

Highlights

At the funeral of an urban myth

Bristol Times

This tale, as told by **Robert Wallace**, is based upon yet another of Bristol's urban myths which, via the internet, became known throughout the world. But, he asks, what if the story is true?

IT IS a cold, dark, late afternoon in December 1957. A dusting of snow has settled in the graveyard and the surrounding countryside beside St Mary's church. Inside, where a funeral is taking place, the eulogy is being read by a narrator, rather than the vicar.

Now this particular eulogy is also a curious one, because it was written by the deceased, whose coffin rests by the altar.

"Thank you for coming, everyone" reads the narrator in a solemn, but clear, voice.

"I'm sorry that I can't be with you in person - I'd like to have been, believe me, just to see your faces. I'm the poor soul in that wooden box in front of you and, to be honest, I'm pretty cross about it.

"But no matter how wealthy you are you can't cheat the big guy, or God, as the vicar might prefer I call him. And you certainly can't take it with you, although I'd love to have tried.

"As most of you probably aren't aware, I've fathered six children - five in wedlock and one outside. Doubtless you are all gathered here today, or at least I hope you are.

"Now, back to my story. "I made millions of pounds over a period of ten years and I've still got it - or had it, anyway.

"You could have it soon, but the big question is what you decide to do with it...

"The thing for me, you see, was opportunity - once I started I simply couldn't stop.

"It was like an addictive drug - a tingle of excitement, an inexplicable buzz which drove me on.

"I can't even remember how I got the job at the zoo now - it might have been through an advert in the *Bristol Evening Post*, but I could be wrong.

"The thing was that the management thought I was employed by the council and they thought I was employed by the zoo.

"It could have been administrative oversight, because in reality, it was neither.

"As a lowly car parking attendant working outside the zoo it didn't occur to either of them to ask where the takings went.

"Well, they went to me, that's where they went - every beautiful pound, and plenty of ten bob notes too.

"At the end of the first month, I was sure somebody would come and ask, 'Where's the money?' But no, nothing was said.

"Three months, six months, nine months went by - soon I had accumulated literally hundreds of pounds in cash.

"Then came a milestone - my first year. I must admit it was nerve racking. Every day I expected any anonymous looking council vehicle to turn up, spraying gravel and dust.



● Above, Robert Wallace; below, Bristol Zoo; right, the ticket machine



Perhaps with an accompanying police vehicle. But no, not a dickie bird. Of course, I should have quit the job then - but I didn't, I couldn't. I wanted to see just how much I could get away with.

"On top of that I was having fun - meeting people, fresh air, getting some exercise. I had a sun tan in May.

"One hundred thousand cars,

coaches and motorbikes every year, each one paying me around ten shillings (50p) to park. Just do the calculations.

"Each got a ticket, because I bought an old bus conductor's ticket vending machine and a black cap. A pair of black sunglasses from Bright's, plus a leather school satchel from Marsh's, completed the picture.

"I looked the part. I acted the part.

Goodness me, I was the part. Next I bought a booth, rather like a soldier's century box.

"The zoo people assumed that the council had bought it for me and vice versa. Anyway, nobody asked.

"That was the thing about that job - nobody asked anything. As time passed I became part of the furniture, almost invisible...

"I expect that you are now all wondering the same thing. Where is it now? What's he done with it? Those millions of pounds.

"Well, I couldn't spend it - I couldn't flash it around. A car park attendant doesn't drive around in an Aston Martin or live up by The Downs, does he?

"No, you are right, so I stashed it away for a rainy day. But I couldn't put it all in one place, because people might have got wise to my dark deeds. I needed help, a trusted accomplice. But who, you might ask, could I really ask?"

"I (or rather we) opened post office savings accounts all over the country.

"I worked six days a week, three hundred and sixty four days a year with only Christmas Day off.

"Any absence on my part, you see, would have aroused suspicion and curiosity.

"I couldn't afford discovery - not being there was more obvious than being there.

"My accomplice did the leg work, depositing the takings and writing up the accounts, such as they were.

"Then, one day, I decided that my rainy day had arrived. It was time to leave - the first day of April seemed appropriate. It was that the fun started.

"A puzzled zoo manager called the council, who said that they would look into my employment. Finally, after three weeks, came a duly minuted announcement.

"No one employs the car park attendant, he doesn't seem to exist.

"We only recall a cheerful chap, Terry, with a black cap, often worn at a jaunty angle, and a pair of snazzy sunglasses.

"But it still didn't occur to either party to ask where the takings had gone. No one knew the full facts of my little venture except my trusted accomplice. I had it all worked out.

"Then, all of a sudden, I started to getting jabbing pains in my sides, in my kidneys. I started to lose weight.

"My ex-wife told me I didn't look well - but then she never really cared. You've got about six months" my consultant told me, but was he wrong?

"I wanted a second opinion, and a third. I didn't want six months, I

wanted another few decades of health. I already had the wealth, and what about some happiness?

"America, that's the place to go I thought - they know about everything to do with health over there. And hell, I can afford it now. But as things turned out I had less than five months.

"My fate was cast, my future denied. By the time you hear this, I'll have departed this world, probably right here in Dallas, where I am now, dictating this to my son.

"Dallas VA Medical Centre is a perfect place to die - if you really have to. I had all the money in the world, but no future - no time left.

"Well, if I couldn't buy the future, at least I could invest in hope. Isn't that what we all do: isn't that why we go to church?"

"So where's the money now, is what you're all thinking, isn't it? What has that cunning, mischievous crackpot done with it all?"

Five people sitting in the pews suddenly look very awkward. Five children in the grace and charity of wedlock, and one outside.

But he doesn't seem to care very much - he's too busy reading out the story.

Could their father be about to play a cruel trick on them, from beyond the grave?

The eulogy continued.

"Nobody inquired about me when I was ill, did they, not even a long distance telephone call? My own family, my own flesh and blood.

"Well, that's not quite true, because one of you did.

"But to get back to the matter in hand my money now exists in one lump sum - a single cheque.

"Life's all about trust, you know - plus faith, hope and charity - and I've no wish to be the richest man in the cemetery."

Five people in the church stare straight ahead, wishing they were invisible.

"But, as they say, where there's a Will, there's a way."

The narrator then takes a single envelope from his jacket pocket.

It carries just four handwritten words, "In God we Trust"

The narrator then passes the envelope to the vicar, who pockets it without even a second glance.

The clergyman nods, and then smiles, because he knows exactly what's in the envelope.

"Now, let us pray and give thanks for such a wonderful and thoughtful Christmas gift to the parish" he says.

● Bristol-born writer Robert Wallace is also the author of *Clara's Secret and Other Bristol Mysteries*, published by Tangent Books.

For more information about the author visit www.rob-wallace.co.uk.