

# Hands On Learning

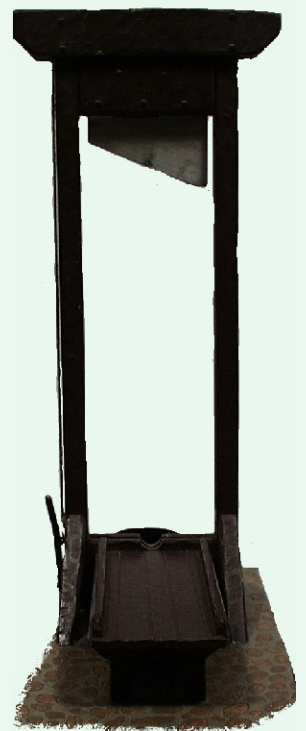
## *with Reading Museum Service*

### GUILLOTINE

H296

The guillotine was neither invented in France nor by Dr Joseph-Ignace Guillotin, as is often supposed. One of the earliest references is to the Halifax Gibbet in Yorkshire, which was used from at least the thirteenth century up to 1650. This 'gibbet' was, in fact, a guillotine - a modern reproduction of this contraption has been made and is proudly on display at the original site (below left).

The Halifax Gibbet was used mainly to execute thieves. Until the nineteenth century most crime was punished by physical pain and humiliation (being held in the stocks, for example) or death. Prisons were usually used to hold suspected criminals before trial, but not as a punishment in itself. The practice of transporting thieves to Australia in the late eighteenth century was thought of as a humane alternative to the death penalty. The only exception to this rule was the treatment of debtors, who were held in debtors gaols until they could pay off their debt. In practice, this meant debtors were often held for years, with little hope of release.



In England persons who stole often quite insignificant amounts of property or money could expect to be executed. For example, the 1699 Shoplifting Act defined shoplifting to the value of 5 shillings (25 pence) as a crime punishable by death. The usual method of doing this was by hanging, but the Halifax gibbet shows that this was not always the case. Aristocrats who were found guilty of treason usually had their head chopped off using an axe.

In Halifax execution took place at the Saturday market. While waiting for execution prisoners were taken out each day to be exposed in the stocks. Often examples of stolen goods would be displayed - stolen cloth might be draped around the thief's shoulders, or stolen animals tethered round about. The last recorded victims were two men found guilty of stealing sixteen yards of russet-coloured cloth on 19 April 1650.

One tale concerning the Halifax gibbet tells of the severed head of one victim that bounced off the ground and grabbed hold of a watching woman's apron!

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H296



Another famous guillotine-like machine was the Scottish Maiden, which was used in Edinburgh from 1564 to 1708. In this case the actual machine still exists and is on display in the National Museum of Scotland (left). During its period of use, over 150 people were executed on it. Notable victims included Archibald Campbell, 1st Marquess of Argyll, executed following the Restoration of Charles II, and his son Archibald Campbell, 9th Earl of Argyll, executed for leading a rebellion against James II. As well as these prominent figures, the Scottish Maiden was used to dispatch the same array of common-or-garden thieves and murderers as the gibbet at Halifax.

Outside the British Isles, there are accounts of similar devices in Italy and Switzerland dating back to the fifteenth century. In Germany a guillotine known as the Fallbeil (falling axe) was used in various states in the seventeenth century. However, it was in eighteenth century France that the guillotine received its common name and notoriety.

The French Revolution began in 1789. In that year, during a debate on capital punishment in the National Assembly, Dr Joseph-Ignace Guillotin (right) proposed that all criminals, regardless of their class, should be decapitated by 'a machine that beheads painlessly'.



In 1792, a German harpsichord maker called Tobias Schmidt was paid to make the first machine. It was tried out on sheep and calves. Later corpses from the hospital were used.

At some point it was discovered that a straight blade, such as that on the Halifax Gibbet, tended to crush rather than sever the neck. Further experiments showed that an angled blade solved this particular problem. On the 25 April 1792 the first criminal was executed, an armed robber called Nicolas-Jacques Pelletier. It was to continue in use in France for the next 189 years, until the death penalty was abolished there in 1981.

