

The Case of John Orme

Gary Oddie

The following note arose after a chance find of the magazine engraving shown in Figure 1. An interesting piece of ephemera cut from an old magazine (claimed date 1883) that fits the author's interests in counterfeits and shillings. Thus the search began and the whole story fell into place, traceable to original records, including several unexpected connections and a surprising twist.

The first challenge was to find the magazine and the rest of the story. Suspicions deepened that this was worth pursuing when four almost verbatim versions of the story were found in "popular" publications dating from 1825 to 1879^(1, 2, and 3) and then an 1883 issue of *The American Magazine* from which the engraving had been cut⁽⁴⁾.

The ever-growing interest in local history and resulting publications, also available online, revealed two short notes from 2015^(5, and 6) that in turn opened the door to the more recently digitised official court records, newspapers, and original documentation.

Figure 2 shows the innocuous label behind which the whole story unfolds⁽⁷⁾.

John Orme (b. c.1742) was a collier, living with his wife and large family in a house at Kerridge End, near Rainow in Cheshire. A mile north-east of Macclesfield and located between Higher Hurdsfield and Kettleshulme on the Macclesfield to Capel turnpike road (opened 1770). In the 1780s the Rainow parish had a population of about 1500. The whole area was in the process of industrialisation and the population starting the transition from agrarian to industrial work with the opening of water powered cotton mills.

At the time of the incident, John was letting a room to a neighbour, a Mr Oddie⁽⁸⁾. A teacher from Birmingham, Oddie taught pupils at Orme's house for three years. (This length of time has not been noted by previous writers).



Fig. 1. Engraving from *John Orme's Case* (1883)⁽⁴⁾.

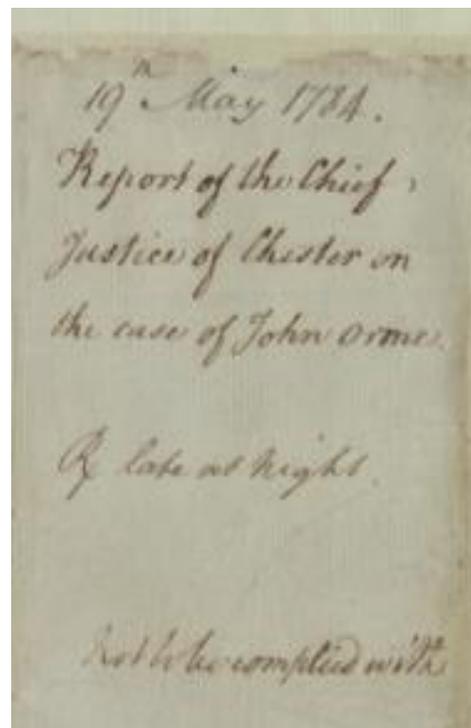


Fig. 2. Label from John Orme Report of 1784⁽⁷⁾.

During 1783 Oddie told Orme that he was going to Birmingham to visit friends and would pay his rent on his return.

Some weeks later Oddie had not returned, so Orme broke into his lodger's room, where he found a crucible and mould for making counterfeit coins and some base metal false shillings. He put two of the shillings in his pocket.

This seems an odd action, as possession of counterfeits was treason, maybe he thought some compensation for the lost rent, with intent to subsequently utter the pieces. This action, combined with keeping the coining equipment would all turn out to be highly incriminating.

Soon afterwards cotton was stolen during a burglary, at a local mill owned by a Richard Roberts.

On 10th October 1783 under the authority of a search warrant Thomas Turner, Constable of Rainow, and James Partington entered John Orme's house while he was at work. James Partington was a servant of Richard Roberts and had been appointed Special Constable. The stolen cotton was not found, but during the search Partington found a box containing a mould, several counterfeit shillings, a crucible, pieces of holed metal (the moulds) and powder. When shown the items, a Macclesfield Magistrate immediately issued a warrant to arrest John Orme for coining. Thomas Turner apprehended John Orme working at the coal pit a quarter mile from his house. On their way to the Magistrate, Constable Turner told Orme that he was suspected of counterfeiting. Orme was presented to William Brooksbank, Macclesfield Justice of the Peace, and was ordered to be searched. Orme panicked and tried to put the counterfeit shillings from his pocket into his mouth. Partington saw this and retrieved the evidence.

