

‘THE GREAT PORTION OF THE SCUM OF SOCIETY’? REPRESENTATIONS OF EXECUTION CROWDS IN THE LANCASHIRE PRESS, 1830-1868

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Abstract:

From 1830 to the abolition of public executions in 1868, there was a growing critique of the execution crowd among elite commentators. To date, however, most, if not all, discussion of this critique has focused on the metropolis, elite groups and decision makers and on national newspapers such as *The Times*. The aim of this article is to shift the focus away from the metropolis towards the provinces, by exploring how the execution crowd was represented in the provincial press. While there have been several analyses of how executions were represented in the provincial press during the period, there has been little sustained discussion of how the crowd were represented. Drawing on a sample of 145 accounts of executions published between 1830 and 1868 it will explore how the execution crowd was presented in four Lancashire newspapers, the *Liverpool Mercury*, *Manchester Times*, *Lancaster Gazette* and *Manchester Courier*. It will show how the majority of reports depicted the crowd in neutral terms, passing no commentary – either negative or positive – on their composition or behaviour. One newspaper, however, the liberal *Liverpool Mercury*, consistently reported execution crowds in negative terms as part of its broader critique of capital punishment and public executions.

Keywords: provincial press, capital punishment, executions, crowds, nineteenth century Lancashire.

Introduction

On 13 November 1849, the author Charles Dickens attended the execution of husband and wife Marie and Frederick Manning at Horsemonger Lane Gaol. The couple had been sentenced to death at the Old Bailey the previous month for the murder of Patrick O'Connor which occurred at their house in Bermondsey, South London. Dickens, who had rented an upstairs room in a building facing the gallows, was scandalised by what he saw both before and during the execution.² In his famous letter to *The Times* published the following day, he excoriated the crowd, claiming ‘that a sight so inconceivably awful as the wickedness and

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² Dickens was no stranger to executions having witnessed at least four or five other executions prior to that of the Mannings including possibly an execution by guillotine in Rome. For a discussion of his ambivalent attitude to public executions, see F.S. Schwarzbach, ‘All the hideous apparatus of death’: Dickens and Executions’, in William B. Thesig, *Executions and the British experience from the 17th to the 20th century: a collection of essays* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland and Company Inc. Publishers, 1990), 93-110.

levity of the immense crowd collected at that execution this morning could be imagined by no man, and could be presented in no heathen land under the sun'.³

Dickens was hardly unique among his contemporaries in expressing such views. For at least half a century, a growing number of commentators were vocal in their criticism of public executions; castigating with particular vehemence the behaviour of the crowds at such occasions.⁴ Nevertheless, historians have disagreed on the accuracy of this portrayal, and, more broadly, on the question of whether public executions were ceremonial occasions where state power and the moral 'lesson of the scaffold' was demonstrated before a compliant plebeian audience, or, in contrast, sites of carnival and resistance. On the one hand, Douglas Hay and Michel Foucault both argued that public executions were symbolic displays where the sovereign power of the state was made manifest on the body of the condemned. For Hay, the gallows acted as a chief component of the arsenal of state power; the terror of the gallows operating to maintain social order and protect private property. While both agreed that crowds could, and did, challenge these messages encoded within executions through their behaviour before the gallows, they regarded the state as the main author of the execution ceremony.⁵ On the other, Thomas Laqueur has argued that, far from being a vehicle through which the power of the state was made manifest, executions were in fact sites of subversive carnival and festivity. According to Laqueur, the state took little interest in stage managing executions and they were, instead, dominated by the crowd, who approached them as a form of carnivalesque entertainment.⁶

A middle position between these two extremes was presented by V.A.C Gatrell in his classic study, *The Hanging Tree*. While accepting that executions could at times be carnivalesque, Gatrell nevertheless argued that the state remained fully in control of the execution ceremony.⁷ Neither the behaviour of the crowd or the condemned could affect the outcome

³ Charles Dickens, 'Letters to the editor', *The Times*, 14 November 1849, p.4.

⁴ See for example, Edward Gibbon Wakefield, *Facts relating to the punishment of death in the metropolis* (London, James Ridgway, 1831); James Grant, *The Great Metropolis*, 2nd Ser. (London, Saunders and Otley, 1837); 'Report of the Capital Punishment Commission; together with the minutes of evidence and appendix', PP 1866, xxi.1 [3590], passim.

⁵ Douglas Hay, 'Property, authority and the criminal law', in Douglas Hay, Peter Linebaugh, John G. Rule, E.P. Thompson and Cal Winslow, *Albion's Fatal Tree: crime and society in eighteenth-century England* (London, Verso, 2011), 17-64. Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The birth of the prison* (Harmondsworth, Penguin Books, 1991)

⁶ Thomas Laqueur, 'Crowds, carnival and the state in English executions, 1604-1868', in A.L. Beier, David Cannadine, James M. Rosenheim and Lawrence Stone (eds.) *The First modern society: essays in English history in honour of Lawrence Stone* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1989), 305-55.

⁷ V.A.C Gatrell, *The Hanging Tree: Execution and the English People 1770-1868* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1996)

of the execution nor undermine significantly the state's power over the life of the condemned made manifest in the execution ceremony or the moral lesson communicated from the state via the execution to the crowd.⁸

More recently a radically different thesis has been proposed by Matthew Trevor Wright, who argues that the image of the riotous crowd was in fact a creation of the political elite and moral reformers. While not denying that on occasion execution crowds could be unruly, he nevertheless argues that such behaviour was the exception rather than the rule and that on the whole crowds behaved in a decorous way.⁹ In a similar way, Rosalind Crone has argued that the critique of execution crowds was part of a broader critique of forms of violent traditional plebeian entertainment, such as bear baiting, prize- and animal-fighting, by elites. According to Crone, while there is some truth in the image of execution crowds presented by critics such as Dickens and Wakefield, they could also be solemn affairs.¹⁰

To date, however, most, if not all of the historiography of execution crowds has focused on the metropolis, elite groups and decision makers and on national newspapers such as *The Times*. This is particularly notable as there were marked differences between executions in the metropolis and the provinces. Not only were there comparatively fewer executions in each county than in the metropolis, but, according to Gatrell '... the rural crowd was smaller and more muted... [with] less support there' for the condemned.¹¹ To what extent, then, is the image of riotous crowds found in contemporary depictions of Victorian executions referring more to a metropolitan than a provincial phenomenon?

