



The Headless Horseman of High Down

High Down House, a Jacobean mansion of chalk clunch with twisted brick chimney-stacks and mullioned windows, stands in an isolated setting just off the Icknield Way at Pirton, west of Hitchin, in north Hertfordshire. The house was built for Thomas Docwra, a descendent of an ancient titled Westmorland family and who began collecting local manors in 1525. It is an appropriate setting for a classic ghost story based on an event in 1648 during the closing months of the English Civil Wars when King Charles I was a captive on the Isle of Wight and the Parliamentarians were on course for victory but were being diverted by the Royalist revolts in Wales and southeast England.

In early July, with Cromwell in Wales and his Commander-in-Chief Sir Thomas Fairfax besieging Colchester, George Villiers Duke of Buckingham and Sir Thomas Rich Earl of Holland organised a successful Royalist rising at Kingston-upon-Thames. Their Parliamentary opponents included two troops of Horse and two companies of Dragoons raised at Hitchin which was strongly anti-Royalist (Defoe later described it as 'Whiggish and full of Dissenters') and enraged by the recent defection of Colonel Dalbier, their quartermaster, to the Royalists.

After their victory, they pursued Royalist survivors north along Watling Street. Skirmishing near Luton they took six by surprise making merry in the 'Prince's Arms' but lost them as they headed east into the local countryside towards another (unsuccessful) engagement at St Neots. Buckingham escaped but Holland was captured (he was executed later) together with 30 officers and 300 'common men' who were brought to Hitchin and held in the crypt and chapel of St Mary's Church whilst the countryside was scoured for fugitives.

High Down was at this time held by Henry Dowcra, a Royalist sympathiser who had previously been fined £66 '*for being in company for six hours with Royalist forces*'. There were rumours of a wounded Cavalier named Goring concealed there. He may have been related to (or mistaken for) Lord Goring, a cavalry commander of earlier battles who had defeated the Parliamentarians at Newbury in 1644.

On 8th July, as a thorough search of High Down House was about to be abandoned, he was discovered hiding '*in the hollow of the wych elm outside the gateway*', his position supposedly betrayed by an owl sharing the same tree. But there was to be no fine for him; Parliamentary troopers dragged him to the foot of the tree where they murdered him in full sight of his fiancée who was watching events from the safety of an upper bedroom. It is said she died of shock afterwards.

In 1911, Ellen Pollard, then owner of High Down, presented a paper to the East Herts Archaeological Society on persistent reports of a headless spectral figure believed to be Goring who '*on the night of 15th June each year rides on a white palfrey from High Down to the site of the cell (former chapel) in the grounds of Hitchin Priory*' where he is believed to have hidden previously.

Tony Northwood, Icknield Way News Spring 2005