

= William Calcraft =

William Calcraft ( 11 October 1800 ? 13 December 1879 ) was a 19th @-@ century English hangman , one of the most prolific of British executioners . It is estimated in his 45 @-@ year career he carried out 450 executions . A cobbler by trade , Calcraft was initially recruited to flog juvenile offenders held in Newgate Prison . While selling meat pies on streets around the prison , Calcraft met the City of London 's hangman , John Foxton .

After Foxton 's death in 1829 the government appointed Calcraft the official Executioner for the City of London and Middlesex . Following this , his executioner services were in great demand throughout England . Nevertheless , some considered Calcraft incompetent , in particular for his controversial use of the short @-@ drop hanging method in which the condemned were slowly strangled to death .

Because with Calcraft 's methods the condemned took several minutes to die , to hasten death Calcraft would sometimes dramatically pull on legs or climb on shoulders in an effort to break a victim 's neck . It has been speculated that Calcraft used these methods partly to entertain the crowds , sometimes numbering 30 @,@ 000 spectators or more .

Executions in England were public until 1868 . That year the law changed , mandating executions would take place privately and inside the prison . In 1868 Calcraft carried out the last public and first private executions . Among his executions were Marie and Frederick Manning , the first husband and wife to be hanged together since 1700 .

= = Early life = =

Calcraft was born in Baddow , near Chelmsford , in 1800 . He was a cobbler by trade , but had also worked as a nightwatchman at Reid 's brewery in Clerkenwell , London . While attempting to earn a living by selling meat pies on the streets around Newgate Prison he made the acquaintance of John Foxton , who was the City of London 's hangman for 40 years . That meeting led to his employment at Newgate to flog juvenile offenders , for which he was paid 10 shillings a week .

= = Career as an executioner , 1829 ? 1874 = =

Foxton died on 14 February 1829 , and Calcraft was appointed as his successor . He was sworn in as the official Executioner for the City of London and Middlesex on 4 April 1829 , a position for which he was paid one guinea a week plus an additional guinea for each execution . He also received an allowance for cats o ' nine tails and birch rods , and supplemented his income by selling sections of the rope used to hang his victims , for which he charged between five shillings and £ 1 per inch . Calcraft 's first duty in his new role was the execution of Thomas Lister and George Wingfield , hanged together on 27 March 1829 , Lister for burglary and Wingfield for highway robbery . Esther Hibner , known in the press as the " Evil Monster " , was the first woman hanged by Calcraft . She was executed on 13 April 1829 , having been found guilty of starving to death her apprentice , Frances Colppits . Hibner did not go to the scaffold willingly , but had to be restrained in a straitjacket to prevent her from attacking her executioners . As she was hanged the watching crowd shouted out " Three cheers for the Hangman ! "

Calcraft was " in great demand " as an executioner elsewhere in the country as well , such as at Reading Gaol . During his tenure of office the Capital Punishment Amendment Act 1868 was passed , requiring that all executions must be conducted in private . Calcraft carried out the last public execution in Britain on 26 May 1868 , when he hanged the Fenian Michael Barrett in front of Newgate Prison for his part in the Clerkenwell Outrage . Calcraft also carried out the first private execution in Britain under the new law . Eighteen @-@ year @-@ old Thomas Wells , who had been convicted of the murder of his superior Edward Walshe , the stationmaster at Dover Priory railway station , was hanged on 13 August 1868 in a former timber yard inside Maidstone Gaol . Members of the press were allowed to attend and reported that Wells , who wore his railway porter 's uniform , did not die quickly , " struggling on the end of the rope for several minutes " . Calcraft 's

final official duty was the hanging of James Godwin , on 25 May 1874 .

Reporting on Calcraft 's visit to Dundee to perform an execution in that city in April 1873 , The Times newspaper observed that " if their visitor had been a Royal personage , or an eminent statesman he could hardly have been treated with greater consideration " . They further reported that Calcraft arrived with only one piece of hand luggage , a carpet bag containing " a new rope , a white cap , and some pinioning straps " .

The number of executions Calcraft carried out is unrecorded , but it has been estimated at 450 , of whom 35 were women , making him one of the most active of British executioners . Among his better @-@ known victims was François Courvoisier , executed on 6 July 1840 outside Newgate Prison . Courvoisier had been valet to Lord William Russell , and had murdered his master after being caught stealing silverware from the household .

Calcraft officiated at one of the very few executions of a husband and wife , and the first since 1700 , when he hanged Marie and Frederick Manning at Horsemonger Lane Gaol on 13 November 1849 . The couple had murdered Marie 's wealthy lover , Patrick O 'Connor , with the aim of stealing his money . Calcraft also officiated at the last public execution of a woman in Britain , Frances Kidder , who was hanged on 2 April 1868 . Convicted of drowning her stepdaughter , she was executed in front of a crowd of 2 @,@ 000 , amongst whom was reported to be her husband . After her drop of 3 feet ( 0 @.@ 91 m ) she struggled for " two or three minutes " before expiring .

