The Curse of The Great Train Robbery

For his second book, *The Curse of The Great Train Robbery*, Jon Fordham, a retired building society general manager and county cricket executive director, investigates the impact the Great Train Robbery was to have on the lives not only of the robbers themselves, but also on their families, on the railway and post office workers who were on the train that night, the police officers who worked tirelessly to bring the robbers to justice and on some of the people who, through no fault of their own, suddenly found themselves involved in what was described at the time as the Crime of the Century.

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PREFACE

The interest in the Great Train Robbery continues to be as strong as ever, even though it is over fifty years since it took place.

2013 saw the passing of three of the train robbery gang - Bruce Reynolds, Ronnie Biggs and John Daly - and the number of surviving gang members, known to have been at the scene of the crime on 8 August 1963, can now be counted on the fingers of one hand.

There have been quite a few books written about the robbery over the years, so you may well wonder why I decided to add to the number. The latest book to be written has the advantage of being the most up to date, but you would think that everything worth writing about a crime that was committed over five decades ago has already been covered.

However this is not the case and there are still questions to be answered and riddles to be solved. For example, as recent as September 2014 gang member Gordon Goody, then aged 84, gave an interview to *The Observer* during which he revealed that the man previously known only as the 'Ulsterman', and one of the principle instigators of the robbery, was in fact a post office worker by the name of Patrick McKenna. Goody followed up the interview with the publication of his book in November 2014 which he titled '*How to Rob a Train.*'

Another unknown surrounds the mystery of who coshed Jack Mills, the train driver of the Glasgow to London overnight mail train. There are a number of people who could have struck the blow that felled Mr Mills, but his true identity has never been revealed.

But the main reason why I decided to write this book is that, at the time, many people regarded The Great Train Robbery as a victimless crime since the money stolen belonged mainly to the big banks of the day, including Midland Bank, Bank of Scotland, Westminster Bank and Barclays Bank.

However, this completely overlooks the lasting effects the robbery had not only on Jack Mills, but also on a host of other men, women and children, who were not directly involved in the crime, but whose lives were changed irrevocably because of the actions of others.

On reading this book you may disagree with some of those I have suggested were victims to 'The Curse of the Great Train Robbery'.

If you do, and I'm sure many who read this book will, I challenge you to write the next book about the crime which was described at the time it was committed as the 'Crime of the Century.'

'The people who paid the heaviest price for the Great Train Robbery are the families. And that is the families of all the people involved with the Great Train Robbery. The Robbers' families, the families of Old Bill, the families of the rail men and the post office workers, and even the families of the people that have helped us over the years. All have paid a price, one way or another, for our collective involvement in the robbery - a very heavy price, in the case of my family. For that I do have my regrets, but it still has been a life well worth living'.

Ronald Arthur Biggs

For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil. Some people, in their eagerness to get rich, have wandered away from the faith and caused themselves a lot of pain.

1 Timothy 6:10

'I felt choked when I saw her. She had been through so much in her life, like all the Train Robbers' wives – the years of absent husbands, the endless round of prison visits, struggling to cope on their own.'

Bruce Richard Reynolds

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INTRODUCTION

It is over 50 years since 'The Great Train Robbery' captured the imagination of the British public and the fascination with the events of 8 August 1963 shows no sign of abating.

When news broke that a large gang of robbers had hijacked a Royal Mail train on route from Glasgow to London, they became instant folk heroes and modern day Robin Hoods in the eyes of many. After all, they reasoned, the money stolen was the property of the banks and didn't belong to anyone in particular.

This perception was further embellished as reports of the amount of cash stolen steadily increased during that first day, finally settling at an astonishing £2,631,784 – equivalent to around £47million today. Each member of the gang walked away with suitcases and holdalls packed with around £150,000 in banknotes.

To put this amount of money into perspective, when Vivian Nicholson became famous overnight in 1961 for scooping the largest ever win on Littlewoods Pools, she banked £152,319. Her winnings would be equivalent to around £2.8million in 2015, significantly more than the average £2million prize pocketed by today's National Lottery winners. As they looked on at the vast piles of cash in front of them, the train robbers must have felt like they had also won the pools.

Another slant on public opinion was that the robbers had given a Churchillian two finger salute to the Establishment – an Establishment already struggling to cope with the fall out caused by the 'Profumo Affair' which led to the resignation of Prime Minister Harold Macmillan in October 1963, and which would ultimately mean defeat for the Conservatives at the general election the following year.

Initially, the gang was faceless and nameless. But over the days and weeks following the robbery, the police, led by Detective Chief Superintendent Tommy Butler of the Scotland Yard Flying Squad, released the names of those they wished to interview and who, they said in the time honoured tradition, could help them with their enquiries. In no time at all, the names and faces of the robbers became familiar to the British public throughout the land.

