

JACK

A Musical based on the life of London thief Jack Sheppard in 1724.

Words and Music by Phil Dixon. 2021.

For my Mum, who loved Musical Theatre, especially Gilbert and Sullivan, which I spent my childhood listening to.

CHARACTERS

JACK SHEPPARD.

A young cheeky lad of about 20 years old. He is of slight build, with a stutter, but by all accounts, a very affable and witty young man, but a little too fond of drink and revelry.

Tenor

ELIZABETH LYON, known as EDGEWORTH BESS.

Bess is a buxom *pocket and file*, a prostitute that picks your pocket. She works in *The Black Lion* public house, but longs for a better life outside London with wealth.

Alto/Mezzosoprano

JOSEPH 'BLUESKIN' BLAKE.

Jack's friend. Blake is an experienced petty thief. The origin of his nickname 'Blueskin' is unknown, but it may refer to a birthmark or a swarthy complexion.

Baritone

JONATHON WILD.

Known as the *Thief-taker-General*, he collects £40 for every convicted felon hanged. He thinks of himself as a gentleman but in reality, he's a gangster who makes London's thieves work for him or he hangs them. Victims of theft come to him to retrieve their stolen goods. Wild acts benevolently and then miraculously recovers the stolen goods (which his network of thieves have surrendered to him) and then receives a reward from the victim thus appearing a gracious benefactor.

Bass

SYKES.

Known as *Hell and Fury* Sykes, he is Jonathon Wild's main muscle.

Bass Baritone

HAYNES.

Haynes is the landlord of The Black Lion pub and secretly works for Wild.

Baritone

WILLIAM KNEEBONE.

Kneebone owns a draper's shop on Drury Lane, where he employs Jack as an unpaid shop boy. He is a decent man who took Jack and his mother in after Jack's father died and helped Jack to read, write and gain a carpentry apprenticeship.

Tenor

JOAN SHEPPARD.

Jack's Mother. She tries to persuade Jack to stop his petty thieving.

Alto

POLL MAGGOT and ROSE

Bess' friends and fellow *pocket and files*. They also work in The Black Lion tavern.

Mezzosoprano

Wild's THUGS, including QUILT, ARNOLD and FIELD. Baritones

Hanging drinks VENDOR. Tenor

DOCTOR. Bass

PREACHER. Spoken part.

PRISONER. Spoken part.

GENTLEMAN who has his watch picked by JACK. Spoken part.

Market stall holders. 7x various, STREET PERFORMER, QUACK DOCTOR, PREACHER

Prisoners (CONVICT, WITNESS, TURNKEY, ORDINARY, JUDGE (played by BLUESKIN))

TURNKEY (prison guard). Spoken part.

JUDGE. Bass

STRAWMAN (a strawman was someone who would stand outside court with a straw in their shoe to indicate they will be willing to commit perjury for a fee.) Baritone

Two aristocratic LADIES. Altos.

Two GENTLEMEN. Tenors.

Newspaper REPORTERS. Tenors.

SYNOPSIS

ACT I

SCENE 1. TYBURN, LONDON, 1724.

A convict is being hung with an eager audience looking on. Various vendors sell Beer and Gin to the audience. Jack and Blueskin Blake enter. Blake reveals he's just come into some money and buys Jack a beer. Jack cannot believe Blake's got money and reveals that he wishes he could afford to buy nice things. After the convict is hung, Blake suggests he and Jack go to The Black Lion pub for some more beers.

SCENE 2. THE BLACK LION PUB.

Bess sings about how she wishes her life were more than just waiting tables and cleaning up after drunks. Haynes interrupts her daydreaming, and the tavern comes to life. Suddenly their revelry is interrupted by the entrance of Jonathon Wild and his thugs. Wild threatens Haynes and demands to know the whereabouts of Blueskin Blake. Wild and his thugs leave, Jack and Blake enter. Haynes warns Blueskin that Wild is after him. Blake gives Jack a few pence to get some beers and promises to be back soon after he's gone to see Wild. Jack spots Bess and immediately falls in love. Bess is more concerned about getting some money off Jack.

