

ARSENIC & SOFT SOAP
The story of one of Britain's most prolific killers
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By
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Mary Ann Cotton
She's dead and she's rotten
She lies in her bed
With her eyes wide oppen*

Sing sing oh, what can I sing
Mary Ann Cotton is tied up with string
Where where, up in the air
Sellin' black puddens a penny a pair
(*Oppen-Northeast slang for open)

The above rhyme, still sung by playing children in and around the Northeast of England, has perhaps the most sinister origins of any verse written in the 19th Century.

Written shortly after the death of Mary Ann Cotton, it celebrates the life of one of Britain's most prolific mass murderess's.



Mary Ann Cotton

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Mary Ann was born 1832 in a tiny pit village called Wesleyan Faith within the County of Durham. Little is known of her childhood years other than she was born to working class parents that were never a far distance financially from the dreaded workhouses. There is evidence that she was brought up in the Christian faith and she even taught Sunday school classes when she was in her teens. Mary Ann's early life was, until her trial, shrouded in mystery. After a lengthy period away from the region, she became a Ward Nurse in the main fever hospital at Sunderland. Again little is known about her life as a carer, suffice to say she was working in an age where premature mortality and disease were rife...a nurse's duties were often restrained to making the dying as comfortable as the limited resources allowed. One notable account of her time in the hospital recorded that Mary Ann worked her way to a position that she had unrestricted access to the medicines, a duty normally only allowed for Doctors and Surgeons. She met Frederick Cotton sometime between 1868-70 and married him on September 17th 1870. Mary Ann surprised her new husband to be on the wedding day when she gave the registrar details of her former husband who had died of fever. They moved to West Auckland, County Durham in the summer of 1871 when Frederick was transferred from North Walbottle colliery in Newcastle to the coal yards of Durham.

They brought with them Frederick's two children from his previous marriage and their own new-born son. Mary Ann had declared her deceased husband's name as Mowbray, but had failed to reveal that she had, soon after the death of Mowbray, married a Sunderland shipwright, James Robinson who was still very much alive. Therefore her marriage to the unfortunate Frederick was a bigamous one.



The Cotton's moved into a house in Johnson Terrace, now called Darlington Road and soon mixed with the neighbours in the village. Frederick religiously delivered his unopened wages to his wife's waiting hands, an action that caused him to suffer an unprecedented amount of ridicule from his fellow miners who always washed the grime and toil of their backbreaking work away with a pint or two at the local Tavern.

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On the morning of September 17th 1871 Frederick suddenly bent double in agony whilst at work and was pronounced dead when the local Doctor arrived.

The Doctor diagnosed cause of death as gastric fever and Frederick Cotton aged 39 was taken, by wheelbarrow, to the local church to await laying out. Mary Ann was informed of her husband's death later that morning, but didn't go to the church till the evening, and not before going to the colliery offices to pick up his owed wages. She attended his funeral carrying their baby son, but she left Frederick's two children with a neighbour. Living in a close community, Mary Ann welcomed the care and attention the locals offered.

The Northeast of England was an industrialised area that was largely populated by extremely poor families, but it was rich with human kindness...especially for a young widow with three children.

Frederick's work mate, Joseph Nattrass began calling on Mary Ann to bring little bits of groceries and provisions. He suggested that he move in as a lodger so she could benefit from a little extra income and he would be closer to the colliery. Within weeks there was talk of marriage. Things in the Cotton house soon settled back to routine, Mary Ann had a new provider, the children had a new man in the house and Frederick lay rotting beneath the old church yard.

With her supposed knowledge of health matters, neighbours occasionally called upon Mary Ann to diagnose any and all ailments that were in their families. She made potions for mothers whose children were sick and even the local Doctor asked her to look after a resident in her street who was suffering a mystery illness.

Mr Quick-Manning an excise officer at West Auckland Brewery who had lodgings at Brookfield cottage, a larger and better house in Johnson Terrace, was suffering extreme pains in his legs that prevented him from attending his work. Mary Ann would call upon him twice a day to wrap his legs in scalded bandages...and to give him a spoonful of her own home-made remedy. The relationship grew and once again there were whispers of marriage.

