

The Great Glasgow Bank Robbery of 1811

by Alastair Dinsmor

Much has been written in recent years about the Great Train Robbery (1963) and the Brinks Mat Robbery (1983), but one of the largest bank robberies in British criminal history was the theft of £19,753 from the Paisley Union Bank during the night of the 13 - 14 July 1811. Certainly, at that time, a sum of money of this magnitude was indeed a *king's ransom* and is the equivalent of £13 million today

The Paisley Union Bank was established in 1788 and quickly set up branches in towns all over Scotland. One of the principal branches was at 49-51 Ingram Street, Glasgow. It was a busy branch, handling business from all parts of the City and surrounding countryside. The bank premises were bordered by beautiful gardens which accentuated the importance of the building, in direct contrast to some of the older buildings in the street. Munn's Tavern was directly opposite the bank and the low wall adjoining it was later said to be ideal from which to take observations on the bank at any time of the day or night

Every Saturday morning the bank agents, Messrs Forbes & Co of Edinburgh, would send a large consignment of bank notes, gold guineas and silver coins, to augment the bank's stock of currency. The supply of money was contained in a strong iron box and transported by the Edinburgh mail coach which arrived at the Black Bull Inn, on Argyle Street at Glassford Street, every Saturday afternoon

The afternoon of Saturday 13 July 1811 was no exception and the box duly arrived. That day the box was unusually heavy but the bank porter managed to carry the well-chained box to the bank premises in Ingram Street where he lodged it in its large iron safe. He then locked up the bank for the weekend and the door and safe keys were taken to the house of the Chief Manager of the Bank, Mr Andrew Templeton, in St Enoch Square. As it was also Glasgow Fair Saturday, the porter and his wife, who had apartments adjacent to the bank, decided to walk to Glasgow Green to *sniff the calder air and see the shows*

On the morning of Monday 15 July, when the porter obtained the keys from Mr Templeton's house to open the door and sweep out the offices, everything was found to be in order. However, about 10am, when the Manager himself opened the iron safe, he saw that the inner safe drawers had been ransacked and were completely empty. Even the iron box had been opened and the bank was left without a shilling in its coffers. By Tuesday 16 July, a reward of 500 guineas (£525) was being offered for information leading to the conviction of the culprits and recovery of the money

Before the reward was announced, a local tradesman, David Clacher, told officials in the bank that about 3 or 4 o'clock on the morning of Sunday 14 July, he was looking out of a window of his house in Taylor Street which overlooked the wall adjacent to Munn's Tavern, opposite the bank. He saw three men jump over the wall from Ingram Street and conceal themselves behind it. The three men got busy *arranging parcels of paper, tying them up and placing them in bags*. They then exchanged some of their clothes before they made off towards the old coach yard in High Street, where he lost sight of them

In 1811, the Glasgow Police were not the investigative organization they were later to become: their duties were restricted to guarding the bank and assisting to search suspects and places. It was not until 1819 that Britain's first Criminal Officer, Lieutenant Peter McKinlay, was appointed by Glasgow Police and two years later the Glasgow Criminal Department was established, twenty-three years before Scotland Yard detectives were appointed

In those early days, the Procurator Fiscal personally investigated serious crimes and so Mr Bennet, the Procurator Fiscal for Glasgow in 1811, was in charge of the investigation into the bank robbery assisted by Sheriff Officers and Messengers-at-Arms. On hearing the information given by Mr Clacher, he went immediately to the coach yard in George Street operated by Mr Sandy Leith. Mr Leith and his assistant remembered distinctly that about 6am on Sunday 14 July, they were wakened by three Englishmen wishing to hire a post chaise (a small coach) to take them to Edinburgh. Mr Leith was reluctant to do business on the Sabbath, but relented when one of the men told them that a relative had taken ill suddenly in Edinburgh. The coach left Glasgow without delay, heading for Airdrie then Mid Calder, Uphall and onward to Edinburgh. It was later reported that at each of the stops, the three men ordered the best food and wine, paying for all their expenses with £20 Paisley Union Bank notes

On hearing this, Mr Bennet lost no time in informing the Edinburgh authorities and requesting that every likely place be searched for the three Englishmen who were obviously the main suspects. The Edinburgh Police searched every hotel, lodging house, departing mail and stage coaches and even the boats in Leith Dock but without success. Trace of the three men was eventually found in a back street tavern where, about 2pm on Sunday 14 July, they had paid for a hurried lunch with a £20 Paisley Union Bank note, but the trail was cold

