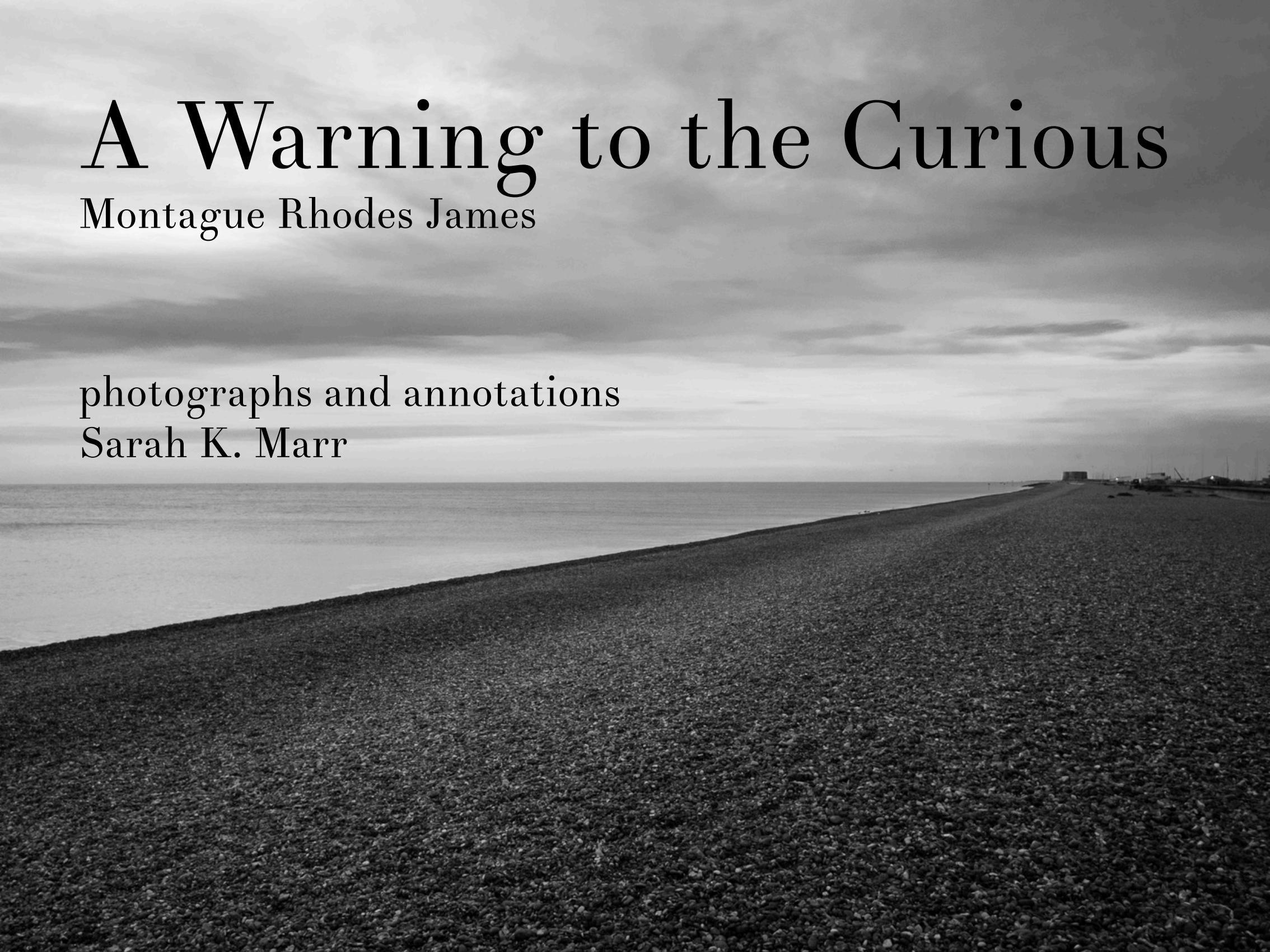


A Warning to the Curious

Montague Rhodes James

photographs and annotations
Sarah K. Marr



Curiosity about a Warning

Introduction

The place on the east coast which the reader is asked to consider is Aldeburgh. It is not very different now from what M.R. James remembered it to have been when he was a child.

If you have not read M.R. James's story, "A Warning to the Curious", then I urge you to skip ahead now and read it, slowly, savouring every word of his and ignoring all of mine. Then come back here. I, like William Ager, will wait for you.

My mother was taking a break from chemotherapy and wanted to see the sea. Aldeburgh was not too far to travel, and I found accessible lodgings. Then something whispered to me: was there not some connection with M.R. James? Indeed, yes; for, although he renames it Seaburgh, the town is clearly the setting for James's "A Warning to the Curious". Walking through the streets, and beyond, one is walking in the footsteps of Paxton and 'others'. So, I told my mother the story as we drove, and we listened to a magnificent, two-part episode of *A Podcast to the Curious*.

I never intended to make my photographs public, but they offered a chance to put everything in one place, to produce a single document which could be used by anyone wishing to experience James's Seaburgh. The "Notes for the Curious" section was an afterthought, but became a labour of love. I've done my utmost not to copy the work of others, but it is the same story and there is bound to be some overlap. Several other guides focus on the locations used for the filming of the (excellent) 1972 BBC adaptation of the story, but here I have stayed with James's text. My hope is that I've echoed, in some measure, that

adaptation's success in capturing the atmosphere of the story.

So much for place. As for time, I have used the dates supplied by James in his original manuscript. They are by no means definitive, and James himself discarded them before publication. Whatever the year, however, the mention of the full Paschal moon places the reburial of the crown within the seven days prior to Easter Sunday.

I am acutely aware of the failings of this document and in no way make the claim that it is definitive. The references are, I hope, complete enough to allow others to find them, but would not hold up if submitted in an academic thesis. In places my conclusions differ from those which have gone before. They do so sincerely and, as far as I know, with good reasons. But, my resources are limited, and I am bound to have made mistakes. I welcome constructive criticism, and I'll update this document with corrections whenever possible and use social media to let people know about them.

If you enjoy this edition please share a link to the original on social media. Please, also take a moment to read the note on copyright at the end of "Notes for the Curious". You can find me on Twitter as @sarahkmarr, and a 'follow' is always welcome. Perhaps, too, you'd be kind enough to take a look at my novel, "All the Perverse Angels": no ghosts as such, but a lot of art, poetry and history, and a setting which is, in part, Victorian. People have said that it has merit.

Anyway, here's an M.R. James ghost story, for Christmas.

Sarah K. Marr, December 2018

Maps for the Curious



Maps from the O.S. Six-Inch series, 1928.

Left map, clockwise from top left: dig site, Sluice Cottage, White Lion Hotel ('Bear'), church, station. Above map (which continues the beach to the south of the left map): martello tower.

Approximate distances between marked locations: Sluice Cottage to dig site — $\frac{1}{2}$ mile; Sluice Cottage to church and hotel — 1 mile; hotel to martello tower — $1\frac{1}{4}$ miles. Friston (*Froston*) church is farther north, and Woolpit church, with its coats of arms showing the three crowns, is some distance to the west.

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A Warning to the Curious

Red text indicates an entry in the “Notes for the Curious” section.
Blue text indicates a clue as to the location of the crown.

A Warning to the Curious

The place on the east coast which the reader is asked to consider is **Seaburgh**. It is not very different now from what I remember it to have been **when I was a child**. Marshes intersected by dykes to the south, recalling the early chapters of *Great Expectations*; flat fields to the north, merging into heath; heath, fir woods, and, above all, gorse, inland. A long sea-front and a street: behind that a spacious church of flint, with a broad, solid western tower and a **peal of six bells**. How well I remember their sound on a hot Sunday in August, as our party went slowly up the white, dusty slope of road towards them, for the church stands at the top of a short, steep incline. They rang with a flat clacking sort of sound on those hot days, but when the air was softer they were mellower too. The railway ran down to its little terminus farther along the same road. There was a gay white **windmill** just before you came to the station, and another down near the shingle at the south end the town, and yet others on higher ground to the north. There were cottages of bright red brick with slate roofs . . . but why do I encumber you with these commonplace details? The fact is that they come crowding to the point of the pencil when it begins to write of Seaburgh. I should like to be sure that I had allowed the right ones to get on to



A long sea-front and a street ...

The sea front at Aldeburgh, looking north: to the right lie fishmongers, boats and the shore. The large brick building is the 16th century Moot Hall, which blocks a view of the White Lion Hotel. The war memorial includes text written by James which originally appeared on a commemorative scroll sent, with a bronze plaque, to the next-of-kin of soldiers killed during the Great War:

He whom this scroll commemorates was numbered amongst those who, at the call of King and Country, left all that was dear to them, endured hardness, faced danger, and finally passed out of the sight of men by the path of duty and self-sacrifice, giving up their own lives that others might live in freedom.

Let those who come after see to it that his name be not forgotten.



the paper. But I forgot. I have not quite done with the word-painting business yet.

Walk away from the sea and the town, pass the station, and turn up the road on the right. It is a sandy road, parallel with the railway, and if you follow it, it climbs to somewhat higher ground. On your left (you are now going northward) is heath, on your right (the side towards the sea) is a belt of old firs, wind-beaten, thick at the top, with the slope that old seaside trees have; seen on the skyline from the train they would tell you in an instant, if you did not know it, that you were approaching a windy coast. Well, at the top of my little hill, a line of these firs strikes out and runs towards the sea, for there is a ridge that goes that way; and **the ridge ends in a rather well-defined mound** commanding the level fields of rough grass, and a little knot of fir trees crowns it. And here you may sit on a hot spring day, very well content to look at blue sea, white windmills, red cottages, bright green grass, church tower, and distant **martello tower** on the south.

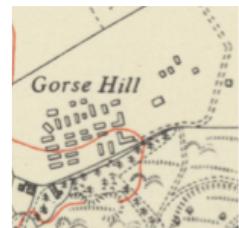
As I have said, I began to know Seaburgh as a child; but a gap of a good many years separates my early knowledge from that which is more recent. Still it keeps its place in my affections, and any tales of it that I pick up have an interest for me. **One such tale is this:** it came to me in a place very remote from Seaburgh, and quite accidentally, **from a man** whom I had been able to oblige—enough in his opinion to justify his making me his confidant to this extent.



On your left (you are now going northward) is heath ...

The land to the north of the church has changed since the 1920s. There's no station, and only a shallow cutting runs to show where the railway once brought Paxton to Seaburgh. For now, I'll say no more about the dig site, except to note that 20 years after James wrote of it, a very different type of guardian occupied the place.

The map top right was drafted in 1938; bottom right was drafted in 1947. I think the buildings in the maps, and the one in the photograph, are the remains of a World War II encampment. The 42nd Regiment joined the 1st Assault Brigade, Royal Engineers, in Suffolk in September 1943, and was headquartered at Gorse Hill. The Regiment was formed from 42 (East Lancashire) Divisional Engineers reinforced by two other territorial Companies from Lancashire and London.*



* 42nd Regiment information is from contributor paul_i_w on an archived BBC site: *WW2 People's War*. I've no reason to doubt it—it was an Editorial Pick on the site—but corroboration would be nice.

I know all that country more or less (he said). I used to go to Seaburgh pretty regularly for **golf in the spring**. I generally put up at the ‘Bear,’ with a friend—**Henry Long** it was, you knew him perhaps—(‘Slightly,’ I said) and we used to take a sitting-room and be very happy there. Since he died I haven’t cared to go there. And I don’t know that I should anyhow after the particular thing that happened on our last visit.

It was in **April, 19**—, we were there, and by some chance we were almost **the only people in the hotel**. So the ordinary public rooms were practically empty, and we were the more surprised when, after dinner, our sitting-room door opened, and **a young man** put his head in. We were aware of this young man. He was rather a rabbity anæmic subject—light hair and light eyes—but not unpleasing. So when he said: ‘I beg your pardon, is this a private room?’ we did not growl and say: ‘Yes, it is,’ but Long said, or I did—no matter which: ‘Please come in.’ ‘Oh, may I?’ he said, and seemed relieved. Of course it was obvious that he wanted company; and as he was a reasonable kind of person—not the sort to bestow his whole family history on you—we urged him to make himself at home. ‘I dare say you find the other rooms rather bleak,’ I said. Yes, he did: but it was really too good of us, and so on. That being got over, he made some pretence of reading a book. Long was playing **Patience**, I was writing. It became plain to me after a



I generally put up at the ‘Bear’, with a friend ...

The White Lion Hotel is the ‘Bear’ of the story, and James himself stayed there from time to time (as did E.M. Forster in later life, and, possibly, Wilkie Collins whilst working on “No Name” in Aldeburgh). It’s been there a long time: here’s mention of its being enlarged, from *The Builder*, June 10, 1865. No more private sitting rooms, but you can still drink, eat and stay there.

OS COUNCILMAN, WORCESTER, WAS CHIEF OF THE WORKS.
Aldeburgh.—“The White Lion Hotel” is about to be extensively increased by the Aldeburgh Hotel Company (Limited), whose prospectus has just been issued, with a nominal capital of 25,000*£*, divided into 2,500 shares. The greater portion of the capital has already been subscribed in London. The designs are by Messrs. Elmsley, Franey, & Haddon, of London, architects.
London.—The foundation stone of a new work-

few minutes that this visitor of ours was in rather a state of fidgets or nerves, which communicated itself to me, and so I put away my writing and turned to at engaging him in talk.

After some remarks, which I forget, he became rather confidential. ‘You’ll think it very odd of me’ (this was the sort of way he began), ‘but the fact is I’ve had something of a shock.’ Well, I recommended a drink of some cheering kind, and we had it. The waiter coming in made an interruption (and I thought our young man seemed very jumpy when the door opened), but after a while he got back to his woes again. There was nobody he knew in the place, and he did happen to know who we both were (it turned out there was **some common acquaintance in town**), and really he did want a word of advice, if we didn’t mind. Of course we both said: ‘By all means,’ or ‘Not at all,’ and Long put away his cards. And we settled down to hear what his difficulty was.

‘It began,’ he said, ‘**more than a week ago**, when **I bicycled over** to Froston, only about five or six miles, to see the church; I’m very much interested in architecture, and it’s got one of those **pretty porches with niches and shields**. I took **a photograph** of it, and then an old man who was tidying up in the churchyard came and asked if I’d care to look into the church. I said yes, and he produced a key and let me in. There wasn’t much inside, but I told him it was a nice little church, and he kept it very clean, “but,” I said, “the porch



... I bicycled over to Froston, only about five or six miles, to see the church ...

James seems to have changed a single vowel to name his fictional church. Saint Mary the Virgin, Friston, is a little over four miles to the north-west of Aldeburgh, along the Saxmundham Road. It’s a beautiful church, much restored around the end of the 19th century, but with some stonework dating back to the eleventh. The porch is a red brick and timber affair, and there’s no sign of three crowns, or any coats of arms for that matter.

This picture was taken early in the morning, when I was already late for breakfast at my lodgings, so I didn’t have time to check for an Ager grave, I’m afraid.

is the best part of it." We were just outside the porch then, and he said, "Ah, yes, that is a nice porch; and do you know, sir, what's the meanin' of that coat of arms there?"

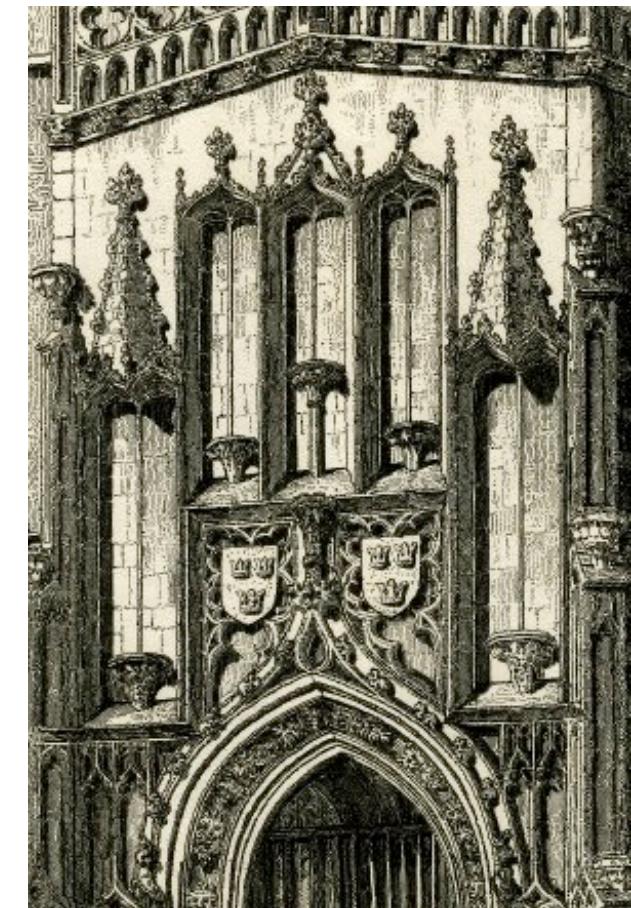
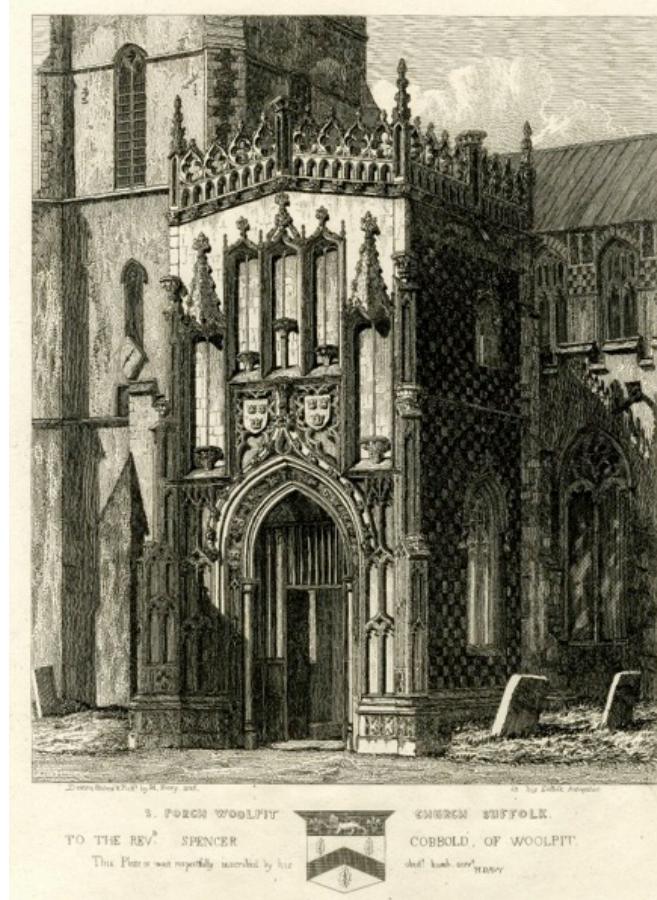
"It was the one with the three crowns, and though I'm not much of a herald, I was able to say yes, I thought it was the old arms of the kingdom of East Anglia.

