

London's Public Execution Sites

Anna Cusack

Public executions were a common feature of English society into the nineteenth century. They were enactments of law and justice and a powerful messaging tool by the authorities. They were huge spectator events and formed a regular part of life for many people from the pickpockets, street sellers, and labourers to members from higher up the social ladder such as Samuel Pepys who was known to have attended several executions. Execution sites were chosen with consideration, both for practical purposes and to add theatre and meaning to the event.

In London, the most famous execution site was Tyburn, near where Marble Arch now stands. The earliest recorded execution there was in 1196 when William Fitz Osbert was executed next to the Tyburn stream by being hanged in chains with nine accomplices for leading a revolt of the poor.¹ In 1537 the ringleaders of the Pilgrimage of Grace were executed at Tyburn and by 1571 the infamous Tyburn Tree or Triple Tree was permanently erected at the site. The Triple Tree consisted of three horizontal wooden beams in the shape of a triangle supported by three perpendicular legs, an arrangement which was occasionally referred to as a 'three-legged mare' or a 'three-legged stool'. This design allowed the

¹ D. Keene, 'William fitz Osbert (d. 1196), populist leader', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*. September 23, 2004.

<https://www.oxforddnb.com/view/10.1093/ref:odnb/9780198614128.001.0001/odnb-9780198614128-e-9621> [accessed 5 Oct. 2019].

execution of multiple felons at any one time. One of the largest mass executions was in June 1649 when 24 malefactors were executed together.²



William Hogarth, *The Idle 'Prentice Executed at Tyburn, from the Industry and Idleness series* (1747). Note the 'three-legged stool' gallows. Public Domain.

Tyburn was not the only execution site within the metropolis. Execution Dock was used for criminals from the Admiralty Court under an Act passed by Henry VIII.³ Individuals would be hanged at this site for various offences including piracy, mutiny, desertion, treason, and after 1807, slaving. The last executions here were carried out in 1830.

Smithfield was also used as an execution site; it is best known as the location of the burnings of martyrs during the reign of Mary I and was often used for the burning of women for high and petty treason. For example, Ann Wallen was burnt there in 1616 for murdering her husband, and Isabella Condon was burnt in 1779 for coining offences.⁴ It was also occasionally used for hangings on temporary gallows erected for that purpose, such as in

² Anon, *A true and perfect relation of the tryall, condemning, and executing of the 24. prisoners, who suffered for severall robberies and burglaries at Tyburn on Fryday last* (1649).

³ An Act for Punishment of Pirates and Robbers of the Sea (28 Hen VIII c 15).

⁴ Anon, *Anne VVallens Lamentation, / For the Murthering of her husband Iohn Wallen a Turner in Cow-lane neere Smith- / field; done by his owne wife, on satterday the 22 of Iune. 1616. / who was burnt in Smithfield the first of Iuly following.* (1616); *Lloyd's Evening Post* (London, England), October 25, 1779 - October 27, 1779; Issue 3486.

1619 when Thomas Horsey was executed there for murder, and in 1761 when John Perrott was executed there for fraudulent bankruptcy.⁵



