

Horse-stealing in Wales, 1730–1830*

by Nicholas Woodward

Abstract

Building on the earlier work of Edwards and Beattie and using Wales as a focus area, this paper asks why horse-stealing was so common in Georgian Britain. It shows that it was partly due to a plentiful supply of horses, particularly field horses, which in Wales tended to be concentrated in the eastern central counties, an area that played an important role in horse-breeding. Thieves were often adult males, in their late twenties or thirties, employed in agricultural occupations, and only rarely were they hardened criminals. They were attracted to stealing horses for a variety of reasons, only one of which was profit. Indeed, horse theft was a relatively lucrative crime, even though thieves often sold the stolen animals at discount. The high level of theft, however, also reflected the fact that there was little economic incentive for horse owners to protect their animals, particularly the less valuable ones; from the individual owner's point of view, the risk of theft was not that great and protection was often expensive.

Just as motor vehicle theft is today, so in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries horse-stealing was one of the most conspicuous serious crimes. Some of the most prominent criminals of the eighteenth century – Samuel Gregory, Dick Turpin and Jonathan Wild, for instance – were implicated at some stage of their careers with horse-stealing.¹ This view is reinforced by both Beattie and King who, using indictment figures, have estimated that horse-stealing was quantitatively one of the most prevalent capital crimes in the south-east of England.² Further corroboration comes from the Select Committee on Capital Convictions (1819), which showed that between 1810 and 1818 almost 900 suspected horse thieves in England and Wales were committed for trial, while the official returns for 1826–31 show that a further 935 were convicted of the crime.³ It is likely, moreover, that such figures understate the true level of criminal activity; like most felonies, some, perhaps most, horse thefts were unrecorded, because the victims failed to either detect or prosecute the criminals.

Why was horse-stealing so prominent at this time? At a superficial level, the answer is obvious. As Cohen and Felson have argued, property crime depends on the co-existence of

* Subject to the usual disclaimer, the author would like to thank Peter Edwards and Peter King for their comments on an earlier draft of the paper, Ruth Campbell for her assistance in collecting the information on horse prices, and the staff of the National Library of Wales for their assistance in constructing the database.

¹ G. Howson, *Thief-taker general* (1970); D. Barlow, *Dick Turpin and the Gregory gang* (1973); J. Sharpe, *Dick Turpin, the myth of the English highwayman* (2004).

² J. Beattie, *Crime and the courts in England, 1660–1800* (1986), p. 147; P. King, *Crime, justice and discretion*

in England (2000), p. 137.

³ BPP, 1819, VIII, *Report of Select Committee on Criminal Law relating to the punishment in felonies*, p. 128; BPP, 1831–2, XXXIII, *Return on number of persons convicted of sheep and horse-stealing*, p. 579.

three conditions: a supply of suitable targets, a failure on the part of owners to protect their property, and a supply of motivated offenders.⁴ High levels of horse theft, therefore, must have been due to widespread use of horses with a high market value, the inability or unwillingness of horse owners to protect their animals, and plenty of criminals prepared to steal horses. This, however, simply raises other questions to which we do not have immediate answers. For example, was horse theft really lucrative? Could stolen horses be disposed of relatively easily? Were horse thieves casual criminals or were they professionals? Did the supply of offenders increase in periods of distress? Why did owners not protect their horses from theft more diligently?

Unfortunately, horse theft has attracted relatively little detailed attention from historians. One notable exception is Peter Edwards's study of the horse trade in Tudor and Stuart England, which includes a chapter on horse-stealing.⁵ He shows that the crime became increasingly important during the sixteenth century. To offset this, the authorities responded by both removing the benefit of clergy and introducing the voucher system.⁶ These measures, it seems, had some impact on horse theft, although it is not clear that they reversed its upward trend. Nevertheless, Edwards identified certain periods when horse theft was exceptionally common, for example, the Civil War, a time when horse prices were high and soldiers were on the move. He speculated that horse-stealing was also common in years of harvest failure. He suggested, too, that the victims of horse theft were quite successful in both recovering their stock and apprehending the criminal. The criminals were a varied group and displayed varying degrees of professionalism, although predictably most came from agricultural backgrounds.

We know even less about horse theft in the eighteenth century. Beattie includes a brief section on horse-stealing in his survey of crime in Surrey and Sussex.⁷ Without providing much empirical evidence, he asserts that it was a well-organized crime, a view supported by both Hay and McLynn.⁸ This stemmed from its lucrative nature. As a result, horse-stealing tended to attract a disproportionate number of professional criminals, sometimes working in gangs with well-established fencing networks. The implication was that, not only was it a common crime, it was subject to low detection rates. The corollary of this was that when horse thieves were captured they were less likely to be treated sympathetically, perhaps experiencing high rates of prosecution, conviction and execution.

The aim of this paper is to build on the work of Edwards and Beattie. The main area of focus is Wales. It is unlikely that the character of the crime was different here from other parts of the country. Of course, rates of horse theft probably varied locally in response to differences in the size of the local horse population. It is also possible – even though Wales was part of the same criminal justice system as England – that there were regional differences in the extent to

⁴ L. E. Cohen and M. Felson 'Social change and crime rate trends', *American Sociological Rev.* 44 (1979), pp. 588–9.

⁵ P. Edwards, *The horse trade of Tudor and Stuart England* (1988), pp. 105–39.

⁶ When the sale of a horse took place at a fair, details about the horse and sometimes information about both the buyer and seller was included in a toll book. The

transaction was also witnessed and the buyer received a certificate of purchase.

⁷ Beattie, *Crime and the courts*, pp. 167–70.

⁸ D. Hay, 'War, dearth and theft in the eighteenth-century. The record of the English courts', *Past and Present*, 95 (1982), p. 134; F. McLynn, *Crime and punishment in eighteenth-century England* (1989), p. 93.

which victims were prepared to prosecute and local courts to indict and convict.⁹ Nevertheless, it is doubtful whether either Welsh horse owners, when exposed to the risk of theft, or Welsh criminals, when faced with profitable opportunities to steal horses, would have reacted very differently from their English counterparts. Indeed, existing studies suggest that crime was as much a feature of life in Wales as it was in England.¹⁰

The principal source of information has been the gaol files of the Court of Great Sessions. The Court was established in 1543 and performed many of the functions of the English assizes until its demise in 1830. Like the English assize courts, the Great Sessions met twice-yearly. There were four circuits: Chester (which incorporated the counties of Denbigh, Flint and Montgomery), North Wales (Anglesey, Caernarvon and Merioneth), Carmarthen (Carmarthen, Pembroke and Cardigan) and Brecon (Brecon, Radnor and Glamorgan). Monmouthshire was part of the Oxford circuit, although occasionally horses stolen there and in the English border counties were included in the records of the Great Sessions.¹¹

The files have been used profitably by a number of eighteenth-century rural historians, most notably David Howell and Melvin Humphries, although neither examined horse-stealing in any depth.¹² They include a familiar range of materials, such as examinations, depositions, recognizances, prisoner's calendars. There are even some newspaper advertisements and handbills, which were occasionally used by victims to recover their horses. These can be used to draw qualitative inferences about the crime. The National Library of Wales (NLW) has used the files to compile a database of Welsh crime for the years between 1730 and 1830. From this, the horse-stealing cases were extracted, and these form the basis of the quantitative judgements.¹³ Over the study period, the gaol files include information on 575 cases of horse theft, considerably more than cattle theft (227 cases) or robbery (201), though less than either sheep-stealing (1568) or burglary (1131).¹⁴

⁹ This possibility has been demonstrated by Peter King in a study of assault in Cornwall in 'Changing attitudes to violence in the Cornish courts, 1730–1830', in his *Crime and law in England, 1750–1840* (2006), pp. 255–80.

