

# THE MARTYRDOM OF THE BLESSED WILLIAM WAY IN KINGSTON UPON THAMES ON 23 SEPTEMBER 1588. WAS IT IN THE MARKET PLACE?

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## ABSTRACT

Katherine Mary Longley in a paper of 1952 wrote that the martyrdom of the Blessed William Way, a Catholic priest, on 23 September 1588, took place at the gallows on Kingston Hill. This was the view taken in other accounts and appeared to be the established view. However, a reasoned case could be made that the Blessed William Way was executed in the Market Place of Kingston upon Thames.

## INTRODUCTION

In 1588, the year of the Spanish Armada, when Phillip II of Spain tried to invade England to depose Queen Elizabeth I and restore Catholicism, the fear of priests as traitors reached its height.<sup>1</sup> The Jesuit historian Fr. John Hungerford Pollen wrote that in the excitement that followed the defeat of the Armada, more Catholics were executed for their faith than in any other comparable period.<sup>2</sup> With reference to Pollen's data, it was estimated that about 30 Catholic priests and laypersons suffered death between 28 August 1588 and 31 October 1588 at various places around London and elsewhere, i.e., Mile End Green, Lincoln's Inn Fields, Clerkenwell, Brentford, Holloway, Tyburn, Kingston upon Thames, Canterbury, Chichester, Ipswich, Gloucester and York. Fr. John Cremin wrote that there was a policy to distribute Catholic victims over as wide an area as possible to make a public example of them and to terrify further any few remaining priests or lay Catholics who might be in hiding.<sup>3</sup> William Way, often referred hereinafter as "*the martyr*" was the only Catholic priest executed in Kingston during this period. Although the Venerable John Griffith, Vicar of Wandsworth in 1528, probably was born in Kingston he was executed at St. Thomas Waterings in Southwark in 1539.<sup>4</sup> Formerly, it was held that a priest called "*William Wiggess*" was executed at Kingston on 1 October 1588 but his was later discounted.<sup>5</sup> Both Fr. Pollen and Fr. Cremin were of the opinion that the martyrdom of the Bl. William Way occurred at Kingston town gallows on Kingston Hill.

The choice of Kingston Hill as an execution site for the martyr, who apparently had no connection with the town, was discussed by Shaan Butters, 2013. She proposed that the choice was made by William Fleetwood, the Recorder of London and legal adviser to Kingston Corporation. And, it may have been designed to appease local Puritans who were unhappy about the persecution of one of their number, the preacher John Udall, and would see the execution of a priest as evidence of the government's resolve to suppress Catholicism. In Butters' opinion, the choice of Kingston was good politics.<sup>6</sup> Moreover, she also was of the opinion that William Way's martyrdom occurred on Kingston Hill.

The Catholic Church declared William Way to be Venerable in 1886 and Blessed in 1929 and he has a shrine in St. Agatha's Church in Kingston – see **Figure 1**.<sup>7</sup> It was assumed that the bust of the martyr was the sculptor's impression because none of the relevant sources described his appearance.



**Figure 1. Bust of The Blessed William Way, from his shrine at St. Agatha's Church, Kingston, 28 December 2019. Photograph taken by David A. Kennedy.**

According to Katherine Mary Longley, formerly a Surrey County Council Archivist, the martyr was born in Devon and after study at the English College in Rheims, in northern France, was ordained as a priest in 1586. Then, on 9 December of that year he left to minister to the persecuted Catholics in England. He would have been about 25 years old at the time. Six months later he was arrested in Lambeth, then in Surrey, and was incarcerated in the Clink Prison. He languished there until some time in August 1588, just after the defeat of the Armada, when he was one of 49 recusant prisoners interrogated prior to their trials.<sup>8</sup> While in prison, he was known as "*William Flower*" and possibly this was an alias that he had used earlier. The potential charge against him would have been high treason. This followed a proclamation issued by the government on 1 April 1582 which stated unequivocally that Jesuits, seminary men and priests who entered the realm secretly were traitors.<sup>9</sup> William Way met these criteria.

The penalty was hanging, drawing and quartering. In practice, this horrible penalty involved being tied to a hurdle, dragged upon it to the place of execution behind a horse, being hanged until almost dead, cut down, emasculated, the body cut open, the bowels drawn out and the heart removed, with both burned before the victim, who was then decapitated before the body was cut into quarters. Thereafter, the head and quarters were exhibited in a public place as a deterrent to others.<sup>10</sup> It was important to bear in mind that in an account of such a grisly execution, the word "*drawn*" could mean being dragged on a hurdle behind a horse or the drawing out, or removal, of the organs from the opened body.

