

## Delivering Post-Mortem ‘Harm’: Cutting the Corpse

### INTRODUCTION

The iconic image of the criminal corpse has been closely associated in historical accounts with one legendary dissection room in early modern England. Section 1 of this fourth chapter revisits that well-known venue by joining the audience looking at the condemned laid out on the celebrated stage of Surgeon’s Hall in London. It does so because this central location has been seen by historians of crime and medicine as a standard-bearer for criminal dissections covering all of Georgian society over the course of the long-eighteenth and early-nineteenth centuries. It is undeniable that inside the main anatomical building in the capital an ‘old style’ of anatomy teaching took place on a regular basis under the Murder Act. This however soon proved to be a medico-legal shortcoming once a ‘new style’ of anatomy came into vogue during the 1790s. By then leading surgeons that did criminal dissections were being tarnished with a lacklustre reputation, even amongst rank and file members of the London Company. This meant that their medico-legal authority was increasingly dubious. It transpired that their traditions were too conservative at a time when anatomy was blossoming across Europe. As it burst its disciplinary boundaries, embracing morbid pathology with its associated new research thrust, London surgeons started to look lacklustre. A prime location of post-execution ‘harm’ that has dominated the historical literature does not then on closer inspection merit its long-term reputation for teaching

and research excellence. Progressively, Surgeon's Hall was over-shadowed by the rising prominence of provincial theatres in the North, South and Midlands of England too. There, criminal dissections served an expanding medical sector by 1800.

A selection of bodies distributed along this complex supply chain, presented in Section 2, illustrates the sorts of penal surgeons that actually handled the criminal corpse in the provinces. To establish a good business reputation for medical innovation it was important to be seen to receive bodies from the hangman in a local area on a concerted basis. Career-standing was more and more dependent on the publication in the medical press of cutting-edge post-mortem work. As that sector of newsworthy information expanded, the medical establishment started to change its views with regard to the anatomical value of criminal dissections staged outside of London. They were no longer seen as necessarily second-rate. At the same time, a conjunction of socio-economic factors slowly altered the financial calculations of surgeons that worked from provincial business premises. The fiscal situation was that those who had trained in the capital and became officially licensed as surgeons were still obliged to serve at Surgeon's Hall in London. On a rotational basis company members had to take their turn about once every five years to act as either Master of Anatomy, or perform a supporting role, for a dissecting season. Many however elected to pay a substantial annual fine, rather than temporarily relocating their households to the capital. Keeping the loyal custom of wealthier consumers meant that many penal surgeons were reluctant to move far from the vicinity of home in a competitive medical marketplace. Few wished to neglect the local hangman's tree either since they relied on that supply to publish original findings. Those that remained *in situ* avoided the expense of a locum and established their credentials in the neighbourhood. They were in a more positive business position to provide a bespoke service that nurtured the goodwill of their fickle patients. It was then serendipitous that a lot of provincial penal surgeons found themselves advantaged by the fact that by the early nineteenth-century more condemned bodies were being supplied from the local gallows rather than execution sites in the capital: a sentencing trend that justified them making a business decision to stay in the provinces (see, Chapter 5 for timings and supply figures). This complex commercial backdrop complicated the medico-legal duties and official reach of penal surgeons in practical terms. Hence, the historical prism of criminal dissections reveals the changing surgical nature of central-local relations understudied in eighteenth-century histories.

How then to cut the corpse to make maximum use of its research opportunities, is the focus of Section 3's discussion. The career path of Sir William Blizard, introduced in Chapter 2 and expanded on here, illustrates how a leading figure that worked from Surgeon's Hall was very critical of the criminal code's underlying ethos. He, like many other penal surgeons, started to question the nature of the discretionary justice in their hands, and how exactly to cut up the criminal corpse to dissect and dismember it. This discussion mattered because it symbolised changing attitudes to medicine and society inside and outside the surgical community. The medico-legal purpose of post-mortem 'harm' was redefined in practical terms. It will thus be shown that from the 1760s there were a lot of medical debates about what 'anatomization' as a legal duty actually entailed and how it should differ from dissection. These private discussions were revealed in the press as a result of one of the most infamous murders of the period committed by Earl Ferrers of Staunton Harrold in Leicestershire. He was tried in a high-profile murder case in London. As a peer of the realm the anatomical fate of his body gave rise to considerable public speculation about how much each criminal corpse should be punished by the lancet. In the course of which, working methods were clarified, particularly in relation to class. Altogether, seven anatomical methods were described under the Murder Act for the first time, and these related to agreed guidelines about cutting up the condemned.

