The Guillotine 1792 – 1967

Dr. Joseph Ignace Guillotin did not invent the execution machine that bears his name. A similar device known as the Halifax Gibbet had been in use in that Yorkshire town since 1286 and continued until 1650. It was noticed by a Scotsman, James Douglas Earl of Morton, who had one built in Edinburgh in 1556, which became known as the Maiden and remained in use until 1710.

There is a credible recording of an execution by a similar machine in Milan in 1702, and there are paintings of a guillotine like machine used in Nuremberg in the mid 1500's.

However, it was Dr. Guillotin (Deputy of Paris) who on October the 10th, 1789 proposed to the Constituent Assembly that all condemned criminals should be beheaded on the grounds of humanity and égalité (equality). Beheading was seen as by far the most humane method of execution at the time and was allowed to people of noble birth in many countries. Ordinary prisoners were slowly hanged, broken on the wheel (an horrendously cruel form of execution) or burnt at the stake. The idea of a standardised, quick and humane death was much more in line with revolutionary thinking.

The Constituent Assembly duly passed a decree making beheading the only form of execution on the 25th of March 1791, and this came into law on the 25th of March 1792. There was a small problem to this, as was indicated by the then official executioner, Sanson, who pointed out the impracticality of executing all condemned persons by the sword. Beheading requires a skilled executioner with a lot of strength, a very steady hand and a good eye, if it is to sever the criminal's head with a single stroke. Sanson proved to be right, as during the Terror, the rate of executions reached staggering proportions, well beyond the capacity of the few skilled headsmen to carry out.

It was clear that some sort of machine was required and after consultation with Dr. Antoine Louis, the Secretary of the Academy of Surgery, such a machine was devised and built. It was initially known as the louisson or louisette, but no doubt, much to the relief of the good surgeon took on the name of its proposer and became known as the guillotine.

The first one was built in Paris by one Tobias Schmidt, a German engineer, and was ready for testing using recently deceased bodies from the hospital of Bicerte on the 17th of April 1792. It had two large uprights joined by a beam at the top and erected on a platform reached by 24 steps. The whole contraption was painted a dull blood red and the weighted blade ran in grooves in the uprights which were greased with tallow. However, it worked well enough and its first execution was that of Nicholas-Jacques Pelletier for robbery with violence on the 25th of April 1792 in the Place de Greve. The execution went according to plan with his head being severed at the first stroke.

Guillotines were soon supplied to all Departments in France and models were made as children's toys and even as earrings for women. Experiments were made with a 45 degree angled blade and also a rounded blade but this proved unsatisfactory and the angled blade became the standard pattern, in use until the abolition of capital punishment in France.

The "Terror" began on the 10th of August and trade for the guillotine increased rapidly. In the 13 month period, May 1793-June 1794, no less than 1,225 people were executed in Paris. The Place de Greve saw the first use of the guillotine on the 22nd of August 1792 for ordinary criminals. Political offenders were executed at the Place de Carrousel. Virtually the whole French aristocracy were sent to the guillotine during the French Revolution. On the 21st of January 1793, it was erected for the first time in the Place de la Revolution for the execution of King Louis XVI, its most famous victim. This was also the place of execution for such famous women as Marie Antoinette and Charlotte Corday. Charlotte was condemned after a brief trial for stabbing to death Jean-Paul Marat, one of the revolution's leaders. She was executed on the evening of the 17th of July 1793 and upon arrival at the Place de la Revolution in the usual tumbrel (horse drawn cart), asked Sansom (her executioner) to be allowed to look at the guillotine as she hadn't seen one before and felt that it was of interest to someone in her position! She was an attractive and brave 24 year old who was seen as something of a martyr by many.

In June of 1793, the guillotine was temporarily moved to the Place St. Antoine where 96 people were decapitated in 5 days. Due to protests from local traders, it was then moved to the Barriere Ranverse...
where 1,270 people were executed in under two months. It returned to the Place de la Revolution for the execution of the famous revolutionary, Robespierre, and 21 of his followers on the 28th of July. The guillotine was also being used in all the other French cities with great frequency at this time and many thousands of people fell victim to it.

France was not the only country to adopt the guillotine as many other governments saw the advantages in speed and humanity of it compared to the other methods then available. It was used by Algeria, Belgium, Germany, Greece, Italy, Switzerland, Sweden, Tunisia and Vietnam. The Papal States in Italy used the guillotine from 1814 to 1870 for 369 executions. Sweden purchased a guillotine from France in 1903 so that they could end decapitation by the axe. This machine was used only once for the execution of Johan Ander at Långholmen in Stockholm on the 23rd of November 1910.

More people were guillotined in Germany during Hitler’s time, than in France during the whole of the French revolution. The guillotine had been in use in some parts of Germany long before Hitler came to power. The Rhine province had introduced it as far back as 1798. The province of Bavaria used it from 1854, Saxony and Wurttemberg from 1853 and 1854 respectively and Baden from 1857. From 1871, German law stated that all condemned criminals must be decapitated but allowed both the axe and the guillotine. Executions were fairly infrequent during the early years of the 20th century, however, increased dramatically particularly between 1938 and 1945. Hitler ordered that criminals and those who opposed his regime should suffer death by either guillotining or hanging and had 20 guillotines built and dispersed to prisons around Germany and Austria. He also greatly increased the number of crimes punishable by death. Between 1933 and 1944, a total of 13,405 death sentences were passed. Of these, 11,881 were carried out. In 1940 alone, some 900 German civilians were put to death. In 1941, the minimum age for execution was reduced to just 14 years.

The execution rate had risen to over 5,000 by 1943. Between 1943 and 1945, the People's Courts sentenced around 7,000 people to death. In the first few months of 1945, some 800 people were executed, over 400 of them German citizens. Nazi executioners could guillotine a prisoner every 3 minutes if required, which it often was. It has been claimed that it took just 90 minutes to guillotine 75 prisoners at Breslau Prison.

