

'Stand and deliver' **Dick Turpin and Epping Forest**

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Over the centuries Epping Forest has been associated with many famous and infamous people among whom one of the best known is the legendary highwayman Dick Turpin.

Dick Turpin was born on 21 September 1705 in Hempstead near Saffron Walden, Essex.

From his early career as a butcher's apprentice in Whitechapel and then as a butcher in Sewardstone near Waltham Abbey, where he had his own business and a wife, young Turpin began to obtain his meat supplies through rustling. This brought him to Waltham Abbey where he sold on the hides of butchered stolen cattle.

By 1734 these activities brought Turpin into contact with the notorious Gregory (or Essex) Gang, named after its leader Samuel Gregory, which operated in Epping Forest. This group of at least 21 young toughs started out as deerstealers who poached large numbers of deer from the great forest.

The gang's headquarters was in Sewardstone, right on Turpin's doorstep.

By October 1734 the gang had progressed from deerstealing to robbery, with their first victim being Peter Split a grocer in Woodford, from here the gang widened its actions across south Essex and into Kent and Surrey in an orgy of house breaking which continued until February 1735. Accounts show that that this lawless gang were deeply involved in robbery with extreme violence. Armed with guns, and primed for violence, the Gregory gang mounted a series of raids on substantial farmhouses in and around London, stuffing their pockets with other people's cash, jewellery and much-loved belongings. Desecration seems to have been positively part of the thrill: what could not be carried off was burnt, drunk or raped.

One such attack took place at Loughton in Essex where Turpin raided the house of an old widow, holding her over a fire until she surrendered her belongings to him.

Following the break up of the Gregory gang and the imprisonment and execution of many of its members, Turpin began operating again in the Epping area, this time as a highwayman. During this period Turpin and his partner Mathew King established their base between the Loughton Road and Kings Oak Road, which in legend becomes known as 'Turpin's cave'.

Here in May 1737 Turpin graduated to murder, with the slaying of Thomas Morris, a servant of Mr Thompson one of the keepers of Epping Forest, who was trying to prevent Turpin from stealing a horse. This event took place close to what is now 'The Robin Hood' pub.

Turpin fled, eventually to Yorkshire where in April 1739 he was hanged at York for 'Crimes against His Majesty's Highways'.

At his execution Turpin played the role of the reckless criminal, he smiled and swaggered, gave hatbands and other favours to the crowd, caused a delicious stir by presenting a gold ring to a married woman, and then threw himself off the hanging platform and "expired directly".

So ended the career of Epping Forest's most celebrated villain.