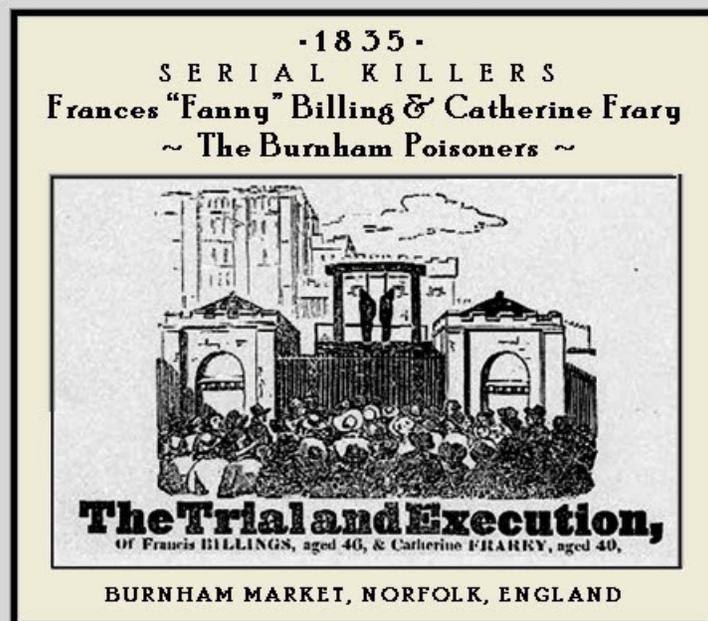


Frances Billing and Catherine Frary - The Burnham Poisoners.



In the early Spring of 1835 two murders by poisoning occurred in the Norfolk village of Burnham Westgate. The victims were Catherine Frary's husband, 33 year old Robert and her lover's wife, Mary Taylor. Frances Billing and Catherine Frary lived in a row of three cottages on North Street in Burnham Westgate. Frances was 46 years old and was a washerwoman who was having an affair with Peter Taylor. He and his wife Mary, who were childless, lived in the middle cottage. Catherine who was 40 and whose occupation was given as a childminder, lived with her husband, Robert and their three children in rented rooms above Thomas Wake's carpenters shop, at the other end of the row. She too may have been having an affair.

On the 21st of February one of Catherine's charges, Harriet Southgate became very ill at her house and her mother Elizabeth was sent for. Harriet died the following morning. Elizabeth noted that Robert Frary was ill in bed complaining of severe stomach pains and he died on the 27th of February. He was buried at St Mary's in Burnham Market, the same graveyard that little Harriet had been interred in. It was suspected that both he and the baby had been poisoned so both bodies were exhumed. However when Harriet's body was examined no trace of arsenic could be found. Robert's body was examined by surgeon, Mr. W. F. Church on the 21st of March after it had been buried for three weeks. A number of tests were carried out on the stomach and these revealed the presence of arsenic.

Sometime during the day of on the 12th of March 1835 some dumplings that Mary had made for that night's dinner had arsenic added to them. Catherine offered to look after Mary when she became ill from eating the dumplings and she was observed by William Powell, the village blacksmith who had gone to the Taylor's for a haircut, to bring Mary some gruel to which she added what appeared to him to be powdered sugar. Phoebe Taylor who was married to John Taylor, Peter's brother also visited Mary who was upstairs retching on a chair by the bedside and saw Catherine making the gruel. She was the first witness called by the prosecution. She recounted how, initially the gruel was too thick and that Mary could not take it, so Catherine took it and thinned it down. Peter Taylor sent Catherine for the local surgeon, Mr. Cremer who came to the house around midnight.

Mary Taylor died shortly after midnight on the 12th of March, in the presence of Mr. Cremer. He attended the subsequent post mortem and took her stomach and its contents to Mr. Nash who was the local chemist for analysis. He applied two tests, one using a solution of silver nitrate and ammonia and the other being a copper salt with ammonia. Both of these confirmed the presence of arsenic in the stomach contents.