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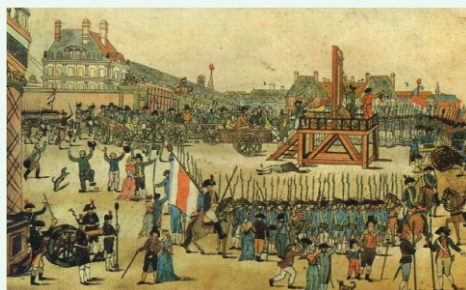
H296



Although the guillotine was at first unpopular with spectators, it soon became familiar. King Louis XVI was executed on the guillotine in January 1793 (left) and Queen Marie Antoinette in October of the same year (right). In September of 1793 the period of *la Terreur* (The Reign of Terror) began in which



struggles between rival revolutionary factions led to violence and mass executions of 'enemies of the revolution'. Approximately 40,000 people were killed throughout France during this 15 month period.



The sight of cart-loads of victims trundling through the streets of Paris on the way to their deaths became a daily occurrence. The killing was only stemmed when Robespierre, a prominent instigator of the executions, was himself beheaded on the guillotine in July 1794 (left). Contrary to popular belief, Dr Guillotine himself did not die on the 'humane'

machine which he had helped to design - he lived on until well after the Revolutionary period, dying of natural causes in 1814. His relatives, though, are said to have been so disturbed by the association of their family with this method of execution that they changed their name.

Outside France the guillotine became a symbol of remorseless revolutionary violence. Its distinctive shape was immediately recognisable and it was used on countless propaganda pamphlets. The illustration on the right was made in 1819 by the British political satirist George Cruikshank. Two grotesque revolutionaries are shown drunkenly dancing around a guillotine. Blood drips from axes. The world is aflame. The red-white-and-blue banner has the words 'No God! No Religion! No King! No Constitution!' written across it.



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H296

The guillotine continued in use long after the French Revolution had burned itself out. It was also adopted in other countries. During the Second World War it was used by Adolf Hitler to kill about 10,000 opponents. The Austrian peasant Franz Jägerstätter, who refused to fight in the German army, was executed in this way in 1943. In 2007 the Roman Catholic Church declared Jägerstätter a saint.

### Coins

All the coins in this box are associated in some way with the French Revolutionary period.

The silver coin (marked C) dates from 1780 and is of a design typical of the pre-Revolutionary period. The text on it is in Latin (*Sit Nomen Domini Benedictum* - Blessed be the name of the Lord). It has the head of Louis XVI on one side and the arms of France on the other.



The other silver coin (marked A) dates from 1789, the year the National Assembly came to power after the storming of the Bastille. It is badly worn. The king's head can still be made out. However, the text is now in French - Louis is referred to as 'Roi' (king). The other side of the coin has changed more dramatically and contains symbols suggestive of a republic. The blurred oblong shape in the centre is in fact a fasces - the bundle of rods surrounding an axe which was carried in front of Roman magistrates to symbolise their authority.



On top of the fasces is a Phrygian cap. These caps were supposedly worn in the classical world by slaves who had been freed. Because of this, in the eighteenth century, they became symbols of liberty and were sometimes referred to as Liberty Caps. Many supporters of the French revolution actually took to wearing



them (left and right) and the symbol spread around the world.

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H296



Many North and South American countries that were founded as a consequence of revolutionary ideas include the cap in their insignia (Bolivia, Nicaragua and Argentina, for example). It can be found, perhaps surprisingly, on the arms of the Senate of the United



States of America (left). The fasces is also found on some dime coins in the USA, much as it was on this French revolutionary coin (above right).

The two brass coins (B and D) feature the head of liberty wearing a Phrygian cap.

The remaining two coins are British. For many centuries tokens were often issued by private individuals or companies to augment the state's coinage. Tokens were also issued as a form of political propaganda. These two coins belong to this latter category. Coin E celebrates the victory of Earl Howe's fleet over that of the French in the Atlantic on 1 June 1794. The battle is sometimes referred to as the Third Battle of Ushant. The French side claimed that the battle was indecisive, but the battle established British naval superiority in the north Atlantic.



Coin F, dated 1795, was produced by the London Corresponding Society, a group which was sympathetic to the ideals of the French Revolution. They wanted to reform the British political system and in the year this coin was issued around 100,000 people attended a demonstration they organised near Copenhagen House in London (left). At the same time King George III's carriage was stoned as he went to open parliament. The government was alarmed by their activities

and prominent members were arrested. At the end of 1795 the Seditious Meetings Act restricted demonstrations to no more than fifty persons. By the end of the century the LCS had been crushed.