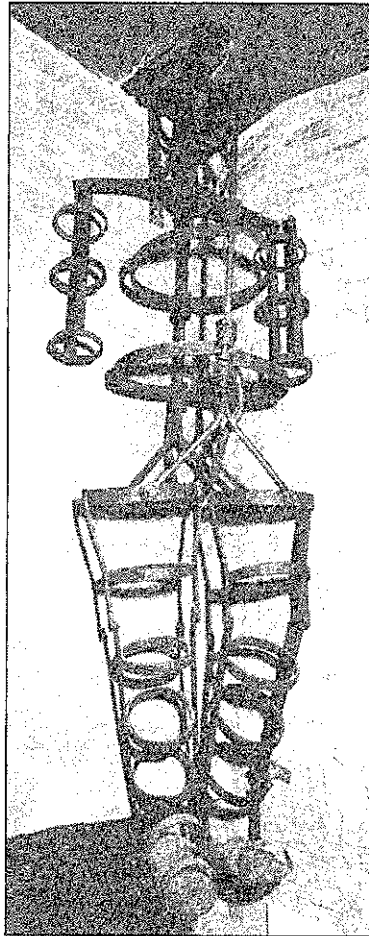


The Last Gibbet

At 11 pm on the evening of 30th May, 1832, neighbours noticed a huge fire blazing in James Cook's workshop in Leicester. As they hurried to the scene, they could not help but notice a strange smell. One man ran to fetch Cook and another to summon the constable. Cook explained that it was some bad meat that he was burning. The constable, however, was not satisfied, and took the charred flesh along with some small bones from the ashes to a doctor. The bones were those of human fingers!

A warrant was issued, Cook was arrested and made a full confession. The crime had been carefully premeditated, he had murdered a commercial traveller called John Paas whom he believed to be carrying a large sum of money.

At the trial, which lasted barely a quarter of an hour, Cook pleaded guilty and was sentenced to hang. The judge also added that his body should then be suspended in irons for public display. The Murder Act of 1752 had accepted ancient practice by allowing judges to order gibbeting as part of such sentences. By the 1770's up to a hundred gibbets



were said to have stood on Hounslow Heath, each with a rotting body inside its iron cage. The sight was supposed to act as a deterrent against violent crime.

Thirty thousand people crowded the Welford Road in Leicester to witness the execution. Later, a gibbet, thirty-three feet high, was assembled and Cook's body suspended in a specially made iron frame. Twenty thousand people came to watch. But times were changing, after three days enlightened residents, disturbed by the spectacle (and also anxious about the possibility of disease) petitioned the Home Secretary, and the body was removed. Within a few months the Act of 1752 was repealed, and James Cook entered history as the last person to be gibbeted in England.

For some time the gibbet irons remained at Leicester Gaol, but in the early years of this century they were loaned to the city authorities to display in the town's Guildhall. They are now returned to the Prison Service, and displayed in the museum at Newbold Revel as a reminder of the brutality of justice in a by-gone age ■

Curator's Corner:

An occasional series of articles about curiosities, curios, and conundrums from prison history by the Curator of the Prison Service Museum.

Dr P J Davies

Curator H M Prison Service Museum

STATISTICS

Retention of prison officers (recruited in 1983)

	White	Ethnic Minority	Total
Recruited in 1983	821	22	843
Still in Service (at any unified grade)	754 (92%)	20 (91%)	774 (92%)

Retention of prison officers (recruited in 1983)

	Male	Female	Total
Recruited in 1983	996	52	1048
Still in Service (at any unified grade)	932 (94%)	45 (86%)	977 (93%)

[Equal Opportunities in the prison Service Progress Report 1 October 1993 - 31 March 1995]