

# Crime and Punishment in Islington

Crime in Islington

◆ Vol 1 - No.1 [Est. 2009]

◆ Special Introductory Price

## Crime and Punishment in Islington

This exhibition traces crime and punishment in Islington from 1700 to the 1950s, exploring 18th century crime, the development of the Metropolitan Police, the desperate no-go areas of the overcrowded Victorian slums, the enormous new prisons and a number of high-profile Edwardian murder cases.

It concludes with Ruth Ellis, who was executed in Holloway Prison, the last woman to be hanged in Britain, and explores the passionate debate about the death penalty sparked off by her trial.



Field Lane negotiations, a cartoon by 'Moses'.



Convicts exercising in Pentonville Prison yard.

# Crime and Punishment in Islington

Crime in Islington

◆ Vol 1 - No.1 [Est. 2009]

◆ Special Introductory Price

## 18<sup>th</sup> Century Crime

During the 18th century highway robbery, theft, burglary and forgery were mainstay activities of the professional criminal and crimes of passion and drunken assault were commonplace. For many others, committing a felony was one way of attempting to solve life's problems.

One criminal in particular caught the imagination of the public during the first quarter of the 18th century. The notorious exploits of Spitalfields-born burglar Jack Sheppard became the talk of all ranks of society, especially his daring escapes from Clerkenwell and Newgate Prisons. On one occasion in May 1724, with female partner-in-crime Edgworth Bess, he was committed to Clerkenwell New Prison for robbery. However, his cunning and guile led to their dramatic escape by breaking a hole in a cell wall, tying blankets together and descending into adjacent Clerkenwell Bridewell's yard and over its 22-foot high wall to freedom. Three months later, Sheppard was captured and imprisoned in Newgate, from which he then twice famously escaped. He was eventually recaptured and hanged at Tyburn on 16 November 1724, aged just 23 years.

The trials of many of Islington's criminals were heard at the Sessions Houses at Old Bailey and Clerkenwell

Green. Punishment for those found guilty of crime during the 18th century was both swift and severe, with little emphasis on custodial sentences. Prisons were typically used for holding defendants awaiting trial and convicts awaiting punishment – imprisonment, as such, was not generally perceived as a punitive measure.

Hanging, hard labour, transportation, military duty and physical chastisement were amongst a variety of penalties available to the judiciary when passing sentence.



Jack Sheppard lowering partner-in-crime, Edgworth Bess, to freedom from Clerkenwell Prison in 1724. Print by George Cruikshank, 1839.



The Sessions House on Clerkenwell Green in 1796.

# Crime and Punishment in Islington

Crime in Islington

◆ Vol 1 - No.1 [Est. 2009]

◆ Special Introductory Price

## The Metropolitan Police

**In 1829, under the new Metropolitan Police Act instigated by Robert Peel, a centralised police force of some 3,000 men was set up and, except for the City of London, became responsible for policing the entire Metropolitan area.**

Formerly, detection and arrest of felons in the capital relied upon a haphazard structure of law enforcement, involving parish constables, justice of the peace officers, night watchmen and, during the 18th century, the notorious thief-takers. Bow Street runners, under the orders of magistrates, were employed to apprehend criminals and even private citizens played a major role in identifying and arresting culprits.

It was anticipated that the new 'Bobbies' or 'Peelers' (named after Peel), resplendent in new uniform and armed with truncheons, would patrol the streets in greater numbers in an attempt to prevent crime and deter potential felons.

The public did not generally like the new force and it took a few years before the police gained the trust of those they swore to serve and protect. This may have originated from the fact that many of the early recruits were of dubious quality and were often drunks and bullies; the first policeman, Constable No.1, was dismissed after only four hours for being drunk on duty!

It was unfortunately not long before the first Metropolitan Police officers were killed in the line of duty. One of the earliest to fall in Islington, and the first constable to die whilst on riot control, was 27-year-old Robert Culley, Constable No.95. He was fatally stabbed during the Cold Bath Fields Riot of 13 May 1833. Mount Pleasant Sorting Office now occupies the site.

The jury at the inquest into his death insisted that a verdict of 'justifiable homicide' be recorded (later overturned), believing the police had been 'ferocious, brutal and unprovoked by the people'. His killer was never brought to justice.



