

The Afterlife of the Gibbet

Abstract Gibbets could remain standing for many decades. Some were removed because their presence was objectionable; others were eventually brought down by time and the weather. Sometimes, bodies were stolen. Folklore was attached to the locations of gibbets and to the remains which stayed there, and often the names of gibbeted criminals are still attached to places in their landscapes. Parts of the gibbet and of the bodies themselves were collected and curated, sometimes for utilitarian or scientific purposes but often just as curiosities. The case of Eugene Aram's skull is a case in point.

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HOW LONG DID THE GIBBET REMAIN?

There was no minimum or maximum specified time for a gibbet to remain standing, and they could remain in situ for anything between three days and more than a century. Whereas some were deliberately removed because of the nuisance caused by visitors or because of the offensiveness of the sight and smell of the remains, others stayed in their gibbets until time or weather brought them down. A body that had not been embalmed or otherwise artificially preserved would normally have decayed fully within a few months in the open air, but some bodies became naturally desiccated and survived, entire or in part, for many years. The gibbets of James Price and Thomas Brown, for example, erected on Trafford

Green in 1796, were taken down in 1818, at which time apparently not only nearly all the skeletons remained but also some soft tissue was still surviving.¹ Gibbet cages were normally designed to hold the body quite securely, but as connective tissue decayed, most elements would fall out of the irons. The exception is the skull which was too large to slip between the bars and so is sometimes found still in its position. John Breeds's skull remains inside his gibbet irons, held at Rye town hall. The skull of Edward Corbet, gibbeted on Bierton Common, Buckinghamshire, in 1773 was still visible in his gibbet in 1795 when a correspondent of the *Bucks Herald* noted it during a visit to the Bierton feast. Corbet's gibbet eventually fell when the action of the swivel eroded the attachment and it fell into a ditch.²

By the 1830s, the duration of gibbeting had become much shorter—for various reasons. The body of William Jobling, gibbeted in 1832 at Jarrow Slake, near South Shields, was removed without authorisation within three weeks of his execution, supposedly by his relatives or friends, although nobody was ever tried for the offence of removing his body, which, in theory, could result in a sentence of transportation.³ James Cook, the last man to be gibbeted in England, was executed in Leicester in August 1832, about a week after Jobling. His body was removed only four days after being suspended, following an application to the Secretary of State. In Cook's case, although the correspondence is not published, comment in the newspapers of the time suggests that it was a combination of the huge crowds and the associated possibility of disorder, combined with distaste for the exhibition of cadavers which motivated the removal of the body. The *Leicester and Nottingham Journal* for 18 August 1832 commented,

¹ *Lancaster Gazette and General Advertiser*, 2 May 1818, issue 881.

² Andrews *Bygone punishments*, pp. 56–57.

³ *York Herald and General Advertiser*, 8 September 1832, issue 3131 contains the news that his body had been stolen and supposedly buried in the sand. There is more to this than first appears. The *Leicester Chronicle; or, Commercial and Agricultural Advertiser* adumbrated on 11 August 1832, issue 1142, “It is supposed, however, that [Jobling's] fellow workmen will very soon remove [his body] and bury it in some private place ... In the act of parliament ordering murderers' bodies of [sic] to be hung in chains, there is a clause inflicting the punishment of transportation for seven years upon all who may be guilty of stealing the body from the gibbet”.

We have heard several reasons given for the interment of Cook's body, but as the Secretary of State's letter has not been published, we can give no positive information on the subject. One cause that we have heard assigned is, that should murders be as frequent within the next twelve years as they have been during the same time gone by, the county would be frightfully studded with such exhibitions, and there being now little waste land except by the side of roads, they must necessarily prove a great annoyance to the inhabitants residing in the villages. However, be the cause what it may, we are glad that the disgusting *sight* has been removed considering it, as we do, the revival of a barbarous custom which a more humanized age has long exploded from the statute book.

WHEN AND WHY DID A GIBBET COME DOWN?

In the absence of any legally specified term for which the body must remain on the gibbet, bodies were generally left until weather, land development or time brought them down. However, there were a number of reasons why a body might be taken down sooner. Local residents sometimes petitioned the sheriff or judge to have a body removed shortly after the gibbeting, and the residents had to give reasons for this. Such reasons divide broadly into two categories: that the gibbet was itself noisome and distasteful, and offended the sensibilities of those who lived or travelled nearby, and that the visitors attracted to the gibbet caused disturbance to the local area.

Concerns of the first kind motivated the complaints about the body of Samuel Hurlock which, in 1747, was removed from its location at Stamford Hill "on Account of the Heat, the Stench of his Body being a Nuisance to the Inhabitants of the Neighbourhood" and placed instead on common land off the Tottenham turnpike.⁴ Similar concerns were later made about, for example, Thomas Watkin's gibbet near Windsor (1764) and Jenkin Prothero's near Bristol (1783):

On Monday last the body of Watkins the Gardener, who was lately executed at Windsor, and hung in chains for the murder of Miss

⁴ *Old England*, 15 August 1747.