Mr Quick-Manning surprisingly began to recover and when he was able to go out, he told all who asked that it was Mary Ann's healing skills that had cured him. Dr. Kilburn called on Quick-Manning and asked him to stop labelling Mary Ann as some great healer, he further told him that his complaint was probably 'Gout,' (an inflammatory disease caused by irregular ureic-acid metabolism) and the arthritic type pains would have eased anyway...he had merely asked Mary Ann to call on him to alleviate his own house call schedule.

For Mary Ann, the attention was gleefully received and she began to boast that her skills would help her open her own Dispensary. She was so swathed in confidence that she decided it was time clear the way for her and Mr. Quick-Manning to marry.

The village was stunned when they heard of another tragedy in the Cotton household.

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Frederick Cotton, eldest son of the late Frederick senior was found dead at the top of the stairs on 10th March 1872. The boy, aged ten years was lying face down on the landing when the Doctor arrived. His right hand had to be prised away from the thread bare matting that covered the floorboards. There was severe scuffing to the floorboards made by the boys boots and he had defecated across the floor before collapsing. Mary Ann was visibly shaking at the foot of the stairs as two men from the street carried young Frederick down, a glue like vomit dripped from his open mouth. The doctor laid the body on the living room floor before carrying out a hasty examination. His immediate diagnosis was that the cause of death was fever, Frederick had vomited in the main street just the day before and the woman next door had told the Doctor this as the body was being brought downstairs. Mary Ann organised the funeral to be held the day after, so the body remained in the living room overnight.

When the Undertaker came to collect the body, there was a coloured scarf tied tightly around the mouth...Mary explained that it was to prevent the hearth matting from being stained.

Two weeks later, Mary Ann ran into the streets screaming that her baby was dead. Passers-by ran into the house to find Robert Robson Cotton aged 14 months (named after Mary Ann's Brother) lying in his wooden crib. There were weak signs of life coming from the baby so one of the passers-by ran down to get the Doctor. When he returned with the Doctor's assistant, Mr. Chalmers, the baby was lying face down in the crib...dead.

Emily Stillet, who had been left with Mary Ann told the Doctor that neither her or Mary Ann had entered the room where the crib was, she later told a friend that Mary Ann had asked her to go get a blanket that was airing above the kitchen stove, but never thought at the time that there was any need to reveal this. In the village, doubts began to emerge about the fact that there had been three deaths in the one house in less than a year. However, as many families in the Northeast had similar unfortunate death rates, the malicious chit chat often fell upon deaf ears. The coal yard where Frederick Cotton had worked, supplied free coal to the Cotton house as a gesture of sympathy.

Mary Ann was the talk of the village and the commiseration for her tragic plight was spoke of as far away as Newcastle. Joseph Nattrass, who had been a pillar of strength to Mary Ann throughout the treble calamity, urged her now to marry him. By 1st April he too was found dead in one of the outbuildings behind Mary Ann's house. Amazingly there was still no real connection linked to the deaths, there was the re-emergence of the stories that Mary Ann was murdering her family and sympathy for the widow was dwindling by the day, but still the Doctors remained satisfied and the Police remained unaware of the situation. Soon after burying Nattrass and collecting his money, Mary Ann announced that she was pregnant with Mr. Quick-Manning's child. For the women of the village, such an announcement, was met with obvious disdain. Mary Ann lived amongst poor but proud wives and mothers who battled against poverty with remarkable determination.

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For them to see a woman equal to themselves in social standing with such an apparent callousness to tragedy, made any lingering sympathies difficult to apply



Mary Ann remained unaffected by the gossip. She would walk around the village as she had always done....only now, she was spending the money brutally ripped from the people closest to her. She took two young brothers named Taylor in to her home and used their presence as an excuse to leave the house in Johnson Terrace and move to a bigger dwelling at 13 Front Street. The new home was a three storey terraced building that looked across the village. It was only marginally taller in stature than the more common two floored properties, but the extra floor made such homes very sought after by the average working family. The two Taylor brothers moved out soon after the move and Mary Ann was left alone with Frederick Cotton's youngest son Charles Edward aged 7.

The money from Frederick and Joseph had dwindled away and Mary Ann was angry that she was unable to earn more because she had the burden of a child at her home. Thomas Riley, the Assistant Overseer of West Auckland and proprietor of the corner shop asked Mary Ann to care for a young orphan that was suffering from smallpox. She agreed, but only on the condition that

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Riley issued an order that young Charles Edward be put in the local Workhouse.