Probably the date set for the martyr's trial, at the Newgate Sessions, was Monday, 16 September 1588. However, he refused to be tried by a temporal judge. Instead, the Bishop of London was appointed to try him. But the martyr refused to be tried by the bishop on the grounds that he had been appointed by Queen Elizabeth as the Head of the Church of England and only the Pope had the authority to appoint bishops.<sup>11</sup> To deny the authority of the Queen was to invite a conviction for high treason and it could be seen as a deliberate attempt to bring on martyrdom. Indeed, it was reported by Longley [1952] that earlier he had expressed great concern about not being called for interrogation when other prisoners were sent for, so keen was he for

martyrdom, which he believed was God's intention for him. Longley [1952] was of the opinion that because Way's denied the Queen's authority, thereby to insult her personally, probably she required him to face the full rigour of the cruel sentence, i.e., being cut down and disembowelled while still conscious.

John Stowe, in 1603, recorded that on the 23 September 1588, "A seminary priest named Flower [i.e., William Way] was hanged, headed and quartered in Kingston".<sup>12</sup> In her paper of 1952, Katherine Longley stated that no detailed account of the martyrdom was known and she surmised that it took place at the Kingston gallows which were about two miles [about three km] outside the town centre in a place called "The Downs" situated on what is now the Kingsnympton Estate on Kingston Hill.<sup>13</sup>

In a later, but undated, unpublished paper held in the Jesuit Archives in London Longley cited an entry in the Kingston Chamberlains' Accounts for the year ending at Michaelmas 1588 which gave the costs of the martyr's execution that were met by Kingston Corporation.<sup>14</sup> They could be translated as follows.<sup>15</sup>

*"Paid to Master Bailiffs for the money laid out about the execution of the Traitor, 4s 1d.*

*Paid to Roger Barnes for nails about the same, 10d.*

*Paid for a peck of salt about the same, 7d."*

In this paper Longley asked whether other arrangements had been made by the Corporation for Way's execution, e.g., had it taken place in Kingston's Market Place rather than at the site of the gallows? She concluded that if the execution was in the Market Place, it would have been necessary for gallows to be erected there and the costs would have been more than the 4s 1d shown in the Chamberlains' Accounts. Moreover, in her opinion, the open site on Kingston Hill would have been preferable because it was capable of accommodating far more spectators than would have been possible in the Market Place.<sup>16</sup>

## **REVIEW OF AVAILABLE EVIDENCE**

As doubts were raised about the exact site of the martyrdom, it was necessary to review the available evidence. First, the Chamberlain's Accounts provided no details of expenditure within the 4s 1d "laid out about the execution of the traitor". However, included, as Longley [1952] surmised,

would have been the costs of a hurdle with a horse to draw it, the provision of a fire on which to burn the excised entrails and perhaps the provision of a cauldron in which to parboil, and preserve, the head and bodily quarters. To this could be added the executioner's fee and cost of the nails needed to attach the quarters for exhibition in a public place, e.g., on Kingston Bridge. Longley [1952] surmised that the peck of salt was used in the preservation of the head and quarters and there was no reason to doubt this.

Second, John Stowe [1603a] did not say where in Kingston the martyr was executed. Third, Burton & Pollen - the relevant source quoted by Katherine Longley [1952] - did not state that the execution of the martyr took place at the gallows on Kingston Hill and it did not state how he was transported from London to Kingston for the execution. However, Longley surmised that probably he was conveyed to Kingston by river and was delivered to a landing stage near the old bridge. It was difficult to dispute this in the absence of other evidence. But, she wrote that "*a contemporary account*" made it clear that the martyr "*was drawn on arrival at Kingston*" which could have meant that upon arrival at the landing stage he was immediately drawn on a hurdle to the execution site or that his bowels were drawn out shortly after he arrived. However, "*the contemporary account*" referred to by Longley could not be identified with certainty, and it was not possible to investigate it.

Fourth, John Stowe [1603b] recorded that one of a number of "*disordered soldiers*", after being apprehended on the 27 August 1589, "*was hanged at the end of a sign at an inn door in the town of Kingston upon Thames for the terror to the rest*". This indicated that purpose-made gallows were unnecessary for hangings in Kingston.<sup>17</sup> And, for the maximum "*terror to the rest*" it seemed likely that this execution was carried out in the Market Place.

