

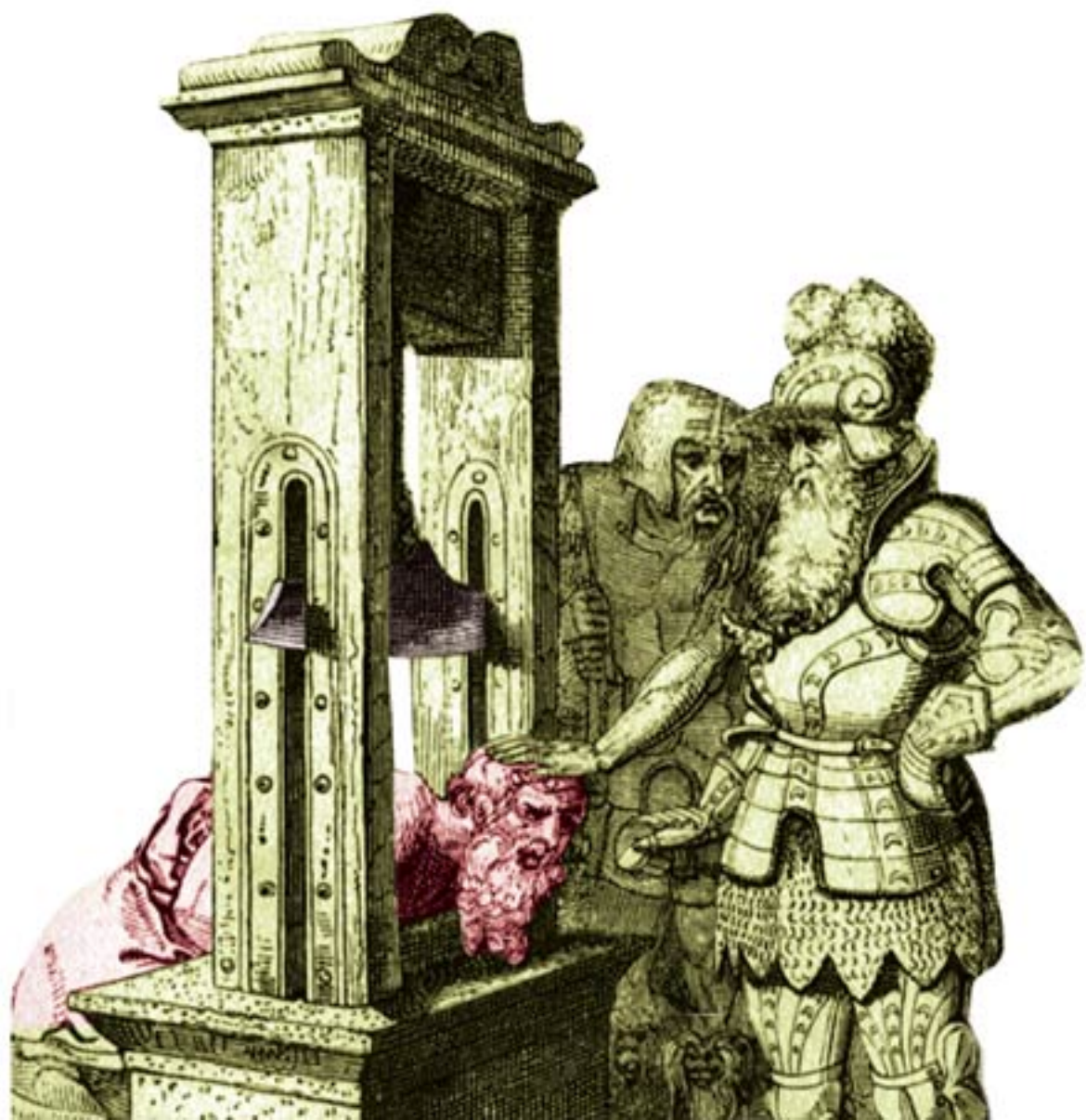
Amazing True Stories of

# EXECUTION

## blunders



Geoffrey Abbott



## AMAZING TRUE STORIES OF EXECUTION BLUNDERS

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I am also greatly indebted to Dr Harold Hillman, formerly Reader in Physiology and Director of Unity Laboratory of Applied Neurobiology at the University of Surrey.

## **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

Geoffrey Abbott served in the RAF for 35 years before becoming a Yeoman Warder ('Beefeater') and living in the Tower of London. He now lives in the Lake District and, when he's not flying helicopters, acts as a consultant to international film and television companies. By invitation Geoffrey is also a contributor of torture and execution items for the latest edition of *Encyclopaedia Britannica*.

