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The tailor of Diss

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The tailor of Diss:

Sodomy and murder in a Norfolk market town

Midway between Norwich and Ipswich, on the borders of Norfolk and Suffolk, lies the old market town of Diss, by-passed by the main road, which runs about two miles to the east. For three days in the spring of 1742 this quiet community became the centre of attraction throughout East Anglia, and was visited by thousands of people, wishing to attend the most popular spectator sport of the eighteenth century - a public execution. The town had been the scene of a particularly sordid murder, committed the previous November. Now that the time had come to punish the malefactor, the citizens were determined to exploit the full commercial potential of the event. They did this by organising a number of public spectacles, which went beyond the customary practices attending public executions and turned the legal process into a gruesome circus. Four contemporary accounts of these events also throw some light on prevailing attitudes towards homosexuals in a small community, who were tolerated only so long as their practices were kept out of the public eye.¹

The largest congregation to attend a service at the handsome parish church (either before or since) did not do so for the good of their souls or to hear the excellent sermon preached by the Reverend Edward Chappelow. On Sunday 4th April 1742, between two and four thousand people crowded in to the church and churchyard, hoping to glimpse a member of the congregation - a local tailor named Robert Carlton. He had been brought there, and was now sitting in his usual pew under close guard, for the week before he had been convicted of one of the most celebrated crimes of his generation. The following day he was to be hanged on Diss Common for the crimes of sodomy with his young lodger and for poisoning his lodger's fiancée.

Robert Carlton was born in 1695 "of honest and upright parents", who gave him the best education they could afford, and bound him apprentice to a local tailor. For several years he served his master faithfully, but at the expiry of the apprenticeship he was "led astray by a company of sodomites, which unnatural practice he followed ever after". For twenty years or more in the town "he was notoriously guilty of that abominable sin", but no complaints were made against him; and he was able to pursue his business and private life without hindrance or persecution. That is until, when in his forties, the tailor fell desperately in love with a young man named John Lincoln, who soon became his "lodger and bed-fellow".

For some time the two men enjoyed a relationship, until Lincoln tired of his middle-aged lover and their secretive way of life. He began courting a young country girl named Mary Frost, from Redgrave in Suffolk, and even brought her back to his lodgings. Carlton then became very angry and threatened Lincoln that

"if he ever brought his whores near to him he would do them some mischief". But paying no regard to Carlton's feelings, the young couple continued to meet and a few weeks later announced their intention of marrying. The tailor attempted to dissuade his young friend from matrimony at first, but then flew into a jealous rage and reputedly threatened to poison her.

On the evening of 15th November 1741, Carlton, apparently now reconciled to the marriage, invited Mary and Samuel Fuller, her landlord, to his house for supper on a cold loin of mutton. The salt on the table was used up once Fuller had been served, and so the host went out of the room to get the girl some more, and then "entreated her to eat heartily". That night she became violently sick, and "swelled very much". Her friends got assistance as soon as they could, "blister'd her and purg'd her, but to no purpose." Mary Frost died in agony at Fuller's house the following day, and "when the doctors open'd her they found all her entrails quite affected by the poison". Lincoln and Fuller impeached Carlton for the murder, who was arrested and taken to Thetford to stand trial at the next Assizes.

The horrific death of a young girl, apparently at the hands of a jealous middle-aged homosexual, attracted a great deal of interest. The trial was well attended and widely reported throughout the region. Lincoln, in his evidence, admitted to his relationships with both Robert Carlton and Mary Frost, and recounted the threats to poison her. Thomas Bacon, an apprentice apothecary from Diss, testified that he had sold "sublimate of mercury" to Carlton to kill rats and mice. Finally Samuel Fuller told the story of their meal together, and suggested that the salt given to Mary had been mixed with the poison. Carlton in his turn admitted to sodomy, but to the last denied having administered the poison, claiming instead that Fuller must have been the murderer. With the weight of evidence against him, the tailor was inevitably found guilty. He was one of six men sentenced to death at the Thetford Assizes, but the only one for murder, and he was the only one to suffer execution. The other death sentences were for horse stealing or house breaking, and these were subsequently commuted to transportation.

