



Inner Temple Library



From a print of Hogarth's Portrait

SARAH MALCOLM, MURDERESS

Murder in the Temple

July 2015

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Sarah Malcolm - Murder in the Temple



**The execution of Sarah Malcolm
in Fleet Street**

It can scarcely be imagined nowadays that the peaceful haven of the Temple was the scene of one of the most notorious crimes of the eighteenth century. The area now known as Church Court contained the old Lamb Building in its centre, and was divided into Lamb Building Court at the western end (where the Millennium Column now stands) and Tanfield Court to the east. A number of sets of chambers stood in Tanfield Court (on the site now occupied by the Inner Temple Library and Francis Taylor Building) and in number 3, on the top floor, lived an elderly widow named Lydia Duncomb.

On Sunday 4th February 1733 a friend of Mrs Duncomb's, Mrs Love, arrived to have dinner with her at one o'clock, as arranged. When she could not get

any reply, she raised the alarm and eventually a group of women, including one Sarah Malcolm, managed to break in to the apartment. Inside was a scene of horror: Mrs Duncomb and her elderly maid, Elizabeth Harrison, had been strangled and a young maid, Ann Price, had had her throat cut. A box in which Mrs Duncomb had stored money and a silver tankard had been forced open and the contents stolen.

Sarah Malcolm, aged 22, was a laundress (a charwoman) at the Temple. She was employed by John Kerrel of King's Bench Walk to clean his chambers and she had also occasionally worked for Mrs Duncomb. In the early hours of the morning following the discovery of the murders, Kerrel arrived home to find Sarah Malcolm still there. His suspicions were aroused and when some bloodstained linen and a tankard, also with blood on it, were found Malcolm was taken by Inner Temple

watchmen to the Constable and from there to the Compter. After her transfer to Newgate the next day, a substantial amount of money (roughly equivalent to the sum known to be stored in Mrs Duncomb's box) was found hidden in her cap. At her trial at the Old Bailey on 21st February 1733, she admitted having planned the robbery with three accomplices and that the tankard and money found in her possession were her share of the proceeds, but she claimed that she had remained on the stairs keeping guard while the crime was committed and that she had been unaware of the murders until the following day. She was found guilty of murder, however, and sentenced to be hanged.¹

In prison awaiting execution she was sketched by Hogarth and copies of the drawing were widely sold, along with published accounts of her 'confession'. Because of the gravity of the crime, she was ordered to be hanged in Mitre Court, as close as possible to the scene of the murders.² The number of spectators was so large that one woman was apparently able to cross from Serjeants' Inn to the other side of Fleet Street on the shoulders of the crowd³ and several specially-constructed viewing platforms collapsed, resulting in a number of injuries.⁴ After the execution, her body was taken to an undertaker's in Snow Hill, where it was exhibited for money before burial at St Sepulchre's. Such was her notoriety that during the excise crisis of April 1733, her effigy was burnt on the streets of London, along with those of Walpole and Queen Caroline.⁵ According to one source, her body was disinterred and her skeleton displayed in a glass case at the Botanic Gardens, Cambridge, where it remained until at least 1878.⁶

The case continues to exert a fascination, even beyond this country. The Canadian academic Jane Magrath has taken a special interest in it and in 2005 the Italian writer Ginevra Bompiani wrote a novel, *Ritratto di Sarah Malcolm*, based on the story.

Endnotes:

1. The court seems to have considered the case of *Rex v. Plummer*, *Kel.109* [84 E.R.1103]. The citation and notes relating to that case appear on the back of Malcolm's Indictment Sheet.
2. Malcolm was perhaps fortunate not to have been charged with petty treason (which included murder of an employee by a domestic servant), for which she could have been sentenced to burn at the stake.
3. The Temple: Church and precinct (part 3 of 3), *Old and New London* – Vol. 1 (1878), pp. 171-82 [Online]. Available: www.british-history.ac.uk/report.asp?compid=45035 [28 March 2007]
4. Donnachie, I. *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* Vol. 36 p. 303. Oxford: OUP, 2004. (Inner Temple Library: Dictionaries collection).

