

**REPRESENTATIONS OF JUSTICE EXECUTED  
AT NORWICH CASTLE:  
A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF EXECUTION REPORTS IN THE  
NORFOLK CHRONICLE AND BURY AND  
NORWICH POST, 1805-1867**

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**Abstract:**

Recent years have seen growing interest among historians in newspaper reporting of crime and criminality in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. To date, however, comparatively little academic attention has been paid to the way in which the press, particularly regional newspapers, reported executions. Examining the newspaper reportage of executions at Norwich Castle between 1805-67, this article examines how two newspapers representing different political opinions that circulated in Norfolk during the period, the Tory *Norfolk Chronicle* and the liberal *Bury and Norwich Post*, differed in how they reported the executions that took place in the city. The newspapers, it will be shown, differed in both the attention given to executions, and the agenda taken towards them. While both newspapers expressed hopes in its reportage that the lesson of the scaffold would be learned, and described the condemned dying penitent, the *Norfolk Chronicle* emphasised this a lot more. In particular, it explicitly sought to legitimate executions in its pages by describing at length the confessions made by the condemned, and championed the actions of the Chaplain in attempting to secure confessions from the condemned even as they stood upon the drop with the noose around their necks, and by linking in various ways temporal and supernatural justice. In contrast, both reportage and commentary such as letters and editorials in the *Bury and Norwich Post*, reveal that it was more concerned with reforming, rather than legitimating, capital punishment.

**Keywords:** execution, capital punishment, crime reporting, newspaper representation

**Introduction**

On Monday 16th August 1819, John Pycraft, a 35-year old gardener standing four foot two inches in height from Westwick, was executed at Norwich Castle after being condemned to death at the Norfolk Assizes for murdering his son with poisoned tea. The *Bury and Norfolk Post* devoted 16 lines to the execution, noting that it had taken place and that the poison he had administered was actually for his wife, to whom he had ‘taken a dislike’ and wanted to be rid of ‘in order that he might more easily continue his connexion with a dissolute woman’.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> *The Bury and Norwich Post*, 18 August 1819, p.3 (hereafter BNP).

In contrast *The Norfolk Chronicle* painstakingly described over 105 lines both the execution and the subsequent dissection of Pycraft's corpse, noting his countenance during the trial and execution, and even going so far as to itemise the relative length and circumference of his skull and limbs. His head, the newspaper described 'was extremely ill-proportioned to his body and limbs, being of an unusual size, His countenance was ill-favoured and heavy' and his limbs 'were not only remarkable for their shortness, but also for their bent and irregular shape'. Pycraft's physical deformity, it concluded, 'was in singular unison with his moral depravity'.<sup>3</sup>

Recent years have seen growing interest among historians in newspaper reporting of crime and criminality in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Developing on the formative work in the field by Peter King, Judith Walkowitz, Rob Sindall and Jennifer Davis in the 1980s and 1990s,<sup>4</sup> scholarship over the last decade has examined how crime and criminal trials were reported in eighteenth and nineteenth century newspapers,<sup>5</sup> and the role played by the press in creating 'moral panics' around certain forms of criminality or deviant behaviour.<sup>6</sup> As yet, however, little attention has been paid to the ways in which the press reported executions. While there is an established body of work covering various aspects of execution culture in the period - not least their representation in other printed material such as broadsides, ballads and the Newgate Ordinary's Accounts<sup>7</sup> - comparatively little academic attention has

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<sup>3</sup> *The Norfolk Chronicle*, 21 August 1819, p.3. (hereafter NC).

<sup>4</sup> Peter King, 'Newspaper Reporting, Prosecution Practice and Perceptions of Urban Crime: The Colchester Crime Wave of 1765', *Continuity and Change* 2 (1987), pp. 423-54; Judith Walkowitz, *City of Dreadful Delight: Narratives of Sexual Danger in Late-Victorian London* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992); Rob Sindall, *Street violence in the nineteenth century: media panic or real danger?* (Leicester: Leicester University Press, 1990); Jennifer Davis, 'The London Garroting Panic of 1862: A Moral Panic and the Creation of the Criminal Class in mid-Victorian England', in V.A.C. Gatrell, Bruce Lenman & Geoffrey Parker (eds.) *Crime and the Law: The Social History of Crime in Western Europe since 1500*. London: Europa Publications Ltd. (1980), pp. 190-213.

<sup>5</sup> Esther Snell, 'Discourses of Criminality in the eighteenth-century press: the presentation of crime in *The Kentish Post*, 1717-1768', *Continuity and Change* 22, 1 (2007), pp. 13-47; Peter King, 'Newspaper Reporting and Attitudes to Crime and Justice in late-eighteenth - and early-nineteenth century London', *Continuity and Change* 22, 1 (2007), pp. 73-112; Peter King, 'Making Crime News: Newspapers, Violent Crime and the Selective Reporting of Old Bailey Trials in the late Eighteenth Century', *Crime, History & Societies* 13, 1 (2009), pp. 91-116; Norma Landau, 'Gauging Crime in Late Eighteenth-Century London', *Social History* 35, 4 (2010), pp. 396-417; Christopher A. Casey, 'Common Misconceptions: The Press and Victorian Views of Crime', *Journal of Interdisciplinary History* XLI, 3 (2011), pp. 367-91; Martin J. Wiener, 'Convicted Murderers and the Victorian Press: Condemnation Vs. Sympathy', *Crimes and Misdemeanours* 1, 2, (2007), pp. 110-25.

<sup>6</sup> Peter King, 'Moral Panics and Violent Street Crime 1750-2000: A Comparative Perspective', in Barry S. Godfrey, Clive Emsley & Graeme Dunstall (eds.) *Comparative Histories of Crime* (Cullompton: Willan Publishing, 2003), pp. 53-71. See also the contributions to two collections of essays edited by Judith Rowbotham and Kim Stevenson: Judith Rowbotham & Kim Stevenson, *Behaving Badly: Social Panic and Moral Outrage - Victorian and Modern Parallels* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2003); Judith Rowbotham & Kim Stevenson, (eds.) *Criminal Conversations: Victorian Crimes, Social Panic and Moral Outrage*. (Columbus: The Ohio State University Press, 2005).

<sup>7</sup> See, for example, V.A.C. Gatrell, *The Hanging Tree: Execution and the English People 1770-1868* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996); Phillipe Chassaige 'Popular Representations of Crime: The

been paid to the way in which the press, particularly regional newspapers, reported executions.

Notable exceptions to this are the work of Zoe Dyndor on representations of capital punishment in the *Northampton Mercury* between 1780 and 1834 and John Tulloch on executions in Lincoln during the nineteenth century. Dyndor shows how descriptions of executions in the *Mercury* were typically formulaic, describing, for example, the background of the condemned, their behaviour on the scaffold (including any final speeches) as well as the size and response of the crowd. More broadly, she argues that execution reportage was intended, like the executions themselves, to both deter people from engaging in criminal activity, and maintain social order. Newspapers framed executions in a didactic manner, emphasizing through the use of religious language what she terms 'the moral lesson of the scaffold'; that justice was seen to be done and that the condemned died penitent, admitting their guilt and accepting their punishment as just. Tulloch too emphasizes the formulaic aspect of execution reports, discussing how this came into tension from the mid-century onwards with journalists, who sought new ways of reporting executions that drew on new narrative styles which empathised with the condemned and their suffering. In particular, he shows how three local newspapers, the Tory *Lincolnshire Chronicle*, and liberal *Stamford Mercury* and *Lincoln Gazette* each employed a different literary approach to their reporting of the execution of Priscilla Biggadike, the first woman to be executed behind prison walls in the county, in 1868.

