

WAVERLEY COUNCIL

NOSEY BOB: GENTLEMAN HANGMAN

A Waverley Library
Local History Fact Sheet



Nosey Bob, illustration from
Truth, 26 April 1903, p. 3.

One of Bondi's most infamous residents in the late 19th century was Robert Howard, better known as 'Nosey Bob'. Born in Norwich, England in 1832, he migrated to Australia in 1861. He was a handsome, tall, blue-eyed young man, who worked for many years as a successful cabman in Sydney. He owned his own hansom and built a profitable clientele among the wealthy residents of Darling Point.

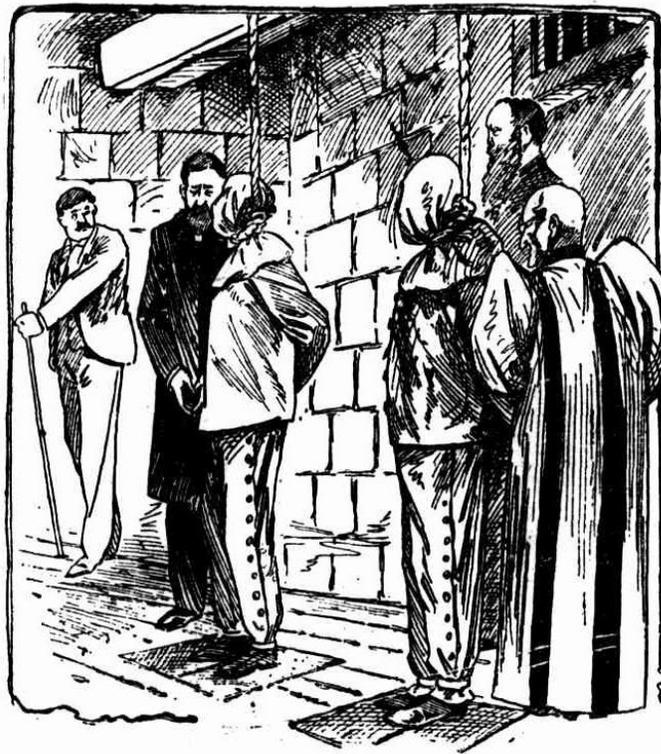
The reasons for Howard's nickname are unclear. Even during his own lifetime, rumours abounded including that it was lost to cancer, or that somebody bit it off. The most common story that is told is that one of his horses kicked Howard in the face, completely smashing his nose and disfiguring him for life.

In Rachel Franks book '*An Uncommon Hangman*', the theory of saddle nose which develops from syphilis is also suggested as the cause of Howard's unfortunate disfigurement. Regardless of cause, the course of his life changed once he acquired the nickname of 'Nosey Bob'. The society ladies who had previously hired Howard's cab began avoiding him and business fell a way so drastically that he had to sell out and look for another job.

His disfigurement caused people to shun him and job offers were not forthcoming. Unemployed, Howard finally accepted the unwanted post of the State's first salaried hangman. His wages were £150 annually, although previously the hangman had

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"Nosey Bob."

"Nosey Bob," the New South Wales hangman, composed a speech 24 years ago when he entered the Sheriff's service, and has fired it off at each subject since without variation or cadence. Walking in to pinion the victim he stands an instant erect, and looking straight into the unfortunate's eyes draws, "My poor man (or woman) no one regrets this more than I do." Then he proceeds with his job "in a workmanlike manner."

Images from top:

Nosey Bob and the hanging of the Bridge St Burglars, illustration from Bird O'Freedom, 2 June 1894, p.4.

Nosey Bob's speech to the condemned, Molong Argus, 3 February 1899, p. 8.

been paid a fee for each execution.

In his new career Howard carried out 66 executions at Darlinghurst Gaol, even acting as 'guest' hangman in other states and in New Zealand. As NSW State hangman Howard also hanged seven men at Old Dubbo Gaol. Their stories are included in the Hangman's Room at the Gaol, which also houses a holographic display telling the story of Robert Howard.

Socially, he was a very caring individual and was said to assist any deserving case, including discharged prisoners or the families of those imprisoned or executed. This earned him another nickname, "the Gentleman Hangman". He used to boast that every one of his executions over a 29 year career was carried out with utmost dispatch and decorum, without the least brutality or pain to the subject.

However, it was widely believed that in fact he often bungled an execution, strangling the victim in a badly tied noose. The

