

## ***Dark Destinations***

### ***Execution Dock, Wapping, East London***

#### **Introduction**

This entry focuses on the crime of piracy and how the state responded to this problem in the eighteenth and early years of the nineteenth century.

#### **Context: Piracy**

Piracy entails the theft of goods being transported on the water: robbery on the high seas. The ship carrying the goods might also be captured and subsequently used by the pirates. Piracy was not unique to the eighteenth century and had previously been directed at Greek and Roman shipping. It still exists today in some parts of the world. However, what has long been termed ‘the golden age’ of piracy (Fiske, 1897: 338) spanned the mid-seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, in the period approximately 1650 -1720. In this period, several thousand pirates operated although their activity was not constant. Several waves of piracy occurred, the last of which was around 1700-1730, with a peak in the early 1720s.

The period 1713-1715 is an important year in the history of piracy since a series of peace treaties under the overall heading of the Peace of Utrecht ended the hostilities associated with the War of the Spanish Succession (1701-1714) in which the UK and French had used privateers in the naval war conducted against each other. Privateers were similar to pirates but were sponsored by the state to attack vessels belonging to other countries, the official authorisation being a certificate known as a ‘Letter of Marque’.

In the post-Spanish Succession period after 1715, many of those involved in privateering had to become ‘self-employed’ in the form of pirates who were the enemies of all established governments. This development affected England more than other European countries, resulting in it being referred to as a ‘nation of pirates’ (Burgess, 2009: 894).

Some of the pirates who were active in the final wave of the golden age are well-known historical figures. They include William ‘Captain’ Kidd (1645-1701), John Rackham (usually known as ‘Calico Jack’) (1682-1820) and Edward Teach (otherwise known as Blackbeard) (1680-1718). The pirate regarded as the most successful was Bartholomew Roberts (known to history as ‘Black Bart’) (1682-1722) who looted more than 400 vessels. Piracy was not confined to men and women pirates included Mary Read (1690 -1721) and Anne Bonney (b 1698 and who disappeared from history around 1721).

Pirates in the ‘golden age’ were active throughout the world, but especially in the Caribbean, the Atlantic (East) Coast (where the UK Colonies in America were located), the West Coast of Africa, the Indian Ocean (targeting the trade routes from India to the USA via Africa) and the South China Seas. The targets of the pirates were ships conveying goods that included gold, silver, sugar and cocoa back to Europe. Pirates were frequently associated with smugglers who would sell the goods that had been plundered or sometimes they engaged in the smuggling trade themselves.

## **Execution Dock: Location**

There are few venues more iconic than the Tower of London which attracts Londoners and tourists alike who come to view this spectacle of the late Victorian age. Boat trips up-River are especially popular which pass under Tower Bridge and head for places such as Woolwich, Greenwich and ultimately to the mouth of the River, the Thames/Essex Strait.

As visitors heads up-River from Tower Bridge, they are passing through places steeped in crime and criminal justice history. The left shore of the River Thames (as the visitor proceeds up-River) houses the place which is the focus of this entry.

## **Execution Dock: A Dark Destination**

Since 1536, persons accused of piracy and other maritime crimes would be tried by the Admiralty Sessions, part of the High Court of Admiralty, which was convened at the Old Bailey. If found guilty, they would be condemned to death, the execution taking place at low tide on the Thames foreshore in the area of Wapping, East London, known as Execution Dock.

The method of execution was hanging and in common with other executions of this nature, (until 1783 when the 'new drop' was introduced), the condemned person with a noose around their necks would either climb a ladder which was then pulled away (or in some cases the prisoner was pushed off by the executioner) or be placed on a cart which was removed, having first made a final 'dying' speech.

In many cases involving pirates, a short rope was used which served to prolong the condemned person's misery. They would die of asphyxiation and in their death throes would provide onlookers with the gruesome spectacle of spasms that appeared to onlookers as a kind of airborne dance (which was referred to as the [Admiralty] marshall's dance). It has been described as 'the involuntary thrashing of limbs that occurs during hangings....They swing, their tongues protruding and their eyes bulging – staring but unseeing (Darby, 2014: [Online]). However, there is some dispute regarding the intentional or consistent use of this means of death for pirates (Ruggeri, 2016: [Online]).

The Dock's precise location is not known. There are several contenders for this site's location, all in fairly close proximity, three of which are public houses - the *Captain Kidd*, the *Town of Ramsgate* (where a small passageway on the Western side of the public house that to Wapping Old Stairs which convey the visitor onto the bank of the Thames) and the *Prospect of Whitby*, where a set of steps, Pelican Stairs, to the left of the establishment lead onto the Thames' foreshore. Another possible site of Execution Dock is the Sun Wharf Building on Narrow Street, Limehouse, which has a large E painted on its side. Alternatively, old maps suggest that the location is at King Henry's Stairs, a name that replaced Execution Dock Stairs in the early nineteenth century (A London Inheritance, 2020: [Online]) and which is close to the *Captain Kidd*.