At the heart of all of these material reveries, novel anatomical angles were exposed—outside/inside—dorsal side/ventral side—supine/prone. In terms of public consumption early modern audiences found new ways of seeing the *'dangerous dead'*. It was the promise of engaging with the material demise of the deviant that captured the attention of many diarists of the period too. Their recollections frame this chapter's focus on first-hand and hands-on experiences of dissection. Often commentators admitted in private how much 'public curiosity' they observed. It appears to be what motivated many ordinary people to enter Surgeon's Hall. In time, those with 'natural curiosity' went further afield as well. Elsewhere, new, and sometimes, more intense, emotional experiences were being staged. By 1800, compelling home-grown murders, and the strong reactions they generated, shifted press attention from London reporting to the English regions. These contemporary developments reflected how much, as Fay Bound-Alberti observes: 'as objects of scientific knowledge, emotions were (and are) unstable and transient experiences' that nonetheless are no

less deserving of historical attention since all human beings encounter ‘emotions as sensory, embodied experiences’ especially when confronted by a fresh corpse that reminds them of their mortality.<sup>1</sup>

### *UNDER-DOOR AT SURGEON’S HALL*

*15<sup>th</sup> September 1773:* Saw two men hanged for murder. I should not have gone if it had not been reported that they intended to make some resistance. Was afterwards at the College [of Surgeon’s Hall] when the bodies were received for dissection. They bled on the jugular being opened, but not at the arm.<sup>2</sup>

Silas Neville in his private diary styled himself a radical. As a medical man of fashion he also followed the anatomical entertainments in the capital. During the London season from 1767 to 1773 his diary entries were all about the new sensation of seeing criminals dissected. Silas obtained his MD at Edinburgh and then he moved down to London, where he walked the wards of St. Thomas’s Hospital as a pupil. This was on the recommendation of his friend and mentor, the Scottish professor of medicine, William Cullen (1710–90).<sup>3</sup> His theatrical taste for medical dramas often reflected how his working life blurred with his private tastes. In early September 1767, for instance, he wrote that he suffered from painful toothache, bought a quack remedy from Elizabeth Miller of Whitechapel, and drank at the Chapter Coffee house in Paternoster Row near St. Paul’s Cathedral. Here he mixed with penal surgeons that peopled Child’s Coffee-House and attended Surgeon’s Hall close to the Old Bailey criminal court.<sup>4</sup> An inveterate gossip, Silas gleaned privileged medical news, and was given tickets for the latest criminal dissections like that of Elizabeth Brownrigg found guilty of murder:

*Wednesday 16 September 1767:* After waiting an hour in the Lobby of Surgeon’s Hall, got by with great difficulty (the crowd being great and the screw stairs very narrow) to see the body of Mrs. Brownrigg, which, cut as it is, is a most shocking sight. I wish I had not seen it. How loathsome our vile bodies are, when separated from the soul! It is surprising what crowds of women and girls run to see what usually frightens them so much. The Hall is circular with niches in which are placed skeletons.<sup>5</sup>

Silas was ‘curious’, pushing up a narrow spiral staircase. He claimed to be shocked by the bloody scene. This private admission is striking, given

his medical training in basic human anatomy at Edinburgh. Either he was being disingenuous writing for posterity in his diary or his surprise was genuine. Like many medical students he had studied '*living-anatomy*' which involved looking at the major organs in the body but not '*extensive dissection*'.<sup>6</sup> He was also used to a male-privileged anatomical training, and this explains why it was disturbing for him to see women and girls running to partake of the post-execution spectacle. Helpfully he recorded in some detail the competing 'entertainments' on offer in the vicinity of Surgeon's Hall in 1767. These included a 'collection of curiosities' that he paid to go round at Pimlico featuring 'Birds' that had been dissected. They were part of a travelling exhibition of 'animals preserved in spirits' that he had first seen 'in the Haymarket'. In theatre-land he likewise bought a ticket for the 'Pit' to see Mary Ann Yates (one of the greatest tragic actress of her day) in a 'Pantomime' called 'Harlequin Skeleton'. She was, he remarked, an expressive actress. Her eyes he thought 'particularly affecting' even if the storyline was in his opinion 'foolish'.<sup>7</sup> We have already seen how Georgian theatrical shows often linked the world of medicine to that of dramatic storytelling on the London stage. The meaning of the word 'theatre', as Andrew Cunningham observes, meant 'literally a *place for seeing*'.<sup>8</sup> Surgeon's Hall was thus conveniently close to the main playhouses of the capital. If audiences were eager to pack out dissection venues, then why not exploit their macabre taste for shocking out of body experiences by featuring the dancing skeletons of infamous criminals on the stage.

