



HANGINGS and HIGHWAYMEN

(around Sutton Coldfield)

By Janet Jordan



In the eighteenth century, there were two important roads which by-passed Sutton Coldfield on their way north up to Chester, which was the embarkation port for Ireland in those days. Both originated as the Chester Road coming up from London which split at Castle Bromwich, the left route veering to the west and going through Tyburn, Pype Hayes, New Oscott, Banners Gate and Hardwick, in the direction of Stonnall and Aldridge, and continuing on as the Chester Road

The other half branched eastwards, running through Water Orton, skirting Curdworth, Wishaw and Allen End, and becoming the London road around the Bassett's Pole and Canwell Gate area. It then carried on through Lichfield and Stone. In the sixteenth century, Bishop Vesey knew this road well, as the place where he provided work for the poor, setting them to gather up the large stones from the highway which, until then, had been almost impassable.¹

Not only did the 18th century traveller have to contend with the continuing appalling state of these roads, especially in bad weather, but the threat of attack by highwaymen was always present. It is not surprising therefore that both of these routes were feared by all. For the local inhabitant, visiting friends could mean it was safer to hire a horse or carriage; for the tradesman, he would seriously have to consider what form of conveyance his merchandise might require. The stage coach occupier would make doubly sure his valuables were safely locked away and the postal service would go to great lengths to ensure their packages were closely guarded - usually with pistols at the ready. And to cap it all, the traveller might even be unfortunate enough to witness what was supposed to be a deterrent to other malefactors - the horrible sight of a felon hanging from a gibbet by the roadside.

So, which of these two roads would you have chosen to travel on?



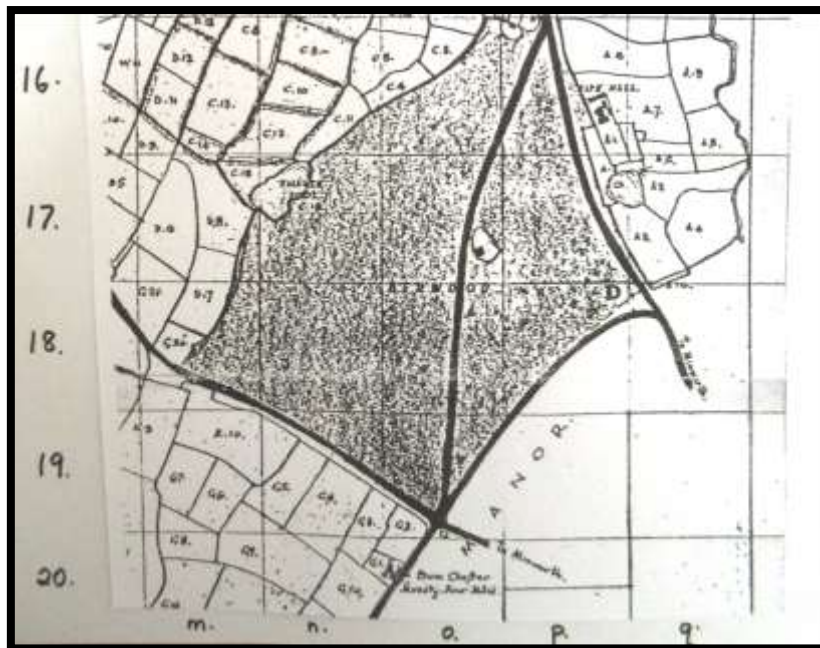
The Chester Road

This might have been the better option - had you been travelling in the 16th century. For the simple reason that help with the problem had been at hand in the Pipe Hayes area long before the 18th century newspapers were shocking their readers with reports of criminal activity. Here, a service had been provided from as early as 1511 giving protection to travellers as they embarked on their journey across the moorlands of Sutton Coldfield. Evidence of this emerged in 1626 when a claim was put forward to recover fees which were still payable for the ancient service. Sutton's Warden and Society were eventually forced to settle the debt with a lump sum of £60.