The aim of this article is address this question by exploring how execution crowds were represented in the provincial press during the nineteenth century. While there have been several analyses of how executions were represented in the provincial press during the period, there has been little sustained discussion of the crowds that attended these events. John Tulloch mentioned crowds in passing in his discussion of the Lincolnshire press, observing how the *Stamford Mercury* described them in disdainful terms; the newspaper reportage highlighting in particular those features of execution crowds – most notably the presence of

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Matthew White, *Ordering the Mob: London's Public Punishments, c. 1783-1868* (PhD, University of Hertfordshire, 2009); Matthew White, 'Rogues of the Meaner Sort? Old Bailey executions and the crowd in the early nineteenth century', *The London Journal*, 33, 2 (2008), 135-53.

¹⁰ Rosalind Crone, *Violent Victorians: popular entertainment in nineteenth-century London* (Manchester, University of Manchester Press, 2012)

¹¹ Gatrell, *The Hanging Tree*, 39.

women and children – that violated the norms of its middle class readership.¹² Zoe Dyndor in her analysis of the *Northampton Mercury* between 1780 and 1834 argued that execution crowds were portrayed in the newspaper as passively accepting the moral lesson of the scaffold presented to them by the state. In doing so, she suggested, the *Mercury* may have presented a sanitized version of what actually took place; ‘depicting the crowd as they needed to be’ to maintain the solemn ritual of execution in the eyes of its middle class readership, rather than how they possibly were.¹³ More recently, in my own analysis of execution reportage in the Norfolk press between 1805 and 1867, I argued that crowds were typically only described vaguely in press reports until the early 1850s. From then until the last public execution in Norfolk in 1867, they were increasingly described in negative terms by the liberal and Tory press alike.¹⁴

Drawing on a sample of 145 accounts of executions published in four Lancashire newspapers between 1830 and 1868, this article will show how the majority of reports depicted the crowd in neutral terms, passing no commentary – either negative or positive – on their composition or behaviour. Other reports presented the behaviour of execution crowds in decorous terms. One newspaper, however, the liberal *Liverpool Mercury*, consistently reported execution crowds in negative terms as part of its broader critique of capital punishment and public executions. Indeed, the *Mercury* was critical of execution crowds while simultaneously describing their decorous behaviour. To this end, the article will be structured in two sections. The first will present a broad overview of executions in Lancashire during the period and briefly introduce the four newspapers. Following on from this, the second longer section will present the analysis of the four newspapers.

1 Setting the Context

Between March 1830 and April 1868, there were 43 public executions in Lancashire; 58 convicted felons dying an ignoble death before crowds in Lancaster, Liverpool and Manchester. The pattern of executions is shown in **Figure 1**:

¹² John Tulloch, ‘The Privatising of Pain: Lincoln Newspapers, ‘mediated publicness’ and the end of public execution’, *Journalism Studies*, 7, 3 (2006), 437-51.

¹³ Zoe Dyndor, ‘Death recorded: capital punishment and the press in Northampton, 1780-1834’, *Midland History*, 33, 2 (2008), 179-95

¹⁴ John Walliss, ‘Representations of Justice executed at Norwich Castle: A Comparative Analysis of Execution Reports in the *Norfolk Chronicle* and *Bury and Norwich Post*, 1805-1867’, *Law Crime and History*, 3, 2, (2013), 30-51.

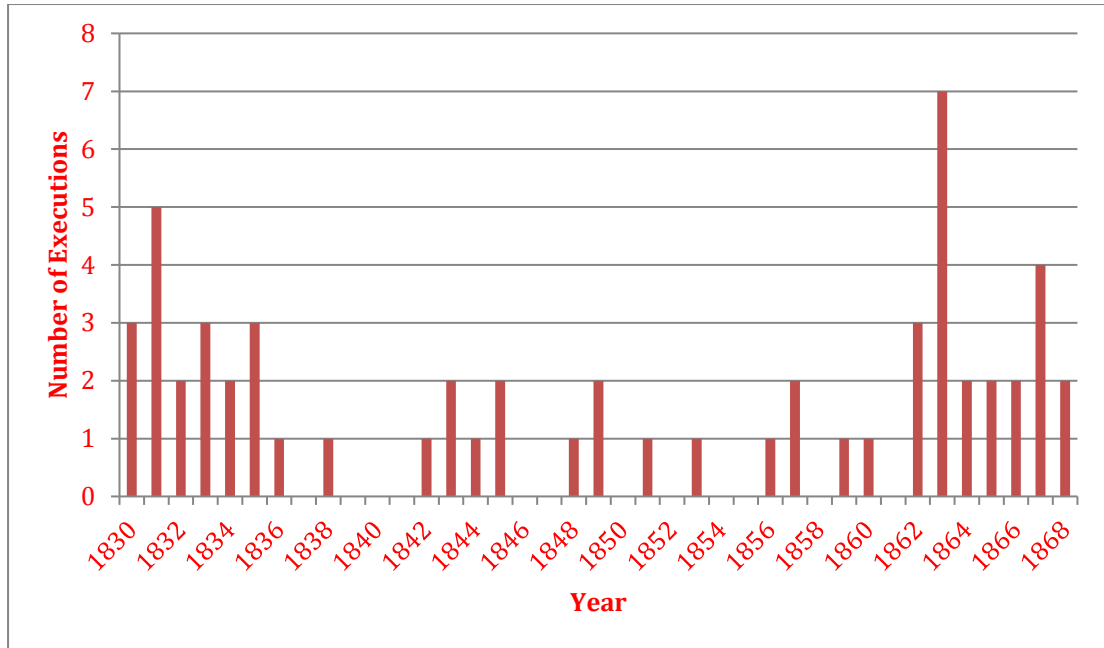


Figure 1: the number of executions per year in Lancashire, 1830-1968.