Riley said he would write the papers...but only if he could have sex with her. Mary Ann refused the offer and decided on a more permanent method of ridding herself of the young boy.

Early the following morning on 12th July, Mary Ann stood on the doorstep of 13 Front Street crying 'My boy's dead.' Passer-by, Julie Riley, heard the crying and went to assist. She later told Police that the scene was false and her state was nothing more than a show. Riley left Mary Ann in the doorway of the house and instructed a neighbour to fetch the Doctor. Julie Riley then walked to Bishop Police Station and reported the scene. She repeated her own opinions about the deaths surrounding Mary Ann several times, almost forcing the officers to take notice.

Sergeant Tom Hutchinson called upon Dr. Kilburn who was surprised to hear of Charles Edward's death, stating...'Well, it was only yesterday that he took my last two black bullets from me.' (Black Bullets- a menthol candy ball, sucked to alleviate stuffiness of the nasal passages)

Mr. Chalmers reiterated that he too had seen the boy on a number of occasions the previous day and that he was looking 'jolly' each time. When they went to Mary Ann's home and were greeted with the usual scene...a distraught mother and the pitiful sight of a young child lying crumpled in a macabre stance of violent death,

Dr. Kilburn refused to issue the death certificate. He announced to the witnessing Policemen present that he would be 'particular about a closer examination of the deceased.'

For Mary Ann, this was a double blow. She had already informed the Prudential Insurance Agency of the death and had told the Undertaker to come and collect the body.

The Prudential agent called later that day, but refused to hand over the £4-10s-0d as there was no certificate pronouncing death.

The death was reported to the Coroner, who advised Dr. Kilburn to carry out a post-mortem immediately. The examination of the body took place on the kitchen table in Mary Ann's house on the morning of 13th July 1872, with the inquest opening an hour later in the bar of the Rose & Crown Inn next door. Dr. Kilburn had examined the contents of the boy's stomach but could not find anything to indicate foul play. He told the inquest that Charles Edward had probably succumbed to gastro-enteritis, but could not be definite when pressed for a more conclusive diagnosis. The board gave their verdict after a short deliberation...death by natural causes.

Thomas Riley, still biting over his earlier knock back from Mary Ann, refused to accept the verdict and spoke of how he had been asked to throw the boy in to the workhouse. Nevertheless, the inquest closed on its original decision and Mary Ann threw a final insult to the whole tragedy by stating she was unable to afford the funeral and would therefore leave it to Thomas Riley. Riley accepted the costs and Charles Edward was buried in a paupers grave two days later.

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Newspapers had taken an interest in the recent events and the details of the inquest were reported in the Newcastle Journal. Mary Ann told a neighbour that she didn't approve of her personal tragedies being broadcast by the papers and was full of rage when she read how the paper had included opinions that some local folk regarded her as a wholesale poisoner. Despite growing suspicions, she continued her relationship with Mr. Quick-Manning, often visiting his home late at night and not leaving till the following morning. She discussed the gossip about her with Quick-Manning, who suggested that they move away to Northumbria for a while.

Mary Ann agreed that a break would be beneficial, but she had kept from him the fact she'd recently taken in another lodger. William Lowery, a traveller, had asked Mary Ann for a room and was given board for one or two days. She spoke to Lowery about finding other lodgings and it was his exhaustive enquiries about the village that alerted Mr. Quick-Manning to his boarding with Mary Ann. He immediately had a change of heart and finished their relationship, saying that the gossip and frequent visitors to her home were too much to endure.

Mary Ann Cotton was distraught over the break up and took to her bed. Mrs. Dodds, a former neighbour from Johnson Terrace called on her and advised her to seek medical attention. Her condition was reported to the surgery but both Doctors refused to treat her. Lowery, finding himself the butt of many cruel jokes and idle tales, left the house but not before buying most of Mary Ann's furniture for £10.00.

At the autopsy a few days earlier, Dr. Kilburn had secretly kept part of Charles Edward's stomach, knowing he wouldn't have time for any chemical analysis of the contents before the inquest. He had his own suspicions and had listened intently to the stories circulating the village.

On Wednesday 17th July, he submitted the contents to a rough test for arsenic, known as the Reinsch's Test...the test proved positive.

At 11.30pm he made his way to Bishop Auckland police station and revealed his findings to Superintendent John Henderson.

