

3.3 Highwaymen: criminal adventurers or violent thieves?

Learning outcomes

By the end of this topic you should be able to:

- describe the nature of the crime of highway robbery (carried out by 'highwaymen') in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries
- explain the different attitudes towards this crime.

What is a highwayman?

A highwayman is a person who robs travellers on the open road. The term is usually used to describe a criminal who travelled the roads and robbed from horseback. This set them apart from those who carried out their crimes and escaped on foot. These kinds of thieves were usually described as 'foot pads'. The term 'highwayman' first began to be used in the 17th century.

Why did the crime of highway robbery increase?

In Britain, the period of time most associated with highwaymen was the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. They came to prominence in this period due to improvements in road construction, which led to the increased use of stagecoaches and so-called 'post-boys' who carried the mail. These became targets for highwaymen because they might be carrying money or valuable documents.

How were highwaymen regarded at the time?

Evidence from the time reveals mixed feeling towards these highwaymen. Those who were robbed regarded them simply as thieves, a point of view shared by those in authority - who realised that highwaymen disrupted the early postal services and made travel difficult and dangerous. As a result, those caught and found guilty faced the death penalty by hanging.

On the other hand, there is plenty of contemporary evidence to show that a rather romantic image of highwaymen was held by some sections of the population. In these images, highwaymen were presented as daring and brave, polite towards women and causing no violence so long as money was handed over.

Source A: The song of the highwayman, Charles Reilly. (From English Folk-Song and Dance by Frank Kidson, Mary Neal.) The song dates from around 1790.

'Pity the fall of young fellows all;
Ah well a day! Ah well a day'
At seventeen I took a wife;
She was the joy of all my life,
And to maintain her rich and gay [happy],
I went to rob on the King's highway,
Which makes me to lament and say
'Ah well a day! Ah well a day'

Why were there differences in attitudes towards these criminals?

The highwayman's demand of: 'Stand and deliver!' became associated with a kind of Robin Hood figure who only stole from wealthy members of society.

This attitude was also partly inspired by the robbery taking place from horseback. Mounted robbers were regarded as being socially superior to those who robbed on foot. This meant that highwaymen were sometimes presented as more courteous than other thieves.

This representation of highwaymen as 'knights of the road' (when in reality they were simply mounted thieves) was added to by tales of mounted pursuits of such robbers and so the excitement of the chase - and the escape from pursuit - further glamorised the image of the highwayman.

In addition, the fact that highwaymen confronted their victims face-to-face gave them a more positive image than was associated with those thieves who ambushed their victims in alleys or secluded roadsides.

Finally, the fact that some highwaymen were prepared to fight when challenged suggested they were brave men. This would not, however, have been the conclusion of those robbed on the open road under the threat of violence.

Areas prone to highwaymen

Areas of lonely heathland or woodland were particularly vulnerable to the activities of highwaymen. In such places there were few witnesses, so the robbery could occur and the highwayman escape before help could be summoned.

Famous highwaymen

A number of highwaymen attracted considerable attention at the time and are examples of how the crime caught the popular imagination. John Nevison (hanged in 1684) supposedly rode from Kent to York to give himself an alibi for a crime he committed one morning. This ride was later associated by Victorian writers with Dick Turpin (but from London to York on his horse Black Bess), who was executed in 1739 for horse-theft. Captain James MacLaine (hanged in 1750) was described as courteous when robbing. John 'Sixteen String Jack' Rann was nicknamed from the decoration on his silk breeches and joked with the hangman and the crowd at his execution in 1774. His actions reveal how highwaymen played up to their image.

The decline of highwaymen

Highwaymen declined due to a number of changes in society in the early 19th century:

- Turnpike gates (at which travellers had to stop and pay a toll to use a road) made mounted escapes more difficult.
- Banknotes slowly replaced the use of gold and these banknotes were easier to trace if stolen.
- Mounted police patrols in the vicinity of London deterred robbers.
- The coming of the railways reduced the numbers of stagecoaches in use.

- Enclosure of open fields reduced the number of open spaces that highwaymen could use as places in which to carry out their attacks.

Activities

- 1 How did changes in society cause both the increase in highway robbery (highwaymen) as a crime and its eventual decline?
- 2 Why were there different attitudes towards highwaymen? Give examples of how highwaymen sought to encourage a positive image of themselves and why they might have done so.
- 3 Look carefully at the details in Sources A and B. How can you tell that the person who wrote Source A and the artist who painted Source B had favourable attitudes towards highwaymen?
- 4 How do these sources illustrate the difficulties of describing how crime is thought of in a particular period of history?
- 5 Choose a famous highwayman and research them online. You could look to films and stories for inspiration.

Source B: The Chase of the Highwayman, c1790.



Summary

- Increased road transport led to the growth of the crime of highway robbery.
- A romantic image grew up of the 'gallant highwayman'.
- Changes in transport, money and policing in the 19th century caused the crime of highway robbery to decline.