

**EXECUTION OF R. WATKINS FOR MURDER**  
**SALISBURY, AUG. 1**

From the Morning Post, Tues 3<sup>rd</sup> August, 1819

Transcribed by Vivien Moss

This criminal (whose trial was given in *The Times* of Saturday) was removed early on Friday morning last from Fisherton-gaol, to a place called Moorstones, near Purton-Stoke, in the parish of Purton, where a scaffold and gallows were erected, just opposite to the spot where the murder was committed. This wretched young man was accompanied to the place of execution by Mr Butt, solicitor (who officiated as sub-sheriff,) by Mr Dowding, gaoler, and by the Rev Mr Harrison, chaplain of Fisherton-prison. At an early hour of the morning, and at the time of the execution, the number of persons in the road and neighbouring fields was immense. That which was not seen in the prisoner, was evident in most of them—a fearful and breathless anxiety, a solemn stillness, and a deep expression of melancholy thought. There was in him a composure and resignation worthy of a better cause: and were not the proofs of his guilt striking, almost beyond example, his firmness of soul must have extorted compassion in all, and a conviction of his innocence. He was earnestly and feelingly entreated by the chaplain, and by some who were deemed likely to make an impression on him, to disburden his soul of part of its guilt by confession; but he was decisive in his denials of any participation in the deed, and only allowed that he was close to the spot where the murder was committed; in every other respect than that of confession, his behaviour was proper and becoming. Near to the fatal spot, the cart passed his wretched mother; he looked steadfastly at her for some moments, and with a gentle inclination of head and great expression of feature, seemed to take an external farewell of her; but soon after, on the cart stopping from some obstruction, she came up again, and he shook hands with her without losing any of his composure. On the scaffold he joined in earnest prayer with the same unsubdued firmness, and at his own desire, read aloud the 108<sup>th</sup> psalm, "*O God, my heart is ready;*" and afterwards said to the crowd—"God bless you all." On the hangman's adjusting the rope, he observed, that it could only "*kill the body;*" the action of his lips and hands showed that he was absorbed in prayer till the moment of his death. He was launched into eternity exactly at a quarter past 2 o'clock, and he died without a struggle. Almost at that instant of time, and before the last convulsions were over, a loud clap of thunder burst over the spot where the innumerable

multitude had collected, and for half an hour afterwards, re-doubled peals reverberated awfully through the heavens. The crowd, who behaved throughout with great propriety, then quietly dispersed. The body of Watkins, after being suspended the usual time, was delivered to Mr Wells, a surgeon, for dissection. Considering the shortness of the notice of the execution, the concourse of persons who attended to witness it was truly wonderful; it is supposed that between 10,000 and 15,000 persons were present. Two hundred special constables were sworn in on the occasion; and the awful ceremony was gone through in an orderly and quiet manner, making, apparently, a suitable impression on the numerous spectators.