Night Watchmen in a Fight, 1822.  
 Guildhall Library, City of London.



Cold Bath Fields riot of 1833,  
 recreated in a 20th century  
 newspaper.



An early Metropolitan Police Officer,  
 1850s – 1860s.

# Crime and Punishment in Islington

Crime in Islington

◆ Vol 1 - No.1 [Est. 2009]

◆ Special Introductory Price

The swarming patrons of the four ale bars may be seen any night of the week roaming the streets in gangs, shouting music hall songs, and molesting unoffending foot passengers.

**Islington Gazette August 1898**

## Victorian Crime

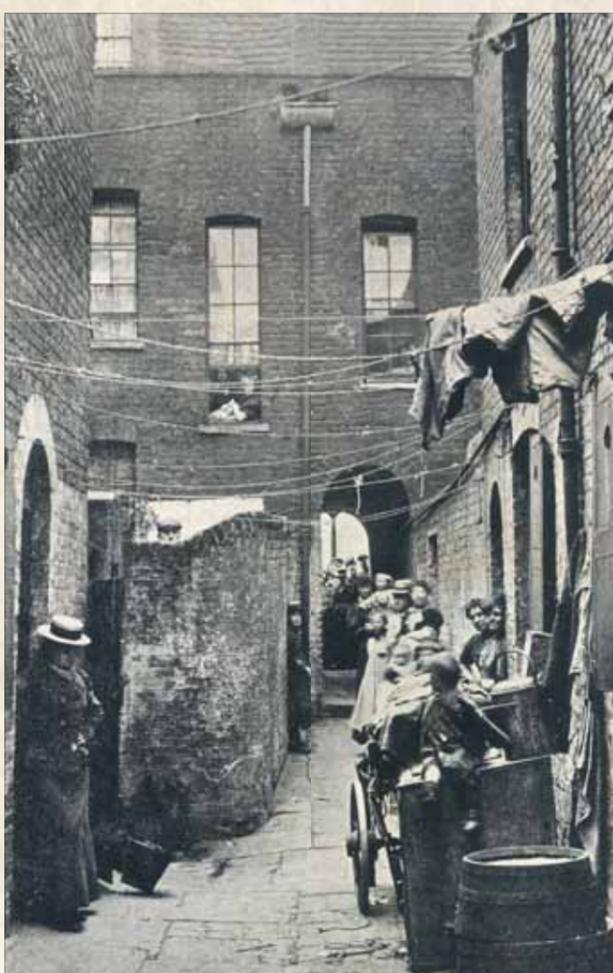
**During the 19th century, wave after wave of poor but hopeful people moved into Islington to work in its new industries, services and shops.**

Many of the migrants crowded into inadequate housing with almost no sanitation. These areas became known as 'rookeries' because the crowded tenement buildings suggested the way rooks nest together.

Criminals would often hide out in the rookeries of Clerkenwell and St Luke's. Their mazes of courts and alleys formed ramshackle no-go areas for respectable citizens and police. The many lodging houses, pubs and coffee shops frequented by these criminals were known as 'flash houses'. They often had hidden trap doors and tunnels to provide easy escape.

Prostitution was common. There were brothels in Clerkenwell's Red Lion Market and Brewhouse Yard, but most women worked the streets. In 1857, a Metropolitan Police report on prostitution counted 349 street walkers in Clerkenwell, Pentonville and City Road alone.

Youth crime was a serious problem. The word 'hooligan' began to be used during the summer of 1898 to describe gangs of young men dressed in uniforms of peaked caps, neck scarves and shaved hair with a long fringe. They shouted obscenities, vandalised property, beat up people and had pitched battles with rival gangs.



Union place, off Clerkenwell Close, circa 1900.



Sir Peter Edlin, a judge at Clerkenwell Sessions House in 1891.

In July 1898, the Islington Gazette reported disturbances by gangs in Clerkenwell. A 16-year old called Mazzoni was charged at Clerkenwell Police Court:

**"The prisoner and others were sweeping the pavement and driving people into the roadway. They were hooting, shouting, using bad language and flourishing sticks."**

## Victorian Prisons

**The huge increase in London's population in the early 19th century created a need for new prisons.**

In 1835, the first Government Inspectorate of Prisons was set up. The inspectors brought in a new 'silent and separate' system for prisons to prevent what they saw as cross-contamination. Three new prisons were built in Islington in the 1840s.