The following morning, Dr. Kilburn, along with two sergeants knocked Mary Ann Cotton out of bed. They charged her on the doorstep of her home with the wilful murder of Charles Edward Cotton.

Mary Ann remained silent as the warrant was read out to her. The police officers led her by the arm back in to the house and held her whilst Dr. Kilburn searched the cupboards for more evidence. He found a little unlabelled powder, some pills, arrowroot and a small quantity of powdered red lead. Mary Ann Cotton was taken to Bondgate police station in Bishop Auckland and locked in one of the holding cells. The next morning she was escorted upstairs to the justice rooms to hear that she was to be remanded in custody awaiting trial.

On the 19th July William Dale Trotter Clerk to the Justices, wrote to the Home Office and asked the Secretary of State for permission to exhume the body of Charles Edward Cotton. A week later the coffin was unearthed, with Dr's Kilburn, Chalmers and four police officers being present. The body was taken

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to an empty house nearby, whereupon the Doctors set about the unpleasant task of re-examination. Samples were taken from the body and sealed in labelled jars. Faeces from the out-buildings at 13 Front Street was also taken away for examination. The samples were despatched to Dr. Thomas Scattergood, lecturer on Forensic Medicine and Toxicology at Leeds School of Medicine. Doctor Scattergood confirmed that substantial deposits of arsenic were found in the stomach, bowels, heart, liver, lungs, kidneys and faeces. The Committal hearings were held in Bondgate on 21st August 1872 and Mary Ann faced the charge of the wilful murder of her 7 year old stepson Charles Edward Cotton by administering arsenic or causing it to be administered. The two Magistrates present, Reverend James Hick and J. Jobson, listened to evidence from a number of people including Mrs. Dodds, Archibald Chambers the Surgeon and Dr Scattergood who had travelled up from Leeds to be present. He told the hearing that in his opinion, 'Death was caused by arsenic poisoning.'

Mary Ann Cotton sat motionless as she was told that she would be committed for trial at the next Durham Assizes. (Assizes-A session of legislative or judicial court)

That same day, Mary Ann was walked down Bondgate and on to Newgate Street to the train station.

During the walk, people lined the pavements, some yelled obscenities but most just stared in silent disbelief, mothers hid their children beneath their skirts, fearing the woman in black would gaze upon them. The Home Secretary issued a statement that any further exhumations relevant to the case should go ahead unhindered and sent a written order to that effect to Durham police station.

Joseph Nattrass was dug up on the 14th September and traces of arsenic found.

The two cotton children were next, Frederick senior could not be exhumed as his grave could not be found, either because paupers graves remained unmarked and unregistered in church records or the body had been stolen by grave robbers.

On the day the two boys were to be dug up, startling new evidence came to light concerning Mary Ann. The exhumations were postponed until further notice.

The new reports read that Mary Ann Cotton had been born around 1832 and that her father Michael Robson had been killed in 1846. She had married William Mowbray before moving to Plymouth, not returning to the Northeast for five years. She had told friends on her return that her and Mowbray had produced four children but all had died. Mowbray then took a job at South Hetton County Durham.

They then had four more children whilst living in Hendon Sunderland, three of which died. Mowbray himself collapsed outside a pawn shop in Sunderland and died soon afterwards.

Investigations in to the eight deaths revealed that all had been insured with the British and Prudential Insurance Company. It was around this time that

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Mary Ann had taken work at the Fever Infirmary Sunderland. She then married a Mr. George Ward who died days after the wedding aged 33. She left the hospital to be housekeeper to James Robinson whom she married six months later. Three of Robinson's children and the last Mowbray child all died around this period...the evidence included certificates of all the twelve dead, with the causes of death ranging from gastro enteritis to fever. Mary Ann also had two children with Robinson, one of which definitely died, but no record of the death could be found.

Durham offices issued a summons that James Robinson be called to give evidence for the prosecution, but he could not be traced. Work mates told police officers that Robinson had been convinced that Mary Ann had killed his children, before abandoning him deep in debt and he himself had refused to sign for an insurance policy on his life.

With the new evidence logged on the prosecution papers, the exhumations were given the go ahead. On 15th October 1872 the two Cotton boys were lifted from their resting places and placed on the autopsy tables. Mary Ann's health began to deteriorate and she was suffering badly with her pregnancy. Meanwhile, Dr Scattergood was writing out his reports about the quantities of arsenic found at the two Cotton boys autopsies.

