

THE COCK ROAD GANG

Bitton lies about six miles to the east of Bristol, close to the River Avon which forms the Gloucestershire-Somerset border. In the eighteenth century it was a large parish covering an area of approximately eleven square miles. In 1801 it had a total population of 4,992 which rose to 7,171 in 1821. Within this parish were Bitton Hamlet, Hanham, Oldland, and what in 1821 became the parish of Kingswood. It was bounded by St. George's parish on the west and Warmley on the east. Its southern boundary stretched from the outskirts of Bristol to the Somerset border and its northern boundary was Kingswood Forest. Coalmining was its main industry. Large tracts of unenclosed land encouraged squatters and others to settle there. On rising ground between Warmley and Bitton lay Cock Road, a centre of criminal activity. From its highest point highwaymen and other miscreants are said to have watched their victims approach.

Many of the inhabitants of Bitton indulged in crime, petty and otherwise, but one family - Caines - became particularly notorious, possibly because they were identifiable as a family. Of the six sons of Benjamin and Ann Caines, two were hanged and the rest transported. Their two daughters each cohabited with three men, all of whom were transported - one of them twice. At least three of their grandsons were transported and one hanged.

Other names occur constantly in the gaol calendars: Brain(e), Britton, Bryant, Fry, I(s)les, Ward, Webb, and Wilmot. It has not been possible to establish what relationship - if any - they bore to one another, but it is certain that, between 1770 and 1797, marriages took place between members of families bearing these names. For instance: Abraham Fry and Lydia Caines (mother of Benjamin Caines mentioned above); Giles Wilmot and Betty Britton; William Webb and Dinah Brain; Morris Britton and Sarah Bryant; Moses Iles and Dorothy Britton; William Bryant and Hester Ward; Sampson Bryant and Susannah Fry; Richard Britton and Nancy Bryant; Thomas Britton and Mary Wilmot.

Bitton's criminals did not appear to operate as a tightly-knit gang but as small loosely-connected groups. Collectively they became known as the Cockroad Gang and, as such, terrorised the neighbourhood and extorted protection money which was collected annually at Lansdown Fair. Their activities were not confined to Bitton as the following account will show. Although there were many criminals in the neighbouring parishes of St. Philip & St. Jacob, and St. George, who quite frequently were concerned in crimes in and about Bitton, they are included only when they were directly connected with others from Bitton.

The year 1781 is, as yet, as far as one can go back with

certainty. In that year John Read and John Ward, condemned to death for housebreaking, were executed at Gloucester on 30th March, and buried at Bitton on 1st April. They were colliers and were described as "part of a desperate gang that has long infested the country."

On 1st September, 1783 James Bryant was executed for sheep-stealing. Four weeks later, Benjamin Webb and George Ward were committed to gaol at Tewkesbury charged with stealing and killing two lambs belonging to Mr. Isaac Lewis of Bitton, who offered a reward of £20 for their apprehension. When caught they were found to be in possession of two stolen horses. Towards the end of October they were removed to Gloucester to stand trial. Late the following January the Keeper of the Gaol found them about to discard their leg-irons which they had almost sawn through. Various lock-picking implements were taken from them and they were again secured by the application of several fetters known as "The Widow's Arms." In March they were hanged and on 28th of that month buried at Bitton. Joseph Fry and Samuel Ward, executed in April 1786, brought up to ten the number of criminals from Bitton hanged within a period of three years. Not all were executed at Gloucester. In that same month George Fry was condemned for burglary but later reprieved.

In April, 1795 two bailiff's men making a seizure for rent at a house in Kingswood were surrounded by angry colliers who put them down a nearby pit. They were kept there some hours, then pulled up and regaled with gingerbread and gin before being immured once more. When released after twenty-four hours incarceration the colliers demanded six shillings for their "lodgings" and made them take an oath not to trouble them again. That same year the Chamberlain of the city of Bristol offered fifty guineas reward for the apprehension of rioters from Kingswood who in attempting to stop the supply of coals and other provisions to Bristol committed highway robberies. Edward Peacock (alias Peake), Richard Hobbs, Henry Lewis, Jacob Porter, Moses Isles, William Fry, and George Thompson were among those involved.

At Monmouth Assizes in March 1799, George Gaines and Francis Britton were sentenced to one year's imprisonment for uttering counterfeit coin. When arrested at Pontypool they were in possession of a number of forged guineas and were well-mounted on stolen horses. They were said to belong to a gang of swindlers who had for a long time frequented country fairs under pretence of horse-dealing, and also as hawkers and pedlars.

