At Wishmore Cross.

By G. A. Kempthorne.

ONE day in the sixties a small party of boys from the new Wellington College might have been observed toiling along The Devil's Highway with a heavy piece of timber.

It was the stump of the old gibbet which they had succeeded in uprooting and were bearing back in triumph.

For a few days the trophy adorned one of the College domitories where Dr. Benson found it, with the result that the young gentlemen dragged it back across the heath and set it up again. For a short time it stood till it rotted away, and with it passed nearly the last relic of the time when "The Great Moor between Bagshot and Wokingham" was the favourite haunt of the owler, the footpad and the highwayman.

A low grassy mound marks the spot. Here on the very summit of Easthampstead Plain the road the Romans cut through the Forest is crossed by an ancient forest track. To the North West the gravel-topped plateau ends abruptly in a spur on which stands a huge Celtic fort. Close by is Wishmoor Cross where four parishes meet, and Wish brook divides Berkshire from Surrey. During the last hundred years the aspect of the scene has been gradually changing. The rolling Heath, where every tree and nearly every thorn bush was a landmark is now covered with Scotch Fir woods, already full grown when Kingsley came to Eversley. Of late the hand of the speculating builder of villa residences has been devastating his winter garden; but here one may ride for miles, without seeing a house or a human being, across the heather and through "endless vistas of smooth, red, green-veined shafts holding up the warm dark roof, lessening away into endless gloom, paved with rich brown fir needle."

Wishmore Cross is in the heart of the highwayman's country. From the summit of the moor Claude Duval must often enough have spied the land; for two miles to the south lies the Salisbury road, at that time a lonely stretch of eight miles from the Golden Farmer hut on the Bagshot hill through Blackwater turnpike, and over the Flats to Hartford Bridge. He is perhaps the most famous of all

the Bagshot highwaymen. Everyone knows how he danced with the lady on the heath, and how London Society flocked to commiserate with him in his prison cell. It was not far from this spot that Esquire Roper, the Master of the King's buck hounds fell in with him while hunting; had to hand over fifty guineas and was left tied up neck and heels.

The inn on Bagshot hill two miles away recalls the name of another well-known highwayman of the Restoration — William Davies, the Golden Farmer. When not occupied in crime he led the life of a respectable farmer in a Gloucestershire village, where he had a wife and eighteen children, though it is said that the neighbours often wondered where all the gold came from with which he paid his bills. He did not confine his operations by any means to Bagshot, but he was well known hereabouts, and the summit of Bagshot hill was a convenient place to lie in wait for the coaches when the horses were blown after climbing the slope.

For forty-two years he plied his trade successfully, till one day he was recognised in London by a butcher, who raised the hue and cry. Davies promptly shot him dead, but he failed to get away, was brought to trial, and was executed in Fleet Street. His body was afterwards brought down to Bagshot and hung in chains near the scene of his crimes.

For many years afterwards the public-house on the hill was named "The Golden Farmer." The present owner, however, prefers "The Jolly Farmer" as being better suited, perhaps, to a well-conducted house.

Thomas Simpson, better known as Old Mobb, Captain Stafford, Whitney the butcher, with his gang, and many others were frequent visitors in the neighbourhood, and throughout the eighteenth century Bagshot Heath and Sandhurst Common bore a sinister reputation.

The Bagshot highwaymen came from various parts of the country, but that they had agents and willing helpers among the people we may take for granted. Duval had a hiding place in the chimney of a cottage among the Chobham Ridges, and many of the beer-houses on the Heath were notorious up till much later times.

The story goes that a traveller once escaped from Whitney, who had summoned him to stand and deliver, by pretending that he himself was a "gentleman thief" down in his luck. He was, however, foolish enough to brag about his adventure at an inn at which he put up, with the result that next morning he again met the highwayman on the road. This time the interview turned out differently.

The Heath people to whom these unwelcome visitors turned for assistance were a wild race, who bowed to no master. The forest laws were obsolete. James I. tried to revive them, and the people laughed at him.

"There is contention between everie neighbour keeper for usurpation and intruding one into another's walkes, for not one of them knoweth his owne boundes," wrote the King's Surveyor in 1601, and under the circumstances it must have been easy enough to run up a bank and a little hut on the waste, where pasturage, heath cutting, turbary, browse-wood and rootage were words capable of the widest interpretation; and the parish constable was most unlikely, even if he so willed, to inquire into any man's business.

The type of Tom Cordery is only now dying out. In spite of inclosures, awards, and allotments, he still survived; ostensibly as rat-catcher, broom-maker, or squirrel tamer, till they drove his children to school and swept away his tent to make way for the stuccoed residence of the retired Army officer. He was, of course, a poacher by birth and instinct, and, so long as he kept within bounds, with resonable luck might lead his free life undisturbed.

But by the close of George the Second's reign the lawlessness of the poachers had passed all reason. "All the country was wild about deer stealing. Unless he was a hunter, as they affected to call themselves, no young person was allowed to be possessed of manhood or gallantry."* While Colonel Negus, at Bigshotte Rayles, was inventing a new drink which was to make his name famous, and corresponding with the Treasury about the ruinous state of his park palings and his arrears of salary, men with their faces blacked were roving about in Sandhurst and Bigshotte Walks slaying the King's deer and levying black mail on the farmers.

Led by one William Shorter, the Wokingham Blacks, as they were called, were for a time a terror to the neighbourhood. Lord Anan, at Bagshot, killed some of their dogs, and they threatened to come and burn down his house. Sir John Cope, at Bramshill, sentenced one of their number who had been brought up before him, and awoke next morning to find five hundred pounds' worth of his young plantations destroyed. Lastly they murdered in cold blood an under-keeper's son, who had annoyed them.

At length a trap was set for the ringleaders. Two Bow Street runners, Messrs. Chelk and Fowler, came upon three of their number

* White's History of Selborne.

at Wokingham Fair, and persuaded them by offers of money to come up to London as witnesses in the case of a clergyman against whom they had laid information. Once out of their own country they were easily secured, and a Troop of Horse Grenadiers succeeded a few days later in arresting twenty-nine others in the Forest. They were remanded for trial at Reading, where they were sentenced to various terms of imprisonment, and four were hung in chains on the Heath. It seems more than likely that one of these may have suffered at Wishmore Cross.

The scene on the Heath must have been one only too familiar to the country people up to the very end of the eighteenth century. It was the ambition of most of these wretched criminals to make what was known as "an edifying end," and of the Sheriff to make the ceremony go off with éclat. The journey from the jail, which might take two to three hours, was made in solemn procession, the prisoner in a cart draped in black, he himself in mourning, as also his relatives, who were allowed to accompany him. In front marched two men with staves draped in crape, on either side six javelin men, and behind, the Sheriff and Chaplain in a coach.

On the *cortege* reaching the ground there would be a further wait of an hour or so while things were being got ready, when the prisoner might take leave of his friends or listen to the ministrations of the Chaplain. Finally, standing in the cart with the rope round his neck, he would deliver the speech with which he came carefully prepared, and when all was over the crowd would wait ere it dispersed to see the body cut down and dressed in its chains to be re-hung.

The light in which this demoralising exhibition was regarded may be judged from the remarks of the *Reading Mercury* after the particularly gruesome execution of two boys on Mortimer Heath in the year 1787 :—"We are happy to state that the whole country seemed sensible of the High Sheriff's attention in giving orders for the above execution being conducted in so decent and solemn a manner!"