¹⁰ D. W. Howell, *The rural poor in eighteenth-century Wales* (2000) esp. pp. 209–40.

¹¹ G. Parry, *A guide to the records of the Great Session*, (1995). The records for Monmouthshire are at the National Archives. No attempt has been made to include in the study either this or information from the extant Welsh quarter sessions (which is very patchy), because of possible differences arising from record-keeping procedures.

¹² M. Humphries, *The crisis of community: Montgomeryshire society, 1680–1815* (1996); Howell, *Rural poor*. Other studies that have used the gaol files for a comparable period include N. Woodward, 'Infanticide in Wales, 1730–1830', *Welsh History Rev.* 23 (2007), pp. 94–125; id., 'Seasonality and sheep-stealing: Wales, 1730–1830',

AgHR, 56 (2008), pp. 25–47; id., 'Burglary in Wales, 1730–1830: evidence from the Great Sessions', *Welsh History Rev.* 24 (2009), pp. 60–91. From the early modern period, there is also S. Howard, 'Servants in early modern Wales: co-operation, conflict and survival', *Llafur* 9 (2004), pp. 33–43 and id., 'Investigating responses to theft in early modern Wales: communities, thieves and courts', *Continuity and Change* 19 (2004), pp. 400–30; S. Parkin, 'Witchcraft, women's honour and customary law in early modern Wales', *Social Hist.* 31 (2006), pp. 295–318.

¹³ The database can be used in the National Library of Wales (hereafter NLW), although an on-line version is also available at http://www.llgc.org.uk/sesiwn_fawr/index_s.htm. The Library database was used in this study.

¹⁴ These figures exclude crimes that were committed under riot conditions. The definition of burglary coincides with the modern treatment by including daytime 'housebreaking' as well as night-time 'burglary'.

Legal records need to be treated with considerable care, and the gaol files are no exception. For instance, a small proportion of the files are missing. Crude adjustments for this can be made, but not for the possibility that information about some of the cases may be missing from the files and it cannot be assumed that the court officials always recorded the cases accurately. As a result, it will occasionally be necessary to draw attention to the possible limitations of the findings.

The paper is divided into nine sections. In the first two we examine whether there was a plentiful supply of suitable targets and whether horse-stealing was potentially lucrative. In the following four sections we examine the offenders: their characteristics, their motives, their professionalism and their tactics. Finally, before drawing conclusions, we consider the victims – what measures they took to protect their stock and why they were not more vigilant – and why there were local variations in the extent of the crime.

I

Whether there was a ready supply of suitable targets depended crucially on the size of the horse population. Relatively little is known about the horse population in Britain; figures were not systematically collected until the late nineteenth century, when it was approaching its peak. Nevertheless, Thirsk suggests that growth was quite rapid in the early modern period, which she attributes to a number of influences.¹⁵ Fashion and wartime demand played a role, but commercial conditions also favoured horse-breeding. There was, for example, a growth of inter-regional trade; agriculture made increasing demands on horses; and the use of horses as a means of private transport expanded. During the eighteenth century, internal trade continued to grow, while within agriculture the decline in oxen and the growth of arable farming increased the demand for traction horses. At the same time, rising living standards and improvements to the road network led to a growth in demand for both riding and working horses. The result was that by the beginning of the nineteenth century, horses were considerably more important than two centuries earlier, and Thompson has estimated that in 1811 there were approximately 1.3 million horses in Great Britain, equivalent to 10 for every hundred persons.¹⁶ By 1871 the horse population had increased to 2.1 million, although the ratio had fallen to 8:100.

What about Wales? It would be unrealistic to expect the Principality to have exceptional horse population densities, which tended to be highest in areas where either arable farming or urbanization were important.¹⁷ Nevertheless, it is possible that relative to population, Wales supported more horses. Unfortunately, qualitative sources, such as the *General Views* of agriculture of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, have little to say about the

¹⁵ J. Thirsk, *Horses in early modern England: for service, for pleasure, for power* (1988).

¹⁶ F. M. L. Thompson, 'Nineteenth-century horse sense', *EcHR* 29 (1976), pp. 60–81.

¹⁷ E. J. T. Collins, 'The farm horse economy of England and Wales in the early tractor age, 1900–40' in F. M. L. Thompson (ed.), *Horses in European economic history: a preliminary canter* (1983). However, his figures

suggest that, despite the prevalence of pastoral farming, the Welsh horse population density was relatively high.

¹⁸ The 1790s surveys were all entitled *General view of the agriculture of [county name]*. The authors were: J. Clark, *Brecknock and Radnor* (1794); J. Fox, *Glamorgan* (1796); C. Hassal, *Carmarthen and Pembroke* (1794); G. Kay, *Caernarvon, Denbigh, Flint, Merioneth and Montgomery* (1794); T. Lloyd and D. Turnor, *Cardigan* (1794).

TABLE 1. Probate inventories: Welsh farmers (excluding Monmouthshire)

	<i>Per cent inventories mentioning:</i>		<i>Average number of horses per farm</i>		<i>Horse: livestock ratio</i>	<i>Horse:cattle ratio</i>	<i>Horse:sheep ratio</i>	<i>Number of inventories</i>
	<i>Horses</i>	<i>Oxen</i>	<i>Mean</i>	<i>Median</i>				
1730–1754	94.3	51.4	3.2	3.0	16.7	24.3	134.9	70
1755–1779	95.0	30.7	3.0	3.0	15.4	24.7	75.7	101
1780–1804	96.8	15.4	2.8	3.0	15.2	25.4	65.4	160
1805–1830	94.5	13.0	3.2	3.0	22.0	40.9	102.1	165

Note: The ratios are calculated from values. The averages and ratios exclude inventories for which no horses were recorded. Stock includes poultry and pigs as well as horses, sheep and cattle.