SCENE 3. WILD'S OFFICE

Blake enters Wild's office. Wild threatens him as he knows Blueskin has been thieving. He demands his cut. Blake, scared, gives him what he wants.

SCENE 4. KNEEBONE'S DRAPER'S SHOP.

Joan and Kneebone lament how Jack has started to go off the rails. They begin to pray. Jack bursts in, drunk with love after his night with Bess. Kneebone and Joan tell him to buck his ideas up. Kneebone tells him off and leaves. Joan pleads with her son to change and then leaves. Jack decides he's not going to take this anymore and he'll thief like Blueskin. He gets away with it, why couldn't he? Then he'd be able to pay for more nights with Bess.

SCENE 5. MARKET FAIR.

Various vendors welcome us to all to the wonderful products available to buy in the market. Wild picks Blake out of the crowd and tells him he needs to make up for holding out on him earlier by robbing Kneebone's draper's shop. Jack plucks up his courage and picks a pocket-watch from a gentleman. He runs to the pub to tell Bess.

SCENE 6. THE BLACK LION PUB.

Jack rushes to Bess and shows her the watch. Bess fences it off to Haynes for a few pence which they start spending on drinks and a good time. Haynes decides to go and tell Wild.

SCENE 7. WILD'S OFFICE.

Haynes enters, shows Wild the watch and that Jack picked it. Wild wants to know who this Jack lad is and why he doesn't work for him. He sets Haynes and Sykes off to fetch Jack to him.

SCENE 8. THE BLACK LION PUB.

Bedroom in The Black Lion. Jack and Bess are in bed. Blake comes in and tells Jack of his plan to rob Kneebone's shop and that Jack could help and share the profit. Jack is at first unsure, but Bess and Blake convince him.

SCENE 9. KNEEBONE'S DRAPER'S SHOP.

Jack and Blueskin rob Kneebone's shop. There is a sound, and they scarper. Kneebone and Joan arrive to discover the robbery. Kneebone says he'll go to Wild to retrieve his goods and find the burglars. Joan suspects it might be Jack.

SCENE 10. THE BLACK LION PUB.

Jack, Bess and Blueskin are celebrating their newfound wealth. They scheme to plan more robberies; this is just the beginning of being able to be rich enough to get out of this rotten town. While Jack and Bess are getting drunk, Blueskin takes his opportunity to steal some of their loot and take it to Wild as a peace offering. Blueskin leaves. Joan enters, frantically looking for Jack. She asks him if he robbed the shop, Jack eventually confesses, but says there's no way Wild could know it was him. Joan reveals that Kneebone has gone to Wild. Haynes and Sykes enter. Haynes points out Jack to Wild saying he's the one who picked the watch. Sykes arrests Jack at gunpoint to take him to Wild.

SCENE 11. WILD'S OFFICE

Blueskin arrives and tells Wild that he robbed Kneebone's shop and here's the loot. Wild thanks him and dismisses him. A gentleman enters and explains that he had a watch picked from him at the fayre. Wild promises to look into it. Jack enters, with a gun to his back from Sykes. Wild tries to convince Jack to come and work for his 'Corporation of Thieves'. Jack refuses and runs off.

Kneebone enters and enquires about his shop's robbery. Wild promises to investigate. Wild realises it must be Jack who helped Blueskin. They leave to find Jack.

SCENE 12. THE BLACK LION PUB.

Jack bursts in looking worried. He tells Bess about his meeting with Wild. Bess calms Jack down with a drink and suggests he gets out of London for a while. Head for the country for a bit. Jack agrees but decides to have 'one for the road'. As he drinks increasingly, he forgets his predicament. The pub-goers encourage him to drink. His friends (Bess, Blueskin, Joan, Poll and Rose) try to convince him to run away, but Jack cannot hear them amongst all the revelry. Wild and Sykes and thugs enter and arrest Jack.

END OF ACT I.

ACT II

SCENE 1. PRISON CELL

Jack is alone, chained in a prison cell wondering how it came to this. He vows to try and escape. He pries a nail loose from the floor, uses it to pick his padlock and begins to make a hole in the roof.