John Orme was tried at the Chester Spring Assizes of April 1784. Peter Wright, Clerk to the Justice, James Partington, Thomas Turner and Richard Roberts all testified to the discovery of the coin making equipment and counterfeit coins in Orme's house and on his person. Richard Franklyn, a moneyer from the Mint, confirmed the mould would make the impression both of a half crown and a shilling. Furthermore, the mould matched exactly with the shilling coins in the box at Orme's house. Orme's defence was that the box had been left at his house by his lodger Oddie and he was unaware of its contents. Other local witnesses including John Orme's brother, Stephen stated that Oddie, who had left the "Country", was suspected of being a coiner.

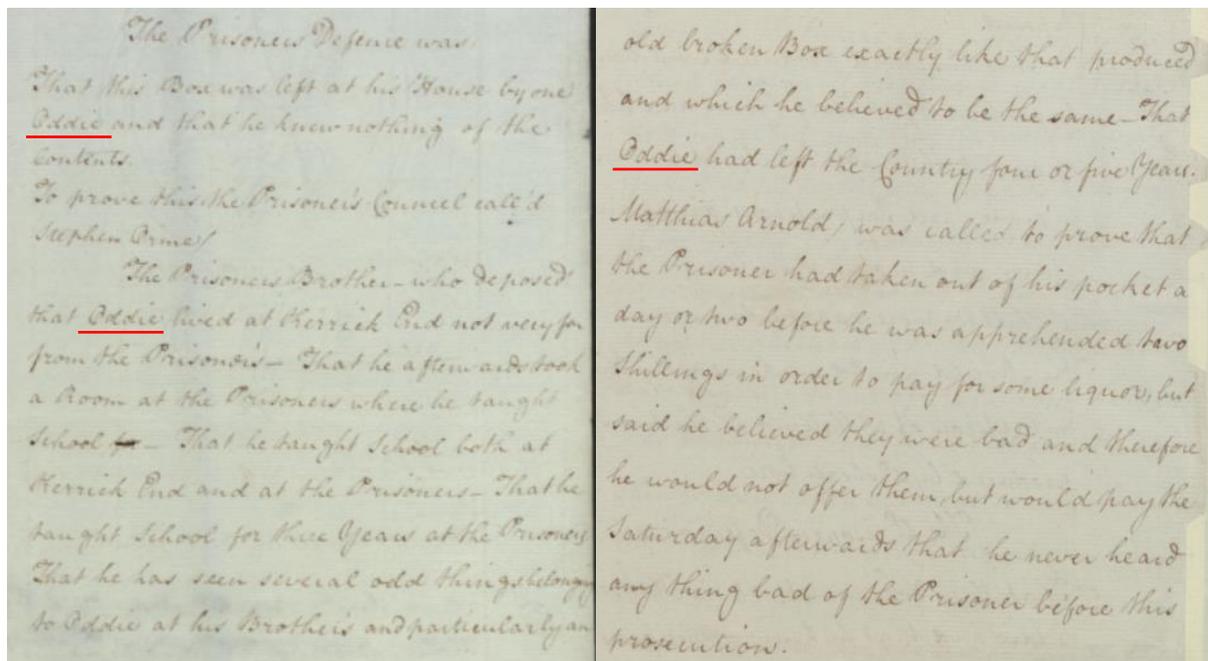


Fig. 3. The defence and witnesses suggest Mr Oddie is the coiner⁽⁷⁾.

Mathias Arnold, a local innkeeper, testified that although Orme had taken some counterfeit coins out of his pocket to pay for some liquor he had said: "As I believe these coins are bad, I'll not offer them (in payment) and will pay next Saturday". Other witnesses attested to Orme as a hardworking man of good character with a large family, all to no avail. The jury found Orme guilty and Judge Richard Pepper Arden was satisfied with this verdict and Orme was convicted of High Treason and sentenced to death. At the same Assizes two other men, John Oakes of Sutton and William Lowe were also charged and convicted of counterfeiting coin of the realm and sentenced to death.

John Orme's brother Edward had moved to London and had risen to become a wealthy hop merchant and cheese factor of considerable reputation and connections. He knew Henry Thornton MP, cousin of the eminent abolitionist William Wilberforce. Through Thornton, Edward Orme was in touch with the leading members of the mercantile and socially progressive communities. Henry Thornton's support helped secure a ten-day reprieve from execution for John Orme from the Home Secretary, Lord Sydney (Figure 4.).

