

# Contexts: The Great Train Robbery

## Frederick Lawrence catches up with a cult heist and some of the gang

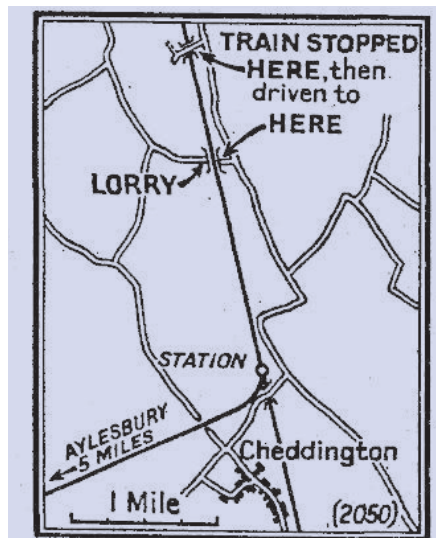
A FEW PUBLIC EVENTS ACHIEVE a mystique that is beyond their importance. The Great Train Robbery of 8 August 1963 is one. Following the Scottish August bank holiday, the overnight mail train from Glasgow to London, loaded with bags of currency notes as well as letters, was stopped by signal a little after 3.00 am in Buckinghamshire. The diesel engine and first two carriages were detached from the rest of the train and driven from the Sears Crossing 'red light' that the gang had crudely created, 2.4 km to Bridego Bridge where 120 sacks of currency were loaded onto a waiting lorry and taken to Leatherslade Farm. This was the rented base from which the gang had operated and to which they returned to 'lie low' and divide up their haul, a bounty of over £2.6 million (about £39 million today) that exceeded their expectations. While they waited, they played Monopoly with 'real' money: their fingerprints later helped convict them. The audacity of the robbery caught the imagination of the public and even now, despite the Brinks Mat, 1983, Securitas Tonbridge, 2006, and other notable heists, it is among the largest robberies of the last 100 years. Apart from the booty, the personalities and the subsequent activities of gang members secured their place through songs, films and books.

### The gang

Bruce Reynolds, a London antique dealer and burglar, is associated with the formation of



The track to the remote Leatherslade Farm that had been rented. The booty was taken to the farm and divided. Fearing discovery, they left hurriedly



Map from a newspaper report, 9 August

the plan. He was a leader of the assembled 15-man gang. Rewards totalling a record £260,000 for information leading to the arrest and conviction of the gang and return of the money were offered on 9 August. Most of the gang were caught within weeks and 12 were sentenced to between 24 to 30 years at Aylesbury Court in April 1964. Reynolds evaded capture until 1969.

Among the more notorious gang members were Ronnie Biggs, Buster Edwards and Charlie Wilson. Charlie Wilson escaped from Winson Green Prison, Birmingham, in August 1964 and lived under the name Ronald Alloway with his wife and five daughters in a large, secluded property near Montreal, Canada but his cover was blown when he invited his brother-in-law for Christmas in 1967. Ronnie Biggs, with another prisoner, escaped from Wandsworth Prison on 8 July 1965 after just 15 months in jail. Rope ladders were thrown into the exercise yard and they then jumped onto the roof of a waiting furniture van. After 'lying low' for several months, Biggs was smuggled to Belgium and France and underwent plastic surgery before he travelled to Spain and Australia, where his family joined him. He worked, with the name Terrence Furminger, in film set construction in Adelaide until he was recognised and fled to Brazil, as Michael Haynes, in 1970. Here he

enjoyed life and the company of several young ladies (a son, Michael, was born in 1974) but with declining health Biggs, with Michael, returned to Britain in 2001 and currently continues his sentence in prison. Fellow robber Buster Edwards gave himself up after fleeing to Mexico. Latterly, he sold flowers from a stand at Waterloo station. Aged 63, he was found dead, through hanging, in 1994.

### The robbery and popular culture

As becomes a folklore event, the robbery has a place in popular culture and here are a few of the greater examples. Peter Cook and Dudley Moore had a skit on the hunt for the gang in the *Beyond the Fringe* comedy revue. Biggs was associated with The Sex Pistols' *No One is Innocent* and he sang for the German Punk band Die Toten Hosen. He also collaborated with Bruce Henry and others to produce *Mailbag Blues* in 2004. Alabama 3 recorded a tribute to Reynolds, 'Have You Seen Bruce Richard Reynolds' on their 2005 album *Outlaw*. In Germany a mini TV series, *Die Gentleman bitten zur Kasse*, 1966, was based on the robbery as was a French film, *The Brain*, in 1969. Notable narrative author, Piers Paul Read wrote an exciting account of the robbery using the testimony of 7 of the then paroled gang. His *The Train Robbers* was published in 1978. Buster Edwards' exploits were portrayed by Phil Collins in the hit film *Buster*.



A Virgin train speeds by the embankment, this year, at Bridego Bridge where the mailbags were thrown down to waiting vehicles (see HERE on map)

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