As it appeared likely that the three robbers were heading for London, Mr Likely, Head Manager of the bank in Paisley, after consultation with his legal adviser, Mr Walkinshaw of Glasgow, decided that both men should travel to London by the next mail coach to get the Bow Street Runners involved in the investigation. (Bow Street Runners were privately employed court officers who investigated crimes within the jurisdiction of Bow Street Magistrates' Court). Whilst en route to London, both men came upon a trail of Paisley Union Bank notes used by the three Englishmen to pay for their food and drink at various taverns along the way

While Likely and Walkinshaw were heading for London, James McCrone, a Messenger-at-Arms, was busy carrying out enquiries in Glasgow. He established that the three Englishmen had lodged for three weeks prior to the robbery at the lodging house run by a Mrs Stewart in the Broomielaw near Carrick Street. Mrs Stewart told him that the three men were quiet and polite and gave her no trouble. She did, however, remember them handling skeleton keys, plans and drawings and, over a period of two months, returning at two or three in the morning. She said that she had been asked to take a parcel to a local carrier for carriage to London. It was later established that the three robbers had entered the bank during a number of nights preceding the robbery to get measurements and wax impressions of the locks. They also tested the skeleton keys and returned them to London for adjustment, so that everything was ready for the night of the robbery

This information was sent to Likely and Walkinshaw who, by this time, had made contact with two of the most famous Bow Street Runners, Stephen Lavender and John Vickery. On receiving the information about the parcel from Glasgow, Lavender and Vickery went immediately to the Glasgow Waggoners' Carriers Office in London and soon had the details of the parcel and what they read raised their hopes. The parcel was addressed to a Mr John Scoltcock, Blacksmith, Tower Street, London, whom they knew was a notorious character who made false and skeleton keys for London's underworld. The parcel had been sent by a Mr Little, which they knew was an alias used by one of London's greatest robbers, Huffey White. A few months before, White had escaped from the prison hulks in Portsmouth and a widespread search for him had been in vain. They knew that he would come out of hiding to take part in another daring robbery and the Glasgow case seemed to carry his hallmark. On re-examining the descriptions of the three suspects, Lavender and Vickery were of the opinion that Huffey White fitted one of the descriptions, while his

main associate, James Moffat alias Mackoull, fitted another. The third man they reckoned to be Harry French, an expert lock-picker. White, Mackoull and French were now wanted men, so Lavender and Vickery decided to search Scoltcock's blacksmith shop for evidence of their whereabouts

Meanwhile, all three robbers had returned, as expected, to London and met up with White's wife and Scoltcock. They had the money which was under the control of the scholar of the trio, James Mackoull. White and French planned to sail to America to make a new life. Mackoull said that he would probably find a remote place to stay in England and live like a gentleman on his share of the money. They all agreed to stay at the Scoltcock's house and plans for a good meal that evening were made as a precursor to the sharing out of the money. As the meal was ready, White and his wife sat with the Scoltcock family waiting for Mackoull and French to arrive, when there was a knock on the door and Officers Lavender and Vickery entered with their assistants. Huffey White was immediately recognized and tried to escape through a window, but he was arrested and handcuffed. A search of White and the house exposed ample evidence of the crime. The box which had been used by the gang to mail the sketches, skeleton keys and other letters between Mackoull and the blacksmith were found. All the occupants were arrested. It was later established that Mackoull had inexplicably changed their plans and decided to lodge elsewhere that night, thus escaping arrest

It is at this point in the case that English legal procedures of the time appear somewhat bizarre compared to what we recognize as justice today and exhibit some of the characteristics of the *rotten borough* system that pervaded the English establishment in the 18th -19th centuries

Soon after the arrests by Vickery and Lavender, negotiations were opened up by Mackoull with the Bow Street Runners and the Paisley Union Bank delegation. It was proposed that if the bank would grant a free pardon to Huffey White and the others, the bank would receive £12,000 of the stolen money. Likely and Walkinshaw accepted the offer and set off for Glasgow with the £12,000, rejoicing in their success. It is not surprising that Huffey White was again in trouble soon after his release. He had been caught robbing the London to Leeds mail coach. He was tried, found guilty and executed at Northampton. French was never heard of again

