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Pierrepoint:
A Family of
Executioners

THE STORY OF BRITAIN'S
INFAMOUS HANGMEN

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THE SENTENCE OF DEATH

The sentence of the Court upon you is, that you be taken from this place to a lawful prison and thence to a place of execution and that you be hanged by the neck until you be dead; and that your body be afterwards buried within the precincts of the prison in which you shall have been confined before your execution. And may the Lord have mercy upon your soul. Amen.'

INTRODUCTION

This book mainly covers the period of 1901 to 1956, and deals with the lives and times of a unique family: a father, Henry Pierrepoint; a son, Albert, and an uncle, Thomas, who each, at one time, held the position of Hangman of England.

Henry Pierrepoint applied to become a hangman just three weeks after the death of Queen Victoria whose reign of sixty-four years had seen numerous changes in the way law and order was applied and carried out. During her reign, a sentence of death was passed for a variety of crimes, including burglary, rape and attempted murder. Gradually sentence of death ceased for all crimes apart from wilful murder, although the sentence was still carried out in public. It is remarkable to think that in the late nineteenth century, one could travel by underground train in London to watch an execution carried out in front of the prison gates.

Public executions ended in 1868, although members of the press were still present to report in macabre detail what they had witnessed.

All the people executed during the period covered by this book were convicted of murder, except during the period when Thomas Pierrepoint officiated; during the First World War one person was convicted of treason and hanged, and fifteen men were hanged as a result of the 1940 Treachery Act. Added to this are a number of American servicemen convicted of offences that were not deemed worthy of the death penalty in twentieth century Great Britain.

Furthermore, during Albert Pierrepoint's time as Chief Executioner, over two hundred people were hanged for offences punishable by the death penalty under the rules of the War Crimes Commission. Albert also hanged the last men convicted of treason during the Second World War.

The Pierrepoints' stock in trade was being skilled at conducting the final act in the penal life of a condemned man – the physical process of hanging him by his neck. The process changed little over the three generations involved, and the cold, unemotional tones of the 1953 Royal Commission Report description would have rung true to all three Pierrepoints.

Immediately a prisoner sentenced to death returns from court, he is placed in a cell for condemned prisoners and is watched day and night by two officers. Amenities such as cards, chess and dominoes are provided in the cell and the officers are encouraged to join the prisoner in these games. Newspapers and books are also provided. Food is supplied from the main prison kitchen, the prisoner being placed on hospital diet.

In most of the English prisons equipped for execution the execution chamber adjoins the condemned cell. The chamber itself is a small room and the trap occupies a large part of the floor. The trap is formed of two hinged leaves held in position from below by bolts, which are withdrawn when the lever is pulled, allowing the leaves to drop on their hinges. Above the trap a rope of a standard length is attached to a strong chain, which is fitted to the overhead beam in such a way that it can be raised and lowered and secured at any desired height by means of a cotter slipped into one of the links and a bracket fixed on the beam. This enables the length of chain to be adjusted to make the drop accord with the height and weight of the prisoner.

The executioner and his assistant arrive at the prison on the afternoon before the execution. The

are told the height and weight of the prisoner and are given an opportunity to see him from a position where they themselves cannot be seen. While the prisoner is out of the cell they test the apparatus to ensure that it is working satisfactorily. For this purpose they use a sack of approximately the same weight as the prisoner, having ascertained the proper drop from a table which gives the length appropriate to a prisoner's weight. Some adjustments in the length given in the table may be necessary to allow for other physical characteristics of the prisoner, such as age and build.

On the morning of the execution a final check of the equipment is carried out. The rope is coiled and fitted to the chain, and secured in position by a piece of pack thread which will be broken by the weight of the prisoner when he drops. Just before the time of the execution the executioner and his assistant join the Under Sheriff and the prison officials outside the door of the condemned cell. The Under Sheriff gives the signal: the executioner enters the cell and pinions the prisoner's arms behind his back, and two officers lead him to the scaffold and place him directly across the division of the trap on a spot previously marked with chalk. The assistant executioner pinions the legs, while the executioner puts a white cap over his head and fits the noose round his neck with the knot drawn tight on the left lower jaw, where it is held in position by a sliding ring. The executioner then pulls the lever. The medical officer carries out an immediate inspection to assure that life is extinct and the body is then left to hang for an hour before being taken down.

BEGINNINGS

February 11th 1901

Dear Sir,

I wish to inform you that I should be very thankfull if you would accept me as one of the public executioner's should at any time Mr Billington's term expires as I have always had a desire for that appointment. I am 24 years of age, height 5ft 8½ inches. Should you require particulars of my character I shall be very glad to give you all the information you require. Hoping the application will be off no offence.

I am yours

Respectfully

Henry Albert Pierrepoint

No 53 Fielden St.

Off Oldham Road

Manchester

It was this short note, sent to Home Secretary Sir Matthew Ridley in the early part of 1901, which set in motion a chain of events that resulted in the Pierrepoint family name becoming one of the most famous in modern British criminology, and being connected with capital punishment for the next half century.

Henry 'Harry' Albert Pierrepoint was born in 1878 at Sutton Bonington, Nottinghamshire. He was the fourth child, and second son, to Thomas and Ann Pierrepoint, who ran the King's Head on 14 Market Street, at East Leake. Soon after Harry's birth, Thomas found work looking after the horses at a Yorkshire quarry and the family uprooted from Nottinghamshire. The 1891 census shows they lived on Wolsley Street, Clayton, near Bradford; Thomas Pierrepoint and his eldest son, also named Thomas, were listed as being employed as quarrymen.

Harry was working at a worsted mill in Clayton, aged 13, when he read about the exploits of the well-known Bradford hangman James Berry, whose career as the country's chief executioner had come to an end following a series of botched executions and run-ins with prison authorities. After reading about James Billington's appointment to succeed Berry, Harry quickly decided it was what he wanted to do too – an ambition that stayed with him night and day, never leaving him. Other boys dreamt of becoming soldiers or engine drivers; Harry's dream was to become an executioner. Over the next few years he hungrily lapped up newspaper accounts of Billington's thrilling adventures across the country as he dashed by railway from one prison to another carrying out his official duties, executing the criminals whose exploits had been splashed across the weekly scandal sheets – names such as the notorious Dr Cream (the Lambeth poisoner) and baby farmer Amelia Dyer.

Harry harboured a desire to travel, one more than likely stimulated by reading the hangman's newspaper accounts. When his father found out he was unhappy working in the local mill, he arranged an apprenticeship for his son at one of Bradford's largest butchers. Harry lasted three years as a butcher until, on reaching his 18th birthday, he decided to leave the business. He travelled across the

Pennines to Manchester where his sister Mary was one of the managers of Robert Boyle and Son cabinet makers, at 316 Oldham Road, Manchester.

In 1898, while he was living briefly in Prestwich, Manchester, Harry met a local girl named Mary Buxton; after a brief courtship they married, and within a year they had their first child, a daughter. Then, in February 1901, Harry Pierrepoint composed his brief letter to the Home Secretary, offering his services as an executioner. He was a month short of his 23rd birthday when he applied for the post – not 24, as he himself claimed when applying for the job and when later he penned his memoirs. *Thomson Weekly News* and *Reynolds News*. All census records from 1881, 1891 and 1901 confirm that Henry Albert Pierrepoint was born in March 1878; it's more than likely that he had added a couple of years to his age to support his application and then kept up the pretence throughout the rest of his life.