Source: NLW will and probate inventory files.

matter.¹⁸ Advertisements for farm stock sales and livestock inventories suggest that there was considerable variation; while some farms kept no horses, others maintained a considerable number. For example, one Denbighshire inventory listed 22 brood mares, colts and saddle horses and 11 wagon horses.¹⁹ To arrive at a more accurate picture, a sample of just under 500 farmers' probate inventories was examined, and this suggests that Wales supported a considerable number of horses. For example, in the second quarter of the eighteenth century, the vast majority of farmers owned at least one horse – very often a riding horse for personal use – but possibly also breeding stock and working animals (Table 1). Later, there was hardly any increase in either the proportion of farmers keeping horses or the average number of horses per farm. Although cattle were by far the most important item of livestock on Welsh farms, in value terms, horses accounted for a fairly high proportion of most farmers' livestock assets – between 15 and 22 per cent. Horse numbers also seem to have expanded – at least in value terms – at the expense of cattle, no doubt due to the substitution of oxen by high-value working horses.²⁰

The 1871 agricultural census returns can also provide us with some insights. The returns, which include working farm horses and breeding stock but not commercial or riding horses, are far from ideal for our purposes, although they may be broadly indicative of patterns during the earlier period. They tend to reinforce the view that horses played a fairly important role in the Welsh farm economy. They show that, overall, the density of the horse population was not much lower than in England and, in the case of breeding horses, it was actually higher (Table 2). They also suggest that Wales supported considerably more horses per head of population.

The relatively large Welsh horse population should, perhaps, come as no surprise. It was due to both supply and demand influences. On the supply side, conditions favoured the production of horses. The Welsh topography and climate encouraged livestock farming,²¹ and

¹⁹ NLW, Chirk F 12510.

²⁰ Due to a rapid turnover, it is likely that these figures understate the relative importance of cattle to the income stream of agriculture.

²¹ On Welsh farming see F. V. Emery, 'Wales', in J. Thirsk (ed.) *The agrarian history of England and Wales*, V, 1640–1750 (2 vols, 1985), I, pp. 393–428.

TABLE 2. Agricultural horses: 1871

	<i>Horses per 100 acres</i>			<i>Horses per 100 persons</i>		
	<i>Number of horses for agricultural purposes</i>	<i>Unbroken horses and breeding mares</i>	<i>All horses</i>	<i>Number of horses for agricultural purposes</i>	<i>Unbroken horses and breeding mares</i>	<i>All horses</i>
Anglesey	2.3	1.2	3.4	8.6	4.5	13.1
Brecon	1.1	1.1	2.2	8.1	8.7	16.8
Cardigan	1.7	1.0	2.6	10.1	5.9	16.0
Carmarthen	1.7	1.1	2.8	8.7	5.6	14.4
Caernarvon	1.0	1.0	1.9	3.4	3.4	6.7
Denbigh	1.6	1.2	2.8	5.8	4.4	10.2
Flint	1.7	1.0	2.8	4.2	2.5	6.7
Glamorgan	1.3	0.9	2.2	1.8	1.3	3.1
Merioneth	0.7	0.5	1.2	5.9	3.7	9.6
Montgomery	1.4	1.1	2.5	10.0	7.7	17.7
Pembroke	2.1	1.1	3.2	9.2	4.8	14.0
Radnor	1.4	1.2	2.7	15.3	13.2	28.4
England	2.2	0.7	3.0	3.4	1.1	4.5
Wales	1.5	1.0	2.5	5.6	4.0	9.6
England and Wales	2.1	0.7	2.9	3.5	1.2	4.8

Source: BPP, 1871, LXIX, *Agricultural Returns for Great Britain*, pp. 271–350.

horses were probably an attractive form of diversification.²² On the demand side, Welsh horse producers faced fairly elastic conditions. Given the dispersed nature of Welsh settlements, the internal demand for horses was high. Indeed, the gaol files suggest that the horse ownership was widespread even amongst labourers.²³ On top of this, there was a large export demand from the eastern English counties. This had been evident during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, and continued to be so in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Some evidence comes from 11,000 entries in the Ludlow Horse Toll books, which cover the years 1723–50 and 1765–1816. As at most horse sales, local traders dominated the market.²⁴

²² Welsh stock-farmers seem to have been extensively diversified. Thus, the probate inventories suggest that almost 80% kept all three types of stock (i.e. cattle, horses and sheep) and 16% kept two types. On the possible reasons for this diversification, see David R. Stead, 'Risk management in British agriculture, c.1750–1850', *EcHR* 57 (2004), pp. 334–61.

²³ Woodward, 'Seasonality and sheep-stealing', p. 28.

²⁴ J. Chartres, 'The marketing of agricultural produce'

in J. Thirsk (ed.), *Agrarian history*, V (i), pp. 440–1. Of the horse sellers at Ludlow, 77.5% came from Shropshire and 13% from Hereford. But they also came from counties as far distant as Berkshire and Wiltshire. Of the horse buyers, 84% came from Shropshire and 6% from Hereford. But some came from London, and the counties of Northampton, Leicester, Wiltshire and Buckingham were also listed.

TABLE 3. Area differences in horse ownership in Wales

Area	Inventories mentioning horses (per cent)	Horses per farm		Horse:livestock ratio (per cent)	Horse:cattle ratio (per cent)	Horse:sheep ratio (per cent)
		Mean	Median			
North	97.5	3.3	3.0	26.6	44.5	243.4
West Central	95.1	2.6	3.0	14.7	23.5	69.1
East Central	97.1	3.5	3.0	17.4	35.0	56.6
South	93.0	2.9	3.0	17.7	26.1	150.5

Note: North covers the counties of Anglesey, Denbigh and Flint; West Central – Caernarvon, Cardigan and Merioneth; East Central – Brecon, Montgomery and Radnor; South – Carmarthen, Glamorgan and Pembroke.
Source: NLW wills and probate inventory files.

TABLE 4. Relative horse prices: Ludlow

<i>Description</i>	<i>Price</i>	<i>Description</i>	<i>Price</i>
All Horses	100.0	Colts	86.5
All Mares	104.3	Fillies	94.8
Mares < 14 h.h.	69.4	Nags	102.2
Mares ≥ 14 h.h.	151.8	All < 4 years	94.9
All Geldings	109.7	All ≥ 4 & < 6 years	112.6
Geldings < 14 h.h.	82.6	All >over 6 years	94.0
Geldings ≥14 h.h.	106.5	Other	94.2

Source: See Figure 1.

Nevertheless, Ludlow attracted a fairly large number of Welsh horses. Most of these came from the adjacent counties of Radnorshire and Montgomeryshire, but horses from as far away as Carmarthenshire and Cardiganshire were not that unusual. Overall, seven per cent of the horses sold at Ludlow came from Wales, although during the French Wars the proportion more than doubled. By contrast, only two per cent of the horses sold at Ludlow found their way into Wales. The Ludlow evidence also shows that Welsh traders sold a slightly lower proportion of mares than their English counterparts, suggesting that breeding activity played a fairly important role in their farming activity.²⁵

There were regional variations. The *General View* for Carmarthen, for example, suggested that the prevalence of small farms operated against the rearing of colts, although the gentlemen of the Towy valley bred a better type of saddle horse, using stallions from Hereford.²⁶ The *General View* for Merioneth pointed to the fact that few horses were bred in the county.²⁷ By contrast, the *General View* for Glamorgan drew attention to plentiful supplies of horses, while

²⁵ The proportions of mares, geldings, colts and fillies for Welsh traders were respectively 38, 20, 5 and 5%. The figures for the English traders were 41, 14, 8 and 7%.