Executions outside of London were still not very common in the early eighteenth century, and even a city such as Norwich - the third largest in Britain - might go a dozen or more years without one.² During the Hanoverian period more and more crimes became subject to capital punishment, and by the early nineteenth century offenders might be hanged for committing any one of 222 different crimes. However it is debatable whether the actual number of executions rose as sympathetic juries might still acquit or find criminals guilty of lesser non-capital offences, and death sentences might be commuted. When they did occur, public executions would always attract spectators from every level of society, and become a great social event. Later in the eighteenth century, Parson Woodforde recorded in his diary several visits made to Norwich just for this purpose, from his home in Weston Longueville eight miles away.³ On those occasions when he was too ill or otherwise unable to go, Woodforde would send a servant, with instructions to bring

him back an account. A market town such as Diss rarely saw an execution, and in 1742 there had been none within living memory. It was even necessary to construct a new gallows and gibbet just for the occasion, and decide upon a suitable place for the execution.

Murderers were frequently executed at, or close to, the scene of their crimes. This had happened in Norwich in 1700 with Robert Watts a weaver, who slit his wife's throat and was hanged in front of his house in St Augustine's parish.⁴ But a particularly large crowd was expected to attend for this notorious case, which might be dangerous in a confined area, in the centre of the town. (In 1807 such a crowd in a similarly confined situation in London crushed and trampled to death nearly one hundred people including many children.⁵) Also the rowdyism, drunkenness, bad-language, petty thieving, and occasional violence among spectators at executions was becoming a national scandal, just as two and a half centuries later they would be a problem among the spectators at another sport. It was therefore thought preferable to erect the gallows upon the open common land between Diss and the nearby village of Scole.

Carlton's homosexuality was undoubtedly an element in the popular interest in the case, and an added attraction for the crowds who were expected to attend the planned spectacles. Mid-eighteenth century society's attitude towards homosexuals was often ambivalent, and unhappy individuals could be the subject of vicious persecution. The week before the report of Carlton's trial, the *Norwich Mercury* contained an account of another homosexual sentenced to stand in the pillory at the Royal Exchange in London, who was "most severely used by the populace; particularly by an Amazon, who tore off the greatest part of his cloaths, whipp'd him with rods for a long while, and diverted the spectators with some other extraordinary discipline".⁶ Carlton's sodomy may have been ignored by the local community in Diss for twenty years or more, when he had been potentially liable for capital conviction at any time, however, now that he was shown also to be a murderer, and his sexuality was the subject of widespread public discussion, he could not expect very sympathetic treatment.

On the Monday morning, following his appearance at church, the second 'event' was organised for the benefit of the spectators. Although Robert Carlton continued to deny knowledge of the murder, he could not bring himself to condemn his young lover who had testified against him. Thus the two men were brought together at a local alehouse, where, under public gaze, they each "drank a pint of ale and ate a biscuit together, and parted good friends". Another account says that Carlton gave to John Lincoln his shears, scissors, and a thimble, together with two sixpences, and told him that "though he died for him, he loved him to the last"

Throughout the day a multitude had been assembling from miles around to witness the events in the town and on the common, eventually numbering more than ten thousand persons. Among them was the local historian, the Reverend Francis

Blomefield, who was also the Rector of the nearby village of Fersfield, and was then engaged upon writing his majestic history of Norfolk.⁷ His account of that day not only described the events in some detail but also quoted appropriate Biblical texts and drew learned comparisons with God's punishment of "the denizens of the cities on the plain". Unfortunately, Blomefield had but recently completed and published his history of Diss, and so his account of Carlton's crimes and execution would never be printed. He had to be satisfied with writing into an interleaved copy of his work.