Many years later, when he wrote his memoirs, Harry admitted that at the time of applying he felt the post of executioner was morally reprehensible, but this didn't deter him in his quest. (Although the occupation would have been regarded as 'unsavoury' by many, it provided a working-class man with a relatively easy way of earning a considerable amount of extra money.) He was at a loss as to whom to address his letter, until after some consideration he decided to post it to no less than the Home Secretary himself. To his great joy he received a letter almost by return, stating his request was being considered and that he would hear again in the near future. On 18 February 1901, the Home Secretary wrote to Governor Cruickshank at Manchester's Strangeways Gaol:

Prison Commission

Home Office

Whitehall S.W.

Please send for H. A. Pierrepoint, whose letter is enclosed, and say whether he would make a satisfactory Assistant Executioner. If you think that he is, you might ascertain confidentially from the local police whether he bears a good character.

That his application was being taken seriously was soon proved when detectives called at the Manchester furniture store to make discreet enquiries about Harry. He received a positive reference from his employer and soon after another letter was received at his new home. This time it was marked confidential and came from the governor of Manchester's Strangeways Gaol, inviting Harry to attend for interview at the prison.

Although Harry had long desired to become an executioner, it was an ambition that he had never shared with anyone. When he arrived at the prison gates, having told no one of his appointment, he was overcome with feelings of embarrassment and a sense of shame at what he was doing. 'I dare not tell you my particular business,' he told the guard, 'but I shall show you this letter.'

His reticence in revealing the purpose of his visit caused an embarrassing episode for the young hangman-to-be. Approached by a principal warder, Harry was asked if he had come for a job in the prison service. Answering in the affirmative, he was taken to a nearby doctor's room and put through a rigorous medical only to be told he had failed on account of his height. Downcast and disconsolate he trudged home. A day or so later the misunderstanding was cleared up and he received another letter inviting him to see the governor.

Governor Cruickshank was to be the key to Harry achieving his ambition. Tall, and in his mid-fifties at the time, he wore a bushy beard and had the appearance and bearing of a country squire. Cruickshank had recently taken over at the Manchester Gaol after a successful governorship at Durham Gaol. He spoke sternly and in a dignified tone to the aspiring hangman, and following the brief interview, in which searching questions were asked for the reason for the application, Harry was

told before he was accepted he would have to undertake six days' training at London's Holloway Prison.

While Harry waited to hear if his application had been successful, Cruickshank wrote to the Home Office at the beginning of March 1901:

I have seen this man and I am of the opinion that he will make a satisfactory Assistant Executioner. He tells me that he can go away at any time either to attend a week's training at Newgate or to assist at an execution.

Harry duly received the letter informing him he had passed the interview. There was just one small snag: the training had been arranged to start on the following Monday, meaning that Harry would not have to inform his wife of his new career choice.

Mary Pierrepont was at first convinced it was a joke, but when Harry told her of his life-long ambition, and then produced the letter and testimonial from governor Cruickshank, she realised he was serious. She made several vain attempts to get him not to go through with the quest, but by now the train tickets had been purchased, and Harry had arranged leave of absence at the furniture store.

Buoyed up with the excitement of travel and ambition, Harry boarded the stuffy express train on the cold morning of Monday, 11 March 1901. Upon arrival in London his shyness and reticence to reveal the purpose of his first visit caused him a certain amount of worry. How was he going to reach his destination if he was afraid to ask directions? He eventually summoned up the courage to ask a policeman and soon presented himself at the gate of Holloway Gaol. After a brief interview with the governor, Harry was informed that there had been a change of plan and that his training was to be carried out instead at Newgate Gaol. Within the hour he was entering, for the first time, the forebodingly grim walls of the soon-to-be-demolished gaol.

By this time, Newgate was no longer a holding prison for convicts serving sentences of imprisonment; rather, it was now a remand prison for those awaiting trial at the adjoining old Central Criminal Court. The site had been a prison for several centuries, but it had been earmarked for demolition and was to be the site of the new criminal court, the Old Bailey. It was still the principal centre of execution for persons condemned for crimes committed to the north of the River Thames though. When Harry's training was being arranged, the authorities had intended to use a wing of the prison that was empty, as prisoners were being redistributed in readiness for the closure of Newgate. When it became clear that the wing would still be occupied, the officials were left with the dilemma of either postponing Harry's training for two or three months, or arranging for it to be carried out at Holloway. Letters were sent out to this effect, but then it was decided to move Newgate prisoners to another part of the prison and for the training to go ahead as originally planned, at Newgate.

Harry was introduced to Governor Millman, a white-haired, kindly man, who explained a little about the prison and his duties and then had one of the wardens escort Harry to his quarters for the duration of the stay. He was assigned to a dismal attic room up a flight of narrow steep stairs known as the 'Hangman's Room', conveniently situated so that it overlooked the execution chamber. The woodwork was pitted with carvings of a generation of former executioners who had occupied the room through the ages. Harry found it glum and depressing.

After depositing his bag in the room, he was allowed to walk around the grounds of the prison. He was later introduced to the man who was to be his instructor on the following day, who during the chat to the warder invited him to cross the city and accompany him that evening to Holloway Gaol where he was delivering an important message. Glad of the company, and of another chance to see some of the city, Harry agreed.

He slept badly that first night inside the prison. The atmosphere of the room and the apprehension of the role he had taken on caused him to toss and turn fitfully, until daybreak allowed him to rise, take breakfast and then finally get the chance to get stuck into his duties.

In the company of his newfound friend and instructor, Harry was taken around the execution chamber, before being left to his own devices to work out how the traps opened and were reset. The duties of an executioner were carefully and patiently explained, and he spent most of the first day familiarising himself with the ropes and chains, how the noose was rigged up, and most importantly how to measure the drops. It was a long day with just a short time for a lunch break.

Day two began with a dummy execution. Harry was led to the condemned cell, where the 'prisoner' was pointed out to him, seated at a table in a dark corner. With little training so far under his belt, he approached what he expected to be a warder with a thumping heart, and his nerve was shaken further when, upon reaching the table, he saw the man he was to hang was a stuffed dummy with a grotesque painted face and its right hand making a salute. Wisely keeping any show of emotion in check, Harry pinned the dummy's arms as he had been shown, and as two warders picked up the dummy, he followed them onto the trap, where he slipped the noose around the pseudo-victim's neck and pulled the lever for the first time.

Repetition was the key during the intensive course, which had been set up for would-be hangmen following the Aberdare Report in the mid-1880s. The report had been commissioned to address the issues regarding the appointment, conduct and all other aspects of being an executioner. This came as a direct result of a series of botched executions by a number of hangmen, in particular Bartholomew Binns, and Bradford's James Berry, who had finally hung up his ropes after a turbulent eight-year reign as the chief executioner in 1892. Berry had applied to carry out the double execution of two poachers at Edinburgh in 1884, and following the successful completion of the task he was given testimonials from the officials there, which were enough to secure him the title of Chief Executioner for England and the rest of the United Kingdom. After a promising start, however, Berry had a run of messy executions, unsavoury incidents and run-ins with officials that led to him eventually leaving the post. The Home Office learnt its lessons from the affair, however: all subsequent hangmen would be thoroughly vetted and trained by their own officials before being allowed to undertake their duties.