On Friday, 10th May 1799, Abraham Isles (alias Scramhanded Jemmy, alias Twink) and Abraham Scull, both of Bitton, and Robert Webb of Chippenham, Wiltshire, stole three horses at Pensford in Somerset. On reaching the Turnpike house at Chelwood, Isles

asked the tollkeeper for change for a shilling, thereby causing her to go indoors to a bureau. Webb and Scull swiftly followed and at pistol point robbed her of £5. Meanwhile Isles sat quietly on his horse at the tollgate and the tollkeeper, not realising his complicity, ran out and asked for his assistance. He assured her that he would try and catch them and rode off in apparent pursuit. Later that day, all three broke into the Inn at Paulton and stole £15 worth of goods. Not content, they broke into other premises and stole another horse and a saddle. The following morning Abraham Isles was arrested at Bitton, while still in bed, and taken to the Bridewell at Shepton Mallet. Some of the stolen goods were found under his pillow and one of the horses was found in his pantry. Although in the house when Isles was apprehended, Scull managed to escape. Webb was seen some days later at Monmouth Fair, but whether they were caught or not is not known.

Shortly before one o'clock on Friday, 25th April, 1800 Richard Haynes aged thirty-four was hanged at Bristol. As was frequently the custom, an account of his life was printed and offered for sale at a penny per copy. One pamphlet survives and from it the following details are drawn. Richard Haynes, known as Dick Boy, was born at Oldland Green, the son of a collier with whom in his early years he worked in the pit. At thirteen he was apprenticed to a hatter but after a time, during a quarrel, he assaulted his master and absconded. Although an accomplished thief from the age of seven - one of his early exploits was stealing food from an oven by making a hole from the outside and then carefully refilling it - it was not until he was adult that he was first committed to prison. However, "through the interest of many friends" he was acquitted of the charge of stealing provisions and clothing from a house at Beach, near Lansdown. In partnership with a childhood friend named Carey he committed many other robberies. On one occasion they were both committed to Gloucester gaol but again their friends bribed the victim not to proceed with the charge. A Mr. Crach, robbed near Downend, tried to resist but Dick Boy threatened him with a pistol and when this misfired hit him with the butt end. Mr. Crach was found dead the next day. Haynes and Carey roamed the country, apparently undetected, until they were apprehended for a highway robbery and tried at Taunton. Carey was hanged and Haynes, who was once more acquitted, removed his friend's body from its grave and carried it to Oldland to bury it there. Learning that Carey had confessed to the murder of Mr. Crach, Dick Boy declared that had he known earlier he would have thrown the body into the river!

Always managing to avoid arrest he continued his depredations until caught robbing a man on Westminster Bridge, for which he

was sent to Botany Bay. Three or four years later he escaped in a fishing boat having thrown its other occupant overboard, and after various adventures returned to Oldland with a young wife, supposedly daughter of a German nobleman, but actually a native of Westerleigh. She later committed a robbery in London and was hanged. While in London, Dick Boy - strong and powerfully built - became a boxer, indulging in theft whenever the opportunity presented itself. Finally, he was arrested in Bristol for shooting at a police officer who apprehended him on suspicion of stealing a silver tankard. This time there was no escape. He was condemned to death. The Ordinary of Newgate who visited him in his last hours said "he always found Richard Haynes to be mild, gentle, and easy to be led, once convinced of the truth of any argument." Before receiving the Sacrament, Haynes declared that he bore no ill-feeling against anyone. At about midday he began his last journey - to the gallows on St. Michael's Hill. One is inclined to doubt the accuracy of some of the foregoing but, nevertheless, the basic points are true.

At Bath, in July 1804, four men were taken into custody charged with stealing more than £400 worth of super-fine cloth from premises at Freshford. Among them was Francis Gaines - George's brother - an oyster and cider seller aged twenty-three. Two accomplices, Thomas Batt and Charles Fuller (alias The Squire) escaped. The robbery was carried out in style. Having supped in Bath at about ten in the evening they made their way to Bathwick where at eleven o'clock they broke open a stable and stole a horse and cart. At midnight they reached Freshford, loaded the cloth on to the cart and returned to Bath where, at about half-past two, they parted having stored their booty in a coach-house behind Pulteney Street, hired for that purpose by The Squire under an assumed name. Francis Gaines, having confessed his part in the affair, was hanged at Ilchester two months later.