On January 12th 1873 Mary Ann Cotton gave birth to her twelfth and final child, a girl, born in the clinic of Durham prison. She was summonsed to appear before the Magistrate's Col. Hall, J. Jobson, Major Hodgson and Rev. J.W. Hick on Friday 21st February, whereupon she arrived carrying her baby. A police photographer escorted her in to the waiting room to take an official photo, Mary Ann wore a black cotton dress, a black and white chequered shawl and a black bonnet trimmed with crepe. The photo was released for media coverage of the trial and is still today the most famous photo of her. Sixteen reporters filed in to the public galleries, including two from Leeds and four from Newcastle, the majority of the spectators were local women who had walked the 14 miles to get to the courthouses to hear the two minute hearing. As the prisoner was led in, a deathly silence crept round the room. Mary Ann listened to the charges being read out and stated 'Nothing to say at present,' when asked if she wished to reply. Colonel Hall informed the court that the trial would begin upon the arrival of Sir John Duke Coleridge, the Attorney General for England, and informed Mary Ann that she could return to her cell. On 5th March 1873 she re-entered the court room with the aid of a walking stick, a sight that brought jeers from the public gallery.

Coleridge appointed Charles Russell to lead the prosecution, and Campbell Foster acted for the defence. Mary Ann Cotton pleaded not guilty to the charges of wilful murder of the two Cotton Boys and Joseph Nattrass. The defence council hung on the fact that no arsenic had been found at the house, but had no answer to the prosecutions reply that Mary Ann had sent Charles Edward to Townsend Chemist to purchase 2-3 pennyworth of soft soap and arsenic. The druggist had refused to serve the boy due to the recent Dangerous Substance Act, whereupon Mary Ann had made the boy walk 4 miles to neighbouring Spennymoor Chemist.

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When the boy returned empty handed she sent neighbour Mary Dodds. The Chemist remembered that he sold Dodds ½ ounce of Arsenic and an 8oz block of soap, he added that 3 grains of arsenic was enough to kill an adult. Mary Dodds confirmed that she and Mary Ann had used half the arsenic and soap to rid the beds of bugs, but could not explain what the remainder had been used for.

Defence attempted to say that Frederick Cotton Jnr must have inhaled a fatal dose of arsenic while laying in bed and he had managed to crawl to the landing before collapsing.

Thomas Scattergood was called to the stand. He spoke of the autopsies. 'After cleansing the exhumed bodies of black soil, I found the stomachs patchy and inflamed, in my opinion, because of an irritant poison. There was no food in the stomach of Charles Edward, other than bits of raw onion skin...there was also 58/100th of a grain of arsenic in the substance of the bowels, liver, heart and lungs...there was none in the spleen.

The court adjourned and the jurors were locked in the Half Moon Hotel.

On re-opening, the prosecution had every autopsy report read out to the jury and repeated frequently the fact that over a dozen persons had died around Mary Ann, including her own Mother. The defence argued that witnesses agreed that whilst living in West Auckland, every emergency was dealt with by Mary Ann herself taking actions to get a Doctor to the scene...was this the actions of a poisoner? The defence spoke for around two hours, often returning to the death certificates, written by men of medicine, that clearly suggested their professional opinions as to causes of death.

Russell countered by stating that the deaths had been caused by direct and intentional administration of a poisonous substance and when suggestions were made that the deaths were through natural causes or accidental poisoning...then the law permitted such evidence to be given to negative these suggestions...The evidence being the quantities of arsenic found in the bodies. He further suggested that her early life as a nurse had allowed her a knowledge in to the administration of drugs and of when they may be applied. He told of the deaths that had continued to happen in Mary Ann's household and boldly suggested 'That only now would those deaths cease to continue.'

Mr Justice Archibald said that the case had been laid before the jury most fairly by Council for Prosecution, but stated that it was impossible to furnish direct evidence of the commission of crime, and if the law stated that you must have eye-witnesses, many, who are guilty of crimes would go unpunished. The jury retired around 3.50pm 7th March and returned less than an hour later. Mary Ann Cotton stood to hear the verdict, clutching tightly on to the brass hand rail. The Foreman, Mr T. Greener informed the court that a verdict had been agreed on.

