

James MacLaine & William Plunkett

"The Gentlemen Highwaymen"

The highway robber James MacLaine lived by day as a respectable gentleman in London's St James's, while his criminal accomplice, William Plunkett, who was also presumed to be a gentleman, lived in nearby Jermyn Street.

James MacLaine was born in 1742, the youngest of a Scottish minister in the north of Ireland. Educated for a career as a merchant, MacLaine took his father's inheritance to Dublin where, aged 18, he blew the lot on clothing, gambling and women. Shunned by his family, he moved to England, married an innkeeper's daughter and set up store as a grocer. When his gambling ruined the business and his wife died, he struck up the famed criminal partnership with Plunkett. With stolen pistols and horses, and their faces hidden by Venetian masks, the pair had a short but highly successful career as highwaymen.

Despite rickety beginnings the pair committed around 20 hold-ups during 6 months, often in the wilds of Hyde Park. As a highwayman MacLaine listed Horace Walpole, Lord Elginton and Sir Thomas Robinson among his many wealthy victims. The robberies were always conducted in a restrained and courteous fashion, earning MacLaine the gentleman highwayman tag and giving him enough money to finally live the society lifestyle he'd always wanted.

MacLaine was eventually arrested when he tried to pawn Lord Elginton's distinctive coat. His trial at the Old Bailey court was a social occasion, while he reputedly received nearly 3,000 guests during his imprisonment in Newgate prison.

Despite calls for MacLaine to be saved from the gallows, he was hanged at Tyburn on 3rd October of 1750. His accomplice Plunkett was smart enough to escape with both his money and his life.