On December 17th, 1808 seventeen years old George Groves was committed to Lawford's Gate House of Correction for stealing a quantity of leather breeches and other articles from William Snellgrove of Keynsham. Some of the goods were found in his possession and the rest in his home at Bitton. It is not known what sentence he received but in June, 1809 he was arrested at Chepstow Wool Fair where he had combined gingerbread selling with a little pocket-picking. Six years later, described as the leader of a notorious gang, he was again in custody but was not convicted. No more is known until August, 1820 when he was apprehended at Lansdown Fair but rescued by some of his "fellow freebooters." The Gloucester Journal reported on 4th September, 1820: "Bristol Fair commenced on Friday - The light-fingered corps have a strong detachment in the fair. CAPTAIN GROVES is absent on the SICK LIST -

we wish we could add that he is SICK OF HIS TRADE." Finally, in January, 1822, he was tried at Derby Sessions for picking pockets and was sentenced to seven years' transportation.

Sampson Fry - half brother of Benjamin Caines - and Samuel Cooke were gaoled for one month for an assault in January, 1809. It is said that Sampson Fry was eventually transported. In May the same year, William Bryant, aged nineteen, and his brother Samuel were accused of breaking into William Batman's house at Bitton and stealing linen, silver buckles and other articles.

The Kingswood Association for the suppression of a society of thieves was formed in 1811. Its aim was to give proof that, although many of the criminals in the area were known, few dared give evidence against them without risking life and property. Whether it was the result of this Association's efforts or increased vigilance on the part of the constables, is difficult to say - possibly there were other factors - but certainly from then on the number of offenders committed to prison from that area increased. New names appeared but almost always in company with some of the old familiar ones.

In 1812, Samuel Bryant then aged twenty and Samuel Britton aged seventeen, were sentenced to two years imprisonment and fined one shilling each for stealing wheat at Mangotsfield. Joseph Bryant, aged forty, was sentenced to two years imprisonment for attempted house-breaking. Dennis Bryant, aged twenty-three, was committed to prison for setting fire to a hayrick. Two years later he was sentenced to fourteen years' transportation for stealing a bed from the house of Stephen Britton. Robert Cribb, aged twenty, originally committed for breaking into a butcher's "killing shop" and stealing carcasses with Thomas Cribb, aged twenty-four, was also sentenced to transportation for fourteen years for horse-stealing.

Buring 1813 there was a steady procession of Bitton criminals to and from the County gaol. James Hathway, who committed a number of highway robberies near Bath was apprehended at Warmley "in the vicinity of Cockroad." William Powe, Henry Willis, Ambrose Willis, Samuel Brain, John Fry, Hannah Jones, Sarah Lacey and Hester Britton were charged with wounding Charles Bull and Moses Batt, constables of Bitton, and attempting to rescue William Lacey from them after apprehension for a felony, namely - stealing bread from Mary Townsend's house at Oldland. No Bill was found against William Lacey or any of the men, but the three women were imprisoned for six weeks.

Among the many inmates of the gaol at this time were Timothy Bush, Thomas Wilmot and Joseph Willis, who were condemned for

horse-stealing but later reprieved and transported for life. At least ten others from Bitton were committed to prison that year but not convicted. A meeting to establish a Bible Association, in connection with the British and Foreign Bible Society, was held in Kingswood on January 31st, 1814. The Gloucester Journal commented: "Such an institution was peculiarly wanted in a district which notwithstanding the various efforts made to improve it, still remains so uncivilized....." At the Lent Assizes that year, Ann Powell, aged twenty-five, was condemned but later reprieved for stealing from the house of E. Frankcomb at Bitton, and her husband Joseph was sentenced to seven years' transportation for receiving the stolen goods.

After a seeming lull the Gloucester Journal reported: 10th October, 1814. - "COCK ROAD GANG OF MARAUDERS -

Information having been given to the Magistrates that a gang of desperadoes infested the above neighbourhood, to such a degree that no inhabitant felt safe in his bed and no traveller could, without danger, pass the Kingswood road, on Sunday evening last a strong party of police officers from Bristol were despatched in order to take them into custody. The gang had, however, been apprized of their approach, and a desperate conflict ensued..." The police officers retreated with their wounded but returned in greater force, well armed, early next day. Seven men and two women were taken into custody and committed to Lawford's Gate Bridewell. Others were later apprehended including Thomas Caines, aged thirty, and his brother George, aged thirty-seven. "George - previously convicted in 1799 at Pontypool - was captured at Torbay. All were committed to await trial at the next Assizes. Elizabeth Caines (alias Bush) - sister of George and Thomas - was committed to Ilchester gaol to stand trial for stealing six pigs from a butcher in Bath. The pigs had been found locked up in her parlour six months previously and a warrant was issued against her 'but could not be executed with safety, from the strength of the gang."