When Viv Nicholson won the Pools in 1961, she told reporters that she would '*spend, spend, spend*'. However, within a couple of years her husband had been killed in a car crash and the money had all but evaporated.

Despite telling reporters later in her life that, given the chance, she would do exactly the same again, there must have been times when Nicholson deeply regretted the pools win that had changed her life forever.

In the same way, and for similar reasons, most, if not all of the Great Train Robbers who were caught must have regretted being part of what was, at that time, the biggest robbery in the country's history.

The events of 8 August 1963 changed forever the lives not only of the robbers and their accomplices, but also many of their family and friends, as well as the British Railways and Post Office employees who were just going about their job on the English Electric Type 4 diesel-electric locomotive D326 that left Glasgow Central at 6:50pm on Wednesday 7 August 1963, but which never arrived at London Euston at 3:50am the following morning as scheduled.

THE STORY

CHAPTER 1

The Planning

The BOAC Robbery

On 27 November 1962, security staff delivering wages to the admin offices of the British Overseas Airways Corporation (BOAC) at London Airport were attacked and relieved of £62,000 by a gang the media called either 'the City Gents Gang' or 'the Bowler Hat Gang', due to the fact that some of them were wearing smart suits and bowler hats and, in some instances, carrying rolled up umbrellas fitted with iron bars.[1]

Amongst the gang were Charlie Wilson, Ronald 'Buster' Edwards, Roy James, Bruce Reynolds, Bill Jennings and Gordon Goody, all of whom would be part of the 'firm' that robbed the mail train on 8 August 1963. A 7th member of that firm, Jimmy White, allowed the City Gents Gang to use his flat in Norbury, South London as a meeting place after the BOAC robbery, where the others were able to count and share out the money.[2]

The attack on the two security staff was a fairly vicious one. Both were coshed to the ground, one courtesy of a whack from a specially adapted brolly.
Two BOAC clerks hit the ground without being ordered to, whilst a third, apparently paralysed with fear, was smashed on the head with a cosh wielded by Edwards. '*His skull seemed to split open and he fell to the floor with blood flowing from his scalp*', wrote Piers Paul Read in his book '*The Train Robbers, Their Story*'. [3]

In the 1988 film '*Buster*', directed by David Green, Edwards was played by singer songwriter Phil Collins who portrayed him as a 'likeable rogue'. However, this would seem to be somewhat at odds with the real life Buster Edwards.

With the way cleared of any opposition, in a flash the gang and the money were in the two getaway cars, both Jaguars, one of which was driven by Roy James.

The choice of James to drive one of the 'Jags' was a 'no-brainer'. At that time, he was showing real promise as an up and coming racing driver, holding his own when racing against contemporaries such as Mike Hailwood and Jackie Stewart. His skill behind the wheel was put to the test several times during the getaway - on one occasion swerving and stopping in front of traffic to give the second Jag a chance to run a red light.

After abandoning the cars, the gang made their way separately to Jimmy White's flat. There was an air of disappointment when they counted the cash as they had expected a significantly bigger pay-day.

The sheer nerve of the gang, and the brutality of the robbery, had both the local CID and the Flying Squad scurrying around looking for some early arrests. The Flying Squad had a fairly good idea who was involved – particularly who the getaway drivers were as few wheel men could have handled a car the way Roy James had.

Within 24 hours, Wilson, Goody, James and Mickey Ball (the other getaway driver) had been arrested and put into an identity parade. However, as none of the four were picked out by witnesses, they were all released without charge.

At another identity parade a couple of weeks later, Mickey Ball was wrongly picked out by a witness who thought he was Bill Jennings. As Jennings had been involved in the violent attack on the security staff, Ball owned up to being one of the getaway drivers as he knew this would mean a shorter sentence. He was subsequently sent to prison for five years.

Immediately after dividing up the cash, Bruce Reynolds and his wife Frances went abroad, first to Paris and then on to Tangier, leaving their young son with friends. Reynolds remained out of the UK for some time, during which his name was taken off the list of suspects for the BOAC job by a friendly police contact – although it cost Reynolds £1500.

The police remained determined to convict Goody, James and Wilson, although ultimately they were unable to get sufficient evidence to put James away, and so he too was in the clear. However, a third identity parade was arranged, and this time witnesses identified Goody and Wilson. Both were then charged with the robbery.

A few months before the BOAC robbery, Gordon Goody had met Brian Field in a Soho nightclub.[4] Field was a solicitor's clerk working for James & Wheater, a legal practice owned by sole practitioner John Wheater. Field and Wheater had both spent time in the British Army where the latter was said to have served his country with distinction.

Field had previously acted for Buster Edwards, and he and Goody struck up a working relationship whereby Field would supply Goody with occasional information about the contents of the country homes of some of his clients. [5]

Goody made bail thanks to Field, whilst some of Wilson's associates greased a few palms so that he too was granted bail.