At about four o'clock in the afternoon, the wretched Carlton was eventually brought to the scaffold in an open cart, and taken up in front of the jeering crowd, to face his hangman. After prayers, conducted by the local rector, he was once again offered the chance publicly to confess to the murder, but rather continued to deny all responsibility. Otherwise he appeared to be most penitent, as he was hooded, the noose placed round his neck, and he met his end. However the celebrations at Diss were not permitted to end quite so quickly; not before the townsfolk had exploited all the commercial opportunities afforded by such a fortuitous event. The next public spectacle involved Carlton's body being cut down and hurriedly carried back to the house where the murder had been committed, where it was "hung up upon a balk in the middle of the room, and shown at two pence a piece".

At the same time, a very crudely, and anonymously printed account of the crime, the criminal, and the execution, was hawked around among the assembled crowd, one copy of which was preserved by Blomefield. This was printed on about 1/8th of a sheet of very poor quality paper, it had no illustrative or decorative matter, and as usual with such productions, had several details wrong. Since there was no printing business in Diss in the 1740s, this small publication poses a number of problems, as to when and where it was printed. It was undoubtedly printed for sale to the spectators, and must either have been printed on or near the spot, or else have been prepared the day before by a printer in Bury St Edmunds, Norwich, or Ipswich, who filled in some of the final details by guess-work.

The nearest working press to the town at this time was Blomefield's own at his rectory at Fersfield, but it is most unlikely that he also printed the account, since it contains none of his typographical material, and more particularly as it badly mistakes the name of the local rector who was a close friend. Similarly it seems to be too crude to have come from the reasonably well established presses in Norwich and Ipswich, and was certainly not advertised or mentioned in the newspapers in the former city. There had been a press in Bury St Edmund's in the mid-1730s, as Blomefield's first journeyman, Nicholas Hussey, had previously been employed at "Bayly's printing house".⁸ Thus this small publication was perhaps one of the first surviving printed items from this town, or else it may even have been printed on the spot, by some small press brought to the town just for that purpose.

On the following day there came the final chapter in the grisly story. In accordance with the sentence of the court at Thetford, Carlton's body was put in chains, and hung from a tall gibbet, erected on Diss common close to the gallows, where it could be seen for miles around. It was left to rot and be eaten by the crows, whilst the people of Diss returned to their everyday pursuits and counted their profits after the three eventful days. Carlton's name does not appear among the burials in the Diss parish register, except in a brief note attached to the entry for Mary Frost indicating his crime and punishment. The same register shows that John Lincoln, who had escaped prosecution by giving evidence against his former lover, married a widow in October 1742, but within three months he too had died.

Clearly, Carlton and Lincoln were not the only known practising homosexuals living in the small town at this time. Writing a few days afterwards, Francis Blomefield commented that the tailor of Diss "hangs there as a just example to all such villains, & especially to those of this place, who were concerned with him in his detestable practices".

David Stoker

Aberystwyth March 1990

Notes

[1.](#) This article is based upon a manuscript account of the execution written by Francis Blomefield and the printed broadsheet sold at the scene of the execution (both preserved in Bodleian Library MS. Gough Norfolk 43). Further details are from contemporary newspaper reports of the trial and execution in the *Norwich Mercury* and *Norwich Gazette* for March and April 1742 (both preserved in Norfolk County Library Local Studies Collection).

[2.](#) A comment to this effect was made in the *Norwich Gazette* 172*****.

[3.](#) James Woodforde *The diary of a country parson* edited by John Beresford 5v Oxford 1924-1931 (entries for April 7 1781 v.1 306, and March 19 1790 v.3 179).

[4.](#) Francis Blomefield *An essay towards a topographical history of Norfolk*, Fersfield, Norwich and Lynn 1736-1775.

[5.](#) This was reported in the *Newgate Calendar (Jackson)* at the execution of Owen Haggerty.

[6.](#) *Norwich Mercury* March 13-20 1742.

[7.](#) See note 4.

[8.](#) Blomefield's *Journal and letter book* (Norfolk Record Office, Rye Ms.32).