After a few months, James Mackoull was finally arrested by Lavender and Vickery but Mackoull denied everything, so witnesses were brought from Glasgow to identify him. Several witnesses had no hesitation in recognizing Mackoull and proceedings were commenced to transport him to Glasgow. He arrived at Glasgow in chains and in the custody of an Edinburgh Sheriff Officer, Archibald Campbell, on 10 April 1812, and locked up in the Tolbooth at Glasgow Cross. He engaged a lawyer who found a flaw in the original warrant and he was liberated by the Lords of Justiciary in Edinburgh on 2 July 1812

After three years, thinking that everything would be forgotten, Mackoull, now in the company of a young woman, returned to Scotland, and rented a grand house in Portobello with servants and a carriage. He used £20 notes to pay for the comforts they both enjoyed and had no trouble in passing the banknotes, especially as none of them were from Paisley Union Bank at this time. However, his luck ran out when he tried to lodge £800 of Paisley Union Bank notes at the bank of the Paisley Bank's Edinburgh agent, Sir William Forbes & Co. The Master of the Leith Police (a former Bow Street Runner), F O Denovan, arrived at the bank. Mackoull quickly regained his composure and appeared indignant at the suggestion that the money was stolen. He was so convincing that he was allowed to leave the bank with the promise that he would make enquiries and return. He never returned to the bank and quickly set off for London

On his arrival in London, he quickly took legal advice and convinced his lawyer to raise civil actions at the Court of Session in Edinburgh against the Paisley Union Bank for the £800 and against Sir William Forbes & Co. for £1800. He also demanded compensation from the Paisley Union Bank for his incarceration in the Glasgow Tolbooth! Five years elapsed with actions and counter-actions between the parties, but they were finally brought before the Edinburgh Lord Chief Commissioner and a jury on 11 May 1820. It was decided that the Paisley Union Bank's action against Mackoull should be heard first. The bank produced as many of the original witnesses as they could, although a few of them had since died, including Mrs Stewart, the robbers' landlady at the time of the robbery. In her place, the *star witness* was Mrs Stewart's niece, Margaret McAulay. As she approached the witness box, Mackoull tried to leave the court unnoticed, but was brought back to hear her damning evidence. After the closing speeches, the Jury found in favour of the bank. Due to the evidence obtained by the court, the Lord Advocate instructed that Mackoull be kept under observation in the court and, a few hours later, issued a warrant committing Mackoull to prison to await being indicted to stand trial in Edinburgh for the capital crime of the 1811 robbery

On 19 June 1820, Mackoull again arrogantly faced his accusers and his lawyer put forward a number of legal arguments to try to gain his release, but to no avail. The evidence led was the same as that of the previous civil action but on this occasion Mackoull was on trial for his life. The most important witness against him was the London blacksmith, John Scoltcock, who admitted making the skeleton keys and other implements for Mackoull and his friends. He had also received drawings of safes and plans of the Paisley Union Bank. Another of Mackoull's *friends* deserted him in his time of need. This time it was the money changer who had been asked by Mackoull to change around £15,000 Paisley Union Bank notes. Finally, Lavender and Vickery described details of their investigation and searches they carried out. By midnight, the closing speeches had been heard and at day-break the jury, without retiring, gave their verdict of *Guilty*. The court had continued through the night with only a break of a few minutes

The Lord Justice Clerk, with great solemnity, pronounced that Mackoull would be executed at Edinburgh on Wednesday 26 July 1820, between 8am and 10am. Mackoull was visibly shaken and later received three postponements to the execution date from King George IV. However, the Secretary of State received a command to carry out the execution on 22 December, but Mackoull cheated the hangman two or three days before, by taking poison which had been smuggled to him in prison

So ended the career of an audacious and intelligent criminal who, but for his greed and arrogance in raising the civil actions against the banks, would probably have remained free to enjoy his new-found riches

Stories and artifacts from the 175 years of the Glasgow Police can be seen at the Glasgow Police Museum. Admission is free. During the Summer Season (1 April to 31 October) the Museum is open 7 days a week (10am-4.30pm, Sun 12noon-4.30pm). During the Winter Season (1 November to 31 March), it is open only 2 days each week (Tuesdays 10am-4.30pm: Sundays 12noon-4.30pm). You can also read more of the people, the stories and the history of Glasgow Police by visiting the Glasgow Police Heritage Society website www.policemuseum.org.uk



Our thanks to the Glasgow Police Museum for permission to reproduce this article

Alastair Dinsmor is a retired Strathclyde officer and founder of the Glasgow Police Museum