Outside the prison

A couple are walking at night when a roof tile lands in front of them. They look up to see someone running across the rooftops. More onlookers join in and a crowd gathers all trying to see the escaping prisoner. Jack joins the crowd and points up to an imaginary self. While the crowd's distracted he makes good his escape.

SCENE 2. THE BLACK LION PUB.

Bess is feeling sorry for herself. She is blaming herself for Jack's capture. Haynes bursts in with the latest newspaper. Haynes, Poll and Rose are captivated but Bess is not interested, until Haynes reads out an article about an escaping prisoner, 'one Jack Shepperd'! Suddenly Bess is interested. As they read, Jack bursts in. The whole pub is pleased to see him, and they all want to know about his daring escape. They drink and hear Jack's tale. Haynes decides that Wild might pay for this information and leaves.

SCENE 3. WILD'S OFFICE.

Wild is furious with his gang that Jack was able to escape. He wants him found at once. Haynes enters and for a coin from Wild, tells him that Jack is right this minute drinking in The Black Lion. Wild sends his thugs out to arrest him and Bess.

Wild sings about being the tough gang lord and that he cannot allow Jack to make a fool out of him if he's to retain his grip on power. Thugs grab their weapons and leave. Wild monologues about how he's worked too hard and hung too many men to let his power slip away now.

SCENE 4. THE BLACK LION PUB.

Jack is still having a wonderful time, regaling his escape to the pub. They keep buying him drinks, but Bess is concerned that Wild will be looking for him. Jack is too wrapped up in his newfound fame. Sykes and thugs enter and arrest Jack. They explain that they're arresting Bess too.

SCENE 5. NEW PRISON, CLERKENWELL.

We hear Jack and Bess arguing off stage. Jack is trying to prize a nail free and tells Bess to rip the bedsheets up and take her dress off! Next thing we see is a rope made of bedsheets, with Bess' dress on the end fly out a high window. Jack and Bess climb down. Only to discover they have escaped their prison cell into another prison yard. 'Out of the frying pan into the fire'. Jack can see London streets and freedom through a gap in the prison gate. Black out.

SCENE 6. THE BLACK LION PUB.

Haynes comes rushing in with the newspapers. He reads out the latest article about Jack and Bess' escape from Newgate. The whole pub cheers Jack. Bess enters and everyone is amazed to see her. Wild and thugs enter and grab Bess. Wild threatens her with a knife and plies her with drink to tell him where Jack is hiding out. At first, she resists, but eventually she reveals he's at his mother's Gin shop. Wild thanks her and leaves. Bess is beside herself for betraying Jack. She tells Poll and Rose to grab some spare clothes and come with her.

SCENE 7. JOAN'S BRANDY SHOP.

Joan pleads with her son to stop his dishonest drunken ways and go back to work for Kneebone. Jack's not convinced. He can earn far more stealing. Wild suddenly bursts in and arrests Jack.

SCENE 8. NEWGATE PRISON.

Jack is locked up with various convicts including Blueskin. Blueskin explains to Jack that proceedings at the Old Bailey begin tomorrow and that they are all going on trial. Jack asks Blueskin to explain what happens in a trial. They all enact out a mock trial scene. The turnkey tells them all to be quiet. Jack is given a file one of the prisoners managed to sneak in. Jack starts filing away at his cell bars.

Bess, Poll and Rose enter and ask the Turnkey if he will let them see Jack, the famous escaper. The Turnkey (who isn't particularly bright) says only for tuppence each but cannot work out the maths for all three of them. Eventually they persuade him with a bottle of Gin. They go to see Jack, who has filed through his cell bar and clothe him in the spare clothes they have. Jack, Poll and Rose then leave, thanking the guard. Bess stays hidden. Seconds later, Bess walks out too. The Turnkey is confused and cannot add up all the people who have come out!

Wild and thugs enter. Wild wants to see Jack. Turnkey tells him he's not entirely sure Jack is there. Wild is furious. He asks Blueskin where Jack is and Blueskin explains that he's escaped yet again. Wild is so angry he decides to tell Blueskin that he'll make sure he hangs at tomorrow's trial. Blueskin pulls out a knife and slashes Wild's neck. The thugs carry him away bleeding.

SCENE 9. OUTSIDE THE PRISON.

