‘In remembrance of the bloody fact’: coins, public execution and the gibbet in Hanoverian England

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Pocket pieces commemorating public execution are comparatively rare. Unlike tokens celebrating love, friendship and family, achievement, or ideology, hanging tokens have few positive messages to communicate and do not presume a personal connection. To own one is to be reminded of traumatic events or, perhaps more positively, of the triumph of justice and the necessity of deterrence. Most, we can assume, were designed and cast for sale as souvenirs of a particularly notorious crime; one was struck in 1692, for example, to mark the execution of the French Jacobite agent, Barthold Granval, for the attempted assassination of William III. Granval was hanged, drawn and quartered for his trouble and so the lavishly illustrated professionally produced coin might serve as an official memento of the King’s providential escape and the failure of Jacobite conspiracy in a foreign court.[1] The execution of Jacobite rebels In Britain after the Battle of Culloden in 1746 caused further coins to be struck, this time featuring one prisoner dangling from a gallows and another two praying for mercy as they wait their turn, beneath the inscription, ‘More Rebels A Coming’.[2] These were representations of a resilient protestant State however, and not a conscious attempt to memorialise the guilty. The few that did include coins marking the execution of the East Anglian murderer, James Bloomfield Rush in 1849, and the London fraudster Henry Fauntleroy in 1824. While we know coins such as these were in circulation, we know little of the circumstances of their manufacture, of their production and design, or the motivation of those who purchased them. This essay focusses on an exceptional and entirely unique coin in the Millet collection.

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[1] *The History of England, Faithfully Extracted from Authentick Records, Approved Manuscripts and the Most Celebrated Histories of This Kingdom*, *Volume II*, London 1715, p. 371. See also *The Art of Assassinating Kings, Taught Lewis XIV and James II by the Jesuites*, London 1695, p. 11.

[2] Noted in J. R. S. Whiting, *Commemorative Medals: A Medallic History of Britain from Tudor Times to the Present Day*, Newton Abbot 1972, p. 130.

Figure 1: #203. Obverse 'J Curtis alias Curtel hung in chains nr Sarum Mar 1768'; Reverse 'For the robbery and murder of Wolf Myars (sic) Dec 28 1767'

One of several individually struck by the same hand, it commemorates a noteworthy murder and an execution, but is too roughly designed and cast to have been intended for public sale. More remarkably still, we know not only the intention of the designer and the identity of the engraver, but the people to whom the coins were presented. It is a pocket piece with a remarkable story to tell.

On a bitterly cold January morning in 1768, high on the downs beside the road between Salisbury and Blandford, a grim discovery was made in a chalk pit. It was the body of a man, partly covered in snow; the victim, without a doubt, of a brutal assault. His skull was fractured, there were deep stab wounds to his chest and abdomen, and his right hand was badly cut, perhaps in self-defence. How long he had lain there undetected and undisturbed, it was hard to say. Deep snow had clung to the Wiltshire uplands for the past month, leaving many of the county's chalk roads impassable to carriages and treacherous to anyone heading out on foot. News of accidental deaths and providential escapes had been circulating in the local press for three weeks and by the end of the month, the city of Salisbury had given relief to more than 3000 people. By all accounts, the winter of 1767-8 was extraordinarily harsh, and the snow stayed heavy on the ground until the end of the month. It was the thaw then that revealed the body in the chalk pit.[3]

The most likely cause of death was the sharp knife found discarded a short distance away, and some large flints left lying beside his head, but the time it had taken for the melting snow to reveal the body fed speculation that he had been murdered several weeks earlier and the perpetrator long gone. Two miles down the road in Salisbury however, memories were quickly jogged. The dead man

[3] *Salisbury and Winchester Journal*, 4, 11, 18 January 1768.

