

THE
HISTORY OF
SUICIDE
IN ENGLAND
1650-1850

4



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1650-1850

Volume 4
1717-1750

Edited by
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NEWSPAPERS: REPORTING SUICIDE

After the Restoration of the English monarchy in 1660, a number of newspapers came into being, foremost among these the *London Gazette*. The lapse of the *Licensing Act* in 1695 allowed the press to burgeon, expanding from a few London papers in the late 1690s to twelve by 1720. The *Flying Post* appeared the day after the Act elapsed, and the *Post Boy* and *Post Man* soon followed.¹ These early papers reported on suicide, and the founding of other weekly and daily papers resulted in a marked increase of the reporting of suicide.² As these papers divulged the names, parishes and places of employment of those who had completed suicide, the act acquired an increasingly public dimension. The reporting, however, especially in the first decades of the century, remains terse and matter of fact, supplying the details already mentioned in addition to motives and publishing the verdicts of coroner's juries when known. The 23 May 1719 issue of the *Weekly Journal* or *Saturday's Post* gives a one-sentence account of a suicide: 'Yesterday was se'nnight the Coroner's Inquest sat upon the Corpse of the Weaver that drowned himself some days before at the New River Head, and brought in their Verdict Non Compos Mentis'. By the 1720s, the reports begin to favour narratives of the events, and take an interest in reporting on the victim's state of mind and behaviour in the final days and hours preceding the suicide, and relating these details to the judgment of the coroner. The 29 October 1720 issue of the *Weekly Journal* or *Saturday's Post* narrates the fall of a gentleman who, having succeeded in

retrieving a broken fortune ... in Change-Alley ... became an Adventurer with that Success, as enabled him to pay his Debts; which he did very honourably; but presuming he had enough left him to afford him a handsome Maintenance for the future, upon the Fall of Stocks³ grew melancholy; and his Dejection of Spirit prevail'd so much on him, as to hurry him onto this irrational Remedy.

The account thematizes the vicissitudes of life and ventures into moralizing with its description of suicide as an 'irrational Remedy'. Although many accounts of this period continue to favour strictly factual reporting, there is a shift discernible here that possibly reflects a response to the South Sea Bubble, an event that

shook English society at all its levels, and in which the public accordingly took an active interest. Readers would have been interested in the circumstantial details provided by the papers, and may have been able to identify with the distress registered in the accounts of those driven to desperation by the loss of their fortunes or their fantasies. The fact that many of the verdicts brought in concerning Bubble-related suicides declared that the victim was *non compos mentis* suggests that jurors may also have sympathized with their situations. Some of the accounts are graphic and lurid in the images they paint of the deceased ‘weltering’ in their own blood or worse – as in the 24 August 1739 account in the *Daily Gazetteer* – which speaks to the sensationalistic turn newspapers took as they sought to compete in an increasingly competitive and cut-throat market. In contrast to this emphasis on scandal, we see in religious newspapers like the *Old Whig or the Consistent Protestant* a brief account on 29 January 1736 of a ‘China-man’s’ self-murder followed by the considerably lengthier moral reflection:

The too frequent Verdict of *Non compos mentis*, is an Encouragement to these Practices; if Persons that destroy’d themselves were to be expos’d naked, and buried in the Highway with a Stake drove through their Bodies, and this executed with Rigour, it’s believed it would put an End to so cowardly a Practice as that of Self-murder.

Leniency vies with severity in these accounts that complicate the trend towards secularization in the period.

Although newspapers reported on suicide with sufficient frequency to awake in the minds of their domestic and foreign readers a sense of an emergent epidemic in England, the task of determining how frequently suicide was reported is next to impossible. As Michael MacDonald observes, ‘*Fog’s Weekly Journal* published 34 reports of suicide in 1731, but only half as many in the next year.’⁴ Papers were selective in terms of what they chose to cover and when. Some stories, like that of the fashionable socialite, Fanny Braddock, who took her life in 1731, evidently commanded more interest and attention than an obscure labourer, although the numerous reports of the suicides from the labouring class would have done much to dispel popular misconceptions that suicide was an aristocratic disease.