The silence of the grave reigns in every part.  
By no chance can one culprit see another

**William Hepworth Dixon, The London Prisons 1850.**

### **Pentonville Prison, Caledonian Road**

Pentonville was built in 1842 for convicts awaiting transportation to Australia. It was built on a new 'panopticon' style, with wings radiating from a central viewing area. Prisoners wore masks in the exercise yard and sat in individual cubicles in chapel. They performed manual tasks such as marching on treadmills or breaking stone. Silence was enforced at all times and serious mental illness could result from this solitary regime.



Pentonville Prison in 1842.

### **Clerkenwell House of Detention, Corporation Row**

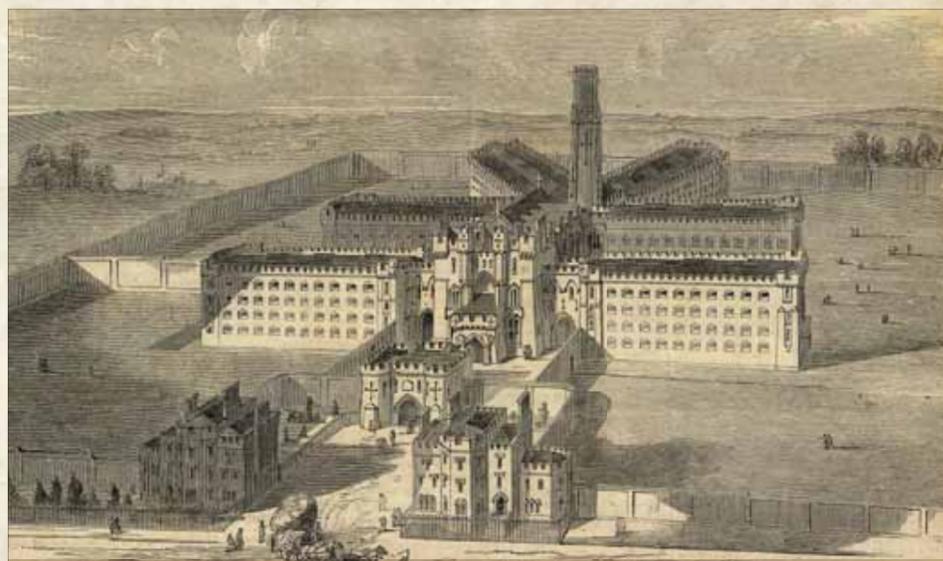
Prisons have existed on this site since 1615 but, in 1845, the area was rebuilt as London's largest short-term remand prison, holding up to 10,000 prisoners per year.

On 13 December 1867, an unsuccessful attempt was made to rescue two Irish nationalist prisoners from the House of Detention. An explosion blew a 60-foot wide hole in the prison wall – this became known as the Fenian Outrage. 12 people died in the aftermath and 120 were injured. Of those arrested for causing the explosion, only Michael Barrett was convicted. In May 1868, at Newgate Gaol, he became the last person to be publicly hanged in England.

Much of the prison was demolished in 1890 but the perimeter wall, warden's buildings and all underground cells were left intact until very recently.

### **Holloway Prison, Parkhurst Road**

The City of London built Holloway Prison in 1849. Its outer gate was likened to Warwick Castle. Holloway became a women's prison in 1903 and, a few years later, became infamous for holding Suffragettes, who were subject to forced feeding and solitary confinement.



Front view of Holloway Prison in 1853.

# Crime and Punishment in Islington

Crime in Islington

◆ Vol 1 - No.1 [Est. 2009]

◆ Special Introductory Price

## Baby Farming

**Amelia Sach and Annie Walters were the first women to be hanged at Holloway Prison in 1903. They were charged with murdering a four-day-old baby and suspected of killing many more.**

Sach and Walters were baby farmers, women who looked after children in Victorian and Edwardian times. The children usually belonged to unmarried women forced to farm out their child to keep their job. They paid weekly amounts to have their child cared for, or a one-off sum to have it adopted. The scandal of infants who were neglected or killed by baby farmers resurfaced many times during the late

Victorian period, and was discussed in Parliament.