was recognised as a Jewish pedlar who tramped into Salisbury with a box of trinkets shortly after Christmas, stopped for a night at the Running Horse tavern, and left in the morning by the Blandford road just as the snow was beginning to fall. His name was Wolf Myers. This prompted further memory. A few hours after the pedlar's departure, some excitement had been caused by the arrival of a carrier who had picked up a wounded sailor on the Blandford Road and taken him to the City's new Infirmary for treatment. The sailor said his name was John Curtis; that he had been walking to Salisbury from Plymouth when he was attacked by a lone highwayman, who stabbed him in the side with a cutlass, threw him to the ground, dislocating his shoulder, and robbed him of 20 guineas in cash. According to Curtis, the highwayman made for the fork in the road leading to Shaftesbury and galloped off. He gave a detailed description of his assailant to a Salisbury magistrate, and a reward notice was published, but the highwayman was never found. Curtis had had his wounds attended to in the Infirmary, then left the following morning on the Gosport coach, 'with his box on his back'.[4]

The discovery of Myers' body caused an immediate reappraisal of Curtis's identity, the box he was carrying, and the cause of his injuries. A coroners' inquest was convened, the sailor's guilt concluded, and a warrant sent down to the magistrates of Gosport and Portsmouth for his immediate arrest.[5] Curtis was soon found amongst the crew of a man of war in the harbour. He was taken up, his lodgings searched and some incriminating evidence discovered, the most telling of which was a trinket box containing 'wares such as the Jews normally carry'.[6] There was also a watch, assumed to have been stolen from Myers and some sticks of dried rhubarb, a common ingredient in Jewish cooking often carried by Jewish pedlars. A handbill was also found, identical to one in the dead man's coat pocket, advertising the business of Jacob Cohen, a Jewish silverware dealer from Frome, together with a letter in Curtis's hand asking the Gosport magistrate Edward Bedford to help

[4] *Salisbury and Winchester Journal*, 25 January 1768; *Scots Magazine*, 1 February 1768; *Public Advertiser*, 6 January 1768.
[5] Myers body was sent to London after the inquest where, presumably, he had relatives. Wiltshire and Swindon History Centre, Britford General Register, 1712-1812, 499/6.
[6] *Oxford Journal*, 6 February 1768.

him recover his alleged losses at the hands of the highwayman, but clearly never sent.[7] An audience with Bedford was granted nevertheless however, because the JP questioned Curtis three times over the next eight days in Gosport Bridewell.

Bedford pushed Curtis for a confession but the sailor steadfastly denied both the murder and the robbery. The trinket box was his, he insisted, and he had been trading its contents to earn a living while his ship made ready to sail. Bedford reminded him of the consequence of going out of the world 'with a lie in his mouth' and assured him he had reliable witnesses ready to testify in court. This was an exaggeration. Bedford's key witness was to be Jacob Cohen, the Frome dealer who had sold Myers his pedlar's box and its contents. Cohen was to confirm the origin and ownership of the box so that Curtis's guilt for the robbery, at least, would be proven. But Cohen failed to show.[8]

One week after his arrival in the Bridewell, Curtis turned to self-harm, first beginning a hunger strike, as 'he would sooner starve himself to death than be hanged wrongfully', then 'falling into a fit' so that a surgeon was required to bleed him. As soon as the surgeon was gone, Curtis reopened the wound and allowed it to bleed freely, losing enough blood to cause Bedford to put him on suicide watch before ordering his removal to the county gaol at Winchester.[9] By the time Curtis came to court at Salisbury in March, Cohen's continuing failure to testify had led to the dropping of the robbery charge, and there was no real evidence to convict Curtis of the murder. Further attempts to gather witnesses were certainly ongoing however, partly through negotiation with some prominent members of Portsmouth and Gosport's Jewish community. The most industrious of these was Abraham Woolf, founder and lease holder of Portsmouth's first synagogue, and a man 'generally regarded as the leading spirit' of the community. Portsmouth was home to one of the fastest growing Jewish communities in England at this time, and it was set to become the third largest by

[7] On Jewish rhubarb pedlars, see interviews recorded with London street vendors by Henry Mayhew in the following century. 'All de rhubarb-sellers was Jews', he was assured by a Moroccan Jew who had been making a living selling it for decades: Henry Mayhew, *London Labour and the London Poor: The London Street Folk*, *Volume 1*, London 1861, p. 453; *Oxford Journal*, 6 February 1768.
[8] *Derby Mercury*, 19 February 1768.
[9] *Derby Mercury*, 19 February 1768.