Examining the newspaper reportage of executions at Norwich Castle between 1805-67, this article intends to expand on the work of Dyndor and Tulloch, examining how two newspapers representing different political opinions that circulated in Norfolk during the period, the Tory *Norfolk Chronicle* and the liberal *Bury and Norwich Post*, differed in how they reported the executions that took place in the city. The newspapers, it will be shown, differed in both the attention given to executions, and the agenda taken towards them. While both newspapers expressed hopes in its reportage that the lesson of the scaffold would be learned, and described the condemned dying penitent, the *Norfolk Chronicle* emphasised this considerably more. In particular, it explicitly sought to legitimate executions in its pages by describing at length the confessions made by the condemned, and championed the actions of the Chaplain in attempting to secure confessions from the condemned even as they stood upon the drop with the noose around their necks, and by linking in various ways

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Crime Broadside - a Subculture of Violence in Victorian Britain', *Crime, Historie & Sociétés* 3, 2 (1999), pp. 23-55; Rosalind Crone, *Violent Victorians: Popular Entertainment in Nineteenth-century London* (Manchester, Manchester University Press, 2012).

temporal and supernatural justice. In contrast, both reportage and commentary such as letters and editorials in the *Bury and Norwich Post*, reveal that it was more concerned with reforming, rather than legitimating, capital punishment.

### 1 Capital Punishment in Norfolk, 1805-67

Between 1805 and 1867, 833 persons were sentenced to death at the Norfolk Assizes and Quarter Sessions, although only 6% (50 persons) of these were subsequently executed:<sup>8</sup>

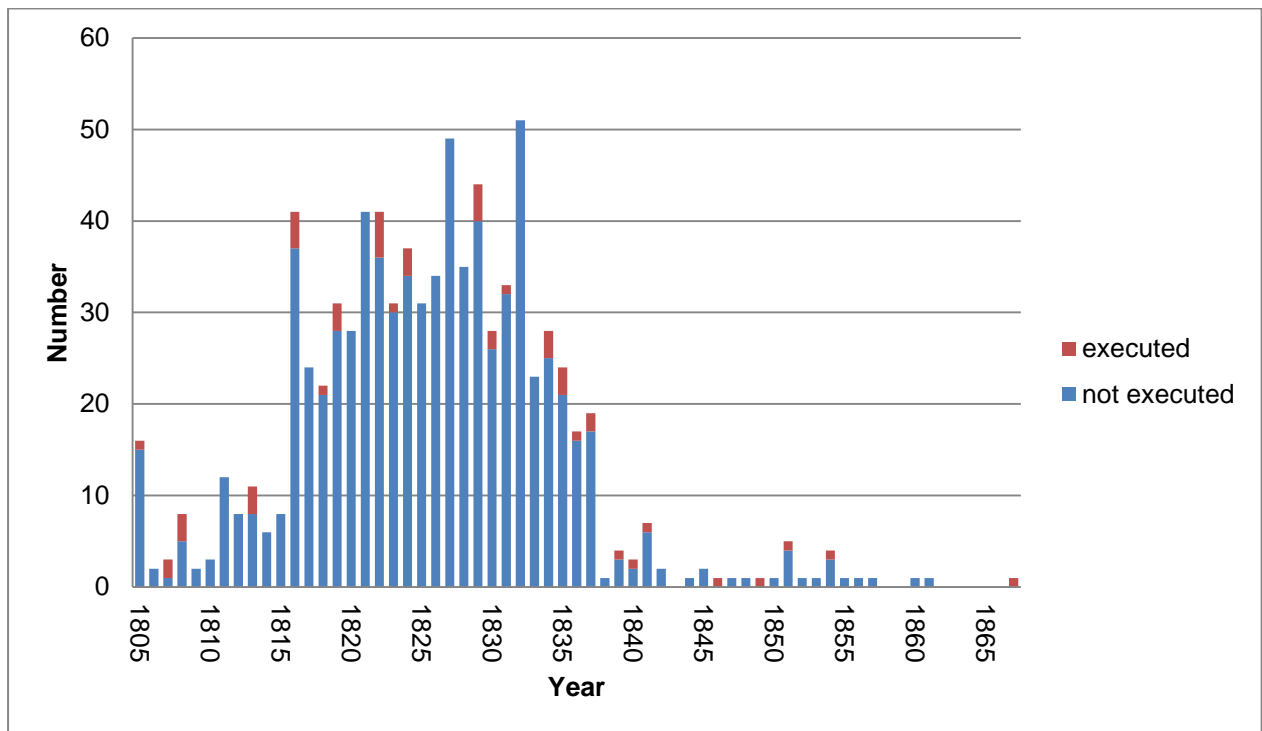


Figure 1 to show the number of persons sentenced to death and executed in Norfolk, 1805-67

As can be seen from **Figure 1** above, the majority of those both sentenced to death and executed was between 1805-29 69% of those sentenced to death while 60% of executions in the period took place in this quarter century. The number of those sentenced to death rose rapidly between the 1810s and 1830s, more than doubling from 166 convictions in the 1810s to 371 in the 1820s before reaching 228 in the 1830s. Following the repeal of the Bloody Code in the 1830s and a peak in 1832 (with 51 capital convictions), the number of capital convictions began to drop rapidly, so that from the 1840s onwards the number of capital convictions never rose above seven per annum (in 1841) and averaged just over one per

<sup>8</sup> Ancestry.com. *England & Wales, Criminal Registers, 1791-1892* [database on-line]. Provo, UT, USA: Ancestry.com Operations Inc., 2009. This material was then coded and analysed using SPSS for Windows v20.

annum between 1840-67. While the ratio of executed/respited for the whole period was 94/6%, this varied between decades from 93/7% in the 1810s and 96/4% in the 1820s through to a 1/3 ratio by the 1860s. The number of executions per decade remained relatively static between the 1810s and 1840s, although some years – most notably 1816, 1822 and 1829 witnessed higher numbers of executions (4, 5, and 5 executions respectively).

<b>Gender</b>	<b>Executed</b>	<b>Not Executed</b>	<b>Total</b>
Female	3 (7%)	41 (93%)	<b>44</b> <b>(100%)</b>
Male	47 (6%)	742 (94%)	<b>789</b> <b>(100%)</b>

**Figure 2 to show the number of persons executed and respited in Norfolk by gender 1805-67**

As would be expected, the number of males both sentenced to death and executed over the period dramatically outweighed the number of females. Males made up 95% of the capital convictions over the period and 94% of executions. However, both were equally likely (at around 93% and 94% of all cases respectively) to have their sentences respited and not face the gallows.

