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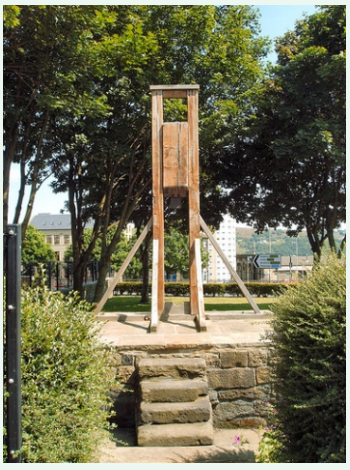
GUILLOTINE H296/A

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

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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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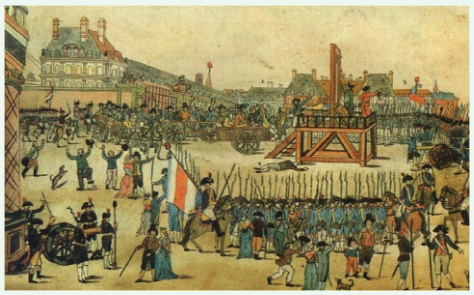
Although the guillotine was at first unpopular with spectators, it soon became familiar. King Louis XVI was executed on the guillotine in January 1793 (left) and Queen Marie Antoinette in October of the same year (right). In September of 1793 the period of *la Terreur* (The Reign of Terror) began in 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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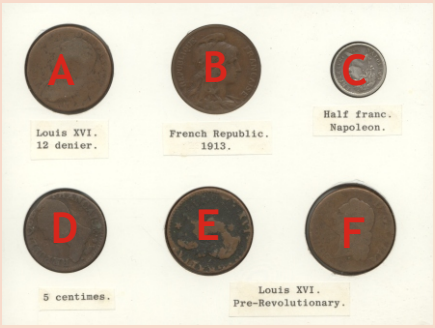
The guillotine continued in use long after the French Revolution had burned itself out. It was also adopted in other countries. During the Second World War it was used by Adolf Hitler to kill about 10,000 opponents. The Austrian peasant Franz Jägerstätter, who refused to fight in the German army, was 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.



Coins E and F are from before the French Revolution. Both are very worn and their exact date is unclear. They both show the head of King Louis XVI and have inscriptions in Latin.

Coin A had a value of 12 deniers. Twelve deniers equaled one sou and twenty sous equalled one livre. It was the equivalent of an old British penny. The symbol for the old British penny was 'd', as the coinage system was modelled on that of France.



The coin dates from the early 1790s and mixes symbols of the both the monarchy and the republic. It is badly worn. The king's head can still be made out. However, the text is now in French. The other side of the coin has changed more dramatically. 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 & right) and the symbol spread around the world.

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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 are also found on some dime coins in the USA, much as it was on this French revolutionary coin (right).

The 5 centime piece (D) was produced after the abolition of the monarchy. All royal symbols and titles have disappeared and an entirely new system of money has come in to operation (as had a new system of weights and measures). The new Franc was instituted in 1795. In the new system 1 franc = 10 decimes = 100 centimes.

The new republic also declared that the old calendar must also go and from the day of the declaration of the republic on 22 September 1792 (Day 1 Year 1), the year was divided into decades (periods of ten days), of which one was a holiday. A coin which bears the date 5, for example, must have been minted between 22 September 1796 and September 1797. This coin appears to have been minted in year 6 of the republic. Instead of the head of the king it carries an image of Liberty dressed in a Phrygian cap.

The half franc of Napoleon (C) dates from 1808. Napoleon was born in Corsica and trained in mainland France as an artillery officer. He first rose to prominence as a general of the French Revolutionary Army, leading several successful campaigns against the enemy armies ranged against the republic (including that of Britain). In late 1799, Napoleon staged a coup d'état and installed himself as First Consul. Five years later he became the Emperor of the French. Although an unelected dictator, Napoleon continued referring to France as the French Republic and to use its symbolism, although he reverted to the common European dating system.

The 1913 ten cent piece (B) dates from over one hundred years later, but still shows the bust of Liberty wearing a Phrygian cap and carries the motto of the French republic 'Liberte, Egalite, Fraternite'.