Hammersley's servant maid, was removed from the road side where it hung, and the gibbet erected on the banks of the River, on a complaint that it was a nuisance to the passengers.⁵

Jenkin William Prothero was hanged for murder in 1783 and the judge specified that his body be hung in chains on Durdham Down, Bristol. However, the local inhabitants petitioned the Royal court that the body be moved, and the sheriff of Gloucester was ordered to find a new spot for Prothero's gibbet or to send his body for dissection. The petitioners particularly suggest that the spectacle was revolting to those who sought out the hot wells adjacent to the Down and that the gibbet was "placed so near the back part of the dwelling house of a widow woman who used to let an apartment in the summer season to persons of decent repute from Bristol that it will be injurious to her".⁶ The fact that this letter was sent to the sheriff confirms that it was he who normally had responsibility for organising the location of the gibbet. Where the proposed location was on private land, however, the sheriff could proceed only with the permission of the landowner. In the case of the Washwood Heath gibbet, the sheriff omitted this crucial step, and the complaint went directly to the judge.

In 1781, murderers John Hammond and Thomas Pitmore were hung in chains on a shared gibbet on Birmingham's Washwood Heath. The crowds of people attending the gibbeting and visiting the structure afterwards had disturbed a rabbit warren and thus compromised the warrener's livelihood, argued local petitioners, seeking to have the gibbet removed or relocated.⁷ As additional argument, the petitioners mentioned the visibility of the gibbet from both Erdington Hall and Aston Hall, illustrating another common factor in the deliberate removal of gibbets: that they offended the sensibilities of polite people. The gibbets of Abraham Tull and William Hawkins in Berkshire were taken down and buried at the request of a local lady. William Andrews recorded that "Mrs. Brocas, of Beaurepaire, then residing at Wokefield Park, gave

⁵ *St James's Chronicle or the British Evening Post*, 24–26 May 1764, issue 503. His hanging in chains in Gallows Lane near Windsor was reported in the *Public Advertiser* on 13 March 1764. A warrant issued by Judge Wilmot on 30 June 1764 orders the removal of the gibbet and body of Watkins to be hung up again at Churgreen, a mile and a half beyond Windsor towards Reading (TNA E389/243/620).

⁶ TNA E389/247/185.

⁷ TNA DD/E/208/15, DD/E/208/16, T90/163.

private orders for them to be taken down in the night and buried, which was accordingly done. During her daily drives she passed the gibbeted men and the sight greatly distressed her”.⁸

Anthony Lingard’s gibbet was taken down by the Duke of Devonshire in response to complaints from local people about the noise the rattling bones (and presumably creaking chains) made.⁹ The noise of the gibbet’s “creaking cage and bleaching bones” was also noted in relation to an encounter with Spencer’s gibbet at Scrooby toll bar, Nottinghamshire, which was erected in 1779 and apparently still visible in 1846.¹⁰

In 1799, the gibbet of a man called John Haines was controversially sited on Hounslow Heath, occasioning some spirited discussion in the newspapers. The *Whitehall Evening Post* complained that it was situated too close to the road; the *Oracle and Daily Advertiser* agreed that its effect was only “to frighten women and poison travellers”; and the *Morning Post and Advertiser* reported that the royal family were now travelling by a different road to avoid the spectacle. Only the *Morning Herald* demurred, claiming that it was 500 yards from the road and not in sight of any house: a claim made rather suspect by the *Morning Chronicle*’s report that on the night of 16 March the body in its irons was blown from the gibbet into the garden of a nearby house.¹¹

THEFT OF BODIES FROM GIBBETS

Despite the possibility of being sentenced to up to seven years’ transportation if caught removing a body from its gibbet, friends and relatives of the deceased sometimes attempted rescue. The bodies of Andrew Burnet and Henry Payne, gibbeted at Durdham Down near Bristol, disappeared from their irons a month after their executions in 1744 but were found hidden in some rocks and hung up again. One can only suppose that their rescuers were disturbed or interrupted by the coming of daylight and attempted to

⁸William Andrews *Bygone Punishments*, p. 63.

⁹Ebenezer Rhodes (1822) *Peak Scenery*; a letter from Jeffrey Rackett dated 22 March 1826 requesting the gibbet’s removal survives in TNA (HO 44/16/25—f25).

¹⁰Robert Mellors (1920) *Scrooby: The Archbishops’ Palace, and the Pilgrim Fathers* (Nottingham: J. and H. Bell).