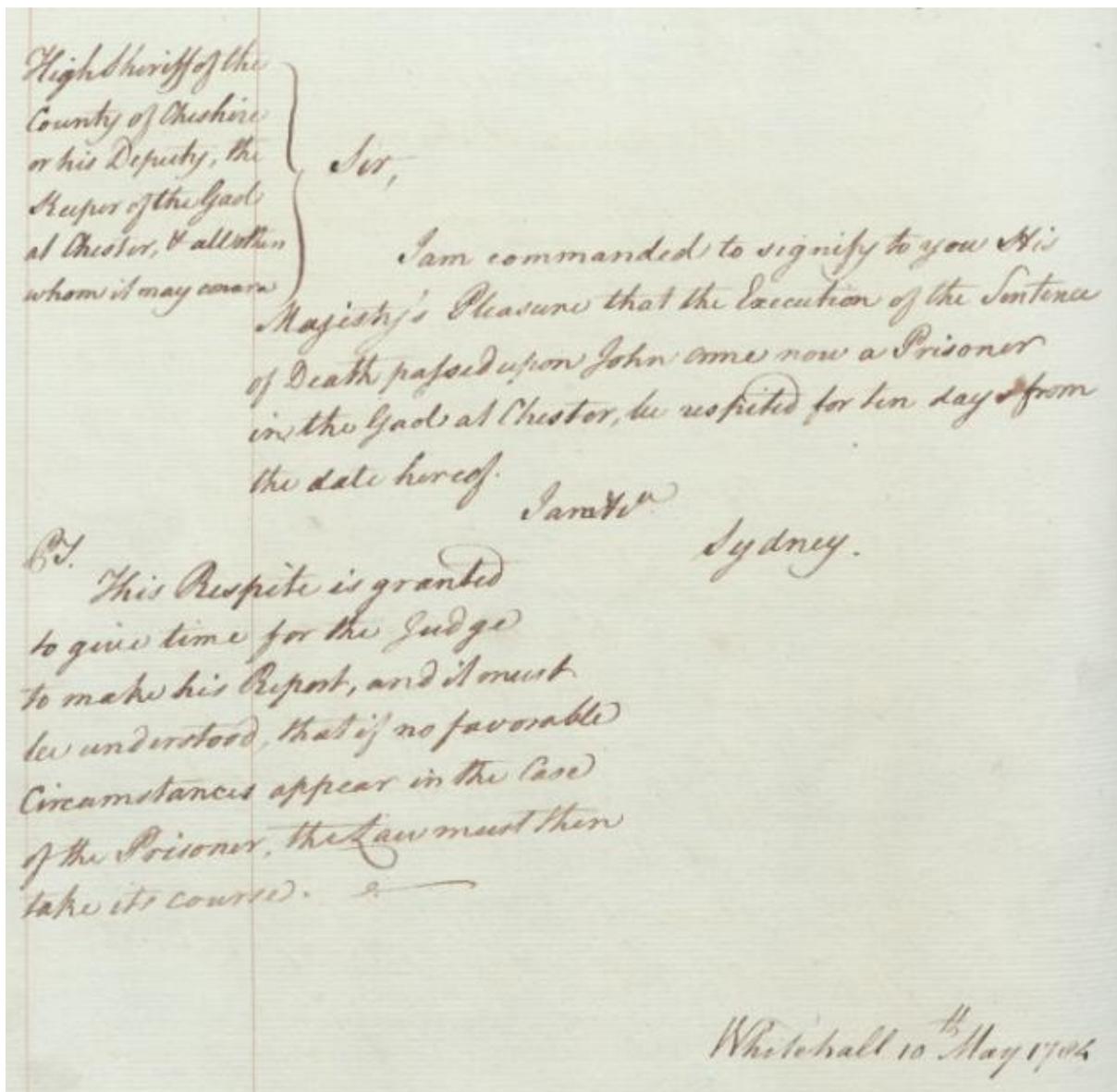
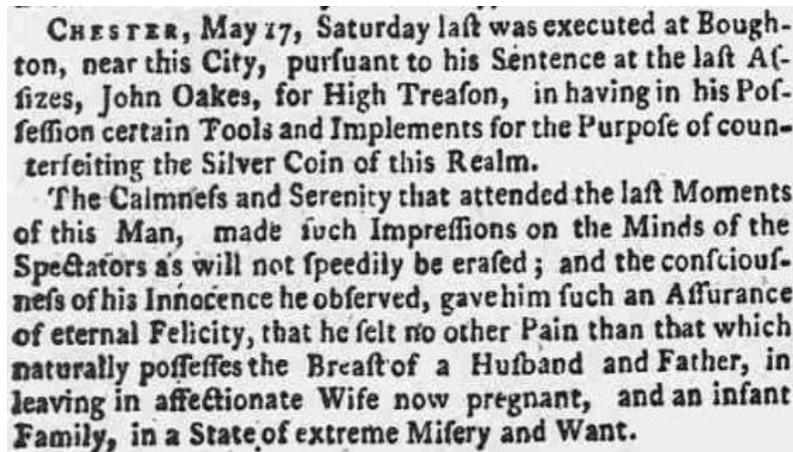


