 1797 after the church was broken into. '*The Surplice and Communion Cloth stolen out of the same, together with a Bassoon and Clarionet.*' (Not many years ago the offertory box was raided, requiring the installing of the present impregnable donation box).

On March 3<sup>rd</sup>, 1840 there was a determined break-in at James Garlick's house 'The Mount', [demolished to make way for Chaucer Court in 1965]. Philip Baker and John Collins were caught and charged with the crime; Baker for the burglary and Collins for feloniously receiving stolen goods. Baker had made a large hole in the brick wall of the larder to steal two fitches of bacon, five hams, and three cheeses, '*amongst other things*'. Mr Garlick's cheese was found at Baker's house and Collins had 30 or 40 lbs of bacon in his cupboard! The pig meat could be identified by the '*peculiar manner*' the carcass had been cut up by Mr Garlick's son. (The Garlick family also lived at The Greyhound Inn and ran an abattoir behind). The sentences were stiff by today's standards. Baker to 18 months imprisonment and hard labour. Collins to 4 calendar months and hard labour!

In 1927 John Reid and Charles Shepard of Ewelme were charged at Watlington Magistrate's Court with stealing a rabbit value 1/6d in Ewelme on July 15<sup>th</sup>. They pleaded not guilty (presumably to poaching) and elected to be dealt with summarily. Farmer Herbert Orpwood, John Munday and Alfred Munday gave evidence. Reid made a statement from the dock denying having been near the spot. Shepard also said he knew nothing about the rabbit. Notwithstanding, they were convicted by the Bench.

The most serious crime in Ewelme was the audacious armed raid on a house party being held at Ewelme Down House in 1972. This made the national papers with the headline '*Armed Gang snatch £1/2 million at party*'. The host was Mr Michael Holding, the 65-year-old owner of the house and retired headmaster of the exclusive Gibbs Preparatory School in Kensington. At 8 pm the gang, believed to consist of 6 men, disguised with balaclava's and stockings burst in through the French windows armed with sawn off shotguns, revolvers and coshes! The guests and servants were ordered to lie on the floor and held at bay with shotguns, whilst Mr Holding and another guest Mr David Cleary, were coshed and forced to go to the strongroom which Mr Holding was compelled to open. Mrs Helen Holding's jewellery and furs and cash were snatched.

Before the gang escaped, they divided the guests and servants into two groups and locked them in separate rooms. They were all released about 20 minutes later when an anonymous call, believed to come from the gang, was made to nearby RAF Benson, telling a startled airman where the captives were. Mr Holding and Mr Cleary were taken to the Radcliffe Infirmary at Oxford, both with head and face injuries. Mr Holding, although suffering from shock, was later allowed home, but Mr Cleary was detained. Watlington Police Station set up a special incident room as hundreds of police officers, some of them armed, were involved in the hunt, which stretched over five counties! Thames Valley Police described the haul as being of exceptional value estimated to be more than £500,000! Unfortunately, there is no other record in the Archive, so we don't know if the gang was ever caught, or the valuables recovered.

Another armed robbery in Ewelme occurred 20 years later. Until 1999 Ewelme's remaining village shop had a Postmaster, Stan Cottrell. A previous attempt on the post office had been abandoned, but on May 8<sup>th</sup>, 1992 an intruder entered the shop armed with a gun! Stan was not the sort of man to be intimidated and tackled the young thug, but during the struggle was hit by the weapon on his head and shoulders. Stan's wife Joan raised the alarm, and the villain lost his nerve and fled. Police cars and a Police helicopter were quickly on the scene whilst Stan went to hospital for his wounds to be stitched up.

The attack on a valued member of the community shocked many villagers and left them feeling vulnerable and angry. There was an urgent move to revive more intimate policing in Ewelme - considered sadly lacking. Indeed, it was remembered that in earlier years Watlington had a Police Station, with a Magistrates Court to deal with local crime and a local policeman was assigned to Ewelme between the wars. During the last war farmer Tom Orpwood filled the role as a Special, and in the 1950's Benson's village policeman, PC Nash, would cycle through Ewelme looking for petty misdemeanours, such as broken bicycle lamps! (George Cannon's memoir mentions PC Mike Brooks being a policeman who lived in Ewelme after 1980. There is a record in the Parish Council Minutes of July 1981 of the 'village policeman' arranging car parking, and PC Brooks is remembered by others as living on the bank next to the village hall. When he left is not known).

Determined to take positive action after a spate of burglaries in 1991 (and some four months before the village shop incident), Brian Benson and John Burbage had asked the Parish Council to put a Neighbourhood Watch Scheme on the Agenda. They were told it was not a Parish Council matter, but the Council was supportive. So, the scheme was pushed ahead, and in 1992 Lydia Benson was the first local co-ordinator with the Wallingford Police. Although the Ewelme initiative petered out after some years, many of us still have the Neighbourhood Watch signs on our front doors.

*Ewelme Village Archive*