

JOHN WOOD'S CROPPING SHOP AT LONGROYD BRIDGE, NEAR HUDDERSFIELD

By Jeremy Clark

A print titled 'The Old Cropping Shop' supposedly that of John Wood's at Longroyd Bridge, Huddersfield is one of the most familiar illustrations of a cropping shop of the early 19th century. The drawing is mainly black and white with traces of colour ¹ measuring 17 inches by 14 inches. It shows the interior of 'The Old Cropping Shop', better known as the cropping shop or cloth dressing shop. It depicts a comprehensive scene of various finishing operations carried out in the dressing shop as part of the woollen textile industry in West Yorkshire. There is no date on the print but it was published in Huddersfield by Benjamin Brown who first appears in local directories for 1850, the lithograph was by George Falkner who set up in business in Manchester in 1843 and died in 1882. These dates indicate that the print probably dates to about 1860. Benjamin Brown was one of Huddersfield's leading booksellers in the second half of the 19th century who also sold the print at his shop.



Above: 'The Old Cropping Shop', a lithograph by G. Falkner, c.1860, it was formerly titled 'John Wood's Old Cloth Cropping Shop'.

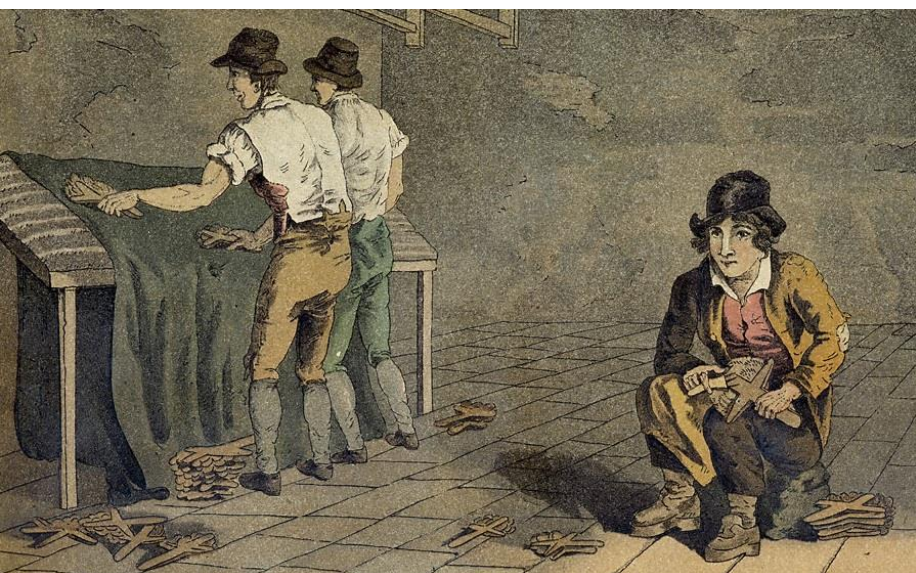
The print of 'The Old Cropping Shop' was based on an actual painting by an artist called J. Thornton, who may have been a John Thornton of Paddock, Huddersfield and originally painted sometime in 1810 or shortly after this date ². This historical drawing has been reproduced in many books and articles at all academic levels and displayed in museums alongside exhibits of the 19th century woollen textile industry. It is regarded as an authentic view of the interior of a West Yorkshire dressing shop just before the practice of dressing and finishing woollen cloth by hand began to be replaced by mechanical shearing frames that could do the work of four skilled men each using a heavy pair of shears to crop the nap from the length of cloth. The building is also noted as one of the famous places in Huddersfield's history because of its connection with the Luddite movement.

The print of 'The Old Cropping Shop', had a limited edition so it is not known how many original prints remain in circulation. In the past the print and the building itself has never been examined in detail, and there are various aspects that have not previously been considered.

The realistic detail shows the interior which consists of the main area with part of an adjoining room seen through an opening on the right. It is a single storey building which illustrates the underside of the roof at mid-height supported on wooden beams and rafters. Examining the central wooden beam in the print reveals two inscriptions, that look as though they have been written in white chalk, the one on the right side reads 'Hood 1799' and the left side 'Johne Green's web June 2d 1810'³. These inscriptions were clearly intended to suggest a date before the Luddites' involvement of 1812. The floor is paved with squared flagged stones and the walls are plastered with traces of a fawn colour. Hanging on the right wall next to the opening is a pair of cropping shears. The interior is lit by a large window divided into four panels by three stone mullions, the middle two of which are sash windows, and a single window on the left matches in size to one of the panels that have small square panes of glass. There is also a window in the second room on the right which also has small square panes of glass. A closer inspection of the large window reveals clouds at the top of the two middle panels and through the small square panes of glass on the right can be seen the outline of buildings on the far side of the River Colne.