Notes

1. J. Black, *The English Press in the Eighteenth Century* (New York: Routledge, 2010), p. 12.
2. M. MacDonald and T. R. Murphy, *Sleepless Souls: Suicide in Early Modern England* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990), p. 304.
3. Another reference to the collapse of the South Sea Bubble beginning in August of 1720 and culminating in October of that year.
4. MacDonald and Murphy, *Sleepless Souls*, p. 305.

Newspapers: Reporting Suicide

Flying Post, or Post Master, 4 September 1701

London, September 5. Yesterday the Right Honorable Charles, Earl of Bath,¹ late Lord Lansdown, was unfortunately killed by the casual going off of a Pistol, which wounded his Left-Hand, and pierced his Head: Upon examination of several Witnesses, it was found, by the coroner's inquest, to have happened *per Infortunium*,² his Lordship being under no manner of Discontent.

Post Boy, 26 March 1709

London, March 29. Mr. Tilson, Clerk in the Exchequer, in my Lord Hallifax's Office, shot himself dead last Saturday; the Coroner's Inquest sate upon him, and brought it in *Non Compos Mentis*.

British Mercury, 24 March 1714

Last Friday Morning, Sir George Newland, one of the Members of Parliament for this City, threw himself out of a Window at his House, and dy'd. The Coroner's Inquest found he had been subject to Melancholy Fits, on Account of a Contusion receiv'd in his Head some Time since, by a fall from his Horse, and brought him in Lunatick.

British Weekly Mercury, 13 August 1715

On Sunday the 7th of August, one Mary Martin, a Quaker, drown'd her self in Earl's Mead near Traytor's Bridge in Bristol, 'tis said for the love of one Francis Montuin, a Quaker, and by Trade a House-Carpenter, who, after two Years Suit to her, left her, and courted another, and was to be marry'd to the last, the Day which this sad Accident happen'd.

The said Francis Montuin had so far carry'd his Design with Mary Martin, that it was deliver'd into their Meeting for the Satisfaction of the whole Body of Quakers, as is usual with those of that Religion. Francis Montuin was with her the Saturday Night, and acquainted her that he should be marry'd the next

Day. Shall you, says she, so will I too, and the next Morning about 6 a Clock was seen to walk in the aforesaid Place, and pull off her Riding-hood and Clogs, and throw her self in the Mead; they seeing her jump in, ran to her Assistance; but before they could come to her, she was dead: They took her up, the Coroner sat upon her Body; after which, she was carry'd to her Mother's House, in order for her Burial. Her mother is the same Religion, and lives very well in Bristol.

Weekly Packet, 17 September 1715

On Tuesday Morning Mr. Hargrave, who kept the Rainbow Coffee House at Temple Bar, and who fail'd in the World for several Hundreds of Pounds, hang'd himself at his Lodgings in Chancery Lane; and has since been found to die *Non Compos Mentis* by the Coroner's inquest.

Weekly Packet, 24 December 1715

On the 22nd, a woman that clean'd a Gentleman's Chambers in the Temple, took the Opportunity of his Absence, to steal some of his Stock of Coals, which lay in a large Closet that was lock'd. There was a Funnel which they us'd to let down the Coals from a Garret above, by which she attempted to pass with the Help of a Rope: but the Funnel growing gradually narrower towards the Bottom, she, sliding down with Violence, stuck in it, and perish'd miserably. The coroner's inquest has brought in the verdict, *Felo de se*.

Weekly Packet, 9 February 1717

We hear that an Under-Officer of St. Bartholomew's Hospital has lately hang'd himself, and the Coroner's Inquest has given their verdict, *Non compos mentis*.

Weekly Journal or British Gazetteer, 11 May 1717

Last week a Coachman at Islington, being in a despairing Condition, as having been a lewd Liver, stabb'd himself; but committing not the designed Fact of Self-Murder effectually, he afterwards hang'd himself. And just before one John Allen, a Barber in Smithfield, who had been missing about 6 or 7 days, was found drown'd in the New-River Head, standing upon his Legs in the Mud. About the same time also one Hobbie, a Porter by Gray's Inn Passage by Red-Lion Square, cut his throat from ear to ear.