At his trial, Wilson was acquitted on the instructions of the presiding judge when two prosecution witnesses swore they had seen him at the scene of the robbery, but in two different places at the same time.

Goody, however, was made to sweat for his acquittal. The alibi that Field and he had concocted failed to convince anybody at the trial as it was so obviously contrived, and the future was beginning to look pretty bleak. In desperation, Goody turned to his 'Plan B' – bribing one of the jury.

Despite the fact that the juror Goody targeted turned down the offer of £400, the jury was unable to come to a unanimous decision and the judge was left with no option other than to order a retrial.[6] At the retrial, Goody and Field came up with a strategy that was far more subtle than simply 'nobbling' the jury.

The crux of the prosecution case was a witness who said that during the robbery he had been assaulted by the man in a checked cap, and that the cap had come off during the struggle and that Goody was the man in the checked cap. The cap in question had been found at the scene and was in the possession of the

police. However, for a payment of just £200, a sympathetic police officer switched the cap for one three sizes larger.

When counsel for the defence cross examined the prosecution witness, he got him to agree that if Goody was wearing the cap, then the cap obviously had to be the same size as Goody's head.[7] The cap was then given to Goody and when he put it on it covered both his ears and eyes. Inevitably, the jury acquitted Goody and he walked out of court a free man, much to the chagrin of the police.

Robbing trains – a softer option

As the banks became more security conscious out of necessity, and safe manufacturers made their products more difficult to crack, criminals in the early 1960's inevitably began to look at softer targets elsewhere.

In his book '*The Autobiography of a Thief*', Bruce Reynolds wrote that he and his associates had begun sizing up the chances of robbing trains sometime prior to the BOAC robbery. *'The firm's collective knowledge, which consisted of half-truths, rumours and exaggerations, all pointed to the railways as being especially vulnerable'* wrote Reynolds.

At this stage, their ideas about robbing trains did not include how to stop them.

The first potential target identified was a train carrying money from William Hill's betting shops in the Midlands to their Central London offices. This plan was shelved when Reynolds found out that the train would be carrying mainly cheques rather than cash.

They then turned their attention to the Irish Mail Train, a passenger train operating out of Paddington station, which Buster Edwards had discovered often transported the wages of railway workers to Swindon. Loading the wages at Paddington was carried out under tight security, so the only realistic option was to carry out the robbery while the train was in motion and then stop it by pulling the communication cord. A practice run with Edwards, Bill Jennings and Gordon Goody went smoothly – in stark contrast to the robbery itself.

On the day of the robbery, when the train had reached Ealing, Reynolds, Goody and Charlie Wilson made their way to the guard's van and smashed their way in. When the train passed the Hayes signal box, Edwards pulled the communication cord – but nothing happened. Jennings had a go and still nothing happened. By this time, the train was approaching West Drayton where a getaway van was waiting.

Edwards and Jennings ran down the train and joined the others; Edwards found a control wheel which he turned and the train began to slow down, but by the time it had stopped completely it was a good mile away from West Drayton.

The gang jumped out and sprinted back towards the waiting van. Their haul was just £700 and they left behind them a railway guard who had been beaten and

tied up with nylon stockings, and a ticket collector who had been coshed and left unconscious with blood streaming down his face. [8 & 9]

When Reynolds returned to the UK after the dust had settled on the BOAC robbery, he and the gang started to look at the possibility of robbing trains once again.

The first under consideration was a weekly shipment of gold from South Africa which was put onto a train at Southampton and then met by a large police presence when it arrived at Waterloo station. The strength of the welcoming committee ruled out any chance of the gang getting their hands on the gold.

The second train, which they nicknamed 'the Money Train', appeared to offer a better chance of success. The Money Train ran from Bournemouth to Waterloo in the early hours of the morning collecting bags of cash on route. The train's last stop before Waterloo was at Weybridge in Surrey. Here it was met by a two car police escort and the cash bags were then taken to Weybridge Post Office.

Surveillance had revealed that the Tuesday morning train usually carried the largest number of bags, and so the gang began to put together a plan which involved an ambush when the bags were being taken from the train to the waiting police cars.

However, the plan never got off the ground. Two Jaguars had been stolen to be used as getaway cars, and these had been stowed away in garages being rented by Jimmy White, together with some other equipment needed during the planned ambush. Ironically, White's garages were broken into, and the thieves got away with both cars and all the equipment the gang had stored. The plan to rob the Money Train was postponed indefinitely.

The Travelling Post Office

Having helped Gordon Goody to be acquitted of the BOAC robbery, solicitor's clerk Brian Field contacted Goody towards the end of February 1963 and arranged to meet him at the Old Bailey the following day.

Field told Goody that he had been contacted by someone who had detailed information on the movement of large sums of cash across the country, who had asked him to sound out a firm which would be interested in making use of this information.