## OTHER BOOKS BY THE AUTHOR

*Beefeaters of the Tower of London*, Hendon, 1985

*Tortures of the Tower of London*, David & Charles, 1986

*The Tower of London As It Was*, Hendon, 1988

*Ghosts of the Tower of London*, Hendon, 1989

*Lords of the Scaffold*, Hale, 1991/ Dobby, 2001

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*Lipstick on the Noose*, Summersdale, 2003, published as *Amazing True  
Stories of Female Executions*, Summersdale, 2006.

## FOREWORD

Geoffrey Abbott is an enthusiast, a natural storyteller with a gift for resuscitating dead trifles. With inside information and access to the worst, he revels in shocking and enlightening.

He is an actor on a paperback stage relishing the role of narrator, star and epilogist. He defies you to leave his theatre until you have the player's last words haunting your mind.

As a visitor to all of Geoffrey's previous productions I heartily invite you to another triumph. Let the show begin!

Jeremy Beadle  
March 28<sup>th</sup> 2006

*Jeremy Beadle has been a keen student of true crime for many years. Before television beckoned he was a hugely successful tourist guide specialising in blood, sex and death. He won Celebrity Mastermind, specialist subject London Capital Murder 1900-1940, bi-annually hosts the international Jack the Ripper Conferences and has amassed one of the finest true crime libraries in Britain.*

*Dedicated to the memory of my friend the late, great hangman Syd Dernley*

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## INTRODUCTION

In the days when life was short and disease was rife, when existence for the lower classes was a daily struggle to survive and humane consideration for the wrong-doers, as prescribed by the law, was minimal, death on the scaffold, however violent, was accepted by the populace as the norm and, to many, as a regular source of entertainment. No instruction was given to the executioner regarding exactly how he should perform his task and little or no consideration was given to the possible suffering of the victim, for had not he or she attempted to remove or replace the monarch, change the country's religion or committed some other hideous crime?

So why hone the axe razor-sharp? Why go to all the trouble of training a man to aim it accurately and mercifully? Why allow the victim to die quickly on the rope, or die at all, before disembowelling them with the ripping knife, had they been sentenced to be hanged, drawn and quartered? After all, the victims were there to be punished – and punished they were. Deterrence was the name of the game and as a negative can rarely be proven, the question as to whether it worked or not remains unanswered.

The legal responsibility in England for the execution of criminals, by whatever means, was that of the sheriff, the word derived from 'shire-reeve', he being the chief officer of the Crown of each county or shire. That official however, in order to avoid having to do the distasteful job personally, subcontracted it out to anyone who volunteered, and so the task of beheading, hanging, or of drawing and quartering the condemned person, was undertaken by the hangman, the title describing his more usual occupation.

Those who tightened the noose, swung the axe or wielded



the ripping knife were men of their times, most of them lacking sensitivity or imagination, many of them brutal and callous. Employed when the occasion demanded rather than as civil (!) servants, few if any records were kept of their names, and anonymity was also essential to avoid retribution wreaked by the supporters of those they had executed. Loathed and abused by the public at large, their services, however repugnant to the society of the day, were essential, for without them all those engaged in administering the law of the land, the judges and lawyers, the court officials and the juries, would have been totally redundant.

Admittedly some of them, Thrift, Sanson, Schmidt and the like, tried to dispatch their victims in a humane manner, but the very presence of the almost invariably hostile crowds inhibited their efforts. By instinct anti-government, those who attended executions generally classified the executioner as a symbol of authority and targeted him accordingly, but he was also traditionally greeted with almost affectionate abuse (akin to the present-day treatment of football referees). And just as today's soccer fans would not miss a home game for the world, so in the days of public executions the locals seized every opportunity to attend a local hanging or beheading. Should it be the execution of the perpetrator of a particularly horrific crime, residents of nearby towns would pour in by cart, coach and wagon; in the nineteenth century the rail companies would even lay on special excursions with reductions in fares for group-travelling.

These events provided a great day out for the whole family; they would get there early to get a good seat on the specially erected wooden stands, while the more affluent would book rooms overlooking the scaffold and partake of wine and such repasts as cold chicken or pheasant to sustain them through the performance. Piemen and ale-purveyors plied their wares among



the spectators, pickpockets thrived, and the ladies of the night worked days for a change.

Crowds of any sort are peculiarly amorphous bodies capable of committing the sort of acts which its individual members would never dream of carrying out. As an integral part of a mob, those around the scaffold never hesitated to direct disparaging remarks towards the executioner, shouting derogatory comments regarding his skill, appearance, doubtful sobriety and parentage; such epithets were sometimes accompanied by easily obtainable missiles such as rotten fruit and vegetables, even the occasional dead cat. Only when a murderer had killed a child or dismembered a female victim did the hangman find any favour with the crowd, and that but rarely.

