

Learning objectives:

- to evaluate the different interpretations of highwaymen using evidence
- to explore why the image of the highwayman changed over time
- to reach a judgement on the different interpretations and how they were created.

Key information:

'Robbery on the roads - highway robbery - was a common crime in this period (1450-1750). There were few banks, so people carried lots of their money around with them. Britain was a rural country, with few large towns. Roads were not made up so travel was slow and there were few travellers. Roads were therefore quiet, with lots of isolated country places, even quite near towns. There was no police force.

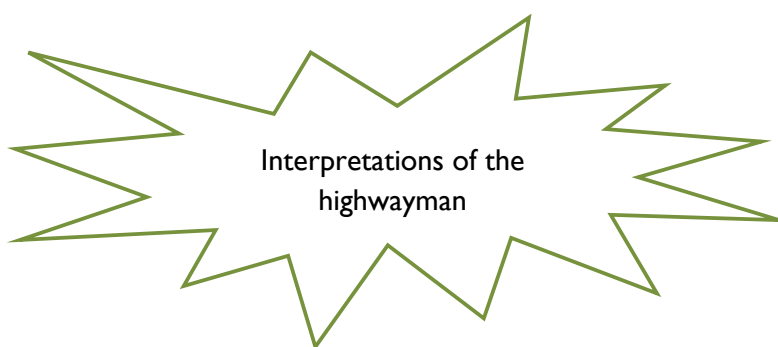
Highway robbers rode on horseback, in order to stop and chase their victims, or get away quickly. Riding on horseback was supposedly the mark of a gentleman, a mark of class. Highwaymen therefore had a reputation as classy criminals: courteous to women, well-mannered and honourable. Does the evidence support this ideal?

From: <http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/education/candp/crime/g04/g04cs4.htm>

Task 1:

Watch the following YouTube clip and record as many ideas as you can about the different ways highwaymen have been interpreted in History using the spider diagram below:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9VVygtL68bow>



Feedback questions:

1. What is an interpretation?
2. What might some of the problems with these interpretations be?
3. How would a good historian try to get to the bottom of the differences in interpretations?

Were highwaymen 'gentlemen of the road' or violent thugs?

Source evaluation table (page 1)

Task 2: Take each of the sources in your pack in turn. In your group, discuss what you can see or work out from the source. Use the table below to record the points which you discuss. This will help when you come to make your overall judgement.

Source	Date of origin	What does it tell you? What can you infer (work out) from it?	Does anything about the source surprise you?	Which interpretation does it support?	Why might it support this interpretation?
A					
B					
C					
D					

Source evaluation table (page 2)

Source	Date of origin	What does it tell you? What can you infer (work out) from it?	Does anything about the source surprise you?	Which interpretation does it support?	Why might it support this interpretation?
E					
F					
G					
H					
I					

Source A

A butcher was robbed in a very brave manner by a woman mounted on a side-saddle, near Romford in Essex. She pointed her pistol at him and demanded his money. He was so amazed by her behaviour that he said he did not know what she meant. Then another highwayman rode up and told him he was a brute to deny the lady's request, and that if he did not do as she said immediately, he would shoot him through the head. So he gave her his watch and six pounds.

An account of a highway robbery from a magazine published in 1735

Source B

I have been in London for a day or two and have heard nothing but conversation about McLean, a fashionable highwayman, who has just been put on trial. He has lodgings in St James's Street, close to White's and another in Chelsea. His face is as known around St James's as any gentleman who lives in that area. He had a quarrel at Putney bowling green two months ago with an officer, whom he challenged to a duel for doubting he was a gentleman, but the Captain declined until Mclean produced a certificate proving his nobility, which he has just received. Lord Mountford, along with half of the members of White's, went to the first day of the trial. Mountford's aunt was crying all over him, 'My dear, have you been involved with McLean?'

From a letter written in August 1750 by Horace Walpole, the famous writer, to one of his friends. White's was a gentlemen's club for the nobility. St. James's was one of the most fashionable areas of London at this time.