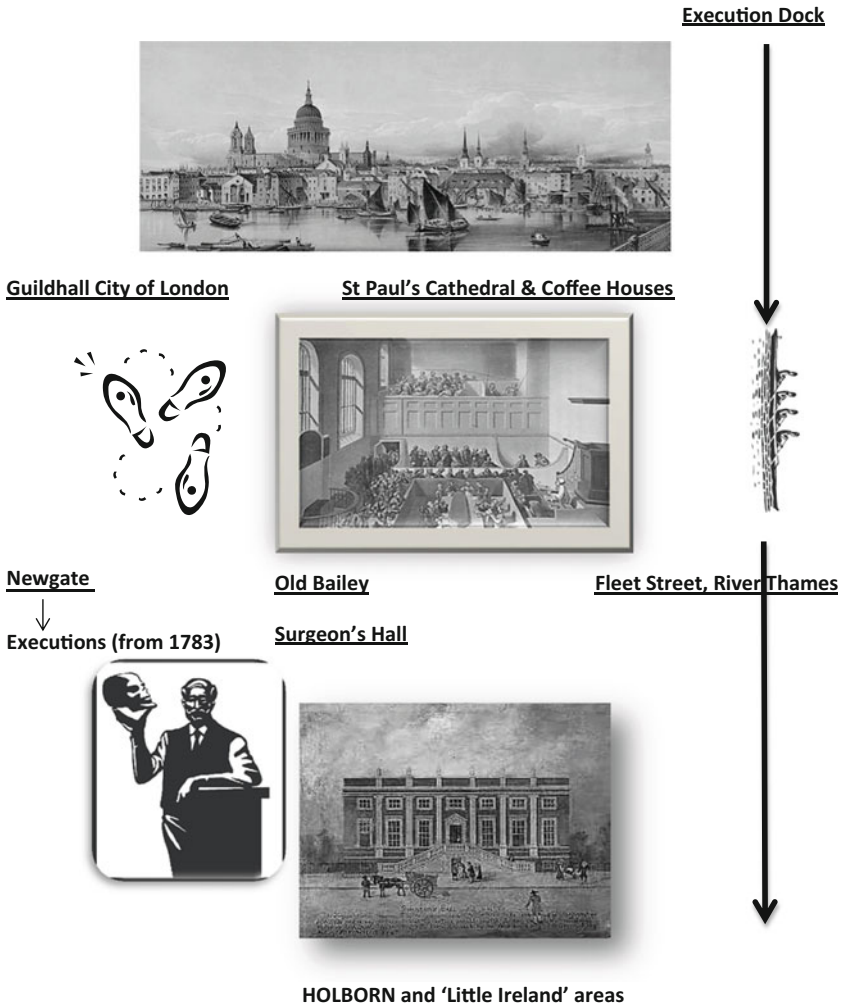
Silas Neville said he disapproved of this macabre theatrical consumption: a predictable attitude perhaps for a 'gentleman' expected to act with 'good sense' and 'decorum' in Georgian society. Even so, his private musings are in many respects an historical prism of broader cultural trends. Like many contemporaries, Silas had a 'natural curiosity' and this overrode his personal misgivings. Few missed out on the anatomy theatre's fare that everyone was talking about in the Coffee Houses. The gossips speculated about how best to cut the corpse open and whether penal surgeons could revive the condemned before proceeding to post-mortem punishment. These medical conundrums were likewise debated in the provinces: a perspective often neglected in crime studies. John Baker in 1773, an attorney from Horsham, and like Silas Neville a diarist, noted carefully how the penal surgeons in Sussex generally bled the executed man before a full-scale dissection: 'After Cannon had hung half an hour, he and two others were cut down when Mr Reid, the older, and Dr Smith and three others of the faculty bled him and carried him to Mr Reid's and tried

blowing and other means to recover him, but all ineffectual'.<sup>9</sup> The fact that it was standard practice to do this, sets in context that there were medical fashions at criminal dissections adopted everywhere.