Outside, Jack, Poll, Rose and Bess are running away. They meet up and Bess apologises for betraying Jack. They forgive each other. Jack suggests going out and getting drunk to celebrate, but they don't have any money between them. Jack spots a rich gentleman. He tries to pick his watch but is seen. A chase ensues and Sykes appears and grabs Jack. He tells him, no more prison cells, it is straight to trial.

SCENE 10. THE OLD BAILEY COURTHOUSE.

Jack's trial. Sykes (Wild is bedridden after Blueskin cut him) pays off a strawman to lie at Jack's trial. Kneebone gives evidence and is sad. Joan pleads with the Judge for transportation. The Judge refuses and Jack is sentenced to hang the next day.

SCENE 11. WILD'S OFFICE

Wild is laid up in bed, ill from the neck wound he received from Blueskin. Sykes tells the gang that with Wild like this they're not making any money. He suggests forming their own gang, with no Thief-Taker-General at its head; equal share for all.

SCENE 12. JACK'S PRISON CELL

Two aristocratic ladies enter and want to pay Jack a penny for a kiss each. Jack says kisses won't get him free. Two gentlemen arrive who pay Jack a penny to tell them his escapes. Jack says pennies won't get him free. Two newspaper reporters enter and offer Jack pennies for his story. Jack says words won't get him free. They all leave, excited to watch him hang the next day, but the reporters hand him a file and tell him that if he can escape again it will make them all rich.

Jack escapes.

SCENE 13. THE BLACK LION PUB.

Jack has disguised himself as a beggar and is begging outside the front of The Black Lion. Inside he can hear the pub singing songs about his daring escapes. Eventually Jack cannot take it anymore and goes out and thieves a posh jacket, hat and sword and joins the revelry. Everyone is happy to see him, but Poll and Rose are angry that they put their necks on the line for him and no reward, so they decide to go and tell

Wild, they exit. The revelry continues. Wild and thugs arrive and arrest Jack, but then turn on Wild and arrest him too.

SCENE 14. JACK'S PRISON CELL.

Jack is handcuffed and guarded. The reporters enter and want to know about Jack's great escape for the paper, Jack explains. Reporters reveal their escape plans for Jack. Jack is hopeful.

SCENE 15. TYBURN.

Enter an excited crowd, eager to watch Jack escape from his 'hanging day'. They show off the 'weapons' they've got to pelt Wild with, like dead dogs and poo! Wild is hung amid great celebrations. Jack enters and passes Kneebone, Joan, Haynes and pub-goers, Sykes and thugs (who reveals that he's now the Thief-Taker-General) and finally Bess. **Jack is spotted by the crowd trying to cut his bonds with the knife the reporters gave him. It is confiscated.** Jack is hung, the reporters move in to free him, but the crowd accuse them of trying to take his body away for medical experiments and rush in and prevent his escape.

THE END

Jack Sheppard (1702 – 1724)

Jack Sheppard was born 4th March 1702 to a poor family in Spitalfields, London. He was baptised at St. Dunstan's church, Stepney the day after his birth on 5th March, suggesting he was weak or sickly. He was named John after an older brother who had died before birth, but in later life was known as "Gentleman Jack" or "Jack the Lad." He had a second brother Thomas and a sister Mary. Their father, a carpenter, died while Jack was young and his sister shortly afterwards.

Unable to support her family without her husband's income, Jack's mother (Joan) sent Jack to work as a shop-boy for William Kneebone, who owned a draper shop on the Strand. Sheppard's mother had been working for Kneebone since her husband's death. Kneebone taught Sheppard to read and write and apprenticed him to a carpenter, Owen Wood, in Wych Street off Drury Lane in Covent Garden.



Sheppard signed his seven-year indenture in April 1717 aged 16.

By 1722, Sheppard was showing great promise as a carpenter. Aged 20, he was a slight man of 5'4" and lightly built. Despite a stutter, his wit made him popular in the taverns of Drury Lane.

Joseph Hayne ran a tavern named the Black Lion off Drury Lane which he encouraged the apprentices to visit. It was also a frequent haunt of Blueskin Blake, a local criminal who would become Sheppard's future partner in crime, and also self-proclaimed "Thief-Taker General" Jonathon Wild, secretly the linchpin of a criminal empire across London and later Sheppard's enemy.

