

The Executioners at Bodmin Jail

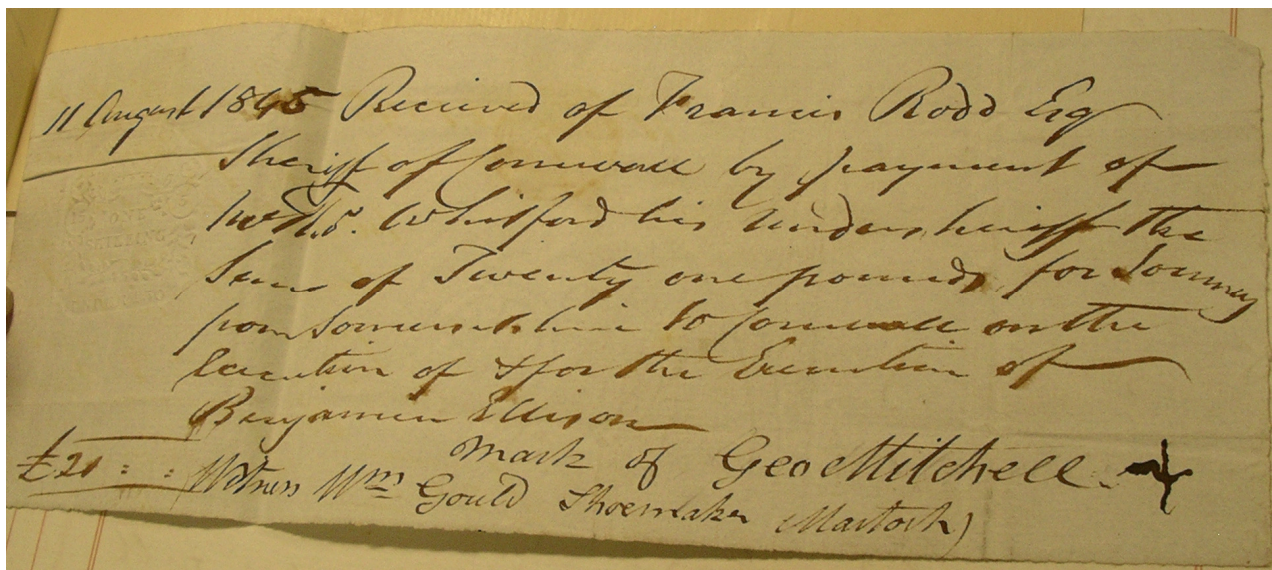
From the building of Bodmin Gaol in 1779 there have been a total of 55 executions carried out; a good number of them for what we consider today as petty offences.

Over the years there have been many hangmen invited by the authorities to carry out the execution of the unfortunate condemned. Some hangmen would have been prisoners who were themselves condemned; they were given a chance of reprieve if they carried out the execution if no hangman could be brought in.

One of the earliest recorded hangmen is George Mitchell, who hailed from Cork Gates, Ilchester, Somersetshire. Records indicate that George Mitchell was a hangman from 1800 until 1854. This would seem to be incorrect, as no one hangman has ever served this length of time. It would probably be that the original George Mitchell had his son assist him at hangings and the name carried on, as his son would then have become hangman for the South West.

In 1840 George Mitchell was to hang the Lightfoot brothers for the murder of Neville Norway. The report states that he was dressed as a respectable yeoman, and that he was a hoary headed man who was a dairy farmer. Unfortunately there is no picture or portrait of George Mitchell in existence, but we do have a copy of one of his receipts for the hanging of Benjamin Ellison on The 11th August 1845.

This was to be George Mitchell's last hanging at Bodmin Jail.



11 August 1845 Received of Francis Rodd Esq
 Sheriff of Cornwall by payment of
 Mr W. Whifford his undersheriff the
 sum of Twenty one pounds for Journey
 from Cornwall to Cornwall on the
 execution of & for the execution of
 Benjamin Ellison
 £21 = : Wm W. Gould Shoemaker (Martock)
 Mark of Geo Mitchell

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Executions at Bodmin Jail were quite a rarity, and the authorities were not keen to keep another hangman on a salary mainly for doing nothing. It was then decided to employ the London and Middlesex hangman when one was required as this would work out as cost efficient.

With the advent of the railways travelling became far easier, and the London hangman would be able to travel to Bodmin Jail quite easily; so it was decided that when a hangman was needed, they would send to London for their hangman, who was William Calcraft.

Calcraft became a hangman by chance as he had no inclination for the job. Calcraft was by trade a cobbler and boot maker, and he supplemented his income by attending public hangings and selling beer or pies to the waiting crowds. At one hanging he met John Foxen who was then the hangman and had taken ill. Calcraft served him a tankard of beer, and Foxen told him of his plight and that he had to travel to Lincoln in two days time to carry out a hanging there. Foxen said he would not be able to make it, and Calcraft said that he would go and carry out the hanging at Lincoln. This was in April 1829, and from then on Calcraft became the official hangman for London and Middlesex, a position he held until 1874.



