

Phoenix Educational Initiatives
Social Studies Topic
'Cops and Robbers'

Background Notes : Unit 3

Crime in Industrial Britain 1750-1900

19th Century Prison Conditions

By the 19th century the number of crimes punishable by death was 200, this included serious crime such as murder and treason but all less serious ones like pick pocketing, stealing bread and chopping down a tree. These crimes were usually committed by people in the most desperate need. Throughout the 19th century the number of crimes punishable by death was reduced. Some criminals were forced to sign up to serve in the armed forces, while other were transported to America or Australia. The journey took up to six months and conditions on the ship were horrendous, which meant that many criminals died en route. The remaining criminals were sent to prison for crimes they committed. They were either sent to prison hulks, penitentiaries, or gaol (jail). Prison hulks were boats often moored on the Thames where prisoners were held when there was no space left in jail. Here conditions were very harsh. Many prisoners died from cholera due to the overcrowded conditions and drinking polluted water from the Thames.

During the 19th century prisons were overcrowded and filthy. Prisoners had little or no fresh drinking water and were expected to provide their own food. Prisoners had to pay the jailer for everything even when they were punished. Those who had no money had to beg from local people passing the prison. Sometimes a prisoner could be released early so long as they behaved well and were not in debt.

In the House of Correction in Bedford, prisoners were made to wear suits with arrows on them so they could be easily spotted if they escaped. Bedford was a silent prison where inmates were allowed to work together so long as they never spoke. If they did, they would

Phoenix Educational Initiatives
Social Studies Topic
'Cops and Robbers'

be whipped and beaten. Bedford had been built for 40 inmates but by 1816 it held 101 and prisoners often had to share beds.

By the latter part of the 19th century family visits were limited to twice a year because they no longer had to bring food for the prisoners because the authorities provided food. It was thought that prisoners should stay away from the bad influence of their families. Instead they spent time with the prison pastor who tried to make them sorry for the sins they had committed. Prisoners were made to do hard labour because this was the most popular form of punishment. Shot drill was one punishment where a prisoner had to pick up a heavy iron cannon ball carry it at chest height for a distance then carry it back. Sometimes prisoners were made to climb the tread wheel which was used to grind flour. This was thought to give the prisoners a purpose. In jail, prisoners had to survive on a diet of gruel, potatoes and bread, with no fresh meat or vegetables.

Elizabeth Fry

Elizabeth Fry was a prison reformer during the 19th century. She was married to Joseph Fry, whose uncle started the famous Fry's chocolate company. At the age of 18 she started collecting old clothes for the poor and began a Sunday school in her neighbourhood to teach children of poor families how to read. In 1812 Fry visited Newgate Prison in London and was horrified to see the conditions women and children were being kept in. Some of them had not received a trial and they were made to live, wash and cook in their own very small cells.

In 1816 Fry worked to introduce compulsory sewing and bible reading for the women and classes for children. Fry and her brother, Joseph John Gurney, worked to abolish capital

Phoenix Educational Initiatives
Social Studies Topic
'Cops and Robbers'

punishment, motivated by the fact that there were 200 crimes for which people could be executed. They persuaded Prime Minister Sir Robert Peel to introduce the Gaols Act of 1823 which was a start to prison reform.

Since 2002 Elizabeth Fry has been depicted on Bank of England £5 notes where she is shown reading to prisoners at Newgate Prison.

The Onion Thief

This is the true story about a man named John Walker, an agricultural labourer from Beeston. Walker had been employed by a man named Robert Cooper who was a market gardener. Cooper had fired Walker because he was not happy with his work.

On September 13th 1873 Cooper caught Walker stealing onions worth 6 shillings. Walker was arrested and taken to court for a trial. Cooper said he had been sitting in a field when he saw Walker picking up onions that had just been pulled. Cooper said that Walker stole the equivalent of two bushels and then moved the onions in the pile to disguise the theft. Cooper confronted Walker saying that he shouldn't even be in the field; Walker begged his forgiveness, which Cooper refused to grant. Cooper gave the information to the Police who granted him a warrant to arrest Walker. Constable Newton of the local police went to Walker's house where his wife said that he was not there and she had not seen him all day. Constable Newton went into the house to look around and found some onions. He asked Mrs Walker where they had come from and she said her husband had brought them home that morning. Constable Newton recovered one bushel of onions from the house. Walker pleaded guilty and expected the case to go to the petty crimes court but the Judge charged him with grand larceny (a very serious crime).

Phoenix Educational Initiatives
Social Studies Topic
'Cops and Robbers'

By the time of the trial Walker had already been in prison for six months. When the prosecution called Walker to the witness box he was reminded of the thirteen previous crimes he had committed under the alias of Mulls. These included three counts of stealing and three counts of assault. The judge decided that, having heard the evidence against him and the fact that previous time in prison had not dissuaded him from committing crime, he should be sentenced to 7 years in prison.