According to Sheppard, he had been innocent until going to Hayne's tavern, but there, began an attachment to strong drink and the affections of Elizabeth Lyon, a "pocket and file," being a prostitute who would pick your pockets during intimacy.

She was locally known as Edgeworth Bess from her place of birth in Edgeworth, Middlesex.

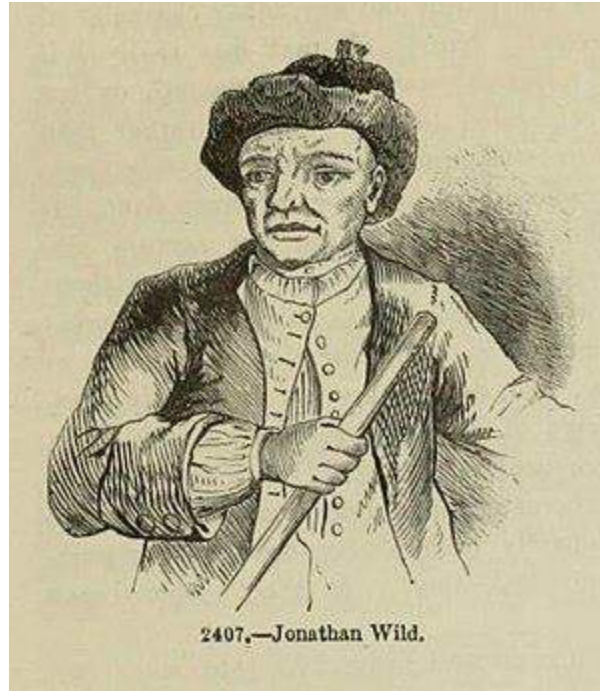
In 1723, with less than 2 years of his apprenticeship left, Sheppard threw himself into a hedonistic whirl of drinking and whoring. As a result, his carpentry suffered becoming disobedient to Wood and Kneebone. With Lyon's encouragement his first known theft was of two silver spoons from a tavern in Charing Cross, but he went undetected and so moved on to larger crimes.

Sheppard was first arrested after committing a burglary with his brother Tom. Fearful of being hanged Tom informed on Jack and he was promptly arrested and imprisoned overnight on the top floor of the St. Giles Roundhouse. But Sheppard escaped within 3 hours by breaking through the ceiling with a nail and running across the rooftops. A crowd had gathered in the street below to watch the escapee. Jack, still wearing irons, coolly joined the crowd and distracted their attention by pointing to shadows on the roof and shouting that he could see the escapee, then made off.

On 19 May 1724, Jack was arrested again for picking a pocket in Leicester Fields. He was detained overnight in St Ann's Roundhouse in Soho. Bess visited the next day and recognised as his 'wife,' was locked in a cell with him. They appeared before a judge and were sent to the New Prison in Clerkenwell but escaped from their cell within a matter of days. They filed through their manacles, removed a bar from the window and using bedclothes and Bess' dress they lowered themselves to the ground, only to find they were in the yard of a neighbouring prison. Using the file they had, Jack scaled the 22-foot-high gate and pulled Bess up. The escape was widely publicised not least because Jack was so slight and Bess was a large buxom woman.



Sheppard's thieving abilities had by now come to the attention of "Thief-Taker-General" Jonathon Wild. Wild demanded that Sheppard work for him, surrendering his stolen goods. Jack refused. Wild could not allow Sheppard to thieve outside of his control and so sought his arrest.



Sheppard began working with Blueskin Blake and they burgled Sheppard's former master, William Kneebone.

Wild believed Bess would know of Sheppard's whereabouts and threatened her and plied her with drink until she betrayed him. Sheppard was arrested for a third time at his mother's brandy shop.