In January, 1815, Moses Owen and James Cribb, two more of "the gang that committed such depredations in the neighbourhood of Bristol last summer [who] belong to that sink of iniquity COCKROAD" were apprehended at Liverpool, "through the spirited exertions of Mr. Palmer of Keynsham." Mr. Palmer was one of almost a dozen people who had had horses stolen, whose value was put at over £700. Moses Owen was executed at Lancaster on April 22nd and James Cribb sentenced to transportation for life.

At the Lent Assizes 1815, George Caines was accused of shooting at Benjamin Curtis and beating him with the butt end of the gun with intent to kill, while attempting to rescue from

the Constables a prisoner named Isaac Cox (alias Lewis) apprehended for stealing a horse and four pigs. He was condemned to death but reprieved and transported for life.

Thomas Caines, aged twenty, Henry Willis, and Sampson Fry, aged nineteen, also concerned in the attempted rescue of Isaac Cox, were each sentenced to two years' imprisonment for violently assaulting Constables Moses Batt and Charles Bull in the execution of their duty. Thomas Caines, aged thirty, James Hodges, Samuel Leonard, Hannah Pratt, Ann Smith (alias Friday) and Hannah Powell (alias Cribb) were also charged with assaulting Moses Batt and Charles Bull while attempting to rescue Isaac Cribb from them. Thomas Caines received two years' and James Hodges one years' imprisonment. The rest were acquitted. Benjamin Caines Jr. and John White did not appear to answer to a similar charge but were acquitted at the next Assizes. Isaac Cribb, a fish carrier, was sentenced to seven years' transportation at Somerset Assizes but got no further than the Hulks at Portsmouth. Whether he escaped or was released is not certain although escape is most likely. At the Lent Assizes in Gloucester 1819, at the age of thirty, he was again sentenced to seven years' transportation - for stealing four sacks of potatoes from Thomas Needs, a horse-dealer of Bitton.

In all, no less than twenty-five criminals from Bitton were in Gloucester gaol in 1815. Throughout 1816 and 1817 the pattern was much the same. George Britton and William Baker were condemned for highway robbery. Both were reprieved and George sailed for Botany Bay ten months later. William probably languished in the Hulks. Samuel Brain (alias Black) served twelve months imprisonment for stealing poultry, but his accomplice, Francis Britton, was discharged by proclamation. Thomas Alberry (alias Maggs) was acquitted of stealing his stepfather's life savings. James Baker, Joseph Parker (alias Evans), Joseph Bryant and Isaac Ballard were charged with breaking into Thomas Pratten's house. Henry and Ambrose Willis were charged with attempting to rescue Thomas Pratten from Constable Charles Bull. (One detects here a little dissension among thieves). Giles Wilmot, George Wilmot, Thomas Sweet, Edward Peacock, and Richard and Henry Moreton were charged with housebreaking. Benjamin Cribb was accused of stealing hay. John and Joseph Etle were acquitted of stealing two ducks. Henry Phipps received seven years' transportation for stealing clothing from a dwellinghouse and Sampson Cooke was sentenced to transportation for fourteen years for stealing a hay knife valued at two shillings. Thirty-one years-old Thomas Caines, "Captain of the Cockroad Gang" was caught by a Private in the Bitton Cavalry in the act of taking away several sacks of wheat just stolen from an Inn at Cold Ashton. He had not long been released after serving the two-year sentence imposed in 1815. The gallant Private:

received promotion: Caines was sent to Botany Bay for seven years.

In August 1817, Benjamin Caines Jr. aged twenty-three (youngest son of Benjamin and Ann) stood trial for burgling, with others, the dwellinghouse of Sarah Prigg at Bitton. Sarah Prigg, an elderly woman, said that on February 1st she had retired to bed leaving her nephew, James Evans, to follow. Some time later she was awakened by three masked men entering her room. Crying "Murder!" she jumped out of bed but was knocked down by one of the intruders who demanded her money. She declared that she had none but muttering "dreadful imprecations" they seized her pockets which were lying at the foot of the bed, emptied them, and left. After waiting about half an hour she went downstairs to find that the house had been rifled.

Her nephew said that he went to bed shortly after his aunt. Disturbed by a noise, he got up but before he reached the stairhead he was confronted by three men - one brandishing a sword and another a pistol - who threatened to kill him if he "wagged". Although pushed onto his bed and covered with a quilt he managed, by lifting one corner, to recognize in the moonlight one of the intruders who stood at the window and removed his mask. Henry Wilmot claimed that he kept watch while the burglary was carried out and was to have met the others later to receive his share, but was apprehended before he could do so. James Bryant, "a fellow of most forbidding aspect" testified "in most unblushing manner" that he and Wilmot attended a club supper that night. Wilmot went home at 10.30 p.m. and at about midnight he, and a man named Monk, joined Wilmot there and stayed until two or three in the morning when all three went to steal turnips because they were hungry!