The peak years for executions were 1831 and 1863, when seven and five felons respectively expiated for their crimes on the gallows in a series of multiple hangings. While there were executions in the county almost every year in the 1830s and 1860s, 12 of the 38 years sampled saw no executions. The crimes for which felons were executed in the county are shown in **Figure 2**:

Crime	Number & % executed		Total
	Male	Female	
Murder	49 (94%)	3 (6%)	52 (90%)
Bestiality	2 (100%)	0	2 (3%)
Robbery	2 (100%)	0	2 (3%)
Burglary	1 (100%)	0	1 (2%)
Rape	1 (100%)	0	1 (2%)
Total	55 (96%)	3 (4%)	58 (100%)

Figure 2: the crimes for which capitally convicted felons were executed in Lancashire, 1830-1868.

The majority of those executed were male. Over the 38 year period, only three women were executed in Lancashire, all of whom had been convicted of murdering an intimate relation. Males were executed for a larger range of crimes; while most had similarly been convicted of murder, two had been convicted of robbery, two of rape, and one of robbery and rape. The last execution in the county for a property crime was in 1831 (brothers John and Thomas Mulvay for robbery), and the last for a crime other than murder was in 1834 (John Heyes for rape) This state of affairs was not out of step with patterns of capital convictions and executions across England; even during the height of the Bloody Code, the majority of those hanged were male and, particularly in the provinces, the gallows were typically only reserved for women who killed.¹⁵

Lancashire was selected for analysis for two main reasons. Primarily, there were a relatively large number of executions carried out in the county, each one generating articles and commentary. Second, four newspapers representing liberal and conservative positions with complete runs for the period were available for analysis and all were published in the three cities in the county where executions took place during the period. The four Lancashire newspapers were sampled from the online British Newspaper archive; the conservative *Lancaster Gazette* and *Manchester Courier* and the liberal *Manchester Times* and *Liverpool Mercury*.¹⁶ Both Tulloch and I compared the representations of executions in newspapers of different political positions, and the present research sought to develop this approach by utilising two liberal and two conservative newspapers. In doing so, it was hoped that it would be possible to explore differences within – as well as between - each position. Not all of the execution reports from the four newspapers could be traced with between four and nine of the possible 43 execution reports in each newspaper either missing, untraceable or illegible (for example, with a crease through a page). The details of each newspaper as well as the number of articles sampled in each is shown in **Figure 3**:

¹⁵ See John Walliss, 'Crime and Justice in Georgian Cheshire: The Chester Court of Great Sessions 1760-1830', *Journal on European History of Law*, 6, 1 (2015), pp. 38-55.

¹⁶ <http://www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk/>

Newspaper	Frequency	Price (d)	Circulation (1853) ¹⁷	Number of Articles sampled (n=43)
<i>Lancaster Gazette</i> (Cons)	Weekly (Sat)	7 (1830) 2½(1868)	35,500	37
<i>Manchester Courier</i> (Cons)	1830-63: weekly (Sat) 1864-8: Mon-Sat	7 (1830) 1 (1868)	263,000	35
<i>Liverpool Mercury</i> (Lib)	1830-49: weekly (Fri) 1850-58: 3 days a week 1858-68: Mon-Sat	7 (1830) 1 (1868)	626,000	39
<i>Manchester Times</i> (Lib)	1830-46: weekly (Sat) 1847-55: 2 days a week 1856-68: weekly (Sat)	7 (1830) 2 (1868)	94,000	34
Total				145

Figure 3: Summary information of each of the Lancashire newspapers analysed

As was common practice during this period, a number of the reports that were published in the four newspapers were either republished from other newspapers or were shared between two newspapers.¹⁸ Both the *Liverpool Mercury* and *Manchester Times*, for example, republished several execution reports originally published in the liberal weekly, the *Liverpool Albion*. One report published in the *Liverpool Mercury* was republished from the *Times*. Newspapers often published reports taken from other newspapers of differing political positions. Not only did both liberal newspapers republish reports from the conservative *Preston Pilot*, but the two conservative newspapers republished reports from the *Albion* and the *Liverpool Mercury*. Only one republished report is cited in the analysis below.

¹⁷ 'Circulation of the Lancashire Newspapers', *Manchester Times*, 8 April 1854, p. 5.

¹⁸ On this phenomenon, see Andrew Hobbs, 'When the provincial press was the national press (c.1836-c.1900)', *International Journal of Regional and Local History*, 5, 1 (2009), 16-43.

2 Execution Crowds in the Lancashire Press

In my previously published work on execution reportage in the Norfolk press, I found differences between conservative and liberal newspapers. While both the conservative *Norfolk Chronicle* and the liberal *Bury and Norwich Post* hoped that ‘the moral lesson of the scaffold’ would be learned by those who witnessed it, the former was much more concerned in its reportage to legitimate public executions and capital punishment more broadly. Reportage, editorials and letters published in the latter, in contrast, reveal that it was much more concerned with reforming rather than legitimating capital punishment. Thus, while the *Norfolk Chronicle* related at length the confessions of the condemned and championed the actions of the Chaplain in attempting to secure their confessions, the *Bury and Norwich Post* promoted a clear reform agenda, recommending first the reduction in the scope of the capital code and then, from the 1830s onwards, the abolition of capital punishment itself.¹⁹

Such a clear politically based distinction was not found in the case of the Lancashire press’ discussion of execution crowds. Rather, a more complex picture was found wherein the *Lancaster Gazette*, *Manchester Courier* and *Manchester Times* presented a broadly neutral image of execution crowds, although, as will be seen below, they were critical on occasions where the newspaper (and I use this term in the sense of the combination of journalist and editor) believed that the crowd had undermined notions of respectability. In contrast, the *Liverpool Mercury* tended to be much more critical in its reportage of execution crowds, frequently castigating them at length. Moreover, in contrast to the other three Lancashire newspapers, the *Mercury* used its critique of the crowd as a way of criticizing capital punishment more broadly and agitating for its abolition. The analysis is summarised in **Figure 4**:

¹⁹ Walliss, ‘Representations of Justice executed at Norwich Castle’.

