



By the time Berry was to hang his last convict, in 1891, he had become increasingly emotional about what he was doing. He claimed he had hanged Jack the Ripper, but also some he thought were innocent of the crimes for which they were sentenced. He was criticised for talking about the executions in pubs after the event, and became increasingly unpopular. He was frequently threatened by friends of the criminals. He was seen as both a monster and a curiosity, but he was always tender-hearted. He enjoyed the notoriety, lecturing about his work and even using lantern slides to illustrate his stories, showing grim scenes. In all, he executed 131 people. He said that most of the murderous crimes had been committed under the influence of drink, and not one offender was teetotal. But his depression increased. Drink was ruining him, and his conscience was reminding him of his own personal sins and his neglect of his family.

One day he left his home, saying to his wife that he didn't know where he was going, but made his way to catch the train travelling via Leeds to London. He was intending to throw himself out of the train in the long tunnel between Bradford and Leeds. As the time for the train's

arrival drew near, Berry called out to God in prayer asking for forgiveness. A young man came and sat next to Berry and began talking to him about Jesus. The night before the stranger had been to a gospel meeting, where it was preached that when Jesus was hanging, suffering on the cross, He was taking on Himself all the sin of the world. He was dying not for sins that He had committed but for the wrongs of the world. That previous evening the man had asked the living, risen Jesus to forgive him and become his Lord and Saviour. He explained that God had led him to that very station platform that morning to speak with someone about Jesus.

The stranger asked Berry to accompany him to the Bowland Mission Hall in Bradford. They agreed to meet at 2pm. First Berry went home, and found



Berry's business card

that his wife, realising what he was planning to do, had been praying for him. He changed his clothes and went to the Mission Hall. There a crowd was singing the hymn 'I was lost but Jesus found me'. Berry struggled for hours as he knew he had lived a life that was displeasing to God.

But that very day, after hearing the Bradford evangelist Smith Wigglesworth preach, James Berry prayed. He thanked God for His love toward him, asked Jesus who died and rose again to forgive him, and invited God by His Holy Spirit to come by His power into his life. His whole life was turned around; the depression and despair lifted. He thanked God 'for preserving my soul and saving him. I asked Him to keep me. Then I began to read the Bible, a book I had never read before. I could think better now.' That night he told a meeting how he had come to know God in a personal way. James Berry was to spend the last phase of his life travelling the length and breadth of the country, and also in America, preaching about Jesus. An ex-hangman was a strong draw, and thousands heard his stories, and many turned from their own ways, trusting Jesus as their Lord and Saviour.

He died on 21st October 1913 at Walnut Tree Farm in a country village near York. He was 61.

I have asked myself, how many of the people he hanged did he meet in heaven?

There is Someone who has the authority to punish us eternally for all our wrongdoing. But the One who has been appointed judge came to be our Saviour. Heaven is not a reward for doing good, but a gift offered to all by Jesus. He came into the world not to call people who have got everything right, but to save sinners. You or I may not deserve capital punishment, but no one is good enough to deal with the sin which condemns us all. He died in our place. He paid the punishment for our sin. Hangman or hanged; religious or secular; good or bad – God commands all of us, everywhere, to turn from our own way and trust Jesus to forgive and transform us. That determines how we live our lives, how we will die, and where we will spend eternity.

Every person from every religion, or none, will meet God for, as the Bible states,

'It is appointed to men and women once to die, and after death the judgment.'

But will you meet Him as your Judge or as your Saviour? Will you ask Jesus now to forgive and change you; to become your Lord and Saviour?

I would like to know more about Jesus Christ

- Please send me a free DVD about the life of Jesus
- Please send me a free copy of John's Gospel (a book of the Bible that describes Jesus' life)
- Please send me a free booklet on how to become a Christian.
- I confirm that I am over 18 or, if under 18, I have the permission of my parent or guardian to request these resources.