Fig. 4. Lord Sydney's ten-day reprieve for John Orme⁽⁷⁾.

Of the two other men condemned to death at the same Assizes; William Lowe was reprieved from execution on a technicality and John Oakes was executed as scheduled on the 15th May 1784.

The execution of Oakes was disturbing; he protested that he was innocent right to the end, that the evidence in his case was merely circumstantial and that, in any case, the punishment was wholly disproportionate. The Editor of the Chester Chronicle, William Cowdroy, considered that John Oakes' case was "singularly lamentable and distressful". The entry in the Chester Chronicle has not been found, however the story was repeated in other provincial papers a few days later⁽⁹⁾.



CHESTER, May 17, Saturday last was executed at Boughton, near this City, pursuant to his Sentence at the last Assizes, John Oakes, for High Treason, in having in his Possession certain Tools and Implements for the Purpose of counterfeiting the Silver Coin of this Realm.
The Calmness and Serenity that attended the last Moments of this Man, made such Impressions on the Minds of the Spectators as will not speedily be erased; and the consciousness of his Innocence he observed, gave him such an Assurance of eternal Felicity, that he felt no other Pain than that which naturally possesses the Breast of a Husband and Father, in leaving in affectionate Wife now pregnant, and an infant Family, in a State of extreme Misery and Want.

Fig. 5. Report of John Oakes' execution⁽⁹⁾.

Cowdroy became a supporter of Edward Orme's campaign to secure a reprieve for his brother during the stay of execution. Edward arrived from London by express coach to Chester to join forces with Cowdroy. The aim was to petition the Crown with the support of respectable gentlemen of the Grand Jury in Chester and from the Macclesfield area. The local legal establishment remained opposed to this and remained happy with the original verdict.

The petition and the Judge's report were presented to Lord Sydney, but the preparations proceeded for John's execution at one o'clock on Monday 24th May 1784.

Whilst there was no evidence that John Orme had used the coining equipment, that it was found in his house and he had counterfeits on his person made by that equipment was strong circumstantial evidence and many locals were reluctant to support the petition.

William Brooksbank, the Macclesfield Justice of the Peace who investigated the charge against Orme wrote: "...every reputable person refused to sign a petition in his favour... the crime (is) too lightly viewed by the common people in general..." Other gentlemen were more benevolent; Mr Rolls Legh sought to persuade the Foreman of the Grand Jury. Initially he had declined to sign the petition because Orme had attempted to break out of the Castle, however, the Foreman relented when Mr Legh exclaimed: "by God so would you, if you were under sentence of death!"

By 19th May 1784, the petition had gained sufficient support to allow hope for a commutation of the death sentence from Lord Sydney, the Home Secretary. That night Justice Richard Pepper Arden, Judge at Orme's trial, repeated his opinion that the original verdict was appropriate. Of the three men convicted of coining at that session, Justice Arden considered the evidence against William Lowe less strong, so granted him a respite from execution; Arden, considered that the evidence against both John Oakes and John Orme was compelling. John Oakes was already dead, hanged on the 15th May. However Arden did allow Sydney some flexibility, writing: "as Oakes had by no means so good a character as Orme and in case only one example ought to be made was the properer (sic) object of severity".

For the whole of Saturday 22nd May 1784: William Cowdroy and Edward Orme waited at the Post Office for news from London. By eleven O'clock there was still no reprieve and John Orme was warned that the execution would go ahead as scheduled.