²⁶ Hassall, *General View ... Carmarthen*, p. 36.

²⁷ Kay, *General View ... Merionethshire*, p. 15.

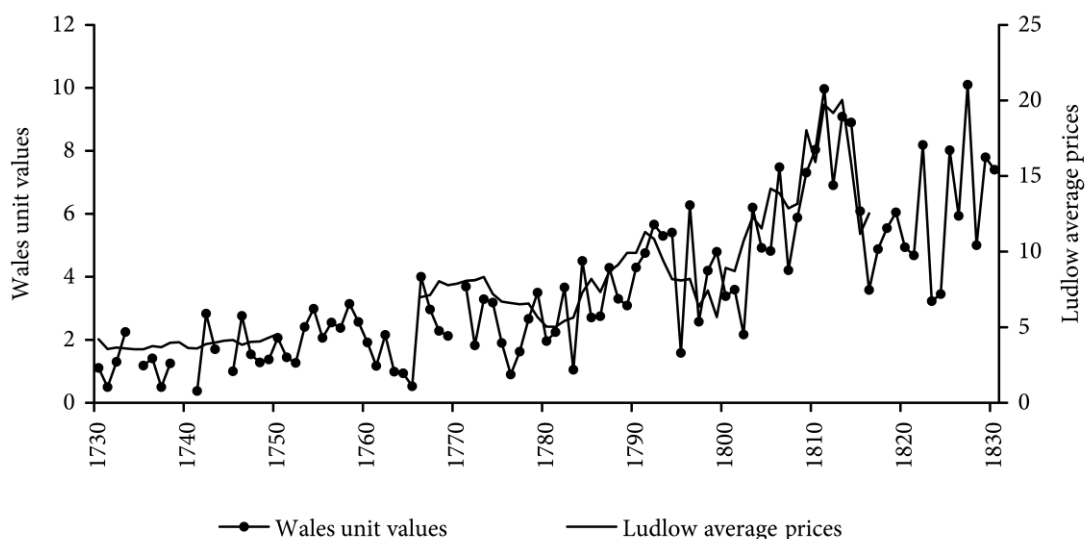


FIGURE 1. Unit value of Welsh horses and average horse prices at Ludlow (£s)

Source: NLW, wills and probate inventory files; Shropshire Archives, LB/7/1063–1066.

that of Montgomery commented that ‘the waste lands or commons ... are chiefly depastured by sheep, innumerable ponies with few cattle.’²⁸ The probate inventories suggest that the central eastern counties supported most horses, although in value terms the northern counties were most important (Table 3). The 1871 census returns suggest that horse population densities were highest in Anglesey and Pembrokeshire, two counties with relatively large arable sectors. But, relative to human population, the central and eastern counties topped the rankings, due in part to a plentiful supply of breeding stock.

Whether horses were suitable targets for theft did not, however, depend entirely on their availability. Another key influence was the price they would fetch. The price of a horse depended on the characteristics of the animal. Judging from the Ludlow data, geldings, mares and nags, in contrast to colts and fillies, commanded above average prices (Table 4). This, no doubt, was due to their average age. Indeed, there was an inverted-U relationship between price and age, horses between four and six years old fetching the highest prices. Height was also an important determinant. Thus, on average, a horse of fifteen hands would fetch almost four times as much as a pony of thirteen hands. In addition, the probate inventories suggest that working horses were worth almost twice the average, while mountain horses would fetch only 60 per cent.

Horse prices, of course, changed over time.²⁹ As Figure 1 shows, Welsh unit values and Ludlow

²⁸ Fox, *General View ... Glamorgan*, p. 22; Kay, *General View ... Montgomeryshire*, p. 18.

²⁹ Not all transactions were conducted exclusively through cash or credit. Exchanges also took place, and these were quite common in the early part of the period. In the 1720s and 1730s just under 4% of the entries in the

toll books referred to exchanges. By the 1770s, however, they were very unusual. Such exchanges sometimes involved a swap of horses. Yet, more often than not, they involved a horse and cash exchange. On some occasions, however, other livestock – sheep and a yoke of oxen, for example – was involved.

average prices moved in sympathy over the period.³⁰ On trend, nominal prices rose quite markedly from the middle of the eighteenth century until the latter stages of the Napoleonic wars. At that point they collapsed, although a recovery took place in the second decade of the nineteenth century. The result was that unit values were five times higher in the late 1820s than in the early 1730s. Once allowance is made for creeping inflation and the change in the price of animal products, there was, perhaps, a doubling in the real values.³¹ However, this probably exaggerates the real change; as we have seen, high-value working horses became relatively more important over the period. In other words, there was probably little change in the economic incentive to steal horses over time.

There were also regional differences in horse prices. Judging from the probate inventories, horses fetched the highest prices in the north. However, this probably reflects a disproportionate number of working horses. A composition effect also explains why Welsh horses tended to fetch lower prices than their English counterparts. Thus, the Ludlow figures show that the average price of Welsh horses was seven per cent below that of the local ones.³² The most probable reason for this is that there were a disproportionate number of hill ponies in Wales; at Ludlow the median height of a Welsh horse was thirteen hands compared with fourteen for an English one. However, this probably has fewer implications for horse theft than might be supposed. For one thing, there were plenty of high-value horses in Wales. For another, it was not necessarily in the interests of a thief to steal a valuable horse. Quality horses would have been 'hot' and would have aroused the suspicion of horse traders, increasing the risks of detection.³³ In any case, horses usually fetched higher prices than other items of livestock. Judging from the stock inventory shown below, horses commanded considerably higher prices than sheep (Table 5). Working and riding horses, although not necessarily hill-ponies, were also worth more than cattle, which, being relatively immobile, were not good targets for criminals.³⁴

³⁰ The correlation coefficient between the two series was 0.868. The correlation between unit values and quoted horse prices has been noted, too, by M. Overton 'Prices from probate inventories' in T. Arkell, N. Evans and N. Goose (eds), *When death do us part* (2000), pp. 120–43. Overton's correlation coefficient was only 0.36, but his study covered the period 1550–1749, suggesting possibly that during the eighteenth century the horse market became increasingly integrated. It should also be noted that the Welsh unit value series displays greater annual volatility because there are fewer valuations in any year than quoted prices.

³¹ Using O'Brien's index of animal prices as the deflator, the real value of Welsh unit prices increased from 100 in 1730 to roughly 233 in 1820. Between 1730 and 1816 the Ludlow average real prices rose from 100 to 119. The differences, of course, may partly reflect that the shift from oxen to working horses may have occurred later in Wales.

³² The Ludlow figures have been used because probate valuations are not reliable indicators of relative values. In particular, they tend to be lower because they include

horses – old, even blind ones, for example – that would not be marketed. Overton's study, too, shows that unit values were well below market values.