Weekly Journal or Saturday's Post, 22 June 1717

Last Week a young Man with a laced Hat, and a Fustian Frock, was found hanging on a Tree in Cane-wood, by Hampstead Heath, supposed to be a Gentleman's Servant, but owned by no Body. He had a Penknife and seven Pence half-penny

found in his Pocket. The Coroner's Inquest have sat up on his Corpse, and brought in their Verdict Felo de se.

Weekly Journal or British Gazetteer, 30 November 1717

About 14 Days ago, the Wife of one Mr. Carr, a Victualler, desiring her Husband to look out after the Bar whilst she went out a little way she gave him the Keys of the Money Box and Cocks, and went abroad, but was not heard of in 10 Days after, when on Monday last, the poor Woman, who was big with Child, was taken up drown'd at Strand-Lane Stairs, and the Coroner sitting on her, brought her in Lunatick.

Weekly Journal or British Gazetteer, 19 April 1718

Last Monday, a Clicker's Wife, not far from Orme's Conventicle, Poysoned herself with Ratsbane. She declar'd before she Dy'd, that the D—I³ appear'd to her three times, in Humane Shapes, and tempt'd her to commit Self-Murder.

Last Thursday, Mrs. Coward, who kept the Rose and Crown Alehouse, in Shoe lane, hang'd herself in the Skittle-Ground.

Weekly Journal or Saturday's Post, 10 May 1718

We have an Account from Lancashire, that 'Squire Farrington of Werdon, a Gentleman of 1500 l. per Ann. coming on Sunday three weeks from Church, he went into the Kitchen and asked if Dinner was ready? To which she answered, it would in half an Hour. He went afterwards into the Stable, and ordered the Coachman to dress the Horses fine to go out in the Afternoon, and soon after, went up stairs, took a Pistol, and shot himself dead. The Coroner's Inquest sate upon his Corpse, and brought in their verdict *Non Compos Mentis*.

Weekly Journal or Saturday's Post, 17 May 1718

On Friday se'nnight, one Pede, a Perriwig-maker upon some discontent not known, hang'd himself at his Lodgings at the White Horse Alehouse, the Corner of Hemlock Court, in Shear-lane, and on Saturday the Coroner's Inquest sat up upon his Corpse, and brought in their verdict, *Non Compos Mentis*.

Weekly Journal or Saturday's Post, 13 December 1718

On Monday last an old Woman, a Laundress, upon some Discontent not known, hanged herself at her Bed-Post in her Chamber at Liquebone-street; and on the Tuesday the Coroner's Inquest sate upon her Corpse at the Ball Inn, at Gray's-Inn-Lane, and brought in their Verdict *Non Compos Mentis*.

Original Weekly Journal, 20 December 1718

On Monday Night some young Boys, being at a Brandy-Shop in Vinegar-Yard, drank to such an extravagant Rate that one of them dy'd at the table. The Coroner's Inquest have sate on his Body, and brought in their Verdict felo de se.

Weekly Journal or Saturday's Post, 23 May 1719

Yesterday was se'nnight the Coroner's Inquest sat upon the Corpse of the Weaver that drowned himself some days before at the New River Head, and brought in their Verdict Non Compos Mentis.

Mercurius Politicus: Being Monthly Observations on the Affairs of Great Britain, (September 1719), vol. 4, p. 386

Six Persons Felo de se's this Month

The Gunner of the *Suffolk* Man of War, Shot himself through the Head.

The Victualler, Mr. *Eaglesfield*, at the *Spread-Eagle* in *Pater-noster Row*, Shot himself through the Head.

An Antient Woman in *Ratcliff* Hang'd herself.

Another Woman in *Spittle-fields*, Drown'd herself.

A Poor, out-of-Work Weaver Hang'd himself.

Another Woman Hang'd herself at *Westminster*.

