

Clippers and Counterfeiters

Notes for Teachers

In this pack

- How to use this resource
- Background information on clipping and counterfeiting
- Background notes and character sheets for pupils
- Six cases from the Old Bailey records adapted for pupil use

Curriculum links

This resource addresses areas of the programmes of study in English, Citizenship and History.

In English, the focus is on speaking and listening with an emphasis on Drama, creating roles and reading and processing information.

For Citizenship, children are taking part and developing skills of communication. They are also developing an understanding of the judicial system.

The historical content and use of authentic accounts helps to develop pupils' understanding of people's lives in a different time.

How to use this resource

Use the case studies and information provided about clipping and counterfeiting to create your own role plays. Divide your class into five or six small groups where pupils can take on the roles of the accused, the judge, the jury, experts, witnesses and the defence based on real coin crime cases from the Old Bailey in the 17th and 18th centuries. Alternatively, turn your classroom into a courtroom and create a play based on one or two coin crime cases instead. Supporting images can be found in the accompanying PowerPoint.

Background Information

How coins were made in the 17th and 18th Century

Before the introduction of machinery to The Royal Mint in the mid-17th century, coins were made by hand. Designs were struck onto very thin pieces of silver using a hammer and a pile and trussell.



Pile & Trussell

The metal used to make the coins was first melted and then beaten into a sheet, from which discs of metal – blanks – would be cut out with shears. Because it was difficult to get all the pieces of silver the same shape, when they were struck with the pile and trussell, the designs on coins didn't always reach the edge.

In the mid-17th century machines were brought in to the Mint that could make thicker coins and put milling around the edge (vertical lines like on the modern 5 pence and 10 pence pieces). However, it was decided not to recall the old handmade coins so people still used them too.

Precious metal coins

Coins in the 17th and 18th centuries were made of precious metals and because of this a coin's weight was very important. It was the law that a coin's weight was equal to how much it was worth. For example, this meant that a silver penny coin had to be made of a penny's worth of silver in weight.

Coin crime

There were two main forms of coin crime in the 17th and 18th century: clipping and counterfeiting.



Clipping

Clipping was taking a small amount of metal off the edge of hand-struck coins. Over time, the precious metal clippings could be saved up and melted into bullion (a lump of precious metal) to be sold or used to make new coins. This could also be achieved by 'sweating' the coins – shaking silver coins in a bag and collecting the dust they left behind.

Coins that had been clipped contained less precious metal than they should so they weighed less. This meant that they weren't worth as much even though they still looked like the right coin. Shopkeepers would keep weighing scales close by so that they could check the weight of any coin they thought was suspicious.

Counterfeiting

Coin counterfeiting is making fake coins and passing them off as the real thing. Counterfeiters often used moulds made from sand to cast melted metal into new coins. To create the mould, they would have used a genuine coin and pressed this into the sand to create an impression.

The metal that the counterfeiters used might have included silver but these fake coins would have mostly been made from different metals and then coloured to make them look genuine.



A forged half-crown of Charles I

Punishment for coin crime

Clipping and counterfeiting were both deemed capital offences in the 17th and 18th centuries. This meant that if convicted coin crime suspects could be sentenced to death. For men this would mean hanging and for women burning at the stake. Those convicted at the Old Bailey court in London would have faced their punishment at Tyburn.

Coins today

Our coins no longer contain precious metals but metals that are chosen because they are hard-wearing and difficult to fake.

Law and order in the 17th and 18th centuries

Before 1829 there was no official police force. Suspected criminals would have been caught by members of the public and then taken to the constable to secure the person's arrest.

Anyone who witnessed a crime was legally obliged to apprehend the person responsible.

Victims of crime could also employ people called 'thief-takers' who would locate and apprehend suspects. Rewards were often offered.

Accomplices were given pardons if they helped to convict a dangerous criminal.

Constables were required to apprehend anyone accused of a felony and bring them before a Justice of the Peace. They did not investigate crimes.

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Background notes

Legal coins from The Royal Mint

In the past, coins contained an amount of metal (gold or silver) which was equal to their value. Coins were made by hand, so they were not always a regular shape and over time the edges would wear away.

Coin crime in the 17th and 18th centuries

There were two main coin crimes.

Clipping included:

- clipping or filing off metal from the edges of genuine coins.
- melting the clippings down to make a single piece of silver that could be sold.

As long as they did not clip too much the coins went on being used as if they still contained the right amount of metal.

Counterfeiting included:

- making fake coins using metal that was not silver or gold.
- making moulds to copy genuine coins.
- passing those fake coins off as real ones.

Sometimes counterfeiters would take a shilling or a penny and change its colour

to try and make it look like a more valuable coin.

The 'Clipper's Toolkit' included:

- shears or files for clipping the metal from the edges of coins.
- bags used for 'sweating' coins – shaking them in a bag together until they left enough metal dust to collect.
- crucibles – small pots used to melt metal down in a fire.

The 'Counterfeiter's Toolkit' included:

- different metals.
- crucibles for melting the metal and for pouring it.
- sand moulds for casting the metal into coin shapes.
- files, wax, salt and aqua fortis (nitric acid) to make counterfeit coins look older.

Why did counterfeiters make fakes?

When they had made the fake coins the counterfeiters sold them.

For example, they would sell 25 or 27 fake shillings for one pound (20 shillings) of good money. The dishonest person who bought the fakes for 20 shillings would be able to buy things worth 25 or 27 shillings. The coiner who had made the fakes would have 20 real shillings to spend.

They would have spent less than a shilling to make the fake coins, so overall they made a profit.

What sort of people were clippers?

Clippers needed access to a steady supply of coins they could clip. Shopkeepers and tavern keepers had a steady stream of coins from their business. They could help supply the clippers. Women often worked as clippers.

