

What was Victorian crime and punishment like?

Objectives

- To find out about typical crimes and punishments in the Victorian period
- To compare Victorian punishments to the modern day justice system.



Crime and Punishment

Think about what happens to people when they break the law in today's society. Answer these questions with your partner:

How many modern day punishments for people who break the law can you think of? Make a list.

Now number your list in order of most severe punishment to least severe punishment.



Crime and Punishment

What do you think today's society would be like if we did not have these things?





Here is an illustration from *Oliver Twist*, a story by the Victorian writer Charles Dickens.

What kind of crime are the boys committing? How do you think they will be punished if caught?

Victorian Crimes

People in Victorian times were concerned about how much crime there was and wanted to find ways to reduce it.

Theft was very common. In busy towns where there were overcrowded streets, **pickpockets** took the opportunity to steal money and small goods from people's pockets or bags. Many of these pickpockets were children.

After lots of factories had been built in cities, groups of criminals would sometimes **steal factory goods that were being stored in warehouses.** Criminals would also break into houses to steal valuable items.

Sometimes people would also commit crimes by **destroying property or damaging railway equipment.**

The most serious crimes usually **involved violence, poisoning or murder.**



A New Police Force

Although there were various groups of people whose role it was to catch criminals, at the start of the Victorian period there was **no official police force in England**. People became worried that crime was getting worse as cities began to grow.

In **1829**, a politician called **Sir Robert Peel** introduced the first English police force in order to improve public law in London. Over the next ten years, many **other areas of the country also formed their own police force**.

The police men **carried truncheons as weapons and noisy rattles to raise alarm**. At first, many people did not trust the new police and thought that they were a way of enforcing unpopular ideas for the government. However, **over time the new police force were successful in detecting and reducing crime**.

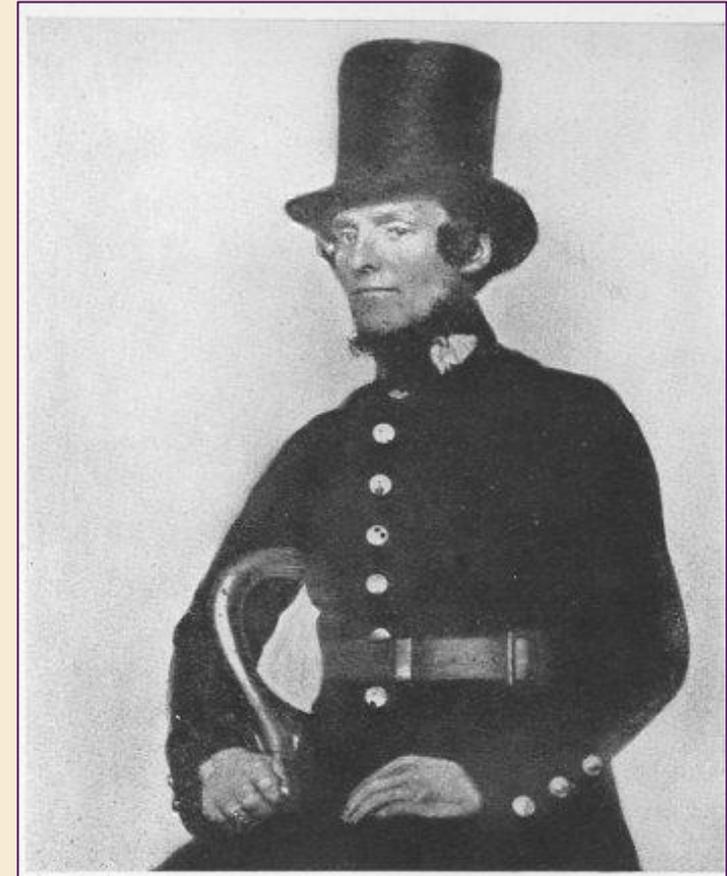


Image: Public Domain

The new police men were often called 'bobbies' or 'peelers'.
Can you work out why?





The object pictured above is called a crank. Prisoners had to turn the handle round and round, thousands of times a day as a form of hard labour, even though nothing happened when it turned! [Find out more in this video \(start at 3;45 minutes in\)](#)

Victorian Punishment

The penalty for the most serious crimes would **be death by hanging**, sometimes in public. However, during the Victorian period this became a less popular form of punishment, especially for smaller crimes, and more people were **transported abroad** (sometimes all the way to Australia!) or **sent to prison** instead.

Over the Victorian period, more prisons were built and there were rules about the treatment of prisoners. **Life in prison was hard** and prisoners were expected to carry out difficult physical work.

At the beginning of the Victorian period, children could be sent to adult prison. However, in 1854, special youth prisons were introduced to deal with child offenders, called **'Reformatory Schools'**.

Other forms of punishment included **finances, public whipping, hard physical labour or being sent to join the army**.



Crimebusters!

You are now a judge in a Victorian court of law!

Case G

Name: Frank and Rose Morris
Age: 52
Crime: Forgery
Details: Frank and Rose are a husband and wife who were caught producing fake documents and selling them to local criminals. The couple produced fake death certificates and will, which were later used to fraudulently claim inheritance at the Bank of England. A supply of fake money was also discovered in their home.

Case C

Name: Walter Evans
Age: 34
Crime: Murder
Details: Walter was caught shortly after the death of his father-in-law, a cooper, who had been ill. Walter was found nearby with a bottle in his pocket containing a poisonous liquid known as 'chinese', the very same used in the death of James.

Case H

Name: Henry Green
Age: 25
Crime: Attempted Burglary
Details: Henry entered a stranger's house in the night through an unlocked window. He attempted to take a box of valuable jewellery and a silver candlestick. The house owner caught Henry on his way out and alerted the police. Henry says that he was forced to commit the crime by an older gang leader, but he is unwilling to provide give names or details of the gang.

Case A

Name: Mary Phillips
Age: 19
Crime: Theft of a coat
Details: The stolen coat was found with Mary's possessions in the servant's quarters. The valuable coat belonged to Mary's mistress Mrs H. Robson. And was noted missing on Saturday morning and discovered with Mary's belongs on Sunday afternoon. Mary was discharged immediately.

With your group, you are in charge of deciding which punishments should fit each of the crimes on your Crimebusters cards.



Spot Check



How were Victorian punishments different to the kind of punishments people are given for crimes today?

Explain the answer to your partner.



Agree / Disagree?

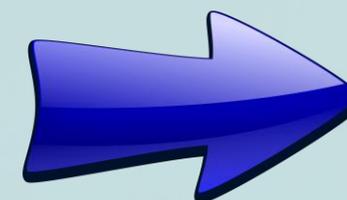
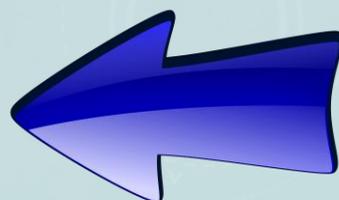
Roll a dice and read the statement that corresponds with the number you land on.



Move to the left or right of the room to show how much you agree or disagree with each statement.

1	2	3	4	5	6
Children who commit crimes should go to adult prison.	People who commit serious crimes should be transported to other countries.	Prisoners should be forced to work for their food and drink.	Instead of prison, adult criminals should be sent to schools to learn to be good citizens.	Nobody should ever be sentenced to death, however bad their crime.	We should have no police force and let people find their own way to deal with crime.

agree



disagree

