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The 1920s & 1930s

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MURDERS

The 1920s and 1930s

JONATHAN OATES



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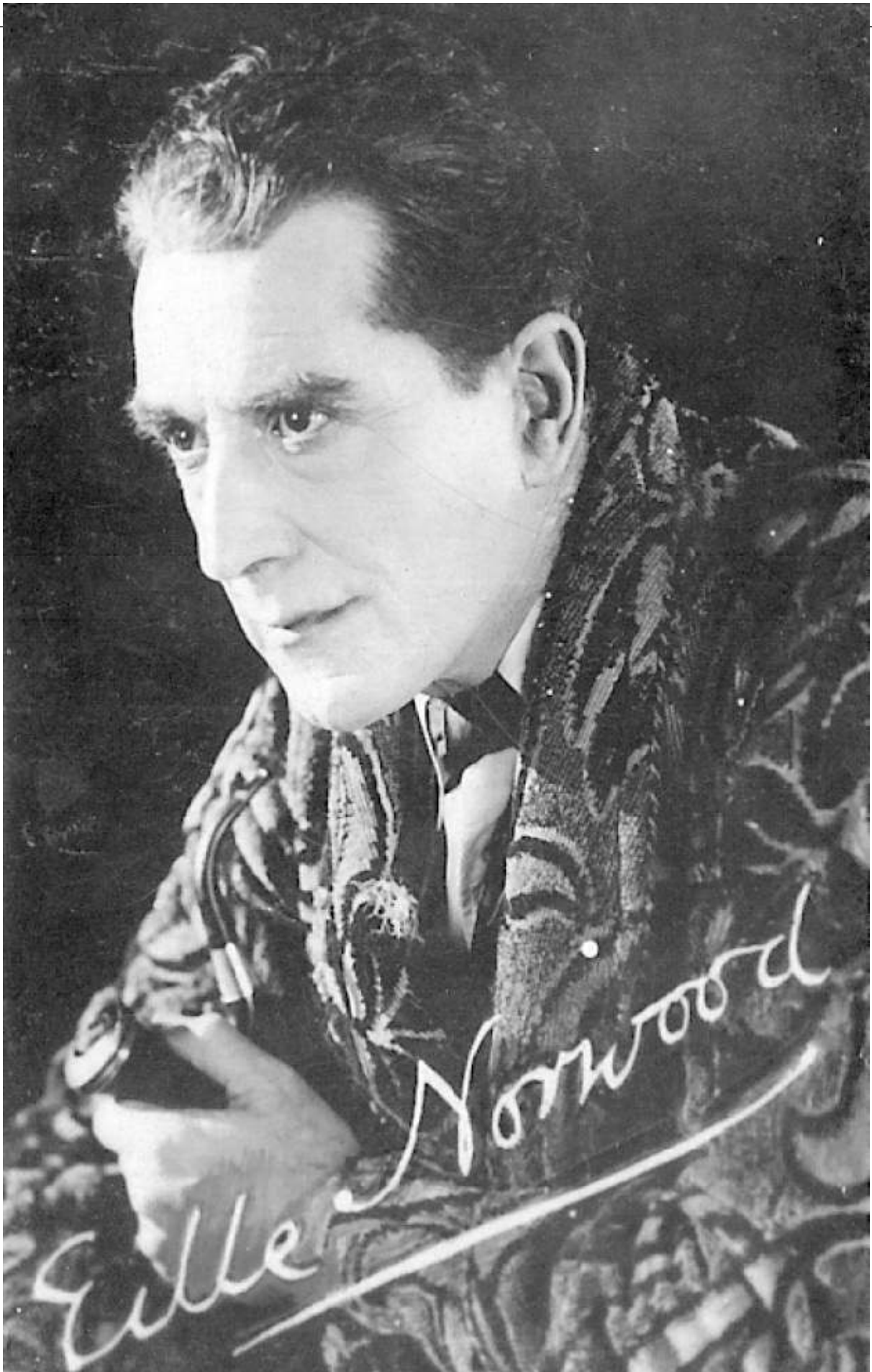
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This book is dedicated to Jenny.

