

## **BIRD, BISHOP AND BLOODY BONES BRIGANDS**

The Rector of Saint Alban's church at Tattenhall from 1834 to 1842 was Edward Bird. His eldest daughter was Isabella, aged three when the family came to Tattenhall.

Isabella was a sickly child and spent her life struggling with various ailments. However, as she grew up she always had a real urge to travel and when she was travelling she was almost never ill!

In 1854 her father gave her £100 and she went to visit relatives in America. The following year she went to Canada and then toured Scotland. Following her mother's death in 1868 she embarked on a series of journeys and finally left Britain in 1872.

She went to Australia, which she disliked, then to the Sandwich Islands (Hawaii) and finally to America.

She always dressed practically and chose to ride not side saddle, as was expected of ladies in those days, but sitting frontwards like a man.

While in the Rocky Mountains she became infatuated with Jim Nugent, an outlaw with one eye and an affinity for violence and poetry!

Isabella ultimately left the Rockies and her 'dear desperado', who was shot dead a year later.

Back home she was romantically pursued by John Bishop, an Edinburgh doctor. However, Isabella's wanderlust got the better of her and she went travelling again, this time to Asia, Japan, China, Vietman, Singapore and Malaysia.

After Henrietta, Isabella's younger sister, had died of typhoid in 1880 Isabella finally accepted John Bishop's marriage proposal.

Following the death of her husband in 1886, Isabella studied medicine and resolved to travel as a missionary. Despite being nearly sixty years old, she set off for India.

Her subsequent varied and colourful travels took in India, Tibet, Persia, Kurdistan and Turkey.

She wrote many books about her wanderings and in 1892 became the first woman member of the Royal Geographical Society.

She died in Edinburgh in 1904. However, her first adventure had taken place in Tattenhall, when she was only a young child.

The story, told in *'The Life of Isabella Bird'* (1906), by Anna Stoddart, refers to 'Bloody Bones Cave' (sometimes called 'The White Sand Hole') beneath the Cheshire sandstone ridge at Rawhead. The book can be viewed on-line.

*'Near Tattenhall rises a hill known as Rawhead ... This hill was full of caves, in which dwelt a gang of outcasts whose doings grew notorious. Robbery followed robbery in the neighbourhood.*

*The caves were searched on suspicion, but nothing was found to warrant arrest ... one midnight someone passing the [Tattenhall] churchyard saw lights and heard voices ...*

*No one would go near it, until the magistrates decided to make a midnight raid with armed constables, and to see what manner of ghosts disturbed its peace.*

*They found the Rawhead gang busy hiding booty in a grave, the slab of which they had raised.*

*An old woman whose cottage was close to the churchyard proved to be in collusion with the burglars and had assisted them to choose their storehouse.*

*All were arrested and transported.*

*But Isabella never forgot how her nurse took her to see the unearthing of silver-plate and jewellery from that grim hiding-place, and how ... she watched the whole process ... from the lifting of the slab to the recovery of the last teaspoon.'*

Further information is given in Frank Latham's 1977 book *'Tattenhall – The History of a Cheshire Village'*, where he claims that the brigands plundered graves, stole cheeses and gave Isabella a black silk dress as 'hush money'!

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A PORTRAIT OF ISABELLA BIRD IN MIDDLE AGE