

= Halifax Gibbet =

The Halifax Gibbet / ˈhælˌfæks ˈdʒɪbɪt / was an early guillotine , or decapitating machine , used in the town of Halifax , West Yorkshire , England . It was probably installed during the 16th century as an alternative to beheading by axe or sword . Halifax was once part of the Manor of Wakefield , where ancient custom and law gave the Lord of the Manor the authority to execute summarily by decapitation any thief caught with stolen goods to the value of 13 ½ d or more , or who confessed to having stolen goods of at least that value . Decapitation was a fairly common method of execution in England , but Halifax was unusual in two respects : it employed a guillotine @-@ like machine that appears to have been unique in the country , and it continued to decapitate petty criminals until the mid @-@ 17th century .

The device consisted of an axe head fitted to the base of a heavy wooden block that ran in grooves between two 15 @-@ foot ( 4 @. @ 6 m ) tall uprights , mounted on a stone base about 4 feet ( 1 @. @ 2 m ) high . A rope attached to the block ran over a pulley , allowing it to be raised , after which the rope was secured by attaching it to a pin in the base . The block carrying the axe was then released either by withdrawing the pin or by cutting the rope once the prisoner was in place .

Almost 100 people were beheaded in Halifax between the first recorded execution in 1286 and the last in 1650 , but as the date of the gibbet 's installation is uncertain , it cannot be determined with any accuracy how many were dealt with by the Halifax Gibbet . By 1650 public opinion considered beheading to be an excessively severe punishment for petty theft ; use of the gibbet was forbidden by Oliver Cromwell , Lord Protector of the Commonwealth of England , and the structure was dismantled . The stone base was rediscovered and preserved in about 1840 , and a non @-@ working replica was erected on the site in 1974 . The names of 52 people known to have been beheaded by the device are listed on a nearby plaque .

= = History = =

What became known as the Halifax Gibbet Law gave the Lord of the Manor of Wakefield , of which the town of Halifax was a part , the power to try and execute any felon for the theft of goods to the value of 13 ½ d or more :

If a felon be taken within their liberty or precincts of the said forest [ the Forest of Hardwick ] , either handhabend [ caught with the stolen goods in his hand or in the act of stealing ] , backberand [ caught carrying stolen goods on his back ] , or confessand [ having confessed to the crime ] cloth or any other commodity to the value of 13 ½ d , that they shall after three market days or meeting days within the town of Halifax after such his apprehension , and being condemned he shall be taken to the gibbet and there have his head cut off from his body .

The Gibbet Law may have been a last vestige of the Anglo @-@ Saxon custom of infangtheof , which allowed landowners to enforce summary justice on thieves within the boundaries of their estates . Samuel Midgley in his Halifax and its Gibbet @-@ Law Placed in a True Light , published in 1761 , states that the law dates from a time " not in the memory of man to the contrary " . It may have been the consequence of rights granted by King Henry III to John de Warenne ( 1231 ? 1304 ) , Lord of the Manor of Wakefield . Such baronial jurisdiction was by no means unusual in medieval England and was described in the 11th @-@ century legal text entitled De Baronibus , qui suas habent curias et consuetudines ( Concerning the barons who have their courts of law and customs ) . Neither was the decapitation of convicted felons unique to Halifax ; the earls of Chester amongst others also exercised the right to " behead any malefactor or thief , who was apprehended in the action , or against whom it was made apparent by sufficient witness , or confession , before four inhabitants of the place " , recorded as the Custom of Cheshire .

A commission appointed by King Edward I in 1278 reported that there were at that time 94 privately owned gibbets and gallows in use in Yorkshire , including one owned by the Archbishop of York . What was unusual about Halifax was that the custom lingered on there for so long after it had been abandoned elsewhere .

Suspected thieves were detained in the custody of the lord of the manor 's bailiff , who would

summon a jury of 16 local men " out of the most wealthy and best reputed " , four each from four local townships . The jury had only two questions to decide on : were the stolen goods found in the possession of the accused , and were they worth at least 13 ½ d . The jury , the accused , and those claiming that their property had been stolen , were brought together in a room at the bailiff 's house . No oaths were administered and there was no judge or defence counsel present ; each side presented their case , and the jury decided on guilt or innocence .