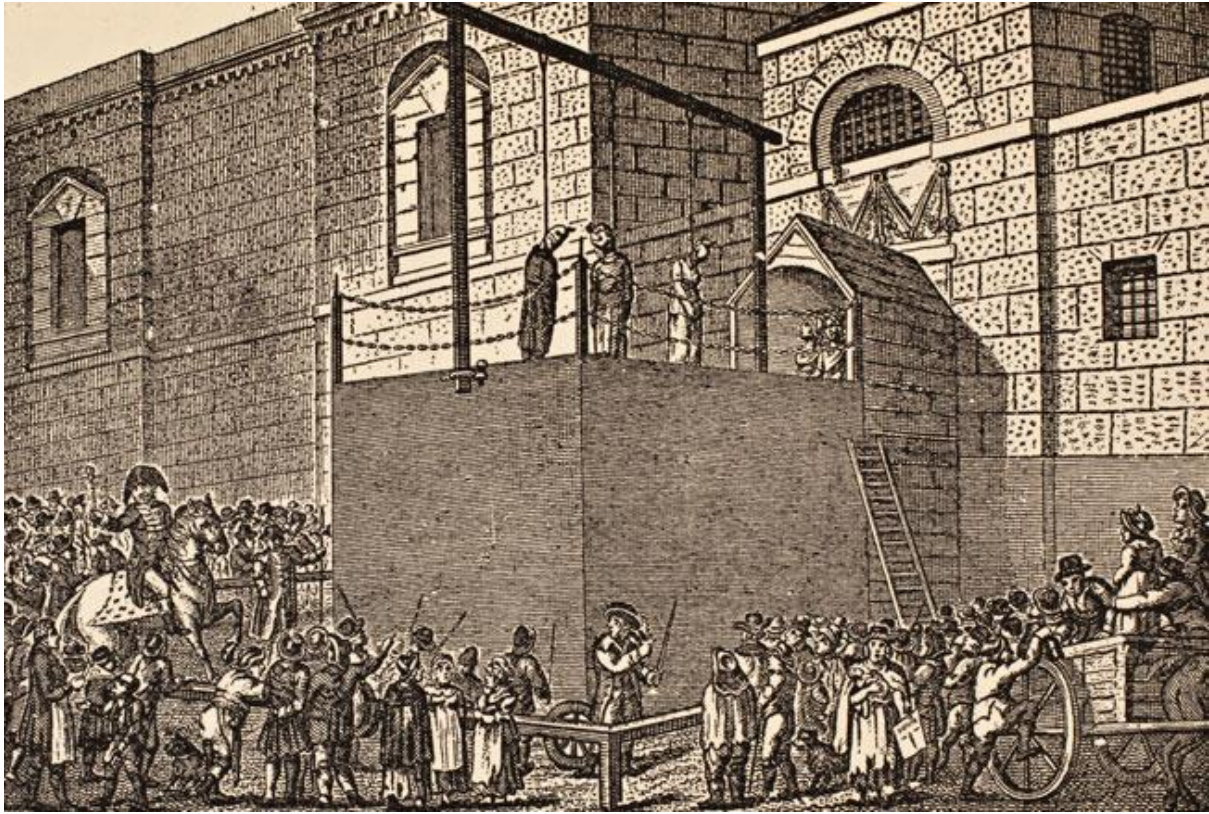
John Badby's death, burned in a barrel at Smithfield (from John Foxe's *Book of Martyrs*, 1563). Public Domain.

In 1660 Charing Cross was used as the execution site for the regicides of Charles I. It had been used for earlier executions too. Kennington Common was another popular execution site and used right across the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Tower Hill and the Tower were the site of many executions, often of those from the upper spheres of society for treason, although some soldiers were also executed here. During the 1780s it was the execution location for those involved in the Gordon Riots. Other execution sites include Lincoln's Inn Fields, Fetter Lane, Old Palace Yard, St Paul's Churchyard, and for Charles I's execution, Banqueting House. Occasional temporary gallows were erected near the site of a crime, often that of murder, all throughout the metropolis.

The final execution site that deserves mention for London was outside Newgate prison. In December 1783 the main execution location moved from Tyburn to Newgate. This move has been understood as a signifier of modernity. The procession to Tyburn was inconvenient, the behaviour of the crowds along the route was too rowdy and it encouraged escape

⁵ H. Goodcole, *Londons cry ascended to God, and entred into the hearts, and eares of men for reuenge of bloodshedders, burglaiers, and vagabounds*. (1619), For Perrott see: Old Bailey Proceedings, OA17611111.

attempts. The historian Simon Devereaux has convincingly challenged this arguing it was not so much a move towards more modern practices, but rather 'one of the last stages of substantial innovation in an older system of thinking about capital punishment and its potential effectiveness'.⁶ Executions continued at this site until 1868 with the end of public displays of the death sentence .



Execution by hanging, outside Newgate, early 1800s. Public Domain.

London's execution sites were known far and wide. The name Tyburn was used in other cities to denote execution sites. Today mock gallows have been erected outside The Prospect of Whitby pub near where Execution Dock is thought to have stood. Three oak saplings placed in the configuration of the Triple Tree on a small pedestrian island around Marble Arch mark the location of Tyburn's gallows.

References and Resources:

English and Welsh execution sites from the late eighteenth century are listed [here](#).

Andrea McKenzie, *Tyburn's Martyrs: Execution in England, 1675-1775* (2007)

V. A. C. Gatrell, *The Hanging Tree Execution and the English People, 1770-1868* (1996)

⁶ G. T. Smith, 'Civilised People Don't Want to See that Kind of Thing: The Decline of Public Physical Punishment in London, 1760-1840', in C. Strange (ed.), *Qualities of Mercy: Justice, Punishment, and Discretion* (1996), 21, 29; S. Devereaux, 'Recasting the Theatre of Execution: The Abolition of the Tyburn Ritual', *Past & Present* 202 (2009), 172.

[The Proceedings of the Old Bailey, 1674-1913](#)

[Capital Convictions at the Old Bailey 1760-1837](#)

[Capital Punishment UK](#)