1841.[10] Woolf was present at Bedford's examination of Curtis at Gosport, questioning his knowledge,

> in regard to the weights found in the (pedlar's) box but he knew the weight of very few of them, their names, or how many of the small ones made an ounce. He did not know the name of rhubarb, which was found in the box, nor the use or value of it, or the silver buckles, spoons, or any of the toys, neither could he tell the name of either of the wheels or movements in a watch, which the Jew showed him.

Woolf travelled up to Salisbury when the trial began, in the hope of testifying, but he was not called.[11]

Despite the inconclusive nature of the evidence, Curtis was convicted after a four hour trial. He was sentenced to be hanged, not in the usual place just outside the city at Fisherton but on Harnham Hill, where Myers' body was found. Moreover, his corpse was ordered afterwards to be 'hung in chains' in the same place on a pole 25 feet high. This was gibbeting. Felons executed for homicide had been forbidden Christian burial since the passing of the Murder Act in 1752, which stipulated 'that some further terror or peculiar mark of infamy be added to the punishment'.[12] In practice, this meant the bodies of murderers would either be sent to the surgeons for public dissection and anatomisation or brushed with tar or tallow as a preservative, encased in an iron frame and hoisted up to slowly decompose as a deterrent to passers-by. Conscious perhaps that the conviction did not sit well with Curtis's continuing protestations of innocence, renewed efforts were made by a number of visitors to the condemned cell, including two clergymen, to persuade him to confess and repent. He would

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[10] I. S. Miesels, 'The Jewish Congregation of Portsmouth (1766-1842)', *Transactions of the Jewish Historical Society of England*, vol. 6, 1910, pp. 111-27; Cecil Roth, 'The Portsmouth Community and its Historical Background'*, Transactions of the Jewish Historical Society of England*, vol. 13, 1935, pp. 170-76; Eugene Newman, 'Some New Facts about the Portsmouth Jewish community', *Transactions of the Jewish Historical Society of England*, vol. 17, 1952, p. 258. See also Tony Kushner, 'A Tale of Two Port Jewish Communities: Southampton and Portsmouth Compared' in David Cesarani (ed.), *Port Jews: Jewish Communities in Cosmopolitan Maritime Trading Centres, 1550-1950*, 2nd edition, London 2013, pp. 87-111.
[11] *Salisbury and Winchester Journal*, 8 February, 21 March 1768.
[12] 25 Geo II c.37 *An Act for Better Preventing the Horrid Crime of Murder*.

not co-operate. His case, he said, was no different to Richard Coleman's, who had been wrongfully hanged on Kennington Common in Surrey in 1749 for the rape and murder of a woman called Sarah Green. Coleman had been convicted on the mistaken evidence of the mortally wounded victim and several witnesses, but like Curtis, he denied it to the last. Two years later, Coleman was exonerated when three men were committed for Green's death on stronger evidence. One of them turned King's evidence against the other two, who were both hanged.[13]

As doubts lingered over the safety of the conviction, Curtis was granted a five day stay of execution. But there was to be no reprieve and on 14 March he was taken up the hill, surrounded by a crowd of spectators, to be hanged on a gallows precisely erected 'in a conspicuous part of Lower Birn Beck Field in Britford within view of the roads from Salisbury to Blandford Forum and Shaftesbury'.[14] One final attempt was made to draw a confession. Curtis was made to look down into the chalk pit in which Myers' body was found and asked 'if he remembered the place, to which he said no, and 'tho ardently pressed to confess the crime for which he was instantly going to suffer, he denied it to the last'. He then handed a written statement to a man he knew in the crowd, ensuring his denials became a matter of public record, and to counter any fictitious 'last dying speeches and confessions' that might be circulating. Sure enough, it was reproduced in the national press. 'I am not guilty', he reiterated.[15]

That some inauthentic gallows speeches were also in circulation is quite possible if the *Salisbury Journal* is to be believed. According to that paper, Abraham Woolf had not gone home after the trial