= = = Technique = = =

Although Calcraft 's career as a hangman spanned 45 years , he appears to have been " particularly incompetent " , frequently having to " rush below the scaffold to pull on his victim 's legs to hasten death " . Those being hanged had their arms pinioned to their sides with leather straps before being walked to the gallows , where they were placed on a trapdoor and their heads and faces covered with a white cap , or hood . The purpose of the hood was to prevent the prisoner seeing the hangman pull the lever that released the trapdoor ? and thus attempting to jump at the critical moment ? and to hide from spectators any agony on the dying prisoner 's face . After the noose had been secured around each victim 's neck and the hangman had retired to a safe distance , the trapdoor was released . The bodies were left hanging for some time to ensure that death had occurred , before being lowered to the ground . Calcraft employed the short @-@ drop method of execution , in which the drop through the trapdoor might be around 3 feet ( 0 @.@ 91 m ) or so . That was often insufficient to break the prisoner 's neck , and therefore death was not always instantaneous , typically occurring slowly by strangulation . Historians Anthony Stokes and Theodore Dalrymple have suggested that Calcraft 's " controversial " use of the short @-@ drop allowed him a couple of minutes to entertain the large crowds of 30 @,@ 000 plus that sometimes attended his public executions . " Renowned for his poor taste " , he would sometimes swing from his victim 's legs or climb onto their shoulders in an attempt to break their necks . In one of the first executions Calcraft carried out at the new Reading Gaol his victim , Thomas Jennings , took more than three minutes to die .

On 31 March 1856 , Calcraft executed William Bousfield , but a threat he had received that he would be shot on the scaffold unnerved him . After releasing the bolt securing the trapdoor on which the condemned man was standing , Calcraft ran off , leaving Bousfield hanging ; a few moments later Bousfield raised one of his legs to support himself on the platform . Calcraft 's assistant tried to push the victim off , but Bousfield repeatedly succeeded in supporting himself . The officiating chaplain forced the frightened Calcraft to return to the scaffold , where he " threw himself around his [ Bousfield 's ] legs and by the force of his weight finally succeeded in strangling him " . Calcraft 's bungling became the subject of a popular ballad .

Calcraft was also reportedly nervous of executing Fenians , because of threats he had received . On 22 November 1867 he officiated at the public execution of William Philip Allen , Michael Larkin , and Michael O 'Brien , who became known as the Manchester Martyrs . The three Fenians had been found guilty of the murder of a police officer , and were hanged together . Most accounts claim that Allen died almost instantaneously from a broken neck , but Larkin and O 'Brien were not so

fortunate . A Catholic priest in attendance , Father Gadd , reported that :

The other two ropes , stretched taut and tense by their breathing twitching burdens , were in ominous and distracting movement . The hangman had bungled ! ... Calcraft then descended into the pit and there finished what he could not accomplish from above . He killed Larkin .

Father Gadd refused to allow Calcraft to dispatch O 'Brien in the same way , and so " for three @-@ quarters of an hour the good priest [ Father Gadd ] knelt , holding the dying man 's hands within his own , reciting the prayers for the dying . Then the long drawn out agony ended . "

Towards the end of his career the feeling began to be expressed in the press that Calcraft 's age was catching up with him . On 15 November 1869 , aged 69 , Calcraft executed Joseph Welsh , for murder , at Maidstone Gaol . Reporting on the execution The Times commented that " the adjustment of the rope was slow and bungling , and such as to show that Calcraft 's age has unfitted him for his occupation " .

= = Later life = =

By 1869 Calcraft 's mother , Sarah , was living as a pauper in a workhouse at Hatfield Peverel near Chelmsford . Calcraft was ordered to pay 3 shillings a week towards her upkeep , to which he objected , arguing that his brother and sister should be made to help , and that he had three children of his own to support , although there is no record of his marriage .

After reluctantly being forced to retire from office because of old age in 1874 , Calcraft received a pension of 25 shillings a week from the City of London and was succeeded as hangman by William Marwood . Although as a younger man Calcraft had been considered to be " genial " , with a love of breeding rabbits , in his later years he was described as " surly and sinister @-@ looking , with long hair and beard , in scruffy black attire and a fob chain " .

Calcraft died at Poole Street in Hoxton , on 13 December 1879 . An obituary published in The New York Times on 1 January 1880 reported that " Several so @-@ called biographies of Calcraft were published during his lifetime , but all are notable for a narrow stream of fact meandering through a broad meadow of commentary , and not one may be considered worthy of the subject or to be relied on for a strict accuracy of statement " . The earliest of them was an octavo pamphlet published in 1846 entitled The Groans of the Gallows ; or ; The Past and Present Life of William Calcraft , the Living Hangman of Newgate .