Fifth, how many people would have wished to see the execution of the Bl. William Way? One approach was to consider the size of the population of Kingston and its surrounding countryside at the time. Shaan Butters suggested that in 1603 it was perhaps 1,260.<sup>18</sup> Thus, if this number of people turned out to see the execution, the site would have to be able to accommodate them. Clearly, this would support the use of an open site like The Downs. But, while the capacity of Kingston Market Place in 1588 could not be determined, it could not be ruled out as the execution site and it

seemed unlikely that every single person in the area would have attended the execution.

Sixth, the Downs execution site on Kingston Hill was about two miles [about 3 km] distance from the centre of Kingston and was approached via the road to London. For the final stage of the journey, this would have required the hurdle with the prisoner on it to be dragged up a gradient of about 5% from the bottom of Kingston Hill to the execution site: a distance of about 930 yards [850 m]. Against this background, it seemed likely that Kingston Corporation would have preferred an execution site in the town centre where shorter transportation distances with lower costs, were involved.

Finally, it appeared to have been neglected that there was a prison in the centre of Kingston, known as *“The Stockhouse”, “Town Gaol”* or *“Borough Gaol”*, which offered safe custody of the Bl. William Way before his execution and was available to the Corporation, which owned the establishment – see **Figure 2**. A prison was necessary for the confinement of felons for trial at the Kingston Assizes; it was also used as debtors’ gaol. There was a prison in Kingston in 1264, there was a record of Assizes held in the town in 1576 and a record of the Stockhouse in 1628.<sup>19</sup> This prison was about 328 yards [300 m] from the end of the old Kingston bridge where Longley [1952] suggested that there was a landing stage. Therefore, possibly Kingston Corporation would have found the Stockhouse convenient for the confinement of the martyr in September 1588.



**Figure 2. The Hand and Mace alehouse in Kingston as it was in 1829. The Stockhouse, otherwise called the Town Gaol or Borough Gaol, was at the back of the alehouse. From Kennedy, 2004.**

## **A CASE FOR MARTYRDOM IN KINGSTON MARKET PLACE**

Records exist of executions in Kingston Market Place. There, on 5 March 1513 Thomas Denys, a Lollard, was burned at the stake and on 25 November 1642, in the early English Civil War period, two un-named soldiers were hanged. Moreover, on 16 March 1681, Margaret Osgood, who had murdered her husband and for this was convicted of petit treason, was burned at the stake. Before her execution, she was confined in the nearby Stockhouse prison.<sup>20</sup>

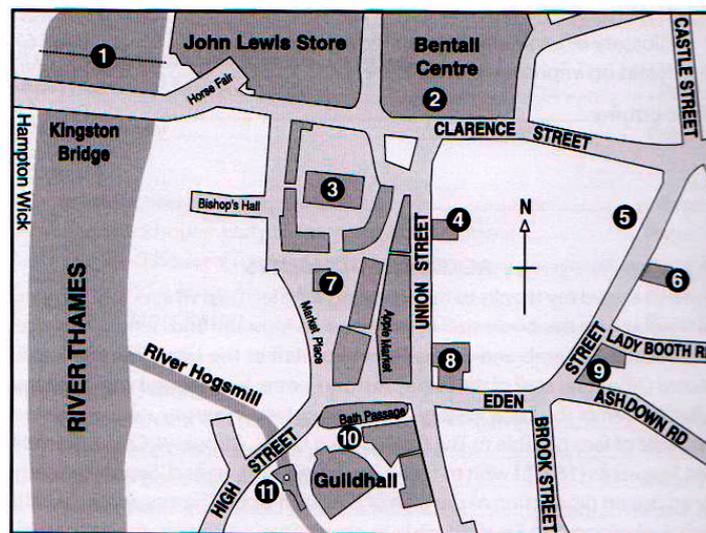
It was recalled that Katherine Longley [1952], wrote that no detailed account of the execution of the Bl. William Way was known and that she surmised that it took place at the gallows on Kingston Hill – see above.<sup>21</sup> Accordingly, the following account was proposed to support a hypothesis in which Kingston Market Place was the execution site.

There was agreement that the martyr's trial was on Monday, 16 September 1588, and his execution was on 23 September 1588, the following Monday.<sup>22</sup> Thus one week elapsed between these two events and one of the days in that week was a Sunday, i.e., 22 September 1588, which in Protestant England would have been dominated by enforced attendance at an Anglican church. So, in the time available to them, i.e., six days, the government authority had to alert Kingston Corporation to its responsibility for arranging the execution and paying for it. Then, the Corporation had to get everything ready, including promulgation of the forthcoming execution to the Kingston populace. Finally, arrangements had to be made to convey William Way from London to Kingston. It was assumed that these costs were met by central government and that Kingston Corporation wished to keep the execution costs, which it had to meet, as low as possible. Against this background, the following account was proposed.

