

Methusalah Spalding – From the Chapel to the Noose: A Tragic Tale.

By George Howard

The story of the Walpole Chapel is itself a fascinating one – from its origins in the 17th Century as one of the first non-conformist chapels in England, to its eventual decline and closure in 1970 due to a lack of congregation. It has played host to a huge array of people and many families throughout its lifetime so far – but one life in particular is what shall be focused on now. Though we do not have an exhibit of this individual, we do have the historic evidence to prove that he lived in Wissett and travelled regularly to the Chapel to worship and played a role in the community during a time in which it was perhaps at its largest. This however, is perhaps the most tragic of all the cases of the congregation of the Walpole Chapel. It is the life of Methusalah Spalding, and how he met his undignified end in London, many miles from both Walpole and the world in which he had lived for what can only be assumed was much of his life.

His is a tragic example of the time in which he existed – where his alleged sexual preferences, though seen as perfectly normal and acceptable in today’s world by most – was seen as an ‘unnatural crime’ – to quote his record directly. To start examination of Methusalah, we must not focus on his birth, but rather on the nature of his tragic death – his conviction and execution for Sodomy in 1803 and 1804. What is known for certain is that Methusalah was clearly indicted for the ‘unnatural crime’ of Sodomy (homosexuality) in November 1803 and sentenced to death at the Old Bailey¹. He was executed in February 1804 by hanging² and buried at Newgate Cemetery in London³. It must be said at this point however – that even though Methusalah was executed for sodomy – there is no concrete historical evidence to support this conviction.



Anne Hurle and Methusalah Spalding in the cart prior to being hanged (for forgery and sodomy, respectively) on the temporary gallows outside Newgate prison, February 1804. Engraving from William Jackson, *New and Complete Newgate Calendar, or Malefactor's Universal Register*, 1818. In November 1803 Methusalah (or Mathusalah) Spalding was convicted for having 'a venereal affair' with James Hankinson and sentenced to death (Old Bailey Sessions Book, No. X.24).

We do not know for certain what his sexuality was, he may have been forced to take up a form of sexual labour in order to make ends meet upon arrival in London. Indeed, he could have always been gay – and gone to London to seek a more appropriate lifestyle than the one he would have been living in Rural Suffolk. Thirdly, he could have ‘discovered’ his sexuality upon arrival in London, through interaction with individuals who may have aroused his curiosity or perhaps offered him a way of making good money during a time in his life where he was struggling for work. It cannot be emphasised enough that each and every one of these scenarios mentioned is pure speculation – we just do not have any way of knowing for sure if Methusalah was indeed gay. Also, the brevity of evidence regarding his conviction and subsequent execution gives us little to no time to try and discover a confession, a letter from Methusalah to a loved one, scrawled by candlelight in his cell – there is simply no evidence for his crime, except the indictment of him at the Old Bailey. It is likely that we will never know the truth – but the truth of his life must be told, even with all of the speculation and possibilities surrounding Methusalah and how he ended up facing the hangman.

¹ Unknown Author, “Proceedings of the Old Bailey, 30th November 1803, page 33”. Taken From: Old Bailey Online website. <https://www.oldbaileyonline.org/images.jsp?doc=180311300033>, Accessed on 10/2/2023.

² “Methusalah Spalding” searched on: [digitalpanopticon.org](https://www.digitalpanopticon.org) <https://www.digitalpanopticon.org/life?id=obpt18031130-60-defend540>, Accessed on 20/05/2023.

³ “Methuselal Spalding” searched on: [findagrave.com](https://www.findagrave.com) <https://www.findagrave.com/memorial/232818959/mathuselal-spalding>, Accessed on 10/05/2023.

There is a fair amount of information on Methusalah Spalding, as an online search brings up the original record of his indictment at the Old Bailey, which has the date of indictment as the 30th of November 1803. No other information is given, except the indictment for ‘an unnatural crime’ – which clearly alludes to sodomy, given the nature of the shortness of his indictment and the tacit refusal to name the crime outright in the official records, due to mandatory censoring of the proceedings. This was due to perceptions at the time regarding homosexuality, which was legally punishable by death up until 1861⁴.

