

The Tipton Slasher and the Grave Robbers: fact or fiction?

The dissection of a Black Country myth.

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In the 1962 film, “*The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance*”, directed by John Ford and starring John Wayne and James Stewart, the following line appears: “*When the legend becomes fact, print the legend.*” Legend masquerading as fact frequently appear when exploring local histories. An example are the numerous accounts of plague pits from the fourteenth century Black Death pandemic which supposedly exist around the Black Country area¹, yet upon investigation have no basis in reality².

Another example involves one of the Black Country’s iconic figures: William Perry, “*The Tipton Slasher*”, and one particular myth I am frequently questioned about.

William Perry (1819–1880) was a British heavyweight bare-knuckle prize fighter, born in Tipton, Staffordshire, hence his nickname: “*The Tipton Slasher*”. He began bare-knuckle fighting at 16 while working as a navvy in London³, where he quickly garnered a reputation: “*he was well known in the neighbourhood of Battersea Fields and Chelsea as a "lumping lad" who... could hit, stop, and use his 'fives' with formidable effect*”⁴. He claimed the English heavyweight championship between 1850 and 1857, before losing it to Tom Sayers on 16th June 1857⁵.

In his biography of Perry, “*The Tipton Slasher: His Life and Times*” Tom Langley recounts the following tale, ascribing it to his great aunt⁶:

¹ The once heavy industrial areas of Staffordshire and Worcestershire, known as the Black Country. So called, due to the dirt that covered the surroundings; the product of the mining and iron-manufacturing industries which dominated the area. Today the area is comprised of the metropolitan boroughs of Dudley, Sandwell, Wolverhampton, and Walsall.

² Goodman, K. (2024) *Disease and Illness in The Black Country: A History. Volume 1: Medieval to Early Modern*. Bows, Blades, and Battles Press.

³ Miles, Henry Downes (1906) *Pugilistica: the history of British boxing containing lives of the most celebrated pugilists; full reports of their battles from contemporary newspapers, with authentic portraits, personal anecdotes, and sketches of the principal patrons of the prize ring, forming a complete history of the ring from Fig and Broughton, 1719-40, to the last championship battle between King and Heenan, in December 1863*. Volume 3. Edinburgh: J. Grant.

⁴ p.157, Miles (1906) op cit.

⁵ Miles (1906) op cit.

⁶ p.7-8, Langley, T. (1970) *The Tipton Slasher: His Life and Times*. The Black Country Society

On Christmas Eve, 1836, Ben Crouch, the diggum upper [grave robber], and a famous surgeon afterwards to become immortal, robbed a grave in a cemetery not far from the Fighting Cocks in Wolverhampton, at this time a small beer house. The body was wrapped in a greatcoat and supported between them as they rode on a two-seater gig. It was so bitterly cold that they stopped at the Fighting Cocks for a drink, the gig with its occupant being left in the yard. As Ben jokingly remarked to the doctor and an ostler: “He woh feel the cold”.

The landlord and the customers knew Crouch and had a good idea about the object slumped across the gig seat, but Crouch was a gorilla of a man, so violent and vicious that they were all afraid. The two grave robbers were served in silence.

While they were drinking, into the bar walked young Bill Perry, trained and ready for his fight with Ben Spilsbury three days hence⁷ ... Quietly he was acquainted with the character of the scowling villain in the corner and the contents of the gig. It was decided to teach the diggum uppers a lesson, and Bill took the place of the corpse... Feeling merrier and warmer, the diggum uppers resumed their journey to Birmingham. Along a Tipton Lane which is now part of the Wolverhampton New Road the doctor, who had a morbid streak within him, felt the hand of the ‘corpse’. “His hand feels warm” he said to Crouch.

Crouch felt the other hand: “It does an’ all”, he replied. And then the ‘corpse’ spoke in broad Black Country: “Ah, an’ yoh’d feel warm if yoh’d been where ar bin this last wik”.

It is alleged that the doctor ran for it and was not seen again until the day after Boxing day. Ben was made of sterner stuff. He jumped down with the ‘corpse’ jumping beside him and struck out at it, when he regained consciousness it was Christmas morning and he was lying in the gig covered in hoar frost.

Bill Perry had driven back to the Fighting Cocks and stabled the horse, but no one would give shelter to Crouch. The body was handed back to relatives and re-interred beneath a granite slab. (p.7-8)

An entertaining local legend: but how much truth does it contain?

“Diggum Uppers”, or to use their other titles, body snatchers, grave robbers, or resurrectionists, were people who would steal dead bodies to sell to medical schools for students to practise dissection, and for established surgeons to practise new techniques⁸. It was a practice not restricted to Edinburgh and London, occurring across the country⁹. Ben Crouch is infamous in the history of resurrection men. A former hospital porter, he was the leader, for a time, of the London Borough Gang, which operated from about 1802 to 1825, supplying stolen cadavers to medical schools. The book “*The Diary of a Resurrectionist*,

⁷ Perry fought – and defeated - Ben Spilsbury of Birmingham on the 27th December 1836 at Oldbury (Miles 1906)

⁸ Hutton, F. (2013) *The Study of Anatomy in Britain, 1700–1900*. Pickering and Chatto.