As expected, Goody told Field he was interested and the following day he and Buster Edwards met Field at his office in New Quebec Street, not far from Marble Arch tube station. Field introduced the pair to a middle aged man who called himself Mark. From Field's office, Mark took Goody and Edwards to Finsbury Park in North London where they were introduced to another middle aged man. However, no names were exchanged at this point and the man would become known as the 'Ulsterman' because of his thick Northern Irish accent.

The identity of the Ulsterman remained a secret for over 50 years until Goody named him as Patrick McKenna in an interview with the *Observer* newspaper

published at the end of September 2014. Aged 43 at the time Goody first met him, McKenna was a Belfast born post office worker living in Islington, North London.

In the *Observer* interview, Goody revealed that he discovered the identity of the Ulsterman when he picked up a glasses case, with the name Patrick McKenna inside, whilst the post office worker had gone off to buy some ice creams. [10]

At this first meeting, the Ulsterman told Goody and Edwards about the trains known as 'Travelling Post Offices' (TPO's) and specifically the train that ran overnight from Glasgow Central station to London Euston. This train was usually about a dozen coaches long and all but one of the coaches contained normal mail which post office workers sorted while the train was on the move.

It was the contents of the other coach that was of particular interest to the Ulsterman as it carried mail bags containing cash, with the train picking up additional bags at stops on route. The cash came from provincial banks and according to McKenna, the amount of cash on the train at any one time could run to several million pounds.

When Goody asked about the source of the information, the Ulsterman told them it was from a relative (brother or step-brother) who worked for the Post Office.

At the end of the meeting, Goody and Edwards told the Ulsterman they were definitely interested, and agreed to meet him again.

After discussing the proposition with Bruce Reynolds at his flat in Putney, it was agreed that a meeting would be arranged with the other regular members of the firm. A few days later Edwards, Goody, Wilson, Reynolds, Bill Jennings, Roy James, Jimmy White and Alf Thomas (a friend of White) met at Edwards's flat in Twickenham.

By then, Goody had met the Ulsterman for a second time and was able to tell the others that the first coach behind the diesel engine on the TPO carried parcels only and would be unmanned. Next was the HVP (High Value Packages) coach where the bags of cash were held. In this coach would be four or five post office sorters. Behind this would be up to 10 other coaches containing mail, and in total there would be around 70 post office sorters spread between the third and the twelfth coach.

The train normally left Glasgow Central at 6:50pm and would arrive at London Euston just before 4:00am, making several stops along the way where additional mail bags were taken on board.

After it was agreed that any robbery couldn't take place whilst the train was at any of the stations, the main discussion concentrated on how and where to stop it during its 400 mile journey.

Where to stop the train

Having ruled out hitting the train at either Glasgow or Euston due to heavy security at both stations, it seemed the only option was to find a suitable place to stop it during its journey.

It was agreed that the train should be stopped as close to London as possible as the firm's thinking at this stage was to be back in the capital long before the police began setting up road blocks in the immediate aftermath of the robbery. The other proviso was that the robbery should take place somewhere remote to avoid anybody witnessing it.

According to Bruce Reynolds, the following day he and his brother in law John Daly (known as 'Paddy') caught a northbound train from Euston to get a feel of the terrain outside London. [11 & 12]

Once the train had gone through Tring in Hertfordshire, Reynolds noticed an area around Leighton Buzzard that looked promising. At around 40 miles from Euston, with open countryside on either side of the track, it seemed a real possibility. On the return journey, Reynolds noticed a point on the B488 where the road curved and ran under the railway track.

The following night, the firm met again at Edwards's flat and Reynolds reported back. It was agreed that Roy James would drive up to this point on the B488 and work out the best and quickest route back to London should this be the place they eventually decided to stop the train.

There is some confusion as to who actually found the location first, since Buster Edwards stated that he and another gang member had taken a drive out from London and tried to follow the railway track by road. This they did, but couldn't find anywhere suitable to stop the train. Having drawn a blank, on their return to London the pair got hold of some ordnance survey maps and found, on paper at least, the perfect spot – quiet, isolated and with a bridge where the road – the B488 - went beneath the railway line. [13, 14 & 15]

According to Edwards, he and Bruce Reynolds drove up to have a look at the spot the next day.

In his autobiography, Reynolds, when discussing his train journey, wrote '*I wouldn't have been surprised to see Buster, Gordon, Charlie and Roy, done up in some guise. They would be out as well, ducking and diving, discreetly digging for inspiration and information'*.

Whichever is the correct version, the facts of the matter are that the perfect location for the robbery had been found. This was at a place called Bridego Bridge in the Parish of Mentmore, in the county of Buckinghamshire – 2 miles from Leighton Buzzard and 38 miles from Euston.