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[13] *Solemn Declaration of Richard Coleman who was Executed on Kennington Common… for the Murder of Sarah Green, Widow*, London 1749; *Lloyds Evening Post*, 14 March 1768. Coleman's case was a well-known miscarriage of justice and Curtis may have been familiar with it from its appearance in several popular publications, including the *Newgate Calendar*, the *Proceedings of the Old Bailey*, which covered the second trial, and the *Gentleman's Magazine*, vol. 21, 1751, p. 377, and also in the rather more sensational and very recently published *The Cries of Blood, or The Juryman's Monitor*, London 1767, p. 69. Indeed, the case was cited by the notorious nineteenth-century murderer, John Thurtell, in his trial defence in 1824: *The Trial of John Thurtell and Joseph Hunt for the Murder of Mr William Weare…*, London 1824, p. 44.

[14] The National Archives, Assizes: Western Circuit: Gaol Books, ASSI 23/7, entry dated 9 March 1768; R. F. Hunnisett (ed.), *Wiltshire Coroners' Bills, 1752-1796*, Wiltshire Record Society, vol. 36, Devizes 1981, p. 149.

[15] *Lloyd's Evening Post*, 23 March 1768.

but stayed for the hanging and 'distributed several quires of dying speeches amongst the populace at different places'. Woolf was stung by the inference that he had only come to Salisbury to hawk doggerel verse around the streets and complained to the paper that it had caused him to be 'amongst some unthinking people, much injured in his reputation and business'. It was not the first time in recent months Woolf had taken steps to defend his character from defamation. In fact, this was his second foray into the law courts in a year. The previous February he had taken another man from Portsmouth to the Court of Common Pleas in London's Guildhall for 'speaking scandalous and defamatory words' of him. He won, pocketing damages of £30 in the process.[16] Now, several weeks after Curtis's trial, the *Journal* admitted a 'mistake' in its reporting of Woolf's interventions at Salisbury and the Prison Ordinary, Vanderplank, tried to put the matter straight. Woolf, and several other 'gentlemen from Portsmouth' had come to Salisbury for no other reason than to give evidence against Curtis in court, said Vanderplank. They had not been called because the evidence was strong enough without them and in any case 'the public in general firmly believe him to have been the murderer'. Far from deserving censure, Woolf should be 'highly commended for the trouble and expense he put himself to in attending the trial of so inhuman and barbarous a villain'. At Woolf's instigation moreover, Vanderplank went further. He had spent many hours sitting with Curtis as he awaited execution, he said, and the prisoner had finally admitted that although he had not struck the fatal blow, he 'had been present' at Myers' murder. Vanderplank thought it as good as a confession, 'as it was proved he had no company with him on the road'.

Woolf had certainly invested a great deal of energy on Myers' behalf. It was he who ordered and paid for a series of commemorative coins to be struck to mark Curtis's execution and organised their distribution. He 'made a present of a pocket piece, in copper, to the under-sheriff, Mr Salmon, after the execution, on the spot, likewise to several Gentlemen of the city, and to several other Gentlemen who had exerted themselves in the apprehending of the murderer, in remembrance of

[16] *Newcastle Chronicle,* 7 March 1767.

the bloody fact'. The engraver was Isaac Levy, a Jewish silversmith at Salisbury and possibly the son of Woolf's co-lease holder at the Portsmouth synagogue, the master engraver, Benjamin Levy.[17]

Figure 2: One of two Wolf Myers coins now in the collections of the Wiltshire Museum, Devizes. 2004/34. Reproduced with kind permission.

These pocket pieces are unique. In their rough and unsophisticated design, they are unlike any other known tokens memorialising public punishment events. The number of them is unknown, but at least thirteen have survived, each one individually engraved by hand on a smoothed coin.[18] On one side of all of them, a rough circle, sometimes with minimal hatching to indicate depth, represents the chalk pit in which Myers was found, surrounded by simple commemorative lettering to record the date of the murder and (in some cases) the robbery too.

On the other side however, two different designs have been produced. Nine depict Curtis in crude manikin form, suspended from the gibbet pole in his iron cage, with additional lettering recording his name, the date of his death and that he was 'hung in chains near Sarum' on a pole '25 ft high'. The other four are quite different. These are engraved with a rough picture map of the point at which the Blandford and Shaftesbury roads diverge, close to the summit of Harnham Hill. At the top we see Curtis and his gibbet pole. To the left, and close to the Blandford road, we see the chalk pit and a barn, while to the right we see Salisbury Cathedral, a landmark visible from the top of the hill.

