

Hogarth in Leicester Square

by Hannah Renier

Leicester Square, once the most fashionable place in London though now about the least, fascinates me. This chapter from my book about it identifies exactly when, 250 years ago, it began to go downhill.

Hogarth was disappointed but not surprised. Having lived there for thirty years, he felt he'd seen it all. (Three years later, taken ill at Chiswick, he would come home to the Square to die.)

Folk memory is long. When Elizabeth Bennet was horrified by her sister Lydia's wanton flirting with subalterns, Miss Austen's readers understood. An unnameable dread attached itself to such behaviour by an ignorant girl: the dread attached to the child who follows the Pied Piper into the cave, unnameable because some things (dark, sexual things), might not politely be mentioned.

Even at a trial. Early in 1761 at the Old Bailey,

Willy Sutton, late of London, merchant, was indicted, for that he, at the parish of St. Martin's in the Fields, in the county of Middlesex, with force and arms, and malice aforethought, on Ann Bell, otherwise Ann Sharp, Spinster, with a certain penknife, value 2d. which he had, and held in his right hand, did strike, and stab the said Ann, on the left buttock, near the fundament; giving to the said Ann one mortal wound, of the width of three inches, and depth of one inch. And one other mortal wound, of the depth of three inches, and width of one inch; whereof she did languish from the 30th of August, till the fourth of October, and then died. And that he, the said Willy, the said Ann did wilfully, and of malice aforethought, kill and murder.

He was a second time indicted, on the statute of stabbing, for feloniously killing and slaying her, the said Ann, against an Act of Parliament in that case made and provided.

The case was sensational, and it was one of two that confirmed Hogarth in his disillusion. Nobody had learned anything from *The Harlot's Progress* or *The Four Stages of Cruelty*.

The story was this. Miss Bell was a young woman of decent family at Aylsham in Norfolk. Her family had looked after her, socially, as best they could. Perhaps, like Lydia Bennet, she fell in with dubious company and no suitor would make a play for her; perhaps there was no dowry. Anyhow, in the summer of 1760 her future was not provided for. The only option that appealed to her was training, in London, for a genteel and fashionable profession such as millinery. Her father corresponded with a shopkeeper near Leicester Fields (Cranbourn Alley, a cut-through north of Cranbourn Street, was called Bonnet Alley) and she was bound apprentice. Mr Bell brought his daughter to London himself, said farewell and took the coach home.

Waists were tight, skirts were wide, necks were encircled by thin black chokers and wide-brimmed hats, held down by ribbons,



perched saucily upon powdered hair worn up and off the face. Gentlemen wore wigs clasped in a bow at the nape, and bright frock coats, frogged and deep-cuffed, over tight knee-breeches, stockings and buckled shoes with heels. Within three weeks Nancy Bell was picked up, in a coffee-house in Covent Garden, by Sir William Fowler, who installed her at the Bohemia Head in Turnham Green with a maid, Elizabeth Honeyball. He visited often. Once or twice a Mr Sutton also came.

Towards the end of August Miss Bell told Elizabeth Honeyball to pack her box; they were moving to the Spring Gardens, at the top of Whitehall, to lodge with a Mrs Parker. Three days later Mr Sutton and Sir William arrived together, and took Miss Bell out walking. Miss Bell did not come back to Spring Gardens for three nights, and when she finally appeared on Saturday morning at around 11 o'clock, her shift, her skirts and all but her outer coat were soaked through with blood. 'As soon as ever I opened the door, she said she had received her death's wound from that villain Sutton,' Elizabeth told the court. Miss Bell's arm and side were black with bruises, her linen bloody. 'She said she had something which she did not care to

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Hogarth in Leicester Square (cont.)



tell of, and it would be her death... She continued ill from that time until the time she died; that was just five weeks to the day.'

As soon as Sir William was informed of her condition he expressed concern. He provided money for her care and a physician, Mr Bliss, who came daily and administered honey poultices. Two weeks later she was worse, and a chair was arranged so that she might travel in it to the country at Marylebone, where she lodged upstairs in the home of a Mrs Knight, with a nurse to help Elizabeth.

Meanwhile a Captain Holland, from the Norfolk Regiment, heard by chance that Miss Bell was ill, and decided to visit her. He was a man in his late thirties who had met her a couple of years before at Aylsham through her brother, another officer.