<b>Type of Crime</b>	<b>Not Executed</b>	<b>Executed</b>	<b>Total</b>
Crime against the person	66 (73%)	25 (27%)	<b>91</b> <b>(100%)</b>
Property Crime	686 (98%)	17 (2%)	<b>703</b> <b>(100%)</b>
Criminal damage	13 (65%)	7 (35%)	<b>20</b> <b>(100%)</b>
Other	18 (95%)	1 (5%)	<b>19</b> <b>(100%)</b>

**Figure 3 to show the number of persons executed and respited in Norfolk by type of crime, 1805-67.**

Over the period, the majority of sentences of death were passed in relation to property crime (84%); the number of such convictions being almost eight times more than those for crimes against the person and almost 34 times more than for forms of criminal damage, such as arson. That said, however, the latter category of offences were much more likely to result in the convict being executed (35% of cases as opposed to just 2% of property crime convictions). Convictions for crimes against the person were also significantly more likely to lead to the gallows than property crime (27%). In sum, while property crime made up the majority of capital convictions, a man or woman convicted of a form of criminal damage or a

crime against the person was almost 18-times and 14-times more likely respectively to be executed than one convicted of property crime. A more detailed breakdown of the different crimes that received capital convictions over the period is shown in below:

<b>Crime</b>	<b>Not Executed</b>	<b>Executed</b>	<b>Total</b>
Murder	9 (33%)	18 (67%)	<b>27</b> <b>(100%)</b>
Attempted Murder	3 (75%)	1 (25%)	<b>4</b> <b>(100%)</b>
Horse/mare stealing	77 (96%)	3 (4%)	<b>80</b> <b>(100%)</b>
Burglary	183 (96%)	7 (4%)	<b>190</b> <b>(100%)</b>
Larceny in a dwelling house	59 (98%)	1 (2%)	<b>60</b> <b>(100%)</b>
Arson	10 (59%)	7 (44%)	<b>17</b> <b>(100%)</b>
Sheep/lamb stealing	105 (96%)	4 (4%)	<b>109</b> <b>(100%)</b>
House breaking	137 (100%)	0	<b>137</b> <b>(100%)</b>
Cattle stealing	10 (100%)	0	<b>10</b> <b>(100%)</b>
Highway robbery	27 (100%)	0	<b>27</b> <b>(100%)</b>
Robbery	54 (98%)	1 (2%)	<b>55</b> <b>(100%)</b>
Bestiality	12 (100%)	0	<b>12</b> <b>(100%)</b>
Buggery/sodomy	8 (100%)	0	<b>8</b> <b>(100%)</b>
Rape	8 (89%)	1 (12%)	<b>9</b> <b>(100%)</b>
Shooting with intent	33 (92%)	3 (8%)	<b>36</b> <b>(100%)</b>
Stabbing/wounding with intent	7 (78%)	2 (22%)	<b>9</b> <b>(100%)</b>
Robbery to the person/with violence	7 (87.5%)	1 (12.5%)	<b>8</b> <b>(100%)</b>
Returning from transportation	2 (100%)	0	<b>2</b> <b>(100%)</b>
Carnally knowing/abusing an infant	2 (100%)	0	<b>2</b> <b>(100%)</b>
Criminal damage, inc. sacrilege	3 (100%)	0	<b>3</b> <b>(100%)</b>
Coining/Forgery/Uttering	18 (100%)	1 (5%)	<b>19</b> <b>(100%)</b>
Larceny or Grand Larceny	8 (100%)	0	<b>8</b> <b>(100%)</b>
Felony	1 (100%)	0	<b>1</b> <b>(100%)</b>

**Figure 4 to show the number of persons executed or respited in Norfolk by crime, 1805-67.**

As can be seen from the above table, there were a number of crimes for which, even in spite of high numbers of convictions, no one was executed. Housebreaking is the obvious

example of this trend with 137 convictions and no executions, but the same could also be said of highway robbery or bestiality. In other cases, such as robbery or shooting with intent, a small number of individuals were executed, while the vast majority had their sentences respited. Indeed, it is only murder where the majority of those executed outnumber the majority respited, with 67% of those convicted being executed. 41% of convicted arsonists were also executed. By comparison, around 4% of those convicted of burglary were executed, despite it making up 23% of all capital convictions during the period.

From this, then, three main conclusions may be drawn out. First, that the vast majority of those sentenced to death in Norfolk during the period were not executed for their crimes, and it was during the period of the Bloody Code that (s)he would have been more likely to have had their sentence respited. From the 1840s onwards, and certainly in the 1860s, it became more likely that a sentence of death would lead to execution. Second, that although men comprised almost all those sentenced to death, both men and women stood an equal chance of having their sentences respited. Women, in other words, would not appear to have been unduly favoured or men more harshly treated by the Courts. Finally, while property crime, burglary in particular, made up the majority of capital convictions during the period, it was crimes against the person, particularly murder, which more often resulted in execution. The trends in executions in Norfolk, in other words, mirrored the national ones, and as Norfolk was not experiencing anything unusual during the period it is likely that the reportage in both newspapers were reflective of the ways in which Liberal and Tory newspapers reported executions more broadly.<sup>9</sup>

## **2 The Two Newspapers**

The origins of the *Norfolk Chronicle* lie in the rapid expansion of the press that took place in Norwich in the early eighteenth century following the founding of the *Norwich Post* by the London printer, Francis Burges in 1701. Burges maintained the newspaper as a commercial venture, reprinting news items on metropolitan and foreign affairs culled from the London press, and did not promote any political position. Following his death in 1706, two other newspapers, *The Norwich Post-Man* and *The Norwich Gazette* quickly emerged, providing Norwich with more newspapers than any other provincial city at the time. In 1713 the *Norwich Post* disappeared, and the *Post-Man* merged with the *Weekly Mercury*, to become the *Whig Norwich Mercury*, while the *Gazette*, changed its name to the *Norfolk Chronicle* in 1771. From its inception, the newspaper had promoted the Tory cause, and in the 1840s, when it was priced at 4 1/2d was described by *Mitchell's Newspaper Press Directory* as

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<sup>9</sup> Cf. Gatrell, *The Hanging Tree*.

'being firmly attached to the Church of England...giv[ing] a steady, but independent support to the causes of the aristocracy and the clergy, and may be considered as the organ of the Conservative party both in the county and the city'.<sup>10</sup> *The Bury and Norwich Post* was established in Bury St. Edmonds in 1782, as the *Bury Post, and Universal Advertiser*, changing its name first to the *Bury Post, or Suffolk and Norfolk Advertiser* and then the *Bury and Norwich Post* in 1786. In the 1840s, when it was also priced at 4 1/2d, it was described by *Mitchell's* as being 'friendly to the Church, but exhibits much liberality towards the Dissenters; and on all questions is much adverse to the extremes of party spirit'.<sup>11</sup>

Both the *Norfolk Chronicle* and *Bury and Norwich Post* gave space to execution reports in their pages, providing reportage of the executions that took place in Norfolk, as well ones from further afield such as, for example, that of the 'Edgware Road Murderer' James Greenacre in London in May 1837 or Franz Müller in November 1864. However, over the period the amount of reportage that each gave to executions changed substantially:

Early reports in both newspapers were very brief, describing when and where the execution took place and the crime for which the condemned died. The execution was described in formulaic terms, with the condemned acknowledging the justice of their sentence and dying penitently or in a manner that was deemed appropriate.<sup>12</sup> The voice of the condemned, if heard at all, is presented paraphrased, never verbatim. Thus, Leeds Mays, executed in April 1805 for horse theft received just five lines in both newspapers, who described how 'his behaviour was truly penitent, and becoming his unhappy situation'.<sup>13</sup> Martha Alden, executed in July 1807 for murdering her husband, was likewise described by the *Bury and Norwich Post* as behaving 'with becoming decency', and 'seemed conscious of the enormity of her crime'. The *Norfolk Chronicle* agreed, observing how Alden 'behaved at the fatal tree with the decency becoming her awful situation'.<sup>14</sup>