[17] *Salisbury and Winchester Journal*, 21 March, 2 May 1768. Benjamin certainly had a son, Isaac, who also practised as an engraver.

[18] The majority are in private collections but two may be seen in the numismatic collections at Devizes Museum, two more at Salisbury Museum and another in the British Museum, London. For the latter two see Whiting, 1972, p. 141.

There are very few known coins with which these pieces may be usefully compared. One example in the Millet collection marks the trial and execution in London of the banker, Henry Fauntleroy for forgery in 1824.

At least four coins were made in commemoration of this event, all individually engraved. Each coin uses just one side of a Georgian penny and content is restricted to a few encircling lines of text in flowing script, except one which includes a central illustration of a hanged man in tails.[19] The similarity of the language and the handwriting in all four suggests the work of a single hand. The most explicit reads, 'Fauntleroy, the robber of widows and orphans, hanged at Newgate 1824. Such be the fate of all bilking bankers and agents', while the other three state simply, or with minimal variations, 'The fate of Fauntleroy to all insolvent, bilking bankers and agents'.

Unlike the Curtis coins, the identity of their maker is unknown and one can only guess at the means by which they were circulated. Although execution for forgery was not uncommon and the numbers of people sentenced to death for it had been escalating in the early part of the nineteenth century, Fauntleroy was not a typical victim of the Newgate gallows. To all outward appearances, he was a respectable middle-class partner in London's Berners' Street Bank. However, for ten years he had been defrauding customers by forging powers of attorney and slowly milking them. By the time of his arrest, Fauntleroy may have embezzled some £400,000. Intense public interest in his case centred on a recognised anomaly. Forgery was broadly understood to be a white-collar crime, and yet the perpetrators most likely to find themselves on trial for it tended to come, like the majority of all defendants at the Old Bailey, from humbler backgrounds. It was felt not only that the wealthy and influential were substantially evading justice but that their crimes were more inexcusable because they were relatively unnecessary. Since it was also understood that convicted forgers invariably went to the gallows without clemency, any reprieve for a man of Fauntleroy's standing would smack

[19] Coin sold at auction in 2009: http://www.londoncoins.co.uk/?page=Pastresults&auc=126&searchlot=718&searchtype=2 [accessed 17.11.2020].

of class favouritism. But by 1824, amidst a general feeling that the Bank of England exerted far too much influence in securing capital convictions, the high number sent for hanging had become a cause for concern. Further controversy was aroused by Fauntleroy's defence; that he had been forced into embezzlement to safeguard the business of his own bank because the Bank of England had refused to extend him sufficient credit.[20]

Popular opinion over Fauntleroy's fate was sharply divided. Given his 'good character' and respectable background, there was some clamour in polite circles for a reprieve. 'Every effort was used to obtain commutation of the sentence', recalled one newspaper 65 years later. 'His case was twice argued before the judges on points of law… followed by appeals to the Home Secretary, and all possible political interest was brought to bear, but without success'.[21] As *Bell's Life in London* put it at the time,

> In the appalling dispensations of justice, there shall appear no reason for the prevalence of an opinion, that any possible distinction can be made between the high and the low when brought to the bar of their country. There is indeed a moral example expected from persons of rank and wealth which it would be impolitic to weaken.[22]

The Fauntleroy case was certainly sensational, in a year already marked for notoriety by the much-discussed trial and execution of John Thurtell for murder. Both trials exposed moral scandal, financial fraud and corruption, although in Thurtell's case it was against the plebeian background of underworld gambling and prize fighting rather than high society banking. This juxta-positioning did no favours to Fauntleroy, who was 'daily annoyed by seeing the unfounded slanders propagated respecting him in the public prints and he was dreadfully distressed and nervous on finding his name

