

Web 3.6bi

Pupils' Response

How and why have interpretations of highwaymen changed over time?

Highwaymen: tall, handsome, dashing young men, thrashing around England on huge, proud horses. This is the general 21st century view that the public hold on highwaymen. However, the public perception of highway men was very different in the 1700s, and it has slowly changed into what is a dramatically different image from the reality.

In the 18th century highway robbery was one of the most serious offences being committed in England; the highway men were normally from poor backgrounds and had been driven into crime by a harsh upbringing and a lack of available work. Highway men chased down stage-coaches on the lonely roads to London, taking everything of value, in an extremely violent way in most cases. So, it is no wonder that people of the time feared and hated these men. The middle and upper classes were deterred from travelling, leaving them feeling very indignant; they had earned their money lawfully, paid their taxes, but couldn't travel due to criminals that their government were failing to punish. Unlike smuggling or poaching, highway robbery posed very small social benefits. It didn't lower the price of day to day goods, but it did mean that luxuries such as jewellery and good furniture could be found at lower prices as highway men were always eager to dispose of their loot quickly in places such as taverns. In the 1740s men like William Hogarth began to create prints, that were displayed in taverns and public places, depicting a role model man. For instance, the *Idleness and Industry* print in 1747 shows how a pauper who works hard and pays close attention to his religious duties becomes successful. In contrast, the lazy brother who doesn't go to church becomes wound up with prostitutes and drink. Hogarth excellently portrays Tom Idle's life as being extremely undesirable. The Government encouraged men like Hogarth, and by doing so people were turned against highway men even more.

However, even though people feared and in many cases hated highway men, it did not stop them being incredibly interested in them. Dick Turpin was England's most wanted criminal for horse stealing, highway robbery, murder and violent theft. The public at the time were fascinated by his movements, and this kept him very well known. It was this avid interest that led to one of the first main events that would change the public interpretation. In the 1800s, some time after Dick Turpin's death and in a time when highway robbery was no longer a problem; there was a growth in the amount of literature being written for the 'masses'. *Rookwood* was published in 1834, it mixed the history of Dick Turpin's life with fiction. It was the first of many exciting novels about highway

men, although a fair amount of it was complete fiction. If you were to imagine that a proportion of young children were actually brought up reading these novels it would mean that it was practically the only knowledge they had of highway robbery. In the 1800's not all children were schooled and those that were certainly weren't thinking about highway robbery. This meant that all their knowledge came from either parents/family or books. As, highway robbery had peaked about a hundred years previously, most family members wouldn't be able to contribute much. So, the young generation of the early/mid-1800s would have based all their knowledge of highway robbery on Rookwood and other such books. This meant that the information was passed in turn on to their children, it was probably changed, more books were written on what was an already popular and exciting subject. And so interpretations began to change again. Instead of a shifty, dangerous, violent menace, a highway man became an exciting hero who actually *put himself* in danger. The highwayman was becoming more of an action man every minute.

Then in the early 20th century, the series of books known as the 'Dick Turpin Adventure Stories' were written, but also more importantly poetry was beginning to be composed about highwaymen. Alfred Noyes wrote 'The Highwayman' in 1906, the poem describes a highwayman and his partner 'Bess'. The poem places the highway man in a romantic light. This shows the two different interpretations of highwaymen at the time. One being the daring adventures held by children, but it appears that adults held a view that these villains were idealistic romantic men. The latter interpretation is probably an effect of the poetry.

Finally, as you get further and further away from the time of highway robbery and it is no longer a crime, attitudes begin to change. From the 1950's onwards there were other crimes that, in the eyes of the public, seemed much more serious than highway robbery. Some of these crimes had been around for thousands of years, but new crimes were beginning to appear, such as fraud. These were very intimidating to the general population, so it became acceptable to make a joke about highway robbery. Even though at the time it was a terribly violent crime, time and changes in interpretations have allowed people to forget the violent side of it. Films like *Carry On Dick* made a joke of highway robbery, finally turning the once feared and serious crime into a 20th century joke.

In conclusion, interpretations of highway robbery have greatly changed over the past few hundred years. It's gone from a feared crime, to an interesting novel topic, then the hero of school boy adventures, and from the late 20th century and early 21st it's become a romantic image of the past. There is even room to joke about it now. This is for a number of factors; new crimes, growth of literature (that lead to merging myth with literature), lack of historical knowledge, the distance we are in time now from the event. All these have played major parts in shaping the public's interpretation of highway robbery and the famous highwaymen.

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Although, generally, the certain degree of admiration for these romantic heroes has remained the same through the years, especially in the eyes of young 'girls who want to be with them, and boys who want to be them', the ways that they have been portrayed has differed considerably over the past 350 years.

At its peak, in the 1730s, highwaymen were looked up to by a number of people, and highway robbery soon became recognized as a social crime. It wasn't long after that, in 1740, that William Hogarth published *picture stories* about two men, one industrious, the other idle. Naturally, the industrious man become rich and famous, while the idle man turns to theft, and highway robbery. The idle man is not only caught, but hanged by the industrious Sherriff of London.

A little fear remained in highway robbery, but people chose to see the elegant, robed figures on horses, who would rob from the rich to give to the poor, but the wool was consistently pulled over their eyes, both by the highwaymen and the local constables, who denied murder, fraud, extortion and torture. It wasn't just the highwaymen. Blackmail and threats were used by local law enforcement to persuade criminals to turn themselves in. It was after the publication of 'Rookwood' in 1834 that opinions began to change, and strengthen. The heroic tales of the highwaymen in this book did nothing but fuel the people's insatiable thirst for highwaymen and their daring deeds. Yet historians may argue that in fact, these tales lack historical substance, particularly Rookwood, which was undoubtedly merged myth and fact.

At the turn of the 20th century, stories and poems portraying the gallant tribulations of the robbers on horseback excited the minds of young boys, and later inspired the Thriller Picture Libraries. Unfortunately, perhaps for former horsemen, the 1980s saw the parodies, comedies and mockeries of the highwaymen. This was most likely due to the fact that the highway robbery had passed, and reward posters and screams for help could be replaced by television shows and laughter.