How to stop the train

Having more or less decided on where the train could be stopped, the next problem facing the firm was how to go about stopping it. At a brainstorming session the best suggestion was that a red signal would always force a train to

stop, and as this was a fairly common occurrence, it wouldn't unduly alert the driver.

There was also some concern that the Ulsterman had told them there could be at least 70 post office workers on the train, leaving the firm seriously outnumbered if things got a bit out of hand.

To minimise any potential opposition, someone raised the possibility of uncoupling the engine and the first two carriages, separating them from the other 10 carriages where the bulk of the post office sorters would be. Bruce Reynolds was certain that it could be done, but at that point had no idea how.

During the discussion, Buster Edwards mentioned that a mate of his, Tommy Wisbey, had been working with a South Coast firm who had been robbing trains on the Brighton line. He had also heard that one of them knew how to stop trains.

It was agreed that Edwards would speak to Wisbey and, the following day, Edwards met him at a club at the Elephant and Castle owned by Bobby Welch, also a member of the South Coast firm. Welch was initially suspicious and more than a little bit miffed that Edwards seemed to know so much about their activities. However, thanks to Wisbey, who had known Edwards since the 1950's when they had both worked for Freddie Foreman, an associate of the Kray twins, Welch knew that Edwards was 'sound' and he agreed to set up a meeting with their man Roger Cordrey who could stop trains.

A couple of days later, Edwards met Wisbey and Cordrey at Waterloo station where he outlined the train job to the two men, and in particular the need to stop the train and then separate the engine and the first two coaches from the rest of it.

Having listened intently to Edwards, Cordrey confirmed that he could stop the train. However, if they wanted his help, it would come with one condition – the rest of the South Coast firm, comprising Wisbey, Welch, James Hussey and Frank Munroe, would have to be part of the team that carried out the robbery.

When Edwards reported back to the rest of the gang, Cordrey's terms were at first greeted with derision and a degree of animosity. However, when they had all calmed down, they realised that it was 'Hobson's Choice' – if they couldn't stop the train, it was game over before it had started. And, as Gordon Goody pointed out, the additional 'muscle' might well come in handy.

A few days later Reynolds took Cordrey to Bridego Bridge for a recce and it was then that Cordrey really bought into the plan. He agreed that Bridego Bridge was the ideal point to unload the mail bags from the train. But to stop it, Cordrey needed to tamper with signals which meant stopping the train at the first set of signals before the Bridge.

Reynolds and Cordrey walked up the line and came to a set of signals at a place called Sears Crossing. It was here that Cordrey explained how he could stop the train. It was both childishly simple and a stroke of genius.

The back plate of the signals would be removed and the green light covered with a glove. The red light would then be disconnected from the main power supply and connected to a six volt Ever Ready battery. Job done!

There was also a dwarf signal at ground level a few hundred yards further up the line which would also need to be fixed so it showed an amber light warning the driver to slow down in time for the train to stop at the Sears Crossing lights. The dwarf signal only had two lights – amber and green.

Whilst Cordrey could stop the train, Reynolds knew that there were still two other problems to overcome – how to uncouple the train, and how to get the engine and the remaining two coaches from Sears Crossing to Bridego Bridge where the mail sacks could be unloaded.

The South Coast Raiders

The next meeting also took place at Buster Edwards's flat, but this time it included the South Coast firm, or the South Coast Raiders as the press referred to them.

The first to put in an appearance was Cordrey who arrived on his own. Then, arriving together were Wisbey, Welch, Hussey and Munroe.[16]

The South Coast Raiders had begun life with fairly low key activities such as opportunist snatches from guard's vans whilst the guard was being distracted. On one occasion, a member of the gang pretended to have a seizure just as the train was pulling into a station. Whilst the guard was trying to administer some first aid, other members of the gang were rifling through the packages in the guard's van.

However, it didn't take long for the Railway Police to wise up and alert the guards to what was going on, and the gang realised that they had to diversify.

It was then that Cordrey came up with the idea of stopping trains by tampering with the signals which enabled him to stay trackside whilst the others, with balaclavas covering their faces, would storm the guard's van, tie up the guards and take any bags which contained cash.

By this time, railway guards were refusing to work on the Brighton line without adequate protection, so British Railways agreed to fit bolts, chains and locks that could only be opened from the inside, to the guard's van on all Southern Region trains. However, this only brought about a temporary halt to the activities of the South Coast Raiders as the gang came up with ways to counter these measures and normal business was soon resumed.

On one occasion, Frank Munroe pretended to be a disabled passenger with Tommy Wisbey as his male carer. As was the practice at that time on non-corridor trains, wheelchair bound passengers always travelled in the guard's van.

As soon as Cordrey had stopped the train between stations just outside London, the disabled passenger miraculously regained use of his legs; the guard was knocked unconscious and within minutes Wisbey and Munroe were in a getaway car with the mail bags safely stashed in the boot.