"That's right, sir," he said, "and do you know the meanin' of them three crowns that's on it?"

'I said I'd no doubt it was known, but I couldn't recollect to have heard it myself.

"Well, then," he said, "for all you're a scholard, I can tell you something you don't know. Them's the three 'oly crowns what was buried in the ground near by the coast to keep the Germans from landing—ah, I can see you don't believe that. But I tell you, if it hadn't have been for one of them 'oly crowns bein' there still, them Germans would a landed here time and again, they would. Landed with their ships, and killed man, woman and child in their beds. Now then, that's the truth what I'm telling you, that is; and if you don't believe me, you ast the rector. There he comes: you ast him, I says."

'I looked round, and there was the rector, a nice-looking old man, coming up the path; and before I could begin assuring my old man, who was getting quite excited, that I didn't disbelieve him, the rector struck in, and said: "What's all this about, John? Good day to you, sir. Have you been looking at our little church?"



... it's got one of those pretty porches with niches and shields.

Friston church does not have a porch of the type described by James*. Some 35 miles west of Aldeburgh, near Bury St Edmunds, is a very close match to the porch at Friston. The porch of The Church of the Blessed Virgin Mary, Woolpit, has been much admired since its construction in c. 1430-1455. It bears the required niches, shields and three crowns, and was doubtless known to James, who wrote about the church in his "Suffolk and Norfolk" of 1930. I have still to visit the place myself, but it remains little changed from the engraving above, drawn, etched and published by Henry Davy, in his "A Series of Etchings Illustrative of the Architectural Antiquities of Suffolk" of 1827.

* It has been suggested that Theberton church may have provided the inspiration for this element of the story, but that does not seem to be supported by the evidence. See [pretty porches with niches and shields](#).

'So then there was a little talk which allowed the old man to calm down, and then the rector asked him again what was the matter.

"Oh," he said, "it warn't nothink, only I was telling this gentleman he'd ought to ast you about them 'oly crowns."

"Ah, yes, to be sure," said the rector, "that's a very curious matter, isn't it? But I don't know whether the gentleman is interested in our old stories, eh?"

"Oh, he'll be interested fast enough," says the old man, "he'll put his confidence in what you tells him, sir; why, you known **William Ager** yourself, father and son too."

'Then I put in a word to say how much I should like to hear all about it, and before many minutes I was walking up the village street with the rector, who had one or two words to say to parishioners, and then to the rectory, where he took me into his study. He had made out, on the way, that I really was capable of taking an intelligent interest in a piece of folk-lore, and not quite the ordinary tripper. So he was very willing to talk, and it is rather surprising to me that the particular legend he told me has not made its way into print before. His account of it was this: "There has always been a belief in these parts in the three holy crowns. The old people say they were buried in different places near the coast to keep off the Danes or the French or the Germans. And they say that one of the three was dug up a long time ago, and another has disappeared by the encroaching



... it was a nice little church, and he kept it very clean ...

The interior of the Church of St Mary the Virgin, Friston. It is, indeed, a *nice little church*, and *kept very clean*. I visited it at around 8am and it was utterly silent apart from my own breathing and something small, somewhere in the woodwork, moving around. The stairs to the organ loft were open to the nave, with no sign of door or barrier, so I walked up carefully and took this picture.

The huge James I coat of arms dates from 1605. It was removed from the chancel by the Victorians, and rehung in its current position after being discovered in pieces in the belfry in the 1930s.



of the sea, and one's still left doing its work, keeping off invaders. Well, now, if you have read the ordinary guides and histories of this county, you will remember perhaps that in 1687 a crown, which was said to be the crown of **Redwald**, King of the East Angles, was dug up at **Rendlesham**, and alas! alas! melted down before it was even properly described or drawn. Well, Rendlesham isn't on the coast, but it isn't so very far inland, and it's on a very important line of access. And I believe that is the crown which the people mean when they say that one has been dug up. Then on the south you don't want me to tell you where there was a **Saxon royal palace** which is now under the sea, eh? Well, there was the second crown, I take it. And up beyond these two, they say, lies the third."

"Do they say where it is?" of course I asked.

'He said, "Yes, indeed, they do, but they don't tell," and his manner did not encourage me to put the obvious question. Instead of that I waited a moment, and said: "What did the old man mean when he said you knew William Ager, as if that had something to do with the crowns?"

"To be sure," he said, "now that's another curious story. These Agers—it's a very old name in these parts, but I can't find that they were ever people of quality or big owners—these Agers say, or said, that their branch of the family were the guardians of the last crown. A certain old Nathaniel Ager was the first one I knew—I was born and brought



... my eye caught a fairly new gravestone ...

These graves—dated about 50 years too early to belong to William Ager—lie beside the Church of St Peter and St Paul, Aldeburgh. When Paxton says that he *bicycled back past the churchyard wall* there is a degree of ambiguity as to which churchyard: he would have ridden past Seaburgh/Aldeburgh Church on his way to, and from, Froston/Friston. Still, Froston churchyard itself seems a more natural place for Ager's burial, since the rector was *born and brought up quite near* Froston and remembers a *certain old Nathaniel Ager, knew William Ager,* and has remained close enough to the family to write to relations *in the colonies.*

up quite near here—and he, I believe, camped out at the place during the whole of **the war of 1870**. William, his son, did the same, I know, during **the South African War**. And young William, *his* son, who has only died fairly recently, took lodgings at the cottage nearest the spot, and I've no doubt hastened his end, for **he was a consumptive**, by exposure and night watching. And he was the last of that branch. It was a dreadful grief to him to think that he was the last, but he could do nothing, the only relations at all near to him were in the colonies. I wrote letters for him to them imploring them to come over on business very important to the family, but there has been no answer. So the last of the holy crowns, if it's there, has no guardian now."

‘That was what the rector told me, and you can fancy how interesting I found it. The only thing I could think of when I left him was how to hit upon the spot where the crown was supposed to be. I wish I'd left it alone.

‘But there was a sort of fate in it, for as I bicycled back past the churchyard wall my eye caught a fairly new gravestone, and on it was the name of William Ager. Of course I got off and read it. It said “of this parish, died at Seaburgh, **19**—, aged 28.” There it was, you see. A little judicious questioning in the right place, and I should at least find the cottage nearest the spot. Only I didn't quite know what was the right place to begin my questioning at. Again there was fate: it took



... it took me to the curiosity-shop down that way ...

I'm quite sure that Paxton did not come across his 18th century prayer-book in Molehall Antiques, which is to be found at the church end of Aldeburgh High Street. Indeed, the location of Paxton's shop may have been in Froston itself, or anywhere between there and Seaburgh, being only described as *the curiosity-shop down that way—you know*. We, alas, do not know.

Anyway, peering through the window should give some sense of the environment in which Paxton encountered *the shopman*.

me to the curiosity-shop down that way—you know—and I turned over some old books, and, if you please, one was a prayer-book of 1740 odd, in a rather handsome binding—I'll just go and get it, it's in my room.'

He left us in a state of some surprise, but we had hardly time to exchange any remarks when he was back, panting, and handed us the book opened at the fly-leaf, on which was, in a straggly hand:

This **poem** was dated 1754, and there were many more entries of Agers, Nathaniel, Frederick, William, and so on, ending with **William, 19—**.

‘You see,’ he said, ‘anybody would call it the greatest bit of luck. *I* did, but I don’t now. Of course I asked the shopman about William Ager, and of course he happened to remember that he lodged in a cottage in the North Field and died there. This was just chalking the road for me. I knew which the cottage must be: there is only one sizable one about there. The next thing was to scrape some sort of acquaintance with the people, and I took a walk that way at once. A dog did the business for me: he made at me so fiercely that they had to run out and beat him off, and then naturally begged my pardon, and we got



... William, his son ... took lodgings at the cottage nearest the spot ...

Sluice Cottage, seen from the road which runs north along the coast, from Aldeburgh to Thorpeness. The last inhabitants were Tom White and his wife, in the 1960s, according to the Thorpeness and Aldringham Heritage Group. The cottage, now ruined, is half-hidden behind overgrown shrubs, but easy enough to find if one is looking for it. There's a parking space more-or-less opposite, too.

into talk. I had only to bring up Ager's name and pretend I knew, or thought I knew something of him, and then the woman said how sad it was him dying so young, and she was sure it came of him spending the night out of doors in the cold weather. Then I had to say: "Did he go out on the sea at night?" and she said: "Oh, no, it was on the hillock yonder with the trees on it." And **there I was.**

'I know something about digging in these barrows: I've opened many of them in **the down country**. But that was with owner's leave, and in broad daylight and with men to help. I had to prospect very carefully here before I put a spade in: I couldn't trench across the mound, and with those old firs growing there I knew there would be awkward tree roots. Still the soil was very light and sandy and **easy**, and there was a rabbit hole or so that might be developed into a sort of tunnel. The going out and coming back at odd hours to the hotel was going to be the awkward part. When I made up my mind about the way to excavate I told the people that I was called away for a night, and I spent it out there. **I made my tunnel:** I won't bore you with the details of how I supported it and filled it in when I'd done, but the main thing is that I got the crown.'

Naturally we both broke out into exclamations of surprise and interest. I for one had long known about the finding of the crown at Rendlesham and had often lamented its fate. No one has ever seen an Anglo-Saxon crown—at least no one had. But our man



... he lodged in a cottage in the North Field and died there.

By 1884 a windmill had been standing on the site of the cottage for quite some time (left map). By 1905 the windmill had been extended to include "Windmill Cottage" (centre map). By 1928 the windmill seems disused, and the cottage is renamed "Sluice Cottage" (right map), as it is on subsequent maps.



gazed at us with a rueful eye. ‘Yes,’ he said, ‘and the worst of it is I don’t know how to put it back.’

‘Put it back?’ we cried out. ‘Why, my dear sir, you’ve made one of the most exciting finds ever heard of in this country. Of course it ought to go to the **Jewel House at the Tower**. What’s your difficulty? If you’re thinking about the owner of the land, and treasure-trove, and all that, we can certainly help you through. Nobody’s going to make a fuss about technicalities in a case of this kind.’

Probably more was said, but all he did was to put his face in his hands, and mutter: ‘I don’t know how to put it back.’

At last Long said: ‘You’ll forgive me, I hope, if I seem impertinent, but are you *quite* sure you’ve got it?’ I was wanting to ask much the same question myself, for of course the story did seem a lunatic’s dream when one thought over it. But I hadn’t quite dared to say what might hurt the poor young man’s feelings. However, he took it quite calmly—really, with the calm of despair, you might say. He sat up and said: ‘Oh, yes, there’s no doubt of that: I have it here, in my room, locked up in my bag. You can come and look at it if you like: I won’t offer to bring it here.’

We were not likely to let the chance slip. We went with him; his room was only a few doors off. The **boots** was just collecting shoes in the passage: or so we thought: afterwards we were not sure. Our visitor—his name was Paxton—was in a worse state of



... going out and coming back at odd hours ... was going to be the awkward part.

This photograph looks back at Sluice Cottage from the path which runs west, up from the road by the cottage, to the trees and the shallow railway cutting. Whilst I was looking around the cottage a group of three local children on bikes turned up. They were able to confirm that I was, indeed, looking at Sluice Cottage and, I, in return, got to tell them a ghost story all about a guy who digs up a crown and... Well, you know the rest.

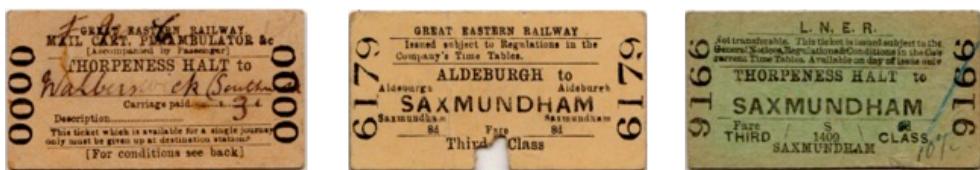
shivers than before, and went hurriedly into the room, and beckoned us after him, turned on the light, and shut the door carefully. Then he unlocked his kit-bag, and produced a bundle of clean pocket-handkerchiefs in which something was wrapped, laid it on the bed, and undid it. I can now say I *have* seen an actual Anglo-Saxon crown. It was of silver—as the Rendlesham one is always said to have been—it was set with some gems, mostly antique intaglios and cameos, and was of rather plain, almost rough workmanship. In fact, it was like those you see on the coins and in the manuscripts. I found no reason to think it was later than the ninth century. I was intensely interested, of course, and I wanted to turn it over in my hands, but Paxton prevented me. ‘Don’t *you* touch it,’ he said, ‘I’ll do that.’ And with a sigh that was, I declare to you, dreadful to hear, he took it up and turned it about so that we could see every part of it. ‘Seen enough?’ he said at last, and we nodded. He wrapped it up and locked it in his bag, and stood looking at us dumbly. ‘Come back to our room,’ Long said, ‘and tell us what the trouble is.’ He thanked us, and said: ‘Will you go first and see if—if the coast is clear?’ That wasn’t very intelligible, for our proceedings hadn’t been, after all, very suspicious, and the hotel, as I said, was practically empty. However, we were beginning to have inklings of—we didn’t know what, and anyhow nerves are infectious. So we did go, first peering out as we opened the door, and fancying (I found we both had



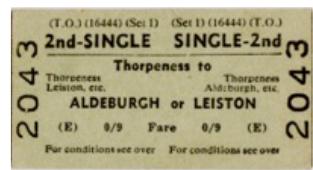
... it was on the hillock yonder with the trees on it.

This is the path which continues west, through the marshes, from Sluice Cottage. I walked along it early in the day, with the clouds scudding across the sky and the rushes shivering in the wind. Nobody else in sight, not even when I looked over my shoulder; and I looked over my shoulder a lot.

Paxton took this route to the dig site after talking to the owners of the cottage but, for the dig itself, he travelled by train to avoid detection: *I had to get to the junction for Seaburgh, and take a train back.* That junction must have been Thorpeness Halt (marked in blue at the top of the map, right). From there the dig site was only a little farther than from Aldeburgh Station (the lower blue mark). Thorpeness Halt opened in 1914 and closed in 1966.



Tickets kindly provided by Michael Stewart.





I made my tunnel ...

Looking west towards the dig site, on the path leading from Sluice Cottage. The line of trees is on the eastern bank of the shallow cutting which once held the railway line, in the position marked as “Marsh Covert” on the 1928 map in *Maps for Curious*.

the fancy) that a shadow, or more than a shadow—but it made no sound—passed from before us to one side as we came out into the passage. ‘It’s all right,’ we whispered to Paxton—whispering seemed the proper tone—and we went, with him between us, back to our sitting-room. I was preparing, when we got there, to be ecstatic about the unique interest of what we had seen, but when I looked at Paxton I saw that would be terribly out of place, and I left it to him to begin.

‘What *is* to be done?’ was his opening. Long thought it right (as he explained to me afterwards) to be obtuse, and said: ‘Why not find out who the owner of the land is, and inform—’ Oh, no, no!’ Paxton broke in impatiently, ‘I beg your pardon: you’ve been very kind, but don’t you see it’s *got* to go

back, and I daren’t be there at night, and daytime’s impossible. Perhaps, though, you don’t see: well, then, the truth is that I’ve never been alone since I touched it.’ I was beginning some fairly stupid comment, but Long caught my eye, and I stopped. Long said: ‘I think I do see, perhaps: but wouldn’t it be—a relief—to tell us a little more clearly what the situation is?’

Then it all came out: Paxton looked over his shoulder and beckoned to us to come nearer to him, and began speaking in a low voice: we listened most intently, of course, and compared notes afterwards, and I wrote down our version, so I am confident I have what he told us almost word for word. He said: ‘It began when I was first prospecting, and put me off again and again. There was always

somebody—a man—standing by one of the firs. This was in daylight, you know. He was never in front of me. I always saw him with the tail of my eye on the left or the right, and he was never there when I looked straight for him. I would lie down for quite a long time and take careful observations, and make sure there was no one, and then when I got up and began prospecting again, there he was. And he began to give me hints, besides; for wherever I put that prayer-book—short of locking it up, which I did at last—when I came back to my room it was always out on my table open at the fly-leaf where the names are, and one of my razors across it to keep it open. I'm sure he just can't open my bag, or something more would have happened. You

see, he's light and weak, but all the same I daren't face him. Well, then, when I was making the tunnel, of course it was worse, and if I hadn't been so keen I should have dropped the whole thing and run. It was like someone scraping at my back all the time: I thought for a long time it was only soil dropping on me, but as I got nearer the—the crown, it was unmistakable. And when I actually laid it bare and got my fingers into the ring of it and pulled it out, there came a sort of cry behind me—oh, I can't tell you how desolate it was! And horribly threatening too. It spoilt all my pleasure in my find—cut it off that moment. And if I hadn't been the wretched fool I am, I should have put the thing back and left it. But I didn't. The rest of the time was just awful.



... oh, I can't tell you how desolate it was!



Travelling west from Sluice Cottage one crosses the course of the old railway line—running up the right of the map—and (what's left of) the dig site is on one's right. This picture was taken from the blue circle, with the dig site a little way behind the trees on the left. See also *A Treasure Map for the Curious* and *Postcards for the Curious*.