³³ The dangers of stealing a high-value horse are illustrated by the case of Shergar, the 1981 Derby winner. Kidnapped in 1983, it has invariably been assumed that, following the immense publicity surrounding the case, the kidnappers killed the horse. Further support for the idea that the incentive to steal a valuable horse was weak comes from the Sherlock Holmes case of Silver Blaze. When the horse disappeared on the moor, it was speculated that he had been taken by gypsies. Holmes's response, however, was that this was unlikely because it was not in the interests of gypsies to take the horse; they could not hope to sell such an animal, and they did not want trouble from the police. See A. Conan Doyle, 'Silver Blaze', in P. Craig (ed.), *The Oxford book of English detective stories* (1990), p. 18.

³⁴ It should be remembered that in a breeding area, such as Wales, not all horses would have been broken. Indeed, some breeding mares would have been halter-broken only. R. J. Moore-Colyer, *The Welsh cattle drovers*

TABLE 5. Value of stock (£): Cusop, Hay-on-Wye, December, 1820

<i>Item</i>	<i>Number</i>	<i>Unit Value</i>
Cart Horses	8	17.00
Riding Horses	6	17.91
Brood Mares	4	8.97
Ponies	1	4.00
Foals	2	6.00
Cows	4	16.00
Cows with (or in) Calf	4	13.99
Heifers	4	8.00
Steers	4	12.50
Bullocks	5	9.40
Feeding Ewes	62	0.70
Wethers	32	0.71
Yearling Sheep	61	0.56

Source: Hereford RO, N44.

The suitability of livestock as a target for theft is also influenced by its marketability. Fortunately for the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century horse thief, there was an exceptionally active market for horses, and the court depositions show that the turnover of horses was sometimes very high. For example, when Evan Evans stole a horse near Cardiff in 1753, he sold it almost immediately to a Gloucestershire innkeeper who, soon afterwards, sold it at a Somerset fair.³⁵ Similarly, in 1803 Griffith Evans, a Merionethshire farmer, successfully located his stolen horse after it had changed hands three times.³⁶

Many horses were bought and sold at fairs, which were quite numerous in Wales, although they were in slow decline by the eighteenth century.³⁷ *Owen's Book of Fairs* suggests that in 1777 there were just over 220 horse fairs in Wales (excluding Monmouthshire). Nevertheless, their importance varied from county to county. In the northern area, cattle-only fairs were predominant, with the exception of Denbighshire, where there were some mixed fairs. Of the eastern central counties, Montgomery and Radnorshire, though less so Brecon, had a high density of mixed fairs. In the western central counties, the pattern was also quite variable. Caernarfon was more like the northern counties, with large cattle fairs that did little or no trade in horses. Both Merioneth and Cardigan, however, had a large number of mixed fairs. There was also a variable pattern in the southern counties; Pembrokeshire and Carmarthen supported

Note 34 continued

(2006), pp. 60–1 argues that drovers could cover between fifteen and twenty miles per day, although over short periods it might have been possible to cover rather more. A fit horse, by contrast, would be able to cover 30 to 40 miles, and in endurance competitions horses have been

known to cover 100 miles.

³⁵ NLW, Great Sessions, 4/616/4.

³⁶ NLW, Great Sessions, 4/197/6.

³⁷ I. Mitchell, 'The changing role of fairs in the long eighteenth-century: evidence from the north Midlands' *EcHR* 60 (2007), pp. 545–73.

a high density of mixed fairs, unlike Glamorgan, which had very few. In the border counties (including Monmouthshire) there were just under 130 horse fairs. However, the uneven county pattern was sustained. Cheshire and Monmouthshire accounted for very few of these fairs, the dominant county being Shropshire, which accounted for over 40 per cent of the total.

Horse fairs provided relative anonymity for horse thieves and were an ideal venue at which to sell a horse. Lewis Harris, who stole a mare from Joseph Emerson, a Monmouthshire farmer, was detected when he tried to sell the animal at Cowbridge fair, unaware that Emerson was there, trying to purchase a replacement.³⁸ Fairs also provided opportunities for thieves to steal horses. Edward Davies used Newtown fair in October 1768 as an occasion on which to steal a horse from a stable yard.³⁹ An advertisement appeared in the *Hereford Journal* in 1771 offering a reward for the apprehension of a 'Welchman about twenty years of age, middle size, rather thin' who had stolen a mare from just outside Brecon, when the owner was at his local livestock fair.⁴⁰

There were other avenues through which thieves could dispose of their stolen animals. By the late eighteenth century, agricultural markets were thriving, and many of these catered for the sale of one or two horses each week. Even more important were the possibilities of private arrangements – selling to friends, family, acquaintances or even strangers. This type of buying became so extensive that the offer of a horse from a complete stranger would have been unlikely to arouse suspicion automatically, even if, in *The Cambrian's* view, it was an inadvisable practice.⁴¹

II

Thus, there were plenty of suitable targets for the horse thief.⁴² There is every reason to suppose that there was a plentiful supply of offenders too. Most horse theft in Wales, if not so much in the south-east of England, was a rural crime and, contrary to what we might expect, crime rates in rural areas were quite high.⁴³ It is true that, on some occasions, such crime was often undetected and that, on others, it was fairly trivial.⁴⁴ Crimes such as wood theft, trespass, poaching and gleaning were quite common in rural areas,⁴⁵ but then so too were more serious crimes such as burglary and robbery and, in Wales, sheep stealing was an endemic problem.⁴⁶ The origins of such crime are complex. Historians have sometimes linked

³⁸ *The Cambrian*, 10 Sept. 1825.

³⁹ NLW, Great Sessions, 4/189/4.

⁴⁰ *Hereford Journal*, 11 July 1771.

⁴¹ *The Cambrian*, 28 Jan. 1829.

⁴² On migrant farm workers, see E. J. T. Collins, 'Migrant labour in British agriculture in the nineteenth-century', *ECHR* 29 (1976), 38–59.

⁴³ C. Emsley, 'The history of crime and crime control institutions, c.1770–c.1945', in M. Maguire, R. Morgan and R. Reiner, *The Oxford handbook of criminology* (1994), p. 152; J. Glyde, 'Localities of crime in Suffolk', *J. Statistical Society* 19 (1856), pp. 102–6.

⁴⁴ R. Storch, 'Policing rural southern England before the police', in D. Hay and F. Snyder (eds), *Policing and prosecution in Britain, 1750–1850* (1989), pp. 211–66.

⁴⁵ T. Shakesheff, 'Wood and crop theft in rural Herefordshire, 1800–60', *Rural Hist.* 13 (2002), pp. 1–17; P. B. Munsche, *Gentlemen and poacher: The English game laws, 1671–1831* (1981); P. King, 'Gleaners, farmers and the failure of legal sanctions, 1750–1850', *Past and Present*, 125 (1989), pp. 116–50.

