

Crime and Punishment - The Georgians

Fact Sheet

Learn about crimes, laws, trials and punishments in Georgian times, between 1714-1837.

Harsh punishment

The Georgian era was a time of mass unemployment and many people were forced into a life of crime to survive. The Georgians used **capital punishment**, the death penalty, for many offences including minor crimes like stealing. This was known as the **Bloody Code**. Condemned people were executed in public, for everyone to see. Children were not treated any differently to adults and punished in exactly the same ways.

In 1823 Home Secretary Sir Robert Peel finally removed 180 crimes from the list of those punished by execution.

Reading's rowdy revellers

In Georgian times **Highwaymen** often robbed travellers and mail coaches on the **Bath Road** in Reading. Thomas Lympus robbed the mail coach outside Reading in 1738 and was later executed.

Reading's Blagrove Piazza (right), beside Saint Laurence's church, had been a smart arcade but in the 18th century it had become 'a place of theft, drinking and fornication'. So much so that in the 1860s the Victorians finally decided to tear it down.



Crime and punishment

Conditions in Georgian prisons were terrible: children were housed with adults and gaolers were often corrupt. Many inmates fell ill and died. Gaolers demanded a fee from prisoners for their release and many could not afford it. Prisons were assessed by reformers and in 1823 the **Gaols Act** made prisons fairer. **Reading County Gaol** was built in 1796, on the site of Reading Abbey. There were other older prisons in the town, the Birdewell in the Grey Friar's nave for example and another beside Saint Mary's church (left).

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Community watch

Members of the community were responsible for maintaining the peace. In Reading these **watchmen** patrolled the streets with a rattle (right) and a lantern. They called out the weather conditions and prevented trouble, using a **rattle** to raise the alarm in an emergency. However this didn't always work so well for them, as thieves would often steal the rattle to use as a weapon against them. It was a very risky job and some watchmen, in fear of trouble, only patrolled areas where there was no danger and for this reason they didn't have a good reputation.



The beginnings of the Police

Every parish in England had a constable, an unpaid volunteer. They were selected every year from the community. The police truncheon on the left is a Baulster, dated to around 1800. It was probably ceremonial and bears the letter GR to show that the holder was working on the authority of King George. Reading did not have a police force, but people could be hired to fight crime. **Thief-takers** were hired across England to recover property. They weren't always honest and sometimes blackmailed people for their own profit. Jonathan Wild 'Thief - Taker General' was famously executed in London in 1725 for receiving and returning stolen goods, for a fee.

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School punishment

Corporal punishment was practised in Georgian schools: if students misbehaved they were treated like criminals. Students could be **caned** or even **flogged** for misbehaving, being late or simply getting questions wrong in class.

Quakers did not believe in physical punishment, but the disciplinary measures in their schools were still pretty harsh by our standards. Bad behaviours could be punished, for example, by having the child wearing a **wooden log** hang with a chain around his neck; or the child could be forced to wear **shakes** and to walk around the room until exhausted; or legs and hands could be bound together behind the child's back. The final "non-physical" punishment for repeating offences was to be put in a **cage** and suspended from the ceiling.

Reading School's 'Mighty flogger'

Georgian schools were only available for those who could pay for them. The **Reading School** (below) was based in the Town Hall during the Georgian period. **Dr Richard Valpy** (right) was a successful headmaster from 1789-1830. He was known as '**The Mighty flogger**' for his hard-handed teaching and support of corporal punishment. It wasn't always the school children misbehaving, the school shared the building with the town council whose court regularly received noise complaints from the school.



School crime

Many Georgian schools were harsh, corrupt and many did not have enough teachers. Not surprisingly, students were badly disciplined and not very happy. In 1797 boys of the Rugby School took staff prisoner at sword point. In 1818, during Winchester's Great Rebellion, boys armed with axes took the headmaster hostage.

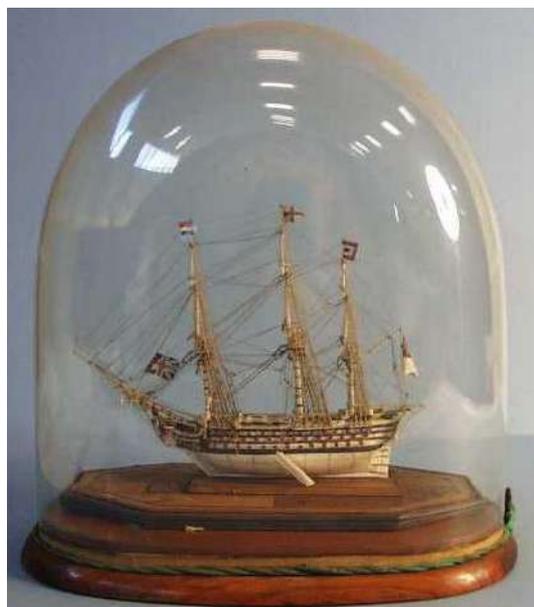


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Prisoners of War

Georgian Reading was home to a type of prisoner who had committed no crime: the **Prisoners of War** (POW). These were men captured during combat in war. Between 1805 and 1812 almost 900 prisoners of war were kept in Reading. They were on **parole**, meaning that they had promised not to run away. They were allowed to work as labourers and craftsmen, and they were free to wander around the town as they pleased but could not go out at night or leave Reading. The prisoners were mainly French, Spanish, Dutch and Danish. The over 600 men from Denmark lived in town lodgings, were highly respected and known as 'the **Gentleman Danes**'. They were released in 1809. Seven prisoners died in Reading: there is a stone plaque to the 26-year-old Laurentes Braag on the Minster Church of St. Mary.



Prison craft

Thanks to the semi-freedom they were granted here in Reading, many POWs were able to learn a craft or make artworks while imprisoned. This model British warship was made from bone by a Georgian POW in Reading. It is probably the one made by Sivert Ryberg and presented to the Mayor in 1809 in the occasion of the release of the prisoners of war. Outside Reading things were very different and many POWs were held in horrible, cramped conditions on **prison hulks** (old warships).

Exporting prisoners

Transportation was a popular punishment in Georgian times. Prisoners were often given the option of execution or being banished to a faraway country for one year, seven years, fourteen years or a lifetime. At the end of their sentence they were given a certificate of freedom, but few could afford to go back home. Hundreds of children, as young as nine years old, were transported too. From 1787 most prisoners were sent to **Australia**. Many had committed petty crimes like stealing. Others were workers who had gone on strike (which was illegal). **Transportees**, even children, wore a one size uniform which was often too big; they were **shackled** (chained together) and locked in prison hulks before they left for the long voyage. It took round eight months to reach Australia. During their sentence some transportees were able to learn a trade, but most of them did unpaid, hard labour and worked as servants. If transportees were rude they were **flogged**.