Description of Crowd	Newspaper			
	<i>Manchester Courier</i>	<i>Lancaster Gazette</i>	<i>Manchester Times</i>	<i>Liverpool Mercury</i>
No mention	5 (14%)	4 (11%)	4 (12%)	4 (10%)
General Description	13 (37%)	9 (24%)	10 (29%)	5 (13%)
Neutral	6 (17%)	9 (24%)	9 (26%)	5 (13%)
Negative	4 (11%)	13 (35%)	5 (15%)	19 (49%)
Positive	7 (20%)	2 (5%)	6 (18%)	6 (15%)
Total	35 (100%)	37 (100%)	34 (100%)	39 (100%)

Figure 4: the manner in which execution crowds were represented in newspaper reports in the Lancashire press, 1830-68.

In the majority of execution reportage in the *Manchester Courier*, *Lancaster Gazette* and *Manchester Times*, execution crowds were typically described in a general manner; between a quarter and two-fifths of the reports simply commented on their size and composition without passing any real comment, either positive or negative.²⁰ The crowd that witnessed the execution of James Barlow in August 1835, for example, was described by the *Manchester Courier* simply as ‘immense, and has been estimated at between forty and fifty thousand’, while, according to the *Manchester Times*, ‘about 8,000 people’ gathered in the rain to witness that of Patrick M’Caffery in 1862.²¹ Similarly, in its report of the execution of Thomas Miller in Lancaster in April 1830, the *Lancaster Gazette* related how ‘a vast crowd had assembled to witness the end of the unfortunate wretch’, adding how ‘every place which afforded a view of the fatal spot, both in the Church-yard and on the Castle parade was literally crowded to excess’.²²

Other reports – between 17% and a quarter – went further, providing often-detailed descriptions of the crowds, including where people had travelled to witness the execution, the

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ ‘Execution of James Barlow for the murder of his wife’, *Manchester Courier*, 29 August 1835, p. 4; ‘Execution of the Fulwood Murderer’, *Manchester Times*, 18 January 1862, p. 3.

²² ‘Execution of Miller for a desperate burglary near Liverpool’, *Lancaster Gazette*, 10 April 1830, p. 3.

types of people present, as well as their behaviour. According to *The Manchester Times*, the execution of Jonathan Heywood in 1856 'was witnessed by nearly 10,000 persons, chiefly of the lowest caste, but including a few hundreds of country people, apparently from Rochdale and its neighbourhood'.²³ Similarly, *The Lancaster Gazette* detailed how the majority of the estimated 100,000 persons that attended the execution of William Taylor and John Ward in 1862

... came from Liverpool and the immediate neighbourhood, but a great many were known to have walked from Ashton-under-Lyne, Oldham, and Manchester, carrying their provisions with them ... More than a thousand persons camped out in the brickfields in front of the gaol during the night, and 400 slept at the Warrington workhouse, on their way to the scene.²⁴

In an article that it republished from the *Liverpool Mercury*, the *Manchester Times* described in great detail the composition of the crowd that attended the execution of Henry Reid in 1859;

... we found the policemen almost as numerous as the spectators, then chiefly confined to lads in their working attire, and a female here and there. One respectably-dressed young couple had taken a seat by the side of the pile of bricks in the field opposite the scaffold. Another very lady-like young person was observed endeavouring to get a view of the scaffold without herself being seen... The respectably-attired female who stood immediately in front of the gallows and close to the barrier, gazing intently at the dread instrument of death, had with her a little girl whom she held by the hand, besides another in her arms, and her appearance indicated that she was far advanced in pregnancy... Some of them whiled away the time in smoking, talking, and passing jokes amongst themselves. A few at the lower end of the field were regularly regaling themselves with spirits, which they drank from bottles they had brought with them. The juvenile portion of the crowd amused themselves by playing at pitch and toss and other games, apparently indifferent to the tragic scene which was about to be enacted.²⁵

That is not to deny that in some cases these more detailed reports contained passing criticism of an aspect of a particular crowd's composition, behaviour or perceived attitude to the execution scene. The *Manchester Courier* described how the execution of Gleeson Wilson in 1849 'had the appearance of a fair', adding that 'Even ladies, we believe, came from distant parts to see the dreadful spectacle'.²⁶ However, the general tone of around half of the articles sampled from each of the three newspapers was broadly neutral in tone, passing no comment – either positive or negative – on the crowds and their behaviour.

²³ 'Execution of Jonathan Heywood, The Rochdale Murderer', *Manchester Times*, 12 January 1856, p. 12.

²⁴ 'Execution of Taylor and Ward', *Lancaster Gazette*, 20 September 1862, p. 10.

²⁵ 'The execution of Henry Reid, at Liverpool', *Manchester Times*, 8 January 1859, p. 2.

²⁶ 'Execution of Gleeson Wilson, the murderer of the Hinrichson family', *Manchester Courier*, 22 November 1849, p. 10.

Negative representations of execution crowds were found in a much lower proportion of the *Manchester Times*, *Lancaster Gazette* and *Manchester Courier's* reports, ranging from just over one in ten (*Manchester Courier*) to around a third (*Lancaster Gazette*). As can be seen in **Figure 5**, no clear pattern can be discerned in the pattern of negative reports:

Years	Newspaper				Total
	<i>Manchester Courier</i>	<i>Lancaster Gazette</i>	<i>Liverpool Mercury</i>	<i>Manchester Times</i>	
1830-9	10% (1)	29% (4)	33% (4)	27% (3)	26% (12)
1840-9	33% (2)	50% (2)	71% (5)	17% (1)	43% (10)
1850-9	0	20% (1)	40% (2)	0	15% (3)
1860-8	7% (1)	43% (6)	53% (8)	8% (1)	29% (16)
Total	11% (4)	35% (13)	49% (19)	15% (5)	41 (100%)

Figure 5: the percentage and number of articles with negative representations of execution crowds as proportion of all articles in four Lancashire newspapers, 1830-68

While the percentage of negative articles across the four newspapers increased slightly between 1830-9 and 1860-9, there was no clear, unbroken trajectory over the period. Rather, the 1840s saw the highest proportion of articles depicting execution crowds in a negative way (43% or ten of the 23 articles sampled). Nor (with the exception of the *Liverpool Mercury*) were liberal newspapers significantly more critical of crowds than conservative ones, or *vice versa*. While the percentage of critical articles increased in the *Lancaster Gazette* and *Liverpool Mercury* over the period, the percentage fell in the other two Lancashire Newspapers. Rather, any differences were between newspapers of the same political position: the *Liverpool Mercury* was significantly more critical of execution crowds than the *Manchester Times*, while the *Lancaster Gazette* was more so than the *Manchester Courier*. This may reflect the fact that the majority of executions took place in Lancaster and Liverpool. In contrast, Manchester only held three executions between 1866 and 1868. It may be possible, then, that the Lancaster and Liverpool press were more critical of execution crowds because the populous of these cities experienced them at close hand on a more regular basis.

