

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 rehung. 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.

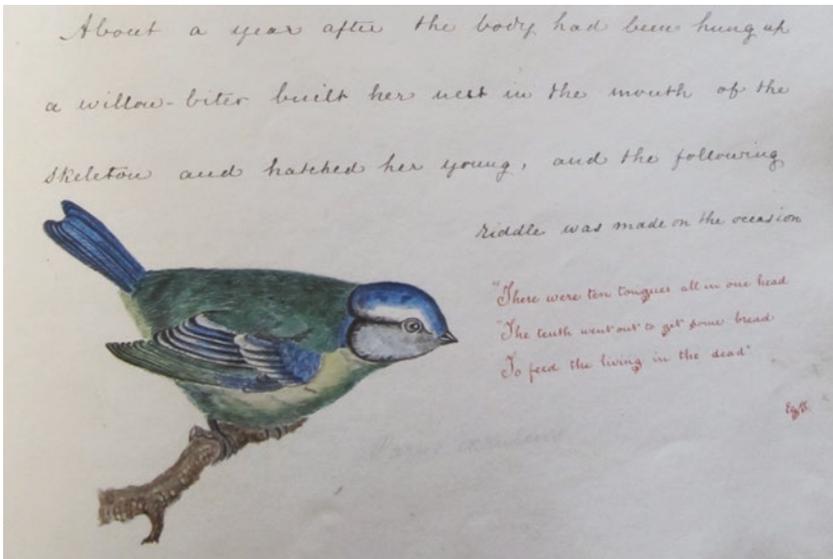


Fig. 3.1 'Willow biter' and rhyme, drawn and recorded in the commonplace book of Edwin Jarvis of Doddington Hall, Lincs., courtesy of Claire Birch (photo: Sarah Tarlow)

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.