The main interest is focussed on the small group of people who occupy the centre of the composition. They are carrying out various work of the dressing shop, apart from the young man in the foreground who is seated on piles of rolled up cloth, taking a break from his work eating from a parcel of food spread across his knees. The smiling young woman standing among the group of men wearing a yellow dress and a white apron is carrying a jug containing refreshment which she is about to offer to the workers. Only the young man at the wooden frame termed a 'nelly' has his back turned, and the boy or youth in the second room are looking towards her. There is an atmosphere of quiet normality that prevails over the whole scene which is a typical example of an early 19th century dressing shop.

The print of 'The Old Cropping Shop' was clearly to record the methods and practices used in the dressing shop after the cloth had been fulled. In fact in the early 19th century the dressing shop was the only non-cottage process in the production of woollen cloth. The picture shows in detail the main processes in the dressing and finishing of woollen cloth by hand. The accuracy of the drawing is supported not only by illustrated documents, but by comparison with surviving examples of objects shown in the print, such as the shears. The process began with wetting the cloth with water from a can, the man on the left in the picture can be seen undertaking this work. The dressing involved drawing out any loose fibres from the cloth with teazles which have stiff but flexible curved hooks, and which also raised the nap. A number of teazle-heads were set close together in a small hand-held wooden frame called a 'handle' of a convenient shape and size to be worked by hand. The cloth was stretched between two rollers on a wooden sloping frame, the 'nelly' seen propped up against the rear wall. Connected to the top roller on the right side is a handle used to wind on the cloth after each section had been dressed. Although the young man working the cloth on the 'nelly', appears to be actually using a card which has wire teeth, it is of a different shape and size to a wooden teazle 'handle' and an alternative to teazles. The wooden rack in the foreground next to the young man taking a break has a number of 'handles' ready for re-use, the teazle-heads in them have been cleaned of flocks using a spiked tool called a 'preem'⁴ then dried. This may have been the young man's job, part of which was also to fetch beer and sweep up.



Left: 'The Preemer Boy' from George Walker's Costume of Yorkshire of 1814, shows the 'Preemer Boy' sitting on a stone cleaning teazle-heads of flocks using a spiked tool called a 'preem'. To the left are two men using wooden teazle 'handles' to dress cloth which is draped over a sloping wooden frame with a number of cleaned 'handles' piled up on the floor near the man's foot on the left.

Setting the 'handles' with teazles was carried out on the small table in the light of the window to the left, beside which are a pile of teazles in the form of 'stavs', that have been stacked up lengthways on the floor as supplied by the growers.⁵ A large number of 'handles' in which the teazle-heads have been cleaned can also be seen drying in a long rack above the open window along the rear wall. Teazle-heads do not last forever and with the hooks bent and broken eventually come to the end of their working life. The print of 'The Old Cropping Shop' may illustrate this, in front and on top of the box in the foreground is a pile of what could represent discarded teazle-heads.

The arrangement of the 'shearboards', which are long narrow tables with a curved surface, stand in pairs on trestles, each with a footboard for the cropper to stand on off the wet floor, can be seen clearly. In the picture the cropper is wearing a red waistcoat using huge cropping shears with square ends that measure over 3 feet long. They were curved to match the 'shearboards' and lead heart-shaped weights were needed to give extra purchase on the unfinished cloth. Four of these weights are illustrated in the print on the blade of the shears behind the man brushing away the flock.

The shears were difficult to hold and manage. The nap was cut as close as possible to the surface of the cloth so that it was smooth with an even surface. To prevent the cloth moving, it was pulled taut using hooks which can be seen on the 'shearboard' in the foreground. The job was slow and laborious, the cloth needing to be continually moved over the 'shearboards' after each cut falling in 'cuttle' on the floor. The shears themselves weighed in excess of 40 pounds and would have needed great strength and skill to operate them.