Original Weekly Journal, 17 October 1719

On Sunday last a young Gentlewoman, in Brownlow-Street poyson'd herself with yellow Arsenick. The Coroner's Inquest have brought in their Verdict Felo de se, but the Apothecary, who sold the Poyson, is bound over to the Sessions.⁴

Weekly Journal or Saturday's Post, 28 November 1719

On Friday the 20th a poor Man cut his Throat with a Penknife in the Fields near Hampstead; and on Monday the Coroner's Inquest sat upon his Corpse, and brought in their verdict, Felo de se.

On Tuesday evening likewise the Coroner's Inquest sat upon the Body of the Woollen Draper's Man that shot himself the Night before in St. Paul's Church-yard, and brought in their verdict, Non Compos mentis.

Original Weekly Journal, 19 December 1719

Yesterday was Se'nnight, a Brewer's Servant in Old-street (some say his Clerk) hang'd himself, about Four a-Clock in the Morning, in a Halter, that he was seen to fetch out of the Stable over Night. The Morning before, his Master seeing him in a melancholly Humour, ask'd him the Reason why he look's so deject'd; he answered Worldly Crosses and Misfortunes troubled his Mind a little, but he hop'd in a short time to overcome them; but his Master looked upon this as the effect of Lunacy, which the Coroner's Inquest confirmed by their Verdict the same Day, in bringing him in *Non compos mentis*.

Weekly Journal or Saturday's Post, 25 June 1720

We hear that on Monday last a doating old Gentlewoman said to be the Author of a silly stupid Pamphlet entitled a *Learned Dissertation upon Old Women Etc.*, upon some *Fright* or Discontent, hang'd herself at her Lodgings in a Garret in *Grub-street*; and that the next Day the Coroner's Inquest sat upon her Body; but being satisfied from very sufficient Proof that the old Gentlewoman had been *Crazy* all her Life-Time, they presently brought in their Verdict, *Non compos mentis*.

Weekly Journal or Saturday's Post, 10 September 1720

Sunday Morning, Charles Blunt Esq.,⁵ Cousin to Sir John Blunt, one of the Directors of the South Sea Company,⁶ cut his own Throat at his House in Broad-Street; upon his falling down on the Floor, the Servants ran upstairs, and found their Master weltering in his Blood; a Surgeon was immediately sent for, but came too late, for the poor unhappy Gentleman had done his business too effectually: The Coroner's Inquest sat on his Corpse, and brought in their Verdict *Non compos mentis*: He has left a wife, and three or four children, and 'tis said, died worth 250000l.

Weekly Journal or Saturday's Post, 29 October 1720

Last Week a Gentleman hanged himself at his House by Golden Square, his Servant coming accidentally into the Room, and seeing her Master in that Condition, was very much surprised; but however had Courage enough to cut him down before he was quite dead, though to very little Purpose, for the next Day the poor Gentleman departed this life; 'tis reported of him, that having shelter'd himself from his Creditors for some Time in the Mint, as soon as the Opportunity of retrieving a broken Fortune presented itself in Change-Alley, he became an Adventurer with that Success, as enabled him to pay his Debts; which he did very honourably; but presuming he had enough left him to afford him a handsome Maintenance for the future, upon the Fall of Stocks⁷ grew melancholy;

and his Dejection of Spirit prevail'd so much on him, as to hurry him onto this irrational Remedy. The Coroner's Inquest have sat on the Body, and brought in their Verdict *Non Compos Mentis*.

Applebee's Original Weekly Journal, 10 June 1721

A certain juryman, as he was returning Home from the Coroner's Inquest that had sat upon the Body of an unfortunate Gentleman that had hang'd himself, being grown Lunatick, through the misfortunes he suffer'd by the South Sea; was ask'd, What Verdict they gave? Whether they had brought him in *felo de se*? Aye, aye, says he, *he fell into the Sea, sure enough*.⁸

Weekly Journal or British Gazetteer, 28 October 1721

Last Wednesday Morning, the celebrated Civilian, Dr. Henchman, who was one of Dr. Sacheverell's Council on his Tryal before the House of Lords, having sustain'd irreparable losses in the South-Sea, wounded himself in the Breast, but there are great Hopes of his Recovery.

