

EXECUTION

A GUIDE TO THE ULTIMATE PENALTY

'Essential reading for all gore junkies' *Sunday Express*



GEOFFREY ABBOTT

EXECUTION

Geoffrey Abbott joined the RAF as an aero-engine fitter before World War Two. After thirty-five years' service he became a member of the Body of Yeoman Warders (a 'Beefeater') and lived with his wife, Shelagh, in HM Tower of London. He now acts as consultant to TV and film companies, has appeared in several documentaries and is the author of nineteen books. By invitation he has written the entries on torture and execution for the latest edition of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*. Geoffrey Abbott is also the Sword Bearer to the Mayor of Kendal, Cumbria, and lives in the Lake District, where he is learning to become a helicopter pilot.

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Dedicated to David and Jil Atkinson
who, when I faltered in the book's execution,
urged me never to say die



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CONTENTS

Introduction.....	11
Axe.....	13
Bastinado.....	29
Beaten to death.....	30
Boiled alive.....	33
Brazen bull.....	37
Broken on the wheel.....	39
Buried alive.....	51
Buried alive upside-down.....	54
Burned at the stake.....	55
Burned internally.....	66
Cannibalism.....	67
Cauldron.....	68
Cave of roses.....	69
Crucifixion.....	70
Cyphon.....	72
Diele.....	73
Drowning.....	74
Dry pan.....	80
Eaten by animals.....	82
Eaten by crocodiles.....	83
Electric chair.....	84
Firing squad.....	97
Flayed alive.....	113
Fried to death.....	114
Gas chamber.....	116
Gibbet.....	121
Gridiron.....	123
Guillotine.....	125
Gunpowder.....	146
Halifax gibbet.....	147
Hanged alive in chains	153
Hanged at the yard-arm.....	156
Hanged, drawn and quartered.....	158
Hanging.....	163
Hara-kiri.....	193
Impaled by stakes.....	196
Iron Chair.....	197
Iron maiden.....	198
Keel-hauling.....	201
Lethal injection.....	203
Mannaia.....	207

Mazzatello.....	208
Mill wheel.....	209
Nail through the ear.....	210
Necklacing.....	211
Over a cannon's muzzle.....	212
Pendulum.....	213
Poison.....	214
Pressed to death.....	215
Rack.....	218
Sawn in half.....	224
Scaphismus.....	226
Scottish maiden.....	227
Sewn in an animal's belly.....	228
Shot by arrows.....	229
Spanish donkey.....	230
Starvation.....	232
Stoned to Death.....	233
Strangulation.....	236
Suffocation.....	238
Sword.....	242
Thousand cuts.....	259
Throat slitting.....	261
Thrown from a great height.....	263
Tied in a sack with animals.....	264
Torn apart between two trees.....	265
Torn apart by boats.....	266
Torn apart by horses.....	267
Twenty-four cuts.....	277
Miscellaneous.....	278
Jargon of the underworld.....	279
Appendices.....	282
Select bibliography.....	288

EXECUTION

INTRODUCTION

Man learned to tie knots – and so was able to create a hangman’s noose; means of making fire were discovered – and heretics were burned at the stake; the wheel was invented – and felons were broken on it; blunt iron became sharpened steel – so decapitation by axe and sword became possible. And even if such knowledge or facilities were not available, local resources always existed with which to dispose of unwanted members of society – they were fed to crocodiles, trampled under elephants’ feet, thrown over cliffs, submerged in rivers... It is hardly surprising, therefore, that so many methods of execution have evolved worldwide, all of them devoted to one basic requirement, that of depriving the offender of his or her life.

History books, newspapers, television – all include accounts of executions that have taken place over the centuries, but many questions are left unanswered: what methods do other countries use; which method hurts the least; how do people behave when faced with execution; does any method bring *instant* death; and, anyway, how instant *is* instant?

To those of an inquiring turn of mind, more prosaic yet just as thought-provoking questions arise: how is the victim held down on the guillotine; does everyone who is hanged fall the same distance; in lethal injections, what is injected; what gas is used in the chamber; how much voltage surges through the electric chair; is a single blow of the axe or sword always sufficient? And many more.