He found her gravely ill. Mr Bliss did not let her eat. That afternoon Captain Holland dined in Green Street, Leicester Square, with Mr Moon, steward to Horace Walpole, Earl of Orford; then both Holland and Moon took food back to Marylebone for her. Within a day or two she told Captain Holland what she had already told her maid. She and Willy Sutton together, and Sir William Fowler and a Miss Young, had spent three nights at Haddock's Bagnio at Charing Cross and the others had made her drink ratafia as if it was small beer. Holland told the jury, 'Mr. Sutton said to her "I have a good mind to cut your backside, so that you shall not be able to sit; and if ever I meet you again, I'll cut you so, that you shall not be able to live."' Sutton had cut her, then stabbed her deeply, with a penknife, she told Holland.

It was only when the nurse was asked to administer an enema that the gruesome and festering wounds were examined. After that, maid and nurse whispered together in horror. The patient suffered appalling pain and no enema could be given. The smell was foul. A surgeon came, and another doctor. And more visitors. Hot poultices were applied. She could not open her mouth. On October 4th, she died in agonies of gangrene and tetanus, her private parts having suffered a three-inch deep stab wound.

She was hurriedly buried on the directions of the physician, Mr Bliss. Captain Holland had promised to seek justice for her, so he took the story to Henry Fielding, Hogarth's old friend, the playwright and London magistrate. Fielding's clerk took notes. Strangely, nothing happened; Willy Sutton was not charged. Captain Holland was summoned to attend a coroner's hearing, but was not allowed in. Impatient for action, he approached Mr Justice Wright and obtained a warrant. Hence the trial, and the scandal sheets hawked all over town before it even began.

Willy Sutton, calf-eyed and handsome, and fortunate in having a very rich uncle, appeared in his own defence. 'I stand here accused, my lord, for a murder I am not only innocent of, but for a murder that in reality never happened. ...Conscious of my innocence, I have, under these circumstances, cheerfully flown to this court,



a court ever distinguish'd for its candour, and its justice for the protection of innocence.'

Witness after witness was now called on his behalf. Nobody at Haddock's had heard a thing that night. Some declared that Nancy Bell had gone out to Bartholomew's Fair, drunk, days later, when she had supposedly been in bed ill. Mr Bliss was dismissive; the wounds were not cuts, but recent venereal sores. 'I have seen mortifications ten times worse, that have been cured. With her habit of body, a mortification would have happened there, whether she had wounds or not; that I aver; she would have mortified just where she did, and when she did, and would have died at the precise time.'

After that, there was no argument. The once-innocent apprentice milliner had been nothing but a trollop, while Sutton's counsel promised 'I have got not less than twenty gentlemen of the first figure and fashion to give Mr. Sutton the character of a gentleman of humanity and compassion, incapable of doing the crime laid to his charge; if the jury think it material, I will call them.' The foreman of the jury got to his feet.

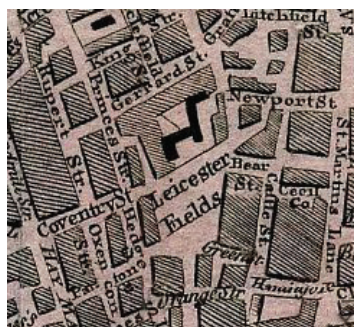
'We think it not material, neither need His Lordship take the trouble of summing up the evidence,' he announced. 'Acquitted.'

This represented everything Hogarth had condemned and ridiculed as an artist. The violent murder of a young woman; the irrationality, complacency and corruption of the court as he had depicted it in *The Bench*. But Hogarth was being systematically sidelined these days, and he knew it. Prints were still sold, but he was unfashionable with the rich dilettanti now running the art market. His painterly skill was dismissed by Walpole, a known connoisseur, and the influential circle around Lord Burlington.

For Hogarth, morosely staring from his parlour window, the early months of 1761 were depressing indeed. And yet to a stranger,

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Hogarth in Leicester Square (cont.)



Leicester Square (as the Fields had become) would have seemed quite charming. In cold wintry sun, a person who made his way west through the drunks and spilled vegetables on Long Acre, dodged carts and carriages in Castle Street, and strolled amongst the wares displayed in Cranbourn Street, might emerge onto the Square as from a forest of wild animals into a tranquil glade. Here the terraced housefronts were smart, servants were modestly dressed, pavements were swept, coaches crunched quietly up and down well-drained slopes, and behind central railings neat paths led from four gates to converge on an equestrian statue of George I. William Hogarth could be seen there most evenings at dusk, a sturdy little figure with his stick, his cocked hat and red cloak, pottering on the grass under the trees with his pug dog.

