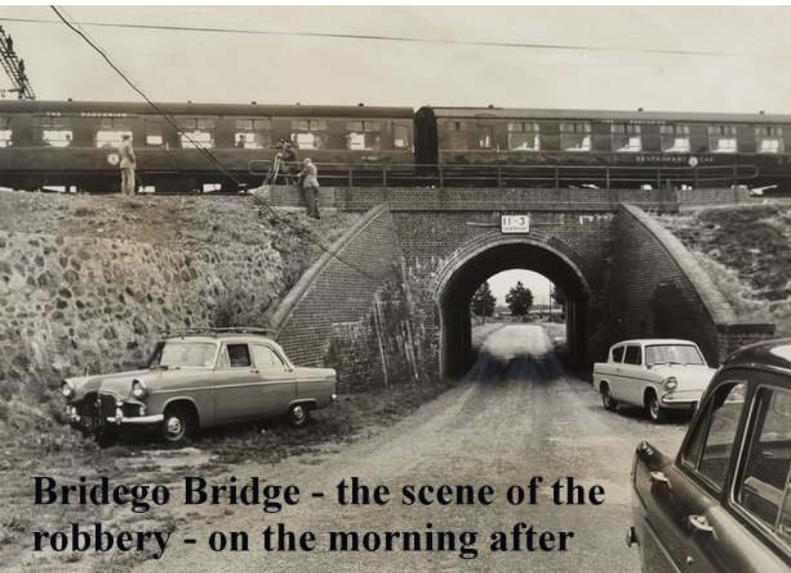


NAPOLEON, COCKNEY MARY and the HEALEY 3000

During the night of Thursday 8th August 1963, something happened, which grabbed the attention and interest of the English public. Something so daring and unexpected, that it caught everybody by surprise. It involved 16 men, 1 Heavy Glove, a Battery and a Railway Train.....and it was The Great Train Robbery.



Bridego Bridge - the scene of the robbery - on the morning after

Thefts and robberies, from trains had occurred before, but this was different. You can stop a train, if you are on it, by pulling the communication cord, but how would you stop a closed train, a moving Post Office which is carrying a great deal of money, in it's High Value Package carriage. One Bruce Richard Reynolds, who liked to be known as Napoleon, worked it out, with a little help from some underworld friends. Throughout his complicated recruiting, planning and carrying out of the robbery, Reynolds seems to have held two things set firmly in his mind - The Train and getting himself an Austin-Healey 3000, as a little reward to himself, afterwards. Bruce Reynolds was a criminal and a sports car man - who planned everything meticulously. Each member of the gang knew exactly where they would be, at what time and what they would be doing. Reynolds even had redundancy built into his plan. Each participant had been trained to double up, for another, in case someone was injured or ill, or had to dropped out.

The train was stopped, on it's route South, on the West Coast Main Line from Glasgow to Euston, at Sears Crossing, Cheddington, to the Northeast of Aylesbury, by placing a thick leather glove over the Green railway signal bulb and using a battery to light the Red signal

bulb, as the train approached. Quite simple really - train drivers are trained to stop at red lights, which is exactly what this train driver did. It was then taken over and driven the short distance on to Bridego Bridge, near the small hamlet of Mentmore, where the sacks of cash were off loaded, carried by a chain of robbers, down the embankment and loaded into the get away vehicles.

Following the robbery, the Reynolds gang held up at Leatherslade Farm, which they had bought only a few days earlier and which is located near the small village of Oakley, in Buckinghamshire, just under 30 miles (half a hours drive) from the robbery location. Unfortunately, during the robbery, someone let slip, to the postal workers on the train, that they should remain still for half an hour, after the gang left - which provided a clue, to the Police, of the distance the gang might be travelling, to their hide out.

On the radio news, the following morning, the Police announced that they believed the gang still to be in the area and that they were commencing searches, within a 30 mile radius. This seems to have pressed the gang into deciding to quit their hide away, instead of using it to lie low, for a couple of weeks, as had been planned.