So it was hardly surprising that when the executioner, exposed and vulnerable as he was in full view of everyone, became distracted and, at times, apprehensive over his personal safety, things went horribly wrong: nooses slipped, wrong levers were pulled, axes and swords wavered off-aim and guillotine blades jammed.

Even in more recent centuries, when executions took place behind prison walls and the executioners themselves were men of conscience and humanity, the scientific advances at their disposal, being more intricate and technical, brought their own problems with them: electrodes dried out, veins eluded the probing syringe, cyanide delivery mechanisms malfunctioned and trapdoors inexplicably failed to fall. Because no system is totally infallible (and executions are operated by human beings with all their failings) blunders were, and still are, inevitable and unavoidable.

Through it all, however, shone the ability of some of the more undaunted victims to retain an almost unbelievable light-heartedness; delivering a blithe quip or wry comment moments



before their lives were brought to an abrupt end. Regardless of their crime, one can only admire their courage and wit under such pressure.



## PART ONE:

### METHODS OF TORTURE AND EXECUTION

#### METHODS OF TORTURE

##### **The Boots**

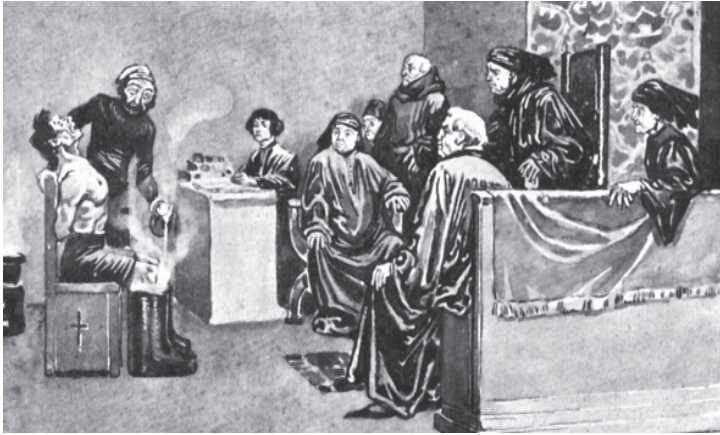
Among the tortures mentioned in this book, many chroniclers believe that the 'boots' ranked high among those available to the courts; indeed, some called it 'the most severe and cruell paine in the whole worlde.' Whichever variety of this device was used, the victim, even if not subsequently executed, was invariably crippled for life. In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries this particular method of persuasion was popular in France and Scotland (where it had the deceptively whimsical-sounding name of 'bootikins'), and so distressing was the sight of a victim undergoing this torture that, as Bishop Burnett wrote in his *History*, 'when any are to be struck in the Boot, it is done in the presence of the Council (of Scotland) and upon that occasion almost all attempt to absent themselves.' Because of the members' reluctance, an order had to be promulgated ordering sufficient numbers of them to stay; without a quorum, the process of questioning could not begin.

One type of the device was a single boot made of iron, large enough to encase both legs up to the knees. Wedges would then be driven downwards a little at a time, betwixt leg and metal, lacerating the flesh and crushing the bone, and incriminating questions asked following each blow with the mallet.

Another version, known as the 'Spanish Boot', consisted of an iron legging tightened by a screw mechanism. Heating the device until red-hot either before being clamped on the legs or while being tightened was an additional incentive to confess.



Another type of high boots were made of soft spongy leather, and were held in front of a blazing fire while scalding water was poured over the fiendish footwear. Alternatively, the victim might have to don stockings made of particularly pliable parchment, which would then be thoroughly soaked with water. Again subjected to the heat of the fire, the material would slowly dry and start to shrink, the subsequent excruciating pain soon extracting a confession.



*Boiling Water In Boots*

## **Branding**

While not an actual torture or a method of execution, it was nevertheless a penalty administered by the executioner and so was equally liable to go horribly wrong. Branding, from the Teutonic word *brinnan*, to burn, was used in many countries for centuries and was applied by a hot iron which seared letters signifying the felon's particular crime into the fleshy part of the thumb, the forehead, cheeks or shoulders. More appropriately, blasphemers sometimes had their tongues bored through with a red-hot skewer.





*Branding With Red-Hot Iron*

In England the iron consisted of a long iron bolt with a wooden handle at one end and a raised letter at the other. The letters allowed everyone to know not only that someone was a criminal, but also what particular type of crime had been committed, having ‘SS’ for Sower of Sedition, ‘M’ for Malefactor, ‘B’ Blasphemer, ‘F’ Fraymaker, ‘R’ Rogue and so on.