From 1813, with the execution report of Charles Harper and Edmund Impson, onwards, however, the *Norfolk Chronicle* began to devote more space to execution reportage than did the *Bury and Norwich Post*. Indeed, with only one exception, from 1813 until the end of the period the *Norfolk Chronicle* always gave more space, often significantly more, to reporting

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<sup>10</sup> Charles Mitchell, *The Newspaper Press Directory* (London, C Mitchell, 1847), p.220; A.D. Euren, *The First Provincial Newspaper: A Brief Survey of the Earliest Norwich Newspapers* (Norwich, Norwich Mercury Office, 1924); The Norfolk News Company, *The Norwich Post: Its Contemporaries and Successors* (Norwich: Norwich News Co. Ltd, 1951).

<sup>11</sup> Mitchell, *The Newspaper Press Directory*, p.161.

<sup>12</sup> Cf. Dyndor.

<sup>13</sup> *BNP*, 10 April 1805, p.3; *NC*, 13 April 1805, p.2.

<sup>14</sup> *BNP*, 5 August 1807, p.3; *NC*, 1 August 1807, p.2



executions than did the *Bury and Norwich Post*. The murderer James Johnson, for example, received 20 and 146 lines respectively in each newspaper in 1818, while, John Stratford, another murderer executed 11 years later received 44 and 1,095 lines respectively. Between 1805-1867, the average length of an execution report in the *Norfolk Chronicle* was approximately 181 lines in length, while one in the *Bury and Norwich Post* was less than a third as long at 55 lines on average. *The Norfolk Chronicle* was also the first of the two newspapers to provide a headline for an execution (that of Johnson in 1818), a practice it continued for almost all of its subsequent execution reports during the period. *The Bury and Norwich Post*, in contrast, only began regularly to do so in 1840, beginning with its report of the execution of John Randalsome in August of that year.

It is not clear, however, whether either the gender of the condemned or the type of offence had any impact on the amount of attention given to each execution in both newspapers. The execution of Martha Alden for murder in 1807, for example, received slightly less coverage in the *Norfolk Chronicle* than that of William Carter executed in the same year for horse stealing. The *Bury and Norwich Post*, however, gave it almost eight-times as many lines coverage than it gave to Carter. Similarly, although the former newspaper gave more lines to the execution of Frances Billing and Catherine Frarey for murder in 1835 than that of James Clarke in the same year for arson, the latter gave it just over half as many lines. The execution reports of murderers were more likely to be longer than that of non-murderers in the *Norfolk Chronicle*, although this was not always the case in the *Bury and Norwich Post*. Thus, while the former newspaper devoted over a thousand lines to the execution of John Stratford in 1829, the latter accorded it less space than the execution of James Smith and Henry Carter in 1822 for housebreaking. Nor would it appear that executions generated more attention as they became rarer events from the late 1830s onwards. While, as noted before, the trend was for reports to become longer and more detailed over the period, not all murderers' executions received equal attention. The executions of Samuel Yarham and James Rush in 1846 and 1849 respectively, for example, were described in the *Norfolk Chronicle* in reports over double the length than those of John Self (1841), Henry Groom (1851) and William Thompson (1851).

### **3 Analysis**

In April 1835, a few days after the execution of James Clarke for arson, the *Bury and Norwich Post* published an article entitled 'James Clarke: the Incendiary', in which it presented further particulars about the recently executed man; information that, the newspaper hoped,

would have the good effect so desirable to be wrought on the minds of young persons, particularly of the class to which James Clarke belonged - that of agricultural labourers; nor ought the allusion made by the unhappy offender to the consequences of a want of regular employment to pass unheeded by the landowners, and above all the landowners of this country.<sup>15</sup>

This was a sentiment that the *Norfolk Chronicle* shared. Indeed, much of the article, and even the above quotation, were largely reproduced from the report of the execution it had published four days earlier.<sup>16</sup> The original report related how, despite claims that at his trial Clarke was 'not properly impressed with the awfulness of his situation...He had, in fact, been fully aware of his danger from the first moment of his apprehension'. Moreover, when visited by the Chaplain after his condemnation, he had, it was claimed, confessed his guilt, and 'appeared to be truly penitent for his offences...rest[ing] his hopes of mercy entirely on the merits of his Saviour...'<sup>17</sup>

These dual, interconnected themes, that the condemned died penitent and the hope that the lesson of the scaffold would have the desired effect on its audience, are, despite their differing political positions, the central leitmotifs in both newspapers' execution reportage. *The Bury and Norwich Post* frequently described how the condemned had died penitent, admitting their guilt. The last moments of arsonists Noah Peak and George Fortis, its readers were told in April 1822, 'proved the correctness of the Jury's decision', with both men appearing to be 'very penitent, having spent much of their time in prayer, after their conviction'. Fortis in particular 'addressed the numerous spectators at length, and confessed that he suffered justly, being privy to the deed, though he did not apply the fire'.<sup>18</sup> Indeed, the condemned was also often described as thoroughly deserving their ignoble end. James Smith and Henry Carter, executed the same year as Peak and Fortis, were thus described as 'having deserved their ignominious fate', while in the case of Charles Daines, executed for murder in 1839, the newspaper noted how 'many discussed the policy and utility of public executions; but none lamented the punishment of the individual'.<sup>19</sup> The newspaper was particularly concerned to dispel in the public mind any doubt that murderer John Randalsome did not deserve his fate:

This unhappy man forfeited his life upon the scaffold on Saturday last, and if any man ever justly deserved his fate he did so pre-eminently. There has been some disposition in the public mind to doubt his guilt, but this could only proceed from an ignorance of the whole facts, and from not being acquainted with the localities.

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<sup>15</sup> 'James Clarke: The Incendiary', *BNP*, 29 April 1835, p.3.

<sup>16</sup> 'Execution of James Clarke', *NC*, 25 April 1835, p.3.

<sup>17</sup> 'Execution of James Clarke'.

<sup>18</sup> *BNP*, 17 April 1822, p.3.

<sup>19</sup> *BNP*, 22 August 1822, p.3; *BNP*, 1 May 1839, p.3.