And what of those who administered the final act, the executioners themselves, their natures and characters being as shrouded as were their victims after the deed? Furthermore, little is reported about the occasions when executions went terribly wrong, when electricity supplies failed or ropes broke, guillotine blades jammed or axes swerved. Were the victims acquitted or re-executed?

The world is still as relatively violent as it was centuries ago, with criminals, murderers and terrorists still disrupting society and its preferred way of life. The whole subject of capital punishment is constantly under review in many countries, some seeking to reintroduce it, others to replace its current method by less painful ones or to abolish it altogether.

The question of the justification for the judicial taking of human life is outside the scope of this book, but before the public can come to any

EXECUTION

decision and thereby, hopefully, influence their governments, it is essential that all the facts of the different methods be known. To that end it is hoped that in some small way this encyclopedia can contribute to that knowledge, while urging at the same time that the wrongs suffered by the victims of crime should always be borne in mind – to the same degree.

AXE

The very prospect of a not-so-sharp wedge of iron descending forcibly on the back of one's neck, perhaps more than once, evokes shudders of horror. Yet this method of execution, rather than that of hanging, was actually granted as a privilege to those of noble birth, death by cold steel being considered more honourable, akin to being slain on the battlefield.

The execution axe itself was not unlike the battleaxes used in combat which, far from being finely honed and balanced weapons, were designed solely to batter through armour and cleave through helmets. Likewise, the 'heading axe', as it was called, was little more than a blunt, primitive chopper which crushed its way through the flesh and vertebrae of the victim as he, or she, knelt over the block.

Death did not always come quickly. The executioner was not noted for his expertise or his sobriety, and the axe he swung was heavy and unwieldy, so ill balanced that it had a tendency to twist in his hands as it descended. Moreover, he was required to aim at an extremely small target under the critical gaze of a crowd numbered in thousands, these factors all having a further disruptive effect on his accuracy.

It is hardly surprising, therefore, that, on occasions, it took more than one blow to complete the task. 'Pray do your business well,' exclaimed James, Duke of Monmouth giving the executioner some gold guineas to ensure a swift demise. 'Do not serve me as you did Lord Russell. I have heard you gave him three or four strokes – if you strike me twice I cannot promise not to move.' The noble duke should have saved not only his money but his breath as well, for it took Jack Ketch five blows before the head was completely severed.

To appreciate what sort of an instrument the heading axe is the specimen displayed in the Tower of London merits close study. No replica, it is reportedly the one used to decapitate Simon, Lord Lovat, in 1747, he being the last man to be executed by the axe in this country.

The instrument is about thirty-six inches long and weighs seven pounds fifteen ounces. The rough, unpolished blade is sixteen and a half inches long, its cutting edge being ten and a half inches in length. As crude and brutal in action as it is in appearance, its absence of precision, while not

EXECUTION

deliberate, was not considered important. It was, after all, a weapon of punishment, not mercy, epitomising the slogan: 'Behave or be beheaded!'

The axe's partner in crime, or rather the penalty for same, was of course the block. At first just any old piece of timber, it soon evolved into a carefully shaped sculpture designed to facilitate the executioner's task. As the victim's throat had to be supported by a flat surface ready for the axe blow, a hollow was scooped out of one side to accommodate the victim's chin and a similar, though wider, hollow on the opposite side of the block allowed the victim to push his, or her, shoulders forward as far as possible, thereby stretching the neck and increasing the size of the target area.

Most blocks were about two feet high, permitting the victim to kneel. Lower ones, such as the ten-inch-high one used for the execution of King Charles I, required an almost prone position, this attitude inducing an even greater sense of helplessness in the victim.

A new block was usually prepared for each execution, the impact of the heavy blows invariably splitting the timber after the blade had passed through the victim's neck. The shock also made the block bounce, sometimes even causing the victim's body to be jolted to one side or the other, both reactions tending to deflect subsequent blows of the axe.

With experience and foresight, these unfortunate repercussions could be countered, as exemplified by the precautions taken at the executions of the two Jacobite leaders, Lord Kilmarnock and Lord Balmerino, on Tower Hill in August 1746. Vast crowds had been assembling since before dawn to watch the event, spectators clambering on to roofs and balconies, some even scaling masts and clinging to the rigging of ships moored in the Pool of London.