Negative reports across all four newspapers highlighted those actions and characteristics of execution crowds that either challenged middle class ideas of respectability and propriety or potentially undermined the ritual ceremony of execution. Such ideas were, as a number of historians have pointed out, both class- and gender-based. Notions of respectability were one way in which the middle class could define themselves and their values against those they deemed to be below them. As noted previously, over the course of the nineteenth century, various forms of violent working class entertainments, including attending executions, became increasingly problematized as remnants of a less civilised era by middle class commentators. Indeed, the persistence of aspects of these entertainments may be read as a form of working class resistance against middle class cultural hegemony.²⁷ Similarly, these notions were thoroughly gendered, defining the 'appropriate' roles, behaviour and characteristics that men and women should adopt, as well as the respective 'spheres' in which both sexes should inhabit.²⁸

Two main areas of crowd behaviour were highlighted for opprobrium across all four newspapers. The first was the presence of persons not deemed to be an appropriate audience for executions, namely women and children. This was by no means peculiar to the Lancashire press: newspapers across the country regularly bemoaned the presence of women and children at executions, particularly on the frequent occasions where they outnumbered men.²⁹ While the 'moral lesson of the scaffold' was envisaged as a universal one, its primary intended audience were males. The presence of large numbers of women at executions was seen as an offence against conventional ideas of femininity. Moreover, as Gatrell observes, the evident pleasure women found in executions – their 'shrieks and excitement' – was particularly problematic and something that 'mystified polite observers'.³⁰ Executions could also be physically dangerous places for women. The press of bodies and the surging of crowds towards the gallows to obtain a better view frequently led to injuries. For example, in 1844 in Nottingham, at least 12 people, 7 of them women, were killed and over a hundred seriously

²⁷ Crone, *Violent Victorians*.

²⁸ Beverley Skeggs, *Formations of Class and Gender: Becoming Respectable* (London, Sage Publications, 1997); Lynda Nead, *Myths of Sexuality: Representations of Women in Victorian Britain* (Oxford, Basil Blackwell, 1988). On the notion of separate spheres, see, Leonore Davidoff and Catherine Hall, *Family Fortunes: Men and Women of the English Middle Class, 1780-1850* [Revised Edition] (London, Routledge, 2002 [orig. 1987]). Subsequent work on Davidoff and Hall's thesis of 'separate spheres' has questioned the extent to which they were maintained, the consensus of the historiography being that they were perhaps honoured more in the breach than in the observance – for a discussion see Kathryn Gleadle, *Revisiting Family Fortunes: reflections on the twentieth anniversary of the publication of L. Davidoff and C. Hall (1987) Family Fortunes: men and women of the English middle class, 1780-1850* (London: Hutchinson)', *Women's History Review*, 16, 5 (2007), 773-82.

²⁹ *Ibid.*

³⁰ Gatrell, *The Hanging Tree*, 74.

injured after being trampled to death as the crowd began to disperse after an execution.³¹ Children too could also be physically injured at executions – eight of those who died at Nottingham had been aged below 18 years. However, a broader concern for contemporaries was that they could be emotionally injured by becoming hardened to death and physical suffering at an early age by what they witnessed on the gallows.³² Nevertheless, executions operated as a powerful magnet to both these groups. Indeed, Gatrell argues that children were often taken to executions by their mothers; the death of the felon producing a stark moral lesson for their offspring. Attending one's first execution was also an important rite of passage for many young men of all social classes.³³ Thus, for example, the *Lancaster Gazette* bemoaned in its account of the execution of Mary Holden in 1834 how the presence of 'a large portion of females, many respectfully dressed, and a great number of children... does not reflect much credit on their guardians, nor is it calculated to operate favourably on their minds, but rather to deaden the senses and blunt the best feelings of our nature'.³⁴ Similarly, both liberal newspapers gave the same description of the crowd that attended the execution of John Roach the previous year. In doing so, they noted how

...notwithstanding the efforts which have been made by the press to prevent the congregation of boys and females at such a place, we are sorry to state, that great numbers of [children and women] were present, and of the latter many had infants in their arms. To add to the manifest impropriety of attending the melancholy place, the boys of all ages up to about fourteen or fifteen, behaved in the most indecorous manner, running about, hooting, shouting, and laughing as if they were in the midst of a fair. Can such exhibitions have a good effect on the habits and morals of the community? Surely not.³⁵

Evidence for the draw that executions could have for children of respectable families is provided by the *Liverpool Mercury* in its report of the execution of Thomas Edwards in Liverpool in 1863:

Shortly after eleven o'clock a neat four-wheeled carriage, driven by a livery, made its appearance near the scaffold. The vehicle contained three boys and three girls, all well dressed and ruddy looking. The driver, on being questioned by the police, said his master had given him instructions to give the 'children a drive anywhere,' and the juveniles having heard of the execution, directed 'Jehn' to give them a sight of the gallows. The driver accordingly obeyed the orders of the children. The boys got out and gratified themselves with a sight of the awful instrument of death, but, much to the credit of the girls, they declined to leave the vehicle. Upon the recommendation of the police, the driver then left the ground with his juvenile 'sight-seers'.³⁶

³¹ In addition, 12 of the 20 persons who were reported as injured at the scene and attended the General Hospital were women. 'Execution of William Saville, for the Colwick Murders', *Derby Mercury*, 14th August 1844, 1.