The understanding of what classed as an ‘unnatural crime’, a ‘crime against nature’ and ‘perversion’ during the 18th and 19th centuries were still closely tied to religion and what the bible said on such matters – these definitions covered gay sex for both men and women (providing penetration could be either proven of likely), bestiality and even recreational anal sex between consenting heterosexual partners⁵. To emphasise sodomy in particular as a perversion against nature showed that the crime itself still held the stigma of being a biblical sin in the 1700s – yet this was not the case further back in time. Homosexuality was a common practise in Ancient Greece, and seen as perfectly natural⁶ - therefore, this shift in attitudes can clearly be seen as one that is intimately related to the deeply religious Christian idea of sin, as the Ancient Greeks were not practising Christians; therefore, they did not view homosexuality through this lens of sin. This is crucial to understanding the attitudes towards social issues of the enlightenment era and why the way in which a consenting same-sex relationship was still deeply rooted in biblical notions of sin and viewed as deeply offensive. Unfortunately, the enlightenment was not enough to bring back an ancient tradition of viewing sexual desire as a broad spectrum, which is much closer to how we view both homosexuality and sexuality as a whole today.

During the time period that Methusalah Spalding lived, homosexuality convictions and executions were more commonplace than in other time periods both before and after his death⁷ - the unfortunate circumstances that Methusalah found himself as one of those individuals who was not just tried for sodomy, but found guilty and executed in what can be seen as a flashpoint in English LGBT history allows us as historians to use his case to both paint a wider picture of the societal views on homosexuality and homosexual acts of the time, as well as examine his life and his participation and role in the life of the Walpole Chapel, and what role he and his family played in the life of the Chapel.

Methusalah was born in May 1756 and baptised at Wissett in Suffolk. His parents were Thomas and Catherine Spalding, who were both also born in Wissett – therefore this can be clearly seen to be his ancestral home. In 1772, at age 16 Methusalah was listed as an apprentice cordwainer (shoemaker) to Sam Smith of Halesworth⁸. His date of marriage to his wife Mary is unknown as there are no records to be found, but he and Mary had three children named James, Rebecca and William who were all baptised

⁴ Unknown Author, “Homosexuality”, Taken From: Old Bailey Online website.
<https://www.oldbaileyonline.org/static/Gay.jsp>
Accessed on 10/2/2023/

⁵ Peakman, Julie, Amatory Pleasures : Explorations in Eighteenth-Century Sexual Culture (Bloomsbury Publishing, 2016), 21.

⁶ Cohen, David, “Law, Society and Homosexuality in Classical Athens” Taken From: Past & Present (No. 117, Nov. 1987), 3.

⁷ Harvey, A. D., “Prosecutions for Sodomy in England at the Beginning of the Nineteenth Century” Taken From: The Historical Journal, Vol. 21, No. 4 (Dec. 1978), 940-941.

⁸ “Methusalah Spalding” searched on: ancestry.co.uk

The National Archives of the UK (TNA); Kew, Surrey, England; Collection: Board of Stamps: Apprenticeship Books: Series IR 1; *Class*: IR 1; *Piece*: 58: s. v. “Methusalah (written MATHUSALEM) Spalding” (Image provided). Accessed on 11/05/2023.

at Walpole Chapel in 1785⁹, 1788¹⁰ and 1792¹¹ respectively. These records were originally held at the Halesworth Museum in Halesworth, but have since been sent to the Records Office at Ipswich for safekeeping due to their importance. By 1802 he had moved to Duke Street, Chelsea, working as a shoemaker. It is assumed at least one member of his family followed him, as his daughter Rebecca died in 1802¹² and is listed as buried at St Luke's, Chelsea. The next available reliable record for Methusalah is his arraignment and trial in 1803 for the crime of Sodomy.