The eighteenth-century was seen by many commentators as an era of conspicuous medical consumption. This allowed diarists to justify their theatrical tastes as social commentary. Frequently, they featured the architectural scaffold of punishment venues and to delve inside we need to follow suit in the capital before comparing conditions in the provinces. It happened then that a history of London written in 1790 praised the central location and convenient setting of Surgeon's Hall (see, Figure 4.1):

On the outside of *Ludgate*, the street called the *Old Bailey* runs parallel with the walls [of London] as far as *Newgate*...The *Sessions House*, in which criminals from the county of *Middlesex* and the whole capital are tried, is a very elegant building, erected within these few years. The entrance into it is narrow so as to prevent a sudden ingress of the mob... By a sort of second sight, the *Surgeon's Hall* was built near this court of conviction and *Newgate*, the concluding stage of the lives forfeited to the justice of their country, several years before the fatal tree was removed from *Tyburn* to its present site. It is a handsome building, ornamental with iconic pilasters; and a double flight of stairs to the first floor. Beneath is a door for admission of the bodies of murderers and other felons; who noxious in their lives make a sort of reparation to their fellow creatures by being useful in death.<sup>10</sup>

Most diarists visiting from the provinces devoted time to seeing the impressive scale of the medical architecture and their theatrical enticements inside. When Richard Hodgkinson steward to the wealthy Hesketh family (major landowners in Hereford and Leicestershire) came to London on business in March 1794, he wrote that taking a medical tour of the capital was very fashionable. His carriage drove past St. Bartholomew's Hospital, the Blue Coat Hospital nearby, and then surveyed the Old Bailey on a morning's outing: 'This [the courthouse] is an immense piece of a Building being as I conjecture about 160 yards in front'. Surgeon's Hall he said was renowned as a major tourist attraction for the *beau monde*; together the courtroom and theatre next door occupied a distinctive urban space. By the 15 March, Hodgkinson had obtained tickets for the most popular lecturers on anatomy: 'Mr Johnson called upon me and took me to the lectures of Dr [George] Fordyce's'. The theme was '*The Death of the Patient*' and Hodgkinson followed the crowd avid for more information about resuscitation methods.<sup>11</sup> Surgeons, he observed in his letters



**Figure 4.1** Geography of buildings and places associated with capital punishment in the City of London after the Murder Act 1752.

home, had three key sources of supply: they obtained bodies that died within the City of London area and were handed over by customary right. By tradition there were also permitted to acquire corpses retrieved from Execution Dock. These were the bodies of those sailors that murdered

which came under the Admiralty court jurisdiction or they were a civilian convicted of homicide having killed someone on the high seas and therefore were dealt with by the Navy. A third source was cadavers sent via the criminal justice courts, hanged either at Tyburn until 1783 (on the site of Marble Arch today) or thereafter at Newgate prison (next to the Old Bailey). This basic geography (refer Figure 4.1) confirms that anatomists favoured a door-step business of supply: a trend under the Murder Act that continues today. It ensured that corpses were fresh on arrival and the close proximity limited bad publicity. For a square mile around Surgeon's Hall shuffling around available criminal corpses was the norm.

It has been estimated using the Surgeon's Company financial records that some 80 bodies were sent for criminal dissection in the fifty years after the Murder Act.<sup>12</sup> It is in fact difficult to be precise about the exact numbers because of the surreptitious nature of body deals. The man in charge was the Beadle of Surgeon's Hall. He was pivotal to the criminal corpse's punishment. Being Beadle to the surgeons was an important ceremonial role. The person appointed walked to the Guildhall on feast or religious days or attend St Paul's marking City of London celebrations. Figure 4.1 illustrates the close geographical networks served by the Company Beadle; for it was he who scheduled all dissection work. In the histories of crime and medicine his role has often been understudied. Perhaps the Beadle's most important responsibility was to keep the key and unlock the '*Under-door*' at Surgeon's Hall. This entrance was at the street-level below the main double staircase in front of the building. As Silas Neville wrote, visitors had to climb a spiral staircase up into the anatomical theatre. So bodies had to come in via a trap-door because they were too heavy to lift up the narrow crowded stairwell. Generally a carriage drew up on execution days and a body was carried in by rough-hewn men known as '*blackguards*'. They were said to be of robust stature, 'as tall as they were wide', employed by the Beadle to secure bodies from the gallows. The *Annals of the Barber Surgeons* explains: 'The Beadle has always had his "house" at the Hall.'<sup>13</sup> He lived on the premises to maximise supply opportunities and so call the '*blackguards*' out. In typical petty cash entries in the Company of Surgeons accounts, 'Mr George Search' (an alias to denote his body-finding duties as *blackguard*) was paid '£1 16s 0d' on 21 May 1767, and in January 1768 '£0 5s 6d' for 'bringing the bodies' to 'John Wells the Beadle'. Another important discretionary activity was to distribute a petty cash purse. By tradition the hangman was 'entitled to the dead man's clothes' at executions. But in the scramble this could damage the