When the shearing was completed, the cloth was well brushed in order to remove the loose particles of wool termed 'flocks'. The man to the right of the cropper is using a long hand brush made for the purpose of brushing away the flocks which can be seen heaped up on the end of the trestles and on the floor. In the room to the right, a boy or youth is pressing the cloth to produce a smooth level surface probably with a screw press. The cloth is folded to form a thick package with sheets of glazed paper placed between the folds of the cloth, in order to prevent the contact of two surfaces.

The perspective of the picture is not quite skilfully drawn, parts of the detail are out of proportion which perhaps betrays the hand of the local artist. All the work in the print takes place in the central area of the dressing shop and the room on the right, these account for about three-quarters of the actual building.

The activity in John Wood's dressing shop can perhaps be compared with George Walker's coloured illustration of 'The Cloth-Dresser' first published in 1814⁶. The drawing shows the interior which is similar to John Wood's main area with a wooden beam ceiling, plastered white washed walls with a window on the right which has small square panes of glass. Hanging on the left wall are four pairs of cropping shears and a number of 'handles' in which the teazle heads have been cleaned can be seen drying piled on the floor below the croppers shears. It illustrates a master cropper standing on a footboard using shears to crop the cloth with three young apprentices looking on. Although in Walker's illustration the 'shearboard' is flat they were in fact curved to match the cropping shears.



Right: 'The Cloth-Dresser' from George Walker's Costume of Yorkshire of 1814, shows a master cropper at work.

THE EXTERIOR OF THE STONE BUILDING

John Wood's dressing shop was situated about half a mile south-west of Huddersfield along the south bank of the River Colne, north of St. Thomas's Road and immediately east of Longroyed Bridge. Before the building was demolished in about the middle of 1891, a few photographs were taken of the exterior showing that it was a rectangular single storey building. The Ordnance Survey map of 1887, confirms that in plan it was rectangular measuring some 50 feet by 20 feet and was probably constructed in one building phase. The walls were constructed in stone and stone slabs used for roofing. The building had a tall stone chimney stack with a single chimney pot built on top at the far western end of the gable roof. Abutting the western end of the building and lying at right-angles to it was a small low stone building with a flat sloping roof that was probably used as an outside toilet for the workers. There was only one entrance with a door that led directly into the dressing shop, this was situated on the south front at the western end of the building. The dressing shop was lit on the south front by a large window at the eastern end and a smaller window set at a higher level near the roof midway between the entrance and the larger window. The photograph of the south front taken from the open space or yard shows the entrance and the small window blocked up and the larger window is boarded up.

Right: A front view of John Wood's dressing shop taken from the open space or yard.

The entrance to the building has been blocked up which is behind the girl in the white dress. The white crosses painted on the building are probably markings for demolition. The empty building was used to store timber in the late 19th century, long after the cropping shop had closed down. This photograph is believed to have been taken prior to demolition in 1891 and is attributed to Alderman F Lawton who could be the dandy man leaning against the side wall wearing a pocket watch chain across his front looking satisfied with himself in the photograph.



Left: The single storey rectangular building of John Wood's dressing shop alongside the south bank of the River Colne long after the dressing shop had closed.

It has five mullioned windows and a tall stone chimney stack. Notice the small building on the right side built against the end wall. It was probably used as a toilet and is marked on the 1887 Ordnance Survey 25": 1 mile map. This confirms that the building was standing at this time and it was probably demolished sometime in 1891.



This photograph is believed to have been taken in 1891 just before the building was demolished and is attributed to Alderman F Lawton.

Right: John Wood's dressing shop alongside the south bank of the River Colne looking west towards the bridge at Longroyd Bridge which it runs under.

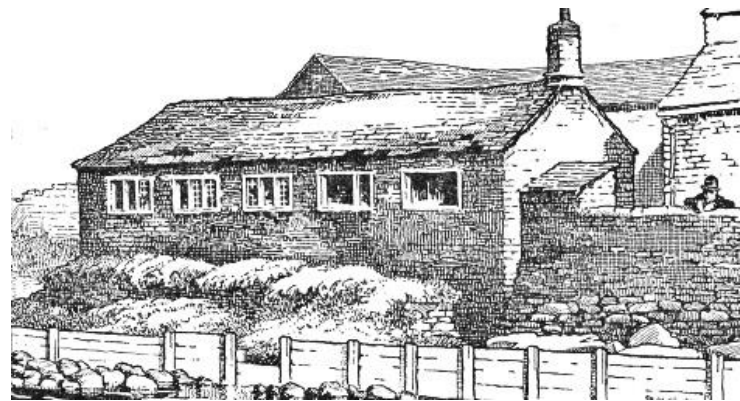
This photograph was probably taken prior to demolition in 1891.