¹¹*Whitehall Evening Post*, 12–14 March 1799, issue 8056; *Oracle and Daily Advertiser*, 26 March 1799, issue 941; *Morning Herald*, 15 March 1799, issue 5769; *Morning Chronicle*, 19 March 1799, issue 9304.

conceal the bodies rather than risk being caught with them.¹² The body of Walter Kidson, also hung in chains in Gloucestershire, on Stourbridge Common, in September 1773, was stolen two years after his execution. *The London Chronicle* of 19 September 1775 (issue 2931) reports that the gibbet was sawn off at the neck and the body removed. Gloucestershire seems to have had an unusual number of gibbet raiders, for it was also in this county that the bodies of Thomas and Henry Dunsden were removed from their gibbets and taken away, on the same night that the lodge of one of the local keepers was raided and a number of deerskins stolen.¹³

In London, in 1759, a body in its irons was stolen from execution dock, where the Admiralty gibbets were located,¹⁴ and a few years later all the gibbets along the Edgware Road were cut down during a single night. This was probably an act of vandalism rather than an attempted rescue, since bodies were left lying in their chains on the road.¹⁵ In 1786, the body of another Admiralty convict—George Coombes, hung in chains at Boar Ness Point, Kent—was stolen, and the Admiralty offered a £50 reward for information leading to the apprehension of those responsible.¹⁶

In Lincolnshire, the body of Philip Hooton, hung in chains on Surfleet Common in 1769, was stolen about a week after it had gone up, and apparently it was rumoured to have been thrown into the sea. The *Leicester and Nottingham Journal* of 18 March 1769 reported that a reward of £500 had been offered for apprehending those who had stolen the body. Despite the offer of this enormous sum, there is no record of any arrest for this crime. The person who removed the body of John Croxford from Hollowell Heath in Northamptonshire in 1775, nearly eleven years after it was hung up there, was not so lucky. The newspaper records that a man was arrested and prosecuted for the crime.¹⁷ Strangest of all is the case of Gill Smith, hung in chains in 1738 on Kennington Common for the murder of his wife. A week after his execution, somebody cut off one of his legs at the knee and attempted to remove one of his arms, although they were obstructed by his gibbet

¹² Darby *Olde Cotswold Punishments*, p. 20.

¹³ *Gloucester Journal*, 8 November 1784, issue 3265.

¹⁴ *London Chronicle* 1759, issue 353.

¹⁵ *Lloyd's Evening Post*, 4–6 April 1763, issue 894.

¹⁶ *London Gazette*, 14–18 February 1876, issue 12,726.

¹⁷ *St James's Chronicle or British Evening Post*, 13–16 May 1775, issue 2223.

irons.¹⁸ This is very clearly not an attempt to rescue the body for burial but probably represents the taking of criminal body parts as curios or as a prank.

Weather

For many gibbets, it was neither planned removal nor illegal rescue but the ongoing onslaught of British weather that eventually brought them down. A newspaper correspondent reported meeting a youth in Derby carrying the skull of Matthew Cochrane.¹⁹ Cochrane had been hung in chains fifteen years earlier but his body had finally been blown down by the wind the previous night. “Numbers, who had often stood in melancholy gaze”, reported the witness, “repaired to the gibbet, and returned with various parts of his remains”. When Tom Otter’s gibbet in Lincolnshire was blown down in 1850, 46 years after he was first hung up, the gypsies acted quickly and were able to take nearly all the iron, except for the head piece, which was kept by Edwin Jarvis of Doddington Hall.²⁰

More dramatic weather put an end to York’s gibbet on Busselton Common near Bristol when lightning split the gibbet “in a thousand little splinters”²¹ and allowed the body, which had been hanging for four years, to fall. A gibbet on Hounslow Heath was also struck by lightning in 1768, and one imagines that being tall and prominent structures topped with iron, gibbets were not infrequently struck.

When the body came down shortly after it had been hung in chains, either accidentally or during an attempted rescue, it was sometimes rehung. The body of Captain James Lowry, wrote the *Whitehall Evening Post* or *London Intelligencer* in 1758, having fallen down soon after hanging, had been brought to Billingsgate where it awaited rehangng. On other occasions, the body would be buried near the gibbet; this is what happened to William Odell, who was reburied “under a gibbet near the hedge on Ealing Common”.²² On nearby Finchley Common, in 1782, Matthew Flood’s

¹⁸ *Old Common Sense or the Englishman’s Journal*, 22 April 1738, issue 64.

¹⁹ *Lloyd’s Evening Post*, 28 October 1791, issue 5356.

²⁰ Jarvis recorded the event in a commonplace book which is still kept at the hall in the possession of Jarvis’s descendant Claire Birch.

²¹ *London Evening Post*, 29 June–2 July 1745, issue 2754.