Harry was among the first of the applicants to undertake this instruction and every day during the week's training he learned all aspects of the ritual required to dispense instant death. On the final day he had to carry out a repeat dummy execution as he had done on the second day of his training. This time the watchful eyes of Governor Millman and other officials were on him; Harry carried out the mock execution competently and efficiently. Prison medical officer Doctor Scott then gave him a short written and oral test before he was sent home to await the outcome. Detectives had already visited the furniture store managed by his sister, for a character reference; his conduct had been reported back as satisfactory, so all Henry had to do now was wait. His wife's original objections to Harry's new career diminished after she realised the extra wage would make a huge difference to the growing family. Soon enough, a letter was sent from Holloway to the Home Office, confirming Harry had passed the test:

HMP Holloway

March 19th 1901

For the Commissioner of Prisons

H. A. Pierrepoint.

Applicant from Manchester for the post of Assistant Executioner at 24. I saw the candidate at the commencement of his instruction, he there appeared to me an apt and promising pupil, handy and active and taking great excitement in his early lessons at Newgate. As his instruction was near completion I again saw him go through with the pinioning and all the other steps necessary at an execution with a dummy figure, he performed all the duties satisfactorily and will I think become a useful assistant at an execution. I agree with the M.O. that the man should if possible be employed as a second assistant at first.

* * * * *

Spring took over from winter and Harry went about his duties selling furniture. What he didn't know was that in official circles it was being proposed that he attend a double execution scheduled to take place at Stafford Prison on 2 April 1901. On 22 March, the Home Office wrote to the governor of Stafford to inform him that Henry Pierrepont had recently undergone a course of instruction to the satisfaction and it was suggested that he should, if possible, be employed as a second assistant in order to test his nerve and make him familiar with the full details of execution procedure. They asked if the governor would contact the under-sheriff to see if he would agree to this. The governor concurred with this thought but soon wrote back to the Home Office that this idea had been rejected by the high sheriff:

The High Sheriff of Staffordshire objects to the appointment of the new Executioner even as a Second Assistant. The commissioners have unfortunately no power to force any man on the High Sheriff.

The gist of the letter was that Staffordshire didn't want to pay any fees for the extra assistant, for which they would have been liable, and concluded with the suggestion that the executioner should be employed at a London prison, where governor Millman could confirm that the assistant was suitable. On 23 March, Harry received a letter informing him that he had successfully completed the instruction and that his name had been added to the list for the post of executioner and assistant.

With his keen interest in murder cases, Harry had already read about an horrific murder that had taken place ten miles or so away, in Bury, carried by 59-year-old millwright William Goacher. Goacher lived with his wife of 30 years, although of late they had been on bad terms. He was seen drinking in a Bury public house one morning in March 1901; later that night after he returned home screams alerted neighbours to a disturbance at the Goacher household. Upon investigation, they found Mrs Goacher had been beaten and was suffering from terrible burns, caused by her husband holding her head into the fire. She died from her injuries on the following day.

Goacher was sentenced to death at Manchester Assizes; an official letter requesting Harry Pierrepont's attendance at Strangeways Prison arrived at his small terrace house at the end of April. Opening the slim brown envelope he read that he was requested to assist James Billington at the execution to be carried out on 18 May 1901. His euphoria at the news was soon dashed by a second letter, received a week later. Tearing it open he read that the Home Secretary had ordered a reprieve and that his services would therefore not be required. Although evidently disappointed, Henry recorded that he satisfied himself that he had been prevented from helping to hang a man who may have been innocent. He waited patiently for the next call; his patience was rewarded when, on the last day of October, he received a letter from Governor Millman inviting him to assist at the execution of a French anarchist, whose crime had shocked the country only a few weeks earlier. Harry wrote back accepting the engagement, and on the morning of Monday, 18 November 1901, he boarded the train at Manchester's London Road station, aware that in 20 hours' time he would no longer just be a Manchester furniture salesman. At 8 a.m. on the following morning, provided he kept his nerve and

there was no last-minute hitch, he would join a select group of men on the list of the hangmen in England.

Marcel Faugeron was a 23-year-old French deserter who had arrived in London in the spring of 1901. He had become friendly with Vincent Durant, a fellow Frenchman, whom he had asked to help him find lodgings and a job in his trade as a barber. He was taken to a boarding house near Tottenham Court Road, where he lodged with a number of other French immigrants.

Around this time Faugeron was introduced to Hermann Francis Jung, a 64-year-old Swiss watchmaker who carried out his business from a shop in Clerkenwell. Jung lived in the basement of the same premises, with his wife and two children. The young Frenchman had by this time discovered that a number of his fellow lodgers and new friends were anarchists, plotting to carry out activities in Belgium, and also planning to assassinate the Tsar, who was in France at the time.

On 3 September, Matilda Jung heard a disturbance upstairs in the shop and as she rushed from the kitchen she saw Faugeron, whom she recognised from previous visits, fleeing through the door. Her husband was lying on the shop floor; he had been stabbed to death. She shouted for help and Faugeron was arrested as he fled down the street.

At his trial before Mr Justice Bingham, Faugeron's defence claimed that he had stabbed Jung in self-defence after the old man had threatened violence against him if he didn't carry out an assault on Joseph Chamberlain, a prominent cabinet minister whom some factions held partly responsible for the war in the Transvaal. The prosecution claimed that Faugeron had gone to the shop in order to obtain either money or goods to fund anarchistic activities he and his comrades were planning to carry out.

When the judge concluded the passing of sentence of death on the accused in the usual manner (both in French), with the words, 'May the Lord have mercy on your soul,' Faugeron replied: 'I hope so. That is what justice is in this country I hope I shall have better justice in the next world!' There had been almost no hope of a reprieve and, arriving in London, Harry confidently made his way across the city, where he finally got to meet James Billington in the entrance to Newgate Gaol. Billington had been the Chief Executioner for over a decade. In his early fifties at the time, he had been a mill worker, singer and wrestler before opening a barber's shop in Farnworth, Lancashire. In 1884, he became the executioner for Yorkshire, carrying out one or two executions a year before superseding James Berry in August 1891. Now, a decade later, he ran a public house in Bolton and was often assisted by his two eldest sons, Thomas and William Billington, who had both graduated from the executioner's training school.

After a brief greeting, Billington led the way as they set off to the execution shed to test the apparatus. Billington allowed Henry to attach the sandbag – filled to match the weight, age and general condition of the prisoner – to the noose; this was done before every execution, to take the stretch out of the rope. Billington rigged the drop and once he was satisfied all was in order he carried out a test drop in front of the governor and prison engineer. The rope was left stretching overnight and a prison officer was posted outside the execution chamber, which stood in the prison grounds, to make sure no one tampered with the apparatus.

After evening tea, Harry was shown his quarters and discovered that instead of sharing the attic room he had stayed in during training, he was assigned to the second condemned cell, utilised when a double execution was scheduled but otherwise empty. They retired after supper and, finding sleep hard to come by, Harry prowled around the room, taking in the grim atmosphere of the prison, knowing that the last occupant of this room was now lying below the neatly cut lawn across from the execution shed; at 8 a.m. on the following morning, the man in the cell next door would occupy an adjacent grave.

