

Up and make ready, ye lovers of fun!

On with your holiday dress and be gay!
Now that the Sheriff has work to be done,
Business with pleasure he mingles today.
Some may go hunting with guns, and a few,
Rods in their hands, little fish may pursue;
Ours is the sport which is sanctioned by law -
We go a-hanging - a-hanging, hurrah!
Two months ago, on a rare drunken bout,
Billy, his comrade, the criminal slew;
Murder's a deed that is vile, without doubt
Ergo, the law will turn murderer too.
As to the place where the liquor he got,
Liquor which maddened him - yonder's the spot,
Sammy who keeps it, approves of the law -
He goes for hanging, for hanging, hurrah!
Bright shines the sun on the place where you see
Yonder, tall gallows, substantial and bare,
Wait a few hours and a fellow will be
Dancing fandangoes of fun in the air.
Gathered in groups at the gallows, behold
Parents and children, maids, wives, young and old
Waiting the time when the halter shall draw -
They go for hanging, for hanging, hurrah!
Pickpockets plenty are - mark how they go,
Slyly and coolly to work at their trade!
Business is business and people must know
Too much attention to that can't be paid.
Swearing and fighting and kicking, the crowd
Utter their blasphemous curses aloud -
Righteous examples are set by the law,
Good comes from hanging - from hanging, hurrah!
Look at the criminal! Please ye, a look!
Standing beside him, the hangman you see,
There is the priest with his gown and his book,
Galloping gaily, they go to the tree.
Thanks to the priest who the hangman befriend,
Choking such knaves as 'twere labour to mend;
Hanging they say is Levitical law -
Cheers for the clergy, they're Christians, hurrah!
Firmly and proudly, the culprit looks round,
Holding his head with a satisfied air,
Murmurs applauding go over the ground -
Down pops the priest with the felon to prayer.

“How interesting his looks are,” says Ann,
“Yes,” answers Sal, “And he’ll die like a man!”
Elegant talk for young maidens, but - pshaw!
Shout for the hanging, the hanging, hurrah!
Prayers are all finished, and now for the fun;
Over his features, the cap has been drawn;
Ketch, and his comrade, the preacher, get down,
Crack goes the whip, and the carriage moves on.
Wonderful sight for the Christian to see,
Merrily dancing on nothing is he;
Though there’s no fiddler a hornpipe to saw,
Light are his leaps. He’s hanging, hurrah!
After the rope has been severed in twain,
Home go the people and joyfully sing,
Heaven will receive who the gallows has slain -
Does not the clergyman settle the thing?
Home go the people and talk of it all,
Children in nursery, servants in hall;
Bob hangs the cat in the manner he saw,
Hung at the gallows, God’s Image! Hurrah!
Rouse ye good clergymen, servants of God!
Stand by my side while I fight for your fun;
Hanging preserves us from shedding of blood,
Remedy like it there never was one.
Rally your forces, thump pulpits and be
Clerical guards of the good gallows tree!
What if our Saviour denounces the law?
You go for hanging - for hanging, hurrah!

Suffolk Chronicle: January 18th 1845





In March 1780, a ne'er-do-well by the name of **Jonathan Sawyer** was tried at Bury St. Edmunds for burglaries at Cretingham and Brundish. He was found guilty and, along with three Ipswich thieves, was condemned to death. It wasn't difficult to get a death sentence. Any number of crimes carried the death penalty at that time. But it didn't mean that the ultimate price would be paid. The three Ipswich thieves were all reprieved and given the dubious alternative of serving as soldiers in war-torn parts of the world. That was not to be for Jonathan Sawyer. He was carted back to Ipswich gaol, from where he was taken on April 8th to Rushmere Heath for a public hanging.