Name:

Address:

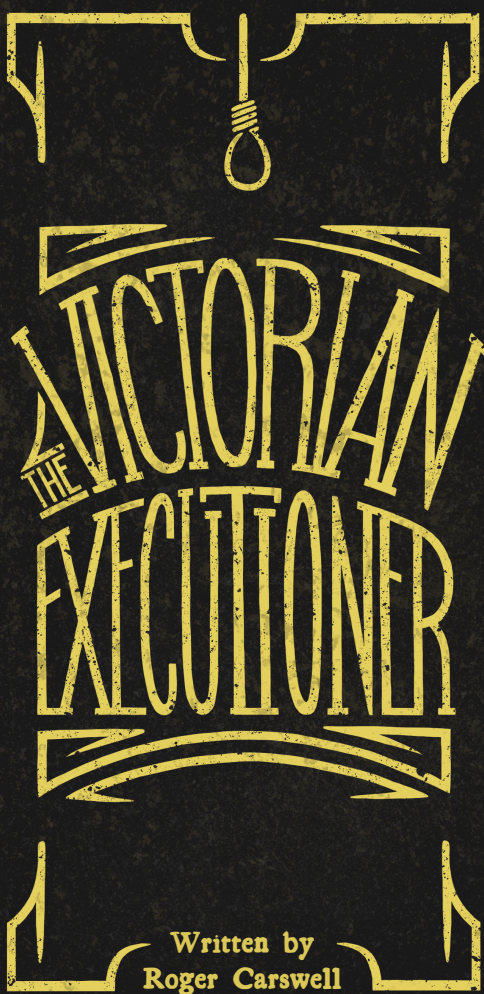


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THE VICTORIAN EXECUTIONER

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The Victorian Executioner

Bradford in Yorkshire is the birthplace of some of Britain's most famous executioners! For nearly a quarter of a century, Albert Pierrepoint, born in Clayton in Bradford like his father before him, was called upon by the state to hang people, including Nazi war criminals and Timothy Evans, Derek Bentley and Ruth Ellis.

But James Berry was the most famous Victorian executioner. Born in Heckmondwike in 1852 he was the thirteenth of eighteen children. His parents were Christians who brought up their children to go to church, but James, always a mischief-maker, did his uttermost to avoid Sunday School.

The last public execution took place in 1866 in front of Newgate prison. At that time, James Berry was trying his hand at a number of jobs, including being a salesman, an 'omnibus man', a publican, and a porter at the railway station in Thornton near Dewsbury. Eventually he settled on being a policeman. Needing more money to support his wife and two sons, in 1884 he applied for the

position of executioner. His predecessor was suspected of being drunk while doing his grisly work.

Berry's first execution was a double hanging in Edinburgh, but his first in England was of 44-year-old Mary Lefley who had poisoned her husband with arsenic. In the next eight years Berry would travel across the whole of the UK and Ireland by steam train and steamer to execute his 'victims'. He never hanged anyone in his home county of Yorkshire. He earned between £10 and £15 per execution.

He took a genuine interest in each of the people he hanged, seeking to be efficient and merciful to them. For the sake of those whose lives he was about to take, he would ensure that the execution would be quick and with little pain. He refined a 'table of drops' seeking to prevent horrific incidents, but he was not always successful.



James Berry

The most famous case

The most famous case was of John Lee, a 19-year-old footman who was found guilty of murdering his employer, a 68-year-old spinster. Berry had travelled from Bradford to Exeter for the execution, but three times as Berry pulled the lever to activate the drop, the boards failed to open. The chaplain, governor and medical officer stopped the execution saying, 'You may experiment as much as you like on a sack of flour, but you shall not experiment on this man any longer.' Lee's sentence was commuted to life imprisonment. Twenty-two years later he was released, claiming his innocence throughout. He died a pauper having outlived his hangman by many years.



Bradford in the 1800s

Some of the executions traumatised Berry

He was capable of cold, callous detachment, but on other occasions he was so affected by what he was doing he was unable to speak. He hanged an old boyhood friend, Walter Wood, who had murdered his estranged wife.

On the eve of the execution Wood said to Berry, 'Remember what I have said, James. Reflect that even you in a moment of temper could be carried away to do what I have done. Do not touch drink, or perhaps you, too, will die as I am about to die on your own gallows.' In a trembling voice Berry replied, 'Goodbye Walter. I will see you in the morning.'

Berry didn't sleep. The next day Walter said to him again, 'Let my fate be a warning to you, and never touch a drop of drink again. When a man lets it take possession of him he is doomed. I loved my wife, and would give anything if she were alive now.' Berry replied, 'You had better forget about me and prepare yourself for eternity.' Wood's last words were, 'Lord have mercy upon me!'