(b) A Bowbearer

What was being demanded was a back payment of sixty shillings and ten pence per annum owing to the "Bow Bearer of Berwood", an archer who would have accompanied wayfarers across the Coldfield. Here, the Ber-wood referred to was then part of Sutton Coldfield.²

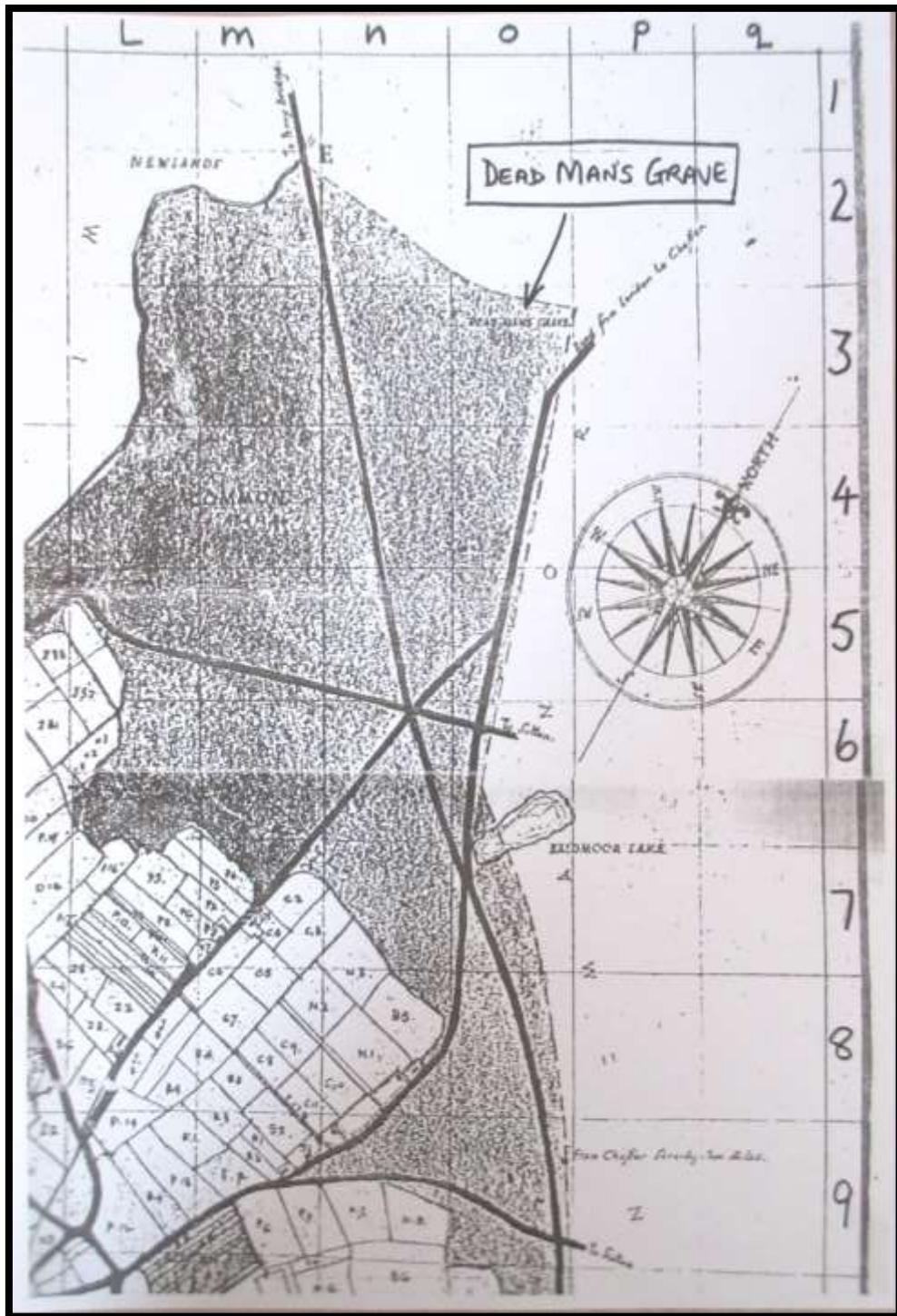


(c) Site of the Bowbearer's Cottage (Grid Reference o.17.)

A 1760 survey map by J. Tomlinson shows that this wood was bisected by the Chester Road. In the middle of the wood, adjacent to the road, was a Cottage and Lodge (part of the Pipe Hall Estate) then owned or occupied by Samuel Smart who was probably a park ranger (Map Grid reference o.17.).

