



## Vere Street Coterie

by Caryn E. Neumann

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The 1810 conviction of London's Vere Street Coterie led to the most brutal public punishment of homosexuals in British history.

The Vere Street Coterie began in 1810 when a man named Yardley introduced himself to James Cook. Yardley advised Cook that much money could be made by supplying the men of London with a male brothel. Cook, a self-proclaimed avaricious heterosexual, agreed to join Yardley in operating the White Swan in Vere Street, Clare Market.

The White Swan had a number of features designed to please its customers. The lower part of the house had one room with four beds, a ladies' dressing room complete with every type of cosmetic, and a chapel for weddings.

Yardley and Cook followed the tradition established by the molly houses of the eighteenth century by allowing visitors to engage in sexual relations with each other free of charge. The upper section of the brothel housed prostitutes who lured casual customers in the manner of heterosexual brothels, presumably by wearing little clothing and offering various skills. No unusual interests, such as sadomasochism, were served.

The White Swan had been open for less than six months when the police raided it on July 8, 1810. Almost 30 of the inhabitants found themselves under arrest, including Cook. The police proved less of a problem than the mob, mostly female, who nearly killed the prisoners as they were transported in coaches from the watch house of St. Clement Danes to Bow Street for examination.

Most of the men were eventually set free for lack of sufficient evidence for prosecution. All seven of the men who were convicted belonged to the lower middle class, including William Amos, alias Sally Fox; Philip Kett; William Thomson; Richard Francis; James Done; and Robert Aspinal. Cook, found guilty of running a disorderly house, was never charged with sodomy.

All of the men except Aspinal were sentenced to stand an hour in the pillory. Aspinal had less culpability than the others and received a sentence of imprisonment for one year. Amos, for his third conviction on similar charges, received three years imprisonment, in addition to the pillorying. The others received terms of two years imprisonment, in addition to the pillorying.

Standing in the pillory involved locking the head and hands of a convict through one wing of a four-winged frame. The prisoner walked in a circle as the device rotated on an axis. The arrangement offered no means of protection to the convict.

On the day of the pillorying, September 27, 1810, the streets surrounding the Old Bailey were completely blocked by thousands of spectators. Shops were shut with the windows and roofs of nearby houses crowded



A woodcut depicting the pillorying of members of the Vere Street Coterie (created 1810). Adapted from an illustration in a reprint edition of *Trying & Pillorying of the Vere Street Club* (1810, republished in 2001 by bibliogay.com).

with humanity. The mob, particularly the women, had built pyramids of mud balls that resembled shot. As the convicts moved in a wagon toward the pillory, the crowd hurled mud, dead cats and dogs, rotten fish, spoiled eggs, dung, offal, potatoes, turnips, brickbats, and verbal abuse. Several of the men began to bleed profusely from wounds.

Once placed in the pillory, the men walked for one hour while the violence continued unabated. About fifty women were permitted by authorities to form a ring among the men and pelt them incessantly. Cook and Amos, placed on the pillory without the protection of two additional prisoners' bodies, suffered the worst, with Cook beaten almost insensible.

Two members of the coterie, who were not present during the raid of July 8 but who were implicated by the testimony of an informer, were charged with buggery. Thomas White, a sixteen-year-old Drummer of the Guards in a Portugal regiment, and John Newbolt (or Newball) Hepburn, a forty-two-year-old ensign in a West India regiment, were captured after an acquaintance reported their involvement with the White Swan to a drum major. The officer arranged for both men to be brought for trial.

Both soldiers were convicted and sentenced to death. They were hanged at Newgate prison on March 7, 1811.

The fate of the Vere Street Coterie terrorized the gay community in England. Part of a general crackdown on immoral behavior, the horrific punishment meted out to the group undoubtedly forced many gay men to re-evaluate their public activities.

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