⁴⁶ BPP, 1844, V, *Report of Select Committee on Commons' Inclosures*, p. 180.

it to rural poverty and need.⁴⁷ Such views received some support from the Select Committee (1827), which attributed the increase in rural crime to the growth of poverty, although it suggested that the poor laws and the growth of poaching, which acted as a nursery for many criminals, were also factors.⁴⁸

However, materialistic motives must have played a role too. Not much is known about the pay-offs from crime in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. We can nevertheless gauge whether the potential returns were high, by comparing the value of the stolen horses with local wages. Whether potential and actual returns were identical, of course, would depend on whether the thieves disposed of their horses at their market value, an issue to which we will return.⁴⁹ For the time being, it emerges that the horse thief could enjoy a fairly high pay-off from his crime. For example, Arthur Young suggested that in 1769 an agricultural labourer from Bridgend, Glamorganshire, could expect to earn 6s. a week.⁵⁰ Over the preceding five years the average value of horses stolen in Glamorganshire was £3 10s., equivalent to roughly two and a half month's pay. In the 1790s the *General View* of Breconshire quoted an average daily wage of 1s. 2d., while the average value of a local horse stolen in that decade was £3, which was equivalent to 51 days work.⁵¹ The *Rural Queries* to the Poor Law Report (1832) suggest that an agricultural labourer from Clyro, Radnorshire – the scene of a number of horse thefts – would earn between £40 and £45 in a year. If, however, he stole a local horse in one of the years between 1825 and 1830, he could expect to get £11 for it, equivalent to roughly a quarter of a year's income.⁵²

Horse-stealing was considerably more profitable than most other types of property theft. As Table 6 shows, only cattle theft was comparable but, as already mentioned, cattle were not as easy to steal. Nevertheless, we have to be careful when using averages, because the potential returns from crime are usually highly skewed. As Figure 2 shows, between 1730 and 1755 (a period of aggregate price stability), three-quarters of Welsh robbers accounted for only six per cent of the value of the goods stolen.⁵³ The pay-offs from horse-stealing, however, were less skewed, due in part to the fact that valuable horses were well-protected. Thieves may also have anticipated that victims would devote greater effort to recovering valuable horses, which, in any case, would be more difficult to dispose of without arousing suspicion.

Any evaluation of the rewards of crime needs to take into account the risks of detection, indictment and conviction. Unfortunately, court records are of limited value for these purposes. Because horses were valuable assets and some owners were strongly attached to them, victims had a strong incentive to recover their stock. Certainly, some horse owners went to considerable lengths. Thus, one Carmarthenshire owner, whose horse, worth £10, was stolen in 1810, had a

⁴⁷ J. E. Archer, *By a flash and a scare: incendiarism, animal maiming and poaching in East Anglia, 1815–70* (1990), pp. 16–17.

⁴⁸ BPP, 1827, VI, *Report of Select Committee on Criminal Commitment*, pp. 3–4.

⁴⁹ Of course, horse prices were low in Wales, but then so too were wages. On wages, see Howell, *Rural poor*, esp. pp. 66–81.

⁵⁰ Arthur Young, *A six weeks tour through the southern*

counties of England and Wales (8 vols., 1768) I, p. 110.

⁵¹ J. Clark, *General View ... Brecknock* (1794) p. 5.

⁵² BPP, 1834, XXX, *Report from His Majesty's Commissioners for inquiring into the administration and practical operation of the poor laws, Rural Queries*, App. B, p. 661.

⁵³ If anything, these figures understate the degree of inequality, because victims of low-value robbery would have had little incentive to devote resources to recovering their goods and prosecuting criminals.

TABLE 6. Median value of items stolen (shillings)

<i>Type of Theft</i>	<i>1730–54</i>	<i>1755–79</i>	<i>1780–1804</i>	<i>1805–30</i>
Horse-stealing	50.0	80.0	100.0	200.0
Cattle-stealing	40.0	100.0	120.0	200.0
Sheep-stealing	4.0	5.0	5.0	20.0
Robbery	11.0	15.5	25.0	32.0
Pickpocketing	24.0	118.5	50.5	140.0
Burglary	15.1	48.5	24.0	61.5
Housebreaking	13.0	28.0	20.0	41.3
All burglary	13.5	40.0	22.5	49.0

Source: NLW Gaol Files database.

set of elaborate handbills printed, depicting a gibbet with a horse thief accompanied by the devil.⁵⁴ He also offered a reward of £45. If this was typical, we might anticipate that detection rates were high but it is unlikely that they were. Horses could be moved quickly from the scene of the crime, third parties would have had little interest in helping to recover a stolen horse and, being a capital offence, potential witnesses were not always prepared to come forward. One witness to a horse theft, who successfully escaped a charge of perjury, argued that he had not revealed his suspicions in case 'I should be sorry to be the means of hanging people'.⁵⁵ Parish constables, where they existed, could have offered assistance, but they were probably too busy.⁵⁶ Not surprisingly, therefore, some victims started off a search with little prospect of recovering the horse, and some may even have regarded the costs as prohibitive.⁵⁷

No doubt, it was for this reason that some horse owners joined prosecution societies. The aim of such societies varied. Sometimes they would financially assist the victim in both the search for and prosecution of offenders, and occasionally they even organized police patrols. Such societies became quite common in late eighteenth-century England,⁵⁸ and they emerged in Wales at about the same time.⁵⁹ Horse thieves were often a major target of these societies.⁶⁰ Thus the stated aims of the Atcham society, established in 1789, was 'to prosecute housebreakers, horse, cow, sheep, pig and poultry stealers'; it claimed to cover Shropshire, Montgomeryshire, Denbighshire, Merionethshire and Flintshire.⁶¹ The Oswestry society was even more explicit about horse theft, advertising itself for 'the prevention of crime, in particular the crime of horse-stealing'.⁶² It offered rewards of £50 for information on crimes including horse theft.

⁵⁴ NLW, Great Sessions, 4/757/4.

⁵⁵ NLW, Great Sessions, 4/757/4.

⁵⁶ King, *Crime, justice and discretion*, pp. 62–75.

⁵⁷ J. Styles, 'Print and policing: crime advertising in eighteenth-century provincial England', in Hay and Snyder (eds), *Policing and prosecution*, p. 76.

⁵⁸ See, especially, D. Philips, 'Good men to associate and bad men to conspire: associations for the prosecution

of felons in England, 1760–1860' and P. King, 'Prosecution associations and their impact in eighteenth-century Essex' both in Hay and Snyder (eds), *Policing and prosecution*.

⁵⁹ *Carmarthen J.*, 12 Jan. 1812.

⁶⁰ Howell, *Rural poor* p. 233.

⁶¹ *Shrewsbury Chronicle*, 25 Apr. 1789.

⁶² NLW, Posters File.