Comprehensive as the evidence on the trial was, it did not, and could not, according to the rules of English law, include a number of circumstances that were well known in the neighbourhood; and which would, if known, have tended to remove all doubt from every thinking mind.<sup>20</sup>

The newspaper, while clearly harbouring some distaste for the spectacle of the scaffold, also hoped that executions would serve a salutary lesson to the populace. 'We trust', it opined when describing Carter and Smith's execution, 'this melancholy spectacle will be a means of turning many bad characters in this city to honesty, and a sense of their former bad habits'.<sup>21</sup> Likewise, in 1830, reporting the execution of Lovett and Simmons, it expressed the hope that both the latter man's children 'as well as the multitude who witnessed the spectacle, derive from the terrible end of their parent that deep and lasting impression, the hope of producing which is the only ground on which such a punishment is inflicted'.<sup>22</sup> Nevertheless, the newspaper was aware that execution was an imperfect tool for imparting a moral message or deterring would-be criminals. This was particularly the case with executions for arson, a crime that, as noted above, while relatively rare (16 cases during the period), led to a relatively high proportion of executions. In 1834, it bemoaned, following the execution of arsonists William Pye and Gilpin Reynolds, that while it was 'some consolation' to know that the latter man (who was strongly suspected of having started 20 other fires) had made a full confession and that no other fire had taken place since his arrest;

We grieve to state that on the very eve of the day when the above wretched men were removed from this world to answer to their Maker for destroying the property of their neighbours, two fires occurred within a few miles of Thetford, both occasioned by the hands of incendiaries.<sup>23</sup>

The *Norfolk Chronicle*, however, as the organ of the Tory Establishment emphasised these themes much more strongly, and sought explicitly in its reportage to propound the legitimacy of executions and necessity of capital punishment more broadly. In 1829, the newspaper reprinted at length the confession of John Stafford, in which he declared 'I acknowledge the justice of my sentence and that I deserve to die', while in 1835, it reported that it was 'glad to learn that' the convicted murderers Frances Billing and Catherine Frarey had not only 'evinced the most poignant sorrow for their offences', but had also 'made a full and ample confession of their crimes, and requested that their shame might be published to the world in

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<sup>20</sup> 'Execution of John Randalsome', *BNP*, 26 August 1840, p.3.

<sup>21</sup> 'Execution'.

<sup>22</sup> *BNP*, 14 April 1830, p.3.

<sup>23</sup> *BNP*, 16 April 1834, p.3.

any manner that might best calculated to atone for the injuries they had done to society and to warn others against similar transgressions'.<sup>24</sup>

In particular, the newspaper described in detail the confessions made by the condemned on the scaffold, in Chapel at the Condemned Service, or in letters to their families. Thus, while the *Bury and Norwich Post* only made passing reference to the speech that George Fortis made on the scaffold, the *Norfolk Chronicle* reported verbatim part of what it claimed was the text of the speech he had delivered at the Condemned Service in which he reminded those assembled how 'I shall be no more', before telling them 'may God bless you, and have mercy on you all!'<sup>25</sup> Similarly, in the case of Reynolds and Pye, the latter newspaper described at length how, along with their fellow condemned William Thirkette;

they had requested permission of the Chaplain to take leave of their fellow-prisoners for the purpose of warning them against those practices that had led them to their untimely end; and this they did in the most earnest, solemn, and impressive manner. They all explicitly attributed their fall to the sin of Sabbath-breaking as the primary cause of all their crimes – as leading them step by step from the service of their God to evil company and evil practices, till they arrived at those atrocious offences which terminated in their disgraceful death.<sup>26</sup>

Such was the power of 'their exhortation' to their fellow convicts, it described with approval, that it 'went home to the bosom and conviction of the hardened criminals, and melted him into tears that would put shame the cold apologist for the violation of God's sacred day'.<sup>27</sup>

In 1837 the newspaper also reprinted what it claimed was a letter sent by convicted murderer George Timms to his parents and other relatives, in which he bemoaned how 'when I think of what a dreadful wretch I have been, I am filled with fright and amazement, and am almost afraid to ask of God that mercy which I refused to others'.<sup>28</sup> He then outlined at length the various stages that had led him from his God-fearing ways to the gallows, concluding the letter with the earnest plea;

May God in his mercy implant his gospel in my heart, and pardon my great and crying sins, for the sake of Him who came to seek and to save that which was lost. Let these my dying words and warning voice be made known to all my companions and friends,

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<sup>24</sup> 'Trial and Execution of John Stratford', *NC*, 22 August 1829, p.3; 'Execution', *NC*, 15 August 1835, p.2.

<sup>25</sup> 'Execution', *NC*, 20 April 1820, p.2.

<sup>26</sup> 'Execution of Thirkettle, Pye & Reynolds', *NC*, 19 April 1834, pp.2-3.

<sup>27</sup> 'Execution of Thirkettle, Pye & Reynolds'

<sup>28</sup> 'Execution of the Denver Murderers and their Confessions', *NC*, 6 May 1837, p.4.

and let them be given to the clergymen of the parish, that he may also warn them to shun those ways that have led me to misery, disgrace and death.<sup>29</sup>

Not all of the condemned, however, were willing to play their allotted role of penitent sufferer in the execution drama, and instead protested their innocence to the last. In such cases, the newspaper described at length and championed the valiant attempts of the Chaplain to win confessions from such men, framing their protestations as further evidence of their obduracy and wickedness.<sup>30</sup> James Johnson was exhorted after condemnation all the way through to the drop by the chaplain to accept that he was guilty. After the rope had been attached and the cap placed over his head, he received a final plea from the chaplain that This...is the last moment of your life, your soul is now going to appear in the presence of your Maker and Judge. I solemnly, therefore, entreat and exhort you, as you hope for salvation, to declare if you be innocent or guilty'. Johnson, however, rejected this, retorting 'Do not fatigue me, do not distress me: let me go in peace to my God and Saviour'.<sup>31</sup> Similarly, Henry Carter was reported as telling the Chaplain on the foot of the gallows in response to the chaplain's final call for him to accept his guilt, 'I hope God will forgive me all my sins; but I have no time to listen to such nonsense, I do not want to have my mind troubled with that now'.<sup>32</sup> Peter Taylor, executed in 1836 for being an accessory to murder, also denied this to the last, and was only willing to confess in general terms that his sins were great.

This was, however, not enough for the Chaplain, who did not feel a sufficient degree of confidence in the sincerity of his repentance; and conceiving that the holy ordinance would, under such circumstances, have been mocked and desecrated, declined administering to him the Sacrament of the Lord's Supper immediately before his execution.<sup>33</sup>

Such protestations of innocence clearly carried little weight with either the Chaplain or the newspaper, who framed them as, at best, foolish bravado, and, at worst, an attempt by the condemned to both deny the justice of their sentences and subvert the lesson of the scaffold. Reporting Johnson's apparent obduracy on the scaffold, the newspaper pointed out

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<sup>29</sup> 'Execution of the Denver Murderers and their Confessions',

<sup>30</sup> Edward Gibbon Wakefield was one vehement contemporary critic of this process of what he saw as the Chaplain in breaking the spirit of the condemned 'so that they [might] stand quiet without kicking or bellowing' while the executioner 'butchered them' (see Edward Gibbon Wakefield, *The Hangman and the Judge, or a Letter from Jack Ketch to Mr Justice Alderson* (London, Effingham Wilson, 1833), p.2. In his *Facts Relating to the Punishment of Death in the Metropolis* (1831), he also excoriated against how "As soon, then, as the council has selected from a body of Old Bailey convicts those who are to be executed, the Ordinary and his assistants visit the press-yard frequently every day, and indeed almost live with the condemned men, exhorting them to repentance, prayer and faith" (Edward Gibbon Wakefield, *Facts Relating to the Punishment of Death in the Metropoli.* (London, John Ridgway, 1831) pp.155-6. See also, Harry Potter *Hanging in Judgment: Religion and the Death Penalty in England* (London, SCM Press Ltd., 1993)

<sup>31</sup> 'Execution of Johnson', *NC*, 28 March 1818, p.2.