That same morning, Mary Manson, aka Cockney Mary, a cohort of the Reynolds gang (and soon to be arrested for receiving stolen property) walked into the sales office of The Chequered Flag garage, in Edgeware and bought an Austin-Healey 3000, on behalf of Bruce Reynolds. She apparently paid in used notes and drove the car to Leatherslade Farm. That car was 222 NFC, a Black, with Red trim, right hand drive 3000 MK11, on steel wheels, which had been first registered the previous year. It had a desirable factory hard top and bore Chassis Number:HBT718135 and



Engine Number:4377. The purchase must have been pre-planned. Reynolds was so meticulous that it is hard to see how he had not chosen the Healey, beforehand, as a present to himself, to celebrate the success of the robbery. He had been a fan of the Austin-Healey for some time. He previously had an Old English White MK1 Sprite, although I have not been able to establish the registration number.



The gang, meanwhile, had been doing two things at the farm - counting their money, all £2,631,784 of it, in used £1 and £5 notes (some £44 Million pounds in today's money) and playing Monopoly - allegedly with real bank notes. They had taken some 120 sacks from the train, which had weighed in at something like two and a half tons.

By various accounts (including those of Ronnie Biggs), Reynolds left Leatherslade Farm, in the Healey 3000, with his friend and co-conspirator Ronnie Biggs and their two shares of the loot. The others went their separate ways, as had been agreed.

Although they had tried to be careful in cleaning away evidence of their short occupation of the farm, they had left empty mail bags lying around (which presented a bit of a clue, to someone who glanced through the window, whilst looking for a lost sheep) and some finger prints were found on crockery and a sauce bottle as well as on the Monopoly set - which resulted in many of them being rounded up, within a week of the event.

Sadly for him, it doesn't seem as if Bruce Reynolds enjoyed much use of the Healey, after a close call with the police, only a couple of months later. Two officers called at his address asking about a ladder, which had been propped up against the wall of the house. His wife had opened the door but Reynolds had had the presence of mind to take off his clothes and play the cheating husband. The embarrassed police left the cheating couple alone, only realising who they had let slip, when they noticed his mug shot on the wall of the police station, later. Bruce Reynolds then left the country, on the run, to Mexico, Canada and then France, for the next 5 years. During that time, he

seems to have squandered away his share of the money on a new lavish overseas life style.

He appears then, to have returned to England, to try to get together with some of his old underworld friends, in an effort to get involved in another robbery, to raise more cash, to support his lifestyle. He was arrested in Torquay and sentenced to 25 years. Bruce Reynolds died in 2013, having been imprisoned again, in the intervening period, for drug related offences. I don't think that he owned any more Healeys - it doesn't appear that he had the money left to buy one.

I am sure that many of us remember the strange sort of celebrity that these criminals gained, after the robbery. There were several prison escapes and a great deal of attention to their "on the run" antics, in the UK press. Who could forget the running Ronnie Biggs farce, beamed over to us in the UK, from Brazil.

Celebrity is a funny thing isn't it, but in this case, the celebrity is clear for me - it's the car.

222 NFC, which had been impounded by the Police, late in 1963, was held for several years and then auctioned off, in February of 1969, in the "Great Train Robbery Special Auction Sale", in an effort to recoup some of the losses suffered. It was sold with a letter of authentication of it's former owner. Since then a great deal of memorabilia of the Robbery seems to have found it's way onto the market, including a signed photograph of the ignition key for the Healey, which was signed by Reynolds.

The Healey sold again, in 2009, for £24,000.

Is 222 NFC still around?

If you have an OEW MK1 Sprite, have a look at the list of previous owners, to see if one of them might have been named Reynolds.



Rod Graham

PS - I wonder if Healeys are still popular with any of the not so legal fraternity - if any owners have a Police Record?. I know that I certainly do - "Walking on the Moon"