At 10 O'clock the next evening, Sunday 23rd May 1784, the reprieve came with the arrival of the King's Special Messenger. Apparently, John was so resigned to his fate that he received the news with disappointment.

On Monday 24th May 1784, the gallows were dismantled, and John Orme was returned to Chester Gaol. On 2nd June 1784 William Brooksbank JP wrote to Lord Sydney concerning Orme’s case, not accepting and arguing against the pardon, stating that if Orme was not to be executed, he shouldn’t be allowed to return home as it might “encourage others to commit the same crime on the assumption that persuading gullible and naïve persons to sign a petition would protect them from justice”.

However, the prisons were full, options for conscription to the army were few (Britain was not currently at war) and transportation of prisoners as slaves to the American colonies was no longer possible after their independence. The prison hulks were rapidly filling.

On 18th August 1786 William Pitt’s government ordered the colonisation of Botany Bay in New South Wales as a penal colony. Both Lord Sydney and Richard Pepper Arden (now Attorney General) were contributors to the policy. Richard Pepper Arden recommended John Orme to be transported for life.

The expedition, later called the First Fleet, sailed from Portsmouth on route to Botany Bay on 13th May 1787. John Orme did not sail with them as expected and previous authors have not been able to explain this^(5, 6). However an additional document has been found in the National Archives dated 14th March 1787 giving Orme a Royal Pardon at the next opportunity of the Chester Court (Figure 6).

The fleet landed at Botany Bay on 26th January 1788, then moved a few miles up the coast to find a more suitable harbour. Their landing place was renamed Sydney Cove in honour of Lord Sydney.

John Orme remained imprisoned in Chester Gaol for another two years, becoming a model prisoner; teaching his fellow prisoners to read and write. Impressed by his good works, Richard Pepper Arden and the Lord Chief Justice of Chester Edward Bearcroft recommended a free pardon for Orme on 5th May 1789.

It appears that Arden managed to keep Orme imprisoned for an extra two years after the Royal Pardon!