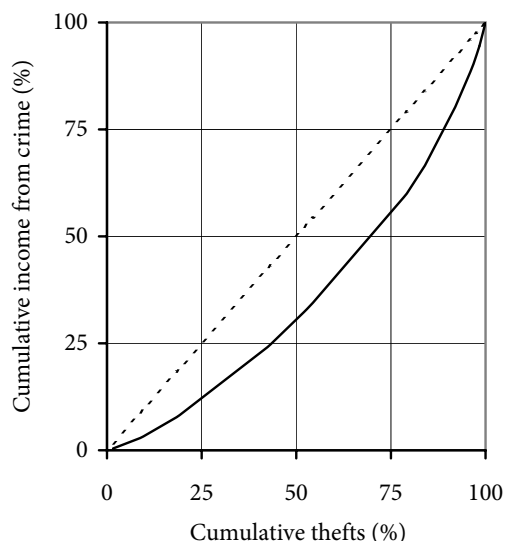


FIGURE 2a. Horse-stealing Lorenz curve: 1730–1755

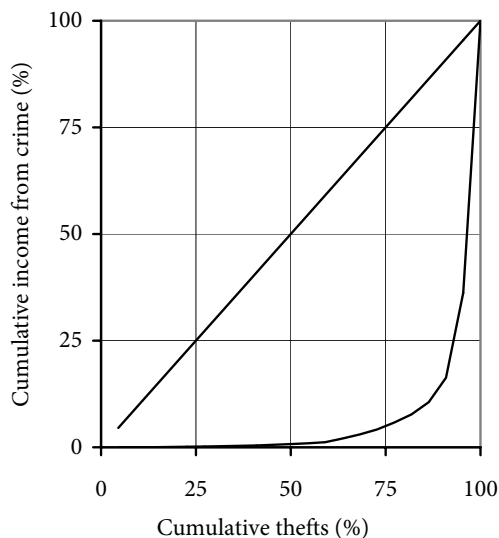


FIGURE 2b. Robbery Lorenz curve: 1730–1755

Source: NLW Gaol Files database.

The horse thief still had a good chance of escaping detection and, even if he was detected, there was no guarantee that he would be prosecuted.⁶³ In the absence of state assistance, the costs of prosecution were so high that some horse owners may have preferred to recover the horse and deal with the criminal informally. It is nonetheless possible, as Beattie has suggested, that prosecution rates for horse-stealing may have been higher than for other property crimes; horse theft was viewed with considerable antipathy and it is possible that owners may have been more inclined to prosecute as a deterrent.⁶⁴ Certainly, the national returns (Table 7) suggest that, once the decision to prosecute had been made, horse (and cattle) thieves had a relatively high probability of appearing before a trial jury, and of being convicted.⁶⁵ This may have been because most horse thieves tried to sell the animal, leaving little doubt as to their guilt. It is also possible, because many thieves were mobile farm workers, that they were unable to produce decent character witnesses.⁶⁶ Nevertheless, having been convicted, the horse thief was less likely to be executed than many other serious criminals. During the period of study only three per cent were executed, the majority being transported, usually for life.⁶⁷ This figure is similar to that for other types of serious livestock theft, but considerably lower than for a number of other capital crimes, possibly because livestock theft rarely involved violence.⁶⁸

⁶³ BPP, 1819, VIII, *Report of Select Committee on Capital Conviction*, pp. 11–12.

⁶⁴ This is consistent with the evidence of Thomas Shelton to the 1819 *Select Committee* (p. 26), who argued that 'I have not observed any disinclination to prosecute in the case of horse-stealing'.

⁶⁵ There were very few partial verdicts in horse-

stealing cases.

⁶⁶ See King, 'Prosecution associations', pp. 221–58.

⁶⁷ This figure is considerably less than that quoted in King (*Crime, justice and discretion*, pp. 274, 276) for the Home circuit. However, execution rates were lower on the other circuits too.

⁶⁸ King, *Crime, justice and discretion*, pp. 297–333.

TABLE 7. Legal outcomes of prosecutions: England and Wales, 1812–18

Crime	as per cent total committals			Executions (as per cent of convictions)
	No true bills and not prosecuted	Acquitted	Convicted	
Arson	30.5	43.7	25.9	51.0
Burglary & Housebreaking	14.3	24.8	60.9	7.2
Cattle-stealing	8.1	18.0	73.8	1.6
Forgery & Uttering	15.0	31.9	53.0	20.1
Horse-stealing	10.4	17.6	71.9	2.8
Robbery	17.2	35.4	47.4	13.6
Sheep-stealing	16.2	24.7	59.1	4.2

Source: BPP, 1819, VIII, *Report of Select Committee on Criminal Law Relating to capital Punishments in Felonies*, 1819, pp. 128–32.

Generally, if a horse thief was detected, there was a good chance that he would be convicted, but the prospects were less daunting for the Welsh horse thief. The gaol files suggest that only 81 per cent of those suspected of horse theft ever appeared before a trial jury, considerably lower than in England and Wales as a whole. It also seems that, once indicted, conviction rates were lower in Wales: 60 per cent as compared with 80 per cent in the area as a whole. The reasons for these differences are unclear, although the lower levels of population density might have reduced the chance of catching a thief in possession of a stolen horse.

III

The incentives to commit horse theft were fairly strong, but what sort of people were involved? Predictably, the majority were men. Only 30 women are mentioned in the NLW database. Women tended to have low overall crime rates, although this may have been exaggerated by low prosecution rates. Nevertheless, they do not seem to have been particularly involved in horse-stealing; they make up 17 per cent of all criminals in the database but only 5 per cent of the horse thieves.⁶⁹ This is probably due to a number of influences. First, women had fewer opportunities to steal horses. Relatively few worked with them and they were less likely to work outside than men. Secondly, they had less control over how they managed their time, an important requirement for horse-stealing, which was often done at night. Finally, women may have been discouraged because of the difficulties of disposal. As women rarely owned horses, they were more likely to arouse suspicion when trying to sell one. A case in point is Catherine Lloyd, a widow who was apprehended in Cardigan in 1789, trying to sell a stolen mare.⁷⁰ She

⁶⁹ G. Morgan and P. Rushton, *Rogues, thieves and the rule of law* (1998) pp. 100, 106, note that livestock theft

by women was unusual in the north-east too.

⁷⁰ NLW, Great Sessions, 4/905/1.

drew attention to herself by her anxiety to be paid and by her willingness to accept a price well below the value of the horse.⁷¹

As a number of authors have argued, the tendency of officials to use fairly general labels restricts the usefulness of court data to describe the occupations of the offenders.⁷² For what they are worth, the figures suggest that relatively few suspects primarily worked with horses. Only six defendants were described as jockeys, grooms, ostlers or carters, and there were only a couple of horse dealers. This is a little surprising, because dealers had a poor reputation, but this may have stemmed more from their selling unsound horses than from either stealing or fencing them. It is possible that they do not figure prominently because dealing was a licensed activity,⁷³ although there were unlicensed horse dealers.⁷⁴ Only five were innkeepers (another group with a poor reputation), less than the number of tailors and breech-makers (17) and cobblers (11).⁷⁵ It may be that their reputation stemmed less from direct involvement in horse-stealing than from their support of criminal networks and the provision of information to horse thieves about opportunities or buyers.

Farm servants were also under-represented; only six were recorded, although this may be because they were sometimes recorded as labourers. Nevertheless, we can be fairly sure that agricultural workers dominated the crime. Yeomen, who accounted for 29 per cent of horse thieves, but only 23 per cent of those in the NLW database, were over-represented. So were labourers, who accounted for 46 and 23 per cent respectively. As some labourers may have magnified their status in order to receive a more sympathetic hearing, it is even possible that these figures understate their importance. We should not be surprised that they played such an important part. If nothing else, their employment, their seasonal migration and their low wages provided them with both the opportunities and the financial incentives to steal horses.