Following death, the body was either left on the noose or was cut down and chained to a post on the foreshore. In either case it would remain until covered by three Thames' tides. In cases

involving more infamous pirates, the body would subsequently be placed in an iron cage known as a gibbet (a harness made of iron hoops and chains designed to hold the head, body and legs in place) and hung somewhere along the Thames where it would remain on public display to deter seafarers from committing maritime crime. Bodies that had been gibbeted were usually covered with tar, to stop birds pecking at the flesh.

If not gibbeted, the 1752 Murder Act made provision for the corpse to be available for medical dissection either to the Royal College of Physicians or to the Company of Barber-Surgeons. The intention of the legislation was to intensify the terror associated with the death sentence (Linebaugh, 2011: 77).

The Royal College of Physicians ceased to use the corpses of executed felons by the 1730s, and the Barber-Surgeons were thus the main beneficiary of the 1752 legislation. Bodies were taken to the Barber-Surgeon's Hall, commonly accompanied by a large procession of people. Prior to the procedures of dissection and anatomisation (which limited numbers of people were allowed to view from the building's gallery), the body was placed on public display. The Barber-Surgeons were (and still remain) one of the City of London's Livery Companies and their building (which is not the original although it stands on the same site as the first building that was erected in the mid-fifteenth century) is located at Monkwell Square, Wood, Street London.

### *The route to Execution Dock*

The conveyance of a condemned pirate to Execution Dock evidenced the main purpose of punishment in the late eighteenth century as deterrence. This required the event to receive as much publicity as was possible and in an age without mass circulation newspapers or other forms of modern media, a procession was the chief way to achieve this penological purpose.

Prisoners who were to be hung at Execution Dock were generally held at Marshalsea Prison (although Newgate Prison was sometimes used). Marshalsea no longer exists, although remnants of it (and a plaque to commemorate it) can still be found in Borough Road in Southwark. The one remaining wall of the prison can be viewed on the North Side of St George the Martyr's Church.

Prisoners were conveyed to Execution Dock in a horse-drawn carriage in a procession led by the Admiralty Marshall (or one of his deputies) who carried the Admiralty Court's ceremonial silver oar which was also on display during court hearings. The route would take them across London Bridge, past the Tower of London and thence to Execution Dock.

As it progressed, the procession would pass by a public house called the *Turk's Head Inn* which was located in Wapping High Street. This was the designated place where condemned persons would customarily receive their last drink of alcohol (a quart of ale) before their execution. This public house was destroyed in the London Blitz in 1940 and was relocated to Green Bank, Tower Hamlets where it served as a community café and is now a French-Anglo bistro, *La Tête de Turc*. It can be accessed from Wapping Overground Station via Scandrett Street which stands between the *Town of Ramsgate* and Wapping Police Station.

This route was taken by many condemned pirates, one of the best known being Captain William Kidd who was executed there in 1701. In Kidd's case, the rope used to hang him snapped. Although custom and practice used in this period might view this as God stepping in to protect an innocent man who should therefore be allowed to go free, this did not happen in this instance. A new rope was fetched and Kidd was executed. His body was then gibbeted on the Thames foreshore at Tilbury Point where it remained for three years.

Today, the various sites competing for being the dark destination of Execution Dock can best be reached from Wapping Overground Station. As the visitor faces the River Thames, the *Captain Kidd* and then the *Town of Ramsgate* are to the right in Wapping High Street and the *Prospect of Whitby* and Old Sun Wharf Building are to the left in Wapping Wall and Narrow Street, Limehouse respectively.

## **Conclusion**

The 'golden age' of piracy ended in the decade 1720-1730, mainly because of the scale of crackdowns by states. This arose from international treaties which resulted in 'a systematic and adequate policing of the seas' (Barbour, 1911: 566) whereby governments used warships and executions to eliminate pirates. Many were killed in battle or were captured and executed at sea.

Similarly, methods of punishment also underwent significant changes during the nineteenth century.

In an era in which policing was based on underpinnings constructed in medieval Britain (the parish constable system), it was hard to prevent crime. Thus the main eighteenth century response to crime was to deter its commission by scaring people through making the gruesome consequences of criminal acts as public as possible.

But the nineteenth century witnessed a move away from capital punishment. The last executions for piracy at Execution Dock took place in 1830 when George James Davies and William Watts were executed for the part they had played in a mutiny (and related subsequent events) on the *Cyprus* in 1829, which was transporting criminals to Tasmania. In 1832, the procedure whereby the body of an executed person could be made available for medical dissection ended and in 1834 gibbeting ceased. In this year, the jurisdiction of the Admiralty Sessions (which had commenced in 1536) also ended.

## **Further information**

A 3-minute video entitled "Execution Dock of London" and narrated by Elizabeth StrangeAgo can be found at the link:

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PA6T\\_mlVaNw](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PA6T_mlVaNw)

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