On the surface, Leicester Square was where mundane existence ended and aspiration began. The Dowager Princess Augusta, widowed but mother of the new King George III, still resided at Leicester House. The grand old palace anchored the whole Square. The Duke of York was next door at Savile House and two of the new King's young brothers lived at 28 and 29, beside Mr Hogarth on the east side. Aristocrats, generals, eminent surgeons, foreign diplomats, and fashionable young Monsieur Dutens of the family that provided jewellery to the Court, were other neighbours. Sir Joshua Reynolds had moved into number 47, on the west side, only last year.

A closer look revealed certain changes. The side streets were noisy with printworks and pubs and stables. The workhouse, around the corner in Castle Street, spewed forth undernourished children and downtrodden adults. Casual workers – who knew where they slept? – could fall prey to anyone. Fish sellers, seamstresses, prostitutes, milkmaids, bootblacks of both sexes, ballad-sellers and pickpockets mingled with house servants in Newport Market. Most of Lisle Street offered lodgings to servants from Savile House and Leicester House.

The chapel in Orange Street was less Huguenot and more Orator Henley than before. As for Green Street and the houses on the south side of the square, nearly everyone who lived there was a French, Dutch or Swedish painter renting a room, for the old houses had been subdivided or extended upwards. Several even had shopfronts.

Near the Green Street end of the east side, the golden Van Dyck's Head that had creaked in the wind outside Hogarth's house had been gone ten years. The man, people said, had become volatile. He had torn the hanging sign down himself after a second disastrous humiliation at the hands of the dealers. Twice in three years they had formed a ring, and he got a pittance for his paintings. They repaid him in kind for his independence.

The biggest change of all was invisible. It was the battle line that ran down the middle of the Square, and existed largely in Hogarth's head; especially on those days when Reynolds, from his house opposite, made his sister ride out in that ludicrously showy carriage, or when some nabob or Kitty Fisher or a Duke was ushered behind Reynolds' front door for a sitting, or when the great *poseur* himself greeted his friends in the evenings, the tall wax candles in his dining room flickering a warm welcome into the icy night. Hogarth was never invited. Hayman was, half of cultured London was, and even Garrick went. Not Hogarth, across the Square with dear Jane, his sister Anne, his pug and his budgerigars. They were all old now, even the servants.

With age – he would be 64 in November – his fragile self-esteem tottered under the chip on his shoulder. Materially, he was well off. He was in his fourth year as Sergeant-Painter to the King. This meant a regular stipend and generous bonuses for supervising the design and execution of ceremonial occasions. When George II died in November, there had been the funeral; this year in July and August, he would be furiously busy with a royal wedding and a coronation. Besides these welcome duties Hogarth received commissions and worked with a new group of young satirists.

But Sergeant-Painter was an artisan's appointment, and he had expected more. He had expected, first, to make a difference. With *Mariage à la Mode* and *Gin Lane* he had grabbed Londoners by the chin and forced them to look at brutal truths about their city. He had thought to find improvements as a result. So far, as witness the case of Miss Bell, he had mostly been disappointed.

And he had wanted, secondly, recognition as a history painter. As an engraver and artist he was accepted, but that was all. As he saw it, his father had been too poor to apprentice him to a master painter, and his own appetite for flattery had never been enough to wangle a position on a Grand Tour, so he was treated as a naïf, and confronted a closed shop. The Burlington group – William Kent, in particular, that toady, that dauber – with their rigid acceptance of all that was old and mouldy and Classical and foreign, and their kow-towing to the 'taste' of the rich, were anathema to him. He accepted the King's patronage, of necessity; but his soul rebelled. British artists should band together and stick up for themselves, and their solid, unpretentious British style. As things stood they were no better than lackeys, forever dependent on the whim of people like Lord Burlington.

When Burlington's circle sneered at Hogarth's *Analysis of Beauty*, his own treatise on taste, he was determined to stand his ground. He had friends and supporters, but it was hard. Allen Ramsay, whom he liked a lot and whom he himself had taught at St Martin's Lane, had been made Painter in Ordinary to the King. He would have loved that job. As to the money Joshua Reynolds had made out of the Spring Gardens exhibition last year — His own catalogue illustration had been popular but it was Reynolds, with his silky manner and flattering portraits, who had carried off the big commissions and spent thousands on his house.