<sup>32</sup> 'Execution', *NC*, 31 August 1822, p.2.

<sup>33</sup> 'Execution', *NC*, 30 April 1836, p.2.

to its readers that 'whatever may be thought of this declaration at the fatal close of his life, or of his conduct after the murder...no doubts can remain of the legality and justice of his sentence'.<sup>34</sup>

The *Norfolk Chronicle* was also keen more broadly to emphasize the propriety and solemnity of the execution, and how the Chaplain and other Officials had acted in an appropriate and dignified manner. The execution of Peak and Fortis was described as being 'skilfully performed by the Executioner from the Old Bailey', while in 1829, the newspaper described with approval how 'Mr Paraman, the active and humane Governor of our Gaol' had travelled to London 'in the zealous discharge of his duty...in search of an experienced executioner'. He had, it went on, returned shortly afterwards with 'the same 'finisher of the law' that was employed by the county in March last'<sup>35</sup> Far from producing 'horror or aversion' in John Woods, Thomas Butler and Richard Everett, executed for sheep and horse stealing in 1829, the 'appearance, dress and behaviour' of the executioner had instead 'from their strikingly unusual respectability the effect rather of soothing the feelings of the unfortunate men'. Their execution was then 'performed by this Metropolitan "finisher of the lawgovernor with the greatest care in avoiding to give the least unnecessary pain'.<sup>36</sup>

The Chaplain and the Governor in particular were regularly singled out for praise for the decorum with which they performed their duties, being described variously as 'the excellent Governor, 'the intelligent Governor', 'that excellent officer', 'the Worthy Chaplain' and 'the excellent Chaplain'. Richard Nockold's execution for arson in 1831 was thus described as having being 'conducted with the greatest decorum and with a profound silence that was interrupted only by the solemn service of Religion', Nockolds having been attended by 'the worthy Chaplain of the Gaol...as well as from the intelligent Governor of the Castle'.<sup>37</sup> The Gaol surgeon, Mr. J. Goodwin Johnson, was also singled out for praise in 1837 for the way in which he nursed murderer John Day, who was suffering from a disease, back from 'the very gates of death', so that he 'was enabled to go through the last awful scene of his life in every respect much better than, from his extreme states of debility, could have been expected'.<sup>38</sup> Day had, the newspaper reported, been too weak to attend the Condemned Service, so had been taken to the Chaplain's room where the schoolmaster read prayers and the Litany to him, while the Chaplain was conducting the Service. The Chaplain then

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<sup>34</sup> 'Execution of Johnson'.

<sup>35</sup> 'Trial and Execution of John Stratford'.

<sup>36</sup> 'Execution of Woods & Butler for Sheep-stealing, and Everett for Horse-stealing', *NC*, 25 April 1829, p.2.

<sup>37</sup> 'Execution of Richard Nockolds for Arson', *NC*, 16 April 1831, p.3.

<sup>38</sup> 'Execution of Richard Nockolds for Arson'.

attended to Day, administering the sacrament to him, before escorting he and his co-sufferer, George Timms, to the scaffold.

Indeed, on two occasions, the execution of James Belcham for burglary in 1819 and James Rush for murder in 1849, the newspaper responded to inaccuracies in reports of executions at the Gaol. In the case of Belcham, all that was required was a printed clarification of its report from the previous week where it had stated that his irons had been removed on the scaffold. This had not in fact been the case; rather, it clarified, Belcham's irons had previously been unriveted, and only needed to be unlocked on the scaffold. In printing the clarification, the newspaper stated, 'we are desirous that this fact should be accurately stated, being ourselves thoroughly persuaded that every proper and humane attention is paid by the respectable Governor of the Prison, on such mournful occasions'.<sup>39</sup> More seriously, in 1849, the newspaper – and the Officials concerned - responded at length to claims made in metropolitan newspapers the *Britannia*, the *Daily News*, and *The Times* concerning events at the execution of Rush. *The Britannia* had reported that Rush had been turned off the scaffold 'amidst fearful screams from the crowd', the *Daily News* adding that Rush's death had been 'greeted with loud cheering from the crowd'.<sup>40</sup> The *Norfolk Chronicle* demurred; there had, it replied, only been 'one solitary shriek, no more, from a woman, overcome at the moment when she saw the body fall'. There had also been 'no cheering whatever; the persons present behaved with the utmost decorum, and instead of cheers, the greatest silence prevailed; the solemn stillness being only broken by the solitary shriek above-mentioned'. More serious was 'an erroneous charge' made in *The Times* that the Chaplain and Governor had shook hands with Rush shortly before he had been turned off the scaffold. Reprinting the letters that both men had written to the newspaper refuting this claim, the Governor retorted that he had in fact been 10-12 yards away, while the Chaplain had been standing at the foot of the gallows 'where I can be heard by the criminal, without being subjected to the painful necessity of seeing his last struggles'.<sup>41</sup> *The Times* had made the error, the Chaplain concluded, in mistaking one of the several officials who were wearing funeral cloaks for the occasion with him. From the moment Rush had left the Gaol, he claimed, neither man had touched each other, the only men to shake hands with him being the gaoler, three turnkeys and the executioner.

Another element that could potentially undermine the theatre of execution was the crowd. From at least the late eighteenth century, and increasingly so from the 1840s onwards,

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<sup>39</sup> *NC*, 24 April 1819, p.2.

<sup>40</sup> 'The Convict Rush', *NC*, 28 April 1829, p.2.

<sup>41</sup> 'The Convict Rush'.

public debate problematized the execution crowd, and what was seen as their often inappropriate response to the theatre of execution.<sup>42</sup> Writing to *The Times* in November 1849, Charles Dickens excoriated against the crowd at the execution of the Mannings at Horsemonger Lane;

I believe that a sight so inconceivably awful as the wickedness and levity of the immense crowd collected at that execution this morning could be imagined by no man, and could be presented in no heathen land under the sun. The horrors of the gibbet and of the crime which brought the wretched murderers to it, faded in my mind before the atrocious bearing, looks, and language of the assembled spectators.<sup>43</sup>

Both the *Bury and Norwich Post* and *Norfolk Chronicle*, if they mentioned the crowd at all, typically did so in general terms as 'an immense concourse of spectators', 'the multitude', 'many thousands' or 'innumerable spectators'. In some cases, rough guestimates of its size were provided, ranging from 5,000 spectators for the execution of Johnson in 1818 to between 12,000 to 50,000 for that of Rush. There is, however, only brief mention of the crowd behaving in an inappropriate manner in either newspaper for the majority of the period. In 1807, a letter to the *Bury and Norwich Post* by one 'C.L.', bemoaned how a crowd had destroyed the home of Martha Alden after her execution, seemingly caring little that the house had in fact been rented by her husband, while in April 1822, the *Norfolk Chronicle* reported how at the execution of Hardiment, 'not more than three yards from the gallows, a boy was knocked down by a gentleman, who detected him picking his pocket'.<sup>44</sup> Indeed, for the *Norfolk Chronicle*, the most problematic aspect of the execution crowd was its gender composition. Describing the crowd at the execution of Woods, Butler and Everett in 1829, it observed with scandalised incredulity how

...it was observed that the average of these arrivals [to the city to witness the execution] contained a proportion of the *gentler* part of the human species, which, as compared with those of the other sex, amounted to at least two-to one! Nay, what is yet more remarkable, *crowds of women bringing young children with them*, were among the foremost to station themselves close to the iron pallisades [*sic.*] as far right and left as any view of the scaffold could at all be commanded from them.<sup>45</sup>

Similarly, six years later at the execution of Billing and Frarey, the newspaper reported how, as the time of execution drew near, 'all the avenues leading to the Hill were literally thronged

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<sup>42</sup> Gatrell, *ibid*; Randall McGowen, 'Civilizing Punishment: The End of Public Execution in England', *Journal of British Studies* 33 (3), 1994, pp.257-82; Randall McGowen, 'History, Culture and the Death Penalty: The British Debates, 1840-70', *Historical Reflections* 29, 2003, pp.229-44.