So strictly was the law applied that anyone who apprehended a thief with his property was not allowed to recover it unless the miscreant and the stolen goods were presented to the bailiff . The goods were otherwise forfeited to the lord of the manor , and their previous rightful owner was liable to find himself charged with theftbote , or conniving in the felony . Halifax 's reputation for strict law enforcement was noted by the antiquary William Camden and by the " Water Poet " John Taylor , who penned the Beggar 's Litany : " From Hell , Hull , and Halifax , Good Lord , deliver us ! "

Before his execution a convicted felon was usually detained in custody for three market days , on each of which he was publicly displayed in the stocks , accompanied by the stolen goods . After the sentence had been carried out a county coroner would visit Halifax and convene a jury of 12 men , sometimes the same individuals who had found the felon guilty , and ask them to give an account under oath of the circumstances of the conviction and execution , for the official records .

The punishment could only be meted out to those within the confines of the Forest of Hardwick , of which Halifax was a part . The gibbet was about 500 yards ( 460 m ) from the boundary of the area , and if the condemned person succeeded in escaping from the forest then he could not legally be brought back to face his punishment . At least two men succeeded in cheating the executioner in that way : a man named Dinnis and another called Lacy . Dinnis was never seen in Halifax again , but Lacy rather unwisely decided to return to the town seven years after his escape ; he was apprehended and finally executed in 1623 .

The earliest known record of punishment by decapitation in Halifax is the beheading of John of Dalton in 1286 , but official records were not maintained until the parish registers began in 1538 . Between then and 1650 , when the last executions took place , 56 men and women are recorded as having been decapitated . The total number of executions identified since 1286 is just short of 100 .

Local weavers specialised in the production of kersey , a hardwearing and inexpensive woollen fabric that was often used for military uniforms ; by the 16th century Halifax and the surrounding Calder Valley was the largest producer of the material in England . In the final part of the manufacturing process the cloth was hung outdoors on large structures known as tenterframes and left to dry , after having been conditioned by a fulling mill . Daniel Defoe wrote a detailed account of what he had been told of the gibbet 's history during his visit to Halifax in Volume 3 of his A tour thro ' the whole island of Great Britain , published in 1727 . He reports that " Modern accounts pretend to say , it [ the gibbet ] was for all sorts of felons ; but I am well assured , it was first erected purely , or at least principally , for such thieves as were apprehended stealing cloth from the tenters ; and it seems very reasonable to think it was so " .

Eighteenth @-@ century historians argued that the area 's prosperity attracted the " wicked and ungovernable " ; the cloth , left outside and unattended , presented easy pickings , and hence justified severe punishment to protect the local economy . James Holt on the other hand , writing in 1997 , sees the Halifax Gibbet Law as a practical application of the Anglo @-@ Saxon law of infangtheof . Royal assizes were held only twice a year in the area ; to bring a prosecution was " vastly expensive " , and the stolen goods were forfeited to the Crown , as they were considered to be the property of the accused . But the Halifax Gibbet Law allowed " the party injured , to have his goods restored to him again , with as little loss and damage , as can be contrived ; to the great encouragement of the honest and industrious , and as great terror to the wicked and evil doers . "

The Halifax Gibbet 's final victims were Abraham Wilkinson and Anthony Mitchell . Wilkinson had been found guilty of stealing 16 yards ( 15 m ) of russet @-@ coloured kersey cloth , 9 yards of which , found in his possession , was valued at " 9 shillings at the least " , and Mitchell of stealing and selling two horses , one valued at 9 shillings and the other at 48 shillings . The pair were found guilty and executed on the same day , 30 April 1650 . Writing in 1834 John William Parker , publisher of The Saturday Magazine , suggested that the gibbet might have remained in use for

longer in Halifax had the bailiff not been warned that if he used it again he would be " called to public account for it " . Midgley comments that the final executions " were by some persons in that age , judged to be too severe ; thence came it to pass , that the gibbet , and the customary law , for the forest of Hardwick , got its suspension " .