The baptismal records of the Chapel show that both Methusalah and Mary were committed to the Chapel – as they would have had to travel miles from their home in Wissett, going South to Walpole and the Chapel for services, special holidays and indeed their children's baptisms on what can be presumed to be regular basis. Though not much is known of their everyday life, the baptisms at Walpole of what is presumed to be all their children shows that Methusalah and Mary both had a commitment to the Chapel that they found on their own – as neither of them are registered as being baptised there themselves. Without a doubt, the Spalding family's dedication to the Chapel can be seen through these baptismal records – Mary and Methusalah had a real commitment to the Chapel, else they would never have had their children baptised there.

To go back to Methusalah however, it is important that we do not get lost in the smaller details of the life of the Spalding family, especially when the kind of records that can be found from the 1800s onwards are not as readily available. Though we have been examining the family, this is a study of the patriarch – and how his life led to him being executed in 1804. Though he was indeed a victim of the system, this does *not* imply that Methusalah was either a martyr *or* that he was a part of a larger wave of executions that specifically targeted gay men during the turn of the 18th and 19th centuries. Indeed, by the legal standards of the day sodomy trials were seen as relatively balanced and fair¹³ - and this is considering how unfair the legal system of the time could be (and often was).

Given the seriousness of an accusation of sodomy, the use of detailed testimony of witnesses was almost always required for a successful conviction. This testimony was often 'keyhole' in nature, as emphasised by historian George Haggerty¹⁴. Essentially, the term keyhole implies that those who were witness to the act were spying or 'looking through a keyhole' – which can be seen by some as an act of voyeurism. As a result of this, not many people would have been willing to testify to acts of sodomy at the time, as it could imply that they were watching the act unfold as opposed to being compelled to stop it taking place. As a result of this sensationalist nature of any eyewitness account of the crime, the reliability of this evidence to bring a successful conviction of sodomy usually required multiple accounts of corroborating evidence

⁹ "James Spalding", searched on ancestry.co.uk The National Archives (United Kingdom); Kew, Surrey, England; General Register Office: Registers of Births, Marriages and Deaths surrendered to the Non-parochial Registers Commissions of 1837 and 1857; Class Number: RG 4; Piece Number: 1862". s. v "James Spalding" (Image Provided). Accessed on 12/05/2023.

¹⁰ "Rebecca Spalding", searched on ancestry.co.uk. Ibid, s. v. "Rebecca Spalding" (Image Provided). Accessed on 12/02/2023.

¹¹ "William Spalding", searched on ancestry.co.uk The National Archives (United Kingdom); Kew, Surrey, England; General Register Office: Registers of Births, Marriages and Deaths surrendered to the Non-parochial Registers Commissions of 1837 and 1857; Class Number: RG 4; *Class Number: Rg 4; Piece Number: 1862*", s. v. "William Spalding" (Image provided). Accessed on 12/05/2023.

¹² "Rebecca Spalding" searched on findagrave.com London Metropolitan Archives; London, England; London Church of England Parish Registers; Reference Number: P74/LUK/255: s. v. "Rebecca Spalding" Accessed on 12/05/2023.

¹³ Harvey, A. D., "Prosecutions for Sodomy in England at the Beginning of the Nineteenth Century" Taken From: The Historical Journal, Vol. 21, No. 4 (Dec. 1978), 941-942.

¹⁴ Haggerty, E. George, "Keyhole Testimony: Witnessing Sodomy in the Eighteenth Century", Taken From: The Eighteenth Century, Vol. 44, No. 2-3, 168-171.

to amount to a guilty verdict. Despite this, executions did still happen – as is proven by the death of Methusalah.

It would be remiss to mention the legal stance on homosexuality during this time without focusing on the state of the legal system as an entity, to be able to paint a more vivid and accurate portrait of both Methusalah as an individual and the world which he inhabited. During the time period which Methusalah lived and died, the legal system in England was undergoing seismic changes due to a multitude of factors, and the increase in the number of convictions and executions for capital crimes in England during the 18th and 19th centuries was not an uncommon feature of life. Indeed, the early part of the 18th Century saw a large rise in both convictions and executions of those found guilty of robbery¹⁵, which was due to the courts actively allowing cases to build up and not choosing to go to trial to punish or acquit. Both factors were exacerbated by the desires of the justice system itself, and indeed even perhaps the influences of certain individuals from within the system and without, to both prosecute those who committed the crime and speed up the time between successful conviction and execution for capital crimes¹⁶. Conversely, both during and after the time in which Methusalah was tried and executed in the early 19th Century, there was a notable increase in the rate of both convictions and executions for one of the four ‘high crimes’ – that of Forgery¹⁷. This uptick, as with the trend of increases in convictions and executions for robbery, was *not* due to a huge rise in people actively committing the crime, but instead due to a more active role of the justice system in trying to address the issue that was already a pre-existing one. This proactivity of the justice system found itself working alongside the active role the Bank of England played in influencing the conviction rate for those who forged banknotes¹⁸ to crack down on the amount of illegal currency that was in circulation.

