

Three Hangings

Matthew Clydesdale

Matthew Clydesdale, a Lanarkshire miner, was hanged for murder on the fourth of November 1818. His trial had taken place at Glasgow and the judges there had ordered that his remains were to be publicly dissected and anatomized by Professor Jeffrey of Glasgow University.

Following his public hanging, Clydesdale's body was taken to the Medical College at the university. The body was later being used for a demonstration when the corpse was suddenly brought back to life by an electric shock administered by Professor Jeffrey. Clydesdale stood up and looked at the professor and at the astonished students. Not in the least disturbed, Professor Jeffrey took out a lancet and plunged it into the bewildered man's jugular vein, who fell on the floor "like a slaughtered ox on the blow of a butcher". This was the last order for dissection made by the Circuit judges at Glasgow.

Robert Johnstone

Later in the year, Robert Johnstone, a 23 year old armed robber, was brought to the gallows. As usual, the Edinburgh crowd turned up in force to witness the day's events at Parliament Square.

Sensationally, after the drop fell at three in the afternoon, Johnstone was left still alive when the gallows equipment failed. An exceptionally tall man, Johnstone's toes could clearly be seen still touching the half opened trap doors. The horrific spectacle swiftly turned the mood of the crowd against the authorities. The City Guard and magistrates were forced to retreat by missiles thrown by the onlookers.

A man then leapt onto the platform and cut Johnstone down with a knife, whereupon the crowd rushed the gallows. While the army was being drafted in to control the mayhem, the unconscious Johnstone was being carried around by the crowd. They left with the body and tried to escape down the High Street until they encountered a force of constables from the nearby Police Office. Dropping Johnstone to the ground, the mob turned and ran.

Showing no signs of life, Johnson was taken to the Police Office, where a surgeon confirmed that he was still alive. Johnstone was transported back to the gallows by the army, where he was hung for a second time. The whole affair had taken some eight hours. The final victim was the English hangman, John Foster. Declared incompetent by the Edinburgh authorities, his services were never to be required again by the city.

Burke and Hare

The crimes of William Burke and William Hare have become part of Scottish folklore. The pair provided bodies to Professor Robert Knox at the Edinburgh Medical School. The usual source of cadavers lay in the robbing of the graves of the recently deceased, but Burke and Hare preferred to obtain their corpses through the simple strategy of murder.

At the trial, Hare provided evidence for the crown against Burke, who was left to face the full force of the law on his own. He was sentenced accordingly on the 28th of January 1829. Due to the terrible nature of his crimes, provision was made for the treatment of Burke's body following his execution, where an example would be made of him.

It was inevitable that Burke would be subjected to the same fate as his victims. On the day following the hanging, Burke's body was dissected for the subject of a lecture by a Professor

Munro. The professor paid special attention to the murderer's brain. The public got their opportunity to revile Burke's remains on the 30th, when an estimated crowd of some 25,000 filed past what remained of the body. Many spat to show their contempt. Burke's skin was tanned into leather and made into purses and because he had murdered for money, his own hide became a container for coins.

Burke's skeleton can be seen to this day in a glass case at the Edinburgh Medical School. He had refused his victims the right to a burial, so it is his fate to never receive one