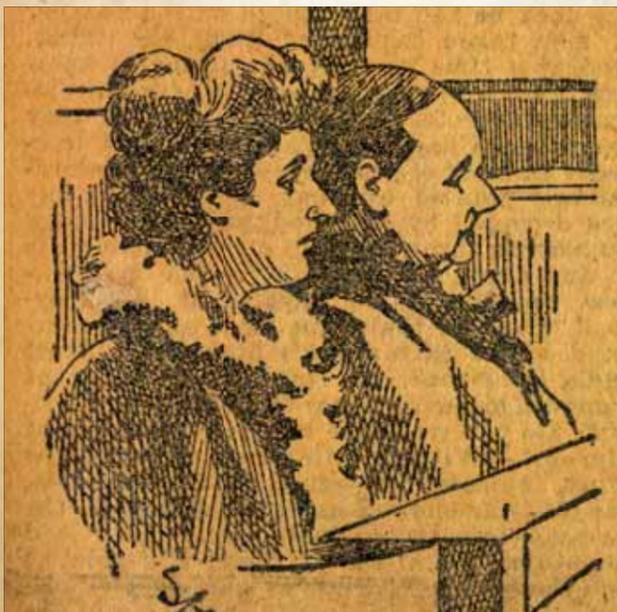
Amelia Sach ran a lying-in home in East Finchley, where women stayed before giving birth. Once the child was born Sach would offer to have it adopted for around £25. The women were told their babies had gone to wealthy ladies.

In October 1902, Annie Walters, who worked for Sach, took lodgings at 11 Danbury Street, Islington. Her landlady was Alice Seal, whose husband was a police constable. Walters said she was a midwife and was expecting a baby boy whom she would be taking to be adopted. On 12 November she received a telegram from Sach: 'Five o'clock tonight'.

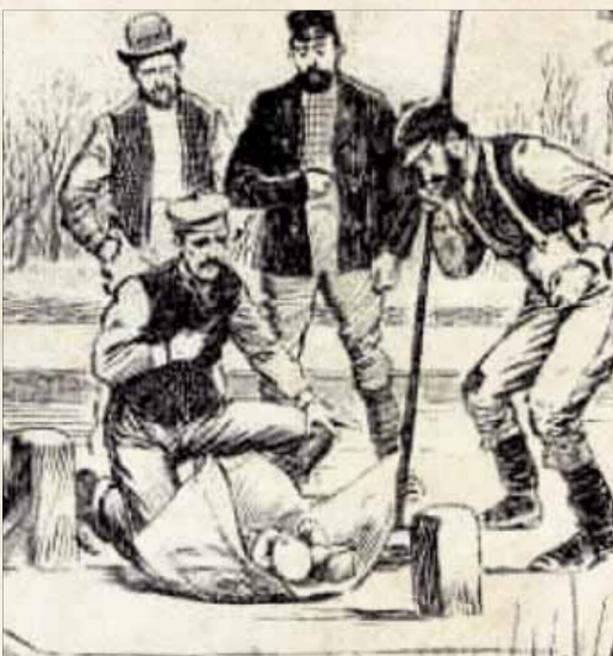
That night Walters brought home a baby boy; two days later he was gone. On 15 November, Walters

received another telegram and again brought home a baby boy. Alice Seal's suspicions were alerted and, three days later, when Walters left Danbury Street carrying a bundle, Detective George Wright was watching her. He followed her to South Kensington where he found her with a dead baby.