⁹ Goodman, K. (2024) *The Diggum Uppers: Body Snatching and Grave Robbing in the West Midlands*. Dudley: Bows, Blades, and Battles Press. Johnson, B. (2017) *Digging in the Dark: A History of the Yorkshire Resurrectionists*. Pen & Sword History

1811-1812, to which are added an account of the resurrection men in London and a short history of the passing of the anatomy act" by James Blake Bailey (1896) contains portions of a diary kept by a member of the London Borough gang in London, including a description of Crouch:

"Ben Crouch, the leader of the gang, was the son of a carpenter, who worked at Guy's Hospital. He was a tall, powerful, athletic man, with coarse features, marked with the small-pox, and was well known as a prize-fighter. He used to dress in very good clothes, and wore a profusion of gold rings, and had a large bunch of seals dangling at his fob... Crouch was seldom drunk, but when he was in that state he was most abusive and domineering" (p.129-130)

About 1817 he gave up the resurrection business and following periods of imprisonment for theft eventually died in poverty¹⁰. While Crouch was an intimidating figure, by 1836 he had long retired from the trade – two years before Perry was born.

While the identity of the "*famous surgeon afterwards to become immortal*" is not given in Langley's account, in the same account given by the folk singer and folklorist Jon Raven (1940-2015)¹¹ the surgeon is named Joseph Liston. This could refer to either the surgeons Robert Liston (1794 –1847) or Joseph Lister (1827-1912). Liston became the first Professor of Clinical Surgery at University College Hospital in London in 1835. He was famed for his speed when operating, to minimise the discomfort for patients, and performed the first public operation utilising anaesthesia (ether), in Europe on 21st December 1846 at University College Hospital, London¹². Lister was a pioneer in surgical antiseptics, using carbolic acid to sterilise surgical instruments, patients' skins, sutures, surgeons' hands, and wards¹³. It is unlikely either of these were accomplices: in 1836, Liston was busy carrying out operations in London¹⁴, and Lister was only 9 years of age.

Another problem is the date: 1836, In 1832, the Anatomy Act came into force, this permitted medical schools to purchase bodies from workhouses, hospitals, asylums and prisons, effectively putting the resurrectionists out of business, by providing a cheaper alternative¹⁵. Few - if any - resurrectionists were practising at this point.

Finally, the incident was first reported in the *Hereford Journal*, dated Wednesday 2nd April 1823, but without the inclusion of Ben Crouch or the Tipton Slasher:

¹⁰ Bailey, J. Blake. (1896) "*The Diary of a Resurrectionist, 1811-1812, to which are added an account of the resurrection men in London and a short history of the passing of the anatomy act*". London: Swan Sonnenschein & Co.

¹¹ Raven, J. (1978) *Tales from Aynuk's Black Country*. Broadside Books.

¹² Brown, M. (2023) *Emotions and Surgery in Britain, 1793-1912*. Cambridge University Press.

¹³ Fitzharris L (2018). The butchering art: Joseph Lister's quest to transform the grisly world of Victorian medicine. UK: Penguin Books.

¹⁴ Brown, M. (2023) op cit.

¹⁵ Hutton, F. (2013) *The Study of Anatomy in Britain, 1700–1900*. Pickering and Chatto.

The Dead Alive —The resurrection men have adopted a new plan to prevent detection, by dressing the bodies which they steal, so that if seen they appear asleep. A few days ago two of them, coming from the country, stopped at a public-house, about four miles from town, with the body of a man, whom, after violating the grave, they dressed in the uniform of a soldier. While in the house, taking refreshment, a soldier who was billeted there, went to the door to smoke his pipe, and curiosity having induced him to look into the cart, he perceived a soldier, as he supposed asleep, whom in the first instance he conceived to be a deserter, and hailed him with "Halloo, comrade, where to?" not receiving an answer, he attempted to awake the corpse, exclaiming, "Come, my boy, let us have something to drink." No answer being made , he went to the ostler, and they examined the body, when the latter expressed his suspicion that the fellows, who were in the house, "were Bodysnatchers," and he and the soldier held a council of war, as to what steps they should pursue, when it was agreed to convey the dead man into the stable, and that the soldier should occupy his place in the cart, while the ostler would follow on horse-back to assist him in case of need. This was accordingly done, and the Snatchers having refreshed, drove off with the cart, but they had not proceeded a hundred yards before they found the supposed dead man tumble about, and stopped to remedy the inconvenience. On taking hold of him, one of the fellows observed. "Ise be cursed if this here subject is 'nt warm" – the other having felt him, said, "Dam un, but he's hot;" – "and so would you, too," said the soldier, "if you had come from h_ll, where I have been." This was enough; the snatchers were petrified, and almost terrified to death; but as soon as they recovered they set off, leaving the cart and horse in possession of the soldier and ostler, neither of which has since been owned. The body of the dead man was in two days after restored to his friends, by whom it was missed from the grave. (p.2).

There is little fact in the account, but this does not imply that anyone – especially Langley's Great-Aunt – deliberately set out to deceive people. The account from Hereford may have been reprinted in local newspapers, and Bailey's "*The Diary of a Resurrectionist, 1811-1812*" was a bestseller when it was published in 1896¹⁶; overtime both accounts were combined, and embellished, to make an ideal vehicle for William Perry. However, it does highlight the fact that when undertaking historical research – whether professionally or otherwise – a refusal to take accounts at face value, and the willingness to explore deeply are necessities.

¹⁶ Laqueur, T, (1983) Bodies, Death, and Pauper Funerals. *Representations*, 1 (Feb.), pp. 109-131.