

The buried treasure, missing silver, and plundering of the family vaults.

Buried treasure

A rumour persists that at the start of the English Civil War in 1642, Thomas Smyth (1609-1642) and his steward buried all of the family silver somewhere on the Ashton Court estate. Both Thomas and his steward died before the location could be revealed. The treasure is said to be still hidden in the grounds.

Is there any evidence for this?

A large silver salver from Ashton Court was recently sold at auction. It had an engraved coat of arms in its centre. The salver was hallmarked 1742 but the coat of arms is Smyth/Ashburnham – a marriage that happened almost a century earlier.

It was suggested that the coat of arms was engraved to match an existing suite of family silver to replace perhaps a piece that was either lost or damaged.

Was the missing piece the 'buried treasure'?

Missing silver

Was being paranoid about the family silver a family trait?

Elizabeth Astry

Elizabeth or Betty Astry was vivacious, affectionate and superstitious. She once visited a witch in Bedminster to help her find three missing silver tankards!

Esme Smyth

There is another curious tale about the family silver. In the oldest part of the house was an attic bedroom in which there was a secret cupboard, known only to the owner. When Esme went to live at Ness Castle, as she did regularly throughout her life, all the valuables were packed up and sent to the bank. A list was prepared and each year the bank checked through to see that no items were missing. One year they discovered that a certain silver table was not there.

A terrible row between the Bank and the Ashton Court estate agent ensued - the agent insisting that the bank had the table and the bank insisting they did not. Mrs Fround, a servant at Ashton Court, eventually had to disclose her knowledge of the secret cupboard and that Mrs Smyth before she went away had put the table in the cupboard.

The following day the cupboard was opened and the silver table was discovered inside but not before the carpenter, who was called to open it up as it was concealed behind oak panels, had turned pale, started shaking and fled the premises! Who knows what he saw in the cupboard.

Plundering of the Smyth family vault

The break into the Smyth Family vault in 1855

Arthur Way, the Ashton Court Steward and a relative of the family, reported in his notes on the 14th of April 1855;

“Some burglars broke into the Smyth family vault last night and disturbed the remains in 2 coffins for the sake of plunder. I am in to Bristol and issued the following notice:

‘Sacrilege. £50 pounds reward. Whereas some evil disposed person did last night sacrilegiously break open the vault of the Smyth family in the Chancel of the parish church of L.A. the undersigned will pay the above reward for such information as shall lead to the Commition of the offender. Arthur Way’.”

Arthur later reported visits to Bristol to discuss the case with the police. He commented that it was impossible to get sufficient evidence. However, a convict under sentence in Taunton Gaol had ‘peached’ on the burglars, 3 of whom were in different gaols for burglaries, and 2 more were still at large.

The Illustrated London News reported in more detail on the burglary on April 21st 1855. They suggested that 7 or 8 persons must have been involved and from the manner in which the vault was laid open stonemasons were engaged in the robbery. The object of the burglary was the coffin of the aunt of Sir John and Sir Hugh Smyth:

“She was of somewhat eccentric habits; and it was currently reported at the time of her funeral that a quantity of jewels were interred with her, and that, the body having been embalmed, the heart placed with in the coffin, enclosed in a silver box, and that the breastplate, handles etc., of the coffin were of pure silver. The sacrilegious villains cut open the lead coffin of the late Sir John Smyth, and also that of the late Lady Smyth. The former they must have had some difficulty in removing from its position, as it took four men to replace it. They were disappointed, however, in their anticipation of plunder, the leaden coffin in which are contained the remains of the Dowager Lady Smyth remaining intact. It is supposed that they were disturbed, as they left a dark lantern behind them and some massive solver ornaments, which had been appended to the exterior of one of the coffins”.

Esme Smyth

The hunt for hidden treasure continued into the early 20th century when Esme Smyth (1863-1946) was said to have desecrated the family vault at Long Ashton Church by prising open an ancestor’s coffin in the hope of finding a valuable gold ring.

Is there any evidence for this?

It seems unlikely that Esme could or would have have done this. It is most likely a mis reporting of the 1855 incident.