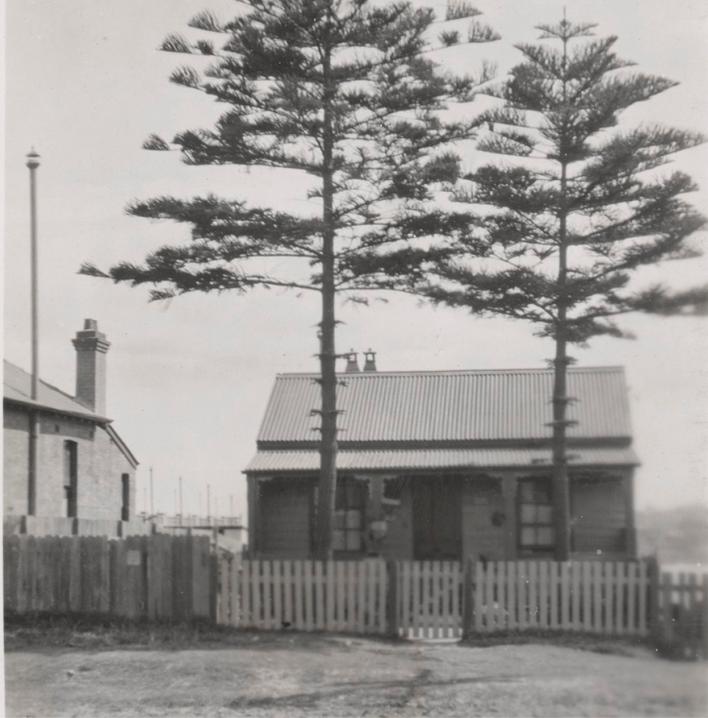
matter was taken up by Truth, a contemporary publication, which ran a series on Howard's botched executions.

One particular incident was the hanging of four youths at Darlinghurst Gaol on the morning of January 7, 1877. They had been sentenced to death for their part in the gang rape of a 16 year old girl at Mt Rennie. Howard miscalculated the drop necessary to hang the prisoners, and while one died instantly, the others struggled for several minutes. Certified at the coroner's inquest by the medical officers who attended the execution, it was a horrible end to a grim episode in the history of law and order in New South Wales.

Despite his professional success, Nosey Bob was not a happy man. He suffered acutely from the bitter abuse and loathing invariably meted out to executioners by the public. When he was first appointed, Howard tried to augment his hangman's salary by working on the side in the household of the NSW Sheriff, William Cowper. He soon relinquished

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Nosey Bob's cottage at Ben Buckler. 103 Brighton Boulevards, North Bondi. Image courtesy of the State Library of Victoria.

the job after a dinner party given by Mrs Cowper was ruined when guests learned that the cutlery they were using had been polished by the same fingers that adjusted the noose around local murderers' throats.

Howard liked his glass of beer, but as the public hangman he rarely had the courage to enter a hotel bar. When he did so the publican on his departure ceremoniously smashed any glasses that he had used.

"It would do my business no good if I gave men glasses into which Nosey Bob had dipped his nose- if he had one," a hotel keeper once explained. When he called at a hotel in Taylor Square the publican set aside a special glass for him.

Howard lived in one of the first tiny timber cottages built at Bondi Beach on Ben Buckler Point. He had a horse which he trained to walk by itself around the beach to Dunlop's Cliff Hotel House on the site of the present Astra Hotel.

When the horse arrived the publican collected the sealed pannikin strapped to the saddle. This was filled with beer and sent back to Nosey Bob the same way it came. The horse trotted over to the hotel, but on the way back he walked sedately being mindful of the beer.

Of his home life very little is known, but he did spend his spare time gardening, and raising pigs. Even his pigs had to be sold cheaper than the going rate because of his social stigma.

Another of his hobbies was shark-hunting. He would set bait, and when the shark was hooked, he would wade in, grab it by the tail, fasten a rope to his old horse, and drag it out of the water. Bob had a large collection of shark jaws around his property, and at least one MP took a sample of Bob's sharks to England.

Only a year or two after he accepted the hangman's post, he lost his wife, Jane, who was

NOBLE "NOSEY" BOB.

Noble Nosey Bob, the hangman,
He deserves a testimonial ;
He deserves it, seeing he has
Worked off many an old Colonial.

All men now get testimonials—
Preachers, teachers, jumpers, lumpers,
Red-nosed saints and paunchy parsons,
Gospel-sharps, and Bible-thumpers.

Why should we exclude the hangman ?
Why in thunder should you squirm, sirs ?
Time may come when you'll wish you had
Been with him on friendly terms, sirs.

Let him have a testimonial,
Let it take the form of— hum, boys—
Say a clock shaped like a gallows,
With a small corpse-pendulum, boys.

Noble Nosey Bob, the hangman,
Swellest of our swells is he, boys,
For he always stands a top of
Their grim common fam'ly-



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An Ode to Nosey Bob, The
Bulletin, Vol. 1, No. 12, 25
August, 1883, p. 10.

said to have died of a broken heart at the taunts and insults her husband was forced to endure. Similarly, his three beautiful daughters were condemned to lives of lonely spinsterhood because, as the story goes, no suitor was willing to suffer the ignominy of having a hangman as father-in-law.

Nosey Bob Howard retired on a pension in May 1904. By this time houses were springing up everywhere on what had once been called O'Brien's Bush.

He died two years later on February 3, 1906 and is buried in Waverley Cemetery, Grave 82/83, Church of England Ordinary, Section 2, with his wife Jane.

In a contemporary publication, Truth, the following poem appeared after Nosey Bob's death:

"The Angel of Death spread his wings on the blast,
And breathed on the face of the foe as he pass'd;
Then the eyes of the sleeper closed up on his "nob,"
And out went the Light of "Nosey Bob!"