Source C

When he was to his trial brought,
He there held up his hand,
Declaring to the ancient judge
He wasn't the worst of men.

He said the Bible I fulfilled,
Though I this life did lead,
For when the naked I beheld,
I clothed them all with speed.
The poor I fed the rich I empty sent away.

What say you now my honoured Lord,
What harm was there in this?
I never robbed or wronged the poor,
Be pleased to favour me therefore,
And be not too severe.

From a popular song about a highwaymen who was hanged in 1695

Source D

1. I swear to be faithful to my companions.
2. To be ready at all hours of day and night.
3. Never to desert my companions in any danger, never to run away from an equal number of enemies, but rather die courageously fighting.
4. To help my companions whether captured, in sickness or other distress.
5. Never to leave my companions' bodies behind me to fall into enemies' hands
6. To confess nothing if captured, or ever to reveal information about my companions, even under punishment of death myself.

From a Highwayman's Oath, recorded in a book published in 1719. The writer of the book probably got the oath from a 17th century leaflet, now lost. The oath may be genuine, though this is uncertain.

Source E

As for those who talk of solemn oaths, I can assure them that we never swore an oath between us, and if we did, no oath is binding when keeping it is a greater sin than breaking it. I know that several persons have saved their lives, as I am doing, by giving information about their companions, and then went back to a life of crime. However, I wish with all my heart that our story may be a warning to other young men, by which they will find that we enjoyed none of those rewards that tempt mankind to break the law. Honesty is the best policy. We do not consider how naturally one thing leads to another until at last we swing from the end of a rope. I have this comfort in my misfortunes, that I was never involved where any murder was done.

From the confession of a highwayman facing execution in 1722

Source F

Walpole, a well-known author, recorded his experience of being robbed by the famous highwayman McLean in Hyde Park, London. Walpole wrote that McLean's pistol 'went off accidentally and razed [ruined] the skin under my eye ...' The next morning he received a letter from McLean offering his apologies for any inconvenience caused. Walpole stated that his brief relationship with the highway robber was carried out 'with the greatest good breeding on both sides.'

From the supplement to the Letters of Horace Walpole

Source G

... His purpose in life was to fill his belly and acquire enough money to enjoy the good life, gambling and drinking ... and to do so at the expense of others who may have worked hard for what little they had. In reality the highwayman was a very unlikeable character.

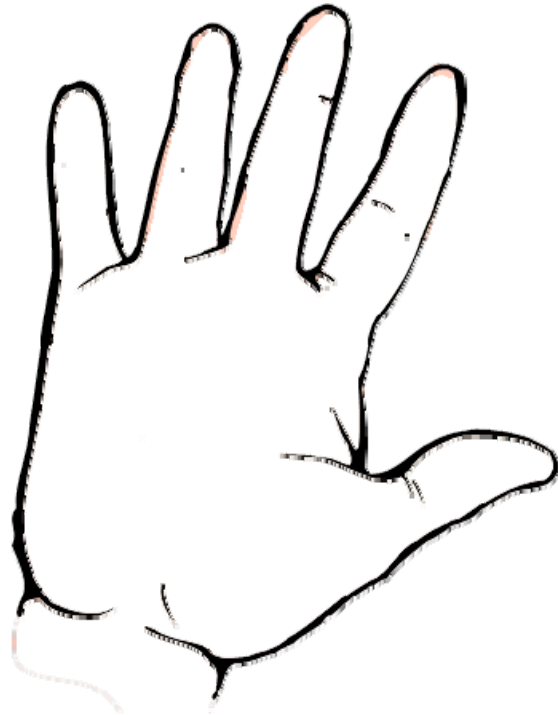
From 'Stand and Deliver - a History of Highway Robbery', from 2004

Were highwaymen 'gentlemen of the road' or violent thugs?

'Highwaymen were 'gentlemen of the road' not violent thugs.' How far do you agree with this statement?

