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Topic:	The last public execution at Bury St Edmunds 1851
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Author:	Nicholas Newman
Notes:	The story of executions in England and the last public execution in Bury St Edmunds in 1851

## The Last Public Execution at Bury St Edmunds 1851

A public execution is a form of capital punishment where the general public is encouraged to voluntarily attend. It was a way in which justice could be seen to be done and was intended to deter others from committing similar offences, although its effectiveness is often disputed.

Commonplace throughout Europe, the practice was eventually banned in England in 1868, although it continued in the US until the 1930's. The last person publicly hanged in Britain was Michael Barret on the 26th May 1868 aged 26 years, for his participation in the deadly explosion set off outside Clerkenwell Prison in London in December 1867. The Clerkenwell bombing was the most serious terrorist action by Irish Republicans in Britain in the 19th century.

The view of the general public at the time was not one of distaste but rather it was accepted by many as an opportunity for a day out, and could perhaps be considered as almost the mass entertainment of the day. Descriptions of crowds who attended, note a lively atmosphere with plenty of gossiping and good-humoured shoving, drunken misbehaviour and clucking disapproval, with the tone only changing as the prisoner is brought out onto the scaffold.

Amongst those opposed to such performances was the esteemed novelist of Vanity Fair, William Makepeace Thackeray (1811 - 1863), who on attending such an execution described it as a "sickening, ghastly, wicked scene".

These depictions would also no doubt be an accurate reflection of the picture on the day of the execution of George Carnt who was hanged on 22nd April 1851, the last public execution in Bury St Edmunds. Within the 5,000 said to have attended, some will have surely made their way from Hargrave to view this public spectacle.

At the time unsurprisingly the matter occupied many column inches in the local newspapers.

**The following excerpts from the report printed in the Bury and Norwich Post on 23rd April 1851 capture the build up to the fateful moment when the 'the bolt was drawn' and the trapdoor opened.**

*THE EXECUTION .....*

*The hour fixed was much earlier than usual, in the hope of lessening the concourse of spectators; but early as it was, the eagerness for such spectacles was shewn by the arrival of numbers of people as early as six o'clock, an idea of a still earlier time for the execution having by some means got abroad.....*

..... As the fatal hour approached, the London and Nowton roads, and intervening field, were occupied every part from which view of the awful scene could be commanded. The crowd consisted almost entirely of the working classes, and a very large proportion of females, many bringing children (some even in arms), under the idea, perhaps, of impressing their minds with a salutary lesson in their early years. We scarcely observed fifty persons of a superior class, and on a rough calculation of the whole number of spectators it is conjectured that there were between 4000 and 5000 present, a number far less than attended at the execution of Catharine Foster.

*(Catherine Foster (1829–1847) murdered her husband after three weeks of marriage. She was not yet 18 when hanged and was one of the youngest females ever hanged in England. She was hanged in front of a crowd of 10,000 persons at Market Hill in a meadow on the west side of the Prison at Bury St Edmunds at 9am on Saturday 17 April 1847.)*

*Doubtless the concourse of spectators was considerably less than it would otherwise have been in consequence of a continuous rain which fell from an early hour in the morning up to the fatal hour. This was not, however, sufficient to damp the ardour of the regular attendants at such scenes, many of whom stayed, some with and some without umbrellas, until the body' of the culprit was removed. The behaviour of the people was on the whole decorous, and except some occasional levities during the time of suspense, and cries of "Hats off and umbrellas down," there was nothing to disturb the awful silence which the more sober and thinking portion of the audience were disposed to maintain.*

The following retelling of the story 100 years later in 1951 summarises the case and the ultimate sad fate of George Carnt.