I had hours to get through before I could decently come back to the hotel. First I spent time filling up my tunnel and covering my tracks, and all the while he was there trying to thwart me. Sometimes, you know, you see him, and sometimes you don't, just as he pleases, I think: he's there, but **he has some power over your eyes**. Well, I wasn't off the spot very long before sunrise, and then I had to get to the junction for Seaburgh, and take a train back. And though it was daylight fairly soon, I don't know if that made it much better. There were always **hedges, or gorse-bushes, or park fences along the road**—some sort of cover, I mean—and I was never easy for a second. And then when I began to meet people going to work, they always looked behind me very strangely: it might have been that they were surprised at seeing anyone so early; but I didn't think it was only that, and I don't now: they didn't look exactly at *me*. And the porter at the train was like that too. And the guard held open the door after I'd got into the carriage—just as he would if there was somebody else coming, you know. Oh, you may be very sure it isn't my fancy,' he said with a dull sort of laugh. Then he went on: 'And even if I do get it put back, he won't forgive me: I can tell that. And I was so happy a fortnight ago.' He dropped into a chair, and I believe he began to cry.

We didn't know what to say, but we felt we must come to the rescue somehow, and so—it really seemed the only thing—we said if he was so set on putting the crown back in

its place, we would help him. And I must say that after what we had heard it did seem the right thing. If these horrid consequences had come on this poor man, might there not really be something in the original idea of the crown having some curious power bound up with it, to guard the coast? At least, that was my feeling, and I think it was Long's too. Our offer was very welcome to Paxton, anyhow. When could we do it? It was **nearing half-past ten**. Could we contrive to make a late walk plausible to the hotel people that very night? We looked out of the window: there was a brilliant full moon—the **Paschal moon**. Long undertook to tackle the boots and propitiate him. He was to say that we should not be much over the hour, and if we did find it so pleasant that we stopped out a bit longer we would see that he didn't lose by sitting up. Well, we were pretty regular customers of the hotel, and did not give much trouble, and were considered by the servants to be not under the mark in the way of tips; and so the boots *was* propitiated, and let us out on to the sea-front, and remained, as we heard later, looking after us. Paxton had a large coat over his arm, under which was the wrapped-up crown.

So we were off on this strange errand before we had time to think how very much out of the way it was. I have told this part quite shortly on purpose, for it really does represent the haste with which we settled our plan and took action. 'The shortest way is up the hill and through the churchyard,' Paxton said, as we stood a moment before the hotel

looking up and down the front. There was nobody about—nobody at all. Seaburgh out of the season is an early, quiet place. ‘We can’t go along the dyke by the cottage, because of the dog,’ Paxton also said, when I pointed to what I thought a shorter way along the front and across two fields. The reason he gave was good enough. We went up the road to the church, and turned in at the churchyard gate. I confess to having thought that there might be **some lying there** who might be conscious of our business: but if it was so, they were also conscious that one who was on their side, so to say, had us under surveillance, and we saw no sign of them. But under observation we felt we were, as I have never felt it at another time. Specially was it so when we passed out of the churchyard into a narrow path with close high hedges, through which we hurried as **Christian did through that Valley**; and so got out into open fields. Then along hedges, though I would sooner have been in the open, where I could see if anyone was visible behind me; over a gate or two, and then a swerve to the left, taking us up on to the ridge which ended in that mound.

As we neared it, Henry Long felt, and I felt too, that there were what I can only call dim presences waiting for us, as well as a far more actual one attending us. Of Paxton’s agitation all this time I can give you no adequate picture: he breathed like a hunted beast, and we could not either of us look at his face. How he would manage when we got to the very place we had not troubled to think:



The shortest way is up the hill and through the churchyard ...

The Church of St Peter and St Paul is just where James says it is: a little way along the road which climbs gently from Aldeburgh High Street, before dividing north, to Leiston—do visit the abbey there if you have a moment—and north-west to Saxmundham.

The path still leads through the churchyard, but today the fields beyond contain a housing estate and a holiday park, before one reaches the open land and Paxton’s dig site.

The reburial of the crown seems to have taken place on Friday, 6th April, 1917: see *Paschal moon*.

he had seemed so sure that that would not be difficult. Nor was it. I never saw anything like the dash with which he flung himself at a particular spot in the side of the mound, and tore at it, so that in a very few minutes the greater part of his body was out of sight. We stood holding the coat and that bundle of handkerchiefs, and looking, very fearfully, I must admit, about us. There was nothing to be seen: a line of dark firs behind us made one skyline, more trees and the church tower half a mile off on the right, cottages and a windmill on the horizon on the left, calm sea dead in front, faint barking of a dog at a cottage on a gleaming dyke between us and it: full moon making that path we know across the sea: the eternal whisper of the Scotch firs just above us, and of the sea in front. Yet, in all this quiet, an acute, an acrid consciousness of a restrained hostility very near us, like a dog on a leash that might be let go at any moment.

Paxton pulled himself out of the hole, and stretched a hand back to us. ‘Give it to me,’ he whispered, ‘unwrapped.’ We pulled off the handkerchiefs, and he took the crown. The moonlight just fell on it as he snatched it. We had not ourselves touched that bit of metal, and I have thought since that it was just as well. In another moment Paxton was out of the hole again and busy shovelling back the soil with hands that were already bleeding. He would have none of our help, though. It was much the longest part of the job to get the place to look undisturbed yet—



... a line of dark firs behind us made one skyline ...

This isn't the exact location of the dig site: the sea and Sluice Cottage are east of here, off the right-hand side of the picture; the trees are along the edge of the shallow railway cutting beyond which, to the west, lies the dig site.

Yet, it was at this point, away from the road and not yet arrived at the new houses on the other side of the (now missing) tracks, that James's descriptions seem most alive. The wind was blowing through the trees and through the rushes beside the path. The crows you can see in the distance were cawing and whirling over the treetops. There was nobody else around. And there was treasure underfoot. But that will have to wait until the afterword.

I don't know how—he made a wonderful success of it. At last he was satisfied and we turned back.

We were a couple of hundred yards from the hill when Long suddenly said to him: 'I say, you've left your coat there. That won't do. See?' And I certainly did see it—the long dark overcoat lying where the tunnel had been. Paxton had not stopped, however: he only shook his head, and held up the coat on his arm. And when we joined him, he said, without any excitement, but as if nothing mattered any more: 'That wasn't my coat.' And, indeed, when we looked back again, that dark thing was not to be seen.

Well, we got out on to the road, and came rapidly back that way. It was **well before twelve** when we got in, trying to put a good face on it, and saying—Long and I—what a lovely night it was for a walk. The boots was on the look-out for us, and we made remarks like that for his edification as we entered the hotel. He gave another look up and down the sea-front before he locked the front door, and said: 'You didn't meet many people about, I s'pose, sir?' 'No, indeed, not a soul,' I said; at which I remember Paxton looked oddly at me. 'Only I thought I see someone turn up the station road after you gentlemen,' said the boots. 'Still, you was three together, and I don't suppose he meant mischief.' I didn't know what to say; Long merely said 'Good night,' and we went off upstairs, promising to turn out all lights, and to go to bed in a few minutes.

Back in our room, we did our very best to make Paxton take a cheerful view. 'There's the crown safe back,' we said; 'very likely you'd have done better not to touch it' (and he heavily assented to that), 'but no real harm has been done, and we shall never give this away to anyone who would be so mad as to go near it. Besides, don't you feel better yourself? I don't mind confessing,' I said, 'that on the way there I was very much inclined to take your view about—well, about being followed; but going back, it wasn't at all the same thing, was it?' No, it wouldn't do: 'You've nothing to trouble yourselves about,' he said, 'but I'm not forgiven. I've got to pay for that miserable sacrilege still. I know what you are going to say. The Church might help. Yes, but it's the body that has to suffer. It's true I'm not feeling that he's waiting outside for me just now. But——' Then he stopped. Then he turned to thanking us, and we put him off as soon as we could. And naturally we pressed him to use our sitting-room next day, and said we should be glad to go out with him. Or did he play golf, perhaps? Yes, he did, but he didn't think he should care about that tomorrow. Well, we recommended him to get up late and sit in our room in the morning while we were playing, and we would have a walk later in the day. He was very submissive and *piano* about it all: ready to do just what we thought best, but clearly quite certain in his own mind that what was coming could not be averted or palliated. You'll wonder why we didn't insist on accompanying him to his

home and seeing him safe into the care of brothers or someone. The fact was he had nobody. He had had a flat in town, but lately he had made up his mind to settle for a time in **Sweden**, and he had dismantled his flat and shipped off his belongings, and was whiling away a fortnight or three weeks before he made a start. Anyhow, we didn't see what we could do better than sleep on it—or not sleep very much, as was my case—and see what we felt like to-morrow morning.

We felt very different, Long and I, on **as beautiful an April morning** as you could desire; and Paxton also looked very different when we saw him at breakfast. 'The first approach to a decent night I seem ever to have had,' was what he said. But he was going to do as we had settled: stay in probably all the morning, and come out with us later. We went to the **links**; we met some other men and played with them in the morning, and had lunch there rather early, so as not to be late back. All the same, **the snares of death** overtook him.

Whether it could have been prevented, I don't know. I think he would have been got at somehow, do what we might. Anyhow, this is what happened.

We went straight up to our room. Paxton was there, reading quite peaceably. 'Ready to come out shortly?' said Long, 'say in half an hour's time?' 'Certainly,' he said: and I said we would change first, and perhaps have baths, and call for him in half an hour. I had my bath first, and went and lay down on my

bed, and slept for about ten minutes. We came out of our rooms at the same time, and went together to the sitting-room. Paxton wasn't there—only his book. Nor was he in his room, nor in the downstair rooms. We shouted for him. A servant came out and said: 'Why, I thought you gentlemen was gone out already, and so did the other gentleman. He heard you a-calling from the path there, and run out in a hurry, and I looked out of the coffee-room window, but I didn't see you.'

'Owever, he run off down the beach that way.'

Without a word we ran that way too—it was the opposite direction to that of last night's expedition. It wasn't quite four o'clock, and the day was fair, though not so fair as it had been, so there was really no reason, you'd say, for anxiety: with people about, surely a man couldn't come to much harm.

But something in our look as we ran out must have struck the servant, for she came out on the steps, and pointed, and said, 'Yes, that's the way he went.' We ran on as far as the top of the shingle bank, and there pulled up. There was a choice of ways: past the houses on the sea-front, or along the sand at the bottom of the beach, which, the **tide being now out**, was fairly broad. Or of course we might keep along the shingle between these two tracks and have some view of both of them; only that was heavy going. We chose the sand, for that was the loneliest, and someone *might* come to harm there without being seen from the public path.

Long said he saw Paxton some distance ahead, running and waving his stick, as if he wanted to signal to people who were on ahead of him. I couldn't be sure: one of these sea-mists was coming up very quickly from the south. There was someone, that's all I could say. And there were tracks on the sand as of someone running who wore shoes; and there were other tracks made before those—for the shoes sometimes trod in them and interfered with them—of someone not in shoes. Oh, of course, it's only my word you've got to take for all this: Long's dead, we'd no time or means to make sketches or take casts, and the next tide washed everything away. All we could do was to notice these marks as we hurried on. But there they were over and over again, and we had no doubt whatever that what we saw was the track of a bare foot, and one that showed more bones than flesh.

The notion of Paxton running after—after anything like this, and supposing it to be the friends he was looking for, was very dreadful to us. You can guess what we fancied: how the thing he was following might stop suddenly and turn round on him, and what sort of face it would show, half-seen at first in the mist—which all the while was getting thicker and thicker. And as I ran on wondering how the poor wretch could have been lured into mistaking that other thing for us, I remembered his saying, 'He has some power over your eyes.' And then I wondered what the end would be, for I had no hope now that the end could be averted, and—well,



... Long said he saw Paxton some distance ahead ...

It's 1½ miles between the White Lion Hotel (that is, the 'Bear') and the martello tower, and it'd be quite a tough run over the shingle. There's no sand visible in the photograph because the tide isn't out far enough, but at low tide there is some sand on which to run after, well, *something*.

On the fateful day, the Friends* had breakfast, played a round of golf, eaten lunch, returned to the hotel, and had baths and a short snooze, before attempting to meet Paxton, who had already left. That would place the run down the beach in the middle of the afternoon, at the earliest. In fact, we're told it *wasn't quite four o'clock*. The text is a good match for the actual tides and time of sunset for the day (6.36pm, and see *Paschal moon* and *the tide being now out*). Given the time needed to run 1½ miles on sand, with a couple of pauses, Paxton's time of death seems to be c. 4.15pm on Saturday, 7th April, 1917.

* See *A Note About Nomenclature*.

there is no need to tell all the dismal and horrid thoughts that flitted through my head as we ran on into the mist. It was uncanny, too, that the sun should still be bright in the sky and we could see nothing. We could only tell that we were now past the houses and had reached that gap there is between them and the old martello tower. When you are past the tower, you know, there is nothing but shingle for a long way—not a house, not a human creature; just that spit of land, or rather shingle, with the river on your right and the sea on your left.

But just before that, just by the martello tower, you remember there is the old battery, close to the sea. I believe there are only a few blocks of concrete left now: the rest has all been washed away, but at this time there was a lot more, though the place was a ruin. Well, when we got there, we clambered to the top as quick as we could to take breath and look over the shingle in front if by chance the mist would let us see anything. But a moment's rest we must have. We had run a mile at least. Nothing whatever was visible ahead of us, and we were just turning by common consent to get down and run hopelessly on, when we heard what I can only call a laugh: and if you can understand what I mean by a breathless, **a lungless laugh**, you have it: but I don't suppose you can. It came from below, and swerved away into the mist. That was enough. We bent over the wall. Paxton was there at the bottom.



... just by the martello tower, you remember there is the old battery ...

The martello tower was built between 1808 and 1812 as part of a series of fortifications to defend against invasion by Napoleon's France. It was converted into a house in 1930's—complete with a tasteful penthouse, now gone—and finally sold to the Landmark Trust in 1971. The battery was still in existence in 1905 (left map) but had completely disappeared by 1928 (right map).



You don't need to be told that he was dead. His tracks showed that he had run along the side of the battery, had turned sharp round the corner of it, and, small doubt of it, must have dashed straight into the open arms of someone who was waiting there. His mouth was full of sand and stones, and his teeth and jaws were broken to bits. I only glanced once at his face.

At the same moment, just as we were scrambling down from the battery to get to the body, we heard a shout, and saw a man running down the bank of the martello tower. He was the caretaker stationed there, and his keen old eyes had managed to descry through the mist that something was wrong. He had seen Paxton fall, and had seen us a moment after, running up—fortunate this, for otherwise we could hardly have escaped suspicion of being concerned in the dreadful business. Had he, we asked, caught sight of anybody attacking our friend? He could not be sure.

We sent him off for help, and stayed by the dead man till they came with the stretcher. It was then that we traced out how he had come, on the narrow fringe of sand under the battery wall. The rest was shingle, and it was hopelessly impossible to tell whither the other had gone.

What were we to say at the inquest? It was a duty, we felt, not to give up, there and then, the secret of the crown, to be published in every paper. I don't know how much you would have told; but what we did agree upon

was this: to say that we had only made acquaintance with Paxton the day before, and that he had told us he was under some apprehension of danger at the hands of a man called William Ager. Also that we had seen some other tracks besides Paxton's when we followed him along the beach. But of course by that time everything was gone from the sands.

No one had any knowledge, fortunately, of any William Ager **living in the district**. The evidence of the man at the martello tower freed us from all suspicion. All that could be done was to return a verdict of wilful murder by some person or persons unknown.

Paxton was so totally without connections that all the inquiries that were subsequently made ended in a **No Thoroughfare**. And I have never been at Seaburgh, or even near it, since.

M. R. James
London Mercury, August 1925



The Martello Tower, Aldeburgh, from "Round Ipswich" by C.R.B. Barrett (1893)

Further Curiosities

A Timeline for the Curious

c. 599 to c. 624	Redwald rules as a king of East Anglia.	see <i>Redwald</i>
1687	The Rendlesham crown is melted down.	see <i>Rendlesham</i>
1740 <i>odd</i>	The Agers' prayer book is printed.	see <i>poem</i>
c. 1750	The second crown is lost to the sea.	see <i>a Saxon royal palace</i>
1754	Nathaniel Ager (of 1700s) begins to guard the crown.	see <i>poem</i>
1860s and 1870s	James/The Author* visits Seaburgh as a child.	see <i>when I was a child</i>
1870 to 1871 (1870, Jul 16 to 1871, Jan 28)	Franco-Prussian War: Nat. Ager (of 1800s) guards the crown.	see <i>the war of 1870</i>
1887 or 1888	William Ager (son) is born.	see <i>19—</i>
1899 to 1902 (1899, Oct 11 to 1902, May 31)	Second Boer War: William Ager (father) guards the crown.	see <i>the South African War</i>
1910	Will. Ager (father) dies and Will. Ager (son) guards the crown.	see <i>William, 19—</i>
1916	William Ager (son) dies.	see <i>19—</i>
1917 between Sat, Mar 24 and c. Wed, Mar 28	Paxton arrives in Seaburgh.	see <i>more than a week ago</i>
1917 c. Thu, Mar 29	Paxton cycles to Froston church, meets John and the rector.	see <i>more than a week ago</i>
1917 c. Thu, Mar 29 or Fri, Mar 30	Paxton visits the curiosity-shop, cottage, and dig site.	see <i>there I was</i>
1917 c. Sat, Mar 31 to c. Tue, Apr 3	Paxton prospects the dig site.	see <i>I made my tunnel</i>
1917 c. Tue, Apr 3 9pm to (Wed) 5am	Paxton retrieves the crown from the dig site.	see <i>I made my tunnel</i>
1917 c. Wed, Apr 4	The Friends* arrive in Seaburgh.	see <i>April, 19—</i>
1917 Fri, Apr 6 8pm to 10.20pm	Paxton meets the Friends, and shows them the crown.	see <i>nearing half-past ten</i>
1917 Fri, Apr 6 10.30pm to 11.45pm	Paxton and the Friends rebury the crown.	see <i>Paschal moon, well before twelve</i>
1917 Sat, Apr 7 3.55pm to 4.15pm	The Friends chase Paxton and find him dead.	see notes in text
c. 1923	The Narrator* tells the Author the story.	see <i>London Mercury, August 1925</i>

* See *A Note About Nomenclature*.

