

EXECUTION

Charles awoke before dawn in St James's palace on the day of his execution. He opened the curtains and announced he had 'great work to do this day'. It was freezing outside and he asked for an extra shirt. 'The season is so cold' he said, and it will 'make me shake which some observers will imagine proceeds from fear. I would have no such impression. I fear not death'¹

Those who had ordered the king's beheading felt different. They were afraid: worried how the people of London would react when the grim ritual of the execution was enacted. Already there had been widespread anger expressed against the king's trial.

In English law treason had always been understood to be an action against the king, not by him. The only precedent for the execution of a monarch was that of Charles's grandmother Mary, Queen of Scots. In 1587 law, history and fact had been twisted to argue that a Scottish monarch owed the English monarch a duty of obedience. It had allowed Mary to be found guilty of treason against her Tudor cousin, Elizabeth I.

Now law, history and fact were being twisted again to argue that a king could commit treason against his people. It smacked of victors' justice. The Scots – whose king he also was - had sent official delegations to plead for his life. So had the French – for his wife- Henrietta Maria was in Paris and Louis XIV was her nephew. The Dutch had done so too: Mary, Princess of Orange was Charles's eldest daughter. But their pleas had been to no avail.

I am the historian Leanda de Lisle, uncovering the Tudors and Stuarts behind the myths

¹ Sir Thomas Herbert's Account

Charles had been allowed only to choose the hour of his death. When the call came he smiled and took the hand of the former Bishop of London, William Juxon. They walked through the frosted garden and into St James's park, where two regiments of foot were drawn up on either side. A guard of Halberdiers went before him and others behind. The drums were beating so loudly no one could hear anyone speak.

As they reached Whitehall Charles was taken to one of the smaller rooms and had a last meal of bread and wine. Just after two o'clock Charles was brought back through the Privy Gallery and into the Banqueting house. He walked below the famous Rubens ceiling celebrating the Stuart dynasty and advocating their divine right to rule.

After the Reformation Christians on either side of the new religious divide had argued had that rulers drew their rights from the people, so the people had the right to overthrow any of the wrong religion. It had justified assassinations, subversion and civil wars. Charles father, King James, had made the counter argument that kings owed their rights to God. Divine Right kingship was supposed to have been a protection against religious justifications for violence.

Yet here Charles was

As Charles walked the length of the room, a line of soldiers held back a crush of people, praying for him.

At the north end of the room the transoms and mullions of one of the windows had been removed to create a door. From here he stepped down onto the black floor of the scaffold. At his left knee, a garter band flashed diamonds. To one witness, watching from a nearby rooftop, it seemed Charles showed, 'the same concernedness and motion as he usually did' when he had arrived at the Banqueting House 'on a masque night'.²

² Sir Philip Warwick *Memoirs of the Reign of Charles I*

The scaffold was his stage in this theatre of death: every gesture he made, every detail of what followed, would be remembered and would impact on his heir's chances of being crowned. Standing in the bright light of that cold day he sought out his audience. The crowd had been pushed far back so they would not hear anything Charles would say. The confined space had also ensured their numbers had been kept low.

On the scaffold itself there were more soldiers, but it was the executioner and his assistant who stood out. They were dressed in wigs and sailors costumes, their faces masked with fishnet. The executioner had even added a false beard. He was taking no chances that he might be recognized and later lynched.

Charles walked to the middle of the scaffold and looked 'very earnestly' at the block. There were ropes and chains in case he struggled. The block itself was scarcely more than a hewn log on the ground, 18 inches long by six in height. He would have to lie flat. Charles asked 'if there was no higher?'³ It was explained that this was what an efficient block looked like. Mollified, he took out the notes for his speech. 'I shall be very little heard of anybody here, I shall therefore speak a word unto you', he said to those on the scaffold.

As he spoke his words recalled the standard he had raised at Nottingham in 1642 at the outbreak of civil war, with its phrase: Give Caesar his due. 'God will never prosper you, until you give Him his due, the King his due (that is my successors) and the people their due'. 'I desire their liberty and freedom as much as anybody whomsoever', but, 'I must tell you' that true liberty and freedom lay in the rule of law, 'It is not for having a share of government, Sirs, that is nothing pertaining to them. A subject and a sovereign are clean different things'. Only he had the divine right to rule. Yet it was for his subjects that he would die, 'I am a martyr of the people'.