What sort of people were counterfeiters?

People often took up making fake coins as a profitable side-line.

Counterfeiters usually worked at home. They set up workshops in their cellars or attics. Men often worked as counterfeiters.



Sand mould



Coins



Crucible



Metals



Files & Tongs

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Character Profiles

The Expert Witness

Sir Isaac Newton
(1696–1727)

Warden of the Mint 1696–99

Master of the Mint 1699–1727



Background information

For many years Sir Isaac Newton studied and wrote books about mathematics and science, including his discovery of gravity (the force that causes things fall to the ground when you drop them).

In 1696 he accepted the post of Warden of the Mint. The Warden was very important and reported directly to the king. The Royal Mint at the time was located in the Tower of London and was under the control of William III.

What did Sir Isaac do?

There was a lot of work for Sir Isaac Newton to do at The Royal Mint.

Lots of people were clipping and counterfeiting coins and getting away with it. The money system was in danger because people were not sure what the coins in their pockets were really worth. Shopkeepers used weighing scales to test coins to see if they were genuine. People started not to trust each other.

It was decided that something had to be done about clipping and counterfeiting.

In the middle of the 17th century the way that coins were made had been changed. Now, machines could be used to give coins milled edges (vertical lines like on the 5 pence and 10 pence pieces today). The edges of some coins were also engraved with the words 'DECUS ET TUTAMEN' which means 'an ornament and a safeguard' (you can still see this on some round £1 coins today).

These changes had made it impossible to clip the new coins without other people being able to see this had happened. It wasn't possible to replace all the coins in the country all at once, so when Sir Isaac Newton came to the Mint people were still using a lot of handmade coins. This meant that there were still lots of coins being used that could be clipped.

Sir Isaac Newton made it his business to talk to and interview criminals and informers who were involved in clipping and counterfeiting, to find out how best to stop it.

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Character Profiles

The Prosecution

Who were the prosecution?

The Constable

Informers

Witnesses

Royal Mint experts

The prosecution's job is to prove the accused person guilty.

What the prosecution might say

The Constable

- He found clipping or counterfeiting tools in the house, maybe under the bed or in a cupboard.
- He found counterfeit coins in the house or in the person's bag.
- He found coin clippings.
- That the accused had tried to escape or did escape and was caught.
- Describe how the accused tried to hide or get rid of the tools they had been using and any other evidence.

The Informers

- That the accused person was a known counterfeiter or a member of a gang that made counterfeit money.
- That they were a shopkeeper and the person had bought the tools to counterfeit or clip coins from them.
- That the person had ordered tools that were made especially for clipping coins.

The Witnesses

- The accused had given them fake coins pretending they were legal.
- That they saw the person clipping or filing coins.
- That they saw the person using moulds or a press to make fake coins.
- That what the accused said in their defence (why they were innocent) is not true.

The Experts

- That the tools could be used for coining.
- That the fake coins they had found on the person had been made in the coin press they found at the house.
- That the coins were counterfeit because they could tell that the workmanship was not as good or the coin was not made of the right metal.

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Character Profiles

The Defence

Who were the defence?

In the 17th and 18th centuries there were no solicitors or barristers to stand up for you in court – an accused person would have had to defend themselves.

The job of the defence was to try and convince the jury that they were not guilty.

The Accused

Here are some examples of what people accused of clipping and counterfeiting said in their defence:

- They might have said that tools and other things did not belong to them. One woman said that they belonged to her husband but that she could not tell the court his secrets.
- One man said that he did not know anything about the equipment found in his house and that it might belong to his lodger (someone who paid money to live in his house with him).

- A man said that the tools belonged to his landlady.
- Some said that the tools did belong to them but that they worked at home as a silversmith and so it was legal for them to have them.
- They might have asked for people who knew them to speak to the court and say that they did not do it.

Character Witnesses

Character witnesses are people who know the person on trial. They might be a friend, a neighbour or someone the accused person worked with. A character witness is there to tell the court about the accused person's good character. Character witnesses might:

- say that they had known the accused person a long time and that they could be trusted.
- say that the person's story was true, that they were a silversmith and it was legal for them to own the tools.
- tell the court that they were hardworking people with jobs who would not have the time to make counterfeit money.
- say that the person was well respected in the community and was a good citizen.

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Character Profiles

The Judge and the Jury

What was the law?

Counterfeiting was a serious crime. It was considered to be a form of High Treason and the penalty for those found guilty was hanging for men and burning for women.

People accused in the City of London and the County of Middlesex were tried at the Old Bailey. Those found guilty were executed at a place called Tyburn (now Marble Arch in London).

The Jury

Juries would have been made up of 12 men as in those times women were not allowed to be on a jury. However, not all men were allowed to be on the jury. Only men aged between 21 and 70 who owned property (a house or land) that was worth more than £10 a year (a lot of money in the 17th century) could be jurors.

Jury service was a requirement for citizens who were allowed to be jurors. It is still a requirement today.

What evidence would you need in court?

Counterfeiting rarely occurred in plain sight. A person having counterfeit coins was not enough by itself to convict them, as those coins could have been made by someone else. This meant it was important that a counterfeiter's or clipper's tools were produced in court to show that the presence of counterfeit money was not an accident. The tools might have been files, shears, melting pots, moulds or stamps.

What would happen in court?

The constable would bring the accused in front of the Justice of the Peace.

The prosecution would try and prove that the person was guilty.

The accused person would defend themselves, trying to explain why the jury should believe they did not do it.

The expert witnesses would testify.

The character witnesses would testify.

The judge was in charge of everything that happened in the court and would keep everyone in check by saying "ORDER" if people got too noisy.

The jury would go away and decide whether the accused person was guilty or not guilty. When they returned the verdict would be given to the court and the judge would decide the punishment.