

Winter's Gibbet – Northumberland's Strange Monument to a Murder

In 1791 on a rainy Northumberland night, an old woman answered her door to a man seeking shelter. Allowing this stranger into her home began the end of Margaret Crozier's life, and the somewhat bizarre story of a gibbet that has become entwined in Northumberland ghost lore.

William Winter seems to have come with some criminal heritage. His father and brother were hanged in 1788, apparently for breaking and entry. I guess that's what you'd call a zero tolerance policy. Released from incarceration in 1791 he returned to his ne'er do well ways in the North East. Along with two accomplices, sisters Jane and Eleanor Clark (whose father would also be hanged for burglary) he singled out Raw Pele, near Elsdon in Northumberland, and its resident Margaret Crozier, for robbery. The isolation of the location making it an easy target for the threesome.

On that rainy night in August 1791, William Winter knocked at the door of the pele. On gaining admission William beat the old woman. Margaret apparently died of a fractured skull, although it has also been suggested that her throat was slit. The alarm was raised by a local boy, and William and the sisters were later apprehended for their crime.

Later that year William Winter and the Clark sisters were executed at Westgate, Newcastle. Winter's body was hung in chains from a gibbet erected at Whiskersields Common, a couple of miles from the scene of the murder. Here it hung until the body rotted away after which the bones were scattered. Later the gibbet itself decayed.

But here not endeth the story!

Almost a century later Sir Walter Traveyan of Wallington ordered a replica of the gibbet to be built and erected on his land – complete with a wooden effigy of Winter!

Over the years the replica body was used for target practice and parts were stolen and disappeared. At one point even the replica gibbet itself went AWOL! Today the replaced gibbet still stands and the replica head swings in the elements of a lonely Northumberland moor, testament to a murder – and maybe also a little to a Lord with too much time and money.

There is a somewhat surprising ghost story attached to this tale. Despite having his life taken from him by hanging in Newcastle, coupled with the fact the current replica gibbet stands in a completely different location to the original – Winter's spectre has been reported at the site of the current gibbet, often standing next to a nearby cattle grid.

Maybe he prefers the view from this new location. Or maybe he's simply mourning the loss of his body – both his physical one and the wooden replica one.