body and result in the mob carrying it off in the fray. So the Beadle gave out gratuities giving 'him [the executioner] compensation' for clothing and belongings, and he invited the hangman 'to the Hall regularly for his Christmas Box'.<sup>14</sup> The Company recognised that there was no substitute for a personal connection. This ensured that each time a body became available it could potentially be made full use of on the premises.

The first task of the Beadle on hearing about an available body was to call upon 'Mr Bates the Constable' who helped to make the deals with the legal officials.<sup>15</sup> Thus for instance petty cash of '£0 15s 0d' was paid on 9 October 1765 for 'three Murderers' and in the same month, 'Paid Bates for wine for Anatomical Officers £0 3s 10d'. Often the Beadle called at the Coffee Houses inside the precincts of St Paul's Cathedral and settled the bill for entertaining the support staff like that on 13 May 1766 'Paid a Bill at Child's Coffee House on the Anatomical Officers £1 15s 3d'. In hotter weather getting a fresh body was thirsty work. Associated bills reveal that Bates, his fellow constables (usually no more than four at a time) and the *blackguards* on duty wrapped the bodies in a winding sheet to carry them aloft. Thus on 1 May 1762 the Beadle 'Paid for Linen used by the Anatomical Officers £1 10s 11d' covering transportation and swabs. Others in the chain of supply included those that were brought in a 'Shell'—this was an elm coffin, its waterproof wood resistant to leaking bodily fluids. It was usually hinged at one end to be recycled—typically, the Beadle 'Paid Marks the Undertaker on April 27 1765' for supplying a 'Body from Tyburn'. Generally such dissections were advertised in advance in the London press as a public relations exercise. The Beadle then called by Child's Coffee House to collect equipment needed for the dissection twenty-four hours later. On 18 September 1761 he thus paid for food and drink of '4s 6d' and 'Paid Edward Stanton the Cutter his Bill £1 8s'.

Record linkage work reveals that Stanton ran a lucrative business through the Saw and Crown public house on Lombard Street up the road from Surgeon's Hall. A surviving business card publicised his services as 'London Surgeons Instrument Makers' (see, Illustration 4.1).<sup>16</sup> He sharpened the dissection knives made blunt by sawing through bone, ribs and the skull. He also made bespoke lancets and midwifery kit. His exclusive contract with Surgeon's Hall was however renegotiated soon after Easter 1761 because Edward died. In his will he left a lucrative business to his sister Mary and her husband William Sparrow who then traded under the family name from St Paul's Churchyard conveniently next to Child's Coffee-House where the surgeons congregated after anatomical sessions.<sup>17</sup>



**Illustration 4.1** ©Wellcome Trust Image Collection, Slide Number M0015855, 'Edward Stanton at the Saw and Crown in Lombard Street London' (1754–61): 'lancet-maker: maketh and selleth all sorts of surgeons instruments likewise razors scissors penknives knives & forks... note: lancets and other instruments carefully ground and sett', business card; Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 4.0 International License (CC BY-NC-SA 4.0)

Thus on 22 September 1756 the Beadle 'Paid for grinding of dissecting knives' some '4s'. He also ordered that the Hall itself had to be kept clean and so on 11 December 1756 'a woman was 'Paid £3 3s' the annual fee for sweeping up and washing the theatre. Another unnamed cleaner of lower status was given '8s for taking away the Dust 2 years to Xmas' in February 1762.<sup>18</sup> In fact the material waste at Surgeon's Hall was extensive, so much so, that it caused a local public health crisis. On 16 July 1766 the Beadle 'Paid a Sewer tax being the Company's proportion for drainage and cleansing the Common Sewer' down which they swilled with cold water, blood, tissue and, associated human waste in a culvert under Surgeon's Hall: we return to this theme later in this chapter when we explore how the body was cut to 'harm' it.