As recorded by the Lieutenant of the Tower of London:

'First went their four Yeoman Warders, two and two, then I followed singly; after Me followd Lord Kilmarnock the Prisoner, then the Chaplins and two friends. Then Lord Balmerino attended by the Gentleman Gaoler; then followd an Officer and fifteen men. Two hurses with the Coffins for the two Lords came behind, then a Sergent with fifteen men more, all with their Bayonets fixd; thus we handed them over to the sheriff at the Gates, who took them up the Hill to the scaffold.

There the Undertaker was ordered to take the Coffins out of the Hurses and lay them together on the scaffold. The block was, at the request of the Prisoners, made two feet high, and I desired a good Stiff post to be put just under it to brace against the blows, and a piece of red Bais to be had, in which to catch their heads and not let them fall

AXE

into the sawdust and filth of the scaffold, which was done. And the Earl of Kilmarnock had his head sever'd from the Body at one Stroke, all but a little skin which with a little chopp was soon separated. He had orderd one of his Warders to attend him as his Vallet de Chambre, and to keep down his body from struggling or any violent Convulsive Motion, but it was observed by those on the scaffold that the Body, on the Stroke, sprung backwards from the block and lay flatt on its back, dead and extended, with its head fasten'd only by that little hold which the Executioner chopt off. So that it is probable that whenever the head is sever'd from the Body at one stroke, it will allwais give that convulsive spring or bounce.

Lord Balmerino's Fate was otherwais, for tho' he was a brave and resolute Jacobite and seemed to have more than ordinary Courage, and indifference for death, yet when he layed his head on the block and made his signal for decollation, he withdrew his body, so that he had three cuts with the axe before his head was severed, and the by Standers were forc'd to hold his body and head to the block while the Separation was making.'

That was the semi-official account by an officer of the Tower based on the report he had received later from the sheriff and others. What actually happened on the scaffold were moments of high drama intermingled with what can only be classed as pure farce.

The man at the centre of the proceedings was executioner John Thrift, a man hardly suited for such a role. For the past ten years or so he had been carrying out his duties more or less adequately, dispatching his victims in the recognised manner, by the rope. The axe, reserved for traitors and the like, had but briefly entered his orbit, yet here he was, the centre of vast attention, having to behead two lords. Had tranquillisers been invented, John would have had his pockets full of them.

So when, dressed in his white suit, he stood by the block and saw the immense crowds, heard the buzz of tense excitement, the mounting roar from those crammed by the gates as the victims and escort approached, it all proved too much for him. He fainted. The officials on the scaffold, already uneasy about his capabilities, gathered round and revived him with a glass of wine. Worse, however, was to follow, for when the young Lord Kilmarnock came up the steps, Thrift burst into tears, more wine being required to enable him to regain his composure. A further tonic was administered by Kilmarnock, who not only spoke gently to him but also slipped a purseful of guineas into his hand.

EXECUTION

This, it would seem, was sufficient to stiffen John's morale for, as his victim knelt over the block, the executioner advised the lord to move his hands from the block 'lest they should be mangled or intercept the blow'. Stepping back, the executioner raised the axe, brought it down, and, as reported, one stroke proved sufficient.

There was then a brief interval to permit the removal of the body, the scattering of clean sawdust to soak up the pools of blood, and for Thrift to don a clean white suit. His confidence was far from regained though, when the doughty Lord Balmerino strode on to the scaffold, defiant to the last, dressed in his rebellious regimental uniform, the blue coat with red facings which he had worn in the Pretender's army. Under his uniform he had put on a woollen shirt which, he said, would serve as his shroud.

At the imposing figure of his next victim, the executioner's nerves were once again at the point of collapse. Humbly, he asked his victim for his forgiveness, to which Balmerino answered, 'Friend, you need not ask me to forgive you,' and he presented the axeman with three guineas, adding, 'I have never had much money, and this is all I have. I wish it were more, for your sake. I am sorry I can add nothing else but my coat and waistcoat.'