However, not long after this, Cordrey received a visit from the police. He spent a night in a cell and was then put into an identification parade. As he hadn't been

part of the robbery itself, no one picked him out and he was allowed to go home. But he had been unnerved by this experience, and for some time after, Cordrey kept a low profile and stayed away from the rest of the Raiders.

Eventually, when they did meet up again, they agreed to keep away from the Brighton line and decided to target the Irish Mail train instead. Also known as the Irish Express, this Midland Region mail train ran out of Euston bound for Holyhead, Fishguard and Dublin. It was rumoured that the train would be carrying valuable diamonds.

On the 20 February 1963, Cordrey set off for the spot the gang had decided was ideal to stop the train, whilst the rest of them bought tickets and settled down in a compartment close to the guard's van.

Soon after the train got underway, the gang descended on the guard's van and attacked both the guard and ticket inspector – but it was at this point that things began to go a bit pear-shaped.

Hearing the commotion, a group of soldiers piled into the guard's van, only to be met by a ferocious attack from the gang who dished out a liberal dose of medicine with their coshes.

Someone pulled the communication cord as the train went through Watford, and thinking that they had arrived at the point where Cordrey was to stop the train, the gang opened the door and jumped out, expecting to see the Hertfordshire countryside. What they saw instead were the lights of Hemel Hempstead train station. The gang scattered – they had no alternative and it was a case of every man for himself.

In an interview for the *Daily Post* in December 2013, Howel Owen, the guard on the Irish Mail train that day, relived the attack by the South Coast Raiders that left him and ticket collector Tom John Thomas beaten, bloodied and tied up. According to Owen, one of the gang told the two '*don't try anything silly, I've got a gun*'. [17]

However, mistakenly, Mr Owen attributed the attack to Bruce Reynolds, Jimmy White and Ray (not Roy) James, and not the actual attackers on the day who were Wisbey, Welch, Hussey and Munroe. He told the *Daily Post* that Bruce Reynolds was probably the man who tied him up, Jimmy White acted as lookout, and 'Ray' James was one of the men he saw in the guard's van.

Ironically, White and James were the least likely of any of the train robbers to be involved in such a violent attack. As Piers Paul Read stated in his book 'The Train Robbers – Their Story', *'Jimmy White…like Roy* (James)*, Bill* (Jennings) *and John Daly, preferred not to take part in the violence which might be involved in the other aspects of the job*.' [18]

In his interview for the *Daily Post*, Mr Owen continued '*The robbers weren't chancers; they knew what they were looking for. They thought the train was carrying diamonds from Amsterdam to Dublin and that there was a consignment of £5 notes going to Ireland. They got away with about £3,000.*

'Where I think they got their plans wrong is that they hadn't counted on there being so few passengers on the train and they didn't expect us back in the guard's van so soon.'

Eventually, the South Coast Raiders managed to make their way back to Bob Welch's club empty handed.

It was while they were considering their next move that Buster Edwards paid his visit to Bob Welch and Tommy Wisbey, and it was probably just at the right time for the Raiders, hence the full turn out at Edwards's flat – the first full meeting of the firm that was to commit what was to become known as the Great Train Robbery.

The back-up train driver

After the introductions, Reynolds took to the floor and gave a brief summary of the progress that had been made since the previous meeting. The need to find someone to uncouple the train was solved when Roy James volunteered to find out how it could be done.[19] As well as uncoupling the train, the vacuum to operate the train's braking system also needed to be disconnected, as well as the tubes that carried steam to heat the coaches. Bill Jennings said that he was happy to help James and Jimmy White offered to become first reserve.

However, there was still the question of moving the train from Sears Crossing to Bridego Bridge, and whilst the general feeling was that the driver would be 'encouraged' to do it, they knew that it would be dangerous to depend on this and not have a contingency. There was therefore a consensus that a back-up driver would be needed on the night, just in case.

At the end of the evening, Reynolds suggested that the next meeting should be on Wimbledon Common where they could have a kick about with a football, so as not to look too suspicious.

The need for an experienced train driver on the night of the robbery continued to cause concern for some time. Roy James, as well as volunteering to do the uncoupling, was also pretty confident that he would be able to move the train the short distance from Sears Crossing to Bridego Bridge.

Masquerading as a school teacher who wanted to tell his pupils how modern trains worked, he had persuaded a train driver he had befriended to let him into the cab when he next moved his train from Euston station into a siding. The driver explained all the controls to James who, as a more than promising motor racing driver, had the ability to absorb how mechanical things worked very quickly.

However, on the actual night, he would also be uncoupling the train, and as he couldn't be in two places at once, the search for an experienced back-up driver continued. As it happened, a solution to the problem fell into Bruce Reynolds's lap when he least expected it.