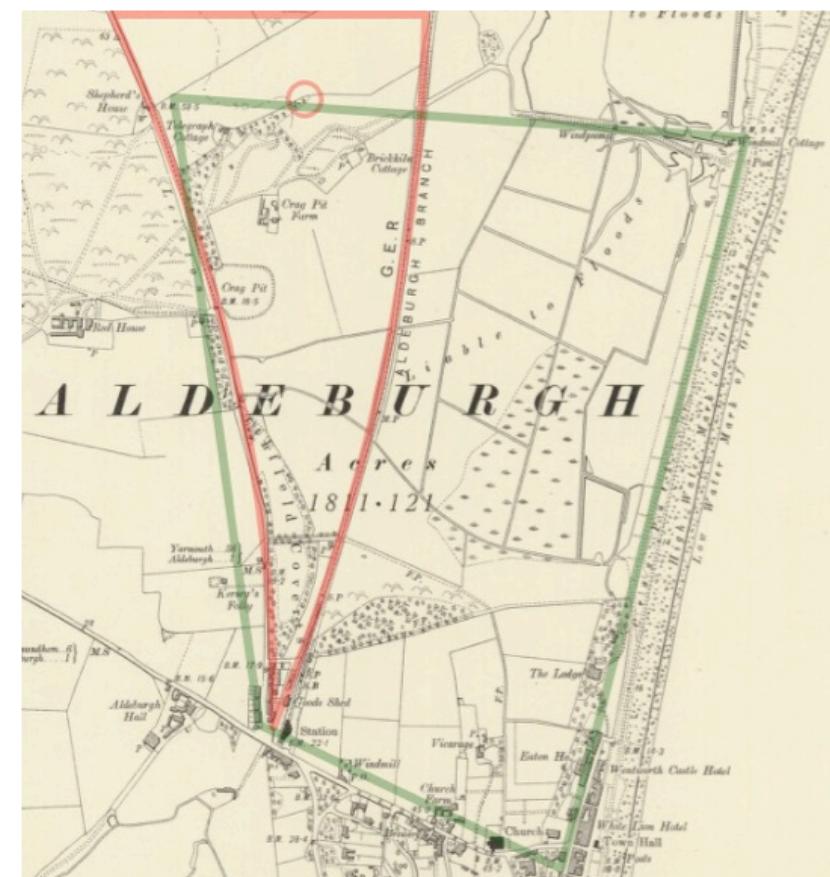
A Treasure Map for the Curious (i)

The sandy road, parallel with the railway must be Leiston Road—with heath on the left and firs on the right—which puts the dig site in the triangle bounded red, as there's no mention of actually crossing the railway. Then one needs to find the top of [a] little hill and a line of firs which strikes out and runs towards the sea, for there is a ridge that goes that way. The letters “B.M.” on the map—more visible on the map on the next page—stand for “Bench Mark”, a point where height above sea level is measured. Here the road rises to 58.5ft, near Shepherd's House, before falling again. Sure enough, a line of firs runs to the east, just before that point is reached, following a 50ft contour line indicating a ridge. That ridge ends in the mound, shown circled in red. One would also reach this point via the church path, fields and a swerve to the left. The area is much changed by building and landscaping now. See also *a rather well-defined mound*.

How does that tie-in with the identification of Sluice Cottage as the Agers' home? We are told that William lodged in a cottage in the North Field. Nicholas Fenwick Hele describes the relationship between the North Field and mere in his “Notes or Jottings about Aldeburgh” of 1870.

THE mere extends from the north field to Thorpe, and is bounded by the railway embankment to the west. It consists of an area of about one thousand acres, and is divided into two parts by a wall running east and west. It is necessary to say that a wall here is understood to be an embankment of earth

Hele's description of the mere—particularly its being divided in two by a wall running east and west, and its draining into the sea via the Haven—suggests that Sluice Cottage existed at the boundary of the North Field and the mere. To the west, the Northfield Covert was, presumably, part of the North Field, too, at least before the coming of the railway. So the green outline is roughly the site of the North Field, although it may continue farther west.

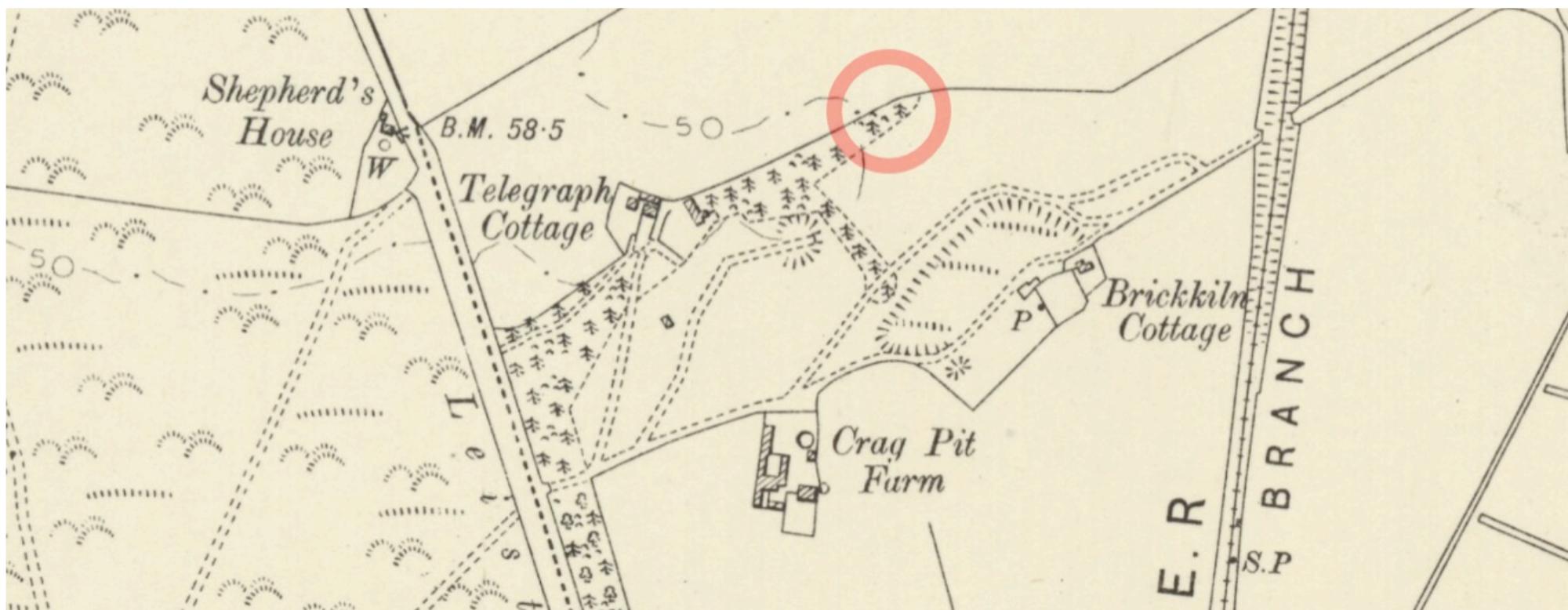


A Treasure Map for the Curious (ii)

This still leaves Telegraph Cottage and Brickkiln Cottage as possible candidates for William's home, but they're ruled out by the additional requirements of Paxton's "We can't go along the dyke by the cottage," and the barking of a dog at a cottage on a gleaming dyke between the dig site and the sea. Still, these other two cottages, and Crag Pit Farm, seem to explain why Paxton had to work at night to avoid detection in an otherwise sparsely-populated landscape.

There are a few problems with this analysis, however. They suggest that James may have been somewhat flexible in his description of

the landscape. First, one would see *the church tower from the dig site*, but it would be a mile off, rather than *half a mile off*. Yet, there is nowhere within half a mile of the church which fits the description. Second, the rector tells Paxton that Ager took lodgings at the cottage nearest the spot. Sluice Cottage is farther away than either Telegraph Cottage or Brickkiln Cottage. Third, Paxton and the Friends leave the hotel at *nearing half-past ten* and return *well before twelve*. The proposed dig site is too far away from their hotel to get there and back, and rebury the crown, in 90 minutes.



Postcards for the Curious (i)



North Fields, Aldeburgh.

do you remember the Juvenile Treat here

A postcard showing the *North Fields, Aldeburgh*, in the early years of the 20th century, giving a sense of the tree-covered landscape in some areas to the north of the town.

The card is postmarked 5th February, 1904. It was sent from Leiston by *Maude* to a *Miss E.*, of Norfolk and reads: *Dear E. / I will write you in a few days. / Have been busy. / Yours lovingly / Maude.*

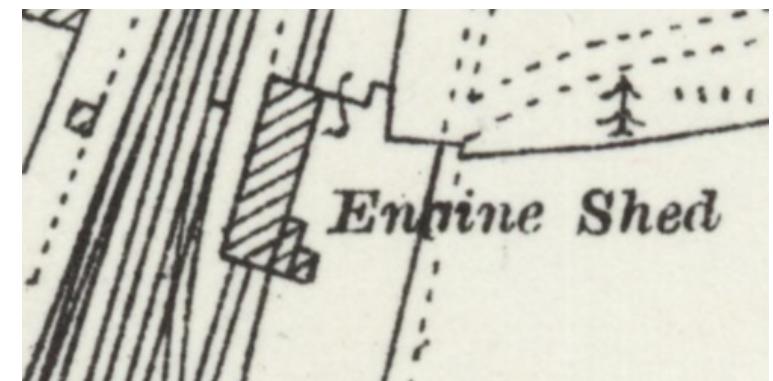
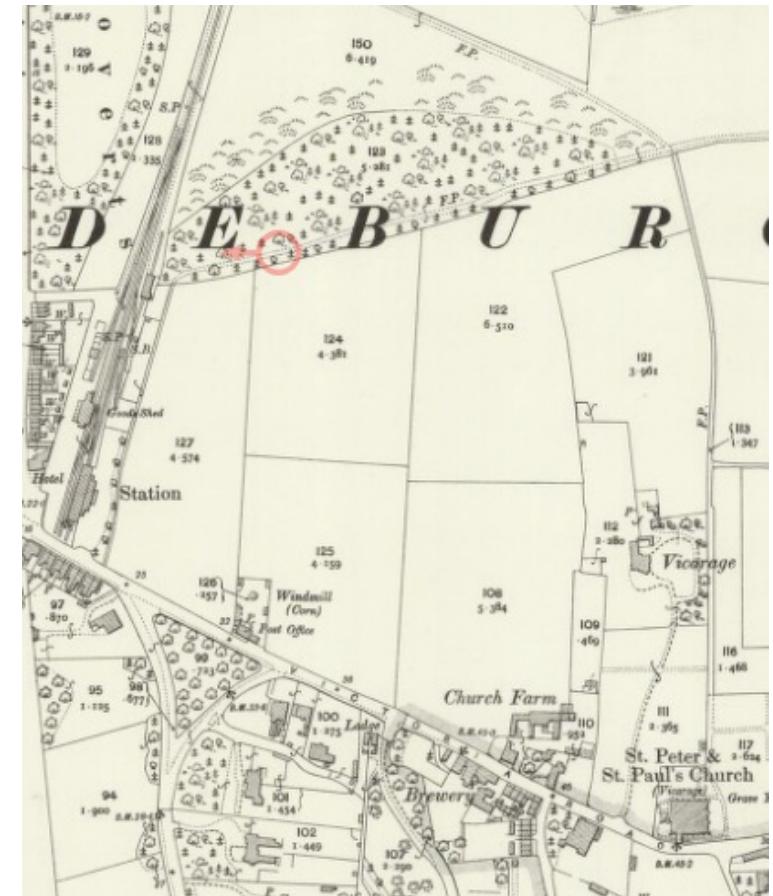
I am intrigued by the nature of the *Juvenile Treat* enjoyed amongst the trees.

Postcards for the Curious (ii)



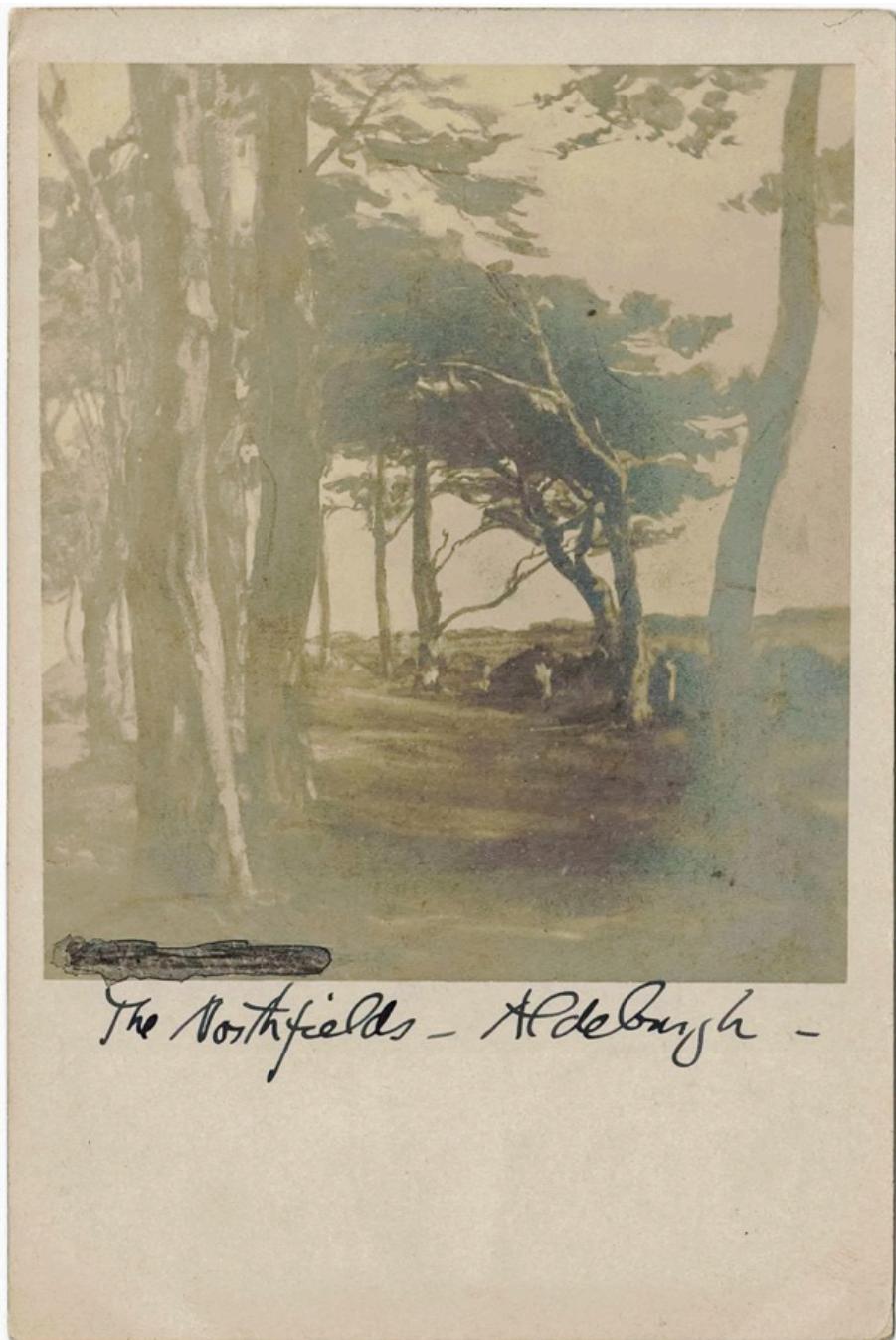
This second postcard (again, from around 1905) appears to be taken in the same area as the first, but looking in the opposite direction. Examined closely, it contains a clue to its precise location.

The building at the end of the path running up the left of the image—enlarged, left—is, I think, the engine shed of the station, identified as such on the 1927 O.S. 25 Inch map, right. So, the camera position and direction is roughly as shown on the 1904 map, top right.



Postcards for the Curious (iii)

Paxton's Dig Site?



This postcard—of a painting rather than a photograph—is unused, but its size and the format of the reverse suggest a similar date of c. 1905. (The erased text just reads *The Northfields*.)

Is this the view through the trees to Paxton's dig site? Alas, there's no way of knowing for sure. But it differs from the previous two cards, topographically, in ways which bring it very close to James's description of the site.

It lacks any formal fence, although it does have some form of barrier on the right. Beyond the trees, there is only a little scrubland and then open sky: no more trees, or buildings. The area off to the left looks lighter and more open (even allowing for the fading of the image). Most importantly, the short path ends in a mound, lighter than the surrounding earth and covered in small trees. (I've shaded it blue on the cropped image below.) As the Author* says,

Well, at the top of my little hill, a line of these firs strikes out and runs towards the sea, for there is a ridge that goes that way; and the ridge ends in a rather well-defined mound commanding the level fields of rough grass, and a little knot of fir trees crowns it.

It is easy to imagine a dark coat lying on the ground, for a moment at least.



* See *A Note About Nomenclature*.

Notes for the Curious (i)

A Note About Nomenclature *Author, Narrator, Friends*

The structure of “A Warning to the Curious” has the opening paragraphs in the voice of the author—not James himself, but an author conjured by James—but after these paragraphs the story is told in the voice of the man who has taken the author into his confidence. For the sake of clarity, the term “Narrator” is used to refer to this man, and “Author” for the person who introduces his story. The term “Friends” is used to refer to the Narrator and his friend, Henry Long.

A Warning to the Curious — On the origin of the title, and one possible aspect of the *Warning*, see *One such tale as this*.