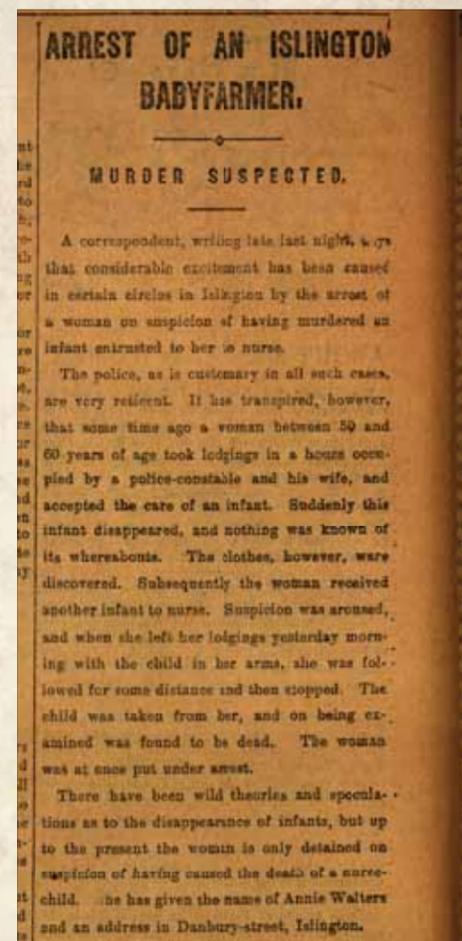
At the trial Walters admitted to giving the baby Chlorodyne, a mixture of morphine and chloroform. They were found guilty of murdering the son of Ada Galley, a servant who had given birth at the lying-in home.



Sach and Walters in court, News of the World 1903 (British Library Newspapers).



The body of a baby being dredged from a canal



Newspaper article about Sach and Walters, the day after their arrest. Islington Gazette, 19 November 1902.

## Doctor Crippen

**On 27 November 1910, American doctor Hawley Harvey Crippen was hanged at Pentonville Prison.**

He had been convicted of poisoning his wife Cora, an actress whose stage name was Belle Elmore, in order to marry Ethel le Neve, his typist. It was claimed that he murdered and then dismembered Cora's body and hid it under the cellar of their house at 39 Hilldrop Crescent, Holloway. The torso was wrapped in pyjamas bought from Selby's Department Store on Holloway Road.

Cora disappeared in February 1910. For a long time he claimed that she had run away to America with a lover, and had died there, but her friends were not convinced and contacted the police.

Shortly after police visited his house to question him in July 1910, Crippen fled the country with Ethel disguised as a boy. Suspicions aroused, the police dug up the floor and cellar of the house and found a body. Crippen was arrested on the SS Montrose as it was entering Canadian waters bound for Quebec. He was the first criminal to be captured by the use of wireless telegraphy, after the ship's captain alerted police.

The story was minutely reported by newspapers at the time. The News of the World started its coverage in July with the headline "Actress Murdered: Mutilated Body Found in Cellar." The paper went on to give almost weekly reports on the progress of the case. At the time, it was known as the 'crime of the century'.



Telegram from Inspector Dew confirming the arrest of Crippen (The National Archives).



Dr Hawley Harvey Crippen.



Ethel Le Neve dressed as a boy.

Dr Crippen killed Belle Elmore  
Ran away with Miss le Neve  
Right across the ocean blue  
Followed by Inspector Dew  
Ship's ahoy, naughty boy!

**From the Musical Belle:  
The Ballad of Dr Crippen, 1961**

## Was Crippen Innocent?

**Dr Crippen went to the gallows protesting his innocence.**

Almost a century later in 2008, a team of American scientists came to the conclusion that he was telling the truth. The body found at Hilldrop Crescent was not his wife's. During a seven-year search, the team tracked down three of Mrs Crippen's grandnieces in order to compare their genetic material with DNA taken from the remains in the cellar and kept on a microscope slide for 97 years. The DNA did not match.

Clinical and forensic toxicologist John Trestrail, Managing Director of the Regional Poison Centre in Grand Rapids, Michigan, USA, said "I've always wondered who that is under the steps. Was he telling the truth?"

One of Dr Trestrail's theories is that Crippen was performing illegal abortions and that the body could have resulted from a botched procedure, which he then tried to cover up.

There are also claims that Cora herself wrote letters from America to the Home Secretary, Winston Churchill, pleading that her husband was innocent. However, these were unsubstantiated.



Policemen, led by Inspector Dew, digging at Crippen's House (The National Archives).



Cora Crippen as music-hall singer 'Belle Elmore'.

"This can't be Cora Crippen, we're certain of that. The DNA in the sample is different from the known relatives of Cora Crippen."

**David Foran, forensic biologist, Michigan State University, 2008.**

# Crime and Punishment in Islington

Crime in Islington

◆ Vol 1 - No.1 [Est. 2009]

◆ Special Introductory Price

## Brides in the Bath Murders

George Joseph Smith was born in Bethnal Green in 1872. Using various false names, including Love, Williams, Lloyd and James, he entered into seven bigamous marriages between 1908 and 1914. On each occasion, he siphoned off his bride's money and then abandoned her. In 1912 Smith turned to murder. He drowned his last three brides in their bath tubs and claimed that they died accidentally.

