

Jonathan Wild: Thief-taker General



1. Wild came to London as a servant but was sent to prison in 1710 for debt. There he learned from other criminals.



2. When released, Wild became a city official, pledged to track down and arrest criminals.



5. In 1716 Wild became known as the Thief-taker General after using his informers to break up gangs of footpads and burglars, and arresting a number of highwaymen.



6. This allowed Wild to build up his power over London's criminals, taking control of the remaining gangs. Now they robbed Londoners to Wild's orders, but he still seemed a respectable official.



8. Sheppard became a popular hero for his escapes, but each time Wild caught him. When Sheppard was executed, Wild's popularity fell.



9. Eventually the authorities trapped Wild with a charge of receiving stolen property. Although the usual penalty was transportation, he was hanged in 1725.

HOW EFFECTIVE WAS LAW ENFORCEMENT IN THIS PERIOD?



3. At the same time he paid thieves to burgle houses and bring him the details of their loot.



4. Wild then visited the people who had been burgled, saying he could get their belongings back – for a fee. He was trusted because of his official position. He never handled the goods himself so could not be charged with receiving stolen property.



7. In 1724 Wild captured Jack Sheppard, a famous housebreaker. Sheppard then escaped four times, once through six bolted iron doors using just his handcuffs and an iron bar.



10. After Wild's death, there was a surge in robberies and other crime in London.

Why no police force?

The career of Jonathan Wild might seem to you to demonstrate the need for a police force. The odds in favour of getting away with crime were still heavily in favour of the criminal. Sir John Fielding, a London magistrate, wrote that 'not one in a hundred robbers are taken.'

Yet at this time there was great opposition to the idea of a professional, paid police force.

- Many people feared that a police force would mean the **end of their freedom** to express their ideas or to criticise the government. The police would be used by the government to stamp out any political opposition.
- Others **feared the expense** in setting up a police force. Instead, they preferred to rely on constables and thief-takers even though these methods were clearly not able to deal with the amount of crime, especially in towns like London.
- Others did not see the need for a police force at all. They did not think it would work. They still believed that the best way to tackle crime was to **make punishments even bloodier**. Criminals were not afraid of constables so they had to be made afraid of the punishments that awaited them if they were caught.

1. Who could arrest thieves?
2. Why was there no police force in England in the early 1700s?
3. Read the story of Jonathan Wild in the story strip.
 - a) What crimes did Wild commit?

- b) Why was he called the Thief-taker General if he was a criminal?
- c) Does the career of Wild show that a police force was needed or was not needed? Explain your answer.