Seaburgh — There need be no doubt that James’s Seaburgh is based on Aldeburgh, Suffolk, for he states it clearly in the preface to “The Collected Ghost Stories” (1931): *Places have been more prolific in suggestion: if anyone is curious about my local settings, let it be recorded that ... Seaburgh in A Warning to the Curious is Aldeburgh in Suffolk.*

when I was a child — James stayed in Aldeburgh when he was a child. His grandparents lived at Wyndham House, near the church, although his grandfather died before James was born. Here’s the marriage announcement of James’s uncle Charles Pope James and his aunt Madeline Emily Blathwayt, from *The Gentleman’s Magazine and Historical Review*, April, 1861. James’s grandfather, William Rhodes James, is already deceased.

At Leiston Church, Charles Pope James, esq., of Foulsham, Norfolk, third son of the late Wm. Rhodes James, esq., of Wyndham-house, Aldeburgh, to Madeline Emily, eldest dau. of the Rev. John Calvert Blathwayt, Incumbent of Leiston, Suffolk.

In fact, James’s grandfather died on 15th September, 1842, 20 years before James himself was born. Here’s a record of the death in *The Gentleman’s Magazine*, October, 1842:

In Dorset-sq. William Rhodes James, esq. of Aldeburgh, Suffolk, and of Haughton Tower, Jamaica.

The UCL “Legacies of British Slave-ownership” project has more on William James and Haughton Tower.

William married Caroline Pope in 1819. Here’s the announcement in *The New Monthly Magazine and Universal Register*, 1st June, 1819:

Notes for the Curious (ii)

when I was a child (cont.) —

**worth, Derbyshire.—At Hanwell-church,
William Rhodes James, esq. to Caroline,
second daughter of the late Richard Pope,
esq.—At St. George's, Hanover-square,**

Caroline was William's second wife, his first, Mary Kerr Brown, having died in 1815, about 5 years after their marriage. Caroline was, in 1866, one of the 1,499 signatories of the women's suffrage petition presented to John Stuart Mill MP, by Emily Davies and Elizabeth Garrett:

Dorothy James, Demigu

Mrs. Charles H. James, Merthyr Tydfil

Mrs. Rhodes James, Aldeburgh, Suffolk

Sarah James, St. James' Street, Newport, Isle of Wight

M. Tamm, Belgrave House, Richmond Road, N.E.

The house itself was built around 1790, and has been Grade II listed since 1950.

For James's holidays in Suffolk see also *I bicycled over*.

**the early chapters of *Great Expectations* — Ours
was the marsh country, down by the river ... ; ...
the dark flat wilderness beyond the churchyard,
intersected with dikes and mounds and gates, with
scattered cattle feeding on it, was the marshes ...**

peal of six bells — Currently, Aldeburgh has a set of 8 bells, not 6, in A♭, with the tenor weighing 11cwt 2qtrs 20lbs or 593kg.

However, this was not always the case. This entry in *The East Anglian*, October, 1863 suggests there were once only 5 bells:

**42. Aldeburg.—Five. Tenor G, 40 inches diameter, c. 13 cwt. 1, 3,
—“Anno Domini, 1622; Brend’s mark.” 2, 4,—“Lester and Pack, of
London, fecit 1764.” 5,—“Thomas Mears, London, fecit, 1764.” Clock
bell, 1812; no inscription.**

Raven's “The Church Bells of Suffolk” of 1890 increases the number to 6, with a new bell 1 and a recast bell 4. These are, presumably, the 6 heard by the Author.

3. ALDEBURGH SS. Peter and Paul. 6 Bells.

**1 Cast by John Warner and Son, London, 1885.
Rev. H. Thompson, B.A., Vicar.**

J. Harvey } Churchwardens.

N. F. Hele } Hung by G. Day and Son, Eye.

2 Lester and Pack of London fecit 1764.

3 Anno Domini 1622. W. I. B.

**4 Recast by John Warner and Sons, London, 1884.
Rev. H. Thompson, B.A., Vicar.**

J. Harvey } Churchwardens.

N. F. Hele } Hung by G. Day and Son, Eye.

5 Lester and Pack of London fecit 1764.

Jnº. Wynter and Samuel Aldrick Ch. Wardens.

**6 Thomas Mears of London fecit 1820.
Clock-bell. 1812.**

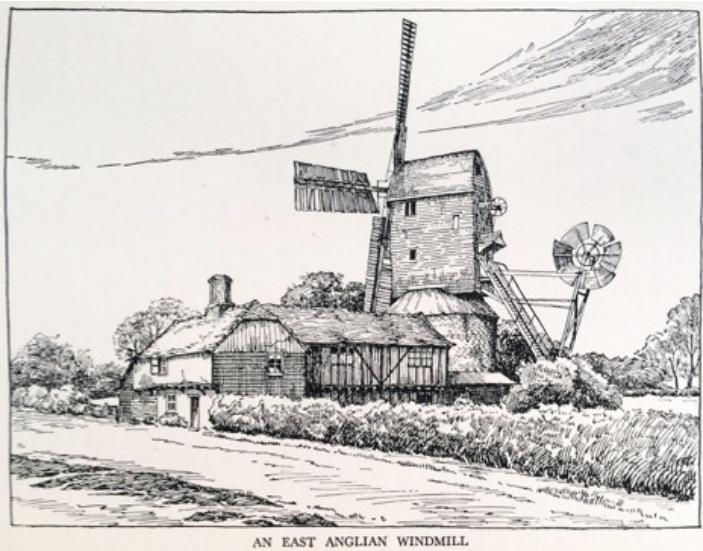
“Great bells iiiij. Sancts Bells j.” Return of 1553. Old 4 by J. Darbie.

In Davy's MS. 2 and 3, then 1 and 2, are reversed, and the bell recast in 1884 has the same inscription as the present 3rd. The old tenor was inscribed “Miles Graye made me 1653.” No mention of bells in certif. of iij Nov. 1547.

The bells of Aldeburgh were the subject of a noise nuisance complaint in 2008 which made the national press. The complaint was rejected by the District Council and, partly because of the case, the Government announced plans to protect the ringing of church bells in planning policy.

Notes for the Curious (iii)

windmill — James's "Suffolk and Norfolk" of 1930, has an East Anglian windmill as its first line illustration.



martello tower — Notes can be found against the main text of the story. (The tower can also be seen in J.M.W. Turner's painting "Aldborough, Suffolk", of c. 1826, which is in the collection of the Tate.)

a rather well-defined mound — The story opens with a few words from the Author and then quickly shifts to the voice of the Narrator. Technically, there is nothing to say that this mound, described by the Author in the early paragraphs, is the same mound as that described by Paxton and the Narrator. That is certainly the assumption, though, and the similarity of descriptions and apparent locations would seem to confirm that it is a perfectly reasonable assumption.

One such tale is this — A phrase which raises the question, where did James get the inspiration for the tale? One answer may come from the writing of Augustus Jessopp*. Jessopp and James worked together on "The Life and Miracles of St William of Norwich by Thomas Monmouth", published in 1896.

For the translation of the first three books Dr Jessopp is mainly responsible: and for that of the last four, Dr James. The footnotes, which are principally concerned with points of East Anglian history, and demanded a somewhat intimate acquaintance with Norfolk topography and family history, are the work of Dr Jessopp.

This publication serves to link Jessopp and James, but there are two earlier pieces of Jessopp's which hint more directly at his possible influence on "A Warning to the Curious".

* Thank you to Edward G. Pettit for making me aware of this, by his comment on the website of *A Podcast to the Curious*.

Notes for the Curious (iv)

One such tale is this (cont.) — In the January, 1887 edition of *The Nineteenth Century*, Jessopp has contributed an article of 19 densely-filled pages—he does not have James's way with prose—entitled, "Hill Digging and Magic". In it, Jessopp notes that he is *inclined to think that we in East Anglia have been at all times more addicted to the hoarding and hiding mania than elsewhere*. The hoards, for the most part, consist of coins, with some other valuables included on occasion. There are no ancient crowns, but there is the idea that more than mere earth protects things buried.

Jessopp recounts the 1340 case of Beatrix Cornwallis and Thelba de Creketon, who uncovered at least one hundred pounds, buried in Thetford. Beatrix died, supposedly of the overeating facilitated by the money. Reginald of Kylverston, and others, learnt of the find, and robbed the women, after which Reginald died and the other men were ruined. Jessopp continues:

when, I say, it came to this kind of thing, you must not hope to persuade any but the most feebly credulous that that was all a haphazard business, or that there were no occult powers enlisted in so awful and terrible a business as that. What ! are we going to be persuaded that only the nineteenth century has anything to tell us about spirit-rapping and bogies ?

There are gods above, there are fiends below, says Jessopp, and the deeper you go, the nearer you get to the homes of the dark and grisly beings who spoil and poison and blight and blast—the angry ones who only curse and hate, and work us pain and woe. All that is of the earth earthly belongs to them. Wilt thou hide thy treasure in the earth? Then it becomes the property of the

foul fiend. Didst thou trust it to him to keep? Then he will keep it.

'Never may I meddle with such treasure as one hath hidden away in the earth,' says Plato in the eleventh book of the *Laws*,

To illustrate the point, Jessopp provides several stories of *hill-digging*, including Lord Curzon's search for treasure in Norfolk and Suffolk, in 1521. The work began with the summoning of a spirit by a Mr Dowsing and several priests. The appearance of this spirit also occurred within a couple of weeks of Easter.

Of the digging itself, Jessopp notes:

It is unquestionable that when some great man was buried in his earthen tumulus, his arms, his golden torque, his brooches and what not, were, as a rule, buried with him. In some cases these would constitute a really valuable find. For ages these buried great men were protected from disturbance by the superstitious awe that haunted the resting-places of the dead. For generations they were left alone. Tradition well nigh perished with regard to them. But there came a day when a vague curiosity which makes diggers of us all and

the lust of gain in the spirit of Cain

began to work, and some one said, 'Let us search and see what lies there in yonder earthy pyramid!' Then they made a hole into the mysterious barrow that none had meddled with for a millennium,

In the April, 1887 edition of *The Nineteenth Century* there is a second article by Jessopp. This piece is shorter—only a little over two pages—and concerns the debunking of a story about the discovery of a hoard of Roman coins in Baconsthorpe, in 1878. Jessopp had received a letter from a woman claiming that the hoard was found as a consequence of an old man who possessed the power of *second-sight*. However, on

Notes for the Curious (v)

One such tale is this (cont.) — making enquiries to a Rev. J.R. Fielden, previously rector of Baconsthorpe, Jessopp discovered that the old man was known for his dreams, but that none of them made any sense when written down. It was true that the old man had attempted some excavations, but they were unsuccessful and not associated with the finding of the hoard. The point is, says Jessopp, that he cannot but think we have here a case of the growth of a mythus—in our own nineteenth century—and a very rapid growth too. But what a warning it suggests to those who are sometimes a little too prone to accept the evidence of witnesses easily enough to be found by the score, but rather apt to be discredited when subjected to cross-examination! As to the illustration which this story affords of the vitality of a belief in the existence of hidden treasure among our rustics in East Anglia, it is unnecessary that I should add a word.

It is, though, the title of this shorter piece of Jessopp's which has a particular bearing on James's story:

A WARNING TO THE S.P.R.

The S.P.R., to whom the warning is directed, is the Society for Psychical Research, founded in 1882. Whether or not one believes that Jessopp is correct in equating the S.P.R. to those who are too prone to accepting evidence without cross-examination, the warning itself makes sense. But it does lead to the question: if James carried

over (a variation of) the title, did he also intend that some element of its meaning remain? In other words, is part of James's warning intended for the curious reader: do not believe this story without further corroboration? But then, which story? The Author's? The Narrator's? Paxton's? All of them?

Jessopp died in 1914, at the age of 90. This cutting is from *The Illustrated News*, 21st February, 1914. The incident at Mannington Hall was the subject of an 1896 ghost story by Jessopp which also had an interesting title: "An Antiquary's Ghost Story".



Notes for the Curious (vi)

from a man — This *man*, the Narrator, seems to encompass some elements of James himself (as do the Author and Long, of course). Compare for example, the Narrator's comment on the *Rendlesham* crown with that of James in his "Suffolk and Norfolk". See also *some common acquaintance in town*.

golf in the spring — The Narrator had plenty of golf courses from which to choose, including Aldeburgh's own links, which date from 1884.



Above: *The Railway News*, 13th October, 1906.
Right: *Golf Illustrated*, 26th July, 1901.

James refers to golf in several other stories, with occasional disdain. In "The Mezzotint" (1904):

[Mr Williams] lighted the candles, for it was now dark, made the tea, and supplied the friend with whom he had been playing golf (for I believe the authorities of the University I write of indulge in that pursuit by way of relaxation); and tea was taken to the accompaniment of a discussion which golfing persons can imagine for themselves, but which the conscientious writer has no right to inflict upon any non-golfing persons.

and

Hall in Mr Williams's college was at seven. It need not be dwelt upon; the less so as he met there colleagues who had been playing golf during the afternoon, and words with which we have no concern were freely bandied across the table—merely golfing words, I would hasten to explain.

In "Oh, Whistle, and I'll Come to You, My Lad" (1904):

'Yes,' [Parkins] said; 'my friends have been making me take up golf this term, and I mean to go to the East Coast—in point of fact to Burnstow—I dare say you know it) for a week or ten days, to improve my game. I hope to get off to-morrow.'

In "The Rose Garden" (1911):

By four o'clock that afternoon [Mrs Anstruther] had dismissed her husband to his golf[...]

In "Mr Humphreys and His Inheritance" (1911):

[Humphreys] was studious and rather diffident, and had few out-of-door pursuits except golf and gardening.

"East Anglian Golf Links." AN INTERESTING RAILWAY PAMPHLET.

"**E**AST Anglian Golf Links" is a twenty-page pamphlet that has just been issued by the Great Eastern Railway Company. It deals with the many places reached by this line that possess courses, and contains invaluable information to every player of the game.

Notes for the Curious (vii)

Henry Long — Henry Long is a curious character. At times he seems undifferentiated from the Narrator, subsumed within the “we” of, *we used to take a sitting-room and be very happy, or but Long said, or I did—no matter which, or we both broke out into exclamations of surprise, or Henry Long felt, and I felt too, or ...*

What, then, does Long bring to the story? There are some ways in which his temperament differs from the Narrator’s and serves to drive the narrative. Long seems the more outspoken, and the more sensitive to his environment.

It is Long whose bluntness leads Paxton to show the crown to the Friends,

At last Long said: ‘You’ll forgive me, I hope, if I seem impertinent, but are you quite sure you’ve got it?’

and Long who elicits Paxton’s full story:

‘Come back to our room,’ Long said, ‘and tell us what the trouble is.’

Of the two Friends, it is Long who knows how to guide others in conversation:

I was beginning some fairly stupid comment, but Long caught my eye, and I stopped. Long said: ‘I think I do see, perhaps: but wouldn’t it be a relief—to tell us a little more clearly what the situation is?’

and

Long undertook to tackle the boots and propitiate him.

Long seems to have a more acute sense of the otherworldly than the Narrator. It is Long who notices the forgotten ‘coat’ after the reburial of the crown and, before that, Long has made his

feelings known to the group. They are only echoed by the Narrator:

As we neared it, Henry Long felt, and I felt too, that there were what I can only call dim presences waiting for us, as well as a far more actual one attending us.

But the most important fact about Long, the one which is repeat at the beginning and end of the story, is that he is dead. Is his death a requirement of the narrative? I don’t think so. There are two possible reasons for the Narrator’s sharing news of Long’s demise. First, Long’s death explains why the Narrator has not returned to Seaburgh and thus ensures the story is self-contained. Second, Long’s death removes the possibility of (lack of) corroboration from another witness. But Long’s death is not needed to deter the Narrator from visiting Seaburgh: “I used to go there a lot but then I followed a chap down the shoreline only to find him dead with his face crushed by a spectral figure” seems more than enough justification to cross somewhere off one’s holiday list. As for corroboration, presumably the martello tower caretaker is still alive and, besides, the Author shares the Narrator’s tale without any consideration of its reliability.

So what is to be made of Long, and his death? The text is certainly stronger for having the extra character: it ‘rounds out’ the story and stops the Narrator’s tale from being entirely “And then I... and then Paxton...” in nature. But, particularly given the nature of the story, it is hard to escape the sense that one is supposed to make something of the fact that Long is dead. The inevitable extrapolation is the linking of Long’s

Notes for the Curious (viii)

Henry Long (cont.) — death to that of Paxton.

The Narrator makes clear that both he and Long have been affected by their involvement with the crown. Even in the hotel, both Friends are unsure that it is the boots they have heard in the hall, and both had the fancy *that a shadow, or more than a shadow* passed before them. On the walk to rebury the crown, both feel *under observation*, as they *have never felt it at another time*. There are *dim presences* waiting for them at the dig site, and a *far more actual one* attending them. The Friends see the *long dark overcoat lying where the tunnel had been*, and then find *that dark thing was not to be seen*. Finally, at the battery, they hear the *breathless, lungless laugh*.

If we are to take these events as precursors to Long's death, then that death would seem to be associated with William Ager. But such an end for Long is not inevitable, as the story makes clear. Boots sees a figure on the night of the reburial—recalling the earlier actions of the train porter and guard—and there's no suggestion that he succumbs to a fate similar to Paxton's:

The boots [...] said: 'You didn't meet many people about, I s'pose, sir?' 'No, indeed, not a soul,' I said; at which I remember Paxton looked oddly at me. 'Only I thought I see someone turn up the station road after you gentlemen,' said the boots.

Paxton himself reassures the Friends that, even with their greater involvement, they can relax: '*You've nothing to trouble yourselves about*,' he said, '*but I'm not forgiven. [...]*' For Paxton, it is the touching of the crown which dooms him. When the Narrator wants to turn it over in his

hands, Paxton prevents him: '*Don't you touch it,*' he said, '*I'll do that.*'

If boots and the Narrator have survived, then the implication is that Long has done something different to warrant Ager's attentions. It cannot have been simply returning to Seaburgh, as boots never leaves. So, one reaches the conclusion that, for Long's death to be related to the story, Long must have touched the crown: he must have returned to the dig site, perhaps after enough time had passed to allow him to rationalize the events of that Easter.