The same night one Johnson an Attorney in Chancery-Lane, hang'd himself at his own House. 'Tis said that having had some Words with his Wife, who lately lain-in, went down Stairs into the Cellar, and with his Garters tyed to the Lock of the Colehole-Door committed this Self-Murder, being found on his Knees.

Daily Journal, 28 October 1721

The Coroner's Inquest having sate on the body of Mr. Johnson, the Attorney who hang'd himself in Chancery-Lane, brought it in *Felo de se*.

London Journal, 17 August 1723

Yesterday was Sev'night, a Milkman near May-Fair, bought some Arsenick under Pretence of killing Rats in the Cow House; but took it himself, and died in 12 Hours; during that time he refused to declare the Motive of such an Action. The Coroner's Inquest having sat upon the Body, brought in their Verdict *Self-Murder*, and he was buried naked in the Cross-way near Pimlico.

Weekly Journal, 29 May 1725

[The execution of Jonathan Wild⁹] The Evening before he suffer'd, he enquir'd how the noble Greeks and famous Romans, who slew themselves, came to be so glorious in History, if Self-murder be a Crime; for such Actions are recorded in History as Matters of Bravery and Courage? He was desir'd to consider, that the wisest and most learned Heathens, in their Writings, call'd Self-murder, Coward-

ice, in not sustaining the Misfortunes that Providence laid upon human Nature; and that Christianity is more express against Suicide. The Prisoner confess'd that Self-murder was Impiety; but his Confession appeared to be Hypocrisy, for about two a-clock in the Morning he endeavour'd to prevent his Execution by drinking *Laudanum*....

Fog's Weekly Journal, 2 January 1731

Hugh Hunter, who kept the Crown Inn or Livery Stables, in Coleman-street for many Years, being reduc'd in his Circumstances, it caused such disorder in his Senses that he hang'd himself last Thursday 7-night in the Morning at his Bed's Feet. The Coroner's Jury sate upon his Body and brought him in Lunatick..... Monday one Clarke, a Broker in Shoe lane, upon some Discontent, shot himself in the Belly and dy'd soon after. There was a Woman in the Room when he did it.

Fog's Weekly Journal, 30 January 1731

Sunday morning early, Mr. Trinket, a great Perfumer without Temple Bar, being disordered in his Senses, hang'd himself in his own shop. The next Day the Coroner's Inquest sate on his Body, and brought in their Verdict, Lunacy.

Fog's Weekly Journal, 20 March 1731

Last Saturday morning one Evan Lewis, an Errand Boy at a Grocer's Shop in the Strand, being under some Discontent of Mind, hang'd himself in his Garters.

Fog's Weekly Journal, 10 April 1731

On Saturday last one Mary Frey, Wife to a Farrier near the Lower End of Kensington square, took a large Quantity of White Mercury, and died in about four hours.-- On Thursday morning early, Mr. Woolaston Shelton, the youngest Cashier of the Bank, being under some disorder of Mind, shot himself in his Chamber, at his Lodgings in St. John's Square. 'Tis believed that some concerns he had with Messrs Woodwards, the Bankers, occasion'd this unhappy Catastrophe.

Daily Courant, 14 September 1731

Yesterday Evening an old Woman of 67, hanged herself at her House in Poor Jury- Lane: She was seen about two Hours before to go in with a full Pot of Beer, and was dress'd in her best Cloaths.

London Magazine (May 1732), p. 91*Domestick Occurrences* in MAY 1732

Abraham Blackmore, Esq; Counsellor at Law, a Prisoner for Debt in the *Fleet*, cut his Throat in his Apartment in *Bell-Savage Yard*, and the Arteries of his left Wrist, and was found next Morning dead and wallowing in his Blood. The Coroner's Inquest brought him in *Lunatick*.