However, these changes that took place during this time period does *not* mean that homosexual standards or lifestyle choices were in any way tolerated by society more generally. The world in which Methusalah lived was one in which being a gay man was punishable by death, but historically was not one that legally would guarantee you a place at the gallows – but would ensure your isolation from the main part of society. The attitude of the everyday individual was actively hostile to gay men, and the emergence of the molly-house as a sanctuary was a direct response to the cultural stigma around homosexuality and related activities within Britain¹⁹, especially within large cities like London where much of the population was concentrated. Though it was much more common to find a molly-house in a large city like London than it would be to find a similar place or venue outside of these areas, it does not mean that they, or the gay/bisexual men that typically occupied these places ceased to exist – no matter how much people of the time perhaps wished they would.

Indeed, the situation which Methusalah found himself in upon arrival in London – most likely very poor or penniless, unable to find regular work due to being an unknown – being a world away from the quiet fields of Wissett and the familiar faces at the Walpole Chapel – is one that anyone today would struggle with, even with modern attitudes and the resources which we have at our disposal. The fact that he was indicted in 1803, not long after his census record in Chelsea indicates that he was living in and around the area in which he was arrested. While we cannot know his particular situation for certain due to a lack of concrete evidence, it is also likely that his financial situation could have forced him to seek employment as a ‘rent boy’ or as another type of male escort – and that he was either the victim of an employment

¹⁵ Devereaux, Simon, “Execution and Pardon at the Old Bailey, 1730-1837”, Taken From: The American Journal of Legal History, Vol. 57, No. 4 (Dec. 2017), 456-459.

¹⁶ Ibid, 459.

¹⁷ Ibid, 476.

¹⁸ Ibid, 477.

¹⁹ Trumbach, Randolph, “Sex, Gender and Sexual Identity and Modern Culture: Male Sodomy and Female Prostitution in Enlightenment London”, Taken From: The Journal of the History of Sexuality, Vol. 2, No. 2 (Oct 1991), Special Issue, Part 1: The State, Society, and the Regulation of Sexuality in Modern Europe, 190.

feud, the wrong place at the wrong time or perhaps an embittered co-worker who wanted revenge for some slight or another. Without the evidence it cannot be said for sure what caused Methusalah to be caught engaged in an alleged homosexual act – but the fact he was married with three children indicates that he was more than likely at least bisexual, as he would have had to have had sexual intercourse with Mary on multiple occasions for their children to be born.

To conclude the unfortunate case of Methusalah Spalding, a committed Christian who would be put to death for his alleged sexual preferences following the moral code of the religion which he practised during his lifetime, it is clear to see that his move away from Wissett was not one that was supported by his family. A lack of evidence as to the Chapel's awareness of either his sexuality or reason for his departure from London lead me to conclude that he was a committed member of the congregation, who was a key feature of chapel life and a face that the other members of the congregation knew well and intimately who disappeared abruptly from the community – the reason for which cannot be known for certain. Perhaps his daughter followed him because they had a special relationship, perhaps his whole family followed him but were not picked up on the newly emerging census records. Without evidence, one cannot say for certain. The life and death of Methusalah Spalding is a story that has been needed to be told for over 200 years, and with certainty I can say that if he had been able to stay in Walpole, we would know much more about him and perhaps his family too. It is a tragedy that in his death, we know more about his personal life and what led him to die before his time – perhaps more information on him and his life will be unearthed overtime, as opposed to focusing on the facts of his death.

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