<sup>43</sup> Charles Dickens, 'To the Editor of the Times', *The Times*, 14 November 1849, p.4.

<sup>44</sup> 'To the Printer', *BNP*, 19 August 1807, p.3; 'Execution', *NC*, 6 April 1822, p.2.

<sup>45</sup> 'Execution of Woods & Butler for Sheep-stealing, and Everett for Horse-stealing'.



with persons of various ages and of both sexes (the weaker vessels being the more numerous!).<sup>46</sup> Executions were clearly no place for a woman, particularly a respectable one.

However, beginning with the execution of William Thompson in 1854, later reports in the *Norfolk Chronicle* began to contain a more explicit critique of the crowd. The crowd that had gathered to witness Thompson's execution, the newspaper bemoaned, seemed by 'their demeanour and levity of manner...to have come to witness an entertaining exhibition [rather] than to be spectators of a fellow-being publicly dying a violent death as an expiation for a crime of the deepest hue';

Men, women, numbers of girls, lads, and children were all mingled together, and if the human multitude did not exhibit any degree of decorum, their conduct was not more disorderly than on similar occasions. They behaved just as well as they would have done before or after a horse race, or any other public amusement...More scenes of drunkenness and immorality were exhibited than had been seen for a long time previous in Norwich.<sup>47</sup>

The newspaper, however, published its most vehement criticism of the crowd at what would be the last public execution in the city, that of Hubbard Lingley in August 1867. As the execution drew near, it described 'from every part of the city, the worst elements of society were led, by that peculiar goût for a strong sensation, which always prevails among them, to the Castle Hill...'. While the conduct of the crowd, estimated at around 15,000 was 'very orderly', it was nevertheless, the newspaper bemoaned, 'marked by that lamentable indifference and almost enjoyment of 'the sight' which supplies so great an argument against public executions'. Holding the execution on a Monday, rather than a market day, it concluded had been a 'decided improvement' on previous practice, but, the newspaper anticipated, 'it is to be hoped that the time is not too far distant when executions will take place within, instead of without, the prison walls'.<sup>48</sup>

The final, arguably most important, way in which the *Norfolk Chronicle* sought to legitimate executions was through explicitly linking temporal and supernatural courts of justice. The condemned man or woman was portrayed as dying not just a convict but also as a sinner, their path to the gallows being framed in the form of a Fall narrative. Peak and Fortis, according to the newspaper, 'confessed themselves great sinners' who had not attended a place of worship for some time, while William Pye had ceased attending religious worship in order to play 'marbles and pitch-halfpenny' before spending the rest of the day 'fishing, shooting, poaching, and every idle amusement'; the day ending with him 'squandering his

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<sup>46</sup> 'Execution'.

<sup>47</sup> 'Execution of William Thompson', *NC*, 15 April 1854, p.3.

<sup>48</sup> 'The Barton Bendish Murder. Execution of Hubbard Lingley', *NC*, 31 August 1867, p.2.

dishonest gains in drunkenness and riot amongst the most profligate of his companions'.<sup>49</sup> Others, such as Henry Groom, executed for murder in 1851, attributed their situation to a complete ignorance of religious ideas. Thus, it was claimed of Groom, that he had been raised in a large family wherein 'very little care [had been] taken of his education, or to instil into his mind any Christian principles'. He had also not been encouraged to attend worship, nor had he been 'instructed in that Divine word whose lessons would have taught him to subdue his malice, and abhor revenge and robbery'. His temperament was 'naturally of a quiet and inoffensive disposition', and it was, the newspaper concluded, likely that had his mind 'been properly cultivated under the mild, benevolent, placable teaching of the gospel, [it] would have been little likely to have instigated him to the perpetuation of crimes that were so ruinous to himself and others'.<sup>50</sup>

Sabbath-breaking was, however, not the only path that led the unsuspecting to the gallows. Rather, and again reflecting its conservative stance, the newspaper excoriated against how forms of freethinking had led at least three of the condemned to their ignoble ends. Thus, it claimed of Richard Nockolds that 'his mind was poisoned by the works of Carlisle [*sic.*], Cobbett and other inflammatory writers, which were placed in his hands; and he was by this means trained for the work of destruction, which hurled mischief on others and ruin on his own head'.<sup>51</sup> Likewise, the newspaper speculated on whether James Rush 'still retained [Cobbett and Carlyle's] doctrines in their full force, unmixed with other views and carried them out to their natural results', or whether they had mingled with religious impressions from childhood 'of the most perverted kind'.<sup>52</sup> Indeed, such was the apparent belief in the mind of John Stratford that 'infidel publications', such as those by Carlyle and Paine had subverted his principles and led to his 'final ruin', that he 'told one of the persons appointed to look over him that there was a pamphlet in his (the convict's house), one of Carlisle's [*sic.*] blasphemous publications, lying in a particular drawer that he described';

He said he was extremely anxious lest that dangerous work fall into any of his children's hands, and occasion the same mischievous effects on their minds which he so deeply deplored had been produced in respect of religion on his own. Nor did he cease to press his suit till he had made the individual promise that he would, at the first opportunity, go and search for it in order that it might be committed to the flames.<sup>53</sup>

The period 1820-1868, witnessed huge changes in capital punishment policy and practice. Between 1820 and the 1840s, successive Governments first streamlined and then reformed

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<sup>49</sup> 'Execution', *ibid.*; 'Execution of Thirkettle, Pye & Reynolds'.

<sup>50</sup> 'Execution of Henry Groom', *NC*, 23 August 1851, p.4.

<sup>51</sup> 'Execution of Richard Nockolds for Arson'.

<sup>52</sup> 'The Convict Rush'.

