

KATHERINE FERRERS

Born during the turbulent 17th century, Katherine Ferrers was a wealthy heiress who, according to legend, turned to a life of crime. Although she definitely existed, historical records about her life are limited; therefore, the lines between fact and fiction have been blurred. Was Katherine really a highwaywoman? One thing is certain: her story captivates imaginations!



Was Katherine a highwaywoman?

COMPREHENSION
CRUISER

TRAGIC CHILDHOOD

Katherine Ferrers was born on 4th May 1634 in Hertfordshire, where she lived with her parents, Knighton and Catherine. It has been suggested that she had a brother named Henry; however, this claim has never been proven. As the Ferrers' were part of the gentry, they were wealthy and privileged. Growing up in a landowning family, Katherine had access to the Ferrers' vast estates and she may have spent much of her time playing outdoors in their grounds. This freedom is believed to have contributed to her strong-willed personality. Despite her family's affluence, Katherine's childhood was tainted by tragedy.

By the time Katherine was six years old, her father and her grandfather, Sir George Ferrers, had both died. As a result, Katherine became an heiress to the family fortune. In September 1640, Katherine's mother married Sir Simon Fanshawe, a member of the aristocracy, but she died two years later. Subsequently, Katherine – now an orphan – was made a ward of court and sent to live with her stepfather's relatives.





Royalists, including the Fanshawes, supported King Charles I.

LIFE-ALTERING EVENTS

In 1642, civil war erupted in England. The population was divided over political beliefs: some people supported Parliament's demands for more power while others backed King Charles's claim to authority. Katherine's stepfather was a devoted royalist. As the war continued, he donated increasingly large sums of money to the king's campaign. This severely reduced his wealth. At this time, Katherine was still a child and unaware of the financial consequences Simon's decisions would later have on her life.

Markyate Cell, Hertfordshire



TEENAGE BRIDE

When Katherine was almost fourteen, she was forced to marry Thomas Fanshawe (Simon Fanshawe's fifteen-year-old nephew). Although she refused at first, Simon, who was desperate to gain control of his stepdaughter's fortune, insisted. The wedding took place in April 1648 and soon afterwards, most of Katherine's estate was sold. Shortly into their marriage, Thomas left for Ireland, but Katherine remained at Markyate Cell (the Ferrers' ancestral home).

Katherine Ferrers (aged 14)



FROM HISTORY TO LEGEND

After Thomas left for Ireland, reliable accounts of Katherine's life become scarce, with little more recorded. According to folklore, stories about Katherine's life became more fanciful over time. Some accounts indicate that she lived a solitary life behind closed doors and had little wealth. Later legends claim that she met a man named Ralph Chaplin, who was a local farmer and an alleged highwayman. These tales suggest that Katherine was drawn into his unlawful lifestyle. It has been claimed that she joined him on rides across Hertfordshire, stalking the highways at night and robbing wealthy travellers. Whilst these accounts are enticing, historians advise that they be viewed as part of local legend rather than reliable evidence.

LEGENDARY LEGACY

Katherine Ferrers is believed to have died around 1660, but the exact date is unknown. Family memoirs say that she died childless and was buried at St Mary's Church in Ware, yet historians have been unable to locate a confirmed grave and the cause of her death remains unclear.

In the centuries since, a further chapter of Katherine's legend has been added: her ghost is said to ride on horseback around Markyate Cell. Whatever the truth may be, Ferrers has become firmly embedded in Hertfordshire folklore as 'The Wicked Lady'.

UNTIMELY DEATH

Some unverified claims describe the circumstances surrounding Katherine's death in dramatic terms. These accounts state that Ralph Chaplin was caught and hanged following a failed robbery, leaving Katherine utterly devastated. Later legends suggest that she became involved in violent acts of revenge against local villagers and was eventually confronted and fatally wounded on the highway. It is also said that she was found wearing men's clothing, which led to the belief that she had been living a secret life as a highway robber.



St Mary's Church, Ware