²² *Public Advertiser*, 10 January 1761, issue 8170.

gibbet, which had been erected sixty years earlier, was clandestinely sawn down and left near the remaining stump of gibbet post, after two of his fingers had been removed.²³

Enclosure and Convenience

Since many gibbets were situated on common land, the enclosure of the commons, which was proceeding swiftly in much of England and Wales through the later part of the eighteenth century, precipitated the removal of gibbets. This is what happened at Badley Moor, Norfolk, for example, when James Clifffen's gibbet was removed as part of the enclosure process. Whyte notes that the gibbets of Stephen Watson on West Bradenham Common and William Suffolk on North Walsham Common, as well as Clifffen's, were taken down in the same year that their parishes were enclosed.²⁴

GIBBET LORE

A quantity of local lore exists around gibbets and some stories recur in several guises. One common motif is the bird nesting in the human remains. *Machie's Norfolk Annal*, vol. 1, 1800–1850 records that around 8 June 1801 a starling's nest with young birds in it was taken “out of the breast of Stephen Watson, who hangs on a gibbet on Bradenham Common, near Swaffam” (p. 6); another starling's nest was found in the chest cavity of Gabriel Tomkins at Dunstable,²⁵ and the baby birds were removed and sold as curiosities by a man who broke one of Thompson's ribs to get at the chicks. In the skull of James Price, gibbeted on Trafford Green, Cheshire, in 1796 was found the nest of a wren or a robin.²⁶ An unspecified bird was said to have nested in the skull of John Stretton, whose gibbet on Finchley Common was blown down in 1776.²⁷ A commonplace book kept by Edwin Jarvis of Doddington Hall records how a “willow-biter” (blue tit) made its nest in the mouth of the body of Tom

²³No explanation is given for this curious incident, which was reported in the *London Chronicle*, 4–6 June 1782, issue 3981.

²⁴Whyte “The deviant dead”, p. 25, 37.

²⁵*St James's Chronicle or the British Evening Post*, 22–24 June 1762, issue 201.

²⁶A wren, according to the *Lancaster Gazette and General Advertiser* for 2 May 1818 (issue 881), or of a robin, according to www.mickletrafford.org.uk/history.php.

²⁷*St James's Chronicle or the British Evening Post*, 21–24 December 1776, issue 2463.

Otter (executed in 1806) about a year after he was hung up (Fig. 3.1). A similar story relates to Bennington in Norfolk. Jarvis records the riddle made about the nest in Tom Otter's skull:

There were nine tongues all in one head
The tenth went out to get some bread
To feed the living in the dead.

One of the most entertaining pieces of gibbet lore, and one that demonstrates the general aversion to gibbet sites, especially during the night, is the widespread story of the talking gibbet. This folk story typically features a man bragging of his courage to his fellows at an inn. He then volunteers or is dared by the landlord or his companions to visit a nearby gibbet in the middle of the night and greet the body hanging there and perhaps also to offer the criminal hanging there some food or drink. As he goes to carry out his task, the braggart feels his courage begin to fail but steels himself to offer some soup or ale to the grisly remains. But he is terrified when the body in the gibbet answers him back, and immediately runs away. The usual twist is that the voice of the dead man was actually that of one of his drinking companions who had rushed to the gibbet ahead of him and hidden himself nearby. Such tales attach to the gibbet of John Grindrod (executed 1759) on Pendleton Moor, Lancashire; Matthew Cocklane, executed in Derby in 1776; and others.²⁸ There are persistent stories of criminals gibbeted alive during this period, but none of them can be substantiated. The case of John Whitfield, a highwayman gibbeted in Cumbria in 1769, for example, is cited by Andrews as a case of gibbeting alive.²⁹ However, contemporary accounts, such as that in the *St James's Chronicle* for 12 August 1768, record that Whitfield was executed at Carlisle before being hung in chains near Armithwaite. Gibbeting alive was still practised in the eighteenth century in the Caribbean and parts of America as a punishment of

²⁸ Andrews, *Bygone Punishments*, pp. 51–52. It is possible that Grindrod's story is the original because it was the subject of a popular ballad that was published in 1855 in W. Harrison Ainsworth's *Ballads: Romantic, Fantastical and Humorous*, and it is certainly plausible that variants of this pleasing story were attached to gibbets in other localities.

²⁹ Andrews, *Bygone Punishments*, p. 58.