5. Historical Outline for Restoration & 18th Century British Literature: *Excise Crisis (1733)* [Online]. Available: <http://mason.gmu.edu/~ayadav/historical%20outline/excise%20crisis> [6 March 2007]

6. Thornbury, W. 1878, *Old and New London*: – Vol. 1, pp. 171-182. [Online]. Available: www.british-history.ac.uk/report.asp?compid=45035&strquery=sarah%20malcolm [6 March 2007]

Further reading:

For a full transcript of the trial, see: The proceedings of the Old Bailey for 21st February 1733 (Ref: t17330221-52) www.oldbaileyonline.org/browse.jsp?path=sessionsPapers%2F17330221.xml

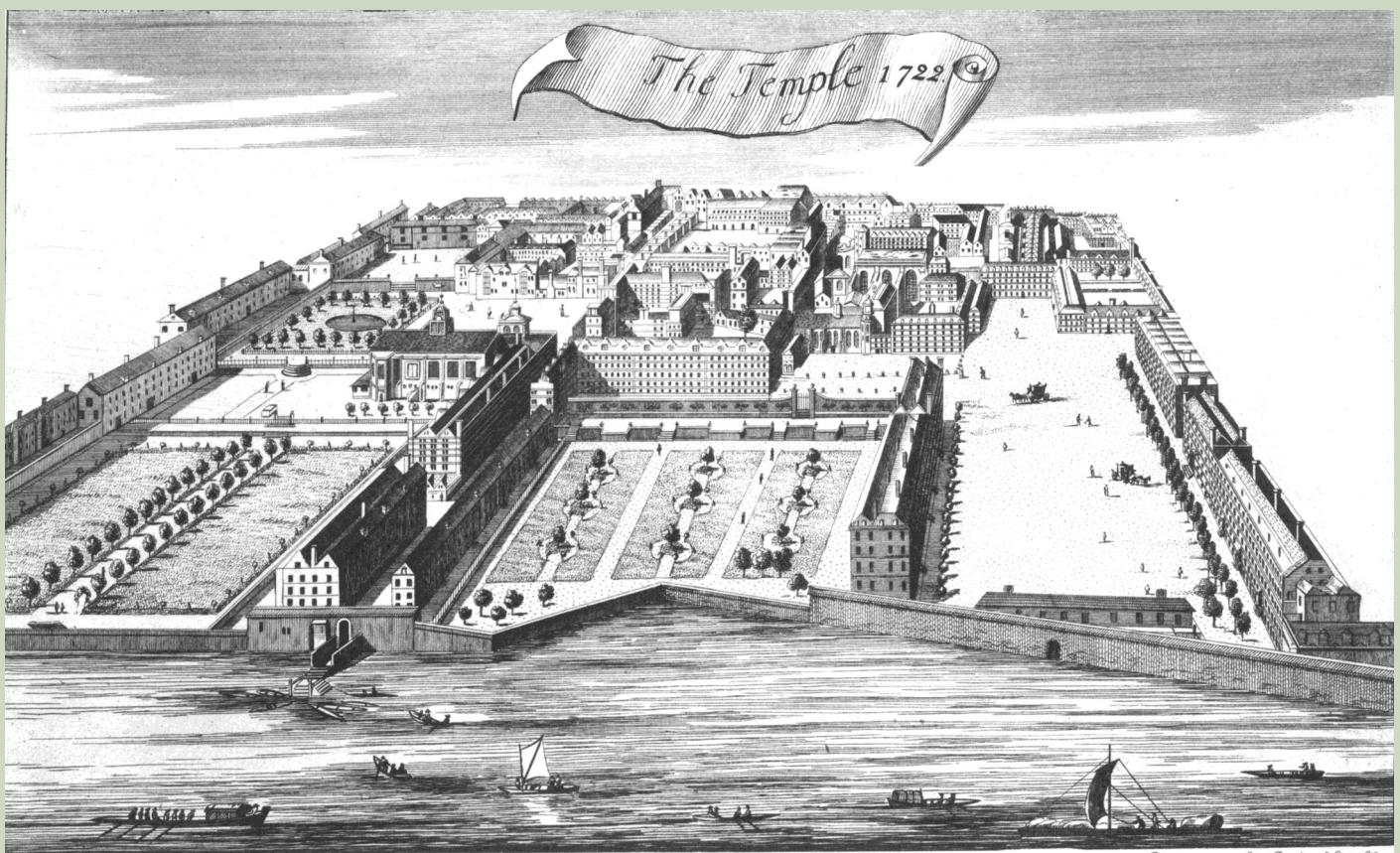
Calendar of Inner Temple Records – Vol. 4. (Inner Temple Library: Inns of Court collection).

Knapp, A. & Baldwin, W. *The Newgate Calendar*, London: J. Robins, 1824-1828 (Inner Temple Library: Criminology collection).

Mackinnon, Sir Frank Douglas, *The Murder in the Temple and Other Holiday Tasks*, London: Sweet & Maxwell, 1935. (Inner Temple Library: Legal Miscellany collection).

Rayner, J.L. & Crook, G.T. (eds.), *The Complete Newgate Calendar* – Vol.3), London: Navarre Society, 1926. (Inner Temple Library: Criminology collection).

www.exclassics.com/newgate/ng186.htm



This **VIEW** of the **TEMPLE**, as it appeared in 1722 was re-engraved (from a Print presented to the Honorable Society of the Inner Temple) in the year 1831.

A view of the Temple as it appeared in 1722 © The Inner Temple