

## Mysterious Death of a Bradiford Gentleman

Henry John Turberville, who was formerly known as Henry John Blackmore and was the elder brother of Richard Doddrige (R D) Blackmore the author of *'Lorna Doone'*, died in very mysterious circumstances in Yeovil in August 1875. This is a summary of his life and death.

Henry Blackmore was the elder son of the Rev John Blackmore, formerly vicar of Ashford near Barnstaple. He was a bachelor and moved to live alone in Bradiford in 1860 when he was 37 with just a servant. He was seen as rather eccentric, with a taste for science, especially astronomy, and had been articled for several years to the Observatory at Greenwich. He was also an authority on the works of William Shakespeare. By the time of the 1871 census he was living in Elm Cottage, also described as being in Bradiford although its whereabouts are not known, and had changed his name to Henry Turberville. He listed himself as *'Gentleman, Land Proprietor'*. However, he lived the life of a hermit, and although generous to charities, at various times was at loggerheads with his neighbours and his landlord.

His name change seems to have been prompted by the grievous wrong he considered that members of his family had done to him. The choice of what was a Roman Catholic family name may have been with the deliberate aim of offending his Church of England relatives. A house in one of R D Blackmore's early novels, *'The Maid of Sker'*, which still exists, was occupied by the Catholic Turberville family.

Like his better known younger brother, Henry had inherited various legacies from relatives and amassed a fortune of £20,000, a sum equivalent more than £1.5M today. In 1875, when he was 51, Henry Turberville began to visit Yeovil where he got to know Thomas Maggs, a chemist, who had a business on the High Street. In June of that year he became engaged to Maggs' 23-year-old daughter, Elizabeth. It is relevant to note at this point that, over the years, he had written a number of wills, one in 1858 in which left his entire estate to Henry Essery, a shoemaker, who lived close by in Bradiford. Another included leaving his entire estate to pay for the erection of a statue to William Shakespeare, although the date is unknown! Then, possibly in 1871, he drew up a will leaving his estate of £20,000 to Charles Bradlaugh, a free-thinker and militant politician. Finally, on 21st July 1875 he made another will in which he left everything to Thomas Maggs and his family.

This is relevant because, on the night of 16th August 1875, when again in Yeovil, he returned to his room in the Three Choughs Hotel in great pain, apparently in his left leg. Although he had been very ill a year or two before when he had *'suffered from an affection of a large vein in his left leg'*, he was reported as being in good health on his visit to Yeovil. As he was a chemist, Thomas Maggs was called in and administered various remedies but Henry grew worse and declared that he was the victim of poisoners. It was rumoured in Yeovil that he had been slighted by a young lady, to whom he had left several thousand pounds, and that he took cyanide of potassium which he had in a bottle under his pillow. He may rather have been in severe pain from his leg. Despite the attention of a physician, Dr Russell Aldridge, he died the next day in very distressing circumstances. At the inquest, Dr Aldridge stated that Henry Turberville had taken potassium cyanide when he was present but the evidence also showed that this had not reached his stomach and it was never explained how he obtained the cyanide. In the end the verdict of the jury was that *'he had taken cyanide of potassium while in a state of unsound mind increasing previous exhaustion which resulted in death'*.

At the inquest, two of the will-holders - Charles Bradlaugh and Thomas Maggs - came together with R D Blackmore, who believed that his brother had been murdered. R D Blackmore was not satisfied with the verdict and set down his view and tried to get the inquest re-opened and his brother declared intestate. However, his unguarded correspondence with friends and the press led to three actions for libel. In the end the case was settled out of court, with £2,000 to Blackmore, £2,500 to Charles Bradlaugh, £15,000 to the Maggs family and £500 to Henry Essery. A writ for libel was also issued by Dr Aldridge but the outcome is not recorded. Unfortunately, for us, all R D Blackmore's papers were destroyed on his death so the death of his brother Henry remains a mystery. Henry is buried in Charles' churchyard near Brayford, where his uncle was Rector. The inscription on his tomb reads *'In affectionate memory of Henry Turberville, Esquire, formerly Henry J Blackmore who died August 17, 1875 aged 51'* with an unusual verse of scripture *'O that they were wise, that they understood this, that they would consider their latter end! (Deuteronomy 32,29)'*.

This story is based on the account in the Exmoor Review (Vol. 30, 1989) *'Brother to Blackmore - A Mystery'* by Noel Allen and on newspaper reports of the time in the North Devon Journal which were provided to The Pilton Story by Dave Lewis.