³ Report on the manuscripts of Lord de l'Isle & Dudley preserved at Penshurst place .
vol VI p 583

Charles had stopped, but Juxon now reminded him, that he had yet say something on the Church of England. 'I had almost forgotten it!' Charles exclaimed. 'I declare before you all that I die a Christian according to the profession of the Church of England as I found it left me by my father'.

Then he instructed the executioner. 'I shall say but very short prayer and then thrust out my hands'. 'There is but one stage more' Juxon re-assured his king and Charles responded. 'I go from a corruptible to an incorruptible crown where no disturbance can be'. He referred to a martyr's crown. 'It is a good exchange' Juxon confirmed. Charles was prepared. His last words would be for Juxon alone.

Charles took off his cloak and handed his Order of the Garter to the bishop. 'Remember', he said to Juxon. ⁴ The bishop was to give it his heir. Charles lay down flat and put his head on the low block.

A doctor, who had a good view, said he caught the king's eye, which was 'quick and lively'. After a short moment Charles thrust out his hands. The axe fell clean. His assistant picked up the rolling head and held it high, 'the usual words uttered: behold the head of a traitor'. ⁵

A royalist, writing much later, said the crowd then gave up a 'groan as I have never heard before and I desire I may never hear again'. In truth not everyone was saddened. An officer cut the diamond garter from Charles's left leg. 'His hair was cut off. Soldiers dipped their swords in his blood' and swore at his body. ⁶

⁴ Payne-Gallwey, Ralph, Sir, 1848-1916. / A history of the George worn on the scaffold by Charles I / by Sir Ralph Payne-Gallwey. : London : Edward Arnold, 1908. P 28

⁵ George Evelyn to John Evelyn 30 Jan ADDitional Manuscripts 78303 (Evelyn papers: George Evelyn Corr) fo 34

⁶ William Dugdale quoted in Robert Partridge O Horrible Murder p 97

Their brothers in arms broke up the crowd and the executioner was whisked off to be smuggled away on a barge. The waterman remembered the man seemed terrified and that 'he shook every joint of him'.

Parliament and the army now had to ensure there was no doubt that Charles was dead. There had been uncertainty in the past over the fate of overthrown monarchs. Such questions had fuelled revolt against the rule of their successors. A surgeon had therefore been employed to embalm the king's corpse and sew his head back in place. He described the task as like stitching the head back on a goose.

People paid a ha'penny to view his work and Charles's body at Whitehall. In the days that followed others then queued to see it at St James's Palace.

A contemporary witness later claimed the dead king's was smiling, as 'perfectly as if he were alive'.⁷ In fact, far from smiling it was bruised. The executioner's assistant, who had held up the de-capitated head for the crowd, had dropped it heavily. But the bodies of martyrs are said to defy the brutality of their end, and it was as a martyr this witness was remembering his king.

On the streets Charles's last testimony, the Eikon Basilike or Royal Portrait, was running off the presses. The first copies were already on sale, promoting him as, a 'martyr of the people', who had died for liberties and the Protestant religion. There would be forty impressions and issues in 1649 in England alone, and twenty more in Latin, Dutch, French, German, and Danish. It helped to keep the royalist cause alive.

In France Louis XIV mother, the regent Anne of Austria, described Charles's fate as 'a blow, which ought to make all kings tremble'. It didn't, perhaps because in 1660

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Sir Purbeck Temple, *Cobbett's State Trials* By Thomas Bayly Howell, Thomas Jones Howell, William Cobbett, David Jardine (of Daniel Axtell Charles II 1660) p 1151

Charles's son, Charles II was restored to the throne. But Charles was not to be the last king to lose his head at the hands of his own people.

If you would like to read this podcast it appears in this month's online *Historia* magazine. If you are interested in reading more about Charles I you might also enjoy my biography *White King: THE TRAGEDY OF Charles I*, winner of this year's Historical Writers Association non-fiction Crown. And do feel free to ask me any questions via my website, facebook or twitter