Hands On Learning
with Reading Museum Service

LAW & ORDER H133



In the eighteenth century Britain underwent huge changes. Large numbers of people moved into the cities and endured poor living conditions. Theft and violence increased but there was no organised group to prevent it.

Individuals were responsible for finding criminals before the introduction of a police force. Victims and witnesses shouted 'stop thief!' or 'murder!' to get the attention of passers-by. They would help them chase the criminal.

In the eighteenth century people began to pay men called thief-takers to hunt suspects for them. Victims offered rewards for the recovery of stolen goods. The thief-taker would negotiate with the criminal for the return of property. The criminal handed over the swag and paid the thief-taker to stay free. Their great knowledge of the criminal world regularly saw them appearing in court to help prosecute criminals. The financial rewards from this could be huge. Thief-takers, however, began to acquire a bad reputation. Some blackmailed criminals with threats to prosecute them for false offences if they did not give them money.



Above: A Bow Street Runner.

In the 1730s the Bow Street Runners were set up in London. They were really a group of thief-takers working together from an office. Victims now had a building to report their crime to, a bit like a police station. Thief-takers could collect and share their knowledge there. The central office improved the reputation of the now supervised thief-taker.



In 1829 the Metropolitan Police was formed by an act of Parliament brought in by the Home Secretary, Robert Peel. The nickname given to police, 'bobbies', was taken from Robert Peel's name. This was the first official British police force. They patrolled the streets of London seeking to prevent crimes before they had been committed. They were particularly effective at stopping minor offences such as drunkenness and street fighting. It was not until 1842 that a detective force was set up within the Metropolitan Police specifically to solve crimes. The gradual success led other towns and cities to form police forces. In 1836 Reading Borough introduced its very own police force. They had 30 officers to patrol the whole town.

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Truncheon



Truncheon comes from the French word *tronchon* meaning a short club or cudgel. Originally, the British police truncheon was ceremonial and a sign of authority. They were designed with the Royal Family's coat of arms and the reigning monarch's initials inscribed.



In about 1880 the police started to issue warrant cards to its officers. These acted as a proof of identity so that decorating the truncheon was no longer required. After that most were coloured black except for ceremonial occasions. One such truncheon is pictured on the right. It was presented to Reading Borough Police in recognition of their policing of the General Strike in 1926.



Above: A 'Bobby' and his decorated truncheon.

The police use truncheons to defend themselves against criminals. Feel how solid it is. It has been made from wood. If you hit a criminal with the truncheon it would be very sore!



Most truncheons are between 45 and 91 centimetres long. The biggest ones have been used by police on horse back. It gives them a longer reach. The officers usually took smaller truncheons on patrol. This particular truncheon is 61 centimetres and might have been used for riot control. Its size alone acts as a deterrent.

The leather strap gives the police a better grip. They put their hand through the strap before holding the truncheon. This prevents the baton being pulled out of the hand by a criminal.

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Handcuffs

Handcuffs are used to restrain criminals. They are put on the wrists to stop them struggling with the police officer.

The two handcuffs in the box were made at the beginning of the nineteenth century. The larger cuff has the name Griffin marked below the lock. Griffin was a firm from Birmingham that made restraints until 1818. We know the handcuffs are from before this date because after 1818 Thomas Griffin formed a partnership and became known as Griffin & Nichols.



Both handcuffs have numbers marked on them. The larger one has the number 4 and the smaller one a 6. The numbers are a bit of a mystery. We don't know what they stand for. These could be marks to easily show the different sizes of the cuffs. A bit like shoe sizes. Or could just be a company marking that has no meaning outside the business.

Have you ever handcuffed a friend when playing cops and robbers? They were probably adjustable like the pair in the picture below. This way they fit different size wrists. The handcuffs in the box can't do that. People with big wrists were left with huge bruises and marks but suspects with thinner wrists could sometimes slip the cuffs off and escape. Policemen had to carry different sizes to try and fit them on. The cuffs are also quite weighty and were sometimes used to hit the officer over the head with.



Handcuffs were not only used to restrain criminals. Handcuffs and leg irons were used on slaves being transported. It was not until 1807 that Britain banned the trading of slaves but it continued in other countries. Slaves were chained in the hold of the ship with their hands cuffed. Slave traders crammed as many bodies into the hold of the ship as possible to make more money. There was little room to move and the conditions were unhygienic. Disease would spread through the ship and many people died on the journey.



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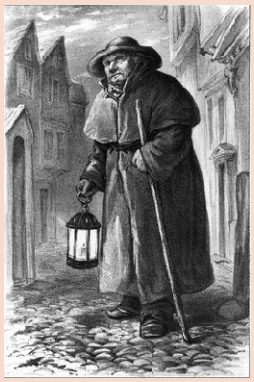
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Watchman's rattle

Thief-takers were not the only people to try and keep law and order in the eighteenth century. Watchmen patrolled the streets and were responsible for maintaining the peace. The rattle was used to raise the alarm in the event of an emergency.



Holding the handle and twirling it above the head makes the star shaped cogs go round and produces a loud 'clack-a-clack' noise as they pass by the wooden strips.



Above: A watchman with his lantern, patrolling the streets.

The rattles stayed in use when the police force was introduced. Then they were withdrawn in 1887 and replaced with a whistle. Despite being very loud they were also cumbersome. Imagine trying to carry the rattle in your pocket. When they got soaked the rattle could rot or warp and become useless. Criminals would also try to take the rattle from the watchman or policeman and attack him with it.



Above: An eighteenth century highwayman.

In Reading the watchmen patrolled the streets with their rattle and a lantern. Their job was to call out the weather conditions and kept the town clear of trouble. They did not have a great reputation. It is said that they only patrolled areas where they knew there would be no sign of trouble.

Key

The key opens the smaller handcuffs. It has a number 6 etched on to it that matches the 6 on the cuffs. Can you see the unusual teeth on the key? This made the cuffs harder to unlock if a criminal escaped.



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Each set of cuffs had its own key to open them. This key can't open the larger pair. Many countries now use a special type of key that allows them to open all handcuffs. An example is shown on the left.

Most keys you will have used take one turn to lock or unlock but this has to be forced deep into the lock and then turned a number of times to release the catch. It is like winding a clock. This was a problem for the older key. It takes a long time to lock and unlock the cuffs. Imagine trying to do this when dealing with a struggling criminal.