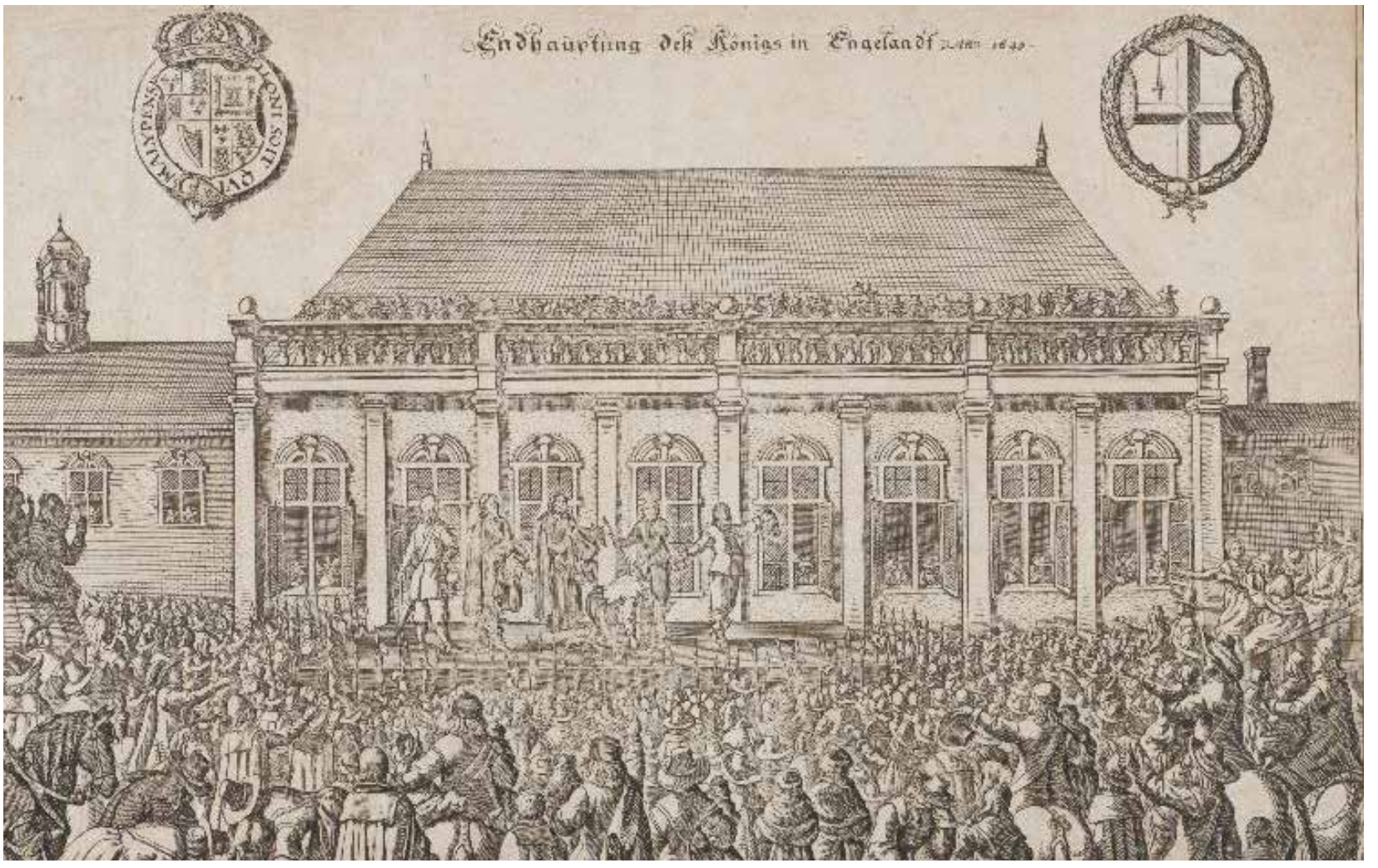
‘Bloody Code’ gruesome public executions under microscope of museum

History journalist Andrew Southam shines spotlight on "Execution: 700 years of public executions" flashback to gruesome gibbets, boiling, burning bygone gore.



In August 1305 Scottish nobleman William Wallace, who rebelled against the overlordship of King Edward I, was stripped naked and dragged by horse from Westminster to Smithfield, beaten by Londoners along the route.

He was then hanged,but not enough to die, so that he was alive when executioners castrated him, cut out his entrails then his heart, beheaded him, burnt the entrails and then carved up his body.

They placed Wallace’s severed head on a spike at London Bridge and sent his other body parts to Newcastle, Berwick, Stirling and Perth, the cities he had scorched.

This was the gruesome practice of public execution, revealed in spine-tingling detail at London Museum of Docklands’ current exhibition "Execution: 700 years of public executions"

Britain’s first recorded public execution occurred in 1196 and, by 1723, was the punishment for 200 crimes popularly known as the "Bloody Code" that covered not only high treason but "taking away any maid, widow or wife" or "maliciously cutting down any trees planted in any avenue or growing in any garden or plantation".

London was the most prolific execution location in Britain, the bloodiest in Europe, most prominently at Tyburn, near Marble Arch, and then from 1783 outside Newgate prison.

Stomach-churning punishments awaited the convicted. Henry VIII introduced boiling alive for poisoners after cook Richard Roose poisoned the Bishop of Rochester’s porridge in 1531.

The bishop and his guests survived but two beggars given the food as charity didn’t. Roose was dipped up and down in boiling water for two hours at Smithfield until dead.

Traitors and rebels like William Wallace tried killing themselves to avoid the agony of quartering. Fanatical Catholics who wanted to blow up Parliament in November 1605 Gunpowder Plot received this gruesome sentence.

One such conspirator Guy Fawkes didn’t suffer this fate as he jumped from the gallows to break his neck and died before being cut up. A fellow conspirator executed the same day tried but failed and suffered disemboweling alive.

Burning had long been used to punish witches and heretics and was seen as a favour to women, which 18th century legal commentator William Blackstone put down to "decency due to the (female) sex (which) forbids the exposing and mangling their bodies" – a likely possibility when struggling on a rope!

This fate befell Lincolnshire born Anne Askew who was one of the first women to try divorcing her husband in 1546 and fell out with the church for extreme Protestant beliefs. She was tortured at the Tower of London on a rack that dislocated and tore her limbs so much that, when convicted of heresy, she had to be carried by chair to the Smithfield pyre for burning alongside two male martyrs.

Women were later spared this trauma from 1656, when they would instead be strangled to death before being burnt.

Beheadings at Tower Hill were reserved for the privileged. This didn’t go well for James Scott, Duke of Monmouth, who as the illegitimate son of Charles II led a failed rebellion against the Catholic practices of James

Macabre public execution (above)

Condemned man's cell (right)