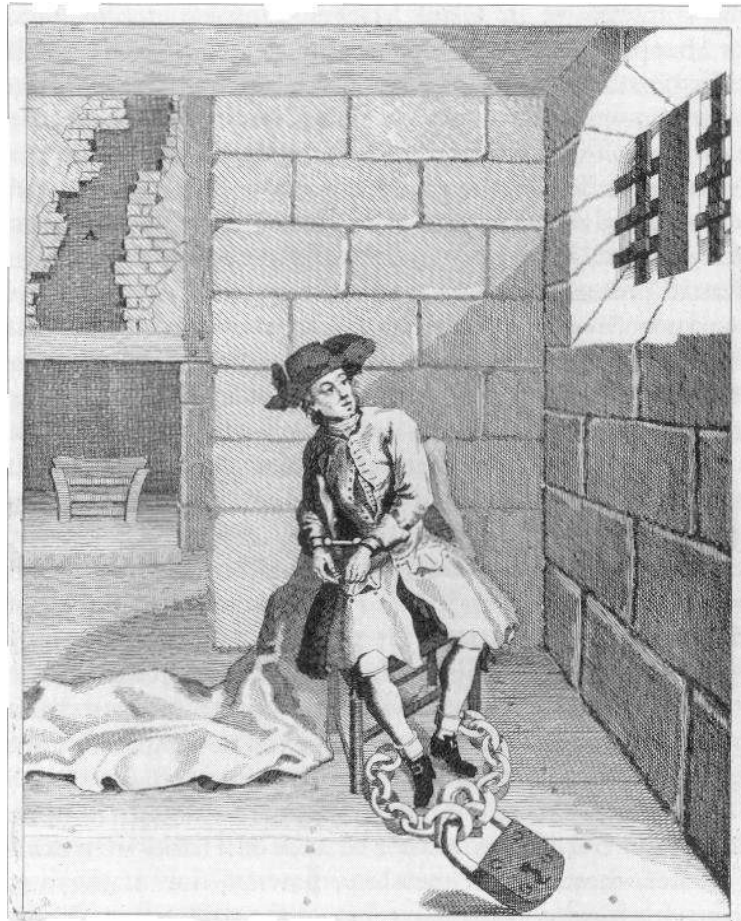
Sheppard was imprisoned in Newgate Prison pending his trial.



On 31st August, the very day his death warrant arrived, Sheppard escaped. Having loosened an iron bar in a window while talking to visitors, he was visited by Bess and fellow prostitute Poll Maggot who distracted the guards while he removed the bar. His slight build meant he could slip through the small window and putting on women's clothes supplied by Bess and Poll, he walked out the front door!



By this point Sheppard was fast becoming a hero, being a cockney, handsome and seemingly able to escape at will for his crimes. He was in every newspaper, an emerging media at the time. After spending a little while outside of London, Sheppard returned to the city only to be recaptured. He was placed in the condemned cell at Newgate, but his plans to escape were thwarted when guards found files and other tools in his cell, presumably slipped to him by an admiring audience. He was transferred to a strong room in Newgate called the “Castle,” clamped in irons and chained to two metal clasps in the floor.