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Hogarth in Leicester Square (cont.)



So Hogarth was moody and disillusioned; the more so when, later, he discovered that with the Bell trial barely begun, a second horrible episode had taken place only yards from his door.

Diagonally across from his parlour window, as he looked towards St Martin's Street, was number 36 on the south side of the Square. The resident, Mrs Ann Millicent King, was a woman of dubious reputation who let rooms. The first floor front was let to a gentleman briefly absent, staying with family in Grosvenor Square. Above on the second floor lived a Swiss enamel painter called Theodore Gardelle. He was 38 years old, a thin sallow fellow with lank black curls, and had tried his luck so far in Geneva, Paris and Brussels. A year or more ago he had alighted from the Paris coach at the Golden Cross, just down the road, as they all did. No Frenchman need walk far up Castle Street before he found a room. In Paris he had left behind a woman and two illegitimate children.

Early in the morning of Thursday 18th February the only people in number 36 were Mrs King and Mr Gardelle. Nan Windsor, the maid, entered the house through an outer door. Mrs King, resting in her ground floor room, let the girl have the house keys and went back to bed. The maid opened the windows and laid the fire. At eight o'clock she climbed the stairs to Gardelle's room. He asked her to run a couple of errands in the Haymarket. Mrs King told her that if she was going out she must first make sure Gardelle came down to mind the street door. So Nan brought him downstairs, where he sat in the parlour in his dressing gown with a book. She left to buy his snuff and deliver his letters.

When she came back, Gardelle was nowhere to be found, and Mrs King's room was shut at both doors, so the servant left the snuff and the change and went below stairs to put the kettle on and toast some bread before the kitchen fire. A little later, as she sat at her table munching breakfast, she heard footsteps overhead, in the parlour or passage. Back on the ground floor, the change and snuff were gone, so she set off upstairs towards Mr Gardelle's room to clean it. As she got there she was surprised to see Mr Gardelle coming down from the attic with a black eye.

He slipped into his room, saying nothing. An hour later he came to Nan with another letter she must deliver at The Feathers. So she went out, and on her return he was in the parlour. He said that a gentleman had come for Mrs King and had gone out with her in a coach. She wondered at this, because Mrs King's room was shut, and it could only be locked from the inside. (Also Nan had not yet emptied the chamber-pot).

He sent her later that day with another letter. This time, the recipient made her wait while he read the contents aloud to her. Monsieur Gardelle wrote that Mrs King had asked him to discharge this servant because she herself had gone away and would be bringing a new maid back. Nan could not read, and had to accept this, but she found it surprising, and said so. She and Mrs King had had a good relationship, but aside from that, she was certain that Mrs King was

at home still, although she had not yet taken either breakfast or dinner (dinner being served at around 2pm). She returned to Leicester Square, packed her box and left, but on the way out she ran into the liveried manservant of the absent tenant of the first floor front, whose room she had prepared for his return that night.

'Look out for Mrs King,' she told him. 'She's been in her room all day and she hasn't eaten.'



Theodore Gardelle

Tom Pelsey, the manservant, moved into his former room in the garret. Late that evening he came downstairs to find Gardelle in the parlour, waiting up for Mrs King, who had, he said, gone out to hire a new maid. Friday went by, and Saturday; Gardelle had several foreign visitors and on Sunday night, two ladies dined in his room. On the Monday morning, passing the open door of Gardelle's room as he came down, Pelsey saw a pair of ruffles (the kind ladies wore on their sleeves) and a necklace on the table. A woman, Sarah, was in the parlour and he heard her tell the charwoman, who was new, that if 'the footman' should ask who Sarah was, he should be told she had come to take over from Mrs King and would be staying in her room.

Gardelle, when asked, said Mrs King was in Bath, or Bristol. On Tuesday morning Pelsey came across him trying to push up the sash on the stairs. What was that terrible smell, Pelsey asked? Gardelle said somebody had put a bone on the fire.

Sarah sat in the parlour, making shirts for Gardelle, and at night she slept in his room.