**The following story from the 'FILES' was printed in the Bury free Press on the 18th April 1951**

*5,000 saw this man hanged*

*THERE is one Easter, nearly a hundred years ago, which was notable not for its weather nor seaside excursions, but for the thousands of people who took their holiday in Bury St. Edmunds to see the public execution of a murderer.*

*The murder had excited the interest of the country by the forlorn love story it revealed.*

*Elizabeth Bainbridge was born at Bradfield St Clare. When she was twenty she married the butler in the house in which she was employed as a servant. The marriage was not a success.*

*Her husband was a bully and wife-beater and within a year of the marriage Elizabeth's father, having heard of his daughter's ill-treatment, took her and her baby daughter to live with him at Lawshall.*

**GOOD-LOOKER**

*Also living in Lawshall was good-looking young labourer. George Carnt. Quiet and respected, at twenty-three he had fallen desperately in love with Elizabeth, who was seven years older.*

*She returned this love, realising at the same time the hopelessness of their position.*

*One January evening in 1851 the customers of "The Harrow" public house in Lawshall were startled when George Carnt staggered in, covered with mud, wet and shaking. He refused to make any explanation and pleaded to be left alone, whispering "The Devil has got me; the halter is for my neck."*

*But later that night, by the light of lanthorns, a search party found the body of Betsy Bainbridge in a pond*

### *THE TRIAL*

*Carnt was tried the Suffolk Assizes for her murder. At the trial the defence counsel produced the improbable story that Carnt had had epileptic fit and had fallen upon his sweetheart, accidentally knocking her into the pond and drowning her*

*It wasn't until after the death sentence that Carnt broke his silence and told the pitiful circumstances of two young people driven desperate by their hopeless love*

*He told how they had walked through the fields and exchanged love tokens—he had given her his watch and she had given him her wedding ring.*

*Suddenly, overcome with unhappiness, Elizabeth took Carnt's pocket knife, saying she would kill herself, George took the knife from her, though she begged him to kill her.*

*He refused, but her own unhappiness was transmitted to him. He said. "No, if you mean to kill yourself, we will both do it together: we will both drown ourselves."*

### *HELD HER UNDER*

*He dragged her, struggling and screaming, to the pond and held her beneath the green water*

*When he threw himself into the pond the instinct of self-preservation was too strong, and he returned, dazed and demented, to Lawshall.*

*An application for a reprieve was made on the grounds that the crime was unpremeditated and unconcealed afterwards. The application was rejected.*

*Between 4.000 and 5.000 people gathered during that Easter holiday around the Bury St Edmunds gaol. The contemporary report continues; "The behaviour of the people was on the whole decorous, except for some occasional levities during the time of suspense.*

*Shortly after nine o'clock the death-bell was heard sounding mournfully through the air and the fatal procession began to emerge from the condemned cell, the operation of pinioning was very quickly performed. At this moment much of the strength of nerve which had distinguished the culprit both before and after condemnation seemed to fail him; his face turned pale and his whole frame was violently agitated.*

### *HAVE MERCY!*

*In about five minutes afterwards he was conducted to the scaffold, exclaiming low but audible accents, 'Lord! have mercy upon my soul.' The rope was adjusted to a staple fixed in the beam, and in less than a minute the cap was drawn over his face, and the executioner retired.*

*"At the appointed signal, the closing of the chaplain's book, the bolt was drawn, and without a struggle the unhappy man was dismissed into eternity amidst the breathless silence of the spectators. His death was instantaneous, the slight convulsive motion of his body a few seconds after the drop had fallen being after life had ceased to exist,'*

*So ended the pathetic little love story of George Carnt and Elizabeth Bambndge.*



#### FOOTNOTE

An unusual variation on the normal gallows was 'The Three Legged Mare' at York Tyburn now part of York Racecourse, which was one of four execution sites in the city. The gallows consisted of a wooden triangle known as 'The Three-Legged Mare', on which many criminals could be hanged at the same time. The site was the scene of executions for more than 400 years.

Illustrated here in the pub sign of the York Brewery establishment at 15 Petergate, York.

**Nicholas Newman**  
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