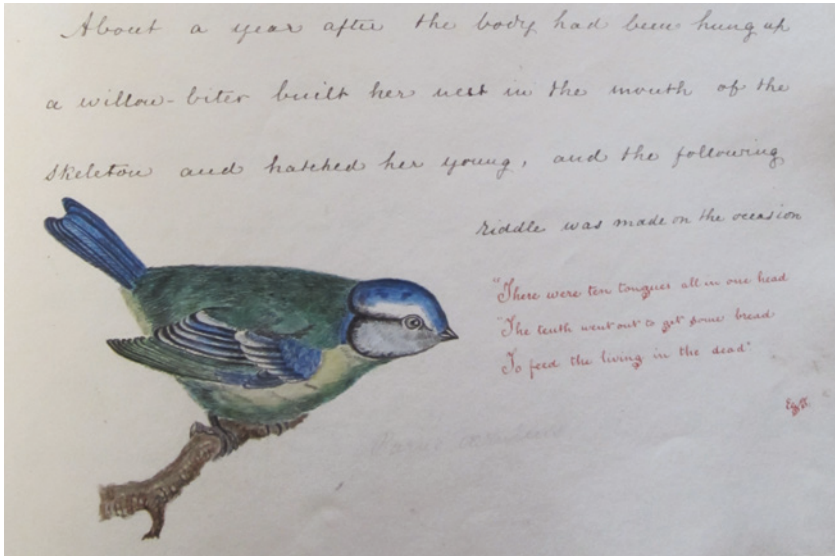


Fig. 3.1 ‘Willow biter’ and rhyme, drawn and recorded in the commonplace book of Edwin Jarvis of Doddington Hall, Lincs., courtesy of Claire Birch (photo: Sarah Tarlow)

slaves for crimes or acts of rebellion but is not known for Britain during this period.³⁰

THE MATERIAL AFTERLIVES OF THE GIBBET

The material remains of the gibbet, including the wooden framework, the iron work and the human bones, followed various journeys in their own afterlives. The wooden gibbet post and cross element were often

³⁰Gibbeting alive seems to have been practised in Britain during the sixteenth century. William Harrison’s *Description of Elizabethan England* (1577) notes that most felons sentenced to death are cut down and buried when they are dead, “But if he be convicted of wilful murder, done either upon pretended malice or in any notable robbery, he is either hanged alive in chains near the place where the fact was committed (or else upon compassion taken, first strangled with a rope) and so continueth till his bones consume to nothing” (Book III, Chap. 6).

substantial pieces of wood, as we have seen in Chap. 2, and could be ten metres or more in length. After functioning as gibbet posts for several years, they were sources of well-seasoned large timbers which were desirable for many utilitarian purposes. The post that had served to suspend Eugene Aram's gibbet in Knaresborough was installed in a nearby inn, the Brewer's Arms, formerly known as the Windmill, where it served as a beam.³¹

The wooden posts were also of interest because of their former grisly function. An 1867 report in the *Times* notes the interest generated by the rediscovery of the post of Spence Broughton's gibbet in Sheffield:

Discovery of Spence Broughton's Gibbet

The remains of the Gibbet-post of Spence Broughton, who was hung in irons on Attercliffe Common after being executed at York for the robbery of the Sheffield and Rotherham Postman, have this week been dug out of the ground.

It is solid old oak, perfectly black and quite sound, though embedded in the ground since 1792. It consists of a massive framework, 10ft. long and 1ft. deep, firmly embedded in the ground to support the Gibbet-post, which passed through it's centre and was bolted to it. Some 4ft. 6in. of this post is left, the remainder of the post is 18in square.

This relic was discovered by a person named Holroyd, in making excavations for the cellars of some houses in Clifton Street, Attercliffe Common, opposite the "Red Lion". It was conveyed into the garden of that Inn, where it may now be seen.

Many hundreds of persons have paid it a visit.³²

The current location of the post is not known, but the association with Spence Broughton's gibbet has been re-invented in the present-day Noose and Gibbet pub on Broughton Lane, Sheffield, which is decorated with a (highly fanciful) gibbet (Fig. 3.2).

³¹P. Walker (1991) *Murders and Mysteries from the Yorkshire Dales* (London: Robert Hale), p. 83. According to the trade directories, there has been no Brewer's Arms in Knaresborough since the 1910s and I have been unable to find its exact location.

³²*The Times*, 6 May 1867.



Fig. 3.2 ‘Noose and Gibbet’ pub, Sheffield (photo: Tom Maskill)

The remains of the gibbet post that had been used for Andrew Mills, hung in chains for murder in the later seventeenth century in County Durham, was known as “Andrew Mills’s stob”. Pieces of the stob were taken away as charms for curing toothache, until there was nothing left.³³ Ralph Smith’s gibbet post, erected in Lincolnshire in 1792, was used to make various fancy goods, including a tobacco bowl, now in the Guildhall museum at Boston.³⁴

It is likely that the ironwork of gibbets was frequently recycled for its value as scrap metal, as was presumably the case with the irons of Tom Otter’s gibbet cage, which were taken (by “gypsies”, according to a local source) very soon after the gibbet was blown down. It is possible that gibbet iron was recycled into items that gained part of their value from

³³ Andrews, *Bygone Punishments*, p. 47.