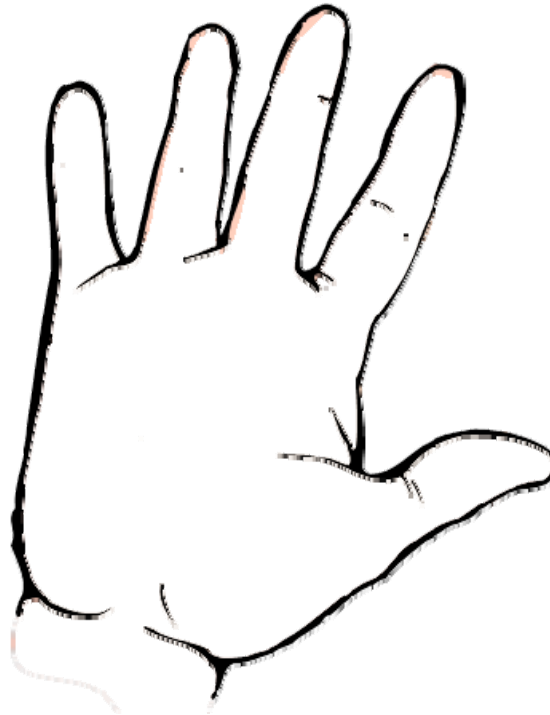
Task 3: The question above is written in the style of a GCSE question. You would be expected to provide evidence from the sources to support each side and then to reach an overall judgement. Ideally, your judgement should be based on a 'knock-out' argument which you think outweighs the evidence on the other side. On each of the hands below, record five pieces of evidence for each of the two interpretations. Record your overall judgement on the boxing glove.

On the one hand ...



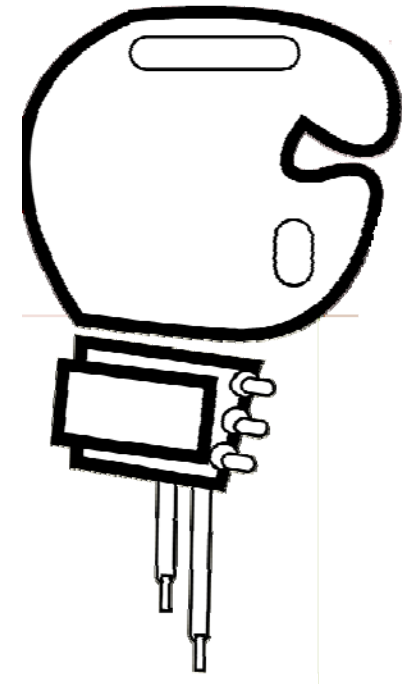
Highwaymen were 'gentlemen of the road'

On the other hand ...



Highwaymen were violent thugs

My judgement ...



Teaching notes

This activity was initially planned for a GCSE class taking the SHP 'Crime and punishment' course. It might, however, work equally well for an able KS3 group with whom you'd like to do some extended source work.

Starter

P.1 functions as a worksheet to help deliver the necessary background information to understand the sources, and some initial stimulus in the form of a YouTube montage which raises a number of the issues around the interpretation of highwaymen. It is suggested that students read through the information and watch the clip, recording key ideas as a spider diagram on the sheet. Some discussion about what interpretations are and why historians reach different interpretations might then be useful, as suggested under 'Feedback questions' on p.1.

Main activities

1. Working in small groups, issue students with a set of the sources from pp. 4-9 and the picture sources which are included as a separate PDF on the Teachit History site. You might initially want them to sort the sources into three piles – those which suggest highwaymen were 'gentlemen of the road', those which suggest they were 'violent thugs' and those which could support either or neither interpretation.
2. Students then talk about each source in turn and record their ideas on the 'Source evaluation table' (pp. 2-3 – this could be printed back to back to save paper).
3. Finally, students reflect on which interpretation they feel the evidence best supports using the guidance on p. 8. You may wish for them to answer the GCSE style question as a follow-up or homework activity.