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Revd Kevin Davies. Langtree Team Ministry.

“Hang them from the nearest tree.”

As a resident of one of Henley's satellite villages, I was interested to learn recently that our area was once plagued by robbers and highwaymen who would make use of the woods and common lands to attack travellers. These scoundrels were attracted to the Henley area because of the number of wealthy families and thus rich pickings.

Even as recently as the late 1700's, robberies and hold ups were so frequent that many took to bearing arms on their journeys. The situation was bad enough to warrant the creation of a new Crown law enforcement officer “The Steward of the Chiltern Hundreds”, who had the possibly quite dangerous remit to catch as many of the highwaymen as possible, and “hang them from the nearest tree.”

Such a “wild west” environment happily feels somewhat alien to us today, but many of our local names bear witness to these turbulent times: “Gallowstree Common,” “Deadman's Lane”, and of course there is “The Highwayman” Inn at Exlade Street.

However the age we live in is seeing a pernicious erosion of corporate social values. The precious infrastructure built up over the last three hundred years is now under sustained attack by greedy individuals and groups who believe that they will not get caught, and that laws made for the common good do not apply to them. The highwaymen are back, but they are not just after your jewellery. In our area lawlessness shows itself in the theft of metal from churches, electric cabling from railways, heating oil from schools and drain covers from the roadside.

This kind of activity is an attack on the very glue that binds us together – facilities which we jointly own, or share, or use, which define who we are as a nation, and are quite truly our “common-wealth”. It is fair to say that if this plundering behaviour is not dealt with very severely, and given the highest priority, in twenty years time we will have no communal facilities left worthy of the name.

There is a rather deep irony in the fact that the office of “Steward of the Chiltern Hundreds” is now a titular appointment only, used as a mechanism to permit the resignation of members of parliament. You may be interested to know that the current holder of the post is the former Labour MP Eric Illsley, now serving a year in jail for his fraudulent greed in the expenses scandal. Anyone see a good tree?