

Intermediate

The Great Train Robbery of 1963

A Warm-up Question

Do you think the train robbers deserved any sympathy?

B Today's Article

One of the most **notorious** robberies in English history took place on 8, August, 1963, when a gang of men stole over two million pounds (US\$53 million in 2018) from a night mail train in the countryside outside London. The daring **audacity** of the raid and its **meticulous** planning have given the **heist iconic** status.

The story began months earlier when the gang received a **tip-off** from a post office worker that a mail train would be carrying bags of old banknotes to London for recycling, an irresistible prize for criminals as they would be untraceable.

After careful research, they chose a lonely spot 50 kilometers north of London and stopped the train in the **early hours** by making a false red signal.

They then **swarmed** onto the locomotive, hitting the driver over the head in the struggle that followed. After uncoupling the front two coaches containing the money, they drove the train to a bridge 800 meters ahead where the rest of the gang were waiting.

Here they unloaded the 128 mailbags weighing 2.5 tons onto trucks parked in the **lane** below. These were disguised as **military** vehicles taking part in a night exercise. The whole operation took just 30 minutes.

Driving slowly through back **lanes** to avoid detection, they arrived forty-five minutes later at a remote farmhouse which they had bought six weeks earlier. When they counted the money, they found it was far more than they had expected and **amid** noisy celebrations, they shared out the **loot**.

By listening in on police radio messages, they soon learned the police had guessed they were still in the area. Concerned that the farmhouse would soon be discovered, they decided to leave immediately and over the next 24 hours went their separate ways.

Each man had about £150,000 (nearly US\$4 million in 2018). The police found the farm four days later.

It was at this point that things started to go wrong. They had paid a man to clean up the farmhouse to remove all evidence but he never turned up, which meant that fingerprints remained at the farm. These would later lead to the arrest of some of the gang.

Meanwhile, as the story hit the headlines, public reaction was surprisingly sympathetic. People wished the robbers good luck rather than **deplore** their lawless behavior, never mind that the driver had been brutally beaten.

The gang were eventually to become **victims of their own success**. The media **frenzy** put the police under intense pressure to make arrests, and as leading professional criminals, they were prime suspects. A few weeks later, an unknown **informer** who was in jail for another crime revealed most of their names, possibly in return for early release. By Christmas, most of the robbers had been caught.

When their trial came early in 1964, the **sentences** shocked the nation: the **defendants** were given a total of over 300 years in prison. The government had clearly been embarrassed by the raid - the train had neither security guards nor an alarm system – and was determined to **make an example of** the men.

Many criticized the **harsh sentences**, including the detective in charge of the investigation. But as it turned out, none of the gang served more than fifteen years, while a number escaped and four were never caught.

As for the money, to this day only a fraction of it has ever been recovered.

It is **sobering** to reflect that train driver, who had bravely defended the state's millions, received a mere £250 (US\$6,700 in 2018) in compensation. Yet some of the robbers' wives were later paid thousands for their stories by the newspapers.

Key Vocabulary and Expressions

Match the words that have similar meanings. Please note that there may be more than one correct answer. Explain how the words are used in the article and make sentences using the new vocabulary.

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| 1. iconic | a. while something is happening; surrounded by something |
| 2. audacity | |
| 3. notorious | b. confidence and willingness to take great risks |
| 4. harsh | c. someone who is accused of a crime and goes to court |
| 5. early hours | d. think something is very bad, morally wrong etc. |
| 6. loot | e. early part of the day between midnight and sunrise |
| 7. deplore | f. period of great activity and excitement |
| 8. meticulous | g. very strict, unkind or cruel; (place, sound) unpleasant |
| 9. amid | h. robbery (informal) |
| 10. informer | i. famous event etc. that represents an idea, period in history etc. |
| 11. lane | |
| 12. frenzy | j. someone who gives information secretly to the police, government etc. |
| 13. make an example of someone | k. small road, often in the countryside |
| 14. heist | l. stolen money or valuable objects |
| 15. defendant | m. give someone a severe punishment to warn others |
| | n. very careful and precise with a lot of attention to detail |
| | o. famous for something bad |

D Discussion Questions

Share your thoughts on the following discussion questions.

1. Do you think the train robbers deserved any sympathy?
2. What kind of sentence do you think is appropriate for this kind of crime?
3. Should criminals and their families be allowed to sell their stories to the media?

E Wrap Up

Take notes on what you can recall from this topic.