Introduction

Name a crime or criminal in the London of the 1920s and 1930s. I certainly couldn't, until I began writing about real crime in London a few years ago. Whereas, before then, even I couldn't have named a Victorian killer (Jack the Ripper), an Edwardian one (Dr Crippen) or a post-war murderer (John Christie). For most people, crime in England in this period is dominated by the fictional whodunit. Conan Doyle's Sherlock Holmes stories still appeared in *The Strand* in the 1920s, though the stories were all set before 1914, and new sleuths, such as Agatha Christie's Hercule Poirot, Margery Allingham's Albert Campion and Dorothy L Sayers's Lord Peter Wimsey, all emerged in this era to do battle with fictional criminals, almost always taken from the middle and upper classes. Television and radio dramas and films have made these characters well known.

The real villains, their victims and their foul deeds have been largely overlooked, at least in the public mindset. Compendia of crime refer to some of these, such as the infamous case of Vera Page in 1931 and the Croydon poisonings of 1928–9, but most of these are now forgotten, and in any case most have only been dealt with in a very cursory manner. The majority featured here have never been discussed in print since they were reported in the press. It is the aim of this book to bring them back to public view. This book deals with all the unsolved murders in London from the 1920s and 1930s. Among the crimes found here are a railway murder, the mystery of parts of a body found at Brentford and at Waterloo station, prostitute murders in Soho, the fatal shooting of a policeman, a brutal child murder and two IRA killings. It does not include the Croydon poisonings (1928–9), the murder of Louisa Steele (1931) or Robert Venner (1934), for though these are usually stated as being unsolved, the author's examination of police files has revealed that the police were well aware of who was responsible, but they lacked the evidence to bring the cases to trial. These two latter killings are detailed in the author's *Foul Deeds and Suspicious Deaths in Lewisham and Deptford*, and the police file on the Croydon case provides a convincing case against the killer who also escaped justice.



Ellie Norwood as Sherlock Holmes, 1920s. Author's collection

There is a mystery and a horror with unsolved murders. First, there is the horror of a brutal killing. Secondly, there is the mystery of who was responsible and the added horror of the knowledge that the killer walked free. They might have killed again. From the view of both police and friends and relations of the deceased, it is unfinished business, a chapter which can never be satisfactorily closed.



Birdhurst Rise, Croydon, 2007. © John Coulter.

The evidence for this book comes from a number of primary sources, documents written at the time of events or at least shortly afterwards. Most important are the murder files created by the investigating police officials themselves. These contain statements by witnesses, medical reports, anonymous letters, case summaries by the detectives and other related evidence. These are located at the National Archives at Kew. They give much more detail than that which appears in the press. Secondly, there are the newspaper reports of the time, which reveal the public facts as they emerge from police bulletins and reports of the inquests on the victims. *The Times* online was a principal source, but so too are local newspapers and the tabloid *Illustrated Police News*. Finally there are the memoirs of serving officers, who discussed their cases, failures as well as successes. These give an insight into the thinking of the police, but should not always be taken as being entirely factual, as officers' memories are often at fault. I have also looked at books about crime, in order to learn what other writers have thought about these cases, though most have only given them a cursory survey.

Finally, a word about money in those pre-decimal times. Twelve pence (d.) made up one shilling (s.). Twenty shillings made up one pound (note). One pound and one shilling made up a guinea.

The Police of London in the 1920s and 1930s

Seldom does one hear a good word for them.

Before we begin examining the crimes detailed in this book, we need first to take a glance at those whose job it was to investigate them, and discover their strengths and weaknesses. The bulk of the work fell onto the Metropolitan Police, founded in 1829 and reorganized in 1835. Their strength in 1933 was 20,154 and they were divided into 24 divisions, each covering part of London and Middlesex. They were of varying sizes and had differing numbers of police attached to each. For instance, Whitehall, division A, had an area of 1.88 square miles and a force of 694; whereas S division, Hampstead, was the largest with an area of 86.81 square miles and an establishment strength of 954. Each division was headed by a superintendent, who reported to the Chief Constable.

The numbers just quoted are ‘establishment’ figures and real numbers were usually below these in 1923, by about 1,000. This meant that men had to undertake more than one beat per day and it made them more difficult to supervise. Despite the growth of the population of the metropolitan district between 1920 and 1940, there was no increase in police numbers.

The Metropolitan Police were under the command of the Police Commissioner, who answered to the Home Secretary, not to any directly elected body. Most commissioners were former military men who had no experience of police work and had little conception of the day-to-day lives of Londoners. Some were reluctant to take on the task, having had to be persuaded by the prime minister of the day to accept the role. Most were past their prime and some downright eccentric. Lord Bynoe, commissioner from 1928 to 1931, for example, refused to use a telephone or even have one in his office. Everyone else in the force had to work their way up from constable. George Cornish (1873–1959) began his 39 years service as a constable in the 1890s, and became a superintendent in the 1920s.