S H E P H E R D

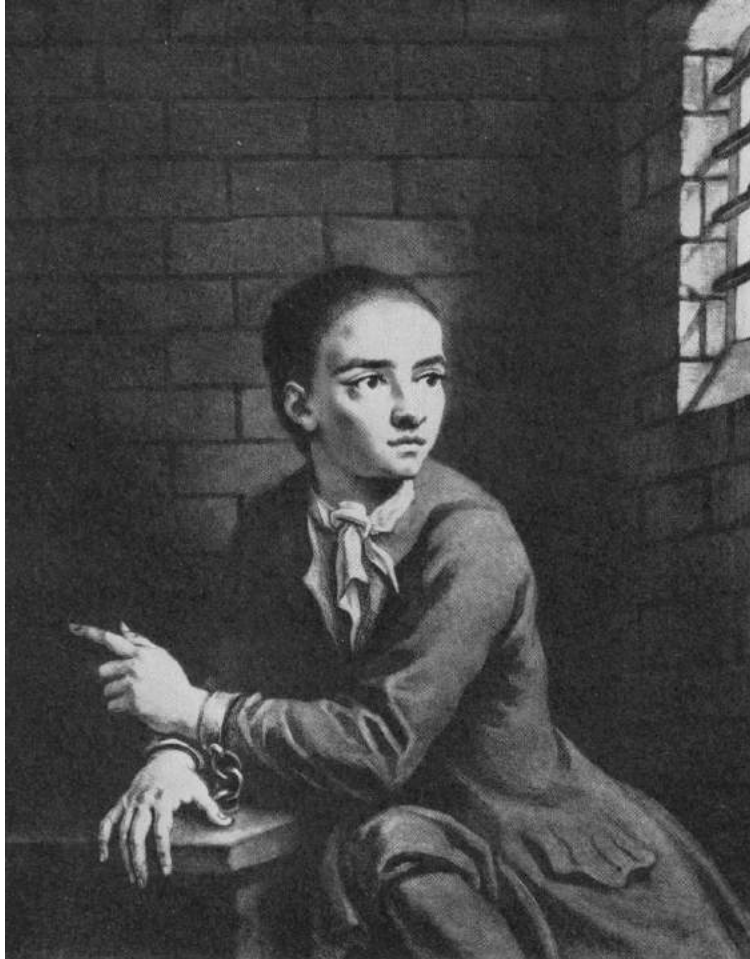
Meanwhile, Blueskin had gone to trial and despite often working for Wild, Wild gave evidence, allegedly saying “I believe you must hang, but I will procure a suitable Blueskin shaped coffin for you,” (or words to that effect.) Enraged, Blueskin took out a hidden penknife and slashed Wild’s throat. Wild was lucky to survive, but from this point on his grip on the criminal underworld began to slip away.

Sheppard, taking advantage of a disturbance in the Newgate, escaped for a fourth time. He unlocked his hand cuffs, removed his chains, and began to climb the chimney. However, his progress was blocked by an iron bar. He removed the bar and used it to smash into the room above, known as “The Red Room,” which was unused. Still wearing his leg-irons, he used the iron bar to break through six barred doors into the prison chapel. As night fell, he made it to the roof, some 60 feet above the ground. Realising there was no way down, he retraced his entire route back to his cell, risking capture all the while and retrieved his bed sheets. Making his way back up the chimney, through the now broken open doors, into the chapel,

onto the roof, he lowered himself down onto an adjacent house. Breaking into the house, he ran down the stairs, out the front door and into the dark of London. He ran and ended up hiding in a cowshed in Tottenham and persuading the farmer to remove his leg irons, he was free again.

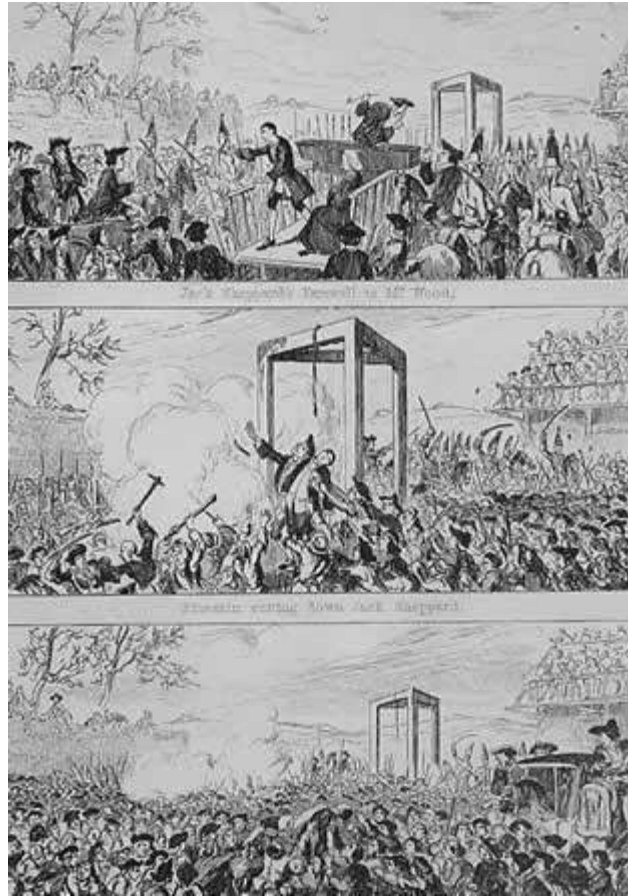
However, his freedom lasted less than two weeks. He disguised himself as a beggar and returned to the city. Sitting in a pub, talking with a woman, he discovered that he was a hero, but no-one knew who he was. Deciding to have one more night on the tiles with two mistresses, he broke into a pawnbroker's and stole a black suit, a silver sword, rings, watches a wig and various other items. He was arrested a final time on 1 November blind drunk.

