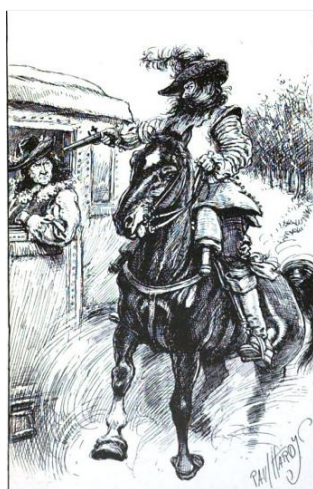


Alternate History Part 2: Of Highwaymen, Ghosts, and Rural Surrey

In my earlier post on [alternate history](#), I talked about why I like to read and write it. In this and the next installment of this series, I thought it would be interesting to share a small sample of how I grabbed some pieces of the past and bent them to my alt-history needs. I was going to talk about Sir John D'Abernon of Stoke D'Abernon fame in this post, but I think first I need to say a little about his locale and the nature of ghosts, and how these things fit into my [alternate history novel](#).

Location: Surrey



Cpt Dudley on the Hounslow Heath, from Harper 1895[2]

My time-travels begin in [Surrey, England](#). For those unfamiliar with the region, this is the county just south of the county of [Middlesex](#), which geographically contains the city (and later, county) of London. It is well known for being beautifully rural, dotted with old manor houses and well-tended farms. In the 18th and 19th centuries, many of the well-to-do in London also kept country homes in Surrey, which they could reach in a carriage ride of up to several hours, depending how far out they were.[1]

In researching a place for alt-historical purposes, general geography, demography, and other routine social science facts are not enough. For narrative purposes, it is more important to glean the unusual, interesting tidbits about a place, looking at its social history, historical events, and so on. I consider which of these factoids really calls to me, and are of use not only from an historical perspective, but that fit into the “alternate” nature of my story universe as well.

The Highwaymen of the Portsmouth Road

Notes From the Lizard Lair

Fulmination, Ruminations, and Snacks from a Resurgent Author
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One long stretch of the old Portsmouth Road runs through the county. In the 19th century and earlier, this carried travelers by coach between London and the seaport of Portsmouth. Before the railroads were built, this was a major thoroughfare and coach route through the countryside. It was as well known for its highwaymen preying on travelers as it was for the many coaching inns and scenic towns and villages along the way.

In the late 1600s, so much highway robbery and other violent crimes were going on – and being prosecuted – that foreign travelers remarked on the great number of gibbets that lined the road from Portsmouth to London. Highwaymen and violent offenders were hanged, their corpses often dipped in tar and then suspended in irons from a post and cross-beam placed near the scene of their crimes. If they weren't cut down by relatives stealthily in the night and secretly buried, they dangled preserved literally for years along the roadside as a gruesome warning against crime.

The warning didn't put much of a dent in the criminally inclined, though. Highwaymen continued their work into and through the 1700s. When the Postmaster-General made mail robbery a gibbeting offense in 1750, this did cut down on highway robbery, but did not eliminate it entirely. (The last man gibbeted in England was Cook, a murderer executed in 1832; the practice was finally abolished by statute in 1834.)



Gibbet irons used on murderer and robber Edward Miles in 1788.

For people living close by the Portsmouth Road, highwaymen were part of the normal hazards of travel – and for locals, the robbers were in many cases people they knew, or knew of.[2]

I am rather fascinated by this history of highwaymen in this part of England. I couldn't delve into it at length – their era was really a century and more before the 1871 setting of [Queen Victoria's Transmogrifier](#) (QVT), and not directly relevant to the tale – but I wanted to incorporate a highwayman into my story if at all possible. How does an alt-historian do this?

The Rules of Being a Ghost

When one of the “alternate” parts of your history is “magic is real”, that opens the door to the supernatural, and existence on other planes as well – or at least, it does within the rule set of my cosmography. If I couldn't have a highwayman proper, I could at least have the ghost of a proper highwayman. Thus we meet Jamie Swales, a young man who tried his hand at being a “knight of the road”, and perished for his trouble in the mid-eighteenth century, hanged for his crimes on a byway between the Portsmouth Road and Stoke D'Abernon.

Jamie is of some assistance to the primary characters at one point in the story, and has a subplot that helps to develop one character arc in particular.

Considering my highwayman, I realized that ghosts play a different role in the world of *Transmogrifier* than they do in our own. In QVT, they are still the stuff of stories and legends, but they very evidently do exist, and can interact at times with the living.

I took some time, then, to detail the rules of ghostly existence in this world. Their attributes had to be in line with the metaphysics that also explain how magic works, and the implications for existence beyond the physical.