According to the two photographs taken along the south side of the building that overlooked the River Colne, the rear stone wall incorporated five mullioned windows. However, by the time the photographs were taken in about 1891 some of these windows were blocked up, two appear to have been completely taken out and some of the small square panes of glass have been smashed.

Three of the windows in the photographs along the outer wall at the eastern end of the building are divided into three equal panels by stone mullions, the two windows at the western end are divided into two panels by a stone mullion with the larger panel being equivalent in space to two panels. It seems likely that these two windows were originally divided into three equal panels and that all five windows had the same design to light the dressing shop on the south side of the building. The series of five windows were the same in size, equally divided and built horizontally at the same elevation along the outside wall. What cannot be deduced from the photographs are the number of rooms the building contained.

Right: Drawing taken from an 1891 photograph of John Wood's dressing shop showing windows in proportion along the outside wall. The illustration is by Harold Blackburn and is reproduced from Colne Valley Cloth by Phyllis Bentley.



THE INTERIOR OF THE BUILDING

Comparing the print of 'The Old Cropping Shop' illustrating the interior with the photographs taken of the exterior of the building is difficult, but they seem to agree that it was a rectangular single storey building with a gable roof. The print illustrates the underside of the roof at mid-height with a thick timber central beam and common timber rafters spaced out at intervals which supported the stone slabs used for roofing. This is likely to correspond with the design of the roof in the photographs. However, the three windows on the rear wall in the print of 'The Old Cropping Shop' do not resemble those in the photographs. The print suggests that the building was divided into two rooms. The main large room had an entrance with a fireplace at the western end not illustrated in the print but shown in the photographs. On the right is part of an adjoining room seen through an opening, and although the dimensions of this room are difficult to interpret from the print, it could extend much further east.

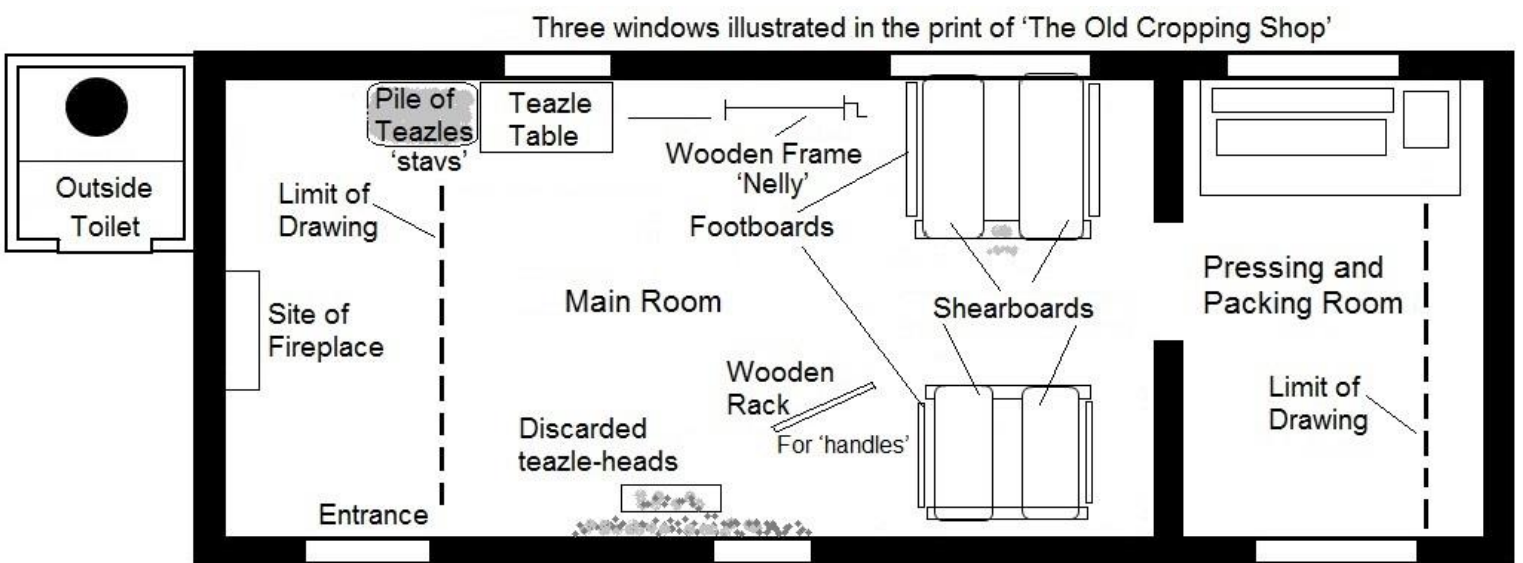
A copy of 'The Old Cropping Shop' was published in 1888 by Frank Peel a local Yorkshire historian in his second edition of *Risings of the Luddites*,⁷ when the drawing was generally known as John Wood's cropping shop, titled 'Interior of John Wood's Old Cloth Cropping Shop' this original title has virtually disappeared from use. The justification for this has never been explained, but might possibly be a distant memory of the Luddites involvement and to be viewed in its original historical connotations. In the preface to Peel's second edition he records that the picture was supplied to him by his friend Mr J J Stead, a Heckmondwike antiquarian, presumably this was after the publication of Peel's first edition of 1880 in which it does not appear. He probably learned of its association with the Luddites and it can only be assumed that this was something that was known at the time.