Mary Ann Cotton stumbled as the 'Guilty' verdict was announced, she motioned to put her hands to her face, but stopped short. Mr. Justice Archibald received the black cap and placed it on his head. The Clerk asked the defendant if she had anything to say before sentence. Mary Ann

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mumbled a reply, and the judge had to ask the clerk what was said. The clerk replied that 'The defendant Mary Ann Cotton states that she is not guilty.' Archibald said...'In these last words I shall address you. I would earnestly urge you to seek for your soul, that only refuge that is left for you, in the mercy of God through the atonement of our Lord Jesus Christ. It only remains for me to pass upon you the sentence of the law, which is that you will be taken from hence from the place whence you came and from thence to a place of lawful execution, and there to be hanged by the neck until you are dead. Your body to be afterwards buried within the precincts of the gaol and may the Lord God have mercy on your soul.

Mary Ann Cotton was led away to her holding cell, before being transferred to death row.

Most prisons in 19th century England had their own procedure for the last moments of a condemned person and some even allowed the prisoner to have his/her partner live in the cell for the short time that was left. Durham prison was less easy-going with the condemned and its custom was based on giving adequate time for the unfortunate soul to make peace with God. A three Sunday delay was the common ritual in Durham, whereupon, the condemned would normally live through three Sundays before meeting the Hangman...this, it was thought, would allow ample time for repentance, confession and reflection. However, the custom meant prisoners like Mary Ann, who had been sentenced late in the week, had less time to live than those sentenced at the beginning.

Almost immediately she promoted the several petitions that had been started to apply for a reprieve and three letters were sent to the Home Secretary asking for leniency due to her having a suckling child. On Wednesday 19th March, Mary Ann Cotton was restrained in her cell whilst two women warders entered and took the baby from her. She was comforted by a local Priest while the Governor of the jail read her the official foster papers. He advised Mary Ann to work with him on finding suitable parents...the alternative being that if she refused consent, the child would be given over to the workhouse, where it would almost certainly perish.

There were over 150 applicants for Mary Ann's baby, including several well to do families, but she gave consent that a childless couple in her village, Sarah and William Edwards, be the new parents.

They sent Mary Ann a letter which arrived on the morning of her execution, telling of how the baby was doing well and hoped they would be re-united in a better world.

The appeals had all failed and the Home Secretary had replied stating that he could see no reason why the execution should not take place. Mary Ann spent her last Sunday knitting with two other Women prisoners and was reported as being quite jovial by the watching warders. She was escorted to the execution cell later that day and informed that she would face the hangman the next morning.

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William Calcraft, England's official hangman, was already within the walls of Durham prison, after journeying up from London that afternoon. He spied on Mary Ann several times throughout the day, scribbling some unreadable notes on a dirty piece of paper.

Calcraft was a feared man throughout the criminal world. He had begun his grisly trade as a flogger of children and steadily rose to official hangman at Newgate prison. Condemned prisoners would often ask the Judge on sentencing, that they be executed by another hangman besides Calcraft....the requests were never granted.

Calcraft made a decent living from killing people and he was allowed, by the jails, to keep the prisoner's clothing and personal belongings. After the execution, Calcraft would sift through his booty and often sell items to Madame Tussauds Waxworks. He would also keep the death rope and cut it in to small lengths which he would sell to the public. The rope cuttings often brought more payment than his fees, particularly if the prisoner had been notable. He was repulsive in both sight and manner, but perhaps most sickening of all, he undoubtedly loved his work. He had practised the art of hanging since 1829, whereupon all executions were carried out in public. The prisoner was merely lynched in front of a baying crowd that sometimes exceeded 100,000. After the Government passed the Capital Punishment within prisons act of 1868, Calcraft brought his hideous trademark indoors, away from the spectator debacle.

Prisons began to build suitable gallows with mechanised trapdoors and floors. Calcraft, infamous for his loathsome strangling of prisoners on public gallows, initiated the 'short drop' method, whereupon the prisoner, although standing upon gallows that could, with correct handling, make death as near to instant as possible, would dance on the end of the rope for upwards of 2-3 minutes.

His short drop method was often questioned by Governors of prisons who had witnessed the terrible sight of legal strangulation, but he continued unmoved. He even invented a leather harness that pinioned the prisoners arms by his sides, making the struggle less violent...but longer.

Warders in certain prisons refused to witness executions carried out by Calcraft, and others were known to jump on the hanging body, adding their

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own weight to the roped neck, hoping death would come quicker to the victim.