Until the practice was abolished in 1832, French criminals were similarly disfigured, the brand being made even more prominent by the application of an ointment comprised of gunpowder and lard or pomade. In medieval times all felons had the fleur-de-lys brand but later forgers had ‘F’; those sentenced to penal servitude, ‘TF’ (*travaux forcés*); for life imprisonment, ‘TPF’ (*travaux forcés à perpétuité*) and so on.



## The Rack

As with other instruments of torture, many different types existed but the basic design of the rack consisted of an open rectangular frame over six feet in length that was raised on four legs about three feet from the floor. The victim was laid on his back on the ground beneath it, his wrists and ankles being tied by ropes to a windlass, or axle, at each end of the frame. These were turned in opposite directions, each manned by two of the rackmaster's assistants; one man, by inserting a pole into one of the sockets in the shaft, would turn the windlass, tightening the ropes a fraction of an inch at a time; the other would insert his pole in similar fashion but keep it still to maintain the pressure on the victim's joints while his companion transferred his pole to the next socket in the windlass. The stretching, the gradual dislocation and the questions would continue until the interrogator had finally been satisfied.

A later version reduced the need for four men to two by incorporating a ratchet mechanism which held the ropes taut all the time, the incessant and terrifying click, click, click of the cogs and the creaking of the slowly tightening ropes being the only sounds in the silence of the torture chamber other than the shuddering gasps of the sufferer.

The 'Ladder Rack' was employed in some continental countries. As its name implies, it consisted of a wide ladder secured to the wall at an angle of forty-five degrees. The victim was placed with their back against it, part way up, the wrists being bound to a rung behind at waist level. A rope, tied around the ankles, was then passed round a pulley or roller at the foot of the ladder which, when rotated, pulled the victim down the ladder, wrenching the arms up behind, causing severe pain and eventually dislocating the shoulder blades. To add to the torment,



and further encourage a confession, lighted candles were sometimes applied to the armpits and other parts of the body.



*The Ladder Rack*

Where it was considered that wider publicity would have a greater deterrent value, felons were racked in the open, usually in the



marketplace. For that purpose a different version of the rack was utilised. The victim had to lie face-upwards on the ground; arms bound behind and wrists pulled up and secured to a stake. A long rope, tied about the ankles, was then wound around a vertically mounted windlass, the shaft of which, similar to other models, was pierced with holes so that the executioner's minions could insert poles and so rotate it, thereby imposing continuous and maximum strain on the victim's limbs. This version not only dislocated hip and leg joints but also inflicted extra strain on the shoulder blades and elbows because of the already contorted position of the criminal's arms. And should any additional punishment be deemed necessary, the executioner would deliver measured blows with an iron bar.

### **Water Torture**



*The Water Torture*

This method of persuasion required the prisoner to be bound to a bench, a cow-horn then being inserted into his or her mouth.



Following a refusal to answer an incriminating question to the satisfaction of the interrogators, a jug of water would be poured into the horn and the question repeated. Any reluctance to swallow would be overcome by the executioner pinching the victim's nose. This procedure would continue, swelling the victim's stomach to grotesque proportions and causing unbearable agony, either until all the required information had been extracted, or until the water, by eventually entering and filling the lungs, brought death by asphyxiation.



## METHODS OF EXECUTION

### The Heading Axe and Block

Being dispatched by cold steel rather than being hanged was granted as a privilege to those of royal or aristocratic birth, it being considered less ignoble to lose one's life as if slain in battle, rather than being suspended by the hempen rope. Such privilege did not necessarily make death any less painful; on the contrary, for although being hanged brought a slow death by strangulation, the axe was little more than a crude unbalanced chopper. The target, the nape of the neck, was small; the wielder, cynosure of ten thousand or more eyes, nervous and clumsy; and even when delivered accurately it killed not by cutting or slicing, but by brutally crushing its way through flesh and bone, muscle and sinew. It was, after all, a weapon for punishment, not for mercy.

Most English executions by the axe took place in London, the weapon being held ready for use in the Tower of London. The one currently displayed there measures nearly thirty-six inches in length and weighs almost eight pounds. The blade itself is rough and unpolished, the cutting edge ten and a half inches long. Its size and the fact that most of its weight is at the back of the blade means that when brought down rapidly the weapon would tend to twist slightly, throwing it off aim and so failing to strike the centre of the nape of the victim's neck. Unlike hangings, executions by decapitation were comparatively rare events, the executioner thereby being deprived of the necessary practice.

A further factor was that the axe's impact inevitably caused the block to bounce, and if the first stroke was inaccurate and so jolted the victim into a slightly different position, the executioner would need to readjust his point of aim for the next stroke: no mean task while being subjected to a hail of jeers, abuse and assorted missiles from the mob surrounding the scaffold.