Deciding that he needed an evening out and a break from planning the robbery, Reynolds took his wife Frances, and their son Nick, to Redhill in Surrey to visit

Ronnie Biggs, an old friend he first came across in Borstal many years earlier. As a criminal, Biggs was not in the same league as Reynolds or the majority of the firm. However, Reynolds enjoyed his company, and Frances seemed to hit it off with Biggs's wife, Charmian.

At that time, Biggs had a small carpentry business and during the course of the evening mentioned to Reynolds that he was doing some work on a bungalow for an old chap who had promised to take Biggs's son Nick for a ride on his train.

As casually as he could, Reynolds probed Biggs with a few questions until he asked him if he thought the old boy would be interested in doing something on the wrong side of the law, and that there would be a good 'drink' in it for him.

Sensing that there could also be something in it for him, Biggs began to pump his old friend for some more information.

Reynolds gave him a brief outline of the proposed robbery, and Biggs agreed to speak to the old train driver on condition that he (Biggs) would also become a full member of the firm. This seemed like divine intervention for Biggs as, at that time, he was having some serious cash flow problems, and at some stage in the evening had intended to 'tap up' his old friend for a loan.

Despite Reynolds's attempts to persuade Biggs to accept a decent finder's fee for the introduction, Biggs was adamant that if he wasn't in, he wouldn't speak to the old boy. Reynolds agreed to speak to the rest of the firm about the proposition, and told Biggs he would get back to him in a few days.

As Reynolds feared, the reaction to the suggestion that Biggs come on board as a full member of the firm was pretty negative. Roy James in particular resented that a train driver was being hired since he was still confident that he would be able to drive the train himself, and having Biggs involved, and taking a full share of the cash as well, was adding insult to injury.

And what if the robbery didn't go totally according to plan? If the old boy was caught and subjected to a grilling from the police, would he be able to keep his mouth shut for long? That was highly unlikely, so in reality he represented a major and unnecessary security risk.

But in the end, it came down to making sure all the bases were covered and that there was someone on hand who could move the train, once it was in the control of the gang, if the driver and his assistant refused to cooperate.

A few days later, Reynolds and Buster Edwards travelled down to Redhill and met up with Biggs and the train driver.

The train driver's true identity has never been revealed, and there is also confusion as to the name he was known by. In his book *The Train Robbers, Their Story*, Piers Paul Read calls him Stan Agate, [20] whereas in *The Autobiography of a Thief*, Bruce Reynolds refers to him as Peter. [21]

And in *The Great Train Robbery, The Definitive Account,* Nick Russell-Pavier & Stewart Richards state that the gang generally called him 'Pop'. [22]

Finally, to add to the confusion even further, in the 2013 BBC drama *The Robber's Tale*, which was inspired by Robert Ryan's book *Signal Red*, the driver

was called Alf. However, given that he was a generation older than the rest of the gang, I suspect that many would have referred to him as Pop, and I have used that nickname from here onwards.

When Reynolds and Edwards met with Biggs and Pop, they found he was in his late fifties/early sixties and thought he seemed a bit 'away with the fairies', as if he didn't quite realise what he was getting himself in to. He also didn't inspire a tremendous amount of confidence when he told Reynolds and Edwards that he had never driven one of the D-type diesels that would be pulling the mail train on the night.

However, he told the pair that it wouldn't be a problem for an experienced driver and anyway, he was going to cadge a ride in the cab of a D-type with an old railway mate – so job done.

A few days later, Biggs told Reynolds that all had gone well with Pop, and it seemed that almost all of the pieces of the jigsaw were now in place.

Leatherslade Farm

The final decision for the firm was to agree on where they would go in the immediate aftermath of the robbery.

Roy James was all for a quick return to London in a convoy of Jags especially adapted with their rear seats removed to make room for the mail bags. He had done the journey from Bridego Bridge several times, and in the early hours of the morning when they would be on the road, he knew that it could be done in well under the hour.

However, as a driver, James was in a league of his own and, in reality, he would be back in South London well before anyone else.

James's idea also meant that the mail bags would be split up with no-one knowing how much money was in each bag. As Shakespeare put it in Henry IV Part One; *'Eight yards of rough road is like seventy miles to me, and these hard-hearted crooks know it. It stinks when there's no honour among thieves.'*

Almost certainly, it was their mutual distrust of each other that drove the decision to remain in the area for a few days after the robbery – in fact when it was put to a vote, James was the only one against, and he accepted the majority view with good grace.

So, the remaining question was where could they hide up while they waited for the dust to settle?

Wherever it was, it needed to be out of the way and isolated, a fair distance from the site of the robbery, with outbuildings to hide the various vehicles, and large enough for at least 16 people to rest up for a few days without being seen.