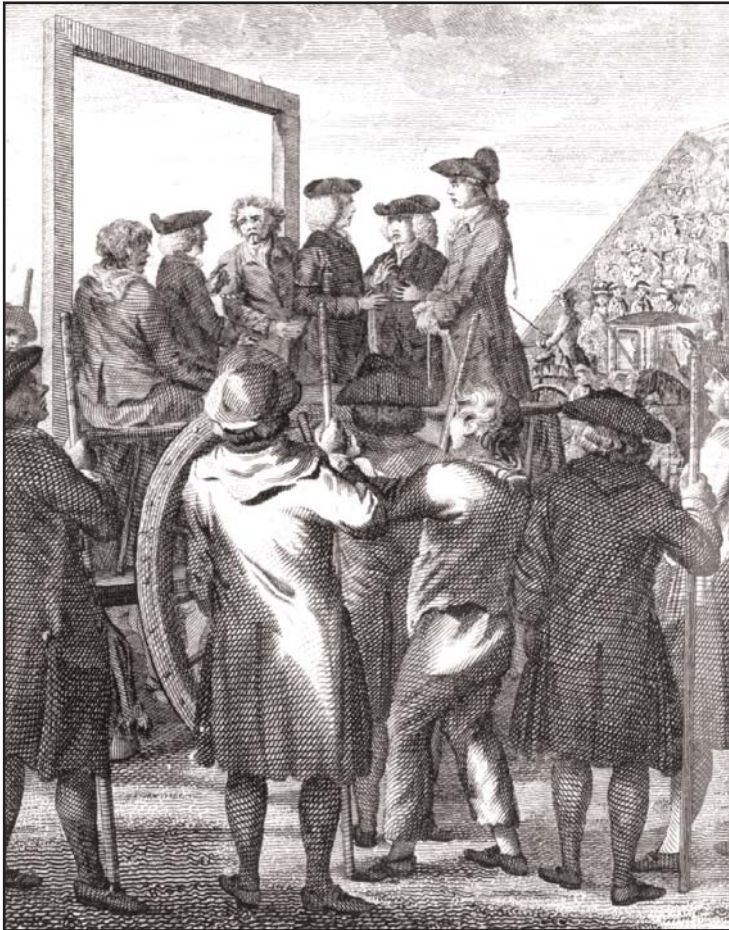
Jonathan Sawyer, otherwise Lock, who is to be executed this day for a burglary, has behaved in a very proper manner since his condemnation. He confesses the crime for which he is to suffer, and many others which he has been guilty of, and acknowledges the justice of the punishment inflicted upon him; which he hopes will be a warning to others. He is only 18 years old. An account of his life will be published this day, and may be had of the printers at 1d each. Although he is but a young offender, there are many transactions in this account, well worth the perusal of the public.

Ipswich Journal: April 8th 1780

Saturday last, Jonathan Sawyer, alias Lock was executed at Rushmere near this town. He had hopes of life on the day he suffered, for when his irons were knocking off, he said he should not be hanged, that the Governor (meaning Mr. Ripshaw) had a reprieve in his pocket, but had a mind to see how he would behave. This notion persisted with him till his arms were pinioned and then he gave an account of more robberies he had committed, and of which he had before denied. It was observed by those that stood near him at the

place of execution that he did not once exchange countenance, and several times pulled up the hand kerchief that had been put over his face, and said he hoped his end would be a warning to others.

Ipswich Journal: April 15th 1780



In all probability that was not the end of his grisly sentence, as the bodies of hanged felons could then be offered or even sold to doctors for dissection, sometimes conducted under the gaze of the public. The worst villains were gibbeted and their bodies hanged in chains for the crows to feed upon.

In November 1900, **Ellis Backler**, a 49 year old man from Haverhill was found guilty of a triple murder, that of his common-law wife and two of their children. He too received the full black-cap treatment, but he did not hang. By then, very few did. He was reprieved two weeks later on the grounds of his insanity, a defence that had saved a number, including the perpetrators of more celebrated killings, such as the Cretingham murder of 1887 and the Winesham murder of 1896. Instead, he would be kept in secure accommodation for the rest of his life. At this time, though hanging in Suffolk would continue well into the twentieth century (3 hanged at Ipswich - in 1911, 1920 and 1924), it was common for submissions to be made to enable even the worst murderers to have their cases examined at the highest level. Execution, if it came to that, would be done as humanely as the technology allowed, and in private. By then, bodies of those executed would receive a proper inquest and a Christian burial.

At the end of this book is a spreadsheet of all cases coming before Suffolk Assize Judges in the period 1732 - 1900. Most of the information comes from local Suffolk newspapers of their day. For much of that time there are, at the very least, two surviving newspapers to refer to, regarding the trials. Such actual Assize records as survive in the Public Record Office at Kew are very incomplete and rarely give much information as to the outcomes of trials. By cross-referencing a number of newspapers, it has been possible to gather a much fuller picture, and though different papers may not agree on every detail, I am confident in the accuracy of practically everything listed here. Occasionally, other detail has been added from surviving trial lists, prison records, transportation lists and published trial accounts.

Capital offences on the statute book (those which carried the death penalty) increased throughout the eighteenth century until the early 1820s, by which time over 200 offences called for the full rigour of the law. These included '*going abroad with your face*

blackened' (wearing a mask when conducting a robbery) and *'disguising oneself as an Egyptian'* (by which they meant a gipsy). In practice, few of those given death sentences in the early nineteenth century hung, as the very viable alternative of transportation to Australia was used more and more. This led the law into no small measure of disrepute. In the years 1820 & 1821, forty-two Suffolk criminals received death sentences, but only one was hanged (in his case, for burglary). It didn't make a lot of sense.