Balmerino then approached the block. Undecided as to which side he should kneel, he hesitated, then suddenly made up his mind and took up the correct position. Then, abruptly, he gave the signal that he was ready by throwing out his arm in such a violent movement that Thrift, caught off balance, brought down the axe so feebly that the lord sustained only a flesh wound. Hence, as stated, two more blows were necessary before John had earned his fees.

After the executions were over, the bodies were laid in the waiting coffins and transported in the hearses back into the Tower. There they were immediately interred in the Chapel Royal of St Peter ad Vincula, their lead coffin-plates now displayed on its west wall.

For poor John Thrift, to say nothing of his victims, the trauma on the scaffold was far from over, for later that year, on 8 December, he had to behead Charles Radcliffe, younger brother of the Earl of Derwentwater who had been executed in 1715. Radcliffe should have met his death with his brother but had escaped from the Tower.

His fate, however, was only postponed, for he was recognised by a London barber who, thirty years earlier, had shaved him in the Tower. Arrested, he now met Thrift on the scaffold. Again Thrift's nerves let him down for, despite the persuasive gift of ten guineas given to him by Radcliffe, he was unable to sever the head in fewer than three strokes.

The rest of Thrift's career was far from a success. Executing Jacobite leaders didn't exactly gain him the plaudits of Jacobite supporters, of whom

AXE

there were many living in London. Wherever he went he was greeted with abuse and cries of 'Jack Ketch', the brutal executioner of the previous century, even being pelted with stones. And late one evening in 1750 he was attacked by a gang of men near his home off Drury Lane. In order to defend himself he ran indoors and seized a cutlass. In the fracas that followed, one man fell dead, and Thrift was identified by the mob as the assailant.

At his trial he was sentenced to death, but this sentence was reduced to one of transportation to the American colonies. However, the City Corporation realised that the hangman was too valuable a man to lose and so gained a free pardon for him on condition that he resumed his trade. But the vicissitudes of his career proved too much for him and, on 5 May 1752, he died, after eighteen years on the scaffold.

Even death brought no peace to poor John, for no funeral could have been more tumultuous. The mobs gathered again, offal and brickbats being hurled at the undertakers' men, and at one time it seemed as though the body itself would be pulled out of the coffin. But at last order was restored, and John Thrift, hangman and axe wielder, was laid to rest in the churchyard of St Paul's, Covent Garden.

Thrift's inaccuracy with the axe was not unusual among those of his profession, and one can only hope that the first stroke at least rendered the victim unconscious. One such was Sir Walter Raleigh who, no favourite of King James I, was accused of treasonable plotting and was imprisoned in the Bloody Tower. Long years passed, and Raleigh eventually promised the king that, given leave, he would sail to South America, El Dorado, and bring back cargoes of gold for the royal coffers. James agreed to this, though added the warning that, should there be any trouble involving the Spaniards who had settled there, thereby endangering relations with that powerful nation, Raleigh would face the block on his return.

The Spanish ambassador, Gondomar, learned of this and informed his masters in Madrid. They, seeing the opportunity to revenge themselves on the buccaneer who in the past had plundered so many of their galleons, set a trap. Arriving on foreign shores, Raleigh and his men were ambushed. In the fighting that ensued, his son, Wat, was killed and many of his party wounded. Shocked and defeated, Raleigh withdrew and returned to England, despite knowing that he faced certain execution.

On the morning of 29 October 1618 he was awakened in his cell, ate his breakfast and smoked his pipe as usual. Being asked how he liked the wine given to him, he replied: 'It was a good drink, if one could tarry over it!' And when Peter, his barber, said, 'Sir, we have not combed your hair this morning,' Raleigh replied, 'Let them comb it, that shall have it!'

EXECUTION

At eight o'clock he was escorted to the execution site at Old Palace Yard in Westminster, and as he approached the scaffold he noticed among the crowd one of his friends, Sir Hugh Ceeston, who was having difficulty in getting near it. 'I know not whether you will get there,' he commented drily, 'but I am sure to have a place.'

