

Norfolk Record Office Information Leaflet 29

Crimes and Trials in Great Yarmouth

1. Introduction

Like any other town of its size, Great Yarmouth has had its share of sensational crimes and trials. A few of the more well-known are described here - piracy, witchcraft, murder and body-snatching - with a list of relevant archive sources at the end.

2. Piracy

Yarmouth was given the right to try pirates under the charter of James I (1608). The first piracy trial was held on 25 March 1613: five men who had landed at Yarmouth on a ship called the *Seahorse* were accused of capturing her and her cargo at sea. The cargo consisted of 22,000 lampreys, 30 barrels of beer and six barrels of red herrings. Three of the men - Thomas Jinkins, Michael Muggs and Edward Charter - were hanged. There were several other piracy trials in the first half of the seventeenth century and, after a lapse of nearly 200 years, a final case was heard in 1823. The Yarmouth Admiralty Court, which held the piracy trials, was abolished in 1835.

William Paine, the infamous pirate who terrorised shipping off eastern England, was tried and executed in London in 1781. His body was brought to Yarmouth by wagon, supposedly in a wooden box marked 'Glass. With Care'. It was hung in chains on a 48 foot high gibbet on the North Denes where it remained until 1804: the site was thereafter known as Paine's Hill.

3. Witchcraft

Several cases of witchcraft occur in the Yarmouth Sessions Court records. The most notorious case was in 1645 after the corporation had invited Matthew Hopkins the so-called 'Witchfinder-General' to the town to identify witches. Eleven people (including two men) were tried before the court in the Tolhouse. Several of the defendants were acquitted but five women - Alice Clisswell, Bridgetta Howard, Maria Blackborne, Elizabeth Dudgeon and Elizabeth Bradwell were found guilty and were hanged. The famous witchcraft trials at Salem in Massachusetts in 1692 had a Yarmouth connection. Those executed included two elderly sisters, Rebecca Nurse and Mary Easty. They had been born in Great Yarmouth, the daughters of William Towne who had later emigrated with his family to the United States.

4. Murder

An Unnamed Dutchman

In 1735 a murder was committed at the Tuns Inn in Row 108. A group of Dutchmen were drinking in this inn and when the group left, one of them remained for more drinks. He was never seen alive again: later his body was

found in the river, showing marks of violence and with the ears cut off (presumably for the gold earrings Dutchmen wore). The landlady, Elizabeth Thompson and nine other women were arrested. Thompson was tried and found guilty of being an accessory to murder. She was sentenced to death but was offered a free pardon if she would name the actual murderer. She refused to do so and was hanged. Many years later a man is supposed to have confessed to the murder on his deathbed.

Elizabeth Martin

Elizabeth was domestic servant living in the large Georgian House known as 20 The Quay. In 1769 she was accused of the murder of her illegitimate child, found guilty and hanged: she is the last woman to have been hanged in Yarmouth.

John Hannah

Hannah strangled his wife at their house in Row 91 in 1813. She was in her late sixties and he was over seventy years old. He was hanged on the North Denes and his body given to the surgeons for dissection. Hannah was the last man to be hanged in Yarmouth.

The Neal family

The Neal family lived in Row 133. In 1825 Mary Neal with her children Susan and William were accused of trying to murder a cordwainer named William Halls and his family. William Neal was apprenticed to Halls and he eventually confessed that he had put arsenic into the boiler in which the Hales family dinner was being cooked. The Neals were sentenced to death. This was the last sentence of death issued by the Yarmouth Sessions Court and they lost the power to pass death sentences in 1835. The Neals were not hanged: their death sentence was commuted to transportation to Australia.

Harriet Candler

Harriet had a shop at the corner of Row 152 fronting Howard Street. One evening in 1844 a group of men went into the shop, struck her over the head and robbed the till. Her neighbour Samuel Yarham turned King's Evidence, saying he was part of the gang who did the crime. In April 1845 three men - Robert Royal, James Mapes and James Hall - were tried at Norwich Assizes for the murder, with Yarham as chief prosecution witness. The three were acquitted. Yarham seems to have thought that as he had informed against the fellow members of the gang he could not now be accused of murder and he made some rash statements about the crime. He was eventually arrested and charged with murder. He was found guilty, and was hanged outside Norwich Castle in April 1846, in front of a crowd estimated at 30,000 people.

The Yarmouth Beach Murders

The body of a young woman was found strangled with a shoelace on the beach facing Harbord Crescent (the area is now an amusement park) on the

morning of 23 September 1900. She was identified as Mary Jane Bennett of London who had been staying in Yarmouth under a false name. Her estranged husband, Herbert John Bennett, was accused of the crime and tried at the Old Bailey in London. He insisted that he had been in London at the time but was found guilty and hanged in Norwich prison. When the large black flag flown at the time of an execution was being raised, the flagpole snapped: some people saw this as a sign that an innocent man was being hanged. In 1912 the body of another young girl, Dora May Gray, was found on the same spot: she too had been strangled with a shoelace. No one was ever charged with her murder.