Inside Surgeon's Hall there were also expenses to be covered for the building fabric that made dissections feasible.<sup>19</sup> After the Murder Act on 9 July 1752 'Bowman the Smith' was paid to erect 'Iron Railings in the Theatre' anticipating the need for greater crowd control at a cost of '£20 12s 6d'. The Beadle also had fixed in position better 'Lighting Lamps' outside and a man called 'Nash' charged '£6 8s at Michaelmas' for keeping the '*Under door*' well lit at night to receive criminal corpses. There are numerous petty cash payments for tallow candles made from beef or mutton fat too. They were cheaper to make and used a lot to light the theatre during long winter sessions. In a pre-refrigeration era it was also helpful that they could be stored for longer than wax candles in sealed containers. Coloured hot wax tended to be used as an anatomical preparation to make models. An ongoing expense from 1755 was glaziers' bills for 'mending and cleaning the windows' to ensure maximum daylight. The repair bill also covered broken glass because the crowd did sometimes stone the building to protest about a controversial criminal dissection. This sets in context a bill by October 1755 of '£2 7s 'for wire work to Iron rails' to better control the crowds determined to press forward inside the theatre. Most were eager to get closer to the body. In winter the room temperature was kept lower to try to counteract the body-heat of the audience and keep corpses fresh. In December 1753 it was so cold however that the Beadle decided to pay 'for Chocolate for Masters and Stewards of Anatomy'. A hot drink must have been welcome because later that month a decision was taken to then pay 'for a Stove for the Theatre' costing '7s'. In the bitter cold of December 1760 tellingly it was deemed necessary to obtain 'a Brazier for the Theatre 6s 6d', and this despite the ambient temperatures audiences generated on public days. The average quarterly

'Bill for Coals' by 15 January 1762 was an expensive '£23 12s 6d'. Additional features found in the petty cash accounts facilitate a reconstruction of the interior circular platform where the criminal corpse was displayed before dissection.

To enhance visibility a 'Horseshoe Table with Black Leather' was placed centre-stage, designed for '£5 5s' in 1767.<sup>20</sup> China and wooden dishes to collect organs and tissue specimens were placed on this main table, as regular bills for 'Turnery Ware' attest of '£3 9s 8d in 1768'. Helpfully, a bill survives for the 'Jack' that the blacksmith made for the Company to hoist up the corpses on 4 August 1752 costing '5s 6d'. The purchase suggests the company expected to be busier once the Murder Act came into force (Illustration 4.2).



**Illustration 4.2** ©Science Museum, Science and Society Picture Library, Image Number 10572107, 'Set of dissecting chain hooks, steel, by Savigny and Co. of London, 1810–1850'; Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 4.0 International License (CC BY-NC-SA 4.0)

Indeed the design-concept of the central table and pulley evidently worked because it was copied elsewhere, notably at Cambridge (see Illustration 4.3 below of the rotund). Likewise the Beadle paid for a large bundle of ‘towels and sheets’ costing ‘£3 12s 6d’ and he popped along to the ‘skeleton maker’. In the case of Thomas Wilford, the first corpse under the new capital legislation, the supply bills were:

<b>Paid Bill for expenses of Thomas Wilford executed for murder</b>	<b>£1 6s 2d...</b>
[hangman and constable-in-charge’s supply fee]	
<b>Paid Skelton Maker for Making Wilford’s Skeleton</b>	<b>£1 5s 0d</b>
[cleaning bones, boiling them, returned a month later]	
<b>Paid for mounting Wilford’s Skeleton, etc</b>	<b>£4 14s 0d</b>
[famous murderers were set in circular niches with nameplates]	
<b>Total cost:</b>	<b>£7 5s 2d<sup>21</sup></b>

On hand, was a sharp razor ‘for shaving the body’, generally done by the duty Master of Anatomy on arrival of the criminal corpse. Although a pencil sketch of an oval dissection table in use up to the 1760s was drawn by a visitor to the Hall, the horseshoe table design of 1767 soon became *de rigueur*. The Company made the change because most leading anatomy schools were introducing revolving tables to improve visibility, so a horseshoe-design was seen as a distinctive innovation. The basic equipment at Surgeon’s Hall looked a lot like that in the contemporary sketch which survives in the Royal College of Surgeons Museum Collection today.<sup>22</sup> These were arresting details that Hogarth had the foresight to satirise in his famous cartoon *The Reward of Cruelty* (1751) in Chapter 3. He however never knew how bodies in the supply chain arrived because the Company preferred to do its dealings in secret across London and use the Beadle to co-ordinate body trafficking long before the Anatomy Act.

