

## **Murder in the Winnats Pass**

Winnat's Pass is a narrow, dramatic limestone gorge to the west of Castleton. Local legend has it that the Pass is haunted by the ghosts of two ill-fated lovers, murdered on their way to be married at the Peak Forest Chapel. The Chapel was built in 1657 by Christiana, Countess of Devonshire. As it was exempt from control by ecclesiastical authorities, couples from outside the parish could marry there without the normal legal requirement for banns to be posted. The Chapel became Derbyshire's own Gretna Green, enabling couples who perhaps faced objections to their marriage to be legally wed.

There are many versions of the story of the murder in the Winnats, some more detailed than others:

From the "Derby News" 28 April 1788:

"In 1758 and young gentleman and lady came out of Scotland on an expedition and were robbed and murdered at a place called the Winnats, near Castleton. Their bones were found in 1768 by some miners sinking an engine pit.

James A, Nicholas C, Thomas H, John B and Francis B, meeting them in the Winnats pulled them off their horses and dragged them into a barn and took from them two hundred pounds. Then, seizing on the young gentleman, the young lady entreated them in a most moving manner not to kill him. But they cut his throat from ear to ear. They then seized the young lady herself, and though she entreated them on her knees to spare her life, yet one of the wretches drove a miner's pick into her head, when she dropped down dead at his feet. On the second night they buried them.

### **The Reckoning**

Nicholas C fell from a precipice near the place of the murder and was killed. Thomas H hanged himself. John B was walking near the place where the bones were buried, when a stone fell from the hill and killed him on the spot. Francis B went mad and died miserably. James A was most miserably afflicted and tormented in his conscience and on his death bed in 1778 he confessed the whole of the affair."

This is the earliest, and most circumspect, version of the story but down the years it becomes embellished with detail:

Some writers give the names of the lovers as Alan and Clara. Alan was allegedly from a poor family and Clara's wealthy parents objected to the match. When Alan was threatened by Clara's brother, the couple decided to elope to the Peak Forest Chapel. They made their way to Stoney Middleton and stayed overnight at The Royal Oak. The following day they went to Castleton and stopped for a rest at another inn. A group of raucous and drunken miners was also there. Seeing the couple dressed in fine clothes, the men decided to follow them up the Winnats where they robbed them of £200 and brutally murdered them. Confessing to the murder on his death bed, James Ashton named the others: Nicholas Cook, John Bradshaw, Thomas Hall and Francis Butler. All writers record that these four died violently, some adding that James Ashton, having bought with his ill-gotten gains horses that turned out to be unfit, had died in poverty.

Adding rather more detail to the Derby News story, other writers say that the bodies of Alan and Clara were hidden in a barn but later dropped down a mine shaft where they were discovered some ten years after the murder. It is also said that Alan and Clara's horses were found four days after the murder and that the red leather saddle on display in the Speedwell Cavern Museum belonged to Clara. The bones of this unfortunate couple are alleged to have been retrieved from the mining shaft and buried by the eastern gate of St. Edmund's Church.

The spirits of Alan and Clara are said to still wander Winnats Pass and on a dark night their voices may be heard begging for their lives.....

The truth? Who knows .....but a dramatic and tragic story by all accounts.