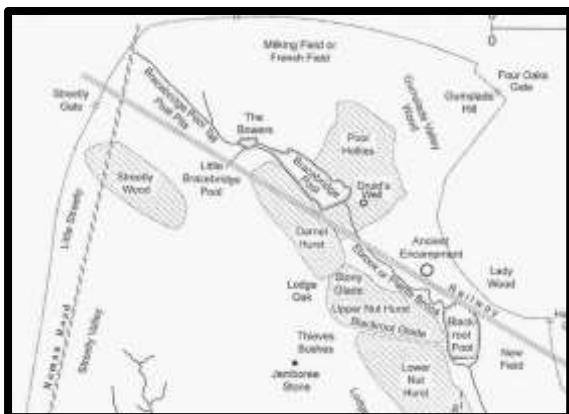
them, were thus able to claim the land from Sutton. The 'Dead Man's Grave' now lies just outside the Sutton boundary.⁶

What caused these deaths? The event took place on highwayman territory, so were the brothers murdered? Were they the victims of a robbery? Were they shot? There are no further facts available, but for the two of them to die together, foul play must be suspected.



(e) The 'Dead Man's Grave' at Hardwick, near Streetly

One only has to look at local maps and newspaper reports of the day to see that this wasn't a nice place to find oneself. A schematic plan drawn from the 1779 map of Sutton Park shows some 'Thieves Bushes' to the west of Blackroot Pool, ideally positioned to give a clear view of any unsuspecting wanderer coming down the pathway known as Blackroot Glade.⁷



(f) The 'Thieves Bushes'



(g) Highwaymen waiting in ambush!

We all know that highwaymen were prone to hide behind bushes, ready to spring out and relieve the occupants of stage coaches of their valuables. You really wouldn't want to meet one on a dark moonless night, but it was no less fraught in the daytime. Just look at some of the newspaper articles of the time:⁸

Derby Mercury, Friday 5th October 1750

Birmingham, Oct. 1. On Wednesday Mr. Henry Hunt of this Town was stopped on Sutton-Coldfield, in the Chester Road, by two Highwaymen, who robbed him of his Watch and Money; but on Mr. Hunt's asking him to give him back some Silver, the Highwayman returned him six Shillings, and immediately rode cross the Coldfield, and robbed another Gentleman in Sight of him, and then rode quite off.

Oxford Journal - Saturday 5th July 1766

A few Days since a Woman genteelly dressed was found murdered, with her Throat cut from Ear to Ear, in a Wood near Sutton Coldfield, Warwickshire. She was carried to the Irish Harp near that Place, where the Jury sat on her Body, and brought in their Verdict Wilful Murder against some Person or Persons unknown.

Derby Mercury - Friday 23 October 1772

A few Days since the Chester Machine was robbed on Sutton Coldfield Common, by a single Footpad, about three o'Clock in the Afternoon. He came out of Sutton Park, presented a Gun to the Coachman and ordered him to stop, declaring at the same Time that he would take nothing from the Out-side Passengers. He opened the

Coach Door, and took from one Passenger Six Guineas, another Gentleman perceiving the Coach stop, had presence of Mind enough to secure his Money (about ten Guineas) in his Boots, and his Money being demanded, he declared he had none, offering at the same Time to stand Search. One of the Out-side Passengers had twenty-seven Guineas in his Pocket, which he said he should have delivered if demanded. The Robber is described to be a very thin short Man, he was muffled up in a Great Coat, and snuffled much in his Speech. Since this Robbery the Proprietors have established a Guard (well armed) with the Coach.

About Seven o'Clock on Thursday Evening as Mr. Westley was on his Return from Birmingham to Walsall, he was attacked by a Highwayman near Handsworth Field, and robbed of his Watch, Half a Guinea, and some Silver.

The same Evening a Highwayman attempted to rob the Chester Fly at Clemsley (Chelmsley) Wood, near to Lord Aylesford's, but Capt. Baldwin being a Passenger (with two Ladies and a Gentleman) he bid him keep off or he would shoot him, and immediately fired his Pistol at him, which is supposed to have wounded him, his Hat being found the next Morning shot thro' the fore Part of the Rim. He was seen by the outside Passengers to fall against a Gate near the Spot, and heard to give several Groans. The Horses took Fright at the Report of the Pistol and went on.⁸



(h) A Hold Up

We even have a report from Twamley, writing in 1855, who says:-

Was buried on the 28th day of March 1729 John Johnson, a Silk dyer from London, Who was found Murdered upon Sutton Coldfield Common in this Parish (the Common land were then lying open, and for many years afterwards remained so). Suspicion fell on a man named Edward Allport, as having committed the barbarous deed. Who was a person of loose habits and bore a very indifferent character; Whose house of rendezvous and place of resort (principally) was at a small pot-house called or known by the "Boot and Shoe" on the left hand side of the Chester Road, near to the village of Erdington, by no means anything like a house of respectability but noted for women of bad character being kept at it.⁹