Directly he mounted the scaffold he asked leave to address the throng. Having prepared his speech, he protested about the accusations which had been made against him and denied any disloyalty to his king or his country. When all was ready, he turned to the executioner and said he would like to examine the axe. He ran his finger along the edge and said, 'This is sharp medicine, but it will cure all diseases.' He then knelt down and placed his head on the block. After a short prayer he gave the signal and the axe descended, two blows being required.

His body was buried in St Margaret's, Westminster, and his head, after being shown to the crowds on both sides of the scaffold, was placed in a leather bag and taken away by his wife, Lady Raleigh, in the mourning coach. Encased in a box, it remained in her possession until her death twenty-nine years later. Their son, Carew, no less devoted to the memory of his father, kept it in his house, and it was finally buried with him at West Horsley, Surrey.

In the same way as the French aristocrats concealed their emotions on the scaffold by making light-hearted comments, so did those Englishmen as they faced the axe. Sir Thomas More, accused of treason for failing to acknowledge Henry VIII as head of the Church, commented drily to the executioner: 'Pluck up thy spirits, man, and be not afraid to do thine duty; my neck is very short – take heed therefore thou strike not awry, for thine reputation!' As he lowered his head on to the block, he went on: 'I pray you let me lay my beard forward over the block, lest you should cut it; for though you have a Warrant to cut off my head, you have none to cut off my beard!'

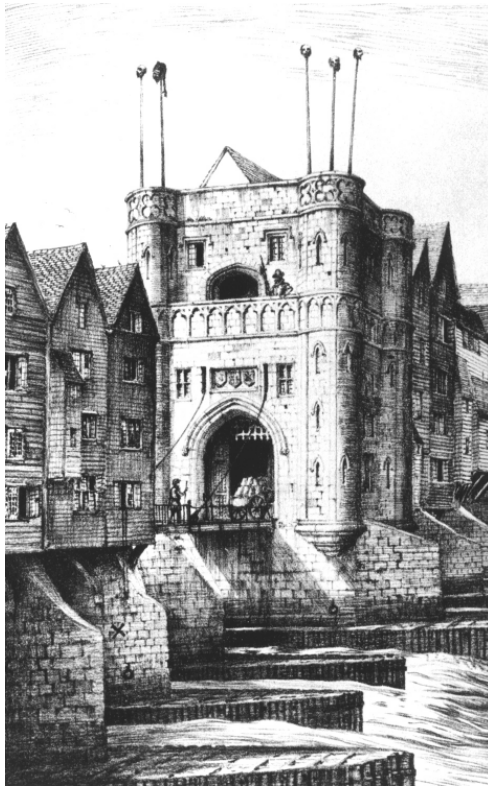
He was one of the more fortunate victims, one blow of the axe being sufficient to decapitate him. His body was buried in St Peter's Chapel within the Tower of London, the resting-place of others who had perished beneath the axe on Tower Hill. When the chapel was restored in 1876, all the remains were reinterred in the crypt of that royal place of worship.

More's head, like that of so many others, was impaled on a spike on London Bridge as a warning to all, having first been parboiled, that is, partially boiled in a large cauldron with salt and cumin seed added to deter the attentions of the sea birds. There it would have stayed, had not his loving daughter Meg Roper persuaded the keeper to let her have it 'lest it be foode for the fishes'.

AXE

Just as Lady Raleigh had done, Meg cherished her father's head until, ten years later, she died, and it was buried with her in the Roper tomb in St Dunstan's Church, Canterbury, 'in a niche of the wall, in a leaden box, something of the shape of a beehive, open in front, and with an iron grating before it', as it was described when inspected in 1835.

John Fisher, Bishop of Rochester, also incurred the displeasure of Henry VIII, being found guilty of the same 'crime' as that committed by Sir Thomas More. On hearing that Pope Paul III, in defiance of Henry's ruling, had promoted Fisher to the post of cardinal priest of St Vitalis and had dispatched a cardinal's hat to the prelate, the king, with savage humour, exclaimed: 'Fore God, then, he shall wear it on his shoulders!'



Heads on London Bridge

The bishop was condemned to death and imprisoned in the Tower. One day his cook failed to produce his dinner and, on being questioned by his master, the servant explained: 'It was common talk in the city that you should die, and so I thought it needless to prepare anything for you.' The