As he nosed around the cell he noticed a small peephole allowing him to spy into the condemned cell and he was greeted with a remarkable sight. The young Frenchman was walking up and down the cell, smoking continuously. Harry watched, unnoticed, for almost an hour and was just about to retire to bed when the chimes from the church across the road caused the condemned man to point up to the sky and count off using his fingers until he reached eight, indicating that he was to die at 8 a.m. Several times Harry watched as the hour loomed and each time as the chimes rang out, Faugeron repeated the ritual.

At seven the next morning the hangmen returned to the execution chamber. Billington pulled up the rope from the trap and adjusted his drop to account for the stretch while Pierrepont went into the droppings and pushed the heavy oak doors up; they were secured and the lever set. As the hangmen finished the preparations, the condemned man ate a hearty breakfast and was granted a last walk in the open air. Once he had taken the allowed ten-minute stroll in the exercise yard he was returned to the cell, where he sat in the company of two guards and a priest and waited.

At two minutes to eight, Harry stood beside Billington outside the condemned cell door. Besides them stood Millman, the governor; the Under-Sheriff of London, Mr Kymaston Metcalfe; Dr Scott, the prison medical officer; and a number of wardens. On the stroke of eight the door opened. Faugeron showed little sign of fear as his arms were pinioned behind his back and with a warder either side he walked slowly out of the cell, into the corridor and out into the yard towards the execution chamber. When the party came into view, the guard outside the chamber flung open the door and the procession entered. As Billington placed the noose around the Frenchman's neck, Harry swiftly slipped a leather strap around the prisoner's ankles and leapt off the trap door as Billington darted to his left and pushed the lever. The drop opened and the prisoner plunged to his death. Harry looked down into the pit and was relieved that he felt both calm and free from nerves. The body was left to hang for the obligatory hour, and they retired for breakfast. No sooner had they sat down to eat than they were approached by Dr Scott. He grasped Harry's wrist and felt for his pulse. Smiling, he told the hangman, 'You will do.'

The two executioners completed their duties, which included removing the body from the rope and placing it, wrapped in a shirt, into a thin wooden coffin. They then dismantled the ropes and chains and replaced everything into a padlocked trunk. By 10 a.m. they were at Euston Station, from where they travelled back to Manchester together. A week or so later, Harry received a letter to say that his name was now added to the list of approved executioners and reminded him that he must not discuss the appointment with any members of the press or public.

The year 1901 had been average for executions, with approximately one taking place every five or six weeks. Up until Harry's first engagement there had been eight executions in England and three in Ireland. Billington had carried out each of those, with the exception of one in Belfast and one in Dublin, which had been officiated by Huddersfield-born Thomas Henry Scott, a former assistant to Berry's who carried out one or two executions a year, usually across the water in Ireland. So far that year Billington had performed his duties as far afield as Bodmin, Maidstone, Stafford and Norwich. The latter was probably the most famous case he officiated at that year: Herbert Bennett was hanged for the murder of his sweetheart on a beach at Yarmouth. There was much disquiet at the verdict, and when the flagpole used to hoist the black flag snapped as the signal of execution was being hoisted, it was taken by many as a sign of a miscarriage of justice.

When Harry returned to Manchester he was pleased to find another letter waiting for him. This time the job was much closer to home and was scheduled to take place at Manchester's Strangeways Gaol on 3 December. Again, he was to act as assistant to James Billington.

Patrick McKenna had been sentenced to death on 13 November for the murder of his wife in Bolton. The crime had been made all the more remarkable by the fact that the victim was attended as she lay dying by William Billington, son of the chief executioner, who was passing the street when the incident took place. William's father was also acquainted with the killer. McKenna, who was a regular drinker in the Derby Arms – of which James Billington was the landlord – was immediately taken into custody, and although his guilt was never in doubt, there was a good deal of sympathy for him locally. His defence at the trial had been insanity, and once sentence had been passed great effort went into obtaining a reprieve for the condemned man. A local petition gathered over 22,000 signatures and the story filled the local press as the hangmen arrived at the prison on the Monday afternoon.

Although it had only been a fortnight since the two men had last met, there had been a sharp decline in the health of the chief hangman during the interim. For the last few days Billington had been confined to bed with a fever and sickness, and was also suffering badly from bronchitis. As they rigged the gallows in readiness for the morning it was clear to Harry that Billington was a sick man. Billington made a brief observation of the prisoner through the spy hole and easily recognised the tall man with the bushy beard as one of his regulars. The eight weeks' imprisonment had taken its toll on him and he looked thoroughly miserable and dejected.

After rigging the drop they returned to their quarters, where Billington collapsed on the bed crying 'Oh Harry, I wish I'd never have come.' Harry offered to carry out the execution by himself on the following morning, but Billington was adamant he would be able to carry out his duties. In the company of a number of warders the hangmen played cards and drank a small quantity of beer in the gas-lit cell.

All was in readiness by 7.30 the following morning. Harry noted that the silence in the gaol was almost overwhelming as the chaplain entered the cell to give the prisoner some last grains of comfort before the dreaded hour arrived. On the stroke of eight the execution party entered the cell and realising his last moments had come, McKenna broke out into loud sobs.

It was only a few short steps across the corridor to the gallows but the silence was broken by the condemned man's pitiful cries for the Lord to help him. Billington stopped him on the drop and noticed tears were rolling down his cheek; as the hood was placed over his head, McKenna cried out aloud:

'Lord have mercy on my soul!' Realising that not a moment was to be wasted, Harry strapped the ankles with great speed and no sooner had Harry cleared the trap than the lever was pushed and McKenna was dead.

The large crowd that had been gathering in the streets outside since dawn were still loitering in the hope of seeing the hangmen depart the prison. Having disposed of the body, and with the crowd still boasting a healthy total, the hangmen chose to leave the prison by crossing an underground passage linking the prison to the assize court where they were able to mingle, unnoticed, into the crowd.

They said their farewells at the railway station and Harry helped the sick man into the carriage. Less than a fortnight later, as a result of his illness, Billington passed away. The Bolton newspapers linked the death to his duties at the execution of McKenna and claimed he had caught a chill on the trip to Manchester that had hastened his demise. It may have been partly true, but Billington was dying anyway and his dedication to his duties would not have prevented him carrying out the execution of his former friend.

There were a number of engagements already in James Billington's diary and these were carried out by his second son William – although younger in years than Thomas, he had been an assistant for three years longer, had much more experience as an assistant in recent times, and had even pulled the

lever once at an execution.

~~There were no further calls to Harry Pierrepoint that December, and it was to be March 1902 before~~ the next official correspondence arrived. Opening it, he read that Richard Wigley was to hang at Shrewsbury Prison on 18 March. The letter asked if he was available to act as chief executioner. Harry replied that he was.

RECOLLECTIONS

Considering that the execution of the 54-year-old slaughterman was to be the first time that Harry Pierrepont was solely responsible for an execution, he made little reference to it in both serialisations of his memoirs. Richard Wigley was convicted of the murder of 28-year-old Mary Elizabeth Bower at Westbury, Shropshire. They had been going out together for a number of years, since he had parted from his wife, and when they had met she was working as a barmaid. Mary soon left her job and found work at another public house, near Berrington, so they could spend more time together.

