

Greenberry Hill

At six o'clock on Thursday 17 October 1678, a baker called Bromley and a farrier called Waters were walking across the fields south of Primrose Hill, when they saw

a sword and belt, and a stick and a pair of gloves, lying together hard by the hedge side; but they went not near to meddle with them, supposing they had belonged to some person that was gone into the ditch to ease himself.¹

They returned that evening with the landlord, Rawson, whom they had gone to visit in Chalk Farm. The sword turned out to be a scabbard; and the sword itself was close by, in a dry ditch, run through the dead body of a man in his fifties. There was a livid circle about his throat, suggesting he had been strangled. There was little blood on his clothes or in the ditch, suggesting that he had been killed elsewhere and run through with the sword once dead. There was plenty of money and jewellery in his pockets, suggesting he had not been the victim of robbers.

The constable knew the dead man's name. He had been missing for four days; and the dozen or so neighbours and housekeepers that accompanied the constable, and indeed nearly the whole nation, were in no doubt as to who had done this. It was part of a much bigger conspiracy.

Many others have tried to solve this murder mystery over the last three hundred years. I will not attempt to do so. I am interested in the place-name mystery that forms its footnote. To tell that story, I must first put the events in historical context, as briefly as possible.

¹ James Peller Malcolm, *Londinium Redivivum, or an Ancient History and Modern description of London, Volume 4* (John Nichols & Son, London, 1807), p. 199-200

The murder near Primrose Hill was one of the most melodramatic scenes in the Popish Plot that convulsed England in 1678. According to its shrill and dire warning, nearly all Catholics in England were about to rise up, assassinate Charles II, and overthrow Protestant rule. They would be assisted in this by the Pope, the Jesuits, and Louis XIV. Catholic servants would kill their masters or burn their houses, and popery would reclaim the Olde England of Good Queen Bess.

The core of the conspiracy theory had been concocted in the bitter mind of Titus Oates, but of course, like the best fake news, it took on a life of its own because so many people wanted to believe it. Oates, for example, was careful not to implicate the king's Catholic brother, James, Duke of York, but of course in the paranoia that followed, fears grew that he would be placed on the throne as part of the Catholic rising. By 1681, when the hysteria waned and Oates was arrested for sedition, more than 21 Catholics had lost their lives.

On 28 September 1678 Titus Oates made a statement on oath concerning the 'facts' of the case before the magistrate, Sir Edmund Berry (or Bury) Godfrey. The conspiracy had already become public by then. Sir Edmund talked about the dangers of being 'knocked on the head', but took no additional security precautions. At nine o'clock in the morning of Saturday 12 October, Sir Edmund left his house in Green's-lane in the Strand² and was not seen alive again.

And now to the 'curious story' that I allude to in episode 10 of *Pagan London*. On 10 February 1679, three Catholics were tried and condemned to death for his murder: a cushion-man³ of the queen's chapel, Robert Green; a porter at Somerset House, Henry Berry; and a servant to the treasurer of the chapel, Lawrence Hill.

² Since obliterated by Charing Cross Station.

³ Charles II's queen was the Portuguese Catherine of Braganza. The association of Green and Hill with her private Catholic chapel in Somerset House, therefore, added political tension to the affair. I am intrigued as to what a 'cushion-man' did. I have been unable to find any description of what this role entailed, and would welcome an explanation from any experts on Catholicism. The most likely explanation seems to be that a cushion-man carried the cushion for the queen to kneel on during Mass, in which case it is significant that Green should have been identified for all eternity by this luxurious and effete role as if to stress his unrepentant Catholicism. In the record of their trial, Green, Berry and Hill are all described as 'labourers'. Elsewhere, they are described in terms of roles that emphasise their Catholicism, and because this then becomes the standard, it is difficult to identify who first described them as such.

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It was curious, contemporary commentators observed, that men called Green, Berry and Hill should have been indicted, when the name of the place where Sir Edmund's body was found had been Greenberry Hill.