Peel also records the location of John Wood's cropping shop at Longroyd Bridge, he writes 'The building still stands on the water side, not far from the highway, and is now used as a place for depositing lumber' from this account the building itself was standing until the early 1890s⁸. The illustration of 'The Old Cropping Shop' was accepted as John Wood's cropping shop based on direct evidence and the involvement with the Luddites.

There can be little doubt that this single story rectangular building was John Wood's dressing shop situated alongside the south bank of the River Colne. Allowing for artistic licence and although the windows in the drawing do not correspond to these in the photographs, probably because of the perspective, the evidence that links the print of 'The Old Cropping Shop' comes from its former title in Frank Peel's second edition of the *Risings of the Luddites*, which is 'John Wood's Old Cloth Cropping Shop'. Old museum labels on the photographs dated 1891 described the building as 'The Old Cropping Shop, Longroyd Bridge' which further confirms the identity of 'The Old Cropping Shop' and John Wood's dressing shop.



Above: The location of John Wood's dressing shop can be identified on the 1887 Ordnance Survey 25": 1 mile map. It is situated between the River Colne and St. Thomas's Road. The entrance was in the south front from an open space or yard. Built against the west end wall is a small building that was probably used as an outside toilet.



Windows and entrance on one of the photographs

Above: Reconstruction plan of John Wood's dressing shop showing the position of the equipment used based on the illustration of 'The Old Cropping Shop', photographs and the 1887 Ordnance Survey 25": 1 mile map. In the print only three windows are illustrated on the rear wall whereas in the photographs there are five, this is probably because the artist had difficulty with the perspective and all the activity in the main area of dressing shop.

There is no date stone for John Wood's dressing shop in the photographs so an actual date for the building is unknown. However, the simple design of the single storey building with a gable roof is typical of domestic architecture in the 18th century. Further dating evidence is provided by the date of 1799 chalked on the central wooden beam, this suggests a construction date for the building in the second half the 18th century. After the building went out of use as a dressing shop it was used for storing timber until about 1890. In the middle of 1891 the building was demolished, and the Huddersfield Corporation Tramway Depot and Power Station was built on the site which opened in 1901⁹. Today the Fired Up Corporation Company occupies the site.

The significance of the central wooden roof beam with the chalked inscriptions dating 1799 and June 1810 appears to be that the scene, although set in John Wood's dressing shop, belongs to the years directly before the Luddite fury of 1812. The 'old' cropping shop of the title is therefore not only the 'old' cropping shop of the pre-industrial age, but of the time before the Luddites' involvement.