The final murder took place in Islington. Smith married Margaret Lofty in December 1914, using a false name. They moved into a flat at 14 Bismarck Road (now Waterlow Road), Archway. Three days later, Margaret visited a local solicitor and made a will in favour of her new husband. The same evening Smith claimed to have found his bride dead in the bath tub. However, the landlord of the house in Blackpool, in which Smith's previous bride had been found dead, read about the inquest in the News of the World. He sent a letter to the police setting out his suspicions about the two unexplained deaths and urging them to investigate.

The investigation to link Smith's pseudonyms, proofs of bigamy and murders took six months and culminated in his trial at the Old Bailey on 22 June 1915. Despite being represented by one of the most prominent lawyers of the time, Edward Marshall-Hall, it took the jury just 20 minutes to find him guilty of murder. He was hanged in Maidstone Prison.

"Bride Murderer Hanged!  
 Modern Bluebeard dies on the  
 Scaffold."

**News of the World, 15 August  
 1915**



George Smith and his brides, (News of the World 1915).



Waterlow (formerly Bismarck) Road, Archway, 2009. No 14 is the house more to the left of the picture.

**DEAL IN "BLACK MARKET" CLOTH  
 Highbury Man Jailed  
 For Receiving**

A bookmaker's clerk of Highbury-hill, N., pleaded guilty at North London to a charge under the Defence Regulations of receiving a controlled article—23 lengths of cloth suiting, worth £150, belonging to a tailor, of Myddelton-street, Finsbury, and he was sentenced to six months' imprisonment and ordered to pay £15 15s. costs or go to prison for a further month.

For failing to notify his change of address under the National Registration Act, was ordered to pay a fine of £5 or go to prison for a month.

His mother, a housekeeper, of St. Paul's-road, Islington, was fined 40s. and his uncle, a messenger, also of St. Paul's road, was fined £5 for being concerned in receiving the cloth, which was found at his mother's address.

The Magistrate said he looked upon these offences as the basis of the "Black Market." Without such gentlemen as he thought the Black Marketeers would not have a chance. The Court took the view that gentlemen who took part in the Black Market should be knocked out altogether.

Mr. said the cloth was part of £200 worth which was stolen from his shop on the night of 27th-28th May.

Article from the Islington Gazette about black market trading.

## The Wartime Underworld

During World War Two, the government emphasised the importance of public-spiritedness and a sense of a community. However, in spite of this, between 1938 and 1945 the prison population increased by 50%.

The large number of bombed houses and factories in Islington provided serious temptation for looters and this became a persistent problem during the war years. As a deterrent, punishment was severe. For example, Ronald Young and Walter Watts pleaded guilty at Clerkenwell Police Court to stealing lead from the roof of a bombed house and were sentenced to four months hard labour. Frederick Carpenter, of Avenell Road, Highbury, stole watches from a house while putting out a fire and his sentence was similar.

Black market trading of food and goods was another concern for the authorities. Not everybody was happy to stick to the meagre rations allowed each week. A father and son from a demolition gang in Islington stole sugar from a bombed workshop and sold it on the black market. They were sentenced to hard labour.

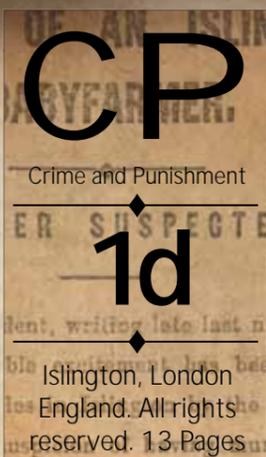
The blackout was also an invitation to crime. All street, house and car lights were switched off at night to prevent enemy bombers from orientating themselves. The pitch black streets made mugging, bike stealing and pickpocketing easier. Prostitutes were reported to have doubled in numbers.

"People who steal from war-damaged premises must expect to pay for it."

Magistrate at Clerkenwell Police Court, 1941.

Bomb damage at the corner of Barnsbury and Upper Streets.