A quick footnote would be all that was needed, I thought. The story was too long to explain on camera (because you need to know at least a bit of background on the Popish Plot) but too interesting not to mention.

And then I looked online and found that this curious little story about coincidence (or was it about nominative determinism?) had been told in dozens of different ways over the years, each with differing facts and differing permutations. It reminded me of allegations that have been made this year about the nature of concerted Russian disinformation campaigns, whereby if a spying scandal hits the headlines, there is no need to rebut it with a single solid alternative version of events: simply flood the internet with dozens of different conspiracy theories, and the echo chambers will reverberate until the signal of truth is lost in the noise.

Let's start with Barrow Hill, which is the smaller hill to the south-south-west of Primrose Hill. The book I am clutching in *Pagan London* is Elizabeth Oke Gordon's *Prehistoric London: Its Mounds and Circles* (1914). Those who pick it up hoping to find earth mysteries therein will be disappointed. There are only a handful of pages throughout that touch on any sacred mounds of London, and these are bereft of historical or archaeological evidence. The rest of the book consists of lengthy details of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Druidry haphazardly shovelled in. Sadly, it's not even well-written. Those seeking a hit of psychogeography are better off reading Peter Ackroyd's opening chapter of *London: The Biography*, in which he swirls these and other poetic ideas around in his magisterial prose-pot to great effect; or, of course, those classics inspired by Gordon's sketchy ideas: Iain Sinclair's *Lud Heat* and Alan Moore and Eddie Campbell's *From Hell*.

In her book, Gordon simply assumes that Primrose Hill and Barrow Hill *were* (and are) barrows. The implication is that the name of Barrow Hill is uncontested evidence of the hill's antiquity and sanctity, and indeed that it was named after the barrow-graves that it undoubtedly contained. The eminent twentieth-century archaeologist, W.F. Grimes, had the same idea, but for him it was just a 'hint of a possibility'.⁴

⁴ *The British Atlas of Historic Towns Volume III: The City of London from Prehistoric Times to c. 1520*, ed. Mary G. Lobel (Oxford University Press, 1989), chapter 2. Available as a free download from [British Historic Towns Atlas](#)

We may never know, because in 1820 the West Middlesex Waterworks Company acquired three acres of Barrow Hill and built a reservoir on it, which (after a mid-2010s re-build) still provides water to Londoners. If there were barrow-graves there, they may have been swept them away, although even a Regency contractor, insensitive to archaeology, would have kept his eye out for the treasure-trove that a rich barrow-burial might have yielded up.

The year 1820 is also the earliest mention I have been able to find of Barrow Hill itself, although I would welcome others sourcing further evidence from primary documents. There are earlier references to Barrow Hill Farm from a 1746 rate book⁵, and estate plans dated 1708⁶, the latter suggesting that Barrow Hill Farm was on, or at least very near, Barrow Hill. There is also a reference to a three-and-a-half-acre pasture called ‘Barrowes’ in a survey for Henry VIII dated from the mid-sixteenth century, when the king bought up much of the ‘Manor of Tyburne within the parish of Maribone’ to lay out a hunting-park. Most of this would eventually become Regent’s Park.⁷

In Ackroyd’s opening chapter he softly flies the reader through and round the sacred mounds of London – as if he is Raymond Briggs’ snowman and we are young James, lightly clinging to his hand – and the dark shadows of history clear for fleeting moments and resolve themselves into woodcut panoramas. It is in this spirit that I first read the story of Greenberry Hill, when Ackroyd insinuates, with his trademark ‘territorial imperative’, that ‘it would seem that the topography of London itself played a fortuitous if malign part’ in the murder. Up in the air above the hills of London, myth and history are blended into a swirl. It is only when we have landed, and Peter Ackroyd has melted in our back garden, that we struggle to remember whether what we saw was an ancient dream.

