

Highway Robbery

William Heyworth and his two sons Roger and George

Extract from a newspaper of the time September 1827.

William Heyworth aged 60 was more commonly known as Bill O'Rogers, in 1827 he and his two sons Roger aged 23 and George aged 18 were executed at Lancaster Assizes. Charged on nine indictments namely sheep stealing, highway robbery and burglary in the neighbourhood of Bacup and the forest of Rossendale. Bill's son in law John Jackson aged 31 was transported for life. The family were so notorious for their crimes a song was written about them and sung by the local folks of Bacup.

The prisoners constituted a gang of robbers, who for many months before their apprehension, kept all that part of the country in a continual state of alarm. When they were arraigned on the morning of Tuesday 4th September, all four pleaded guilty to four indictments, but Mr Justice Bayley very strongly urged them to withdraw their plea, and plead not guilty. He postponed the trial for one day to give the prisoners time to consider his words. They were put to the bar on a charge of robbing Mr James Taylor and Mr Robert Whittaker to which they had pleaded not guilty, and with the view of shewing the guilt onto the Heyworth's, Jackson was admitted evidence. Mr Taylor stated that he was the deputy constable of Bacup, and being on his return from Burnley, in company with Mr Robert Whittaker, on a dark wet night, in March last was suddenly knocked down senseless by someone he did not see. With a heavy blow like something like a hammer which cut through his umbrella and his hat and knocked his left eye completely out leaving it hanging on his cheek. He remained for some time insensible during which time his pockets were rifled, and the first thing afterwards for which he was sensible was being lifted by Mr Whittaker out of the channel by the side of the road, in which he had been left by the robbers. He had entirely lost his eye and was confined for eight to nine weeks in consequence of the violence which had been inflicted upon him. Mr Whittaker stated that there were three men in the gang, one of whom knocked him down by a violent blow, which cut through his umbrella and hat, and which wounded him so severely on the head that the blood flowed down his back to his coat skirts. He was also robbed of all that he had about him. Neither of the witnesses could identify any of the prisoners as the men by whom they were attacked and it was proposed to call Jackson the accomplice, for the purpose of proving that the other prisoners were involved in it. Mr Justice Bayley inquired whether there was any evidence to confirm Jackson as to the identity and being answered in the negative by the counsel for the prosecution, he said that his testimony would not be sufficient and the prisoners were consequently acquitted on that charge. Mr Justice Bayley then said he would hear evidence on one or two of the cases they had pleaded guilty to. Hannah Fielden, of Spotland stated that on the night of the 14th April last, she and her mother were ironing clothes and two of her younger sisters were with them; her stepfather and the rest of the family were gone to bed. About eleven o'clock they were alarmed by the three Heyworth's bursting into the house with a fourth man, all armed with large clubs and dressed in dirty smock frocks. Their faces were painted red and yellow; dark painted handkerchiefs tied round their chins and their hats turned up at front. Witness and the other women shrieked on seeing them and called for Fielden, when witness was struck violently on the head by one of the men, whom she believed to be George Heyworth, and fell senseless to the floor. When she recovered, two of the prisoners were standing in the middle of the floor, and two were attacking her father in law at the shop door and he was defending himself with a drying iron. They asked for money, and

threatened to kill all the family if it were not produced. James Fielden stated that two of the prisoners attacked him with large clubs, one of which was aimed at his head and he parried the blow with the drying iron which was broken by it. George Heyworth then sharpened a knife on the step, and threatened to cut his throat with it. This being all the evidence relative to the cruel usage of the family. Mr Justice Bayley desired that another case might be gone into.

Joseph Crabtree stated that he was returning from Todmorden to Bacup, in company with a friend, on the evening of 11th April, when the prisoners rushed upon them, knocked them down with a bludgeon like the one produced in court. A staff with a lump of lead at the end which the witness said he picked up near the place a few days afterwards. The blow cut through his hat, as though it had been cut with a knife, and struck him violently on the temple. The man took his watch, and one of them cried out "cut his throat" (The prisoner here Roger Heyworth appeared to be violently agitated). His watch chain broke short but they took a knife out of his pocket and cut away part of his clothes, and his watch with them.