Almost all of the members of the police force were men. There had been the novelty of women police during the First World War (1914–18), but in 1922, in London, they numbered a mere 20; about 0.1 per cent of the whole. They had the power to make arrests, but were chiefly used in ‘rescue work’ among young women and girls. If they were out on patrol, they would always be followed by two male colleagues. Although it was felt that they were effective, in their limited remit, with Sir Leonard Dunning writing ‘there is a definite place for women in the police force’, the rank and file of the force were suspicious of them and hostile to any extension of their powers. One said that it was enough that married men were bossed about by their wife in the home; they had no desire for the like at work.

There had been major changes to the force towards the end of the First World War. For decades the police had been very poorly paid; the job being seen as equivalent to that of an unskilled worker

an agricultural labourer, though it was far more dangerous and arduous. A National Union of Police had been formed and when a constable was dismissed in August 1918, the union called out the men on strike and about a third of the Metropolitan Police responded. The government responded in a conciliatory manner by reinstating the sacked man, and making improvements in pay and pensions. However, the union was not recognized and in the following year there was another strike in order to have the union officially recognized. This time, only a little over 1,000 men in London responded. Most did not want to jeopardize their recent gains. The strikers were all dismissed. In the same year the Desborough Committee put forward a number of recommendations which were accepted by the government. These resulted in the formation of the Police Federation, a representative body for the men in the ranks up to the rank of inspector. It also made further increases in pay and pensions. For some men, the pay rises resulted in a doubling or more of their wages. A constable's weekly wage rose from £1 10s to £3 10s. A police sergeant had an annual salary of £400 in 1928.



Policeman directs traffic in the City of London, 1920s. Paul Lang's collection

There were a number of ways in which technological changes were put into play as regards police work. The introduction of automatic traffic signals in 1931 relieved the police of the burden of having to control the ever increasing volume of motorized traffic. Each Metropolitan division had its own cars and vans for transport and supervisory work. Wireless communication between Scotland Yard and patrol cars was introduced in 1922. Police boxes became a familiar site in the main streets of London and proved to be a rapid method of communication, and each police station was now equipped with a telephone.

Other changes occurred. Lord Trenchard, Police Commissioner in the 1930s, founded the Hendon Police College, in order to promote and train men from the ranks to higher positions. This was treated with suspicion by radicals who claimed this would lead to the militarization of the force. A police laboratory was also set up at Hendon in 1934. A police driving school was also founded in that year. However, there was a tradition of conservatism and, as one assistant commissioner grudgingly noted, 'Modern preventative measures such as police boxes and the like are useful as far as they go.'

A leading figure in many murder investigations in the Metropolitan districts, and who features in most of the cases in this book, was Sir Bernard Spilsbury (1877–1947), a Home Office pathologist. He was usually on hand to identify the causes of death of murder victims and to carry out post mortem examinations. He had first come to prominence in the public eye in 1912 when he was involved in the Dr Crippen murder case. He also gave evidence, usually for the prosecution, during murder trials and such was his repute that his words carried great weight among juries. However, more recently his ability has come into question, and it seems certain that his testimony in the case of Donald Merritt in 1926, where the verdict of not proven was brought against a young man who almost certainly shot his mother dead, was erroneous. The accused man later went on to commit a double murder.

Most policemen patrolled on foot. The daily beat began at 5.45 am. There would be a parade and instructions at the police station. Then the men would file off, under their sergeants, until each man had begun his beat. This beat lasted from 6 am to 2 pm. The rest of the day was divided into two other beats of equal length.



Scotland Yard. John Coulter's collection

The detailed detection of crime rested with the Criminal Investigation Department (CID). The plain-clothed detectives, not the divisional police, investigated the murders discussed in this book, though they were expected to report their findings to the divisional superintendent. The CID was recruited from the uniformed service. Any new recruit to the detective service had to pass exams and show proof of his superior powers of observation.