Some of the confusion has been caused by Paul Thomas Anderson’s 1999 film about coincidences, *Magnolia*, in which a brief mention is given of the Greenberry Hill murder. The names and location are the same but the date is given as 1911, not 1678. This is likely to have been taken from a book by Charles Fort, *Wild Talents* (1932), in which he claims that the

⁵ Gordon E. Bannerman, *Merchants and the Military in Eighteenth-Century Britain* (Routledge, London, 2016), page 91

⁶ Arthur Ashbridge, ‘St Marylebone and its Anglo-Saxon Manors’, in *Transactions of the London and Middlesex Archaeological Society Volume IV* (Bishopsgate Institute, London, 1922), page 60

⁷ Ashbridge, page 58

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report of the three men being hanged in 1911 was taken from the New York Herald on 26 November of that year.⁸

The major condundrum, though, comes to light when we trace the best contemporary reference we have, back to the diaries of the magnificently-named Narcissus Luttrell. In February 1679, during the trial of the three men, Luttrell wrote that

It is remarkable that the place where sir Edmondbury Godfreys corps was found is in old leases called Green Bury Hill, being the names of the three persons condemned for that murther.

But it seems improbable that Luttrell had gone out of his way to trace these 'old leases'. He was more likely to have heard this story as part of the wave of fantastical rumour that swirled around the Popish Plot and the murder of Godfrey, whose status had quickly become elevated to that of full-blown Protestant martyr. On the same page, Luttrell relates how Godfrey's ghost appeared, Banquo-like, while the trial against Green, Berry and Hill was proceeding at the King's Bench:

About the middle of this month, on a Sunday, about eleven in the morning, a prodigious darknesse overspread the face of the sky, the like never known, and continued about half an hour. The darknesse was so great, that in severall churches, they could not proceed in divine service without candles; and 'tis said during that time the figure of sir Edmondbury Godfrey appeared in the queen's chappell at Somerset house while masse was sayeing.

Sadly, the date does not coincide with the list of known solar eclipses visible from London⁹, so we may have to entertain the idea that this was indeed the wrath of a Protestant God, darkening the skies above London, and terrifying the guilt-stricken Papists while they cowered in the queen's chapel. Given their already-heightened state of fear caused by the feverish backlash against Catholics during the Popish Plot, the sudden appearance of Sir Edmund's ghost must have caused them to beshit themselves.

Or we could surmise that the coincidence of Greenberry Hill is on the same plane of reality as the darkness and the ghost: it is fake news, dutifully

⁸ Charles Fort's writings would inspire the movement known as Forteanism.

⁹ Darren Beard, 'A millennium of British solar eclipses (1501-2500 AD)', in the *Journal of the British Astronomical Association*, Volume 111, Number 2, 2001, page 90

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set down in Luttrell's diary after he heard the stories reverberating around the echo chambers of the London coffee houses, stories that are still reverberating to this day. One verse from a broadside ballad in 1682 mentions:

From Godfrey that Himself did kill,
A Popish Malice to fulfil;
And then went to GREEN-BURY-HILL,
To pierce his Heart, but no Blood spill,
Libera nos, etc.

For there are two big problems. Firstly, the only time I can find anyone referring to Greenberry Hill as an alternative name for Primrose Hill *after* 1678 is in the context of this famous murder. Secondly, despite Luttrell's mention of 'old leases', I have been unable to trace any mention of Greenberry Hill *before* 1678.¹⁰

Again, I would be fascinated if others can find evidence that refutes these two points. It would revive the idea of uncanny coincidence. Until then, I am going to unwillingly consign the story to the lagoon of anti-Papist propaganda that historians of this era must wade through in any search for historical fact. In this scenario, the likely explanation is that a punster in 1678 observes that Barrow Hill ought now to be called Green-Berry-Hill, and it is taken up humourlessly as an alternative fact. The only conclusion I can reach for now is not a new one for me: that underneath the myths of London crawl a multitude of aberrant half-truths, no less engrossing.

Robert Kingham
London, December 2018

¹⁰ There is one tantalising claim that Greenberry Hill was in use long before 1678, in an excerpt from a book called *Vanities and Vicissitudes*, by Ralph Nevill (Hutchinson, 1927), but I have been unable to track down a copy to check what evidence Nevill puts forward.