And this is where another famous Sutton landmark came into being, as Twamley continues:-

He was apprehended and taken before the Magistrates who examined him, and committed him to Warwick, afterwards, to be tried there, at the next Summer Assizes. When he was found guilty of the Murder, and sentenced to be hanged by the neck until he were dead; and afterwards Gibbeted, at or near the place, where he committed the murder, Which sentence was carried into effect, on the 29th day of August, 1729. That part of the Coldfield, were called Gibbet-hill afterwards.⁹



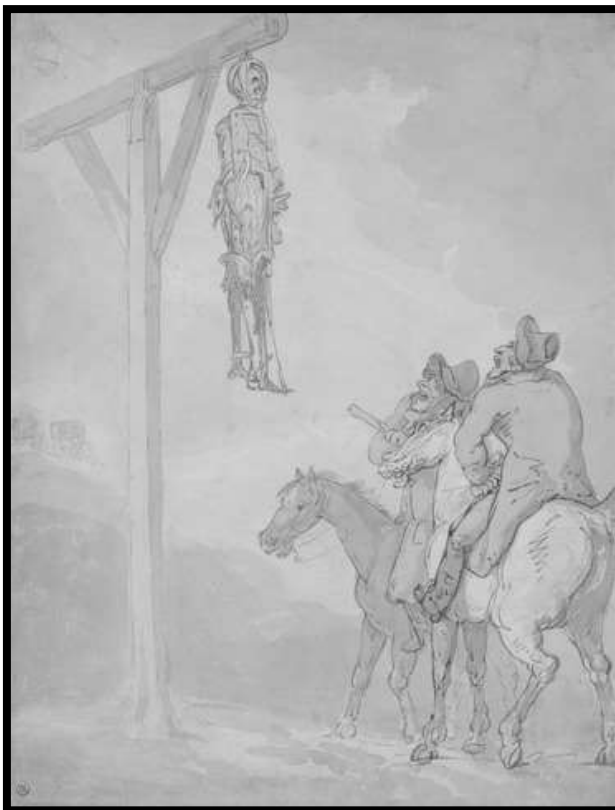
(i) Gibbet Hill, near New Oscott

A gibbet was quite a revolting sight, especially if it was occupied, as would happen when a person found guilty of murder, particularly a highwayman, had already been hanged. His body was then hoisted up in a sort of cage, purposely erected near a crossroads to be a deterrent to others of similar leanings. Here the gibbet remained while the body decomposed or until it was decided to take it down. Such offensive practice was outlawed in England in 1834.

Although most people were unlikely to witness such an atrocity, a rather amusing fictitious account written in 1792 by Richard Graves regarding a certain Mr Geoffry Wildgoose and his companion Jerry Tugwell, who had been travelling from Lichfield to the races at Warwick, shows that it was always a possibility:-

Our spiritual adventurers, having sufficiently refreshed themselves, travelled at a good rate; Wildgoose being desirous to reach Sutton-Cofield, on his way to Warwick, that night; so that little conversation passed between them.

As it was now some time past the summer solstice, night overtook them sooner than they expected; and when they came into the forest, or chase, near Sutton, it was quite dark, and they had wandered considerably out of the great road. At length, however, they came to what they took for a direction-post, when Wildgoose told Jerry, if he could but climb up the post, and trace out with his finger the first letter upon either of the hands, he could tell which way to turn; as, he took it for granted, one road led to Birmingham, and the other to Warwick. "That I can do, then, master," says Jerry; "for, when I was a young fellow, there was not a boy in the parish could climb a crow's nest as well as myself." Tugwell, therefore, desiring his master to take care of his staff and his wallet, ran up the post like a cat; but, when he was got about seven or eight feet high, he made a sudden pause, and squelch he came down again, bawling out, with great consternation, "Lord have mercy upon us!



as sure as I am alive, there is a dead man hanged up." Which, indeed, was partly true; for a highwayman, who had committed a murder, was hanged in chains there two or three years before; but, the body being decayed, only part of the skeleton remained, for a terror to these honest men, rather than to those hardened wretches for whose edification it was intended.