Mr. Nash had sold arsenic to Frances Billing and Catherine Frary and would testify to this at the trial. They had

visited his shop on the 21st of February and again on the 7th of March. On the former occasion they each bought a penny worth of white arsenic which was a quarter of an ounce. On the 7th of March Billing came to the shop with Jane Dixon, to buy three pennies worth of arsenic for a Mrs. Ann Webster. It was later discovered that Mrs. Webster had neither asked for or received the poison. Billing also bought a further penny worth for herself.

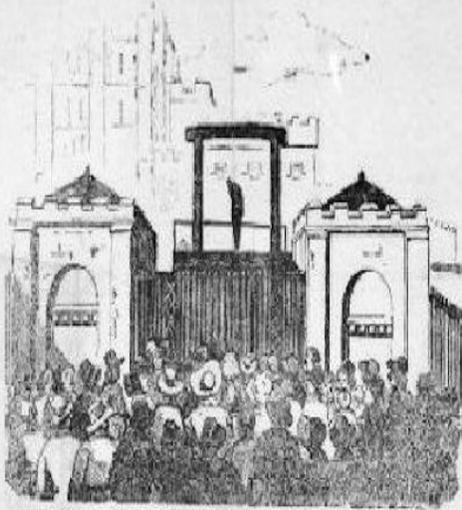
On the 18th of March Fanny Billing and Peter Taylor were arrested. Catherine Frarey was arrested the following day. Sufficient evidence was found against Catherine and Frances to commit them for trial at the Norfolk Summer Assizes and they were remanded in custody, while Peter Taylor was released.

The pair were tried before Mr. Baron William Bolland at Norwich on Friday the 7th of August 1835, commencing at 9.00 a.m. the trial lasting to around 8 p.m. Catherine was charged with having administered poison to Mary Taylor and Frances was charged with being an accessory before the fact. They were further charged with having poisoned and murdered Robert Frary and Frances was also charged with administering poison to her husband, James. Both pleaded not guilty. The various people mentioned above gave testimony at the trial. Only the murder of Robert Frary was proceeded with and as this resulted in a guilty verdict and the death sentence, the case of Mary Taylor was left on the file.

At noon on Monday the 10th of August 1835 Catherine and Frances were led to the gallows erected on Castle Hill. It was decided, in view of the exhausted state of the two women to move the scaffold from the foot of the bridge where it was normally positioned to the summit of the bridge, halfway between the lodge and the Castle. Just after midday the procession led by the chaplain, the Rev. James Brown emerged from the main gate, followed by the prisoners. Catherine had chosen a black silk dress with a mourning cap and Frances a green gown. Both had to be supported by two warders for the short walk of some 30 yards to the gallows and Catherine had to be lifted up onto the platform. Both were supported while the preparations were made by William Calcraft. A few moments later the signal was given and the drop fell, launching them into eternity. Both struggled for a few moments before becoming still. The bodies were left to hang for one hour before being taken down and death masks made. They were buried within the Castle. Vast numbers of people witnessed the hanging and a broadside was sold depicting the execution. As was not uncommon at the time, death masks were made of the women's heads, which fortunately survive. Photography had not come into being in 1835 so we have no record of what they looked like in life.



THE LIFE, TRIAL, AND
EXECUTION, OF



PETER TAYLOR,

*Who was Executed on the Castle Ditch, at Norwich, on Saturday, April 23rd,
1836, for the MURDER of his Wife.*

Peter Taylor was hanged at Norwich on the 23rd of April 1836 having been convicted of incitement to murder his wife, Mary and being an accessory to it. A broadside of his crime and execution was published which included this woodcut drawing of the hanging. Note the similarity with the one produced for Billing and Frary.

Those hanged after 1830 were buried on the Castle Mound in graves marked with their initials and date of execution.