SPECIAL ISSUE

# Crime and Punishment in Islington

Crime in Islington

◆ Vol 1 - No.1 [Est. 2009]

◆ Special Introductory Price

## Ruth Ellis

PC Alan Thompson, who was at the pub heard two bangs and a scream. Running out, he saw Ellis with a revolver in her hand and Blakeley lying on the ground. ...when taken to the police station, Ellis said 'I am guilty. I am rather confused'

News of the World, 1 May 1955

**On Wednesday 13 July 1955 at Holloway Prison, Ruth Ellis became the last woman to be executed in Britain.**

Ellis was in a tempestuous relationship with racing driver David Blakely. On Easter Sunday 1955, she shot him outside the Magdala Tavern in Hampstead, emptying more bullets into him as he lay on the ground.

By the time of her trial in June that year Ellis had become a celebrity. Described by the News of the World as a smartly dressed platinum blonde model, she was reported as saying, "It was obvious that when I shot him I intended to kill him." Thousands of people signed petitions asking for clemency against the death penalty, because Ellis had been psychologically and physically abused by Blakely.

After a final meeting with her brother, he told reporters that, "she seemed absolutely calm and unafraid of what was going to happen to her. On the night before the hanging, the Governor of Holloway Prison was forced to call for police reinforcements. A crowd of more than 500 people had gathered outside the prison's gates, singing and chanting for Ellis for several hours.

Around 1,000 people stood silently outside the prison the next morning, some praying for her. Ellis was buried inside the grounds of Holloway Prison the same day. She was re-buried in a churchyard in Buckinghamshire when Holloway was rebuilt in the 1970s.



Derek Blakeley and Ruth Ellis.



The Magdala Tavern in 2005.



Newspaper article on the Ruth Ellis trial 27 April 1955, (Hampstead and Highgate Express).

## The Death Penalty

"The execution by hanging of a young woman at Holloway Gaol has set the whole nation talking. The Great Debate is now raging through the country. Is the death penalty necessary or is it a barbaric relic of the past which has no place in any civilised community?"

**News of the World, 24 July 1955.**

The great publicity surrounding Ruth Ellis's hanging sparked national newspaper campaigns against capital punishment, as well as a great deal of discussion.

A group of teachers who taught near Holloway Prison wrote a letter to the Islington Gazette after the execution:

"Today Ruth Ellis was hanged. The school was in a ferment. There were some children who had waited outside the prison gates; some claimed to have seen the execution from their windows; others spoke with a fascinated horror about the technique of hanging of a female. ...Not only was Ruth Ellis hanged today, hundreds of children were a little corrupted."

MPs finally voted to abolish the death penalty for murder in 1969 but there was still strong public support for its retention. The number of people supporting capital punishment has gradually reduced in subsequent years. The last vote in the House of Commons in 1994 was overwhelmingly against restoration of the death penalty.



Protestors against capital punishment outside Holloway Prison, 1955 (Mary Evans Picture Library).



The Newgate hanging room, circa 1905.

## The Death Penalty Debate

The death penalty is still a subject of debate today.

### Against capital punishment

- ◆ Capital punishment goes against our most basic human right - the right to life.
- ◆ Lethal injection and electrocution can cause painful deaths.
- ◆ Keeping prisoners on death row for many years is itself cruel and a form of torture.
- ◆ No one has ever been able to demonstrate statistically that killing murderers deters others. Most murders are not pre-meditated.
- ◆ When countries get rid of the death penalty there is no instant increase in crime.
- ◆ Legal systems always create some miscarriages of justice. Executing the wrong person makes people think the law is unfair.

### In favour of capital punishment

- ◆ The state may better spend public money on the old, the young and the sick, rather than on the long term imprisonment of murderers and rapists.
- ◆ Execution is a very real punishment preferable to some form of 'rehabilitative' treatment. The criminal is made to suffer in proportion to the offence.
- ◆ The death penalty is the ultimate deterrent and prevents future murders.
- ◆ The death penalty provides 'closure' to the families and friends of the victim.



Peter Allen and Gwynne Evans were the last men to hang in Britain. They were simultaneously hung at 8am on 13 August 1964. They were convicted together of the murder of a laundry driver during a burglary at his home in Workington.

Recent polls have shown that there is now a fine balance in public opinion for and against the death penalty.

## What do you think?