

# The Gowrie Conspiracy *is one of the stranger incidents in Scottish history*

On August 6th 1600, 34 year old King James VI was staying at Falkland Palace some 14 miles from Perth. Up early in the morning, he and his retinue were going to hunt deer. They went to the stables to saddle up. The king had his foot in the stirrup when the Master of Ruthven, brother to the Earl of Gowrie, arrived and a conversation ensued.

The Ruthvens were a powerful, popular family, particularly round Perth which was their base. The Earl was 22, educated abroad and a man covered in golden opinions. His father, the first Earl, had been leader of the militant Protestant faction in government and, fearing the Catholic influence of the powerful Duke of Lennox, had kidnapped the king in August 1582.

James, under duress, had banished Lennox, taken over the reins of power at the age of 16 and, a year later, decapitated Gowrie for treason. But all had ostensibly been forgiven and the young Earl arrived back home in Perth in May 1600.

The royal hunt took up much of the morning; they killed their buck. Then James told his entourage they were off to Perth, to Gowrie House. On the way he told an attendant that the earl had captured a man with a pitcher stuffed with gold coins, was holding him at Perth and would like the king's opinion on what to do.

The party arrived at Gowrie House. The Earl was at a wedding, seemed surprised to be told of the King's arrival, and hurried home to greet his royal guest. His staff took an hour to produce a meagre lunch for their monarch which was served in the dining room.

No mention was made of the gold. After the King had eaten, the rest of the party was given some food in the hall. James was said to have gone upstairs with the Master of Ruthven to admire some paintings. Gowrie and the others went into the garden which ran down to the River Tay to pick cherries. Then word came that the King had ridden off.

In some confusion, the party returned to the courtyard in front of Gowrie House. The porter said that James could not have departed as he controlled the keys and had not opened the gate for him. Then they heard the King's voice.

They looked up to see his face at a third floor window. There seemed to be a hand at his throat and another across his mouth trying to silence him, but he was in good voice.

"I am murdered. Treason! My Lord of Mar, help, help!"

The King's attendants rushed back into the house climbed the stairs and were faced by a locked door. They called for hammers and spent some time unsuccessfully trying to force entry.

Outside, one of James's courtiers, Ramsay, had realized that there was another, much smaller, spiral staircase that led to the room where the King was in trouble. With a hawk on his arm, he rushed up and entered the room.



The King was the source of later information on what Ramsay found. James was wrestling with the Master and had his head in an arm lock; behind stood a man in armor.

“Strike him low,” cried the King. “He wears a secret mail doublet!”

Ramsay dropped his hawk and stabbed the Master about the face and neck. The King, showing an uncharacteristically cool head, put his foot on the hawk’s lead to stop it flying off. Gowrie had been in the courtyard when James appeared at the window. His reaction was dismay, knowing that any injury to his monarch whilst under his own roof would have dire consequences. He was seized by some Royal attendants but they were pulled off by his own servants. Gowrie then ran to get a sword. Ramsay meanwhile had thrown the mortally wounded Master down the stairs and appeared at the window to shout for those below to come up.

Two others were quickly in the chamber, followed by Gowrie. A scuffle ensued and Gowrie was killed by Ramsay.

The door at which the nobles had been battering was finally opened and all tumbled into the room. They found the King on his knees thanking the Almighty for his deliverance. The armor-clad figure behind James had vanished.

After the tumult in the town occasioned by the death of their popular patron and Provost died down, the King and his retinue jingled their way back to Falkland.

So an assassination plot was thwarted ran the official account of the affair. The bodies to the dead Ruthvens were

solemnly tried for treason, were found guilty and dismembered. All their property was seized by the Crown, their name was forbidden to be used and surviving members of the family fled the country.

But questions remained. Who, for instance, was the mysterious figure in armour seen standing behind the King? He was identified as a man named Younger, a servant of Gowrie, and presumably part of the plot.

But Younger was in Dundee at the time. On his way to Falkland to clear himself, he was murdered in a cornfield by Colonel Bruce, in charge of a party sent by James to meet him. And Gowrie had no discernible motive for killing James. His loyalty showed no cracks, rare at the time. He was owed £80,000 by the King.

And, as he was well aware, he was responsible for his monarch's safety so he could not have got away with his murder.

Why had Gowrie not been armed? Why had the plot been so badly carried out? Why had Gowrie been surprised by the King's arrival? The more people looked at the circumstances the more holes appeared in James's explanation of events.

And he was the only source for everything from the tale of the pitcher of gold to the events in the room itself. Other witnesses were proven liars, or in the King's pocket.

With Gowrie's death, James saved himself a fortune. He disposed of a charismatic and much admired young man whom he may have considered a rival to his throne. And James was interested in beautiful young men like the Master.

Perhaps he spurned the Royal advances? Of course kings, particularly Stuart kings, could do no wrong, but history has not been kind to James's personality.

"A character so shamelessly base and enormously wicked is seldom called to act on the stage of life. James possessed dissimulation and hypocrisy in an eminent degree.

"His domestic character was amongst the most vicious and disgraceful that could be conceived," wrote one commentator.

The Gowrie Conspiracy has remained an enigma for four centuries and it will always remain so. The moral, if there is one, is never go deer shooting with a head of state. They are not as other men.