5. Body Snatchers

Body snatching was the digging up of recently buried people from churchyards to sell to students in anatomy (whose only legal source of corpses was the bodies of hanged criminals). The most famous case in Yarmouth was that of Thomas Vaughan alias Smith in 1827. He and some associates rented a room opposite the west end of St Nicholas church, in Row 6 (known later as Snatchbody Row). They dug bodies out of the churchyard, moved them into their house and then sent them to London by wagon. Although it aroused terror in many hearts, the courts regarded body snatching only as a misdemeanour meriting a short prison sentence: Vaughan received six months. Later he was found in possession of clothes he had taken from a dead body he had dug up in Plymouth. This 'theft' raised his crime to the level of felony and he was transported to Australia. After 1827 high fences were put up around St Nicholas churchyard to prevent a repetition of the crime.

6. Great Yarmouth court records

At the Norfolk Record Office:

- Borough Sessions rolls or books, late 13th century to 1931 (with gaps) (see lists Y/C 4 and 5; many available on microfilm).
- Supporting papers, 1689 to 1931 (with gaps) (see list Y/C8).
- Admiralty court records, 1828-35 (Y/L16/9).
- Yarmouth Quarter Sessions rolls or books, 1567-1864 (with gaps) (see lists Y/S 1 and 2; available on microfilm).
- Yarmouth Quarter Sessions supporting papers, 1700-1863 (see lists Y/S 3).
- Yarmouth Petty Sessions registers 1916-54 (Y/CJ/1-28).

Elsewhere

- Records of the Norfolk Assize Court are held at The National Archives (formerly, the Public Record Office) Ruskin Avenue, Kew, Richmond, TW9 4DU (tel. 020 8876 3444, website <<http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk>>)
- Crimes and trials are reported in local newspapers held at Great Yarmouth Library and at the Norfolk Heritage Centre, Norfolk & Norwich

7. Borough Gaol and Bridewell records

- Gaol books (giving name of prisoner, date of committal and discharge, name of prosecutor, nature of offence), 1798-1865 (Y/L 2/1-3, available on MF 1872)
- Bridewell book, 1822-1838 (Y/L 2/4, available on MF 1872)
- Committal and discharge books (with separate sections for debtors and Bridewell inmates), 1819-1838 (Y/L 2/5-6, available on MF 1873)
- Gaol registers (with particulars of each prisoner including state of education), 1808-1875 (Y/L 2/8-14, available on MF 1873-1876)
- Indexes to Gaol registers references Y/L 2/9-14, 1838-1875 (Y/L 2/16-18, available on MF 1876)
- Analyses of registers, 1840-1870 (Y/L 2/19, available on MF 1876)
- Daily number books, 1837-1873 (Y/L 2/22-24, available on MF 1877)
- Summary of convictions register, 1852-post 1872 (Y/L 2/25, available on MF 1877)
- Register of prisoners' belongings, 1867-1875 (Y/L 2/26, available on MF 1877)
- Register of employment, 1868-1875 (Y/L 2/27, available on MF 1878)
- Register of admissions (with religious denomination), 1868-1873 (Y/L 2/28, available on MF 1878)
- Journal of admissions and discharges, 1869-1876 (Y/L 2/29, available on MF 1878)
- Register of particulars of prisoners convicted under 1st schedule of 1869 Habitual Criminals Act, 1870-1873 (Y/L 2/30, available on MF 1878)
- Discharge books, 1850-1874 (Y/L 2/31-33, available on MF 1878)
- Dietary book (showing amounts consumed by each prisoner), 1839-1844 (Y/L 2/34, available on MF 1879)
- Provisions account book, 1835-1843 (Y/L 2/35, available on MF 1879)
- Receipt and consumption account books (showing daily consumption by each diet class, with weekly accounts), 1845-1875 (Y/L 2/36-42, available on MF 1879-1881)
- Diet class book (showing numbers in each diet class), 1852-1867 (Y/L 2/43, available on MF 1881)
- Gaol account books, 1850-1875 (Y/L 2/44-45, available on MF 1882)
- Gaol Keeper's journals, 1825-1876 (Y/L 2/46-51, available on MF 1882-1883)
- Surgeon's journals (with lists of prisoners treated and their diseases at back), 1838-1875 (Y/L 2/52-55, available on MF 1884)
- Chaplain's journals, 1847-1865 (Y/L 2/56-58, available on MF 1884-1885)
- Chaplain's private journal, 1856-1865, later used for accounts of money taken at Tolhouse (Museum) door, 1886-1887 (Y/L 2/59, available on MF 1885)
- Schoolmaster's journal, 1853-1862 (Y/L 2/60, available on MF 1885)
- Visiting Justices' order book, 1846-1875 (Y/L 2/61, available on MF 1885)

- Visiting Justices' minute books, 1843-1876 (Y/L 2/62-63, available on MF 1885-1886)
- Visitors' book (for unofficial visitors), 1843-1879 (Y/L 2/64, available on MF 1886)
- Gaol Sessions minute book, 1853-1876 (Y/L 2/65, available on MF 1886)
- Misconduct book, 1849-1875 (Y/L 2/66, available on MF 1886)
- Register of prisoners committed for re-examination, 1875-1877 (Y/L 2/67, available on MF 1886)



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Produced by:

Norfolk Record Office
 The Archive Centre
 Martineau Lane
 Norwich
 NR1 2DQ

Tel: 01603 222599
 Fax: 01603 761885
 E-mail: norfrec@norfolk.gov.uk
 Website: <http://archives.norfolk.gov.uk/>



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