Is that a reasonable possibility? One can believe that the Narrator is loyal to Long's memory, and does not want to tell a relative stranger that Long, too, attempted to steal the crown away. However, this interpretation makes one particular sentence seem rather callous. Of the reburial, the Narrator says: *We had not ourselves touched that bit of metal, and I have thought since that it was just as well*. If Long did return then this is essentially the Narrator saying, "Neither of us touched it back then. I'm even more grateful that I didn't since Long did and died." Harsh.

As for real-life inspirations for James's Henry Long, I suspect there are a number of his friends who would fit the bill. Indeed Long, like the Narrator and the Author, seems to encompass some aspects of James himself. I should say that I rather hope James had Augustus Jessopp* in mind for Long, as a way of remembering their collaboration, but it is a hope based on no evidence.

*see *One such tale is this*

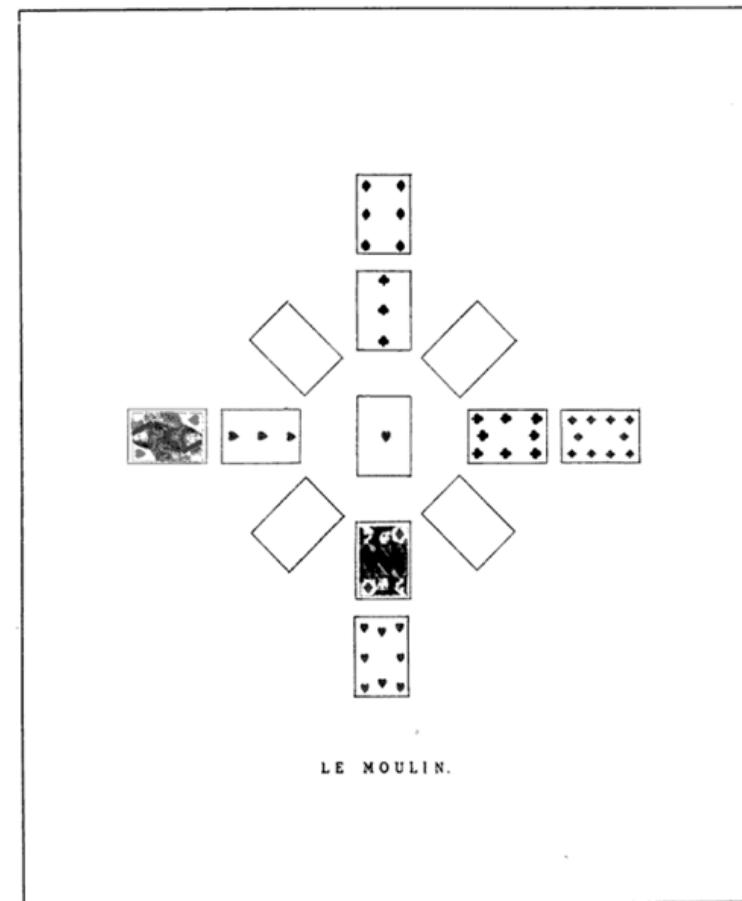
Notes for the Curious (ix)

April, 19 — In the manuscript this reads *1917* in James's hand. It's clear that the threat of invasion would be foremost in the mind of many during the period. I've suggested a date for the arrival of the Friends based on the *Paschal moon* and the fact that they have not seen Paxton before his arrival at the door of their rooms, despite his having been flitting about the place for over a week.

the only people in the hotel — Perhaps a little surprising, since the story is set at the time of the Easter bank holiday. On the other hand, see *as beautiful an April morning*.

a young man — This is of some relevance if one considers James's original date of 1917, during which time the Great War was still very much in progress. The *Times* for 7th April, 1917, for example, lists the names of over 1,200 men killed or wounded in action. One must wonder why Paxton is not engaged in the war effort in some way. (There are, of course, narratives to be spun around the fact that he *is* involved in the war effort, on one side or the other.)

Patience — A card game, usually played by a single player, the aim of which is to arrange the deck in a specific order. Lady Adelaide Cadogan's "Illustrated Games of Patience" (1874) gives 24 variations on the game, using one or two packs of cards, with names like *La Belle Lucie*, *The Besieged City*, *The British Constitution*, and *Le Moulin*.



Notes for the Curious (x)

some common acquaintance in town — With the exception of William Ager, the main characters in the story all seem to have existing connections in their lives. The Author has ‘obliged’ the Narrator, presumably as a result of some shared interest or employment. That sphere of interest extends to Henry Long, whom the Author knows *slightly*. And then there is this *common acquaintance* of the Friends and Paxton.

Given that there *was nobody* [Paxton] *knew in the place*, it must be assumed that *in town* refers to the same town in which Paxton had had a flat. Cambridge, perhaps, because of its connection with James? Or somewhere closer?

What’s curious is that Paxton knows who the Friends are, because of this acquaintance. But the conversations through which he gained that knowledge must have occurred in town, prior to the trip. What, then, was the context of those conversations? And what is the renown of the Friends, such that their names came up in that context?

Bonus image: “Aldborough [Aldeburgh], Suffolk”, drawn and engraved by J. Greig, from Frederic Shoberl’s “The Beauties of England and Wales” Vol. XIV, 1813. The view is looking south from the shoreline in the North Field. Note the windmill, church and martello tower (in the distance, on the left).

more than a week ago — If one takes the date of the reburial of the crown as Friday, 6th April, 1917—see *Paschal moon*—then Paxton arrived in Seaburgh on or before 31st March. Later, though, when recounting the consequences of his unearthing of the crown, Paxton says, ‘*And I was so happy a fortnight ago.*’ I take this to mean that he was happy before he came to Aldeburgh (as if he were referring to the time before he dug up the crown then he would have been suffering from Ager’s attention for over two weeks, which seems a long time to have survived). That puts Paxton’s arrival in Seaburgh between Saturday, 24th March and Wednesday, 31st March. (One may shift that latter date somewhat earlier, depending on the length of time allowed for Paxton’s visits to Froston church, the curiosity-shop and cottage, and his prospecting of the dig site.)



Notes for the Curious (xi)

I bicycled over — James, a cyclist himself, was no fan of the Suffolk roads, as shown by this letter to the *Bury and Norwich Post, and Suffolk Standard*, published on 17th January, 1899.

WEST SUFFOLK ROADS.

TO THE EDITOR.

SIR.—Ever since I have possessed a bicycle, and ridden it upon West Suffolk roads—that is to say, for some four years—I have vowed at short intervals that I would write and ask you and your readers what it is that makes these roads so incredibly, so intolerably, so detestably bad? In spring, summer, autumn, and winter the kind of badness varies; but badness of some sort is always present. I chose this time for addressing you on the subject because I am told that this is the proper season for mending roads; and, indeed, I have here and there noticed patches of flint or muddy gravel which would appear to indicate some pious aspiration towards improvement on the part of the responsible authority. Now, I do not think that it is merely my own fancy that leads me to suppose these roads of ours to be worse than others. I remember an article upon bicycling runs which appeared some years back, I think, in the *Strand Magazine*. It was written by Mr. Frank Shorland, a person of great repute among cyclists, and in enumerating various parts of England in which he advised his readers to make bicycling expeditions, he particularly excepted West Suffolk, because, he said, the roads there were “proverbially bad.” I add to this competent witness the unanimous testimony of all the people I have heard speak on the subject, and I am convinced that the state of our roads is far worse than it need be, and that some one—probably a good many people—must be gravely at fault.

Take an instance. Bicycle from Bury to Cambridge at any time of year you like. From Bury to Newmarket the road is either a mass of moist soil or a waste of flint and dust. From Newmarket to Cambridge it is as smooth and hard as could be wished, one of the best roads I knew. And for an instance of a road which is wholly in West Suffolk, and is wholly

bad, both at this season and in the height of summer, nobody can miss one if they will go two miles out of Bury in any direction.

Of course at this time of the year one does not expect to find the roads at their best, but one does not expect to be actually driven off the main track by its extensive badness, and then find, when one is doing violence to one's feelings, and the law of the land by riding on the path, that the path is covered with hedge-clippings. Something is wrong, and badly wrong. You, sir, if you will, can at least give publicity to the complaints of a large class, and perhaps, though I am rather despondent about this, the responsible persons will consider the possibility of thinking whether it would be advisable to begin consulting as to the practicability of some improvements.

I do not know—I do not think I very much wish to know—who the responsible persons may be. It seems as if they did not much like cyclists, and I am quite sure that cyclists do not at all like them. Yet, as fellow creatures, I have sufficient feeling for them to induce me to ask them seriously to consider their latter end. If it is true that, as I have been told, the two most eminent architects of the middle of this century (one French and the other English) are now engaged in gradually licking away with their own tongues life-size models of the cathedral they “restored,” what, I ask, is likely to be the fate of those who keep the roads of West Suffolk in their present conditions? Will they spend long ages in riding up and down three or four picked miles of the worst roads on a punctured bicycle, with men stationed behind the hedges on either side at uncertain intervals armed with rifles? Or will they merely be turned into rollers, still sentient, and compelled to reduce all the roads in their district to a state of absolute smoothness? They would do well to contemplate these probabilities.

One word in conclusion. In all questions of appointment of officials to be entrusted with the supervision of roads it ought now-a-days to be made an indispensable condition that the person appointed should be a cyclist. The roads ought to be kept up to the standard of the vehicle that requires the best quality of surface, not kept down to the requirements of that which is most easily satisfied.

I am sir, yours faithfully,
MONTAGUE RHODES JAMES, Litt. D.

Notes for the Curious (xii)

pretty porches with niches and shields — This note is concerned with an existing claim that Theberton church was the inspiration for the porch at Froston. See the notes by the main text for details of the porch, niches, shields and crowns to be found at St Mary's, Woolpit*.

Saint Peter's, Theberton lies some seven miles to the north of Aldeburgh, taking the B1122 through Aldringham and Leiston. I visited it because there's a suggestion that the spandrel to the upper right of the porch door—which contains a shield bearing the crossed swords of Saint Paul—holds the three crowns**. I confess that I couldn't find them when I was there, and only 'saw' them in my photograph, later.

Alas, it's fairly clear that these aren't crowns. The upper left spandrel—with the crossed keys of Saint Peter—places its arms on a background of wide fronds, and the right spandrel seems to be doing the same, but with longer, looping foliage. (There's also something odd about the triangle of background stone to the left of the swords of Saint Paul, as though the decoration—which would have continued the pattern below the

arms and confirmed it as foliage—has been damaged.) The deciding factor is that there are actually four loops of foliage beneath the arms, not three: one is very small and right at the bottom of the triangle.



Above: the porch of St Peter's, Theberton.

Below: a closer view of the 'crowns' beneath the shield; the exterior of the south aisle, rebuilt in 1846 by Sir Charles Doughty and worth visiting for the gargoyles and flintwork.



* Troston church, near Bury St Edmunds, is only one letter away from James's Froston. It has a suitable porch, with coats of arms but, as far as I can tell, no crowns. Also, I can't imagine James resisting a mention of the mediaeval graffiti and wall paintings for which it's known. Woolpit remains a better match for Paxton's account, even though I like the idea of James combining Troston and Friston into Froston.

** One might make the argument that it is the decoration above the niche which represents the crowns but, first, the design is more akin to 'stacked trefoils' and, second, if they are crowns they number at least four, if not five.

Notes for the Curious (xiii)

a photograph — The Kodak handheld box camera first went on sale in 1888, and the Kodak Brownie followed in 1900. Paxton is unlikely to have been lugging a large, heavy plate camera around with him: it's more likely he was carrying something similar to the Brownie. If he were a slightly keener photographer, he may have had a Vest Pocket Kodak—the VPK—available from 1911, which folded flat when not in use. The VPK was very popular with troops during the Great War, although the use of private cameras by soldiers was prohibited in March 1915.

Here's the *Athenæum*, 21st September, 1895, praising James's use of photography in his "A Descriptive Catalogue of the Manuscripts in the Fitzwilliam Museum":

appreciate it. In former days photographic facsimiles totally failed to preserve the gradations of light and shade and the true proportions of the colours, while coloured prints were almost always too gaudy and glaring; so that a student could obtain no idea of illuminative art except from the originals themselves. The great advance that has been made of late years in the art of photography now makes it possible to obtain from a facsimile a very fair idea of the character of an illumination, and it is

Per the *Cambridge Independent Press*, 11th July, 1902, James himself was part of a Reception Committee at Cambridge for the Photographic Convention of the United Kingdom.

It is, perhaps, a shame that neither the Friends nor Paxton—who may be forgiven in his frame of mind—thought to photograph the crown.

the three crowns — There is some suggestion that the three crowns are linked to the Wuffingas dynasty which ruled East Anglia—of which *Redwald* was a member—and, through them, to the three crowns on the arms of Sweden. However, there is more concrete evidence of the association of the crowns with St Edmund and the abbey dedicated to him at Bury. From Richard Taylor's "Index Monasticus" of 1821:

ST. EDMUND'S BURY, *Seynt Eadmundes Bipi, Eadmundes top. MITRED ABBEY.*



ARM.—According to Reymer, Fuller, Tanner, and Edmondson, this monastery bore for its arms, *azure*, three ducal crowns two and one *or*; which were the arms of King Edmund. In the manuscript life of this saint by John Lydgate the monk of Bury, written *temp. Hen. VI.*, is an illuminated representa-

tion of one of the banners which was said to have been borne

by King Edmund in his wars. It was the royal arms, after-

wards adopted by the monastery, the three crowns signify-

ing, according to the poet, "royal dignity, virginity, and

martyrdom."



Some time after the monks had assumed these arms, they introduced arrows transfixing the crowns in *sabre*, *argent*; intending thereby to commemorate the martyrdom of their patron. Mr. Blomefield traces this change no further back than the time of Henry VI, but Dr. Tan-

nner appears to have good grounds for

referring it to the reign of Richard II, or earlier. The church of Beccles*, which was under the patronage of Bury abbey, and

which is as old as the time of Richard II, is ornamented with

shields bearing a single crown pierced with arrows in *sabre*: according to

Notes for the Curious (xiv)

William Ager — The name is certainly known in Suffolk. N.I. Bowditch includes it in “Suffolk Surnames” (1861), in the chapter titled “Names from the Face of Nature”:

ACKERS, HOAKER, HOWAKER, DESERT, CLOSE (“a field”), **AGER** (“a field”); (**AGAR**’s Sermons were published in 1756 ;) **HOLMES, WOSTENHOLM, &c.** ;

And the derivation, from the “Encyclopaedia Perthsensis” (1807):

AGER, in Roman antiquity, a certain portion of land, allowed to each citizen. In the early days of the Roman state, the ager was only two jugera, amounting to $1\frac{1}{4}$ English acre. After the expulsion of the kings, seven jugera were allowed to a plebeian. See **AGRARIAN LAWS**. Ager is also used by writers of the middle age, for what we now call an acre.

One use of “ager” specific to Suffolk is mentioned in J.J. Raven’s 1895 “History of Suffolk”:

Kelerys, for keelers, or as the word is now pronounced killers, carries us to Shakespeare’s

‘Tu-whit, tu-whoo, a merry note
While greasy Joan doth keel the pot.’

A large tub, which would be best emptied by turning it upside down, or *keeling* it, would be a ‘grut owd killer.’ In such a vessel was a Suffolk farmer placed to cure him of the ‘lump ager’ (lumbago), when, the water being ‘hot enough to scald a hog,’ the sufferer ‘up and shuck his fist’ at his man, asking if he wished to ‘bile his owd master.’

Redwald — More often given as Rædwald in modern texts, Redwald was a king of East Anglia who reigned from c. 599 to c. 624.

Redwald has been connected to the ship burial excavated in 1939 at Sutton Hoo, about $4\frac{1}{2}$ miles from *Rendlesham*. However, there is no conclusive evidence that Sutton Hoo was created for the burial of Redwald, and it’s even possible that it is not a burial site at all, but merely a cenotaph. These are archaeological waters into which I do not wish to wade too deeply, but they do provide an excuse to include a picture of the Sutton Hoo helmet. (No sign of *intaglios and cameos*.)



More recently, excavations in the area around *Rendlesham* have recovered over 4,000 objects which suggest an exceptional, high-status Anglo-Saxon settlement which flourished in the time of Redwald. The archaeological survey has also identified a 23m-long structure that may have served as the hall of a royal palace.

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Rendlesham — Or possibly Mendlesham. A typo in 1722 makes this a bit complicated.

The first reference to a crown being found in Rendlesham appears—as far as I can tell, and others before me—in the 1722 edition of “*Britannia: or a Chorographical Description of Great Britain and Ireland, Together with Adjacent Islands*” by William Camden. The reference is actually in a note added by the editor of this edition, Edmund Gibson, which reads:

It is said, that in digging here, about thirty years since, there was found an ancient silver Crown, weighing about sixty ounces, which was thought to belong to Redwald, or some other King of the East-Angles; but it was sold, and melted down. (The surrounding paragraph can be read in the image on this page, for context.)

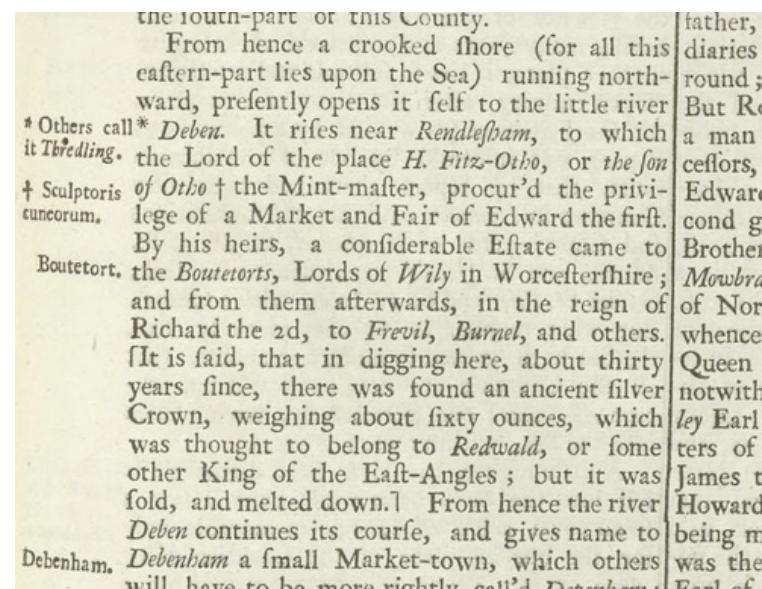
This is the reference which James uses in “*A Warning to the Curious*”, and he also refers to it in his guide “*Suffolk and Norfolk*”, published in 1930:

Where this hybrid worship went on is not recorded: it may have been at Rendlesham, in Suffolk (which was the site of a palace), for in 1687 a silver crown, reputed to have been Redwald's, was dug up, and (it is painful to relate) was melted down almost at once, so that we know nothing of its quality.