In Austria, 1,377 men and women were guillotined between 1938 and 1945 after sentence by the Special Court or People’ Tribunal in Vienna. These Special Courts had replaced the ordinary courts in 1939. Most of them were executed for opposing the Nazis and for treason. It is thought that in all, some 16,000 people were guillotined by the Nazis. For accounts of some of these executions click here.

After the war, the Allies permitted the use of the guillotine for German nationals and even had some new ones constructed by the company of Fritz and Otto Tiggeman. West Germany (as it became) abolished capital punishment in 1951, the last guillotining of Berthold Wehmeyer, taking place on the 11th of May 1949. East Germany continued to use the guillotine until 1967, but records of executions there are very sketchy.

Construction

All guillotines follow the same basic pattern, but the modern ones did not have a scaffold for the condemned to climb and were placed directly on the ground. As with the gallows in Britain, this was found to be a great improvement, due to the difficulty of getting an often terrified person with their hands strapped behind them up a flight of steps.

French guillotines had two uprights of approximately 14 feet 9 inches (4500 mm) high and 15 inches (370 mm) apart, with metal lined grooves to ensure free movement of the triangular shaped weighted blade which ran on a 4 wheeled carriage. The substantial frame is set perfectly level using spirit levels after the guillotine is erected, to prevent the blade jamming.

At right angles to the uprights, is a bench shaped structure, about 800 mm from the ground, at the end of which is the bascule. This is a hinged board which stands upright to receive the prisoner who is then strapped to it before the bascule is turned to the horizontal and slid forward bringing the prisoner's head into the lunette. The lunette is formed in two halves each with a semicircular cut out for the neck. When the victim is correctly positioned in the lower half, the top half is lowered into position to prevent
them moving.

The blade is of high quality steel, about 300 mm deep and is weighted with lead to give a total weight of approximately 40 Kgs. It falls just over 7 feet (2,250 mm) in around one 0.75 of a second before being brought to rest by a spring mechanism in the block beneath the lunette. The blade is drawn up by a rope running through a brass pulley until it is caught by a spring release mechanism. It is released by pulling a cord or a lever mounted on one of the uprights.

There is a metal bucket to catch the head and a metal tray for the blood. Originally, a wicker basket lined with oil cloth had been used to catch the head. The decapitated body falls or is pushed off the bascule onto an angled board that deposits it into a basket or coffin.

The Nazi guillotine (fallbeil) was similar to the French style but not as high, as the photo of the one in Plötzensee prison in Berlin shows. It is around 8 feet tall but has a heavier blade to produce the required force. The condemned was made to lie face down on a simple bench rather than being strapped to a bascule and the head fell into a metal basin attached to the frame. Later a tip board was used to further speed up the process and Johann Reichhart designed a device for rapidly clamping victims to this.

The Cause of Death

The person guillotined becomes unconscious very quickly and dies from shock and anoxia due to haemorrhage and loss of blood pressure within less than 60 seconds. It has often been reported that the eyes and mouths of people beheaded have shown signs of movement. It has been calculated that the human brain has enough oxygen stored for metabolism to persist about 7 seconds after the supply is cut off. As in hanging, the heart continues to beat for some time after decapitation.

Various experiments have been made on guillotined heads and generally seem to show that little consciousness remains after 2-5 seconds of separation from the body although some have concluded that the head retains feeling for much longer. Whatever the truth, guillotining is probably one of the least cruel methods of execution and yet one that has a high deterrent value because it is perceived as gruesome.

The guillotine was the catalyst for the famous Madame Tussaud's waxwork exhibitions. In the 1790's there was, of course, no television and the rudimentary media of the time had no means of printing pictures in quantity. Thus only very few people knew what the French aristocracy looked like. Madame Tussaud collected the guillotined heads and made plaster casts of them, which she then filled with wax to give a reasonable likeness. She toured France with her exhibition for some time before falling foul of the Revolution herself and fleeing to England where her work continued. Her waxworks are still enormously popular today. Executed criminals continued to be popular subjects and Tussaud's used to buy the clothes and other effects of famous criminals from the hangman in the days when these items became his property after the execution.
Answer the following questions on a separate sheet of paper in complete sentences

1. Did Dr. Guillotin invent the machine that bears his name?
2. Why did Dr. Guillotin propose that all condemned criminals should be beheaded?
3. Before this how were Nobles and Commoners executed?
4. Why was it impractical for an executioner to execute all the condemned people by sword?
5. What was the Guillotine originally known as?
6. Who built the first Guillotine in Paris and why do you think they painted it a dull blood red color?
7. Who was the first person to be executed by the Guillotine?
8. What shape of blade did they decide was best for the Guillotine?
9. What happened to almost all of the aristocracy?
10. Who was the most famous victim of the Guillotine during the Reign of Terror?
11. Why was Charlotte Corday executed?
12. How many people were executed in 5 days in June 1793?
13. How many were executed in under two months?
14. What other countries used the Guillotine?
15. How many people did the Germans execute using the Guillotine between 1933-1944?
16. How many people are thought to have been executed by the Nazis using this method?
17. Why do modern Guillotines not have steps but are placed directly on the ground?
18. Why is it important that the frame be perfectly level?
19. What was originally used to catch the decapitated head?
20. How do people die after being guillotined and how long does this take?
21. How long does the brain continue to function after being guillotined?
22. Why does guillotining, as a method of execution, have a high deterrent value?
23. What did Madame Tussaud collect and what did she do with them? Why?
24. Why did she flee to England?
25. Where did Madame Tussaud get the clothes and property of famous criminals from?