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[20] Sara Malton, 'Forgery, Fiscal Trauma and the Fauntleroy Case', *European Romantic Review*, vol. 18, no. 3, 2007, pp. 401-15.
[21] *Sporting Times*, 8 May 1889.
[22] *Bell's Life in London*, 28 November 1824. For the case against Fauntleroy's execution, see for example, *Blood for Gold or Death for Forgery, Proved to be Inexpedient, Unjust and Unscriptural, Suggested by the Recent Execution of Mr Fauntleroy*, London, 1824.

frequently associated with that of the cold-blooded murderer Thurtell'.[23] The Fauntleroy coins express plebeian satisfaction that a man who could turn 'robber of widows and orphans' with a simple stroke of his pen should be brought to justice. And their stark warning to 'bilking bankers' everywhere was not without impact, for they were called to mind in the popular press some 40 years later.[24]

But few other victims of the gallows were memorialised in this way. Coins were circulated for sale to mark the execution of the murderer, James Blomfield Rush at Norwich in 1849, but these were professionally struck in brass rather than scratched into existing coinage. These were collectors' pieces, and like William Corder, the 'red barn murderer,' Rush also inspired the production of a set of commemorative Staffordshire pottery figurines. The turning of notoriety into the mass production of collectable curiosities played a central role in the afterlife of both these killings, but this only highlights the essential difference between them and the Curtis/Myers case.[25] Abraham Woolf was not creating dark souvenirs for general sale but personalised mementos for individuals who played a part in bringing Curtis to the gallows. Indeed, the example in the British Museum has been drilled through with a small hole at the top, presumably so that it could be worn around the neck of the owner.

Moreover, the use of picture maps on at least four of them suggests Woolf's principal interest was in the assignment of spatial association as much as the recording of justice. Each coin locates the gibbet site in relation to its wider landscape.

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[23] *Pierce Egan's Account of the Trial of Mr Fauntleroy for Forgery*, London 1824.
[24] James Gregory, *Victorians Against the Gallows: Capital Punishment and the Abolitionist Movement in Nineteenth Century Britain*, London 2012, p. 103, citing the *Railway News* in 1864.
[25] For a Rush commemorative coin in the collections of the Ashmolean Museum see: http://www.jermy.org/photos/rushmedal1.html [accessed 17.11.2020]. For comparison with the souvenir industry surrounding Corder: Shane McCorristine, *William Corder and the Red Barn Murder: Journeys of the Criminal Body*, Basingstoke 2014.

Key dates in the narrative are added to each of the coins: the murder (28 December 1767), the discovery of the body (25 January 1768) and the date of Curtis's execution (14 March 1768). All four of the map coins define the landscape with reference to the same key features (gallows, pit, barn, and cathedral) and two add a milestone to mark the fork in the road. The cathedral's architecture is inconsistent and emblematic rather than representational and the significance of the equally variable 'barn', a feature that plays no part in the recognised narrative of events, is now a mystery. Woolf's mapping of Harnham Hill critically changes its associative identity from simply the high road to Salisbury to a site of suffering and retribution. At the time of Curtis's execution, detailed and reliable maps of Wiltshire were still hard to find. There had been no fully surveyed cartography since the pioneering work of John Speed, a century and a half earlier, and the first mapping to replace it would not appear until the publication of Andrews and Dury's map of the county in 1773. In a sense then, Woolf's map coins were not so much an attempt to reinterpret the cartography for contemporary use but to establish it. Curtis's gibbet is clearly marked by Andrews and Dury.

Curtis, it will be recalled, was asked pointedly whether he could 'remember the place' as the execution procession marched him to the chalk pit and gallows. 'Remembering' the place was as much about *defining* it as a crime scene as recalling any of its other possible meanings and associations, especially given a landscape now to be permanently inscribed by a 24-foot gibbet pole.