³² Randall McGowen, 'Civilizing punishment: the end of public execution in England', *Journal of British Studies*, 33, 3 (1994), 257-82

³³ Gatrell, *The Hanging Tree*.

³⁴ 'Execution of Mary Holden', *Lancaster Gazette*, 22 March 1834, p. 4.

³⁵ 'Execution at Lancaster', *Manchester Times*, 7 September 1833, p. 7.

³⁶ 'Execution of Edwards, the murderer', *Liverpool Mercury*, 5 January 1863, p. 6.

In addition to the presence of inappropriate persons, the four newspapers also railed against what they saw as a crowd's inappropriate behaviour at the execution scene. Echoing the criticisms of Dickens, Wakefield and others, the four newspapers excoriated execution crowds for their levity, shouting and jeering as well as for their perceived ghoulishness. The *Lancaster Gazette* noted with chagrin that the crowd that gathered to witness the execution of Roach '...laughed and talked, evincing the utmost levity, as if it had been a bull-bait, a fair, or some other object of amusement that had called them together'.³⁷ Three decades later in 1864, it described how at the execution of Luke Charles in Liverpool, 'Several of the youths and men filled up a portion of the intervening time by disporting themselves upon the frozen ponds in the adjacent brick-fields, and a burst of laughter might now and then be heard as some unlucky wight got a roll upon the ice'.³⁸ Reporting on the first execution in Manchester, that of James Burrows in 1866, the *Manchester Courier* questioned the attraction of executions for some members of the community. Acknowledging how easy it was to attract a crowd 'at the least' occasion, it waxed nevertheless that;

there is something awful in the thought that thousands of persons of both sexes – young, middle-aged, and old – will assemble together and voluntarily undergo severe discomfort, and encounter the absolute risk of death or bodily mutilation, to get a chance of seeing the convulsive struggles of a fellow-being in the last agonies of a shameful death upon the scaffold. However, so it is; and whilst executions continue to be held in public, to gratify the wonder or curiosity of the vulgar throng, we may expect a morbid taste for the horrible – and more especially among the uneducated classes, to which such tragic spectacles minister with degrading effect.³⁹

This was a common trope in the arguments of abolitionists; that public executions did not deter 'the uneducated classes' but, instead, further brutalised and degraded their sensibilities, such as they were. Explicit here also is a statement of taste; the *Courier* separating itself and its perceived readership from such persons and their 'vulgar' and 'morbid' tastes.

Conversely, positive representations of execution crowds across the four newspapers emphasised their orderly and respectful attitude and behaviour. These were found in around a seventh of the articles sampled (14%), ranging from 5% of articles in the *Lancaster Gazette* to a fifth of those in the *Manchester Courier*. According to the *Manchester Courier*, the crowd

³⁷ 'Execution at Lancaster', *Lancaster Gazette*, 24 August 1833, p. 4. In its subsequent issue, the newspaper observed ruefully that:

When exhibitions of this description take place, it is certainly becoming the solemn occasion, that the ceremony should be performed with profound reverence, and with the least noise possible; so we sincerely hope, that it will not be our painful duty again to record the unbecoming behaviour of a great number of the spectators, as was the case at the last execution (*Lancaster Gazette*, 31 August 1833, p. 3)

³⁸ 'Execution of Luke Charles', *Lancaster Gazette*, 16 January 1864, p. 10.

³⁹ 'Execution of the convict Burrows', *Manchester Courier*, 27 August 1866, p. 3.

that gathered to witness the execution of George Evans and Thomas Stew in Liverpool in 1845 was 'not so numerous as is usual on these dreadful occasions', and 'behaved with great order and decency'.⁴⁰ Similarly, the *Lancaster Gazette* related how 'the utmost decorum was observed' by the crowd at the execution of Richard Hardman in 1856 and how they quietly dispersed afterwards.⁴¹ Even the *Liverpool Mercury* was on occasions positive in its treatment of some crowds. Thus, while the crowd that gathered to witness the execution of Richard Pedder in 1853 'exhibited so morbid a taste...we must say that their conduct generally was orderly and decorous, only a few unthinking young men displaying a levity most unbecoming the dreadful scene.'⁴²

On the whole the *Liverpool Mercury* was typically much more negative in its reportage of execution crowds than the other three newspapers. This was part of a broader campaign against capital punishment that was carried out in the *Mercury's* pages; one that stemmed from the reformist efforts of its proprietor-editor, Egerton Smith, and, following his death in 1841, subsequent editors.⁴³ By highlighting, and possibly exaggerating, the disorderly nature of the crowds that gathered to witness executions in the county, the newspaper hoped to highlight to its readers all that was wrong with public executions and capital punishment. Like the *Bury and Norwich Post*, the *Mercury* regularly published editorials and letters critical of capital punishment and rehearsing abolitionist arguments. In particular, it regularly criticised the stance of the conservative *Liverpool Courier* on a variety of topics, including capital punishment. Thus, when, in 1838, the *Courier* decried the *Mercury's* abolitionist position, referring to its rival as 'the murderer's advocate', the latter replied with equal vehemence to what it termed 'the hangman's advocate'.

The *Mercury* rehearsed two broad critiques of capital punishment in its pages, all of which echoed those heard in national debates. Primarily the paper argued that public executions did not deter, but, instead, brutalised those who witnessed them. Incidences of 'ribald and profane jesting', laughter, jeering and generally boorish behaviour at the foot of the gallows were clear evidence that the 'moral lesson of the scaffold' was not being inculcated by its desired audience. It also argued that capital punishment was a remnant of a bygone, less civilised

⁴⁰ 'Execution of the condemned murderers – Stew and Evans', *Manchester Courier*, 11 January 1845, p. 3.

⁴¹ 'The execution of Hardman for the murder of his wife at Chorley', *Lancaster Gazette*, 5 September 1857, p. 6.

⁴² 'Execution at Lancaster', *Liverpool Mercury*, 30 August 1853, p. 3.