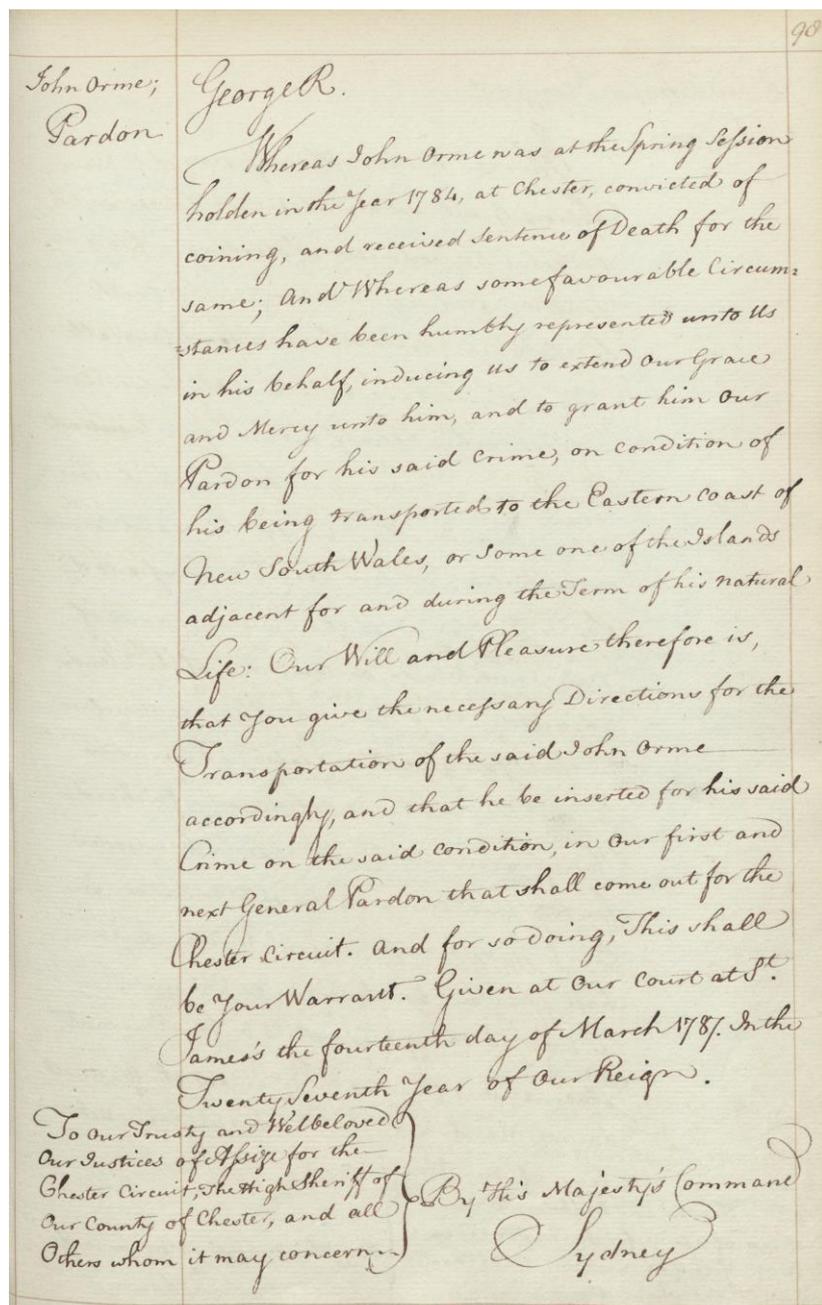


Fig. 6. John Orme’s Pardon of 14th March 1787⁽¹⁰⁾.

Thus John Orme twice escaped the gallows and missed the first convict transportation fleet to Australia. He endured 5 years imprisonment, and after release returned to Rainow to support his family and lived for another 16 years until his death in 1805.

Orme's story must have been fairly well known during his lifetime. When his death was announced in the Chester papers in August 1805⁽¹¹⁾ it was stated that his story would be published the following week⁽¹²⁾. The story was repeated in the London and other weekly journals around the Country and forms the basis of Watts' 1825 note and all subsequent derivations.

Having read the surviving records there remain some unanswered questions. At no point in the contemporary statements do we learn the first name of Mr Oddie. Accepted this was a time when professionals could be simply titled, but renting a room to teach, with pupils visiting and teaching class for three years, without once picking up a first name is very suspicious indeed.

Orme knew the possession of counterfeit coin was a serious offence, he could have just disposed of the evidence, need not have put the coins in his pocket and then try to put them in his mouth. Leaving the box of coining equipment in his house suggests that he may not be completely innocent or at best very naïve. If others not living in the house had previously suspected Oddie of coining, was John Orme totally unaware of this? Without any other details of Mr Oddie, no progress can be made on that line of enquiry.

Notes and References

- (1) J. Watts. *Judicial case of John Orme*. In; Remarkable events in the history of man; or Narratives of the most wonderful adventures, remarkable trials, judicial murders, prison escapes, heroic actions, and astonishing occurrences which have taken place in ancient or modern times. 1825, pp282-283.
- (2) Anon. *John Orme*. Dublin University Magazine, a literary and political journal. Vol LXXV, Jan-Jun 1870 pp96-97.
- (3) F. Leslie. *John Orme's Case*. Pleasant Hours, v25, 1879, pp231-232, including a slightly different engraving.
- (4) Anon. *John Orme's case*, The American Magazine, v15 1883 pp688-689, including the engraving that started this.
- (5) R. Murray and J. Kennelly. *John Orme and the good old days in Rainow; when you could swing for a tin shilling*. The Raven, the Quarterly Magazine for the Whole of Rainow. n30 Spring 2015, pp16-17.
- (6) R. Murray and J. Kennelly. *The conclusion of the story of John Orme*. The Raven, the Quarterly Magazine for the Whole of Rainow. n31 Summer 2015, pp12-13.
- (7) HO13: Home Office: correspondence and warrants. Chester Assises. Judges' Reports On Criminals 1784-1830 – Correspondence and Warrants. 1784-1785. © The National Archives.
- (8) G. Oddie. *Author nearly falls off chair – that was a surprise*. 5th October 2020.
- (9) Derby Mercury, Thursday 13th May 1784, p4, col 1. © British Library and British Newspaper Archive.
- (10) The National Archives. TNA_CCC_HO13_005_00103. © The National Archives.
- (11) Chester Chronicle Friday 30th August 1805, p5 col 5.
- (12) Chester Chronicle Friday 6th September 1805, p3 col 5.