They now travelled on, therefore, under the direction of Providence, and in half an hour more saw some lights at a distance, which proved to be Sutton-Cofield, whither they were bound.¹⁰

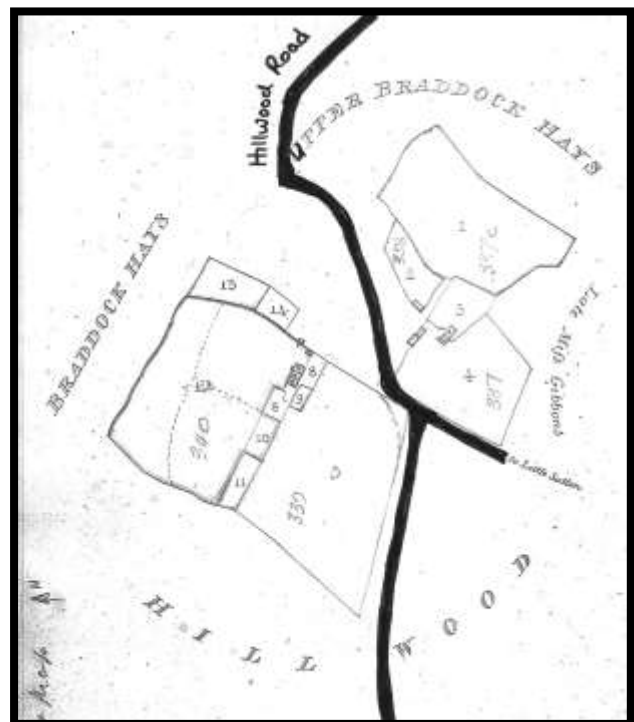
(j) "A dead man hanged up!"

Based on the fact that Wildgoose and Tugwell were travelling from Lichfield to Warwick, it seem more likely they were traversing the eastern side of Sutton Coldfield, down the London Road. That, too, was known for its gibbets.

The LONDON ROAD

As far back as the 16th century, in Bishop Vesey's time, there were known to be frequent robberies on the roads which crossed each other over Bassett's Heath. On one particular stretch of the London Road, near to Canwell Gate, was Cotty's Moor. It had the delightful reputation as a 'den of thieves', and it was to combat this that he built a house in which he installed someone to police the area. Agnes Bracken, writing in 1860, tells us that the house was known as Muffin's Den and Roughley cottage.¹¹

A suggestion has been put forward about this particular 'hot spot'. The idea is that nearby Little Sutton Common could well have provided a means of escape from Muffin's Den to another public house known until recently as 'The Highwayman' on the road to Shenstone. It is possible that, from Slade Road in Little Sutton, highway robbers could sneak off up Grange Lane, which continued at that time across the fields to the open common at Hill Wood, and then cross the heath to the inn at Shenstone Wood End. A plan of Hill Wood made in 1811 clearly shows a road coming from Little Sutton and joining Hillwood Road making it an easy get away.¹²



(k) The Easy Get Away.

And, once again, Twamley has a tale to tell (here he uses the words from the Sutton Coldfield Parish Register):-

Was buried at Sutton on the 25th day of August 1727, Thomas Eastham, a Stranger, that was found Murdered, at the upper end of a bye-lane, called Holly lane, in this parish. He was decoyed to the fatal spot from Canwell Gate, a Publick Inn, on the

left-hand side of the Lichfield and Coleshill turnpike-road, by a person of the name of Edward Powers (that was then drinking in the house) who professed he would show him a nearer way to the town of Coleshill, over the commons, which were then open fields, and when he got him into this bye-lane (before mentioned) he murdered him. Suspicion fell on 'Powers', as having committed the horrid deed, he being a man of bad character and dissolute habits.

He was apprehended and taken before the Magistrates, examined and sent to Warwick to be tried at the next Spring Assizes following, when he was found guilty of the murder. He was sentenced to be hanged by the neck until he was dead then Gibbeted afterwards upon Little Sutton common. Which sentence was carried into execution on the 25th day of April 1728 not far from Collett's brook. The common field for many years after was called Powers' Field. It's now called Fox-hill - 1852.¹³



(1) A Notorious area (showing Muffins Den, Canwell Gate, Basset's Pole and Gallows Brook

All this was substantiated by an old widow woman, Sarah Brown, who lived at a house on Redicup-heath, and was known to Twamley. He said that when he was a boy she told him she well remembered seeing "Allport" (mentioned previously) and "Powers" hanged up, having been a by-stander at both the times (i.e. 1728 at Little Sutton Common and 1729 on Sutton Coldfield Common).¹⁴

However, such punishment did not seem to put the highwaymen off. The newspapers continued to report:-

Oxford Journal, Saturday 15 December 1735

On Monday last the Man who robbed Mr. Meredith, on Bromsgrove Lickey the Day before, was apprehended at Lapworth. Mr. Meredith's Watch was found upon him, and another that he robbed a Coventry Man of the Friday before, at Cannon-gate, near Sutton-coldfield. He is committed to Warwick Goal.