The Judge, passing sentence of death on Benjamin Caines, said that he had seriously considered ordering execution to take place before the usual lapse of time and to have the body hung in chains "as an example to the rest of his infamous gang." On Saturday, September 6th, 1817 Benjamin, in company with another offender, was hanged. He received the Holy Sacrament in the Prison Chapel before going to the scaffold where he behaved with resignation and fortitude. His body was given to his family for interment. One of his brothers took the body to Bitton, travelling through the night, and according to custom it was put on view in his father's parlour. A small charge was levied to defray the funeral expenses.

Benjamin was interred in the same grave as his brother Francis who was executed in 1804. (It is said that when he attended Francis's funeral - at the age of ten - he sat on a wall

and whistled throughout.) "A numerous concourse of his acquaintances attended the procession from Cock-road (near two miles); the pall was supported by six females dressed in white The minister preached a very impressive sermon to Caines' associates from 'Let him that stole, steal no more', [received with solemn attention by the congregation.] The body was afterwards committed to the grave by candlelight....." Henry Wilmot and James Bryant apparently went free.

One might suppose that the events of the last three years, culminating in yet another execution, would have had a deterrent effect on the inhabitants of the Cockroad area, but crime continued unabated. During the following four years, sixteen men and one woman were sentenced to transportation and one woman was hanged for poisoning her husband.

In April 1821 John Horwood was executed for the murder of Eliza Balsum of Hanham - a girl he had tried unsuccessfully to court. Among the witnesses at his trial were Thomas Barnes, and William, Joseph and Hannah Fry, "whose heads" observed the Judge, "have already been before the public." Familiar names continued to figure in the gaol calendars - Bryant, Britton, etc., and, occasionally, Caines.

On the evening of 27th November, 1824 the Tennis Court, a public house near Warmley, was filled with its usual company. Isaac Gorden, whose job it was to impound horses found trespassing on his master's land, was there. So also, were James Caines (son of Elizabeth Caines alias Bush; grandson of Benjamin, Senior) Mark Whiting, Francis Britton and their friends. A week before, Isaac Gorden had impounded Francis Britton's horse, and this became the cause of a quarrel during which Caines pelted Gorden with bits of tobacco pipe and Robert England, a friend of Caines, declared that Gorden deserved a good hiding. Eventually Gorden left the Tennis Court, intending to go home, but shortly afterwards he was knocked to the ground. He returned to the Tennis Court and left only when the rest had gone. An hour later he was found dead from a blow on the back of the head and two stab wounds in the forehead.

Twenty witnesses were examined and finally seven were charged with murder. Thomas Wilmot aged nineteen, who had assaulted Gorden the first time he left the Tennis Court, was discharged. Francis Britton aged forty, Isaac Britton aged eighteen, Samuel Peacock and Robert England were found not guilty. Mark Whiting and James Caines were condemned to death. A knife found near the victim's body was proved to belong to Robert England and to have been in his possession on the day of the murder, but this evidence appears to have been disregarded. Caines and Whiting were

convicted on the evidence that footprints found in soft earth near an uprooted clothes-post - said to have been used to inflict the fatal wound - were Caine's and seat-prints found in earth near the spot where the victim was found were said to match exactly the patched trousers worn by Whiting. James Caines and Mark Whiting were executed on 11th April, 1825. On the following day James Caines's younger brother Francis, and Samuel Needs, both aged seventeen, were committed to prison for highway robbery.

Reporting these events the Gloucester Journal commented: "The name of Caines has for years been notorious in this county and the majority of them have either been hanged or transported. It would seem as if the severe visitation of the law could have no effect in checking the propensity to crime which pervades this depraved family..." Francis Caines had four years previously been sentenced to one month in prison and to be once privately whipped for stealing poultry.

This was not quite the last of the Caines family. In November, 1828, Thomas Caines - brother of Francis and James - was sentenced to transportation for seven years for stealing a spade worth two shillings. His two other appearances in court had been in company with Robert England (implicated in the Warmley murder) but on each occasion both were found not guilty.

Looking back over the events of these years one gains the impression that, at least on some occasions, with the Caines family it was a case of "give a dog a bad name...." The foregoing does not pretend to be a complete account of crime in the Cockroad area during those years: there are many gaps. One hopes, in time, to fill some of them and to discover more about the social and other conditions which engendered such a criminal society.

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Sources

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