Mary suddenly ended the relationship and returned to her old job. Wigley took the split badly and began making frequent visits to her place of work. She told him there was no hope they would get back together and wrote asking him to stay away from her. She also told the other members of staff at the pub that if he called for her again, they were to say she was unavailable.

On the morning of Saturday, 30 November 1901, Wigley arrived in Westbury, some time before 10 a.m. He was wearing his butcher's apron and carrying two knives in a leather pouch. Inside the pub he ordered a drink, drank it quietly, but on asking for another was told by Mary he had drunk enough and that she refused to serve him any more. He asked again but Mary would not change her mind, merely turning her back on him and walking away briskly. Wigley followed her behind the bar, put his left arm around her neck and with his right, pulled a knife from his apron pouch and drew the blade across her throat, causing an enormous gash. She died almost immediately.

At his trial, Wigley said that he had killed Mary because if he could not have her, no one else would. He had written a letter before setting out to Westbury stating his intention to kill and said he would be ready to die for what he had to do. His only defence was insanity – evidence was presented to show that his mother had been admitted to the Salop County Lunatic Asylum.

When the Sheriff of Shropshire received notification to employ an executioner to carry out the sentence passed on Wigley he wrote to William Billington offering him the engagement. Following James Billington's death, all engagements in his diary were carried out by his middle son, William, assisted by the eldest son, Thomas. The latter had not been in good health himself and less than a month after his father's death he too passed away. William, however, was unavailable on that date, having accepted the offer to hang a young lorry driver at Maidstone. The only persons still active on the list of executioners were Harry Pierrepont and Rochdale barber John Ellis, who so far between them had assisted at just three executions. Nevertheless, both had been fully trained to carry out an execution, and with Harry claiming seniority, by just a fortnight, it was he who was asked to officiate.

Arriving at the prison on the afternoon before the execution, Harry was introduced to Ellis, the man who was to be his assistant. He received the details of the prisoner: height 5 feet 10½ inches, weight 160 pounds. Discreetly observing Wigley at exercise, he noted he had a strong neck and according to his measurements worked out a drop of 7 feet 6 inches. Richard Wigley was duly dispatched without incident.

On 29 April 1902, Harry assisted William Billington for the first time: together, they dispatched 50-year-old Charles Earl, a retired baker from Mortlake, who had shot dead a woman out of jealousy. Earl was hanged at Wandsworth Prison, having told the governor on the day before his execution, on hearing that a reprieve had been refused, that it was, 'a good job too!'

The year 1902 was becoming a busy and profitable one for the young hangman. At the end of July he was at Derby to assist William Billington again. This time the condemned man was a labourer from Chesterfield who had used a poker to beat to death the woman he had been having an affair with after she refused to leave her husband for him. Two weeks later, again assisting William Billington, Pierrepoint was engaged in the execution of George Hibbs, a 40-year-old skilled mechanic from Battersea, who had killed his landlady, and sometime sweetheart, Miriam Tye. They had been out drinking and when they returned to their lodgings Hibbs tried to get her to pawn some items so that he could buy more drink. When she refused he stabbed her to death. At the Old Bailey trial Hibbs said he blamed it all on the drink and hoped that his execution would serve as a lesson to others.

At the end of September Billington and Pierrepoint carried out the first execution at Pentonville Prison, using the giant wooden beams that had previously been in place at Newgate. Twenty-three-year-old John McDonald was hanged on 30 September for the murder of John Groves, whom he had stabbed to death after a quarrel over money.

Six weeks later Harry was back at Pentonville, again assisting Billington, to hang Henry Williams, a 32-year-old former soldier, whom Pierrepoint later described as the bravest man he had ever hanged. Williams had slit the throat of his five-year-old daughter, Margaret, at their home in Fulham, on 1 September. Having recently returned from serving in the Boer War to find his wife had been unfaithful, he had covered the body of his daughter with a union flag, then given himself up, telling the police he had killed her so she wouldn't grow up to be like her mother.

He was sentenced to death at the Old Bailey and was hanged two months and a day after committing the murder. Recording the execution in his memoirs, Harry noted that Williams had walked bravely to the scaffold and stood erect on the drop while his executioners prepared him for execution. The memoirs then erroneously state that Harry placed the noose around the neck of the condemned man, an act *always* carried out by the chief and never delegated to the assistant. This was probably journalistic licence adding spice to the memoirs years after the event.

In December, Harry was back at Strangeways Gaol for the hanging of another Bolton-born criminal when he assisted William Billington at the execution of Henry McWiggins (aka Harry Mack), who had committed an horrific murder in nearby Oldham. The 29-year-old Mack, a foreman fireman and petty criminal, had been living with Esther Bedford since June 1902. Initially they had a happy relationship, but subsequently he had started to act violently towards her. On 2 August, their landlady heard noises from the front bedroom; on investigating, she found Mack dragging Esther around the room by her hair. He then struck her in the face and kicked her as she lay on the floor. A week later, after Esther slept, he woke her up by savagely kicking her, then hit her in the face with a shovel. Advised to call the police, Esther refused, saying that she didn't want to cause trouble for Mack. In truth, she was terrified of him. On 13 August screams were heard coming from Mack's room and Esther was found lying face-down on the bed in agony. Mack had thrown a kettle of boiling water at her before fleeing the house. Having spent the rest of the night drinking heavily, he returned at midnight and kicked Esther several times in the stomach.

On the following morning, a doctor was called, quickly followed by the police. Esther was taken to hospital, where it was found that the brutal kicking had caused her bladder to rupture. The police were advised that Esther was unlikely to last the day, and statements were taken at her bedside. Again she was too terrified to testify against Mack: she denied the landlady's claims that he had kicked her, and added that the scalding was an accident. She died the following day, and Mack, who had been held in custody following her admission to hospital, was then charged with murder. Tried before Mr Justice Jelf, the defence claimed that accounts of the attacks had been greatly exaggerated by the witness.

and offered a plea of guilty of manslaughter. It took the jury just 20 minutes to return a verdict of guilty of murder.

Mack weighed 168 pounds and stood just under 5 feet 9 inches tall. The drop was calculated at 6 feet 9 inches, and the execution was timed at 75 seconds. At the inquest the coroner recorded that the death had been due to dislocation of the second and fourth vertebrae.

The next entry in Harry's diary notes that he assisted at the execution of Thomas Fairclough-Barrow at Pentonville on 9 December. He records that the condemned man was 49 years old, weighed 137 pounds, stood 5 feet 8½ inches tall and was given a drop of 6 feet 6 inches. Barrow was a partially disabled man who lived with his stepdaughter Emily Coates (aged 32), as man and wife, at Wapping. In October 1902, Fairclough-Barrow saw Emily drinking with another man and became violent towards her, to the extent that she feared for her life. As a result, she left him and took out a summons for assault. On 18 October, Fairclough-Barrow approached her as she walked to work and stabbed her several times in the heart; she died instantly. At his Old Bailey trial, a weak defence was put forward based on a claim of insanity; it proved unsuccessful. Prison records list the hangmen as William Billington assisted by his brother John – no mention of Harry – and the details of the prisoner's height, weight and drop differ slightly from those recorded by Harry. It's difficult to see why Harry should record the details in his diary if he wasn't present. However, it is recorded in the diary and contributes towards the overall total of 105 executions credited to Harry Pierrepont.