³⁴ www.boston.gov.uk/index.aspx?articleid=4138.

their glamorous association with criminal notoriety. Anthony Lingard's gibbet irons, for example, were made into toasting forks.³⁵

The bones of gibbeted criminals usually did not survive but were broken, dispersed by animals and decayed by natural processes. Archaeologically, a couple of possible gibbeting deposits are known, marking the probable locations of gibbets. Disarticulated bone was found during the enlargement of the Royal Edward Dock at Avonmouth, Gloucestershire, at the beginning of the twentieth century. The bones are thought to have originated from the gibbet that stood nearby on Dunball Island, possibly that of Matthew Mahoney, executed in 1741, which was blown down in a storm in the late 1830s. Similar remains from Eyre Square, Galway City relate to a place of gibbeting. In Ireland, the display of criminal bodies and body parts in urban locations was more frequent than in England, where gibbets were almost always erected in the countryside.³⁶ The paucity of post-gibbeting or post-dissection human remains traceable by either historical or archaeological sources is itself interesting. It evidences the successful disintegration or obliteration of the criminal body.

Some remains are known to have been buried after the gibbet fell or was removed, most usually in a pit at or near the gibbet site.

The body of John Gatward, gibbeted probably at Collier's End near Puckeridge in Hertfordshire, was eventually buried by his mother, according to one source:

I saw him hanging in a scarlet coat, and after he had hung about two or three months it is supposed that the screw was filed which supported him and that he fell in the first high wind after. Mr Lord of Trinity passed by as he lay on the ground, and, trying to open his breast to see what state his body was in, not being offensive but quite dry, a button of brass came off, which he preserves to this day... His mother had the body brought to the inn and buried it in the cellar.³⁷

³⁵ Andrews, *Bygone Punishments*, p. 71.

³⁶ J. Brett (1996) Archaeology and the construction of the Royal Edward Dock, Avonmouth 1902–1908. *Archaeology in the Severn Estuary* 7: 115–20. C. Lofqvist (2004) *Osteological report on human skeletal remains from Eyre Square, Galway City* (Moore Archaeological and Environmental Services Ltd, unpublished report).

³⁷ Cole's manuscript history of Cambridgeshire, cited in Charles George Harper (1908) *Half-hours with the Highwaymen: picturesque biographies and traditions of the knights of the road, volume 1* (London: Chapman and Hall), pp. 202–04. *The London Magazine or Gentleman's Monthly Intelligencer* (vol. 26, p. 202) records that at Hertford Assizes one John Gatward alias Gardgreen was convicted of robbing the Northern Mail. He was sentenced to be hung in chains at New Bridge, Puckeridge, Colliers End.

On other occasions, bones were kept either as gruesome but thrilling curios or for their phrenological interest. The alleged skull of Michael Morey, gibbeted on the Isle of Wight in 1737 for the murder of his grandson, was an attraction to guests at the nearby Hare and Hounds tavern until recent archaeological examination confirmed that the skull in question is female and probably belonged to one of the individuals buried in the Bronze Age “Michael Morey’s tump” on which Morey’s gibbet was situated. Morey’s gibbet post is still incorporated into the fabric of the inn, and a notice adjacent to the beam gives its provenance.

Four men were hung in chains near Guyhirn in the Fens near Wisbech in 1795. Their gibbets were eventually washed down by a flood coming in from the Wash in 1831. A local diarist recorded that his brother, Joseph Peck of Bevis Hall, acquired the headpiece of one of the gibbet cages.³⁸

As this brief review shows, the material remains of the gibbet were conserved and re-used not only for their utilitarian value as building elements or scrap metal but also for their glamorous association with the body of the criminal. The body itself, unless it was salvaged by friends or family and buried, had value as a curio or scientific value as an object of phrenological investigation. A closer look at the material afterlives of one eighteenth-century celebrity criminal will demonstrate the complex and multiple ways that the power of the criminal body—and his gibbet—endured after death.

BODIES AND BODY PARTS: EUGENE ARAM

Eugene Aram, hung in chains at Knaresborough in 1759, was not a typical eighteenth-century murderer. He was an educated professional, a published author of works of philology who, at the time of his arrest at a school in King’s Lynn, was working on his comparative lexicon of Latin, Greek and Celtic.³⁹ Eugene Aram was born in 1704 to a family of

³⁸Diary of John Peck 1818, p. 134, held by Wisbech and Fenland Museum, which also holds the gibbet headpiece.

³⁹This history of Eugene Aram is largely compiled from ‘The genuine account of the life and trial of Eugene Aram’, *The Critical Review, or, Annals of Literature* (September 1759) 8: 229–238; N. Scatcherd (1838) *Memoirs of the celebrated Eugene Aram*, (London: Simpkin, Marshall and Co.); J. Dobson (1952) ‘The College criminals 2: Eugene Aram’, *Annals of the Royal College of Surgeons of England* (April 1952) 10(4): 267–275.

labourers in Yorkshire in the north of England. His unusual intellectual energy and quick mind enabled him to gain an education and to discover and develop a particular gift for languages, especially ancient ones.