Apart from the Met, there were a number of other police forces in the capital. One was the City of London Police. This was controlled by the City of London, not the government. Its headquarters were in Old Jewry and had a strength of just over 1,000 men. There was also the River Police, which was part of the Met, and its officers patrolled in motor boats. Finally, there was the railway police maintained by the railway companies. The Southern Railway Company ran the railways in the south of England and their police were involved in the detection of crime on the railways around London, noted in [Chapter 9](#).

The police were far from perfect. Even a writer in 1934 who was sympathetic to the force had to admit, 'there have been black sheep – and there may be still – in the ranks of the police as there are in every other section of the community'. There was public shock when it was revealed in 1928 that one PS Goddard at Vine Street police station, had been amassing a fortune in bribes from nightclub and brothel owners, which enabled him to buy a large house and a fast car, as well as to accumulate over £17,000 in cash. He was sacked and spent three years in jail.

Low-level corruption was more common, at least judging from anecdotal evidence. Nightclub owners, bookmakers, prostitutes and publicans all gave bribes in order that police would turn a blind eye to their semi-legal status or assist if they were in trouble with criminals. Some of this might only have been low level, with one superintendent stating that the habit of publicans leaving beer for the beat constable was 'simply a token of genuine friendship'. Another example of corruption was noted by 'Boy' Mulcaster in *Brideshead Revisited*, when he and his friends are stopped by the police in London: 'There's no need for you to notice anything. We've just come from Ma Mayfield's. I reckon she pays you a nice retainer to keep your eyes shut. Well, you can keep 'em shut on us too, and you won't be the losers by it.' Later, when Rex Mottram comes to their aid after their arrest, 'with the slightest nuance, he opened the way for bribery' and gives the desk sergeant a havana cigar. However, in both these instances, the police do not accept bribes, though clearly it was envisaged that they would. Tipping was a recognized element in a policeman's remuneration, even to the extent of helping the rich in and out of their cars. Yet corruption may have been at a lesser level after Trenchard became commissioner in 1931. Nor was it prevalent. When two constables found a middle-aged man with a younger woman in Hyde Park, they planned to have them charged with public indecency. The man tried to bribe them, but they withstood the temptation. He turned out to be Sir Basil Thompson, one of the Assistant Commissioners at Scotland Yard.

The police in London had not only to deal with criminals in the inter-war period, but were also involved in political disputes. There were fears about Bolshevism among the working classes in the 1920s and, on one occasion, a procession of the unemployed was dispersed by a baton charge on the grounds that most of them were 'low class' Jews, and therefore suspected as being Bolsheviks. The principal crisis in the 1920s, though, was the General Strike of 1926, when the police had to ensure that food supplies got through and that the volunteers running the transport system were unmolested.

This sometimes involved them in clashes with the strikers. Evelyn Waugh noted that the police had to disperse a crowd in Hammersmith by a baton charge and a similar method of crowd dispersal was used in Southall. The police were also on the receiving end of violence in Hanwell, where some men threw stones at them. In *Brideshead Revisited*, during the Strike, a policeman is knocked to the ground and is being kicked by half a dozen youths, and another has a head injury during a disturbance in the Commercial Road.

In the 1930s, the threat to public order came from the far right. The formation of the British Union of Fascists by Sir Oswald Mosley led to violence between groups of political extremists. Although the police did not sympathize with Mosley's socialist opponents, they did not approve of the Blackshirts trying to impose their own form of order on the streets. Matters came to a head in 1936 when Mosley planned a march through the Jewish districts of the East End. This led to the 'Battle of Cable Street', where the police clashed with crowds who opposed such a provocative gesture.

In both instances, the police earned the enmity of sections of the London community. They were not seen as impartial upholders of the law but, certainly by some, as enemies of the working class. One observer noted 'the curious fact that a crowd, particularly in working class districts, is almost invariably hostile to the police'. A priest remarked, 'seldom does one hear a good word for them'. Notting Dale was a notoriously rough part of London. In 1929, following the arrest of a suspect, there were verbal and physical attacks on the police and the police had to barricade the police station on that occasion. Neal's Yard in Monmouth Street, Covent Garden, was a place, in the words of a veteran policeman, 'where [thugs] break all you young coppers in'. There had been fighting between police and people on Peace Night in 1919 and one observer said 'I have never seen in all my life such a hostile crowd'. In 1923, there were 1,429 cases of injuries to police officers. Part of this animosity was because there were instances of the police beating up suspects and planting evidence on them. Sometimes policemen misused their powers and in 1928 one Helen Adele was falsely accused because she would not have sex with two constables. Mr William Bignell recalled troublemakers at the Tottenham National Assistance offices in the 1950s and an ex-copper told him that in the 'old days' i.e. before 1939, the police would simply have taken the offender behind the premises and seen to it that he would not repeat his offence. Despite this, senior officers tried to create a more favourable image. Thomas Divall wrote 'I can assure the public that the "bobby" is a real good fellow, and if they would only treat and trust him as such, there will be a much better feeling between the two.'