<sup>53</sup> 'Trial and Execution of John Stratford'.

the so-called Bloody Code of the eighteenth century. Similarly, from the 1840s onwards there was a growing debate in Parliament and in the press about whether capital punishment itself should be abolished as a relic of a more barbarous past. Over the next 20 years this debate developed into one over whether the issue was not execution itself, but rather the inappropriate behaviour of the crowd, and it was this side of the debate that triumphed with the shift from public to private executions in 1868. In its pages, the *Bury and Norwich Post* both commented on and provided a space for its readers to debate these changes. In doing so, it promoted a clear reform agenda, recommending first the reduction in the scope of the capital code and then, from the 1830s onwards, the abolition of capital punishment itself. For three issues in August 1818, the newspaper reprinted an unattributed selection of material from Romilly's *Observations Upon Thoughts of Executive Justice* (1786), describing its author as being 'no less distinguished for philanthropy than correct jurisprudence'.<sup>54</sup> A decade later, in 1828, it again editorialised for almost a full column on the subject of a local man who had been recently executed at Newgate for forgery. Citing Beccaria with approval, it railed against capital punishment, arguing, 'the experiment of death *has been made*, and it has utterly failed as we believe it will always will fail to produce a greater effect than a more lenient punishment, but one which is in more accordant with the feelings of society'.<sup>55</sup> In 1835, it also drew on a report from 'an intelligent gentleman' who had recently travelled to Prussia, and discovered that the Prussian Sovereign had abolished the majority of capital offences, leaving murder as the only crime punishable by death. 'Why is it', the newspaper asked rhetorically, 'that the despotic Government of Prussia is more tender of shedding the blood of its subjects than the Constitutional Government of free and Enlightened England?'<sup>56</sup> The answer, it claimed, was that the Prussian Government sought to reform its offenders, rather than believing 'in the spite of all experience, that the great efficacy of criminal law is in its exterminating examples'. Like the Prussian Monarch, it claimed, George IV was 'exceedingly averse to executions', and that executing his subjects was a decision that cost the King 'a great struggle great pain'; so much so, that it was only through his 'own merciful anxiety to save the lives of his subjects' that there had been no executions for the previous two years. Rather than being made an example of upon the scaffold, the capitally convicted offender, should instead be banished from society, set apart from even other prisoners as was the case, it claimed, at Coldbath Fields prison in Surrey. 'There are crimes', it concluded,

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<sup>54</sup> 'On Capital Punishment', *BNP*, 12-26 August 1818, p.4.

<sup>55</sup> *BNP*, 10 December 1828, p.2.

<sup>56</sup> 'Capital Punishments', *BNP*, 9 December 1835, p.1

which it is better for society should be covered with the oblivion of the solitary cell, than dragged under circumstances of horrible interest into the light of day. Copies of reports of such executions are hawked about the streets and villages – disgusting details are given to gratify a vicious curiosity – and thus the exterminating severity of the law is made instrumental to polluting the morals of the people.<sup>57</sup>

Letters published in its pages were also invariably against capital punishment. In the same December 1828 edition that the newspaper had editorialised on the subject, it published a letter from one I.S, who recommended that capital offences that did not involve an attempt on the life of a person, should be replaced by labouring in the mines. Hanging, as a punishment, he argued had ‘become so general a punishment that death seems to lose its awe’, and a more ‘lasting impression’ would be formed on those who saw the convict labouring without release rather than being dispatched on the scaffold.<sup>58</sup> Similarly, in November 1833, one A.B, argued ‘the more the subject of capital punishments is considered by thinking and intelligent persons, the more repugnant they appear to the professed principles of a christian community’.<sup>59</sup> Capital punishment did not produce a moral effect on ‘depraved characters’, but, rather, brought about an opposite reaction; ‘engender[ing] a ferocity and recklessness of disposition, which is lamentable to contemplate’. Indeed, he went on;

If by the laws of God a man is forbid to commit an act of suicide upon his own life, and justly rendered an obnoxious member of society by destroying or attempting to destroy the life of his fellow man – in what esteem can we hold those laws that inflict, under the plea of retributive justice, a punishment in the very spirit of the crime.<sup>60</sup>

Rather suffering at the hands of an offended society, he recommended that the criminal instead be banished from society, ‘until it appears evident that by an unfeigned repentance his sin shall be blotted out, and his character radically changed’.

‘A Constant Reader’ in May 1849 offered more detailed arguments against capital punishment. Beginning with the claim that punishment by death was both non-scriptural and a right not conferred upon monarchs by God, he quickly moved on to echo I.S and A.B, arguing that the lesson of the scaffold did not produce its intended effect. The sight of the condemned man with his ‘trembling step’, ‘pale and dejected countenance’ and ‘broken accents of confession’ did indeed produce an effect, but it was far from a salutary one. Rather, it was accompanied by ‘the most awful scenes of drunkenness, theft and riot’ and produced a hardening of the heart. Like A.B, he recommended that the capitally condemned

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<sup>57</sup> ‘Capital Punishments’.

<sup>58</sup> ‘To the Editor of the Bury Post’, *BNP*, 10 December 1828, p.4.

<sup>59</sup> ‘To the Editor’, *BNP*, 27 November 1833, p.1.

<sup>60</sup> ‘To the Editor’.

criminal should be 'banished to our Colonies, or confined within the cells of some gloomy dungeon for life'. This, he argued, 'would strike far more terror into the murderer's soul, than the sound of the executioner's footsteps, or the acclamations and shouts of a dissipated populace'.<sup>61</sup>

## Conclusion

The *Bury and Norwich Post* and the *Norfolk Chronicle* both reported executions in Norwich consistently between 1805 and 1867 alongside other news items of local, national and international importance. While the *Bury and Norwich Post* shared with the *Norfolk Chronicle* the hope that those for whom it was intended would learn the lesson of the scaffold, reflecting its liberal position, it gave more space in its pages to commentary and debate on the issue of capital punishment. Promoting a clear reform agenda, the newspaper published editorials, letters and reprinted articles that sought to either ameliorate the capital code, or offered alternatives to capital punishment. The *Norfolk Chronicle*, in contrast, gave more space to execution reportage than the former, seeking through its reportage to legitimate executions and capital punishment more broadly. It sought to do so by describing in detail confessions made by the condemned, and championing, as a voice of the Established Church, the actions of the Chaplain in winning reluctant confessions from obdurate criminals. Again, reflecting its support of the establishment, it also emphasized the propriety and solemnity of the execution process, showing how temporal and eternal courts of justice were interlinked; with the condemned man dying both a criminal and a sinner. While it occasionally bemoaned the behaviour of the crowd, particularly from the 1850s onwards as public executions became rarer occurrences, executions remained for it a necessary part of the functioning of an ordered society and a bulwark against the threat of disorder.

As Tulloch has shown, the scope for newspapers to cover executions changed dramatically with reporters being excluded from executions from the 1880s onwards. The period leading up to the transition from public to private executions from 1868 thus in many ways represents a high water mark for newspaper coverage of executions. While the execution of William Sheward in 1869 received one-and-a-quarter columns in the *Norfolk Chronicle*, that of George Watt in 1898 received a terse 34 lines.<sup>62</sup> Further research is required to fill out our knowledge of how the press represented executions in this period. One area that could be explored is whether, as found in the case of the *Norfolk Chronicle*, representations of the

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<sup>61</sup> 'Death Punishment. To the Editor', *BNP*, 23 May 1849, p.2.

<sup>62</sup> 'The confession and execution of Sheward', *NC*, 24 April 1869, p.2; 'The Execution of the Sprowston Murderer', *NC*, 16 July 1898, p.5.

crowd in newspaper reportage changed from the 1840s onwards as the crowd became increasingly problematized in public discourse. Another area meriting investigation, following Weiner's claim that the provincial press exhibited greater sympathy for the condemned than elite national newspapers, would be to examine whether there were any differences between reports of the same execution in these two sources. Further research could also examine whether, and if so how, different categories of offenders were represented in execution reportage, or whether women received different treatment to men. Finally, more work is required to chart how execution reportage changed after 1868, as journalists became increasingly constrained in how they reported the execution of justice.