This time, Sheppard was placed in the Middle Stone Room, observed at all times and 300lb of iron weights loaded on him. He was so famous that Gaolers charged four shillings to see him and the King's painter, James Thornhill painted his portrait. According to Daniel Defoe, Sheppard said to a visiting preacher "one file's worth all the Bibles in the world."



The following Monday, 16 November 1724, Sheppard was taken to the gallows at Tyburn. He had planned one more escape, to cut the ropes binding him with a penknife he had smuggled in his coat, but it was discovered and confiscated.

Up to 200,000 people (one third of London's population) attended his hanging and there was a carnival atmosphere.



His slight build had helped him in his escapes, but it condemned him to a slow death by strangulation. After hanging for the prescribed 15 minutes, his body was cut down. However, the crowd pressed forward to prevent his body being taken away for medical experiments inadvertently preventing Sheppard's friends from implementing a plan to remove his body to a nearby tavern for revival. His badly mauled body was later recovered and buried at St. Martin-in-the-Fields later that evening.

In contrast, a few months later, 24 May 1725, Wild was taken to the gallows. On the day of his hanging, afraid, Wild took an overdose of laudanum in a suicide attempt. It failed and Wild became catatonic. A huge crowd gathered to witness his demise and all manner of foul things were thrown at him including dead dogs and excrement. Ironically, the hangman was a friend who had been a guest at Wild's wedding. His body was buried in secret at St Pancras Old Church. However, autopsies were allowed on the bodies of criminals and he was quickly exhumed and sold to the Royal College of Surgeons for dissection. His skeleton can be viewed to this very day in the Royal College's Hunterian Museum in London.

Jack Sheppard's popularity and the fear that others would emulate his behaviour led the authorities to ban any plays in London with "Jack Sheppard" in the title for the next forty years.

A note on the History

Jack Sheppard's story has fascinated me for years. However, trying to find a definitive account of his last years are difficult to come by. The historical account above is just the universally accepted story from the known sources. There are conflicting reports on who he was with, where he went and what robberies he committed. The only documented accounts are those of his escapes.

As such I have been a little loose with the history (which I have been far from happy about). I have omitted certain characters (his brother Tom, or his carpenter master Owen Wood for example) for fear of swamping my narrative with too many characters. I have altered the timeline of events slightly also. But the one thing I have tried most of all to retain is Jack's numerous escapes, which I have kept in chronological order and as true to their actual events as possible, with minor exceptions due to impossibilities of staging, such as Jack using his file to climb the

gate at St Anne's Roundhouse.



Additionally, I have made Musical decisions which have altered the Historical account slightly, such as Bess and Poll recruiting a third person, Rose, in Jack's humorous dressing up escape, to have a harmonic trio rather than a duet. Also, the priest saying the Catholic Latin '*In nomine patris et filii et spiritu sancti*', which by 1724 I assume would no longer have been used as England was staunchly Protestant at this stage; however, I felt the rhythm and message of the Latin had more dramatic effect.

In addition, for the sake of staging, I have centred all the tavern scenes in the Black Lion, although it is accepted that Jack frequented several taverns about Covent Garden.

I have also taken liberties with certain characters betraying Jack. We know he was betrayed by his brother and Bess, but I have also staged him being betrayed by

Blueskin, Haynes, Poll and Rose also. We do not know whether this happened or not, but it was Wild's network of spies who almost always seemed to find Jack among the dark, narrow alleyways and taverns of the City of London in 1724.

In short, I am unhappy about twisting Historical truth, but in order to create a coherent Musical Theatrical piece I have found it necessary; I hope I will not be judged too harshly for this and that people will do their own research on the Historical truth as I have done.

Phil Dixon 2021.