The Last Abbey

Forgotten History & Buried Stories

Volume One

Stephen Lambert

Contents

The Last Abbey Forgotten History and Buried Stories Volume One

The Village That Vanished Without a Trace---------- 6
The First Witch Hunt---------- 10
The Storms That Started a Witch Hunt---------- 14
The Dead Man Who Walked Alnwick---------- 18
The Allendale Wolf---------- 22
The Lost Templars of Northumberland---------- 26
The Head That Killed a Viking---------- 30
The Army That Returned Blind---------- 34
The Massacre of Abergavenny---------- 38
The Castle Lost Over a Drink---------- 42
They Came for the Castle---------- 47
Ashwood Rain---------- 52
The Crown and the Clay---------- 57
A Pilot, A Spy, A Traitor---------- 62
The Fog over Togston---------- 67
The Last Voyage of the SS Paris---------- 71
The Hartley Pit Disaster---------- 75
The Burial That Drew 2000 People---------- 80
The Tea Was Poisoned---------- 85
Gilles de Rais---------- 91

The Village That Vanished Without a Trace

Roanoke Island, 1587–1590

On 24 July 1590, the English governor John White finally returned to Roanoke Island after an absence of almost three years. He had expected to find more than one hundred settlers waiting for him, including his daughter Eleanor and his granddaughter Virginia Dare, the first English child born in an English colony in the Americas. Instead, he found silence.

The settlement had been abandoned. The houses had not been burned or destroyed. They appeared to have been dismantled, as though their timber had been taken away and used elsewhere. There were no bodies, no graves and no obvious signs of a battle. The colonists had not simply died where they stood. They had gone somewhere.

The only clear clue was a single word carved into a wooden post: CROATOAN. Nearby, the letters CRO had also been cut into a tree. Those few letters have kept the story alive for more than four centuries.

The colony had always been a dangerous experiment. England wanted a permanent settlement in the New World, both to challenge Spanish power and to create a base for future expansion. Roanoke Island, on the coast of what is now North Carolina, was chosen as the site for an English colony. It was a remote, unfamiliar landscape of shifting sands, thick woodland, dangerous weather and established Indigenous communities who had their own political alliances, territories and interests.

The first attempt to settle Roanoke had failed. A military colony sent out in 1585 struggled to survive and was eventually abandoned. When a second expedition was planned, the aim was different. This time, families were included. The settlement was meant to become a permanent community rather than a temporary outpost.

Among the settlers were Ananias Dare and Eleanor White Dare. Eleanor was the daughter of John White, an artist, mapmaker and one of the leaders of the expedition. Soon after the settlers arrived, Eleanor gave birth to a daughter. The child was named Virginia, after the English colony itself, and Virginia Dare became the first English child born in an English settlement in the Americas.

Her birth should have been a moment of hope. Instead, the colony was already facing serious problems. Supplies were limited, relations with local Indigenous groups were complicated, and the settlers had little experience of surviving in their new surroundings. John White decided that the colony needed help. He returned to England to collect food, tools and reinforcements, intending to come back as quickly as possible.

He did not know that he would be separated from his family for three years.

England was at war with Spain, and ships were urgently needed for military service. The voyage back to Roanoke was delayed. When White finally returned in 1590, he sailed into a place he still believed would contain his family and the settlement he had left behind. Instead, he found a deserted village.

White searched for signs of what had happened. The homes had been dismantled rather than destroyed, suggesting that the colonists may have left in an organised manner. The settlers had also agreed on a system of signals before White departed. If they were forced to leave, they were to carve the name of their destination. If they had been attacked or taken against their will, they were to carve a Maltese cross beside it.

There was no cross.

To White, CROATOAN appeared to be an important message. Croatoan was the name of an island to the south, associated with

the Croatoan people, who had previously maintained contact with the English. The carving may have meant that the settlers had moved there voluntarily, perhaps because they needed food and protection. It might also have indicated that the colonists had split into smaller groups and joined communities elsewhere.

White wanted to follow the clue. Before he could properly search Croatoan Island, however, bad weather and damage to the expedition's equipment forced the ships to leave. The journey had already cost lives, and the remaining sailors could not safely continue along the dangerous coast. White returned to England without finding Eleanor, Virginia or any of the other settlers.

From that point, the colony became a mystery rather than a settlement. Later visitors reported stories of people with European features living among Indigenous communities. Some accounts suggested that the colonists had been killed. Others implied that they had moved inland, joined local societies or gradually disappeared through disease, hunger and conflict. None of these explanations has ever been proved beyond doubt.

Archaeology has added clues but not a final answer. Objects associated with European life have been discovered in parts of the wider region, and researchers have investigated possible links between the colonists and the Croatoan people. Yet an object can travel, be traded or be carried by someone who was not part of the original settlement. The evidence points towards several possibilities, but it does not identify the fate of every person who vanished from Roanoke.

The word CROATOAN may therefore have been less a cry for help than a direction. It may have told John White exactly where the settlers intended to go. The tragedy is that he never had the chance to discover whether they reached it.

The mystery has endured partly because the evidence is so small. There is no final letter, no witness account from the settlers and no confirmed burial ground. There is only an empty settlement, a missing community and a word carved into wood.

More than 430 years later, CROATOAN still feels like a message waiting to be understood. It may record the place where the colonists found refuge. It may mark the beginning of a journey that scattered them across the coast. Or it may be the last surviving fragment of a story whose ending was lost almost as soon as it happened.