Although the middle classes were generally supportive of the police – Agatha Christie's Hercule Poirot refers to them as 'a brave and intelligent force of men' – they had reason to be in conflict with the police too. First, they were shocked by scandals such as the Goddard case and other police misdemeanours which were made public in this era, such as the wrongful arrest and failed prosecution of innocent people. Secondly, the increased use of motor cars meant that they came into conflict with the law enforcers. However, middle-class volunteers cooperated with the police during the General Strike, to their mutual benefit and appreciation.

Relations with the press were often poor, too. Superintendent Percy Savage wrote of 'the lack of efficient co-operation between the police and the public. It is indeed a strange and regrettable fact that there is – and always has been – a strong disinclination in certain police circles to take the public fully and frankly into their confidence.'

The Metropolitan Police force undoubtedly had its defects in the inter-war period. How far the examples of misbehaviour were commonplace is difficult to discern, however. Their popularity and the trust they were held in, or not, were clearly important for solving crime. Yet as we shall see in the next chapter, they did have a fair amount of success.

Crime in London between the World Wars

All great cities are magnets for crooks, gamblers, dope pedlars, prostitutes, pimps and perverts and riff raff of all kinds.

As has been said, the impression that most people have about crime in this period has been formed for us by the detective novels of Agatha Christie and other writers of detective fiction at that time. Murders are committed in country houses and among the upper middle classes. They are solved by private detectives. This, however, is fiction. We must now look at the facts.

Criminality in London was always a diverse affair and this period was no exception. While the Chicago gangsters of this era are well known, there were also criminal gangs in London. The most famous were the Sicilian gangster clan, the Sabinis. They committed burglaries, thefts, extorted money from prostitutes and book keepers, and fought rival gangs. They mostly used knives and razors to settle disputes over protection rackets. There were also shoot outs, with Henry Sabini being shot dead in Great Bath Street in 1922. They also fought with other gangs both in London and outside. Charabancs would take the fighters from Saffron Hill, the famous Italian quarter just to the west of the City, and Stepney, to the race courses of Greenford and Epsom Downs. Or there could be violence and intimidation in London races, such as at Alexandra Palace in 1921. Common battle grounds were Holborn, Clerkenwell and Gray's Inn Road.

At first the police did little (some policemen even connived and protected these gangsters) though in part this was because few would testify against the gangsters. Yet in 1922, 60 policemen arrested 100 of the criminals. The Sabinis were not finally defeated until they were interned as enemy aliens in 1940, but their activities had been curtailed from about 1930, with Inspector Hambrook remarking that Scotland Yard could 'predict with confidence that the terrorist days of the gangsters as we have known them are gone, never to return'. Another foreign gang were the Messinas, also from Italy, who founded a vice empire in Soho of gambling dens and brothels, using both British and Italian girls in the latter. Soho in the 1920s was the centre of the cocaine trade in London.

Most crime, however, was the work of individuals. The 1927 *London Guide* warned visitors to the capital of the dangers of crime. 'A favourite dodge of the light fingered fraternity is to join a crowd for one of the motor omnibuses. Standing on the steps as if about to enter, they work their will while the scrimmage for buses ensue, and then hastily alight.' In public places, especially on vehicles, the poster 'Beware of pickpockets' was a common sight. Thieves often carried overcoats over their arms to use as a screen for their nefarious activities.

Crime was not dominated by foreign gangs, despite their demonization in the press. As Chief Constable Frederick Wensley wrote, 'The cleverest thieves ... are undoubtedly born cockneys'. Criminal

was usually the province of the poor. Dockers, with their weekly pay packets, were a common target for pickpockets and in 1927 nine Shoreditch pickpockets were apprehended en route to Poplar and Canning Town. Groups of women from Hoxton often took part in shoplifting expeditions, reselling the goods at markets. Poor people valued their padlocks in order to safeguard their few possessions and in some districts it was unsafe to hang the washing outside if one was absent from home.

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