Derby Mercury - Thursday 05 February 1789

On Tuesday last as a servant of Mr. Godfrey of Tamworth, was riding along the road between Basset's Heath and Sutton Coldfield, he was accosted by a person well mounted, who asked him if he had heard the hounds, to which the servant had no sooner answered in the negative, than he was by a violent blow knocked off his horse and robbed of upwards of 5l (five pounds) and terribly beaten. The highwayman it is supposed must have known that the man had this sum of money about him. He was pursued but without effect; his horse was a dark brown, about 15 hands high, and he appeared himself to be about 30 years of age, wore a dark drab-coloured coat, with short brown hair untied.⁸

Finally, showing that the danger could present itself even closer to home, one can also look to Mr. Luttrell, a member of the respected gentry of the day living at Four Oaks Hall, who, writing a letter in the 1760s, apologised for haste as he had just had to despatch his servants in pursuit of two highwaymen at Four Oaks.¹⁵

So, it appears that in the 18th century neither the Chester Road nor the London Road could claim to be the safer route to the north. By the 19th century, however, both were offering a much better experience for the traveller. This was as a result of the new Turnpike Trusts which were setting up tollhouses everywhere, thus producing enough revenue to raise the standard of the roads. All this made the highwayman's job so much harder that, before long, reports of hangings and gibbeting ceased to fill the papers.

The last of these tollhouses still standing in Birmingham is at Collet's Brook Farm, built around 1792 on the Tamworth Road.¹⁶ This is not far from the London Road, so maybe that branch of the London to Chester Road could lay claim to being the safest, at least in the 19th century.



(m) The old Toll House on the Tamworth Road

Nowadays, in spite of the fact that journeys around the outskirts of Sutton Coldfield are no longer bedevilled with the dangers of the past, you might still feel it prudent to keep a wary eye and ear open when passing through some of the wilder parts, particularly if you come across any large bushes!

SOURCES (All numbered references are to be found in Sutton Coldfield Library)

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3. A Plan of the Manor of Erdington in the Parish of Aston in the County of Warwick, surveyed by J. Tomlinson 1760, (Upright Map Cabinet) and Index (QSH84.79)
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ILLUSTRATIONS

- Title *1739: Dick Turpin, outlaw legend*, www.executedtoday.com
- (a) *The Chester Road and the London Road*, Map of Sutton Coldfield in the Sixteenth Century, circa Bishop Vesey's lifetime. Sutton Coldfield Library (Maps)
 - (b) *A Bowbearer*, www.historic-uk.com/HistoryUK/HistoryofEngland/The-Longbow
 - (c) *Site of the Bowbearer's Cottage (Grid Ref o17)*, A Plan of the Manor of Erdington in the Parish of Aston in the County of Warwick, surveyed by J. Tomlinson, 1760, Sutton Coldfield Library (Maps)
 - (d) *Site of the Bowbearer's Cottage (Plot 683)*, A Plan of the Hamlet of Erdington taken from a Survey made in the year 1833 by William Fowler, Sutton Coldfield Library (Maps)
 - (e) *The 'Dead Man's Grave' at Hardwick*, A Plan of the Manor of Erdington in the Parish of Aston in the County of Warwick, surveyed by J. Tomlinson, 1760 (see above)
 - (f) *The Thieves Bush*, HODDER, Michael, The Archaeology of Sutton Park, pub The History Press 2013. p12
 - (g) *Highwaymen waiting in ambush*, [www.storiesoflondon.org/Part Two: The Road to Hounslow - Stand and Deliver](http://www.storiesoflondon.org/Part%20Two%3A%20The%20Road%20to%20Hounslow%20-%20Stand%20and%20Deliver).
 - (h) *A Hold Up*, www.sidneysussexheritage.co.uk/highwaymen-and-respectable-highwaymen
 - (i) *Gibbet Hill, New Oscott*, 1834 Ordnance Survey Map (1980 Second Impression)
 - (j) *"A Dead Man hanged up."*, www.britishart.yale/thomasrowlandson/gibbet
 - (k) *The Easy Get Away*, Observer History Spot with Roger Lea, September 18, 2015 (plan taken from the Survey of the Charity Estates, Ref: QSH31.85)
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 - (m) *The old Toll House on the A453 Tamworth Road, c1935*, Keith Jordan' Collection (No. 2428)