

Crime and Punishment - The Victorians

Fact Sheet

Learn about crimes, laws, trials and punishments in Victorian times, between 1837-1901.

Victorian Police

The Victorian era, thanks to industrialisation, saw a massive expansion of cities and towns, and with it a rise in disease, poverty and unemployment. In 1836 **Reading Borough police force** (below) was set up on Friar Street, with 30 officers. From 1856 Reading had **inspectors** to investigate serious crimes. In an infamous case of 1896 Reading Detectives arrested **Amelia Dyer**. She was found guilty of multiple murders.



Neighbourhood police

Constables walked a beat around part of the town, making sure there wasn't any trouble. Constables were tall, strong well-built men who could read and write. They didn't have to have moustaches, but they were popular (picture above). In 1887 metal **whistles** replaced rattles, so constables could whistle for help. **Handcuffs** were used from 1829, there were even special small handcuffs for children! From the 1840s **photographs** of people who had committed more than one crime were taken to identify people, these are now known as '**mugshots**'. These were useful to tell us what people looked like and how they were dressed.

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Victorian School

Victorian children often had tough and dirty jobs, like being **Chimney Sweeps**. The Victorians wanted to stop children being forced to work and commit crime. From 1876 **'The Education Act'** made compulsory for children to attend school until they were 12 years old. Schoolrooms were tough places and not everyone wanted to be there. Some children who misbehaved were placed in **'Solitary confinement'**, locked in a room on their own. Tough **reformatory schools** were set up for children who had committed a minor crime, like theft, so that they could get a better life. Boys were taught how to use machines, while girls were taught how to cook and clean. It wasn't a fun life: in reformatory schools children could be hurt, have their hair cut off or their meals reduced if they misbehaved.

Victorian school punishments

All Victorian schools were strict and the punishments were harsh. Students could be **caned** or forced to wear a **dunce hat** for answering questions incorrectly. If they didn't sit straight, a wooden **back board** was pressed into their back. Their fingers could be tied behind their backs in wooden **finger stocks** if they were caught fidgeting.



Prejudice and the Workhouse

Many Victorians thought that criminals were born that way, and treated children they found on the streets as criminals! Children could be sent to **Industrial Schools**, working hard manual jobs and having only a few lessons. Poor people, many of them starving children, were forced to go to the **Workhouse**. Children weren't allowed to see their parents and everyone wore dull uncomfortable uniforms and had to do **hard labour**. Children were even punished for crying or playing games! Some workhouses were worse than prisons. Reading's workhouse was called **The Oracle**. It was opened in an old Stuart craft workhouse and closed in the 1850s.

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Victorian Gaol

Victorian prisons were harsh and many prisoners were already poor and unhealthy when they arrived. Some prisoners were sentenced to **hard labour**, they had to do tough physical work. They were made to turn a **crank**, a heavy metal handle or walk on **treadmills** hundreds of times a day as punishment. Prisoners could be hurt or have their food taken away for misbehaving. Some children were imprisoned with grown-ups: Warder Martin, a prison guard at Reading Gaol, was sacked in 1895 for giving a sick child food. From 1850-1900 a series of Acts, laws in parliament were passed to improve prison life and rehabilitate prisoners, help them settle when they were released from prison. **Borstals**, prisons for young offenders, were also introduced.



Reading Gaol was built in 1844 by George Gilbert Scott and William Bonythorn Moffatt. Prisoners were locked in their cells for nearly every hour and were not allowed to see people: it was called the '**Separate System**'. There was a library and an exercise yard, but outside their cells inmates they wore a cap to cover their face and were not allowed to talk, this was called the '**Silent System**'. When they arrived at the gaol, prisoners had a cold bath, their hair was cut off and they were given a rough grey suit.

Oscar Wilde was imprisoned at Reading Gaol from 1895-1897. He was sentenced to **hard labour**. He broke stones and picked oakum (old rope) but became seriously ill and was allowed to stop. He had a tough time in prison and wrote about his ordeal and the cruelty of Victorian gaols. These writings are titled '*De Profundis*' and '*The Ballad of Reading Gaol*'