There is no confusion surrounding the next entry in the diary. William and Elizabeth Brown had been married for 22 years. On 2 November they were heard to quarrel in a public house at Mortlake and on the following morning 42-year-old Brown, a labourer, went to a neighbour's house and announced that his wife was dead. The police were called and found Elizabeth's body at the foot of the stairs. Arrested and charged with murder, William claimed Elizabeth had fallen down the stairs, but later he was alleged to have made a statement admitting that he had killed her. At his Old Bailey trial, held just three weeks after the death of his wife, Brown denied ever making such a statement. The key witness for the prosecution was a young neighbour, who claimed that through a window he had seen Brown beating his wife.

As sentence of death was passed, the father of the victim stood up in court and shouted to the judge, 'Give him mercy, my Lord. I know her faults and he was a good husband to her for twenty years.' But even as petitions for clemency were being forwarded to the Home Secretary, the Governor of Wandsworth wrote to Harry asking him to carry out the execution as the chief. As on his previous engagement as number one, he was assisted by John Ellis. Brown was given a drop of 6 feet and the execution passed off without incident.

The last execution of the year took place at Warwick on 30 December and again Harry was asked to act as chief, after Billington had to turn down the offer, being engaged for a job in Ireland at the time. George Place had taken lodgings with Eliza Chetwynd at Baddersley Ensor, Warwickshire. Shortly thereafter, the 28-year-old miner began a relationship with her 30-year-old daughter, also named Eliza. Within a year George and the younger Eliza were living together as man and wife and she became pregnant. A son was born and Eliza took out a bastardy naming George as the father of the child. When he heard about this, George became enraged, stormed out of the house and did not return for two days. On 23 August, he was seen brandishing a revolver in a public house, claiming he was going to make the Chetwynds pay. In the early hours of the following morning, an armed and angry George Place returned to the house. Shots were fired and Eliza senior and the still unnamed child died instantly; her daughter died later from her injuries. Eliza's brother heard three shots and saw Place come out of the bedroom holding the revolver.

At his trial Place said that it had been his intention to commit suicide after he had killed the Chetwynds, but that he had changed his mind afterwards. His defence was insanity; it was unsuccessful. Pierrepoint and Ellis went to work, and Ellis noted that Harry worked with assurance and confidence, as though he had been doing it for years. Place stood just an inch over 5 feet tall and was given a drop of 7 feet. A total of 25 executions were carried out in 1902, with Harry being involved in nine of them – bringing in a healthy income to supplement his salary from the furniture shop.

1903 was also to be a busy year for Harry Pierrepoint. The first executions that took place were in Ireland, and were carried out by William Billington. The first date in Harry's diary was to help at the double execution at Holloway of two nurses who had been convicted at the Old Bailey for the murder of a young child.

Twenty-nine-year-old Amelia Sach ran a nursing home in East Finchley, London, where – for a hefty fee – unmarried mothers would be looked after until they had given birth and helped to find a suitable foster home for their newborn infants. Sach had a business partner, 54-year-old Ann Walters, to whom she would pass on the children for rehousing. On the occasions when she couldn't place children with suitable parents, however, Walters would resort to administering a few drops of morphine-based drugs, which caused the babies to die from asphyxia, or to smothering them with a pillow.

In August 1902, a Miss Galley gave birth to a boy at Amelia Sach's nursing home. By now the police had become suspicious about the activities of the two women, however, and on 18 November when Walters left her lodgings carrying a small bundle, she was followed to South Kensington railway station, where detectives stopped her. The bundle contained the dead body of Miss Galley's child. Cause of death was found to be asphyxia; it appeared that the baby had been smothered. Walters claimed she had been taking the child to Kensington to meet a potential foster mother, and that when the child began to cry loudly she had administered two drops of chlorodyne in milk. She claimed that she hadn't realised the child was dead until she was stopped by the police.

Amelia Sach denied giving children to Walters, but when her home was searched more than three hundred articles of baby clothing were found. Detectives deduced that this suggested more victims; there had been a spate of small bodies found in the River Thames, or uncovered on rubbish dumps, in recent years. The pair may have been responsible for around twenty deaths, and were now finally to face justice.

Harry met up with both William and John Billington and travelled across to Holloway Gaol on the afternoon of 2 February 1903. The case had filled the newspapers since Mr Justice Darling had presided over the trial in December and as the date of execution became imminent crowds were already hovering around the gates of the prison, hoping to catch sight of the executioners.

The three men managed to slip inside unnoticed and made their way along the long, narrow corridors and up two flights of cast-iron stairs until they reached the cells of the condemned. Each woman sat with two wardresses watching over her. A matron entered the cell at the request of the hangmen and got the prisoners to move to the other side of the table so that they could assess their build and general physique.

Once William Billington had sized up the first of the condemned women, Harry followed and realised he was looking into the cell of Mrs Sach. He saw that she was a tall, gaunt woman who seemed to realise her position most keenly. Through the small eye-hole he saw she presented a pitiful appearance: 'A poorer wreck of humanity as I have ever seen,' he later noted. Weariness clouded her

face and stray tears rolled down her cheek. Silently moving aside so the younger Billington could observe, he followed William down the corridor and waited his turn to observe Mrs Walters. The latter's demeanour presented the hangmen with something of a shock – her features showed no trace of emotion. Describing her as stout and stocky, Harry recorded that she was cheerful and talkative, if unaware her last hours were ebbing away.

Details of the prisoners' weight and height were passed to the hangmen and as they rigged the gallows, it was decided that in case of emergency two male warders should be brought in from Pentonville. It was feared that Mrs Sach's distress may cause upset to the female warders if, anticipated, she should be overcome with terror in the morning.

The morning broke cold and frosty as the hangmen went across to the execution shed to finish the preparations. At a few minutes to eight they were in position outside the condemned cells. As they waited for the signal from the governor, Harry silently raised the peep-hole into Mrs Sach's cell. She was, in his words, 'broken up', her appearance grotesque – her hair had been scraped up in a 'peculiar fashion' to prevent it fouling with the noose.

The chimes of the hour rang out from the adjacent church clock, and the party entered the cell. As Harry pinioned her arms, Sach swooned as if in a faint. A warder whispered words of comfort to her and she was led out into the corridor. In contrast, Mrs Walters submitted bravely to the pinioning, and followed Billington senior as he walked out of the cell.

At this point, the two women came face to face for the first time since sentence of death had been passed on them. Harry took a grip of Mrs Sach and steadied her on the short walk to the gallows. She was crying bitterly and barely conscious. Mrs Walters followed behind, quite bravely and calm. In a flash both women were placed on the trap and as Harry dropped to his knees to fasten the leg strap on Mrs Sach, John Billington did the same to Mrs Walters.

William Billington then placed the noose and caps over the culprits' heads and as he moved across to the lever, Mrs Walters cried out in a firm voice: 'Goodbye, Sach.' The younger woman was about to fall in a faint, and Harry was forced to leap to his feet and support her arm. Seconds later the door crashed open; the Finchley baby farmers had paid the ultimate penalty. They had made no confession.