There are many other mentions of this tale. H. Munro Chadwick in “*The Sutton Hoo Ship-Burial. VIII. Who Was He?*” (*Antiquity*, March 1940) refers to Rendlesham as *the place where the silver crown, weighing 60 ounces, was dug up in 1687*, but gives no source for this claim. And in an article on “*Saxon Rendlesham*” in the *Proceedings of the Suffolk Institute of Archaeology and History* Volume XXIV, 1948,

R.L.S. Bruce-Mitford quotes Gibson's note of 1722 directly (but strangely insists that Gibson doesn't say the crown is made of silver).

There are many 19th century examples of the Rendlesham crown story*, but these, like Chadwick and Bruce-Mitford, all seem to share a single source, sometimes stated explicitly in their text: Gibson's note of 1722.



* Including, “Rendlesham House” in the *European Magazine and London Review* (1807); “Account of Rendlesham Church, Suffolk” in the *Gentleman's Magazine and Historical Chronicle* Volume XCI (1821); “Rendlesham” in John Wodderspoon's “*Historic Sites, and Other Remarkable Places, in the County of Suffolk*” (1839); and “Rendlesham Parish” in William White's *History, Gazetteer and Directory of Suffolk* (1844).

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Rendlesham (cont.) — But here's the problem: there's a typo in the 1722 edition of "Britannia", and the paragraph in which Gibson's note has been added does not refer to Rendlesham at all.

In every edition prior to 1722, this paragraph is about Mendlesham, not Rendlesham. This includes the first edition edited by Gibson, in 1695:

From hence a crooked shore (for all this Eastern part lies upon the Sea) running northward, presently opens it self to the little river Deben. It rises near Mendlesham, to which the Lord of the place ...

This is the case all the way back to the first editions by Camden. In 1607, in Latin; with an English translation by Philemon Holland:

Hinc incurvatum littus (haec enim plaga orientalis tota mari obversa est) in septentriones procurrens mox Debeno fluviolo se aperit, qui fontes habet iuxta Mendelsham ...

From hence the curving shore (for all this East part lieth full against the sea), shooting foorth Northward, straight-way openeth it selfe to the Deben, a riverlet having his spring head neere unto Mendelsham ...

And it's not just the text of these editions which confirm that "Rendlesham" is an error for "Mendlesham" in the 1722 edition. The paragraph is describing the course of the river Deben, shown left on an extract from a map from that 1722 edition. From the start of the river it lists Mendlesham, and then mentions Debenham, Letheringham, Wickham, and Ufford. Finally, it traces the river to Rendilisham (Rendlesham) where Redwald, King of the East-Angles commonly kept his Court. So, the rising point of the river, and the town at the start of the

paragraph, must be Mendlesham. (And this is further confirmed by its association with Fitz-Otho.)

This presents two options: first, Gibson's note is in the right place, and is meant to refer to Mendlesham; or, second, Gibson's note is in the wrong place, but it's there because he mistakenly thought the paragraph referred to Rendlesham, where he believed the crown to have been discovered.

There are plenty of subsequent references to the crown's being found in Mendlesham, too. Here's Samuel Tymms's "Camden's Britannia Epitomized and Continued" Volume III, c.1840:

Saxon Octarchy, *East Anglia*. Remains discovered at Mendlesham, about 1700, a silver crown weighing sixty ounces, supposed to have belonged to the Kings of East Anglia; and in the same parish, in 1758, a gold concave ring, with a Runic or Sclavonic inscription.



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Rendlesham (cont.) — Similarly, in the *Proceedings of the Suffolk Institute of Archaeology and History* Volume V, 1880:

Leaving Cotton, a pretty drive of three miles brought the party to MENDLESHAM, at which place Camden fixes a residence of the East Anglian Kings. Here, towards the close of the 17th century, a large silver ornament, supposed at the time to be a crown, but more probably a torque, was found; and subsequently a gold ring, inscribed with runic letters, was unearthed.

A third example comes from Thomas Dugdale's "Curiosities of Great Britain" Volume VIII, c.1850:

MENDLESHAM, a parish, and formerly a market-town, is situated in a deep miry soil, near the source of the river Deben. Towards the end of the seventeenth century, an ancient silver crown was dug up here, which weighed about sixty ounces, and supposed to have belonged to one of the kings of the East Angles.

These three examples—and there are others around the same time period, all with similar wording—suggest that: there is a second source for the story; and/or that at some point an author or authors spotted the 1722 typo and corrected it; and/or that there are some copies of the 1722 edition in which the typo had been corrected. The earliest "Mendlesham version" I can find is in a letter published in the *Gentleman's Magazine and Historical Chronicle* Volume LIV, 1784:

Ipswich, Nov. 23.

Give me leave to enclose you an exact drawing (See the Plate, fig. 7) of a gold concave ring, the inscription on which has puzzled many antiquaries. It was ploughed up in Mendlesham, in the county of Suffolk, in 1758, near the palace, by tradition, of one of the Kings of the Heptarchy: near which place, it is

said, a silver crown of considerable weight was long since found. You will oblige me much by giving it a place in your Magazine, in hope some of your learned reader may be able to decypher it. It is in value about eight shillings; the inscription is supposed to be in the Runic or Sclavonian language.

A. CONSTANT READER.

The ring mentioned in this letter is picked up by many of the other "Mendlesham" versions in print. Here's the drawing of it; the fig. 7:



The ownership of the crown provides other clues. In the 1722 note, Gibson writes that the crown was thought to belong to Redwald, or some other King of the East-Angles. (James assigns the crown to *Redwald* alone.) According to Camden/Gibson, Rendlesham is *Rendilis-ham*. i.e. as Bede interprets it, the home or mansion of *Rendilus*, where Redwald King of the East-Angles commonly kept his Court, so if the crown does belong to Redwald, one would think it more likely that it would be found in Rendlesham.

The Mendlesham versions often refer only to the kings of the East Angles, with no mention of Redwald. Some of them, however, echo phrases like this from "A Suffolk Garland" (1818)*:

Camden supposes Mendlesham to have been the residence of Dagobert, one of the Kings of the Heptarchy.

* An almost identical phrase appears in William White's *History, Gazetteer, and Directory of Suffolk* (1855): *Camden supposes Mendlesham to have been the residence of Dagobert, one of the East Anglian Kings.*

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Rendlesham (cont.) — This is a strange claim. I cannot find where Camden mentions Dagobert at all and Dagobert (I, II or III) was a Merovingian ruler and not a king of East Anglia or the Heptarchy. Camden does mention Sigeberht, who was an East Anglian king—probably a son or step-son of Redwald—but, again, there's no apparent connection with Mendlesham.

A review (of B. Granville Baker's "Blithe Waters: Sheaves Out of Suffolk") by H.A.H. in the *Proceedings of the Suffolk Institute of Archaeology and History* Volume XX, 1930, includes the line:

No proof that King Dagobert resided at Mendlesham is found in the legend that a silver Crown was dug up in that parish, as the tale evidently originated in a mis-spelling of Mendlesham for Rendlesham.

This quote seems to pull together all the pre-existing confusion of the stories arising since 1722: wrong king, wrong crown, wrong place. (And also the wrong reason, as the problem is a mis-spelling of Rendlesham for Mendlesham.)

It's hard to be definitive when there's only a single original source. I tend towards believing that any crown was found in Rendlesham. It seems likely that the change from "M" to "R" and the introduction of Gibson's note into the text are linked. Either the text was changed and Gibson inserted his note where it seemed to be associated with Rendlesham on a cursory reading; or Gibson inserted his note and he, or another editor, picked up on the Redwald reference and changed the text to associate the note with Rendlesham.

The evidence in favour of Mendlesham seems slimmer. The only association of the crown with the ring is in a single letter, and predicated on the crown's being found in Mendlesham, so offering no corroboration. Dagobert is a strange addition to the story.

This is an argument that has been going on for a long time. Here's a scan of John Kirby's "The Suffolk Traveller: or, A Journey through Suffolk" from 1735. Around 250 years ago, a certain Dr Tanner is arguing with the author or one of author's sons. Kirby, it seems, sticks with the Mendlesham story, and adds another layer: a piece of money was found at Rendlesham.

MENDLESHAM, a Town situate in a dirty Place, to which the Lord of it, Hugh Fitz Ocho, or the Son of Otho the Mint Master, procured the Privilege of a Market, and Fair of King Edward I. The Market is Weekly on Tuesdays, and a very mean one it is. The Fair is Yearly on the 21st of September.

In this Age some Persons in digging here, found ^{I think} an Antient Silver Crown weighing about 60 Ounces, ^{This way} which is thought to have belonged to Redwald, or ^{some} ~~some~~ other King of the East Angles. ~~Mendlesham - not here~~ PURSUING ^{but square,}

H²
After?
That was a piece of money, according to this author, not a Crown.

It's only fair to finish by pointing out that James himself knew about the muddle, though clearly fell on the side of Rendlesham. Here he writes in "Suffolk and Norfolk":

Mendlesham has a handsome church, with good flint-work; but I doubt if I should mention it, were it not that Camden or his editors have mixed it up with Rendlesham, and said that King Redwald's crown, weighing 60 oz., was found in both places.

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a Saxon royal palace — This *might* be Dunwich, which was once the capital of the Kings of East Anglia, until badly effected by coastal erosion. But there are clues in the text which suggest otherwise.

Paxton is talking to the rector about the three crowns. The crown found at Rendlesham has been described, and then the rector continues:

“... Then on the south you don’t want me to tell you where there was a Saxon royal palace which is now under the sea, eh? Well, there was the second crown, I take it. And up beyond these two, they say, lies the third.”

The implication is that the palace is south of Rendlesham and/or Froston (that is, Friston) where the conversation is taking place.

Furthermore, the third crown, the one Paxton seeks, is up—i.e. north—beyond both of those. Dunwich, however, is north of Rendlesham, Aldeburgh and Friston, so it makes no sense to refer to it as “on the south”. And for the third crown to be up beyond Dunwich, it would be miles away from Aldeburgh. (The alternative is that the third crown is on higher ground, but Rendlesham is higher than any of the other sites, at over 70ft above sea level.) However, the third crown must also be in Suffolk, as it is one of the crowns of the kings of East Anglia.

A likely candidate for James’s *Saxon royal palace* is Walton Castle, a Saxon shore fort which stood until the 17th century in what is now Felixstowe. This isn’t without problems, though. For a start, Saxon shore forts were constructed by the Romans, and are named after their location,

not their builders. So the questions become: was Walton Castle later occupied by the Anglo-Saxons, and did James know that? Unsurprisingly, there’s no easy answer.

As mention in the note on *Rendlesham*, Sigebert followed *Redwald* as king after the assassination of Redwald’s son Eorpwald. He helped St Felix to establish an episcopal see at a place which Bede, in his “Historia ecclesiastica gentis Anglorum” called Dommoc. The debate about the location of Dommoc has been running for 700 years, and the two main candidates are—surprise!—Dunwich and the area around Walton Castle. The matter is not helped by the loss of both sites to the sea.

James, on the other hand, had no doubts. In his “Suffolk and Norfolk” he wrote:

Felix was the first Bishop of East Anglia, his See being fixed at a place which Bede calls Donmoc [sic: Bede spelled it several different ways]: we may safely identify it with Dunwich.

Were it not for the rector’s description of the location in the text of the story, I would agree that one of the crowns was lost at Dunwich. However, I can’t make that fit the narrative and, in “A Warning to the Curious” in particular, James has clearly built his tale around the true landscape of East Anglia. Nor was James unfamiliar with Felixstowe. In his preface to “The Collected Ghost Stories” (1931), before he identifies Seaburgh with Aldeburgh, he states that: *in Oh, Whistle, and I’ll come to you, I had Felixstowe in mind.*

Much like James’s church at Froston is a portmanteau of Friston church’s name and

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a Saxon royal palace (cont.) — location, together with architectural elements from Woolpit or some other church or churches, I suspect that Walton Castle drove the location of James's lost crown, whilst other sites—Dunwich, and possibly Reculver in Kent (once thought to be home to the palace of King Æthelberht)—provided the additional historical requirements.



From south to north, the red circles show Walton Castle *on the south*, Rendlesham, and, *up beyond those two*, Paxton's dig site at Aldeburgh. The blue circle is Friston. (Dunwich is on the coast, some 11 miles north of Aldeburgh.)

the war of 1870 & the South African War — The Franco-Prussian War, 16th July, 1870 to 28th January, 1871, and the Second Boer War, 11th October, 1899 to 31st May, 1902. Neither of these conflicts seem to have held a high risk of an invasion of the British Isles, which might suggest that the crowns played a wider role in underpinning British military and geopolitical interests abroad. Or perhaps just that the Agers were very, very cautious.

he was a consumptive — That is, he suffered from tuberculosis. The name 'consumption' was given to the disease due to the associated weight loss. The condition itself is a communicable disease, and the assertion here is that Agar's extended exposure to the damp night air of Suffolk exacerbated his symptoms and expedited his death.

19 — In the manuscript this reads 1916. The rector's describing William as having *only died fairly recently*, suggests the latter half of the year is perhaps more likely. Ager was 28 when he died, which means he was born in 1887 or 1888.

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poem — This form of poem was not unusual in the front of books. The dates suggest the year when the book passed from the ownership of one Ager to the next, presumably on the death of the existing owner.

Amongst many examples, here's F.M.M. writing on book rhymes in *Notes and Queries*, 26th February, 1853:

I find that the following formula is much used among the poor in country villages :

**"John Stiles is my name,
England is my nation,
— is my dwelling-place,
But Christ is my salvation.
And when I'm dead and in the grave,
And all my bones are rotten ;
This when you see, remember me,
Though I am long forgotten."**

And in "Supplemental Notes on Book-Plate Mottoes, and Inscriptions" by Walter Hamilton, in the *Book-Plate Collector's Miscellany* (1890-91):

**"Charley Roberts is my name,
England is my nation.
London is my dwelling place
And Christ is my salvation.
When I am dead and in my grave
And all my bones are rotten
Take up this book and read my name
When I am quite forgotten.**

Dickens uses variations on the start of the poem several times. In "Dombey and Son" (1848):
'Cap'en Cuttle is my name, and England is my nation, this here is my dwelling-place, and blessed be creation—Job,' said the Captain, as an index to his authority.

In "Dr Marigold's Prescription" (1865):
"John Robins is my name," he said, "and England is my nation, Woodbury is my dwelling-place, and Christ is my salvation"

In "The Mystery of Edwin Drood" (1870):
*"Mister Sapsea is his name,
England is his nation,
Cloisterham's his dwelling-place,
Aukshneer's his occupation."*

It can also be seen in Flora Thompson's "Lark Rise to Candleford" (1945):

Some of the imported books had their original owner's book-plate, or an inscription in faded copper-plate handwriting inside the covers, while the family ones, in a ruder hand, would proclaim: [...]

*George Welby is my name,
England is my nation,
Lark Rise is my dwelling place
And Christ is my salvation.*

*When I am dead and in my grave
And all my bones are rotten,
Take this book and think of me
And mind I'm not forgotten.*

In the *Mirror of Literature, Amusement, and Instruction*, 29th October, 1825, M.M. gives an early example of the poem used as an epitaph in a Herefordshire churchyard:

poem (cont.) —

4. IN MICHAELCHURCH.
John Prosser is my name, and England
is my nation,
Bowchurch* is my dwelling-place, and
Christ is my salvation ;
Now I am dead, and in my grave, and all
my bones are rotten,
As you pass by remember me, when I
am quite forgotten.

*A village about four miles from Michaelchurch.

William, 19 — In the manuscript this reads 1910. The implication is that the elder William died in 1910 and his son inherited the book.

there I was — The location of *there* is the subject of *A Treasure Map for the Curious*. Exactly when Paxton was there—which is the same day as he visits the curiosity-shop and cottage—is dependent on how long one allows for his prospecting of the site, and the length of time between his retrieval of the crown and his meeting the Friends. The prospecting probably occurred over more than one day, as Paxton returns to his hotel room on several occasions, to find the prayer book *open at the fly-leaf where the names are, and one of [his] razors across it to keep it open*. See also *I made my tunnel*.

the down country — In this context, the chalk uplands of southern and south-eastern England. (Not to be confused with the usage in America and other countries, where “down-country” refers to the flat part of a country, the part on the plains.)

For a well-observed, if tongue-in-cheek description of “Downshire”, see “All in the Downs”, in *All the Year Round*, 9th June, 1860 (edited by Charles Dickens):

But can I leave the Down country, with its quivering blue horizon, out of which the eye gradually evolves long funeral processions of firs; little toy farm-houses, so small in the distance that they are no bigger than a giant could carry on the palm of his hand (I mean a small giant, because, of course, a great giant like Brandyborax or Aldeboron has a palm to his hand as big as Salisbury Plain); grey spires, sharp and small as darning-needles; black specks of furze and bramble; and lesser specks, where glossy crows feed, or vibrate their wings—must I, I say, leave the high downs without describing the little stone tea-caddy of a Downshire church, built by that worthy but noseless man whose battered mummy of an effigy still lies, in a patient but ill-used way, on a flat tomb in the chancel?

I like the simple church, with the dial over the porch, erased by time. It is old as the Normans, I should think, that square tower, so massy and low, firm as the rock, so phalanxed and solid in its imperturbable immovability. The sunshine wanders over it, the rain beats it, the wind torments it, but it remains as it has stood for centuries. The green waves of that dead sea around the yew-tree, rise and fall, century after century, but the tree is fixed as the good ship’s mast: and daily casts its moving shadow into the chancel to flicker about the latticing of sun and shade, as with the movement of passing wings.