As the geographer Doreen Massey has noted, such re-descriptions of the landscape tend to make it 'temporal and not just spatial; as set in time as well as space… The identity of places is very much

bound up with the histories which are told of them, how those histories are told, and which histories turn out to be dominant'.[26]

To fully understand the Curtis/Myers tokens, we must also understand the practice of hanging felons at the scene of their crime.[27] Although sentence of death would be passed by the trial judge on conviction by the jury, arrangements for the time and place of an execution and whether to gibbet or anatomise the criminal body were normally the responsibility of the county Sheriff. Generally, the customary place was close to the boundaries of the county town and a short distance from the gaol. But occasionally, to maximise impact, he might order an execution elsewhere. Taking convicts back to the place where the crime was committed transformed the execution process from a standardised ritual in a customary place associated predominantly with public punishment, to a one-off performance, delivered in a series of theatrical scenes against a familiar backdrop. Crowds were often far greater than at the 'usual place', and often considered better behaved as well, perhaps because the mystique of the ritual had not been weakened by over-familiarity.

In these circumstances, dramatic last-minute confessions were often hoped for by the prompting of associative memory. As the *Morning Chronicle* put it, reporting the execution of two men for murder at Godalming in 1818, it was fitting that 'the neighbourhood which had been alarmed and horror-struck at the atrocity of their crime, should likewise witness their punishment and hear their confession, if disposed to make any'.[28] And sometimes it worked. John Ogleby, hanged for a murder in a village near Sevenoaks in Kent in 1750, was 'much surprised by the sight of the gibbet and of several thousand people… he stood up in the cart and desired all people would pray for him and the poor man he had killed, and confessed the fact which till that time he had denied'.[29] John Walford was another. Taken back to his home village of Over Stowey in 1789 to be hanged and gibbeted for

[26] Doreen Massey, 'Places and Their Pasts', *History Workshop Journal*, vol. 39, no. 1, 1995, p. 186.
[27] I have written about crime scene execution in detail in 'For the Benefit of Example: Crime-Scene Executions in England, 1720-1830', in *A Global History of Execution and the Criminal Corpse*, ed. R. Ward, Basingstoke 2015, pp. 71-101.
[28] *Morning Chronicle*, 15 August 1818.
[29] *Penny London Post*, 31 August 1750.

the murder of his wife, Walford like Curtis was confronted with the crime scene. 'On the way to the gallows they drove to the very spot where he committed the murder', recounted Tom Poole. 'The horses stopped. He looked over the side of the cart and said, Drive a little further. Now, said he, I see it'.[30] William Keeley, hanged for murder on a hill outside Chipping Camden in 1772, 'persisted in denying the fact in the most solemn manner until he came within sight of the spot where he committed the murder. He could then hold out no longer, but confessed'.[31] Perhaps the most performative of these confessional moments was John Plackett's in 1762. Hanged for robbery in the countryside near Islington, 'he loudly spoke a confession of the fact for which he suffered, and two other facts, all committed within sight of the spot where he suffered. There, said he, in that field (pointing to the place), I robbed the gentleman, myself alone, for which I die. And there (pointing to Goswell Street Road), I robbed a woman of a trifle of money but did not hurt her. This was the first I ever did. And there (pointing near the same place) I robbed a man of a small sum but did not abuse or ill-treat him'.[32]

In contrast to the often hurried twice-yearly executions at the usual place, crime scene hangings impressed themselves upon local memory by familial and situated poignancy. At Chipping Camden, William Keeley's mother and father 'met him on the road not far from the place of execution', it was reported, 'and the scene of their parting was very affecting'.[33] Such pathos, it was hoped, would produce an equally profound effect on the watching crowd. Those who came to see Robert Watkins hanged at Purton Stoke in Wiltshire fell into 'a fearful and breathless anxiety, a solemn stillness, and a deep expression of melancholy thought' as they waited. 'Near to the fatal spot, the cart passed his wretched mother, he looked steadfastly at her for some moments and with a gentle inclination of

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[30] As cited in H. Sandford, *Thomas Poole and His Friends*, vol. 2, London 1888, pp. 235-37.
[31] *Bath Journal*, 31 August 1772.
[32] *God's Revenge Against Murder; Or, the Genuine History of the Life, Trial, and last Dying Words of... John Plackett, for a Highway Robbery on Jacob Faye, a Danish Young Gentleman, near the City Road, for which he was Executed, and afterwards Hung in Chains on Finchley Common*, London 1762.
[33] *Bath Journal*, 31 August 1772.