One month later, Harry was back in London, this time at Wandsworth Gaol, where he was engaged to execute 44 year-old Edgar Edwards, an habitual criminal with a long string of convictions for theft and burglary. (Newspaper reports of the trial had used the name Edgar Edwards, although his real surname was Owen.) Released in 1902, after serving five years at Northampton Gaol, he moved back to London, telling his wife he was taking over a shop in Camberwell. John Darby had put a grocery store in Camberwell up for sale; Edwards said he was interested in purchasing and asked to see the accounts. While Darby prepared the books, his wife, carrying their infant daughter in her arms, invited Edwards upstairs to view the living quarters. Alone with the young woman, he took a large sack of weight he had concealed inside a rolled-up newspaper and battered her to death. He then went back downstairs, bludgeoned Darby to death, then callously strangled the crying child. Edwards began pawning Darby's belongings and, using the name William Darby, took the lease on a house in Leyton. Now believing he had got away with committing the murders, Edwards decided to repeat the venture. On 23 December, another grocer with a business for sale was invited to Leyton to discuss terms, and as he turned to leave was struck from behind. Despite a fearful beating the man managed to escape and raise the alarm.

Edwards was arrested for assault. The police searched the house and, finding pawn tickets in the name of Darby, soon directed their attention to Camberwell, where the bodies of the Darby family were uncovered. After being found guilty, Edwards burst into laughter; asked if he had anything to

say, he replied, 'No, get on with it, as quick as you like!'

When Harry and William Billington went to observe Edwards on the night before his execution they found a big strapping fellow who had borne his fate bravely, asking his brother who had visited him earlier that afternoon to keep news of his execution secret from his aged mother.

Entering the cell at nine o'clock Harry recorded that Edwards stood between two warders with staring eyes that saw nothing. The grim procession made its way along the corridor then out of a side door and down a flight of steps into the prison yard, where the scaffold was awaiting him. Edwards began to recite the hymn 'Jesus, Lover of my Soul' as he neared the scaffold. His self-possession began to desert him a little as he reached the drop, but the executioners went to work quickly and seconds later he had paid the price for his triple crime.

There was still a healthy crowd milling around the prison gates when the hangmen departed the prison. Harry recalled that there was one woman dressed in deepest black, seemingly waiting for them to pass her. As they walked by, she asked Billington if Edwards had really been hanged all right. Exchanging glances, Harry spoke for him, replying, 'yes he was.' Without waiting for a response they walked on to catch their train. Afterwards, Harry often thought about the woman, claiming that he was never quite able to get the sight of her pale, tearstained face out of his mind.

Instead of returning home that morning, the two decided to spend the day at the Crystal Palace Exhibition Hall. Harry later told a story to his son about an incident that happened as they made their way home later that evening. Apparently, they decided to call into a public house before catching the train home from Euston. Leaning leisurely against the saloon bar on the Euston Road, they were enjoying a quiet drink when a group of young men – 'hooligans' as they were named in the press of the day – entered the bar and approached. One placed a clay pipe on the bar close to the arm of Billington, who had his back to the door. Harry noticed what had happened and whispered for Billington to take care. Turning to see what was afoot, he sent the clay pipe crashing to the floor. An altercation then took place, during which the young gang pulled out knives and picked up chairs as weapons. The hangmen were made of stern stuff, however, and in the ensuing struggle they were able to drive the men out of the bar. Harry told his son they were escorted to their train by a group of elderly local men who said it was the best sport they had seen in a long while. He also said that they were left without a scratch but this doesn't seem to be the case, as Billington arrived home sporting a badly bruised face and a damaged arm. He explained his injuries by saying he had been attacked in his train carriage and had fallen onto the track!

On 13 May, shortly before the birth of his daughter, Ivy, Harry made the short trip across Manchester to assist in the execution of William Hudson, a 26-year-old Birmingham soldier who had shot dead a fellow soldier at Fulwood Barracks in Preston.

The next letter engaging Harry's services was again from Wandsworth, and for only the fourth time in his short career he was to carry out the execution as the chief hangman; it also marked the first time that he was entrusted with a double execution. He was to hang a young London motor mechanic named William Tuffen, along with his lover and former housemaid, Mary Stone. They had been living in a house in south London, where the battered body of Tuffen's wife had been concealed. Acting on a tip-off from concerned relatives, police called at a house in Thames Ditton, where the body of one Caroline Tuffen was discovered; she had been battered to death. Tuffen and Mary Stone had vanished but were soon located at Norbiton railway station and arrested. Mary claimed to know nothing about the death of Caroline Tuffen, William having told her that his wife had simply gone away. Both were charged with murder. Tuffen was found guilty of the crime, and Stone guilty of being an accessory before the fact. Sentence of death was then passed on both prisoners. Mary Stone was reprieved on

August and Tuffen alone went to the gallows a few days later.

A rare execution took place at Devizes on 17 November, when William Billington and Harry carried out the execution of Edward Palmer, who had shot dead his former girlfriend at Swindon. Palmer and Esther Swinford had been engaged, and she had given him money to buy furniture for their home which he spent on drink. As a result, the wedding was cancelled. He became sullen and later moved away from Swindon. Several months later he heard that Esther was working as a barmaid in Swindon. Palmer found work on the Great Western Railway and moved. Carrying a gun, he called at the pub and, after a quarrel, shot her dead. In his pocket was a photograph of Esther, and on the back Palmer had written, 'The curse of my life.' He claimed that the gun had gone off accidentally, but the jury gave this short shrift. Harry noted in his diary Palmer was 25 years old, weighed 152 pounds and stood a little under 5 feet 8 inches. He was given a drop of 6 feet 6 inches; death was instantaneous.

December 1903 was a busy month for the executioners, with ten persons hanged and three others reprieved at the eleventh hour. On 15 December, Harry carried out the last execution at Hereford Gaol when, with assistant John Ellis, he was engaged to execute a 61-year-old quarry labourer named William Haywood, who had been convicted of the murder of his wife at Lucton. He had battered her to death while drunk and was then seen moving her body in a wheelbarrow. At his trial his defence council claimed Haywood was '... an imbecile of the higher grade'. Summing up, Mr Justice Bigham told the jury that lunatics should not escape punishment simply because they were lunatics.

On 29 December Harry accepted an execution at Liverpool as the assistant to William Billington and was then unavailable when the governor at Leeds Prison received two convicts under sentence of death. The double execution, that of John Gallagher and Emily Swann, was then offered to John Billington, who accepted the offer and carried out the execution and claimed the hefty fee Pierrepont must have rued. It was only John Billington's second senior engagement, his first being at Manchester earlier that month.

Henry Bertram Starr had married in the spring of 1903 and the newlyweds had moved in with his wife's mother. He soon took to drinking, however, and left his wife, only to return when she gave birth in August of the same year. The couple moved into their own home but she soon left and moved back to her mother's. A separation and custody order for the child were obtained. Then, on 24 November Starr called at his mother-in-law's house and stabbed his estranged wife to death. It was Starr's second murder trial: in 1896 he had been acquitted, but this time the jury returned a verdict of guilty without even leaving the courtroom to ponder the outcome.

1904 got off to a slow start for the hangman. Harry Pierrepont's first job came on Tuesday, 2 March, when he travelled to Leeds to assist John Billington in the execution of a young tailor from Guisborough who had savagely murdered a 12-year-old girl. Elizabeth Mary Lynas had been to a Christmas service at her local church with some friends. They parted at the end of her street, but when she failed to arrive home her parents contacted the police. A search soon located her body in nearby woods: she had been brutally murdered, her hands and feet were tied and her throat had been cut.