An Act of 1823 removed a large number of offences from the Capital List. These included *'stealing cloth from the rack or tenters in the night time'*, and many varieties of theft from shops, warehouses, ships or docks. Also, it was no longer a hanging matter to kill deer, take rabbits from a warren or fish from a private river or pond. You could not be executed for rescuing people in custody for these offences, or for sending letters demanding money with threats of violence or false accusation. (For details, see the Bury Post: July 16th 1823)

Later 1820s courts introduced a two-tier system, distinguishing between the full *'Sentence of Death'* and the lesser *'Death Recorded.'* The truth of the matter is that little genuinely serious crime had troubled Suffolk for centuries. When **William Corder** was executed in August 1828 for the murder of Maria Marten in the Red Barn at Polstead, it was not just the horror of his crime that made it notorious, but the fact that he was the first murderer in Suffolk to hang for 13 years.

Rapidly, the number of capital offences declined, so by the early 1830s only about a dozen offences called for the death penalty, though rarely was execution enacted for anything other than murder after that point. *Arson* and *'An unnatural offence'* (sodomy) are exceptions to this rule, though no-one in Suffolk hanged for anything other than murder after 1835. The Criminal Law Consolidation Act of 1861 reduced these offences still further to Murder, Treason, Mutiny and Piracy.

Overall, the appended list at the back of this book contains nearly 1000 cases that definitely resulted in a death sentence of

one kind or another. Of those, about 165 were hanged. Public hangings ended in 1868, **John Ducker** being the last in Suffolk, executed at Ipswich in April 1863 for the murder of a policeman in Halesworth. Of the names listed, just 55 are women, but a higher proportion of them hanged, fourteen in all. Their public hangings always drew a larger than average crowd. No woman was hanged in Suffolk after **Mary Cage**, who murdered her abusive husband in Stonham Aspal in 1851. Such was the tide of opinion at the time, she would almost certainly have had her sentence commuted, had her offence been as little as a year later. A select few feature on this list more than once, including the famous **Margaret Catchpole**, who received two death sentences before being transported to Australia.



Hangings accelerated during the eighteenth century and it is estimated the high point was between 1770 and 1830. In earlier times, it was felt that to enable justice to be seen to be done, punishment should be enacted as close as possible to the scene of the atrocity. Thieves were '*whipped at the cart's tail*' from the gaol to the place they had robbed and back again. Public exhibitions of justice were often on market day to attract the largest possible crowd. This system could mean occasional hangings in out-of-the-way places. **Tobias Gill**, described as a black drummer, responsible for rape and murder of a young girl at

BLYTHBURGH, Sept. 5, 1750.

WHereas it was thought that **TOBIAS GILL**, the Black Drummer, who was condem'd at Bury Affizes for the Murder of **ANN BLAKMORE**, would be executed at Ipswich; this is to inform the Publick, That he will certainly be executed at this Town, on Friday the 14th Instant, and afterwards will be hung in Chains near the Place where he committed the Fact.---He will be brought from Ipswich Goal to the Angel in this Town on Thursday the 13th Instant.

Blythburgh in 1750, was hanged there to appease local opinion, as this Ipswich Journal advertisement shows.

Such executions were rare in any one location, and drew a great deal of interest when they did occur. The Ipswich Journal

I P S W I C H, *April 9*

We hear from B U R Y, that Reeve, Flower, and Townshend were executed there on Wednesday; and that the two first seem'd to be very penitent, but Townshend shew'd very little Sense of his unhappy Condition.

Extract of a Letter from DISS, dated April 8.

' Last Saturday Robert Carlton (who was condemn'd at the last Thetford Assizes for Sodomy, and the Murder of a young Woman by Poison) was brought hither from Norwich Castle. Sunday in the Afternoon he was carried to Church, where an excellent Sermon, applicable to the Criminal's Condition, was preached before the largest Congregation ever seen here. The next Day he was executed upon our Common, and afterwards hanged in Chains. He behaved to the last with very little shew of Remorse; and altho' he acknowledged the Sodomy, yet, when the Rope was about his Neck at the Gallows, he denied that he was guilty of the Murder. The People present at the Execution were computed by some at 15,000, and by others at 20,000.'

published on April 10th 1742 brushed lightly over three hangings at Bury, giving more detail to an execution at Diss.

Until 1752, a variety of felons could expect their bodies to be 'anatomised' after death. From 1752 until 1834, the dissection of the body by doctors became a mandatory part of the sentence for murder, though often the gibbet was chosen instead. Gibbeting, or 'hanging the body in chains' ended officially in 1832. Traitors (not a crime we encounter much in Suffolk at this time) were decapitated after hanging until 1820. Prisoners who tried to escape the hangman's noose by terminating their own existence (committing suicide) were often exhibited on a cart before being