

# **The Great Train Robbery - 28/09/1961**

On Thursday 8th August 1963 a Royal Mail Train was held up at Bridego Bridge near Mentmore and a 15 strong gang of robbers relieved the train of £2.8 million in old bank notes. It became known, of course, as the Great Train Robbery. What is less well known is that nearly two years earlier, on 28th September 1961, Marlow experienced its own 'great train robbery'. Well, that is a bit of an exaggeration of course, but that night a truly bizarre incident did take place, and it was reported nationally in The Times. Interestingly that Thursday was also the very day the Railway Hotel was renamed the Marlow Donkey.

Just one year after the steam locomotive was replaced by a diesel multiple unit, the Donkey was held up in wild-west style by three men wearing cowboy outfits and brandishing what turned out to be toy guns. The three men were members of a jazz band, and they had fancy dress with them, including the cowboy outfits. Presumably they had been well 'lubricated' at the Donkey prior to their prank.

Apparently the three men walked along the track as far as the pedestrian crossing (known technically as an occupation crossing) at the end of Fieldhouse Lane, where they placed three detonators on the line. Detonators are small explosive devices used on the railway network as a warning signal, for example of a stationary train ahead, people working on the line, or to alert the driver to a signal which is not visible because of fog. Whilst they were placing the devices, the rest

of the jazz band and a number of customers walked from the Donkey to the station to wait for the train.

As the train approached Marlow from Bourne End, with just one passenger on board, it triggered the three detonators and the driver, Mr Tom Burton, brought the train to a rapid stop.

The three 'cowboys' boarded the train brandishing their toy pistols, approached Mr Burton, and declared 'this is a stick up!'. As it was dark the driver had no idea whether the guns were real or not, and it was only when they told him it was a stunt that he returned to the cab and drove the train into Marlow Station.

However the British Transport Commission took a very dim view of the episode, and the three men, identified as

- John Pike, aged 40, an electrician, of Marlow
- Robert Cecil Willan, aged 40, a company director of Hyde Green, Marlow
- James Markham, aged 35, a car salesman of York Road, Marlow

were summoned before magistrates in Marlow on 30th November (yes, in those days there was a Court in Marlow!). All three men pleaded guilty to charges of unlawfully entering the train, wilfully stopping a vehicle on the railway, and obstructing the driver in the course of his duty. They were each fined 30 shillings and ordered to pay costs of £2 11s. In present day money the fines amounted to around £40 each, which appears perhaps unduly lenient. I can't help but feel that if the same prank were played today the train would quickly be surrounded by dozens of police, some probably armed! And I suspect the fines would have been in the

hundreds of pounds at least, and maybe a suspended prison sentence might be on the cards.

As the Times noted in its article perhaps the age of innocence surrounding such pranks finished with the real Great Train Robbery just two years later.