Pelsey heard nothing on Tuesday night but Sarah did. She awoke at two and found Gardelle was not in bed. She crept down by candlelight and met him on the stairs, agitated and saying something about having been nearly taken up by the Watch. On Thursday morning he gave her a couple of shifts he happened to have, and told her to find lodgings elsewhere, since Mrs King was coming back.

On Thursday evening, when Pelsey came in, Mrs Pritchard the new charwoman was muttering about something blocking up the tub. She couldn't draw water off from the spigot and she'd perched on a ledge and stuck a poker down from above and it hit something soft like blankets. Gardelle was out, so Pelsey, who was getting suspicious, said 'Let's go and have a look.' The cistern, in which drinking water was kept, was in the front basement kitchen near the street. Out at the back in the icy wash-house stood the main water-store, the great barrel called the tub. They crept out to it through the cold and dark, carrying two lights and a chair to stand on, and Mrs Pritchard (diligent indeed, for twelve pence a day) got up.

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Hogarth in Leicester Square (cont.)



'She pulled one blanket partly out; and said, she was afraid of pulling a child out. I set down the candle, and said, if she could not, I must. I pulled out two blankets, two sheets, a coverlid, and a bed-curtain... The water stunk, and was so thick we could not tell what stains they were.' They hauled the load back into the tub and withdrew.

The following morning, when Pelsey got up, Gardelle had wrung out the curtains and draped them over the banister of the kitchen stair. Pelsey went to see Nan Windsor. Did she know anything about all this linen in the tub? Not a thing.

Pelsey took the whole story to his employer, who advised reporting it to the Watch. Things began to move fast. Constable Barron obtained a warrant by deposition from Nan Windsor. On Saturday 28th February he entered the house, confronted Gardelle and (on the basis of suspicion) charged him with the murder of Ann King.

He and his men then undertook a search, entering Mrs King's room through a window. Gardelle had the key, they found out later; there was no lock on the outside. Her bedclothes had been replaced wet. 'There we found the bed bloody, and other marks of violence, and the blankets bloody, and marks of blood about.' That night Gardelle, along with the evidence, was taken before Mr Justice Fielding. 'On Monday Mr. Fielding desired I would attend some people that were to examine about the house,' Barron told the Old Bailey later. 'We had a carpenter with us. He pulled down a place, and I saw taken out the contents of the bowels of a human body from the necessary.... Upon searching farther, in the cock-loft there were the parts of generation; there was a breast, part of a body and bones, this was between the garret and the ceiling.' No wonder Pelsey had smelled something. Also in the garret, Barron (who when not engaged on parish duties was an apothecary) said 'I saw, where there had been a fire, there were many pieces of human bones burnt... I both handled and saw them.'

Gardelle had recently deposited, with a Monsieur Perroneau, a box he said contained expensive colours. It proved to hold Mrs King's



gloves, her gold watch and chain (which would have been worth several guineas) and her bracelets and ear-rings. In his own defence he told the jury, half of whom were French, German or Dutch, that he had not meant to kill her; she had died of a fall in the course of an argument; but rather than be charged with her murder he had chopped her up.

The jury found him guilty and he was sentenced to be executed two days later, on Saturday 4th April at the Haymarket end of Panton Street, not a hundred yards from the scene of the crime. Mr Richards, Secretary to the Royal Academy, saw him pass in a tumbril on his way to the gallows and began a sketch. By Richards' own account to Samuel Ireland later, 'Hogarth came into the room and seeing what he was about snatched up the paper, and hastily taking a pen out of the ink-stand marked in the touches that are exhibited in the etching, and then returning the paper, said, 'There, Richards! I think the drawing is now as like as it can be!'

Gardelle's body was hung in chains on Hounslow Heath, and his friends got up a subscription for his woman and children in Paris. On the street, hawkers sold his final confession. A mob collected outside the house, giggling and claiming that they could still smell burning flesh. Mrs King's murder was, in many ways, a tipping point for Leicester Square; the moment when its reputation began an inexorable decline.



About Hannah Renier

Hannah has ghost-written five well-reviewed books for a presenter of TV history programmes. As a ghost-writer, she has also researched and brought to life the long history of London, other people's family histories, and some early 19th century diaries. Under her own name she has published articles on aspects of London such as the music hall – and Lambeth Past, about North Lambeth. This extract is from her as-yet-unpublished book on Leicester Square, a place that represents 400 years of entertaining depravity and ruthless ambition with numerous law-suits, rivalries and murders thrown in.