Oliver Cromwell finally ended the exercise of Halifax Gibbet Law . To the Puritans it was " part of ancient ritual to be jettisoned along with all the old feasts and celebrations of the medieval world and the Church of Rome " . Moreover , it ran counter to the Puritan objection to imposing the death penalty for petty theft ; felons were subsequently sent to the Assizes in York for trial .

= = Mechanism = =

It is uncertain when the Halifax Gibbet was first introduced , but it may not have been until some time in the 16th century ; before then decapitation would have been carried out by an executioner using an axe or a sword . The device , which seems to have been unique in England , consisted of two 15 @-@ foot ( 4 @.@ 6 m ) tall parallel beams of wood joined at the top by a transverse beam . Running in grooves within the beams was a square wooden block 4 feet 6 inches ( 1 @.@ 37 m ) in length , into the bottom of which was fitted an axe head weighing 7 pounds 12 ounces ( 3 @.@ 5 kg ) . The whole structure sat on a platform of stone blocks , 9 feet ( 2 @.@ 7 m ) square and 4 feet ( 1 @.@ 2 m ) high , which was ascended by a flight of steps . A rope attached to the top of the wooden block holding the axe ran over a pulley at the top of the structure , allowing the block to be raised . The rope was then fastened by a pin to the structure 's stone base .

The gibbet could be operated by cutting the rope supporting the blade or by pulling out the pin that held the rope . If the offender was to be executed for stealing an animal , a cord was fastened to the pin and tied to either the stolen animal or one of the same species , which was then driven off , withdrawing the pin and allowing the blade to drop .

In an early contemporary account of 1586 Raphael Holinshed attests to the efficiency of the gibbet , and adds some detail about the participation of the onlookers :

In the nether end of the sliding block is an axe keyed or fastened with an iron into the wood , which being drawn up to the top of the frame is there fastened by a wooden pin ... unto the midst of which pin also there is a long rope fastened that cometh down among the people , so that when the offender hath made his confession , and hath laid his neck over the nethermost block , every man there present doth either take hold of the rope ( or putteth forth his arm so near to the same as he can get , in token that he is willing to see true justice executed ) and pulling out the pin in this manner , the head block wherein the axe is fastened doth fall down with such violence , that if the neck of the transgressor were so big as that of a bull , it should be cut in sunder at a stroke , and roll from the body by an huge distance .

An article in the September 1832 edition of The Imperial Magazine describes the victim 's final moments :

The persons who had found the verdict , and the attending clergymen , placed themselves on the scaffold with the prisoner . The fourth psalm was then played round the scaffold on the bagpipes , after which the minister prayed with the prisoner till he received the final stroke .

In Thomas Deloney 's novel Thomas of Reading ( 1600 ) the invention of the Halifax Gibbet is attributed to a friar , who proposed the device as a solution to the difficulty of finding local residents willing to act as hangmen .

Although the guillotine as a method of beheading is most closely associated in the popular imagination with late 18th @-@ century Revolutionary France , several other decapitation devices had long been in use throughout Europe . It is uncertain whether Dr Guillotin was familiar with the Halifax Gibbet , but its design was reported to have been copied by James Douglas , 4th Earl of Morton , in the production of a similar device that became known as the Scottish Maiden , now on display in the National Museum of Scotland . The Maiden was rather shorter than the Halifax Gibbet , standing only 10 feet ( 3 @.@ 0 m ) tall , the same height as the French guillotine .

= = Restoration = =

The Halifax Gibbet was dismantled after the last executions in 1650 , and the site was neglected until the platform on which the gibbet had been mounted was rediscovered in about 1840 . A full size non working replica was erected on the original stone base in August 1974 ; it includes a blade made from a casting of the original , which as of 2011 is displayed in the Bankfield Museum in Boothtown on the outskirts of Halifax . A commemorative plaque nearby lists the names of the 52 people known to have been executed by the device .