At some time between Monday, 16 September and Saturday, 21 September, the martyr was taken by river from London to a landing stage on Kingston riverside where he was lodged in the Stockhouse to await his execution. The distance involved in this journey would have been about 267 yards [about 244 m]. On the morning of Monday, 23 September 1588, the executioner and the wherewithal for the execution was assembled in the Market Place. Then, the martyr was dragged on a hurdle to the Market Place,

a distance of about 300 yards [about 275 m], with negligible gradient, where first he was hanged until he was half-dead from a makeshift gallows, e.g., an inn sign as in the case of the “*disordered soldier*” about one year later. Then, the rest of the prescribed execution formula was carried out. All this was carried out before as big a crowd as could assemble in the Market Place.

**Figure 3** is a plan of modern-day Kingston showing the site of the old bridge, where according to Longley [1952], there was a landing stage, the site of the Stockhouse and The Market Place.



**Figure 3. Plan of modern-day Kingston, not to scale. No. 1 indicates the site of the old bridge, near which, according to Longley [1952] was a landing stage. No. 2 indicates the site of the Stockhouse, otherwise called the Town Gaol or Borough Gaol. The Market Place is indicated in the centre of the plan – see No.7. From Kennedy, 2004.**

## DISCUSSION & CONCLUSIONS

There was a consensus that the Bl. William Way, a Catholic priest, was executed with great cruelty for high treason in Kingston upon Thames on 23 September 1588. However, as no eye-witness account of the execution yet has been discovered, the exact site of his martyrdom could only be surmised, as Longley [1952] indicated. In her view, in short, the martyr was brought to Kingston by river on Monday 23 September 1588 and from a landing stage near the old bridge was then dragged about three miles on a hurdle through the town and up Kingston Hill to The Downs site where, upon a pre-existing gallows, his execution began. After review of the available evidence, a different account was formulated [above]. In short, this proposed that

sometime after his conviction on Monday 16 September 1588, the martyr was brought to Kingston by river to a landing stage near the old bridge. Then, he was taken to the nearby Stockhouse where he was confined pending his execution. On the morning of 23 September 1588, he was dragged the relatively short distance to the Market Place, where on a makeshift gallows his execution began.

In a discussion on the limits of historical knowledge, John Tosh cited Theodore Zeldin's view that all a historian could do was to offer his readers a personal vision of the past and the relevant evidence from which they, in turn, could fashion their own vision.<sup>23</sup> In this paper, I have analysed the established view that the Catholic martyr Bl. William Way was executed on Kingston Hill and have proposed a new account that he was executed in Kingston Market Place. Of the two accounts, in my opinion, the evidence presented in this paper makes the new account more credible. However, as Zeldin summed-up "*everyone has the right to find his own perspective*" on the site of the Bl. William Way's execution.<sup>24</sup>

Finally, assuming that Bl. William Way, a Catholic martyr, was indeed executed in Kingston Market Place in 1588, he would not have been the first person to die for his faith there. As mentioned previously, Thomas Denys in 1513 was burned at the stake in the Market Place. He was a Lollard, which some regard as a pre-Protestant movement, and was a heretic in the eyes of the Catholic Church and the state at the time.<sup>25</sup> Therefore, he also died for his faith and by Lollard standards probably qualified as a martyr. Shaan Butters recorded that John Udall was imprisoned for seditious libel but later was pardoned and released. Nevertheless he died in 1592, probably as consequence of harsh treatment and according to Butters was mourned by his friends in Kingston as a Puritan martyr.<sup>26</sup> The state's intolerance to certain religious beliefs at different times is a very interesting area which deserves much more research.

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<sup>1</sup> Shaan Butters, 2013, *That famous place. A history of Kingston upon Thames*, Kingston, Kingston University Press, pp.158-159.

<sup>2</sup> John Hungerford Pollen, 1908, *The Massacre of 1588, LI*, in *Unpublished documents relating to the English martyrs*, London, Catholic Record Society.

<sup>3</sup> Rev. Michael Clifton, 1980, *The Southwark martyrs*, London, Catholic Truth Society, pp.6-8. Fr. John Cremin, 1989, *St. Agatha's Kingston upon Thames. A parish history*, Sevenoaks, GCP publications Ltd., p.89.