In general, the Company discouraged individual surgeons from making supply deals at Newgate prison next door. It was easy to be tricked. The Beadle was far more worldly-wise in the subterfuge of body-dealing. One anecdote published in 1819 recalled the sort of double-dealing that could catch surgeons out under the Murder Act.<sup>23</sup> A convicted man described as a ‘hardened villain was given a capital sentence and ‘contrived to send for



**Illustration 4.3** ©Wellcome Trust Image Collection, Slide Number M0010176, J. C. Stadler (1815), ‘*The Anatomical Theatre at Cambridge*’, (Cambridge: R. Ackermann’s History of Cambridge), original sketch; Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 4.0 International License (CC BY-NC-SA 4.0)

a surgeon...he offered his body for dissection after his execution for a specified sum'.<sup>24</sup> He wanted the surgeon ‘to advance him the money immediately, that he might make himself while he lived, as comfortable as circumstances would allow’. The surgeon fell for the trick. He decided that since ‘no person could present a better title to the body than the wretch who offered to sell’ the proposal was profitable, but as a precaution he made the convict place ‘his signature to a written article, which he thought would be legal’ in exchange for the money. The surgeon then told a fellow member of the Company that he had made a great deal. But his friend was sceptical: ‘He shook his head saying: *I am very apprehensive*

*that he has tricked you, even under sentence of death*'. The criminal in question was so notorious that the judge had sentenced him to be '*hung in chains*'. There would be no body to collect because it was destined for the gibbet. The duped surgeon was furious and confronted the prisoner who 'confessed'. Laughing, he pointed out that since nearly all the money had been spent and he was already 'placed beyond the dominion of the law' by being condemned to die within days, it was hard luck. The Beadle by contrast knew by long experience and close personal ties which bodies to target and which not.

The Company members had the advantage of fostering corporate ties with the City of London Guilds. These personal connections facilitated the smooth running of body supply, display and disposal. It was the Carpenter's Company that provided the most support staff to Surgeon's Hall: a recent archival finding. John Hopper for instance was a carpenter who resided 'near the George' public house on Drury Lane in 1777 and he came on a regular basis to assist on dissection days.<sup>25</sup> So did Thomas Pacey and Thomas Mansell, fellow carpenters. Since coroner's records survive of these craftsmen serving together as jury-members at inquests into suspicious deaths, it is perhaps not surprising to discover that they were familiar with the 'view' of dead bodies in a dishevelled state.<sup>26</sup> Carpenters had two hands-on encounters with criminal corpses at Surgeon's Hall. They made the recycled coffin shells that were used to take what was left for burial after being '*dissected to the extremities*'. If the corpse could be kept for longer in the coldest winter months sometimes a carpenter's backboard was inserted under the spinal cord to keep the torso intact to protect the integrity of the human material for another dissection day. Once the surgeons had cut down to the bones, a carpenter's wooden cross was occasionally used to pin limbs to. That is, until the skeleton-maker came to collect them to be boiled down, wire them up, and then four weeks later brought them back to be displayed. There has been some historical dispute about how often bodies were dissected at Surgeon's Hall and whether extensive use was made of the potential teaching material, or not. The medical press and newspapers did consider some surgeons to be lack-lustre. Yet, payments to the carpenters for work on the premises, seems to have denoted a busy working-session. When less cutting was done it was because bodies tended to be in a bad shape on arrival at Surgeon's Hall, as we have already seen in Chapter 3. Another factor was how the theatre space at Surgeon's Hall was peopled. It determined expectations about how to dissect; something there had been a lot of ongoing

discussion about amongst company members since the 1730s. It is then fortuitous that a major proposal to reform internal procedures has survived in the Halford collection at Leicestershire Record Office. There it reveals an open-ended policy of continually modifying duties, reflecting the forward-thinking ethos of the Company until the Murder Act was passed. It then became somewhat conservative as a medical institution concerned to be seen as part of a new ‘scientific’ establishment. This stagnation meant that it lost credibility by the 1790s when it did not embrace ‘new anatomy’ with gusto. Revisiting therefore the reform proposals dating from the 1730s kept amongst the family records of Henry Halford pinpoints debates that did not abate about how exactly to cut the criminal corpse: this chapter’s main focus.