This is not merely an exercise in creating rules for a paranormal setting. Rather, because ghosts are real in this place, this has direct implications for historical events and occurrences. I needed to know the answers to questions like these:

- What if ghosts can and do speak directly to the living at times?
- If they can share their knowledge or warnings, what impact might this have had on key historical events?
- What if they can be fairly easily contacted by psychics and people whose magic or meditation practices let them enter the astral plane?
- Would they have autonomy beyond merely being location-bound haunts? If so, why, and how does this affect their historical footprint?

I can't share my set of meta-rules on these issues here (spoilers!), but suffice it to say that I have guidelines which define how ghosts “work” in this world. I had to be very clear on what someone like Jamie can and can't do, in order to fit him properly into the story.

Meanwhile, Back at the Village...

With my ghost rules established, Sir John resting in his grave at Stoke D'Abernon took on a somewhat different meaning. A real historical figure, Sheriff of Surrey and Sussex, he is immortalized as the subject of the first and best known Norman memorial brass engraving in England, dated 1277. We know what he looked like, and where he is buried, and several facts about his life.

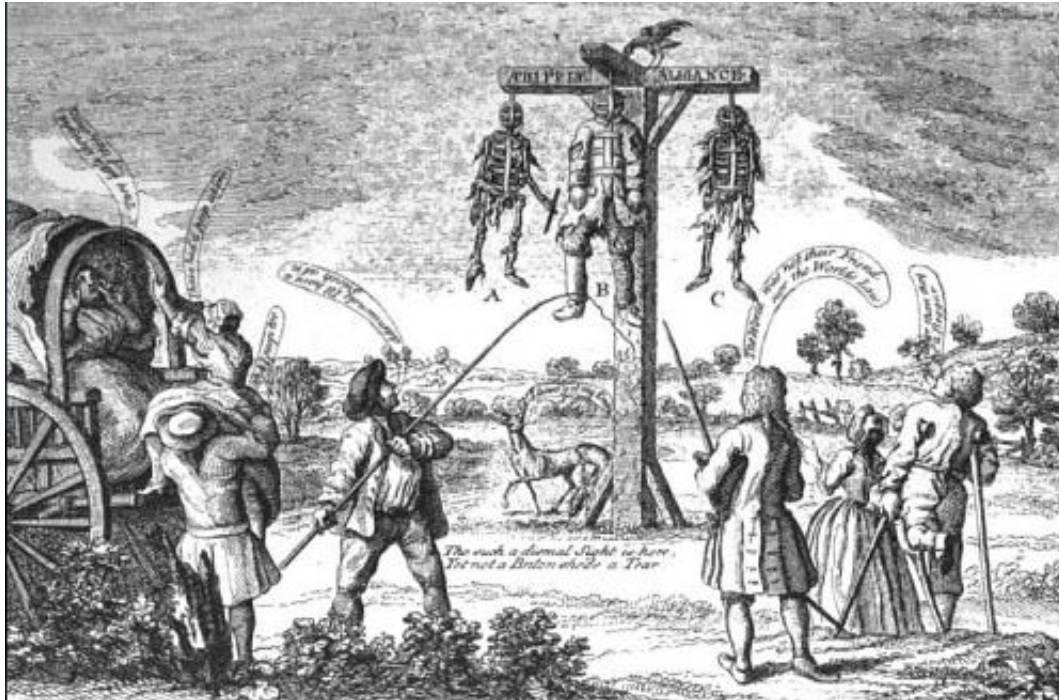
In *Queen Victoria's Transmogrifier*, something is amiss in Stoke D'Abernon. But in this setting, there can be supernatural intervention from beyond the grave. Once I knew more about the

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nature of ghosts in this world, it became evident to me that Sir John could not simply stay slumbering while his beloved home was in danger.

In my next post in this series I'll look more at this knight and shire forefather. His activities may not affect grand historical events, but they will affect local ones, and not incidentally move my plot along.



1. If you care to read more about the region as it used to be in the 18th and 19th centuries, I recommend a wonderful old travel guide and local history book published in 1895, called [The Portsmouth Road and its Tributaries: today and in days of old](#), by Charles George Harper, complete with delightful ink sketches by the author and an illustrator named Paul Hardy. The link points to it in full text (and downloadable ebook formats) at Google Books.
2. Another book I found particularly interesting on the subject of highwaymen was [Half-hours With the Highwaymen: picturesque biographies and traditions of the "knights of the road"](#), Vol. 1, also by Charles George Harper (1908) and likewise neatly illustrated, at Google Books.

Related Posts:

[Alternate History \(Part 1\): Picking Out the Threads](#)

[My Other WIP: Queen Victoria's Transmogriifier](#)

[Of Things Victorian: The Lillian Story](#)

Alternate History Part 3 will appear the second weekend in July.

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How do you feel about alternate histories? Have any books you care to recommend? Leave your thoughts in the comments below.