**William Calcraft - hangman
1829-1874**

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Calcraft carried out three hangings at Bodmin Jail, all in public, and the last one was outside the bottom wall of the jail, where Berrycoombe Road is today.

To Mr. W. B. Call Bart., High Sheriff of the County of Cornwall Do to W. Calcraft.		
1856	Attending at Bodmin on the execution of	L. s. d.
August 11 th	W. Nevan convicted of murder	28 0 0
	Railway fare to and fro, and expenses	5
	Paid for rope	
		<u>L 28 5</u>
1856	By Cash of Messrs Gregory & Co. on account	5 0 0
August 11 th		
	William Calcraft Balance	<u>L 16 5</u>

Calcraft's receipt for carrying out the execution of William Nevan on August 11th 1856 for shooting dead his sergeant major

From Calcraft carrying out the last public hanging in Cornwall, there was to be a gap of 16 years before there was another hanging at the jail. This time the authorities chose a new man to carry out the task; this was William Marwood, the pioneer of the long drop, as it became known. Marwood had taken heed of Samuel Haughton a Chaplain who in 1866 introduced the standard drop without much success. Marwood refined this to the long drop, and was very successful with it giving instant death to the persons condemned to die by hanging. By the time Marwood attended Bodmin Jail, all executions had gone behind the prison walls, and only a handful of persons were allowed to witness the procedure. Marwood like his predecessor was a cobbler and boot maker. He officiated at Bodmin jail twice in his career, and in both cases death was instantaneous with each culprit receiving a drop of eight feet.

The Executioners at Bodmin Jail



William Marwood. Executioner 1872-1883

So successful was Marwood in his career as a hangman he termed the saying
“I prefer to be called an executioner”.

As he said about his predecessor Calcraft, “He hangs them, I execute them”.

Children even made a rhyme about Marwood which went,

If Pa killed Ma, who'd kill Pa? - Marwood.

After Marwood's last execution at Bodmin jail in 1882 there was not to be another execution in Cornwall, or at Bodmin Jail for 19 years. During this time a committee was set up on the orders of Queen Victoria to Lord Aberdare in 1886. After two years the committee published its findings, and this became known as the 'Aberdare Report'. With this came the changes in the way executions were carried out from 1888. This led to the development of the execution shed, just like the one in the corner of the front yard of the Jail today.

The Executioners at Bodmin Jail

This particular execution shed had the pit and gallows installed in 1897, and was used twice in its entire history. The first executioners to use these gallows were James Billington, and his son William. James Billington was the Yorkshire region executioner from 1884 until James Berry who was executioner for London and Middlesex retired from his post in 1891. James then became Chief Executioner for Great Britain and Ireland. All three of his sons were to follow in his footsteps and became executioners.

The first execution in the shed was carried out on July 9th 1901 when he executed Valeri Giovanni. James Billington's son William assisted him on the day. Once the execution had been carried out the prison doctor, Bartholomew Gidley Derry had to pronounce death, and check the body to make sure that death had been instantaneous. However the doctor cited the cause of death as asphyxiation rather than a broken neck, as he said he could not certify a broken neck without doing a post mortem; this would have resulted in a higher fee for the doctor. Giovanni would have died instantly as Billington gave him a drop of seven foot one inch.



James Billington
Executioner 1884 - 1901



William Billington
Executioner 1899-1903

James Billington died in the same year he officiated at Bodmin jail from pneumonia. There was not to be another execution at the jail for eight years until July 20th 1909.

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The next executioners to carry out their duties at Bodmin Jail were the Pierrepoint brothers. Henry Albert Pierrepoint became an executioner in 1901 and went on to become chief executioner for Britain and Ireland in 1905.

In 1906 Henry persuaded his older brother Thomas to apply to be an executioner as at this time there was a shortage of persons prepared to undertake the work. Once Thomas had passed his training they regularly worked together all over the country and also in Ireland. They were to be the last executioners to use the execution shed at Bodmin Jail when they officiated at the execution of William Hampton.



Henry Albert Pierrepoint
Executioner 1901-1910



Thomas William Pierrepoint
Executioner 1906-1946

The execution of William Hampton in July 1909 spelled the end of all executions in Cornwall. Cornish people continued to be executed, but were moved to prisons nearby that were fitted with gallows and execution sheds, or chambers.

Up until the 1940's Cornish death sentences were carried out at Exeter and thereafter at Winchester and Bristol.

The very last Cornish executions were on December 17th 1963 when Russell Pascoe (Bristol) and Denis Whitty (Winchester) were executed for the 'Constantine murder'. These became known as the 'Christmas hangings'.

If Bodmin Jail had been kept open as a working prison they would have been executed here at the jail.