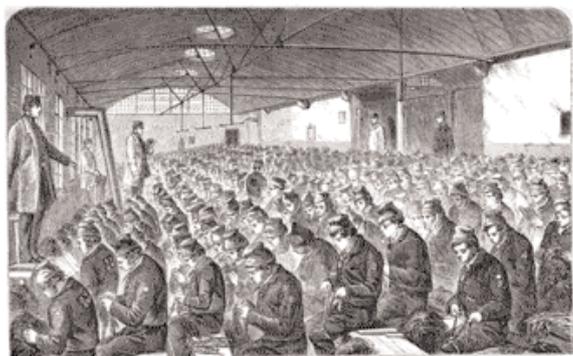
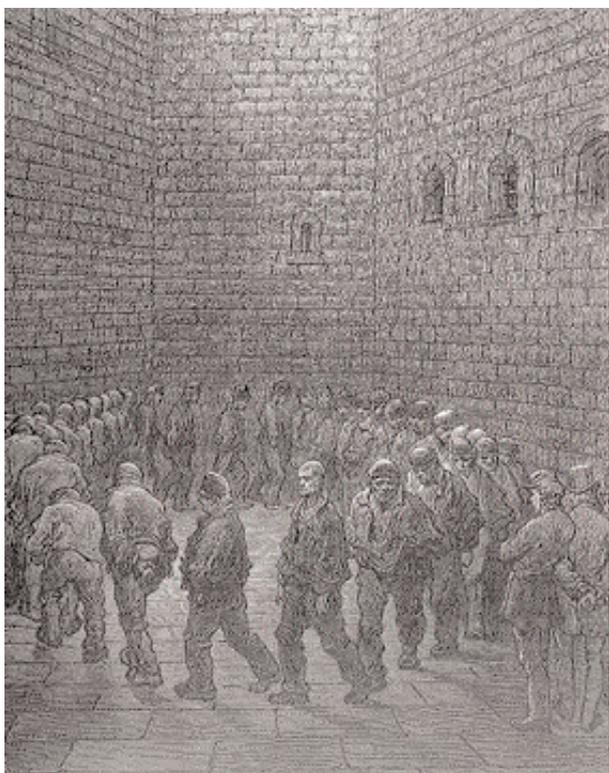


Hanging outside Newgate. Many crimes were hanging offences and 'missing' ancestors may turn out to have been executed. (Image is over 100 years old and out of copyright)



Picking Oakum Middlesex 1860s. Though some people prefer to ignore a criminal ancestor, they can be a wealth of information. (Image is over 100 years old and out of copyright)



Exercise Yard at Newgate 1870s. Criminal ancestors could expect a hard life at prisons such as Newgate where conditions were poor, disease rife and ill-treatment common. (Image is over 100 years old and out of copyright)

Family History Series Part 7: How you can Trace a Criminal Ancestor

By Sophie Jackson

Most of our ancestors were very law-abiding, but just once in a while you get a glimpse of that 'dubious' ancestor, the one who crossed the line and found himself on the wrong side of the law. Everyone has the odd skeleton in the closet and very often that skeleton is a criminal. Tracing them and their crimes can give a real insight into the lives of our predecessors.

Criminal Minds

The first clue that an ancestor might have been up to no good comes when they are missing from the usual records; they might not be at home for instance, in the census. Or they might be mysteriously absent from family records for a period of time. Of course, this could be due to a number of innocent reasons, including an ancestor being in the military abroad or being at sea. This is where old family stories come into play, that old rumour that so-and-so got himself into trouble might just be accurate.

It should also be remembered that the definition of 'crime' has changed over the centuries. Today we don't routinely send debtors to prison, but the Victorians did. Children are also given more leniency in the law these days, and we don't imprison or execute witches or heretics. So having a 'criminal' ancestor can be rather a loose term.

A good first stop is the census returns, typing in an ancestor's name may bring them up away from home. If they are listed under the name of a prison then you know they were in trouble at that period.

Findmypast.co.uk has 518,000 records of criminals who passed through the legal system of England and Wales between 1770 and 1934. A handy search engine gives instant access to these records which include registers of convicts in prison hulks, after-trial calendars from the Central Criminal Courts, Metropolitan police registers of criminals and records from the Home Office. The records are still in the process of being digitised, but with luck you will find an ancestor and his/her crime on file.

Beyond Prison

Knowing an ancestor was in prison is one thing, learning about his/her crime and potentially understanding it, another. For that you need resources such as court papers and news reports. Minor charges were usually prosecuted locally by touring magistrates who would visit an area at set portions of the year. Serious crimes were not likely to receive a fair trial in their own county, so a request could be made for the defendant to face trial in London instead. In which case court records may either be found in the local record office, or at the National Archives. For crimes that reached the Old Bailey (therefore the most serious) there is a separate search engine at <http://www.oldbaileyonline.org/>

For background detail of a crime, newspapers can be invaluable. Local papers usually contain details of criminal offences, though sometimes it can be a slog to trawl through all the issues from the relevant period to find your ancestor's story. Cases that were reported nationally can sometimes be found in *The Times* archives, which can be accessed along with other Victorian papers via <http://gale.cengage.co.uk/> Certain libraries offer their customers free access to this resource if they have a reader's ticket.

Not everyone wants to know their ancestor was a criminal, but the fact is we can't whitewash history and ignoring a person because they behaved outside the law does not change the fact they were related to us. If you are prepared to learn about a criminal ancestor it can provide a glimpse into another time and place, a window into the past. Not to mention that often our criminal ancestors are some of the best documented people around!