Sir Henry Halford (1766–1844) was an ambitious medical man. In 1795, he made a fortuitous marriage to the Honourable Elizabeth Barbara St. John Bletsoe of Wistow Hall in Leicestershire. This propelled him into aristocratic circles. He used those connections to become medical adviser to the Royal family. Considered handsome, discrete, and talented, he was appointed as Regus Physician to four monarchs from George III to Queen Victoria. The young Henry evidently had innate surgical skills. He also benefitted from having a number of renowned surgeons on his paternal and maternal family-lines. These connections helped him to navigate a competitive medical market-place; training in Edinburgh, moving to London, but keeping his surgical links by marriage, with the Midlands. His grandfather, Henry Vaughan, ran a lucrative medical practice on the corner of New Street and Friar Lane in central Leicester in 1763. From here, he helped to found the Leicester Royal Infirmary in 1766. Strategically, this family background placed Henry at the centre of medical debates in provincial society and the capital. Amongst his collection of surviving family papers it is therefore instructive to rediscover that surgeons in his family had contributed to debates about the role of the Royal College of Physicians and its relationship with Surgeon’s Hall. Starting in the 1730s, of particular interest, was how the London Company should be staffed in the decades running up to the Murder Act.

Henry Halford’s surgical relatives took an avid interest in proposals to restructure anatomical teaching on criminal corpses in the capital. These have survived in draft form and in a final edited version. Their handwritten testimony permits us to gaze in through the windows of Surgeon’s Hall at a pivotal time in the Company’s internal restructuring and rebuilding work.<sup>27</sup> It should be stressed that the Halford surgical papers were



never intended for public consumption. They attest instead to the internal debates there had been about the teaching function of the Company and the format for public anatomy over the long eighteenth-century, but especially around the time of the Bloody Code. According then to the draft notes, at criminal dissections the corporate ambition was to reform the working-day as follows: the 'first professor of anatomy' to examine 'the parts' of criminal corpses 'during 2 hours not less every day so long as those Bodyes [sic] can be kept sweet' and 'afterwards' to dissect 'human preparations...[to] show where he could not upon the said Bodyes[sic]'. A second professor of anatomy was meanwhile to:

Give 2 courses of all ye operating practical upon human Body (Those of the Bones excepted) with your instruments, operations, and dressing properly by belonging to every Respective operation of the Bodyes – [if] they cannot be kept sweet long enough, that he shall shew them in the best manner he can.<sup>28</sup>

A third professor was then to take responsibility for 'the ligaments of the Bones and other parts useful in the case of fractures and dislocations, and during the summer season give 2 courses on the human skeleton'. This together with instruction on 'dressing...& distemper and all ye Bandages observed in practice for your distempers of the human body'. If the Company acquired a female body then a fourth professor 'shall every year complete a course of midwifery viz two of these at Surgeon's Hall and 2 others in different parts of London and for the instruction of Midwives'. A fifth and sixth professor were then given the task of demonstrating 'all the other parts of surgery and compression under the foregoing head viz *Principia Chirurgie*'. They were to give additional instruction in 'The Doctrine of Tumours, of Ulcers, of Wounds, and the apparatus and method for the cure of Distempers, the *material medica* and all the Chirurgical instruments'. These men were hence in ordered ranks to stand around the dissection table in the theatrical space (see, Figure 4.2). Their career standing and desire to reform working practices were together pivotal in the development of the sort of experiential routine this book has been recovering in the archives.

The draft notes make it clear that there were to be '3 demonstrators of anatomy and surgery and they shall be coequal, but to prevent confusion in the Discharge of their respective duties that Mr John Douglas and Mr Abraham Chovet shall prepare one private and one public Body and shall make the very best use that can be made of such Bodies'. John Douglas was a surgeon attached to the Westminster Infirmary, a Fellow of the Royal