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I made my tunnel — The time at which Paxton digs is set by his need for the cover of darkness, and his leaving the site just before sunrise. Fixing an approximate date depends on the length of time between the dig and Paxton's meeting the Friends. I figure Paxton could suffer the attentions of Ager for a couple of days before he would be so distraught—and so certain that he is not imagining it—that he would approach other guests and tell them his story. That he has survived those days is, I think, justified by his observation that Ager is *light and weak*. See *he was dead*.

boots — The boot boy or *boots* was a servant with responsibility for taking care of the footwear of hotel guests, ensuring they were polished overnight and returned in time for the owner to wear them again when leaving the room in the morning. Boot boys were often required to perform other menial tasks around the place, too.

antique intaglios and cameos — Both are carved jewels or semi-precious stones. Intaglios are carved into the surface. Cameos stand proud of the surface, with excess material having been carved away. As far as I'm aware the Anglo-Saxon's weren't big on making their own intaglios and cameos. They did reuse Roman jewels in some of their smaller pieces, however, and this is probably why James specifies *antique*. In crowns, though? Not so much.

Here's a 6th century gold filigree finger-ring set with a 1st to early-5th century Roman intaglio gem depicting a figure of Bonus Eventus, discovered during the excavation of a ship burial at Snape, about 6 miles from *Rendlesham*, in 1862:



Image © Trustees of the British Museum.

Jewel House at the Tower — That is, the Jewel House at the Tower of London, where the Crown Jewels are kept. These date from the time of Charles II onwards. The original medieval pieces, were—like the *Rendlesham* crown—the subject of a melting-down: in their case it occurred in 1649, the year in which Charles I was beheaded at the start of the interregnum.

Notes for the Curious (xxiv)

he has some power over your eyes — There's a thesis to be written on the Victorian ideas of sight in relation to sensitivity to spirits and what that means when considering related literature. I'm not going to write it. (It's probably already been written, anyway.) But one obvious starting point is the work of the another James: Henry. His "The Turn of the Screw", first serialized in *Collier's Weekly* in 1898. Here, a governess is assailed by sightings of Miss Jessel and Peter Quint, two deceased employees of the household. The governess fears for the safety of her charges—a protective drive which leads to fatal consequences—but the real or imagined nature of the apparitions is never made clear to the reader. Nor is it clear whether, within the story, any but the governess can see them. Yet, as Peter Beidler points out in his introduction to the excellent Coffeetown Press edition (2010), which presents the original *Collier's Weekly* version:

... because [at the end of the nineteenth century it was considered that] some people had the ability to see ghosts while others did not, it would not have been unusual that only the governess for sure sees the ghosts of Quint and Jessel, and her seeing them would not have been evidence of madness.

Still, the ambiguity between madness and "sensitivity" is still there. Beidler (*op. cit.*) points out that H. James changes the line "*By writing to him that I have the honor to inform him that they [his children] see the dead come back?*" to "*By writing to him that his house is poisoned and his little nephew and niece mad?*" for the New York edition—the more often-seen text—of "The Turn of the Screw".

Montague James makes a subtle shift in "A Warning to the Curious": it is not the innate sensitivity of the individual—or, at least, not entirely—which dictates his or her ability to see Ager. Rather, it is Ager's spirit which makes the decision, which has *some power*.

There is still room to make the argument that sensitivity plays its part. Boots, the station porter and train guard are all aware of *something* concrete enough to be seen, or warrant the holding open of a carriage door. Even the *people going to work* as Paxton returns from the dig site look behind him, very strangely. None of these individuals are involved with the crown, so there seems no reason for Ager to exert his power over their eyes. (See, also, **Henry Long**.)

nearing half-past ten — The Friends meet Paxton after dinner: around 8pm would give them just over a couple of hours to talk, see the crown and hear Paxton's story. See, also, **well before twelve**.

Notes for the Curious (xxv)

Paschal moon — The calendric details of the Paschal moon are ferociously detailed, but some summary may be made. The lunar month in which Easter falls is the Paschal Moon. It never begins earlier than 8th March, or later than 5th April. From the starting day of the lunar month it takes 14 days, inclusive, to reach the full moon—called the Paschal Term—which therefore falls between 21st March and 18th April. Easter is on the first Sunday after the Paschal Term. (If the Paschal Term is itself a Sunday, then Easter's a week later, not that day.)

The Narrator says *It was in April, 19*—and describes the day after the reburial as *as beautiful an April morning as you could desire*. Since the night of the reburial has a full Paschal moon we can narrow down the date of the reburial to between 31st March and 18th April, inclusive.

If we accept James's original intention to set the story in 1917, then we have exact dates. Easter fell on Sunday, 8th April. The Paschal Term—the Narrator's full moon—was technically at 1.50pm on Saturday, 7th April. It's feasible that the reburial took place on the Saturday night, but I think that's unlikely as it would mean that the Friends' plans for Easter Sunday involved a lie-in and a round of golf. It seems more probable that the reburial occurred on Friday, 6th April, 1917.

some lying there — That is, in the graves. Thus, *on their side* is the Narrator's joke: Ager is both in league with them, and also on their side of life and death, *so to say*.

as Christian did through that Valley — A reference to John Bunyan's "The Pilgrim's Progress", 1678. In it, Christian passes through two valleys, the Valley of Humiliation and the Valley of the Shadow of Death. The circumstances and description of the Friends' and Paxton's journey lend themselves to Christian's path through the Valley of the Shadow of Death: *The path-way was here also exceeding narrow, and therefore good Christian was the more put to it; for when he sought in the dark to shun the ditch on the one hand, he was ready to tip over into the mire on the other; also when he sought to escape the mire, without great carefulness he would be ready to fall into the ditch.*



Christian and assorted fiends in the Valley of the Shadow of Death; from the 1692 edition of Bunyan's "The Pilgrim's Progress".

Notes for the Curious (xxvi)

well before twelve — This is quite early, given that the Friends and Paxton don't leave the hotel until *nearing half-past ten*. In 75 minutes, the trio leave the hotel, walk $\frac{1}{4}$ mile to the church, and then $\frac{1}{2}$ mile to the dig site where Paxton alone digs a hole deep enough that *the greater part of his body was out of sight*, replaces the crown, fills the hole, and makes the place *look undisturbed*, before all three return along the same route. The total walk must have taken about 35 minutes. So, when the Narrator says that he *never saw anything like the dash with which [Paxton] flung himself at a particular spot in the side of the mound, and tore at it*, he's not exaggerating.

Sweden — It's not obvious why Paxton plans to decamp to Sweden. Perhaps he had, in fact, long-intended to acquire the crown: a moonlit excavation and off to Sweden before the authorities caught on. Also, if the story *is* set in 1917, then 'running' to neutral Sweden has an additional reading: see *a young man*.

James himself visited Sweden. From his "Eton and King's Recollections, Mostly Trivial 1875-1925" (1926):

In 1893 James McBryde came from Shrewsbury to King's [...] The] expeditions I made in his company to Denmark and Sweden a few years later were the most blissful of all that I ever had.

James's *blissful* experience was not carried across into his story "Count Magnus" in which the protagonist, Wraxall, flees from Sweden in terror. Not that his flight does him much good.

as beautiful an April morning — The weather in April 1917, across the UK, was terrible. Aldeburgh seems to have avoided the worst of it: the UK Met Office gives measurements from nearby Lowestoft: a monthly low of 1.4°C and high of 7.8°C, with 67mm of rainfall. "The Times" reported that the *railway companies ran no special or duplicate trains in connexion with the spring holiday [...] Consequently hundreds of holiday-makers were prevented from leaving the city*.

Cuttings from April editions of the Hull *Daily Mail*, the *Times* and the *Western Times*:



Notes for the Curious (xxvii)

to the links — See *golf in the spring*.

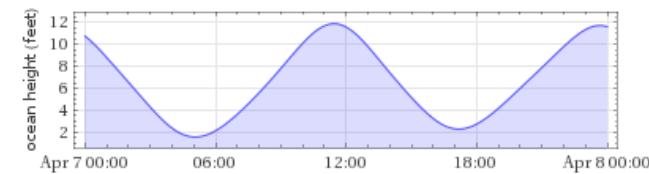
heard you a-calling — The servant's explanation to the Friends—‘*Why, I thought you gentlemen was gone out already, and so did the other gentleman. He heard you a-calling from the path there, and run out in a hurry [...]*’—leaves two possibilities. Either Paxton has been fooled into following *something* in a mistaken belief that it is the Friends, or he has told that story to the servant, having no desire to tell her the (unbelievable) truth: that he knows precisely what awaits him but has chosen to face his inevitable fate sooner rather than later.

the tide being now out —

Input interpretation:

tides	Aldeburgh, Suffolk	Saturday, April 7, 1917
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Extrapolated result:



Saturday, 7 April 1917		
low tide	5:03 am GMT	+ 1.6 feet
high tide	11:26 am GMT	+ 11.9 feet
low tide	5:10 pm GMT	+ 2.3 feet
high tide	11:39 pm GMT	+ 11.7 feet

(computed using 20 years of historical data, not taking into account weather, etc. heights relative to a particular point at the tide station)

Averages:

range of tide (MN)	9.26 feet
average high tide (MHW)	+ 11.7 feet
average of high and low tides (MTL)	+ 6.8 feet
average low tide (MLW)	+ 2.44 feet

(all-time averages relative to a reference point at the measurement station)

Tide measurement station:

station	Felixstowe
coordinates	51.96° North 1.349° East
relative position	17.1 mi SW (from center of Aldeburgh)

Notes for the Curious (xxviii)

a lungless laugh — I came across one similar instance of *lungless*, in part of a ‘humorous’ verse, “Sir Billy Boreas”, in the *Renfrewshire Annual* of 1842. The “Dame” is telling a story, and the ghost has just spoken to a woman called Agatha.

“Such a voice!” said the Dame, “Oh no wonder, my
That Agatha now fell to earth in her fears!— [dears,
So hollow and lungless—so dead and unsaintish!]
(Here she paused to allow those who lik’d to grow
faintish,)

I think we can safely say that this was not James’s inspiration.

he was dead — It is interesting that, after so many terrifying but physically harmless interventions by Ager—whom we are to assume is the owner of feet which *showed more bones than flesh* and a *lungless laugh*—Paxton is now found dead. The circumstances of his death are somewhat unclear.

Paxton’s injuries—*His mouth was full of sand and stones, and his teeth and jaws were broken to bits.*—suggest some sort of impact, as after a fall. In support of this interpretation, Paxton is found at *the bottom* of a wall: the Friends are looking down at him, having themselves clambered to the top of the battery before bending over that same wall to search for Paxton. Furthermore, after *scrambling down* to reach the body, the Friends met the caretaker of the martello tower, who tells them that he *had seen Paxton fall*.

And yet, the *lungless laugh* comes from *below*, when the Friends are already on top of the battery. The Narrator is clear that Paxton’s *tracks showed that he had run along the side of the battery* and that he had *dashed straight into the open arms of someone who was waiting there*. The Narrator even confirms Paxton’s route by tracing out *how he had come, on the narrow fringe of sand under the battery wall*.

It’s quite hard to visualize the scene, as the battery no longer exists, and the seaward side of the martello tower is much changed. The circular wall which can be seen on the right in the photograph with the text, used to continue around the entire tower, with a bank from its top running away from the tower, to the ground. This is what the caretaker runs down. However, I am not aware of any images of the battery itself.

If Paxton had fallen then it would be possible that it occurred purely as a consequence of fright or surprise, but it seems that we must take the Narrator’s description of the cause of death at face value, and assume that William Ager—and that it *is* Ager at all is also an assumption—had finally summoned the strength he needed to finish off his quarry. One must wonder if Paxton could have done anything different in order to avoid his fate, once he had taken the crown.*

* This is echoed in—spoiler alert—Hideo Nakata’s film “Ringu”, based on Kōji Suzuki’s novel. There, too, the spirit Sadako Yamamura is not satisfied by an effort to placate her and continues to take her revenge, but at least there *is* a way to avoid the ‘curse’ when it comes to Sadako. (And it’s a way reminiscent of James’s “Casting the Runes”).

Notes for the Curious (xxix)

living in the district — Since it would be easy enough to confirm that Aldeburgh was once home to at least two William Algers, the emphasis here must be on *living*.

London Mercury, August 1925 — “A Warning to the Curious” first appeared in this monthly literary journal, which ran from 1919 to 1939 and, until 1934, was under the editorship of J.C. Squire. The story was subsequently included in James’s final collection of ghost stories, “A Warning to the Curious and Other Ghost Stories”, published by Edward Arnold, also in 1925.

No Thoroughfare — The basic meaning is clear enough in the text, and the metaphor was already in use before James was writing: the Narrator has been unable to find further information about Paxton, meeting a dead end in his investigations.

More subtly, a *No Thoroughfare** does not necessarily indicate a dead end, but may only convey that a route is closed to the public and, in that sense, there may be something slightly more sinister here: there are no direct connections of Paxton to question, and such indirect routes as exist have chosen to exclude themselves from public scrutiny.

* *No Thoroughfare* is also the title of a play and associated novel, both written by Charles Dickens and Wilkie Collins in 1867. A reference to Dickens’s “Great Expectations” opens “A Warning to the Curious”, so this would be a nice mirroring in the final paragraph. I strongly suspect, however, that this is just a coincidence.

A Note on Copyright

In summary: please don’t steal my stuff and reuse it without credit. I’m not saying it’s cursed, but I’m not not-saying it, either.

All the modern photographs in this document—those from Aldeburgh and Friston in the main text, and those of Theberton in the notes—were taken by me. Please don’t reuse them outside this document.

As for the document itself, do, please, share it, but do not change the contents in any way and never, ever, charge for it. Please link to the original at sarahkmarr.com/sarahkmarr_awtcc.pdf, so that recipients always get the latest version. If you need to reference it anywhere, I’d go with, *Sarah K. Marr, “An Annotated Warning to the Curious” (2018)* with whatever formatting and additional information your audience demands.

Curious Companions

References and Acknowledgements

I must start by repeating my apology for the quality of the references in this document. In my defence, I can only argue that this isn't an academic work and that there should be enough information to find any source with a simple online search. Still, there remains a certain guilt.

I don't consider myself an M.R. James scholar, but there are many who are, and their work has been immensely helpful in preparing this guide. Any mistakes, however, are mine, needless to say.

The M.R. James Podcast, *A Podcast to the Curious*, can be subscribed to through all the usual channels, and found at its home on the web at mrjamespodcast.com. Episodes 30 and 31 are dedicated to "A Warning to the Curious".

Several relevant articles have appeared in the *Ghosts and Scholars* newsletter. The story's manuscript is discussed in "The Manuscript of 'A Warning to the Curious'" by Rosemary Pardoe, available at www.users.globalnet.co.uk/~pardos/ArchiveWarningms.html. It is the source of the dates I use here. Darroll Pardoe visited Aldeburgh in 1993, and his write-up is available at www.users.globalnet.co.uk/~pardos/ArchiveSeaburgh.html. A more recent visit was made by Tom Baynham. I haven't been able to read his "A Return to Seaburgh"—which is in the newsletter, but not available online—but he talks about his visit on Episode 30 of *A Podcast to the Curious*.

On churches, Simon Knott's suffolkchurches.co.uk was invaluable as was, on trains, Nick Catford's disused-stations.org.uk. If you'd like to see a film of a train journey which includes the stretch between Thorpeness Halt and Aldeburgh, there's one from 1958 at [youtube.com/watch?v=hUA-LEuo_XI](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hUA-LEuo_XI), with the added bonus that the accompanying music is "Slow Train" by Flanders and Swann*.

I checked the text of the story itself against the excellent "Collected Ghost Stories" from OUP, edited and annotated by Darryl Jones, 2011. My text differs in two points of punctuation where I've preferred an earlier edition. I'm grateful that Ash-Tree Press have made their "A Pleasing Terror" available as an e-book (edited by Christopher and Barbara Roden, 2012): their notes on "A Warning to the Curious" include many details of the manuscript version.

Whereas I've written here about the text, there are some fine articles on the BBC adaptation of 1972, which was filmed in Norfolk. Adam Scovell considers those locations, and revisits some sites in Aldeburgh, at bfi.org.uk/news-opinion/news-bfi/features/warning-curious-locations-ghost-story-for-christmas.

And, apart from the afterword, that's it. I'm off to work on my script for a new film adaptation. Any takers?

* 'Fun' additional fact: my copy of James's "Collected Ghost Stories" used to belong to Michael Flanders. It's signed in the front with "Michael Flanders' second copy!" which suggests his first was permanently 'borrowed' by someone.

A Curious Find

Afterword

I visited the dig site on my last day in Aldeburgh, walking up past Sluice Cottage and along the path through the marshy ground between the sea and the course of the old railway line. The line of trees in this photograph follows the cutting where tracks once lay, and I stopped for one last look before I returned to the road. For the most part it is desolate and wind-whispered, although the occasional lycra-clad runner does tend to take the edge off the eeriness. Still, I was there alone on my return journey.

As I was leaving my foot caught something in the sand on the path. Broken glass. I started to walk away. But I never walk away from something like that. I always stop and pick it up. Then, almost invariably, it *is* broken glass, or a bottle-top, or somesuch, and I take it to the nearest bin. Sometimes, rarely, it's an interesting pebble. I went back for a closer look.

It was a piece of flint. It was a beautiful piece of knapped flint*. I could see the sharp edges, the ripples radiating from the point of impact as it was separated from a larger piece. It sat on my palm. It rested between my thumb and index finger, blade ready. It was made by someone; lost; found.

I followed James. I followed Paxton. I found my treasure in the ground. And I'm pleased to say that so far, people aren't looking behind me very strangely. Still, it's odd that nobody's taking that empty seat on the train...



... when I actually laid it bare ... there came a sort of cry behind me ...

* A friend's father's friend, who is qualified to speak about such things, has written of the flint: *I have a good idea the flake could be a utilised core rejuvenation flake, from a small Mesolithic blade core. Edges have been finely blunted and proximal end re-toched.*