London Journal, 8 September 1733

On Saturday last one Reynolds, an Ostler, aged about 70 Years, was found hanging at the Angel, in S. Stephen's parish, in this City: It appeared that he was drunk when he hanged himself, and the Coroner's Inquest found him *Felo de Se*, and he was accordingly buried in the Highway without St. Stephen's gates.

Country Journal, 16 November 1734

It has been observed by a certain Writer, that November is a month in which the English are most apt to commit Self-Murder. We have had some Instances of that Observation within a Week past. A Man was found hanging on the Rails belonging to the Ice-house in St. James's Park, his Knees touching the Ground; a Woman found drowned in Rosamond Pond; a Gentleman, well-dress'd, taken up drowned at Westminster-Bridge; a Woman near Rag-Fair founding hanging by her Bed-Side, her Child of Three Years old crying by her; another we hear of is from Canterbury, one Aldridge, who buried his Wife on Sunday the 3rd Inst. and courted a Woman the Tuesday following, from whom meeting with a Repulse, he went home and hanged himself; but being cut down in time he recover'd, and was married to her the Tuesday following.— He is still alive, but his Friends are obliged to watch him.

General Evening Post, 12 August 1735

Ireland

To shew how detestable a Crime Self-Murder is in this Kingdom, the Ring-send Carman who hanged himself on the 12th of last Month, was buried in four or five different Places, and as often dug up by the neighbouring Inhabitants, who could not suffer any Suicide to be buried in their Ground: But last Sunday, the Right Hon. the Lord Mayor, and Alderman Walker, one of our Sheriffs, attended by the High Constable, and a File of Musqueteers, had him buried under the Gallows, to which the Inhabitants thereabout gave great Opposition.

Old Whig or the Consistent Protestant, 29 January 1736

Yesterday Afternoon a China Man in Clare-street opposite Clare Court near Drury-lane, cut his Throat and died immediately.— The too frequent Verdicts of *Non compos mentis*, is an Encouragement to these Practices; if Persons that destroy'd themselves were to be expos'd naked, and buried in the Highway with a Stake drove through their Bodies, and this executed with Rigour, it's believed it would put an End to so cowardly a Practice as that of Self-murder.

Read's Weekly Journal or British Gazetteer, 23 October 1736

We hear from Rushall in Norfolk that last Week a Man and his Wife having some Words, he went out and cut some Brambles, with which he hang'd himself on a Tree, and was found with one Knee upon the Ground: the Coroner's Inquest found it Self Murder, and ordered him to be buried in the Cross-ways: but his Wife sent for a Surgeon and sold the Body for Half a Guinea; the Surgeon feeling about the body, the Wife said *he is fit for your Purpose, for he is as fat as Butter*; and then he was put naked into a Sack, with his Legs hanging out, thrown upon a Cart, and convey'd to the Surgeon's.

Daily Gazetteer, 12 May 1737

Yesterday Morning the Corpse of a Gentleman¹⁰ was taken up in the River, and brought to Tower-stairs. There was found a Gold Watch in his Pocket, and a Paper, by which it is thought he was a Relation of the late Mr. Secretary Addison, and formerly enjoy'd a considerable Post in Ireland.

Daily Post, 12 May 1737

Yesterday was taken up at the Stern of a Ship near Iron-gate, the body of Eustace Budgell, Esq.; who threw himself out of a Boat a few Days ago, and was drown'd, as the Waterman was shooting the Bridge. A Gold Watch and a Purse of Guineas were found in his Pockets. He was Author of several Pieces both in Prose and Verse, some of which were very well receiv'd.

Country Journal or The Craftsman, 14 May 1737

Wednesday Morning, about 11 o'Clock, over-against King's Stairs at Tower-wharf, the Body of a Man was seen floating on the Water, which was soon brought to Shore by a Waterman; and by Circumstances is believed to be the Gentleman who took Boat last Week at Dorset Stairs, and said he was going to Greenwich, but jump'd out of the boat at London Bridge, and was seen no more, leaving a Silver-hilted Swrd behind him. On searching his Pockets there