⁴³ Anthony Foggo, 'Liverpool Mercury' in Laurel Brake and Marysa Demor (eds.) *Dictionary of nineteenth century journalism* (London: British Library Publishing Division, 2009), 368-9.

past. In describing one execution crowd in one of the final public executions in the city, it waxed ironically how

If they knew of it, how these lovers of the horrible must have looked back with longing to the 'good old times,' when an execution was really something to create a sensation – when there was a procession of perhaps a mile or two to the place of execution – when the condemned were (for it was generally a plural number) not infrequently in a state of semi-intoxication – and when the hangman might be seen, as in Hogath's picture, sitting upon the gallows smoking his pipe. Our times are more decorous.⁴⁴

Just under half of the reports published in the *Mercury* that were sampled were critical of the crowds that attended executions (49%). In addition to the two areas of criticism explored above, the *Mercury* also regularly bemoaned the presence of respectable people – or at least those with pretensions to respectability – at executions. This, again, was a trope that was regularly rehearsed by both critics and defenders of capital punishment alike; that no respectable person would willingly attend an execution. Several of those who gave evidence to the Capital Punishment Commission claimed to have either never attended an execution or have only done so reluctantly in the course of their official duties. As one opponent of capital punishment told the Commission, 'no gentleman, except from pure eccentricity, and no respectable woman, would go to see an execution'. Any respectable person who attended an execution, he went on, 'is considered to belong to a degraded class of persons who like to witness horrible and repulsive sights'.⁴⁵

Nevertheless, respectable members of society regularly attended executions in Liverpool and elsewhere. The *Liverpool Mercury* excoriated against this, stating in no uncertain terms in its report of the execution of Thomas Gallagher in 1860, 'It was a most sickening sight to see hundreds of women, many respectfully attired, gazing with an anxious look upon the scaffold, and many of them holding their offspring in their arms to obtain a good view of the horrible spectacle'.⁴⁶ Likewise, it observed at the execution of Thomas Edwards three years later, how 'amongst the individuals who thus sought to gratify their morbid curiosity was observed a female in the attire of a lady – muff, veil, and the *etceteras*...'.⁴⁷ It reserved particular opprobrium for those in attendance who affected respectability, such as the 'no inconsiderable portion of [women] who attended the execution of Taylor and Ward in 1862. These, the newspaper related,

...were anxious to pass for 'ladies,' being arrayed in 'silks and satins,' velvet mantles, and carrying flashly-coloured parasols. Some of these 'ladies' met with rather

⁴⁴ 'Execution at Kirkdale gaol', *Liverpool Mercury*, 11 January 1864, p. 5.

⁴⁵ 'Report of the Capital Punishment Commission', 351-2.

⁴⁶ 'Execution of Thomas Gallagher', *Liverpool Mercury*, 10 September 1860, p. 3.

⁴⁷ 'Execution of Edwards, the murderer'

unpleasant treatment, in the shape of getting their crinolines 'crushed up to nothing,' and some of them got knocked down and trampled on, to their great annoyance of course, which they expressed in no measured or elegant terms.⁴⁸

As noted previously, executions could be dangerous occasions, particularly for women and the young. However, the *Mercury's* main concern here is not the possible injuries received by the women, but, rather, that they were attempting to pass for respectable women ('ladies') through their dress when presumably from the tone of the piece they were not. In the eyes of the writer, not only were they failing to do so, but their ostentatious dress – 'silks and satins' and 'flashly-coloured parasols' – and coarse language betrayed their true class origins and lack of respectability.

It is notable that on many occasions the *Mercury* described the crowd at a particular execution in negative terms while acknowledging that it behaved in a relatively orderly way. In its reportage of the execution of Captain Rogers in 1857 the newspaper lamented how the occasion had brought together 'the great portion of the scum of society' comprising

wretched and debased men and women – prostitutes, thieves, and vagabonds of every description – the residents of filthy and abominable courts and cellars, places known only to the police There were, we are sorry to say, many decently-attired, respectable-looking females pushing their way in the crowd, but the majority of the women were disreputable and abandoned characters, who seemed, by their conversation and manner, highly delighted at having an opportunity of seeing a man hanged. The most deplorable sight of all, we thought, was to see fathers and mothers with babes in their arms, and children led by their hand, wending their way through the dirty and muddy streets to the place of execution. Another melancholy spectacle was observable in gangs of bareheaded ragged urchins, boys and girls, ranging from five to twelve years of age.⁴⁹

Even so, the newspaper went on, the crowd were 'well-behaved and orderly; as much so as could be expected under the circumstances' and 'behaved with the utmost decorum'.⁵⁰

Similarly, in its report of the execution of Duncan MacPhail and George Woods in 1863, the *Mercury* denounced 'the morbid curiosity displayed on these occasions' as 'something astonishing', highlighting for particular opprobrium 'The behaviour of some of the younger men'. This, it claimed 'was anything but creditable; the foul expressions used and the levity displayed were perfectly disgraceful'. In addition, the newspaper noted the presence of 'many respectably-dressed persons, and even women with children in their arms', who were seen pushing their way to the front of the crowd in order to obtain a good view of the execution.

⁴⁸ 'Double execution at Kirkdale Gaol', *Liverpool Mercury*, 15 September 1862, p. 5.

⁴⁹ 'The murder on the high seas. Execution of Captain Henry Rogers', *Liverpool Mercury*, 14 September 1857, p. 5.

⁵⁰ 'The murder on the high seas. Execution of Captain Henry Rogers'.

Nevertheless, it went on, the number of women present was less than on former occasions, and 'The crowd from the time the culprits made their appearance on the scaffold, behaved in the most orderly manner...'.⁵¹ In this way, the *Mercury* railed against both the plebeian background of the crowd and the presence of respectable persons on such occasions, even where the former's behaviour was not disorderly. The presence of persons of any social class or gender at an execution was therefore deplorable in its own right, irrespective of how decorous or not their behaviour.

