

# Factsheet

## The Tower of London and Torture

The Tower of London is infamous throughout the world as a grim fortress in which, over the centuries, hundreds of prisoners suffered and died. Of all the many uses to which the Tower of London has been put, torture has attracted the largest body of myth and legend, and it has come to dominate the image of the Tower of London in the popular imagination. Behind the legend is a true story, and many of the details of torture in the Tower are well-documented by reliable sources.

- Actually torture only occupied a relatively short period of the castle's history, from the 16th to the 17th centuries, and of the prisoners who have passed through the Tower, only a tiny fraction were ever tortured.
- It is no co-incidence that the period which torture occurred at the Tower was a period of religious upheaval in England. In such times of national emergency the Government used every available method to gather information and torture became a matter of state policy.
- The idea of torture in the Tower became a matter of myth and legend long after the instruments of torture had been placed in storage (and in most cases, lost).
- If it was mentioned at all, it was portrayed as a savage foreign invention, and a few surviving instruments were displayed to visitors as Spanish inventions. Myth-making reached its peak in the 19th century, spurred on by novelists who wished to evoke the Tower of London in its former days as an ancient fortress and stronghold e.g. Ainsworth's *The Tower of London*
- It must be remembered that torture was essentially a matter of gathering information to be used in Law, not a matter of punishing prisoners for bad behaviour. In many cases, the victims were deemed to be guilty already, and now the aim was not to extract a confession but to know about co-conspirators, safe-houses, the routes of letters and so on. In the reign of James I, Sir Francis Bacon wrote: "...in the highest cases of treasons, torture is used for discovery, and not for evidence."

- Torture has never been officially recognised in English Law as a means of gaining information. The officers who tortured prisoners in the Tower were acting with the knowledge and authority of the highest levels of Government, the Privy Council and the Monarch. Critics claimed that torture was ineffective as well as cruel, and that a man on the rack would say anything to be released. From the mid 17<sup>th</sup>-century onwards, torture was effectively abandoned.
- Apart from the instruments themselves, there were other ways of assuring cooperation, such as the very close confinement afforded by a truly tiny cell. In the Tower, the notorious chamber known as '*Little Ease*' measured just 1.2m square (4sq ft), and its cramped conditions prevented the prisoner from ever finding a comfortable position. There has been much speculation about the location of *Little Ease*, although the truth may never be known for certain.
- As part of their interrogation, many prisoners were subjected to threats and intimidation – another form of torture, though this time at the discretion of the Lieutenant and Warders. The authorities played on the prisoners' fear: for example, the clerk of the Council introduced John Gerard to '*the master of torture*', but Gerard later found out that this was a trick to frighten him, and the man was in fact an artillery officer in the Tower.
- A certain amount of information has survived about the individuals who actually tortured prisoners in the Tower. There is an important distinction between those who operated the instruments, and those who questioned the prisoners during each session. The Warders of the Tower (Beefeaters), under the command of the Lieutenant, saw to the physical business of torture. The interrogations themselves were carried out by two or three Commissioners, usually including at least one law officer, such as the Royal Attorney or Solicitor.
- One of the most notorious Commissioners was 'Norton the Rackmaster' Thomas Norton, MP and Recorder of London, who interrogated prisoners in the late-1570s and early-1580s. On his death in 1584 he was replaced by Richard Topcliffe, who operated as an interrogator all over England. Topcliffe was fanatically anti-Catholic but held no formal office, and appears to have carried out much of the torturing in person.
- While Topcliffe and Norton took to their jobs with near relish, other officers found the duty an unpleasant one. John Gerard later heard that Sir Richard Berkeley resigned as Lieutenant, not wishing to be involved in torture again.