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<sup>4</sup> See endnote 3 and Malcolm Pullan, 2013, *The lives and times of the forty martyrs of England and Wales, 1535-1680*, New Generation Publishing, p.59. In the Catholic Church, the title “Venerable” denotes that it is worthy of belief that a deceased person is sanctified but is not yet qualified to be given the title “Blessed” - see endnote 7.

<sup>5</sup> Edwin H Burton & J. H. Pollen, 1914, *Lives of the English Martyrs, Second Series, The martyrs declared venerable, Vol. 1, 1583-1588*, London, Longmans, Green & Co.

[https://archive.org/stream/livesofenglishma01burtuoft/livesofenglishma01burtuoft\\_djvu.txt](https://archive.org/stream/livesofenglishma01burtuoft/livesofenglishma01burtuoft_djvu.txt)

<sup>6</sup> Shaan Butters, 2013, *That famous place. A history of Kingston upon Thames*, Kingston, Kingston University Press, pp. 156-159.

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.stagathaschurch.org.uk/history>

In the Catholic Church, the title “Blessed” denotes that it is worthy of belief that the person is in Heaven and can make intercession with God on behalf of living persons. On the wall in St Agatha’s Church, close to the shrine of Bl. William Way is an undated marble plaque indicating that it was installed by the Knights of St. Columba, Council 282.

<sup>8</sup> Katherine Mary Longley [1952] He was especiall...Blessed William Way martyred at Kingston upon Thames, 1588, *Southwark Record*, July 1952, pp.141-146.

<sup>9</sup> John Bellamy, 1979 [edition published in 2013], *The Tudor law of treason*, Abingdon, Routledge, p. 72.

<sup>10</sup> See sentence passed on Edmund Campion in Richard Simpson, 2013, *Edmund Campion*, Charlotte, Tan Books, p. 559.

<sup>11</sup> Katherine Mary Longley, 1952.

<sup>12</sup> Clifton [see endnote 3], reported that this date fell on a Monday.

<sup>13</sup> John Stowe, 1603a, *Annals of England, Queen Elizabeth*, 23 September 1588, Seminary priests executed, p.1260.

<https://archive.org/details/annalsofenglandt00stow/page/n3>

Katherine Mary Longley, 1952.

<sup>14</sup> Katherine Mary Longley, undated, unpublished typescript in the Martyr’s Cause Papers, held in the Jesuit Archives, 114 Mount Street, London W1K 3AH. I am grateful to Mary Allen, Assistant Archivist, for locating this.

<sup>15</sup> I am grateful to Anne McCormack for this translation.

<sup>16</sup> Katherine Mary Longley, undated.

<sup>17</sup> John Stowe, 1603b, *Annals of England, Queen Elizabeth*, 27 August 1589, Disordered soldiers executed, p.1264. The full report read, “*Sir John Norris and Sir Francis Drake being returned, as ye have heard, many of their sailors and soldiers, shortly after their landing, fell sick and died of a stench bred among them on ship-board; some of the others so rudely behaved themselves about the country, about the court and elsewhere, that many men misliked of their doings and divers of them being apprehended on the 27 August [1589], one of them was hanged at the end of a sign at an inn door in the town of Kingston upon Thames for the a terror to the rest.*”

<https://archive.org/details/annalsofenglandt00stow/page/n3>

<sup>18</sup> Shaan Butters, 2013, *That famous place. A history of Kingston upon Thames*, Kingston, Kingston University Press, p.119.

<sup>19</sup> David A Kennedy, 2004, *History of prisons in Kingston upon Thames. Part 1, The Stockhouse and Debtors’ Prison*, published privately. National Archives, ASSI, 35/18/6, Justices of Assize, Norfolk, Home and South-Eastern Circuit, Indictment Files, Surrey, at Kingston upon Thames, 23 July 1576. David Kennedy, 2010, *Kingston burning*, Newsletter of the Kingston upon Thames Society, pp.7-9.

<sup>20</sup> *Victoria History of the County of Surrey*, Vol. 3, p.492. Transcribed Kingston Parish Burial Records, Kingston History Centre. David Kennedy, 2010.

<sup>21</sup> Katherine Mary Longley, 1952.

<sup>22</sup> Katherine Mary Longley, 1952. Michael Clifton, 1980.

<sup>23</sup> Cited by John Tosh, 2002, *The pursuit of history*, 4<sup>th</sup> Edition, Harlow, Pearson Longman, p.174.

<sup>24</sup> See endnote 22.

<sup>25</sup> <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Lollards>

<sup>26</sup> Shaan Butters, 2013, p.158.