On several occasions the *Liverpool Mercury* presented an ambivalent description of the crowd at a particular execution where the other newspapers represented it in neutral or even positive terms. For example, in its reportage of the execution of Thomas Grimes in 1866, the *Manchester Courier* simply highlighted that the crowd was initially a lot smaller than previous ones; large numbers being presumably deterred from standing outside for several hours before the execution because of the inclement weather. As the time of execution drew near the size of the crowd increased until there were around 50,000 persons present.⁵² Both the *Lancaster Gazette* and the *Manchester Times* were positive in their appraisal of the crowd, the former noting with approval how it was generally quiet and orderly with little noise either from 'larking roughs' or psalm singers. There were also comparatively few women present. The latter newspaper concurred adding that 'as the time for the execution drew near, the crowd quieted down still more, and whatever talk there was carried on in little above a whisper'.⁵³ In contrast, while agreeing that the crowd 'was very orderly – unusually so, in fact', the *Liverpool Mercury* nevertheless castigated at length the behaviour and motivations of those in attendance. Noting that the crowd appeared more respectable than on previous occasions, it added caustically 'that is, if respectability is to be judged of from the clothes which people wear'. Clearly, for the *Mercury*, no respectable person would attend an execution. The newspaper also noted that many men were accompanied by 'sweethearts dressed in their best', some of them carrying infants. The execution of a felon, it speculated, being 'evidently the first sight in their day of "pleasure"'. Indeed, it interpreted the lack of psalm singers and tract distributors at the execution as evidence that these men and women had realised that those to whom they hoped to minister were unlikely to approach the occasion with the appropriate, receptive solemnity. Certainly, it concluded, 'The ribald language in which some of the visitors indulged as they proceeded on their way to the scene of the execution is at any

⁵¹ 'Double execution at Kirkdale', *Liverpool Mercury*, 28 April 1863, p. 10.

⁵² Execution of Thomas Grime', *Lancaster Gazette*, 8 September 1866, p. 10.

⁵³ 'Execution of the Wigan Murderer', *Manchester Times*, 8 September 1866, p. 7.

rate against the supposition that they were at all affected by the sight they were about to witness'.⁵⁴

Conclusion

The evidence from the Lancashire press suggests two possible conclusions. On the one hand, the large proportion of neutral descriptions found in the *Lancaster Gazette*, *Manchester Times* and *Manchester Courier* suggests that provincial execution crowds, at least in Lancaster, were possibly better behaved than those in the Metropolis. It is possible, in other words, that the image of riotous execution crowds found in the polemics of commentators such as Dickens and Wakefield and the work of subsequent historians was largely a Metropolitan phenomenon. On the other hand, a more radical conclusion that could be drawn, developing from that of White, is that the riotous execution crowd was an invention of – or at least an exaggeration propounded by – critics of capital punishment.

Despite the growing critique of execution crowds from the 1840s onwards, the majority of execution reportage in three of the Lancashire newspapers sampled described such crowds in the county in neutral terms. That is to say, bearing in mind that the four newspapers did not hold back in criticizing crowds when they behaved in a manner that offended middle class sensibilities, neutral descriptions (or even a complete absence of a mention) could be read as evidence for the crowds on these occasions behaving in a manner that was not deemed as meriting concern.

In contrast, then, to the state of affairs in Norfolk, there was little real difference between liberal and conservative newspapers in how executions were represented. Whereas in Norfolk the conservative *Norfolk Chronicle* sought to legitimate capital punishment in its reportage and the liberal *Bury and Norwich Post* pursued a reformist agenda through editorials and printed letters, there was little to distinguish the representations of execution crowds found within the Lancashire newspapers sampled. Rather, the crucial difference was not between broadly liberal and conservative newspapers, but between the *Liverpool Mercury* and the other three newspapers. Again, several reasons can be speculated upon for why this was the case. It may have been the case the *Mercury* and two Norfolk newspapers were anomalies, and that in general the provincial press during the period did not pursue a strong agenda either for or against in its execution reportage. Another interpretation could be that the critique of capital punishment found in the *Mercury* and the *Post* – or the pro-capital punishment views of the

⁵⁴ 'Execution at Kirkdale Gaol', *Liverpool Mercury*, 4 September 1866, p. 9.

Norfolk Chronicle - reflected the strongly-held views of their respective proprietors and editors, views possibly not held as strongly by the proprietors/editors of the other newspapers.⁵⁵ This is a question that merits further research.

Leaving to one side the execution reportage found in the *Liverpool Mercury*, only between 11% and just over a third of descriptions of execution crowds found in the Lancashire newspapers sampled presented the crowd negatively. The proportion of negative descriptions did not increase across any of the newspapers as execution crowds became increasingly problematized in elite discourse from the 1840s onwards. That said, negative reportage repeated the same kinds of criticisms that were found in national debates; that such crowds acted in an inappropriate manner, betrayed an inappropriate attitude to the moral lesson before them, or contained persons deemed to be an inappropriate audience for such displays. In contrast, positive reports emphasized the crowd's decorous behaviour and the solemnity of the occasion. In other words, execution crowds were seen and judged through the prism of middle class notions of respectability. The irony here is that, like Dickens, journalists and other correspondents bemoaned the awfulness of public executions while simultaneously attending and describing them in detail to their readers. Therefore the space given to execution reports in contemporary newspapers shows both their 'newsworthiness' and the interest that they generated for their readership.

As John Tulloch has observed, journalists during this period 'arguably...saw in the [execution] crowd what they wanted to see'.⁵⁶ This was particularly the case with the *Liverpool Mercury*, which was a vehement critic of capital punishment and the practice of public executions over the period under investigation. In contrast to the other three newspapers, the majority of execution reports published in the *Mercury* depicted the crowds in a negative way. Indeed, it did so even while simultaneously agreeing with other published accounts that a particular crowd had generally behaved in an orderly and respectful manner. In this way, the *Mercury* saw and depicted execution crowds as a symbol of all that was wrong with public executions and capital punishment more broadly. Both were remnants of a less civilized age that did not deter would be offenders, but only served to further brutalise those who witnessed, as the newspaper termed it, 'a fellow-creature strangled by the hands of the common executioner'.⁵⁷

⁵⁵ Lucy Brown, *Victorian News and Newspapers* (Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1988)

⁵⁶ Tulloch, 'The privatising of pain', p. 441.

⁵⁷ 'Double execution at Kirkdale', *Liverpool Mercury*, 28 April 1863, p. 10.