Bruce Reynolds and John Daly scanned the property pages of the local newspapers and eventually found a farm being advertised by Midland Marts, a local firm of estate agents.

Midland Marts were one of three agents marketing the property, and were advertising it as '*a smallholding between Bicester and Thame. Valuable freehold holding of five acres, elevated position, well set off the road, detached four bedroomed house, two reception rooms and large kitchen, adjoining two bedroomed cottage, mains water, septic tank drainage, useful outbuildings. Price £5500.'*

1963 was almost thirty years before the advent of the Property Misdescriptions Act which '*prohibited the making of false or misleading statements about property matters in the course of estate agency business and property development business*', and in reality, this property had been allowed to become run-down. The outbuildings were dilapidated; the five acres of land were as uncared for as the main building, and to top it off, there was no mains electricity – power was provided by a generator.

This was the infamous Leatherslade Farm, and when Reynolds and Daly had taken a look at the property on the outside they agreed that it would suit their needs perfectly, particularly as a large screen of trees hid it from the road.

Reynolds then made the mistake of knocking on the door and speaking to the vendors, Bernard and Lily Rixon. By doing this he was creating a potential link between himself and the crime. [24]

After Gordon Goody and Buster Edwards had also taken a look at the outside of the farm, it was decided to go ahead with the purchase, and the matter was referred to Brian Field so that the transaction could be handled by James & Wheater, the law firm Field worked for.

A couple of days later, Brian Field called on the Rixons accompanied by Leonard Field, (no relation to Brian), and the pair were shown around the property by Mrs Rixon.

Leonard Field, a merchant seaman, was the brother of Harry Field who had been a client of James and Wheater when he was charged with horse doping and robbing a bank in Stoke. For the last offence he was sentenced to five years in prison.

Possibly not the sharpest tool in the box, Leonard agreed to allow the purchase of Leatherslade Farm to proceed in his name, so that the true identities of the purchasers could remain hidden. In return, Brian told him he would receive a £12,000 'drink'. According to Leonard, he believed the farm was going to be used to store stolen cigarettes.

After looking over the property, Brian Field told Mrs Rixon to instruct their solicitor to send the legal contract of sale to Mr John Wheater of James & Wheater as Mr Leonard Field was ready and willing to sign it straight away.

When John Wheater spoke to Mrs Rixon, he was told that another prospective purchaser had also made an offer. Wheater upped the offer on behalf of Leonard Field to £5750 not wishing to be gazumped or to become involved in a contract race. However, the other purchaser subsequently withdrew, and the sale price was eventually agreed at £5550.

A 10% deposit was provided by Leonard Field as when his brother Harry was convicted and imprisoned for the bank robbery, Leonard had been appointed Power of Attorney over Harry's financial affairs, and the deposit was raised from Harry's capital.

According to the report prepared for the Home Secretary by HM Chief Inspector of Constabulary on 6 October 1964; *'The owner…understood that a deposit of £555 (10%) had been paid to the agents and agreed with the solicitors that the purchaser could have possession of the premises when full settlement was made. He was later given to understand that full settlement could not be made until 13 August 1963, because the purchaser's money would not be available until that date. The purchaser still wished to take possession of the premises by 29 July 1963, and finally it was agreed he could take over on that date, providing he paid 7% interest on the balance outstanding to cover the mortgage on the new property the owner was buying.'* [25]

On 29 July 1963, Mr and Mrs Rixon vacated Leatherslade Farm and Brian Field advised Bruce Reynolds that he and the gang were free to move in as soon as they wanted.

The last piece of the jigsaw was now in place.

Final preparations

Gordon Goody and Buster Edwards had their last meeting with Patrick McKenna, the Ulsterman, and the date for the robbery was set for the early hours of 7 August. This was just after the August Bank Holiday and expectations for a bumper pay day were high. Goody and Edwards agreed to meet the Ulsterman at Brian Field's house, near Pangbourne, a few days after the robbery to hand him his share of the cash. The Ulsterman also gave Goody a telephone number to ring on the evening of 6 August to confirm that everything was good to go.

By now, Brian Field had collected the keys to Leatherslade Farm and passed them to Reynolds. The plan was for the firm to arrive at the Farm on the 5/6 August in small groups so as not to arouse any suspicions.

The full roll call was Bruce Reynolds, Charlie Wilson, Gordon Goody, Buster Edwards, Roy James, Bill Jennings, John Daly, Jimmy White, Alf Thomas, Roger Cordrey, James Hussey, Bob Welch, Tommy Wisbey, Frank Munroe, Ronnie Biggs and Pop, the engine driver.

Each one had a specific job to do.

Reynolds would be up track so he could radio through to the others the moment he could see the approaching mail train. His brother-in-law, John Daly, would be at the dwarf signal changing the green light to amber as Roger Cordrey had shown him. Cordrey himself would be at the signals at Sears Crossing