Aram was hanged for the murder of Daniel Clark, a shoemaker, who had disappeared in 1745. When Aram precipitously left Knaresborough, not long after Clark had vanished, his friends assumed that he had fled with a quantity of valuable goods he had acquired illegally. Thirteen years later, the discovery of bones in a cave just outside Knaresborough led to speculation that Aram and another man, Richard Houseman, had conspired to kill Clark and steal his possessions. Aram was traced and arrested; Houseman, who in all accounts seems far more suspicious, turned King's Evidence and testified that Aram had murdered Clark. At his trial, in August 1759, Aram decided, unwisely, to conduct his own defence.⁴⁰ He questioned the identification of the bones and asserted his own good character but did not challenge the shaky, inconsistent and unreliable evidence of Houseman, his former friend. Despite the lack of conclusive evidence, he was convicted and sentenced to death and to have his body hung in chains close to the scene of the murder, on the wooded banks of the Nidd gorge at Knaresborough. According to criminal defence attorney Rodney Noon, it is very unlikely that any contemporary court would convict on such evidence or that such a conviction would be safe enough to withstand an appeal.

Accordingly, Eugene Aram was executed at York, after an unsuccessful attempt to end his own life in prison, and his body returned to Knaresborough, where his gibbet was erected close to the scene of crime, overlooking the river Nidd; his body remained there, gradually decomposing, for at least 25–30 years.

Aram's crime and trial were of great public interest. The association between the apparently gentle and scholarly man and violent murder for material gain was unusual and—combined with the instability of the evidence on which he was convicted—resulted in a widespread belief that the wrong man had been executed. His biographer Norrison Scatcherd

⁴⁰Rodney Noon, 'Should Eugene Aram have Hanged?' *Web Mystery Magazine* 1(1), Summer 2003. http://lifeloom.com/Eugene_Aram.htm. Accessed 25 March 2013.

described the riots and threats with which Houseman was greeted on his return to Knaresborough. Aram's story was irresistible to cultural producers of the period. Bulwer-Lytton's novel *Eugene Aram* (1831), giving Aram a beautiful and brilliant lover, romanticised the story. Bulwer-Lytton's Eugene Aram, though involved in the death of Clark, was the victim of circumstances and no murderer. The novel was adapted for the stage and had a successful run with Henry Irving in the title role. Thomas Hood's narrative poem "The Dream of Eugene Aram" (1829) was recited by generations of schoolchildren. PG Wodehouse even has Bertie Wooster quoting Hood's poem in proper Wooster style:

All I can recall of the actual poetry is the bit that goes: Tum-tum, tum-tum, tum-tumty-tum, I slew him, tum-tum tum! (PG Wodehouse, *Jeeves Takes Charge*, 1916)

Hood's Aram, though guilty, was thoughtful, penitent and intelligent: a sympathetic hero. Bulwer-Lytton's novel and Hood's poem are the best known of Aram's literary incarnations, but there are many more,⁴¹ including a stage play and at least three films.⁴²

Eugene Aram's body remained in the gibbet for some years. One account holds that his wife collected his bones as they fell from the gibbet; if true, this account suggests quite a turn-around in her feelings about her late husband, who had abandoned her and in whose arrest she had been instrumental.

At some point, probably before the end of the eighteenth century, a doctor called Hutchinson, then practising in Knaresborough, decided to augment his private cabinet of curiosities with the skull of Eugene Aram and managed to remove it from its gibbet cage.⁴³ Writing in 1832, the pseudonymous correspondent of a literary journal imagines Hutchinson's attempt to extract the skull:

⁴¹See Judith Flanders (2011) *The Invention of Murder: how the Victorians revelled in death and detection and created modern crime*. Harper Collins; Nancy Jane Tyson *Eugene Aram: the literary history and typology of the scholar criminal* (1983).

⁴²The play, by W.G. Wills, opened in 1873 with Henry Irving in the lead role; the films were by Edwin Collins (1914), Richard Ridgeley (1915) and Arthur Rooke (1924).

⁴³Norrison Scatcherd (1838) *Memoirs of the celebrated Eugene Aram who was executed for the murder of Daniel Clark, in 1759: with some account of his family and other particulars* (London: Simpkin, Marshall and Co.).

on a dark and stormy night, agitated by conflicting feelings, like a bridegroom on the eve of marriage, the doctor sallied forth, from the town of Knaresborough, with a ladder on his shoulder, and with the firm purpose of mounting the gibbet and detaching from the iron hoop which bound it the skull of Eugene Aram. The gibbet clung to its own property with wonderful tenacity; but the ardor of the doctor became a furor, and he succeeded in extricating another neck, almost at risk of his own.⁴⁴

Why was Hutchinson was so keen to acquire Aram's skull? It is probable that he wanted it simply as a curiosity because of its association with a significant local event—and one which had attracted national attention. However, it is as evidence for the new “science” of phrenology that Aram's skull became best known. If the correspondent of the *Phrenological Journal* of 1839 is right that Scatcherd had seen the skull in Hutchinson's possession forty years earlier, then it is unlikely that phrenological study was a motivation for its original acquisition, as phrenology became popular only following the publications of Gall and Spurzheimer in the early nineteenth century. Indeed, Simpson claims that Hutchinson was only “desirous of possessing the skull of so noted a person as Eugene Aram” (1839: 67). However, within a few decades, the skull was important not only as a phrenological specimen but also as a test case on the interpretation of which turned the credibility of phrenology as a whole.