head and great expression of feature, seemed to take an eternal farewell of her'.[34] Indulgent Sheriffs might let scenes like these play out for several hours for there was no need to hurry. Richard Randall, hanged at Totterdown near Bristol in 1783, 'remained under the fatal tree for two or three hours and a considerable part of the time with the rope fixt for launching him into eternity' before finally signalling for the cart to pull away.[35] Crowds had plenty of opportunity for reflection, as they measured crime and punishment against familiarity and locale. Watching the fatal return to the small village of Kenn in Somerset of three young men condemned to death for incendiarism, stirred painful reflections for the Methodist minister, John Leifchild. 'What occasion had these men for deep sorrow and regret when brought for the last time to witness scenes familiar to them from their infancy?' he wondered, 'How often may they have paced this very spot in the innocence of childhood!'[36]

Curtis had no familial connection with the place chosen for his execution, but the extraordinary manner of his death was designed nevertheless to leave its mark on local memory. Besides Woolf's engraved pocket pieces, the gibbet itself became a marked feature on Andrews and Dury's map of Wiltshire, first published five years later in 1773, and the case was committed to a lengthy doggerel in 1844, with key moments in the narrative duly remembered:

Then the murderer's conducted all round the drear pit

And the Sheriff exacts that he look into it

From the cart where in agonised state he doth sit

Ah! Will he not madden or fall in a fit?

As he once more perforce approaches that spot

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[34] Ethel Richardson, *The Story of Purton*, Bristol 1919, pp. 83-85; *Salisbury Journal*, 3 August 1819.
[35] *Felix Farley's Bristol Journal*, 10 April 1784.
[36] Rev. J. Leifchild, D. D., *Remarkable Facts Illustrative and Confirmatory of Different Portions of Holy Scripture*, London 1867, p. 222. For this event see Steve Poole, 'A Lasting and Salutary Warning: Incendiarism, Rural Order and England's Last Scene of Crime Execution', *Rural History*, vol. 19, no. 2, 2008, pp. 163-177.

Where his victim he left to stiffen and rot!

He's then pressed to confess while yet there's still time

But denies the commission of murder's fell crime…[37]

In presenting his pocket pieces to specific individuals, Woolf clearly had no interest in their wider circulation. They are story-telling devices trapping time and place, nailing remembrance of past trauma and mapping a landscape of loss.

The High Sheriff of Somerset did something similar after the hanging of the Kenn incendiaries in 1830, cutting the silver buttons from his tunic and handing them to the principal tenant famers of the district who made up his Javelin men for the day. The buttons were passed down through the recipients' families as tokens of memory, several of them emerging once more at a Clevedon charity auction in 1941, their meaning and provenance not yet lost to local knowledge.[38] In our own world, where roads are frequently re-interpreted through the placing of unofficial memorials at fatal accident sites, we may perhaps re-read Woolf's coin-maps in the light of what Karen Till and Julian Jonker have termed the haunted archaeologies or 'spectral traces' of traumatic pasts in the present. The more so, indeed, since gibbeting sites have long been associated with hauntings. In proposing an alternative cartography, Woolf's tokens remind us that landscape cannot be reduced or tied to a fixed moment of becoming and that autonomous reading may not be suffocated by a neutral hierarchy of signs introduced by the Ordnance Survey. 'Landscapes refuse to be disciplined', wrote Barbara Bender, 'They make a mockery of the oppositions that we create between time [History] and space [Geography] and between nature [Science] and culture [Social Anthropology].[39]

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[37] Miss Child, *The Spinster at Home in the Close at Salisbury. No Fable. Together with Tales and Ballads*, Salisbury 1844.
[38] *Clevedon Mercury*, 13 December 1941.
[39] See Julian Jonker and Karen E. Till, 'Mapping and Excavating Spectral Traces in Post-Apartheid Cape Town', *Memory Studies*, vol. 2, no. 3, 2009, pp. 303-35. For Bender see Doreen Massey, 'Landscape as a Provocation: Reflections on Moving Mountains', *Journal of Material Culture*, vol. 11, no. 33, 2006, p. 34. See also the exhibition catalogue, Karen E. Till (ed.), *Mapping Spectral Traces*, Blacksburg, VA 2010.