Bloodstains were found in a neighbour's backyard and when the house was searched a bloodstained razor was found on a kitchen shelf. James Henry Clarkson lived at the house with his sister and his father, and while they both had alibis for the night of the murder James was unable to account for his movements. When bloodstains were found on his clothes too, he was formally charged with murder.

Throughout his trial he maintained his innocence, but the jury took just half an hour to find him guilty. On the night prior to his execution he repeatedly cried out: 'What made me do it?' He was hanged two days before his twentieth birthday. He weighed just 126 pounds and was given a long drop of 8 feet.

Harry's next job was to assist in the execution of two men at Liverpool's Walton Gaol on 31 May. William Kirwan, a 39-year-old sailor, had shot his sister-in-law dead during a quarrel; he believed she and his wife were using his house for immoral purposes and sleeping with other men while he was at sea. Kirwan had been under arrest and was taken outside the house after he had shot at, and slightly injured, his wife. When his sister-in-law came outside to berate him as he was being led away, he struggled from the policeman's grip, pulled out his gun and fatally wounded her. Sharing the gallows was Pong Lun, a 43-year-old Chinaman, who had shot dead his friend John Go Hing, following a quarrel over a bet on a game of dominoes. Harry and William Billington travelled to Liverpool together and as they made the short walk to the prison from Preston Road station they were recognised by the small crowd milling around outside the prison gates. Harry felt that in the glorious sunshine the prison looked like an old castle, and though he had been there before he still marvelled at the beautifully tended flowerbeds that flanked the path from the gatehouse to the governor's office.

They were billeted in the old hospital wing – no longer used, but conveniently close to the scaffold. After rigging the drops – 6 feet 3 inches for Kirwan, 6 feet 2 inches for the Chinaman – they took the opportunity to view the condemned men at exercise. Kirwan was sullen and morose, trundling around the exercise yard with his head bowed, while Lun was the opposite, smiling and content as he spent his last hour in the sunshine.

The two hangmen retired to bed that night, but Harry was soon woken by a noise and, striking a match, he saw the room was overrun with mice. Looking across at Billington he saw eight or nine of the rodents scurrying across the bedclothes and climbing up the bed frame. 'Get up Billy, you're being worried by mice,' he called out, startling the sleeping hangman. Despite the lack of sleep the hangmen were up and ready for the duties on the following morning. It was decided to bring the two prisoners to the holding cells in the old hospital wing directly below where the hangmen had slept. Kirwan was the first to be pinioned; he seemed resigned to his fate and more cheerful than he had been on the previous afternoon. Pong Lun was then taken from his cell and strapped in the corridor behind where Kirwan waited. 'Come on Ping Pong,' Billington called as the procession to the scaffold began. The prisoner bristled at this and replied tersely: 'My name not Ping Pong, my name Pong Lun.' As they took their place on the scaffold, the Chinaman looked up at the noose hanging down and began to laugh. Moments later the white cap was placed on his head and as the chaplain recited the litany the floor opened and both men dropped to an instant death.

Around this time Harry left the job with his sister at her Manchester furniture store and moved back to Bradford, settling at 14 Cowgill, Clayton, where he set up a carrier's business. Working for himself transporting goods from the local railway station, gave him the freedom to be his own boss and the liberty to go away on official business when required.

William Billington and Harry carried out two executions in two days in July. On Tuesday, 12 July, they were at Pentonville Gaol, where they executed John Sullivan, a Durham seaman who had battered a young deck hand to death with an axe on the merchant ship *Waiwera* while at sea. After completing the execution without any incident they travelled together to Northampton, where they prepared the drop for Samuel Rowledge, a carpenter who had shot dead his fiancée on the day of their engagement following a domestic argument.

Whether Harry resented the fact that he hadn't received the offer to carry out an execution as the chief hangman since the turn of the year isn't recorded, but he must have been dismayed to find that any work that William Billington was unable to carry out was seemingly now being offered to the younger Billington instead of to him. The lack of work would also have had financial implications. Harry's wife was pregnant again with their third child; he was now self-employed, and the difference

between a chief executioner's pay and that of his assistant was considerable.

In August, Harry helped John Billington to dispatch John Thomas Kay, a 52-year-old Rotherham labourer who had killed the woman he lived with, then stopped a policeman in the street and confessed abruptly: 'I did it with a hatchet.' Kay's defence had been that he was under the influence of drink at the time of the attack, and therefore, as he was not aware of what he was doing, he was only guilty of manslaughter. The jury had disagreed.

On 13 December, Harry assisted William Billington in another double execution, this time at Pentonville Gaol. A paperboy had arrived at a newsagent's shop in Stepney, but was surprised to find the shop open and no sign of his employer, 65-year-old spinster Miss Matilda Farmer. The police were later contacted and, searching the shop, found the deceased old lady lying face-down on her bed, her hands tied behind her back and a towel fastened around her mouth. It was clear that the motive for the crime had been robbery: the bedroom had been ransacked and jewellery was missing. A witness told the police he had seen two men standing near to the shop: one he had never seen before, but the other he recognised as Charles Wade. Another witness described two men he had seen coming out of the shop on the morning of the murder. The descriptions fitted Charles Wade and his half-brother, Conrad Donovan (aka Joseph Potter). Both men had long criminal records for robbery and were picked out from identity parades by the two witnesses.

At their trial the defence discredited one of the witness's testimonies by proving he had been shown pictures of the suspects prior to picking them out from the identity parade. Other witnesses who had claimed to see the two men on the morning of the murder had failed to pick them out when they attended the same line-up. Police had also failed to locate any of the missing jewellery, despite thoroughly searching both men's houses.

Although there was some doubt as to the guilt of the two men, the jury took just ten minutes to decide that the evidence was strong enough to convict them; as sentence of death was passed, both Donovan and Wade loudly protested their innocence. A few days before they were to hang, workmen at the Stepney newsagents found the missing jewellery under the floorboards in one of the rooms, indicating the thieves had not escaped with as much as police had originally assumed. As the hangmen arrived in London, and with protestations going on outside the prison that a miscarriage of justice was about to take place, Conrad Donovan made a statement to the prison chaplain: 'No murder was intended.' Four words that confirmed the sentence was a just one.

As Christmas approached, Harry accepted an engagement closer to home when he assisted John Billington in the execution of Edmund Hall at Armley Gaol, Leeds. John Dalby, Hall's father-in-law, lived alone at York. Hall had travelled over from Leeds to see him, and was seen being let into the house. Neighbours subsequently heard sounds of a struggle from next door and went to investigate. Dalby opened the door and collapsed. Hall appeared from inside the house, and – saying he would go for a doctor – leapt over the wall and vanished into the street. Dalby died in hospital later that same day, and Hall, who was known to one of the neighbours, was arrested at York station as he sat waiting for his train to pull out. He was sporting a gold watch and chain identified as one Dalby had been wearing earlier that day.

The year had almost come to a close without Harry carrying out a single job as chief hangman, 'number one' as they were known. But then he travelled across to Ireland in what was to be one of the strangest experiences of his career.

John Flanagan had been missing from his home near Clones, Monaghan, since April 1903, and despite numerous searches there was no sign of his whereabouts. He had travelled into Clones carrying a large sum of money, to purchase items at the market. While in town he met up with Joseph Fee,

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