The skull resided in Hutchinson's personal museum until he died. On Hutchinson's death, the skull passed to his widow's second husband, and his former assistant, Mr Richardson, a surgeon from Harrogate. When, in 1837, the young Dr James Inglis, burning with phrenological zeal, took up a post as physician at the public dispensary in neighbouring Ripon, it is probable that he found out about Aram's skull from Richardson, as a fellow medical man working in a neighbouring town. It was Inglis who presented the skull to the Newcastle meeting of the British Association for the Advancement of Science in 1838.

Phrenology divided the British scientific establishment. Some strong voices maintained that such hokum had no place among the Fellows of the British Association for the Advancement of Science; others, equally strong, saw it as a progressive and rigorous approach to understanding character and the workings of the brain. The skull passed from Dr Richardson to his step-grandson, John Walker, in whose private

⁴⁴‘Civis’ (1832) *The Literary Gazette*, 14 January 1832, p. 25.

collection it remained, first at Malton in Yorkshire and then at Great Yarmouth, Norfolk, when Walker moved house. He presented the skull to the Royal College of Surgeons (Dobson 1952) in 1869, by which date it had become something of a strange embarrassment to its owner, an Anglican minister, who therefore sought to place it in a museum. The skull was included in Sir William Flower's catalogues of the Royal College collections in 1879⁴⁵ and 1907. The skull remained in the museum of the Royal College until 1993 when it was given to King's Lynn Borough Council, which exhibited it in the Old Gaol House museum in the town of Lynn, where it remains on public view at the time of writing (Fig. 3.3).

Phrenology at the 1838 British Association Meeting

When Inglis presented Aram's skull to the medical delegates at the British Association meeting in Newcastle in 1838, phrenology was not

Fig. 3.3 Eugene Aram's skull (photograph courtesy of King's Lynn Museum)



⁴⁵ *Catalogue of the Specimens illustrating the Osteology and Dentition of Vertebrated Animals*, p. 49, entry 337.

universally accepted as a science, and indeed it was always treated with suspicion and scepticism by many, or indeed most, of the British scientific establishment. Accounts of the 1838 meeting are mostly unsympathetic. This one, for example, is from the *Literary Gazette*:

the Doctors had a dose of phrenology foisted into their section; and hardly has that science made a more absurd appearance since Tony Lumpkin practised it upon Crackskull Common.

James Inglis trained in Edinburgh, which was a stronghold of phrenology in Britain; the Edinburgh Phrenological Society, established in 1820, was the first such society in Britain. Phrenological societies were established in Wakefield (1825) and Manchester (1830) as well as London (1823), Birmingham (1838) and Aberdeen (1838), so there was some regional support for Inglis's position. But the 1838 meeting of the British Association for the Advancement of Science was also a significant moment in the history of phrenology in this country. Because the B.A. had excluded phrenology from the disciplines it recognised as properly scientific, the newly formed Phrenological Association held its own parallel meetings in the same city (Newcastle) and at the same time. Therefore, the presentation and analysis of Eugene Aram's skull were crucial in negotiating the respectability of the science. Van Wyhe has noted that phrenologists depended very heavily on single examples to legitimate their approach, rather than employing any kind of quantitative or experimental method. Aram was an ideal example, and phrenological discussion of his skull an entirely circular exercise. Since it was precisely his character that was in dispute (gentle scholar or hardened murderer?), any phrenological interpretation could be fitted to the story. Analysis of his skull did nothing to prove or disprove the method.

Aram was a celebrity criminal. Although he was convicted of a murder whose motivation appeared to have been purely monetary, his life and character did not fit the normal stereotype of a violent criminal. He had not lived the life of a thug but that of a scholar, a teacher and a man of apparently refined sensibilities, all of which both interested the public and occasioned later doubts about his guilt. Fictionalised retellings of his life, crime, flight from justice and eventual trial and execution took different positions on Aram's culpability, but all portrayed him as an intelligent and reflective character (Fig. 3.4). Aram's conviction would certainly not be regarded as safe today and even at the time his guilt was widely doubted. Given the fame and popularity of his legend, there was great



Fig. 3.4 Gustave Doré's engraving of Eugene Aram (photostock)

public interest in the truth of the Aram story, and scientific examination of his skull therefore afforded a method by which the question of his likely criminality could be addressed. Was he “a criminal type”? Aram’s fame was not the only kind of “afterlife” he enjoyed; his actual body continued to be a thing of powerful and changing meanings long after his final breath.

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