Edward Kershaw a mechanic at tipping bank near Bacup, stated on Monday the 24th March, he was returning about midnight from Bacup, when he was struck down with a blow from something like a bludgeon, and two men set upon him, and struck him several blows whilst he lay on the ground. One took him by the shirt and waistcoat, dragged him across the road, threw him over the wall knelt upon his body and began to strangle him. The other man followed and cut his head, through his hat with a sharp object, they then rifled his pockets and ran off.

There was evidence to prove that the two men who committed the robbery were two of the prisoners at the bar; but they had pleaded as guilty, it was of course unnecessary.

Mr Justice Bayley then placed the black cap upon his head and proceeded to pass sentence of death upon all the prisoners, intimating at the same time that it would not be carried into effect with Jackson. The scene which presented itself during the sentencing was most strikingly impressive. Heyworth and his two sons earnestly called for mercy and especially the sons wept audibly, and leaned upon the front of the dock and upon each other. Mr Justice Bayley appeared greatly affected by the scene before him, but he exhibited more of a sternness and decision than he usually did in these cases. He told the prisoners it was utterly impossible to extend mercy to men who themselves had shown no mercy. Armed with dreadful and deadly weapons, they had used them so cruelly, so wantonly, and so frequently that there could be no protection for the public if such offenders should escape. That a father could expect mercy, who had accompanied his sons on such enterprises, or that the sons who had exacted the cruelties which had been proved against them, should now expect mercy was quite out of the question. They must not entertain the slightest hope of being permitted to remain long in this world, and he earnestly urged them to prepare for their fate, by seeking forgiveness were it could only be obtained. His lordship then proceeded to pass sentence in the usual form, at the conclusion of which George Heyworth turned on Jackson, who stood in the dock, and vented a violent imprecation upon him. The prisoners were then removed from the bar.

As reported Oct 6th 1827 Execution of a father and two sons.

It will be remembered that at the Lancaster Assizes, William Heyworth aged 60, George Heyworth aged 23 and Roger Heyworth aged 18 a father and two sons were convicted of several highway robberies and burglaries, in and about the township of Bacup. After their condemnation, and the intimation that it was useless for them to expect mercy, they attended seriously to the religious instruction offered them and seemed to feel the intensely the awful situation to which their almost unparalleled career of crime and depravity had ultimately led them. They

ingeniously confessed the variety of lawless outrages which they had committed and acknowledged that the punishment they were about to receive was just and equitable. We understand that the whole three had been in the habit of associating with the Methodists, and particularly the old man, who was a zealous member of the society.

The old man inveighed most bitterly against his son in law Jackson, who was indicted along with them for many of the crimes, and in other admitted Kings evidence, and by that means saved his life, for having injured his family and compelled them, in consequence to seek a precarious maintenance from the produce of their crimes. On Saturday last as the parish church struck twelve, the solemn and funeral knell of the bell belonging to the prison denoted that the last religious service had closed, and that the fatal moment was at hand. A death like silence then reigned through the multitude, which was only interrupted by the grating noise caused by the removal of the temporary door to the room from which these miserable men proceeded to the scaffold. The old man came first, dressed in a blue coat and trousers, and did not evince the slightest symptom of grief or dread not even a tear rolled down his aged furrowed cheeks either for his own deplorable fate or for that of his two sons. His step was firm and his fame unagitated, there were evidently no strong emotions of anxiety or fear, but all was perfectly calm and composed. The executioner then placed the cap over his face, and made fast the fatal rope, and the old man threw his hands behind him and stood with the greatest sang froid. Roger was brought on the second, and was dressed the same way as his father, and after him the youngest of this ill fated family, dressed in a round fustian jacket and blue trousers. The youthful appearance of the sons, particularly of George drew forth the commiserations and pity of all present. It was really distressing in the extreme to hear an aged father, with his two sons, in the flower of their youth mingle their loud supplications at the throne of grace upon the public scaffold. After the chaplain had read part of the burial service, the drop fell and their mortal existence was soon closed. The father and youngest son appeared to be instantly dead, the other had a few convulsive throes, and all was then still. We understand the whole three carried on the business of joiners, at the time they pursued their desperate course for which they have paid with their lives. The old man as left a wife, and two daughters both married. Roger has also left a wife and two children. The youngest was a single man. One of the old mans daughters (Jacksons wife) was in Lancaster, and the whole of the clothes of her father and brothers, were at her own urgent request given to her. They were all three buried in the same evening, between seven and eight o'clock in the churchyard at Lancaster.