THE LUDDITES

It was the direct cause of the Luddites disturbances that brought John Wood's dressing shop into disrepute and acquired its role in the uproar and the extremism into which the Luddite movement degenerated. Although there were many cloth finishers and others in the cloth industry who did not participate in the Luddite movement, and there were many who sympathized and supported them without being part of it in the hope for its success. George Mellor a rather fiery young man of 22 with fair curly hair, was a cropper working for his step father Mr Wood at John Wood's dressing shop became the unelected leader of the Luddites in the Huddersfield area. It is believed that several attacks were planned at the dressing shop as well as the assassination of William Horsfall a mill owner of Ottiwells in Marsden. Although John Wood himself would later deny having had any knowledge of what was happening in his own dressing shop. On 28th April 1812 George Mellor aided by two workmates and a man from another dressing shop shot William Horsfall as he was returning home on horseback from Huddersfield. Sympathy for the motives of those who supported the Luddites movement was now full of moral condemnation of what had been done. It was one thing to break machines to pieces but quite another to commit murder. It must also be remembered that unemployment in those days meant nothing less than starvation.

*Right: A contemporary artist's impression of the shooting of Mr William Horsefall on 28th April 1812*¹⁰



George Mellor and his two accomplices William Thorpe and Thomas Smith were hanged on the scaffold for the murder of William Horsfall on January 8th 1813 at York. The judge in their case was Justice Le Blanc. A lasting impression was also left by the impunity with which George Mellor had converted John Wood's dressing shop into a centre for conspiracy, where there was continual talk of violence and lawlessness, and by his considerable success in organising the cover-up afterwards.

The peaceful scene in 'The Old Cropping Shop' is a warning of things to come. This is significant only if seen in terms of an interval between the early 19th century and the time when 'The Old Cropping Shop' was published. Luddites represented the brief but epic struggle of the hand workers to resist the forces of the factory system and machines that could do the work of several men, and which in the course of a few decades had altered the structure of the textile industry in West Yorkshire.

By the mid-19th century the methods shown in the print and in other small dressing shops like John Wood's were largely a thing of the past. 'The Old Cropping Shop' represents and idealises and the virtues of a lost past as seen from a period that had experienced the brutalities of the industrial revolution. The drawing of 'The Old Cropping Shop' has remained popular to the present day, its meaning was almost lost in time, whilst the creative interest of the Luddites has since been left to the writers of literary and dramatic fiction. One of these includes Charlotte Brontë's novel *Shirley*, published in 1849, and based on events in the Spen Valley. Although her novel is overly romantic it is probably one of the earliest signs of the growing interest in the subject of the Luddites and since then there have been numerous publications.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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REFERENCES AND NOTES

- ¹ The print of 'The Old Cropping Shop' in the collection of the Colne Valley Museum, Huddersfield. It has recently been cleaned and restored revealing some traces of colour in the print.
- ² This information was on a label attached to the back of the print in the collection of Bankfield Museum, Halifax in 1979, it was written in 1911 by Ling Roth, former Curator of Bankfield Museum, R. A. McMillan, *The Old Cropping Shop, Yorkshire Archaeological Journal*, 51 (1979). Since then the print has been mounted and sealed with glue which now conceals this label and there are no records establishing the source of this information. Written by hand at the bottom of the white cardboard frame is 'Cropping Shop Huddersfield 1799' suggesting the date when the print was painted. Considering the second inscription on the central wooden beam has a date of 1810 the original painting must therefore have been painted shortly after this date. I would like to thank Calderdale Museums, for examining the print and providing me with a digital image.
- ³ W. B. Crump and Gertrude Ghorbal., *History of the Huddersfield Woollen Industry* (1935) Tolson Memorial Museum, Huddersfield, handbook No. 9.
- ⁴ G. Walker, *Costume of Yorkshire* (first published in 1814 and republished in 1885 by Richard Jackson, Leeds) Plate XXI page 59.
- ⁵ Robert A. McMillan., *Teazles and Teazle Men - The teazle trade in the West Riding of Yorkshire since the eighteenth century*. Published by Robert A. McMillan (2012).
- ⁶ Walker, (1885) Plate VI pages 19-20.
- ⁷ F. Peel, *The Risings of the Luddites* (2nd edition, Heckmondwike 1888), frontispiece. It also appeared in the third edition of (1895).
- ⁸ Peel, 2nd edition (1888) page 11.
- ⁹ Gordon and Enid Minter., *Discovering Old Huddersfield Part 2* (1995) page 65.
- ¹⁰ Leman Thomas Rede., *York Castle in the Nineteenth Century: Being an Account of All the Principal Offences Committed in Yorkshire from the Year 1800 to the Present Period, with the Lives of the Capital Offenders ..* (1831) pages 443-463.