Sunday 23rd March 1873 William Calcraft, carrying a carpet bag and wooden stick, signed to spend one night in the upstairs room of Durham Police Station. Mary Ann Cotton paced the short length of her cell, clutching a leather bound hymn book.

By 7.00 am the following morning, a huge crowd had gathered outside the prison walls to await the execution. Calcraft and his assistant Robert Evans entered the prison by a side entrance at around 6.30 am and made their way to the women's quarters.

The execution had brought reporters from around the Country. It had been 74 years since a woman had been hanged in Durham...Mary Nicholson hung for murder had fallen from the gallows as the rope around her neck had snapped during hanging. She had sat on the apparatus steps talking to her family while another rope was being found.

At 7.50 am the bells of St. Oswalds Church rang and the death bell in the prison was sounded moments after. The Under Sheriff, Richard Bowser and his assistant E.G. Marshall entered the cell and quietly read out the demand. They then moved to one side of the small room to allow Calcraft and Evans to dart in and grasp a surprised Mary Ann by the arms. She began to sob loudly as the two hangmen struggled to fit the leather harness around her waist. The Matron of the Wing and two Wardress's led her from the cell...the entourage followed behind.

Calcrafft and Evans overtook the slow moving group and entered the execution shed. Mary Ann stumbled as she was led in, her sobs had turned to a pathetic whimpering that obstructed her attempts at reciting prayers being read by the Minister.

Evans pulled her towards the platform and Calcraft turned her to face the door she had entered by. A white sack was roughly pulled over her head as she began to shake uncontrollably. Calcraft slipped the rope over her head and tightened the knot just behind her right ear. He strapped her ankles together and stepped back from the trapdoor. It is unclear who actually pulled the lever, but at a little past 8.00 am on march 24th 1873, Mary Ann Cotton fell through the trapdoor into oblivion.

She screamed as the floor beneath her gave way and then grunted as she came to a violent stop. For a second it looked as though death had come quickly to Mary Ann...a luxury she had not afforded her victims.

Slowly at first, her legs began to twist and shake and soon her whole body was writhing in a macabre dance of death.

She began forcing out a high-pitched squeal that so unnerved the two wardress's that one fell to her knees and cowered in the corner of the shed. Calcraft stepped from the side flooring and grasped Mary Ann's legs, adding his own ample weight to the rope. He steadied her and held her until her writhing had lessened to pitiful twitches. Nearly four minutes had lapsed since the trapdoor had been sprung.

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Calcraft, in an astonishing show of impatience, started to pinch Mary Ann's hands and legs to confirm death. She was left hanging for about an hour before he returned and loosened the rope. He removed the hood and let Mary Ann Cotton's head fall clumsily onto the stone floor. Her mouth was open in a hideous smile of death and both lips had swollen and burst. Her face was puffed and was a reddish purple colour, blood had coagulated around the base of her ear where the rope had tore flesh upon impact. Calcraft suggested the body be stripped and placed in the black coffin leant up against the wall outside. He waited outside for his pickings of clothing and then left the Gallows Shed. Boyd, a local Surgeon, asked in to confirm death, stated that the executed woman was dead and that death had been instantaneous.....the convulsions were, as he stated...'involuntary and in a state of total unconsciousness.'

Mary Ann Cotton was wrapped in a woollen blanket and bundled in to the coffin. She was buried at 2.00 pm near the west wall of the jail beside two previous executed criminals, John Dolan and John McConville who had been hung in 1869.

Evans and Calcraft took lunch in The Half Moon Hotel, where they gave a few words detailing the execution to a local newspaper. They boarded the 3.05 train at Durham Station. Onlookers rushed on to the platform hoping to glimpse Calcraft. The little old man with white hair sat by the carriage window, he glanced at the shouting crowd, before pulling the small curtains closed...Evans stood at the door waving as the train pulled away.

Mary Ann Cotton was dead. Her life of infamy and callous murder brought to a sickening end by the executioner's rope.

Today, the house in Front Street remains and despite it's new modern appearance, it still reflects a bygone era. Locals claim they steer clear from the house when ever possible, and some say they have heard children crying from within and seen faces at the top floor windows. At the time of writing, the house lies unoccupied. It has had scores of owners....but neighbours say, 'no one stays there too long.'

ARSENIC & SOFT SOAP
The story of one of Britain's most prolific killers
Kevin Stock

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