A fairly typical example of the migrant horse-stealer was William Jones, who was apprehended at Knighton, Radnorshire, in November 1785.⁷⁶ Jones, who came from Shropshire, was aged 22 at the time of his crime. He had worked as a farm servant for eight years. Although he was described as a 'yeoman' in the court documents, he had become a day labourer two years before the crime was committed. In the months preceding the theft, he had worked on the harvest near Gloucester. When this finished, he made his way home, picking up occasional work. On the way, he came across a mare that was both saddled and bridled – the details are not clear – which he stole. Seeing an opportunity to make a profit, he then rode to Knighton, where he tried to sell the mare. But when he failed to produce a voucher, he was taken before the magistrates.

Job Pritchard and Howell Powell were also farm labourers. Both men came from Breconshire and, in the summer of 1740, decided to go on the tramp in search of work.⁷⁷ They first went to Herefordshire and then to Gloucestershire. However, they do not seem to have been very

⁷¹ NLW, Great Sessions, 4/197/6.

⁷² Edwards, *Horse trade*, p. 128.

⁷³ Moore-Colyer, *Welsh cattle drovers*, pp. 64–71.

⁷⁴ For example, *The Cambrian*, 21 Nov. 1807.

⁷⁵ On innkeepers, see P. Clark, 'The alehouse and

alternative society', in D. Pennington and K. Thomas (eds), *Puritans and revolutionaries* (1978).

⁷⁶ NLW, Great Sessions, 4/529/3.

⁷⁷ NLW, Great Sessions, 4/377/2.

TABLE 8. Age distribution of horse thieves and other criminals (per cent)

	<i>Horse-Thieves</i>			<i>NLW database – all thieves</i>	<i>Old Bailey Property Crimes</i>
	<i>NLW database</i>	<i>Prison Hulks 1828</i>	<i>Old Bailey</i>		
Under 20	5.4	8.1	18.9	19.9	30.6
20–24	19.4	21.2	31.8	19.7	22.4
25–29	16.1	24.2	17.4	15.4	13.8
30–34	17.2	13.1	8.5	13.5	9.6
35–39	9.7	15.2	8.0	9.0	7.0
40–44	9.7	3.0	8.0	8.8	5.5
45–49	8.6	5.1	3.5	4.8	4.1
50–54	5.4	1.0	1.0	4.0	2.6
55–59	3.2	3.0	2.0	2.5	1.9
60+	5.4	6.1	1.0	2.3	2.4

Source: NLW, Gaol Files database; Prison Hulks, TNA, HO 8; Old Bailey, www.oldbaileyonline.org.uk.

successful and decided to return home. Determined that this should not be empty-handed, they stole a pair of horses from Pritchard's former employer, which they later sold. Although they were probably not as opportunistic as Jones, it is doubtful that they were regarded as hardened criminals, and it was possibly because of this that the presiding judge recommended a commutation of their death sentences.⁷⁸

Information on the age of the offenders has survived for 93 cases.⁷⁹ The oldest recorded thief was 63,⁸⁰ while the youngest was 16.⁸¹ As with most crimes, the crime rate of horse-stealers tended to rise with age, peaking in early adulthood, after which it declined. It seems that horse thieves were relatively old, with an average age of 34 years, compared with 30 for all criminals in the NLW database and a marked under-representation of those under the age of 20 (Table 8). This does not seem to have been a peculiarity of the Welsh data; it was evident on the prison hulks in 1828⁸² and, judging from the Old Bailey transcripts over the 1730–1830 period, London too.⁸³

⁷⁸ TNA, SP 36/56, fo. 186.

⁷⁹ It is also subject to data-heaping, with over-representation of those aged 20, 30, and 40. This may slightly distort the frequency distributions presented.

⁸⁰ NLW, Great Sessions, 4/634/3.

⁸¹ NLW, Great Sessions, 4/201/1; 635/4.

⁸² On the prison hulks, the mean age of the horse stealers was 32 years and the median 28. However, the hulk data may be subject to selective age bias. Indeed, we might expect young horse thieves to attract an unusual number of transportation sentences.

⁸³ Although, when compared with the overall age distribution, young horse thieves were under-represented

at the Old Bailey, it is evident that the proportions under 20 and between 20 and 25 were considerably higher than in Wales. One possible reason for this difference is that many young thieves from the Home Counties may have converged on London to dispose of stolen horses because of the anonymity that the metropolis provided. Perhaps they reasoned that they were less likely to arouse suspicion there because the large volume of horse sales implied that purchasers would come into contact with a wide variety of vendors. However, it is also likely that prosecution practices differed in London, although whether this resulted in an unusual number of juvenile prosecutions specifically for horse theft is not clear.

Why were young thieves under-represented? There are (at least) three possible reasons. First, in agricultural communities a high proportion of young men would have been employed as farm servants. King has argued that the frustrations of service help to explain the relatively early peak in the age-crime profile for property theft as a whole.⁸⁴ However, because service reduced the mobility of young farm workers, it may, if anything, have reduced their opportunities to steal horses. Secondly, young men may have anticipated difficulties in disposing of stolen horses. Like women, young men were unlikely to own horses and would have been treated with suspicion when trying to sell one. Finally, it may be that their lifestyles, values and responsibilities encouraged them to commit crimes that provided excitement and immediate returns, crimes such as burglary and robbery. Only later, as their lifestyles and responsibilities changed, did they shift towards low-risk, relatively lucrative crimes, such as horse-stealing.⁸⁵

IV

While it was primarily an acquisitive crime, not every horse theft was driven by profit. Some were the result of family feuds and disagreements with employers. Thus, in 1730 Edward Lewis, a Radnorshire servant, stole a horse from his brother-in-law and employer, following a dispute over unpaid wages.⁸⁶ John David, a Carmarthenshire labourer, stole a horse from his employer when his request to attend an aunt's funeral was refused.⁸⁷ Predictably, some thefts were committed by joy-riders. For instance, William Bevan, a Radnorshire yeoman, was accused of horse theft in 1756, although he was never prosecuted, the horse having been found on a nearby moor.⁸⁸ In the same year, John Rowland, a Denbighshire labourer, was indicted for stealing a bay gelding, worth only 15s. In his defence Rowland argued that, being tired, he had borrowed the horse. However, there were doubts about the veracity of his story; he was found guilty, although he was pardoned on joining the army or navy.⁸⁹

The most interesting issue, however, is whether horse-stealing was motivated by economic hardship. In his study of sheep theft in Yorkshire, Wells suggested that it was committed for a variety of reasons. Although butchers and farmers sometimes stole for profit, urban and rural workers stole sheep as a means of alleviating poverty, supplementing their meager incomes, even enhancing their diets.⁹⁰ He also implied that, occasionally, under conditions of extreme privation, it was a means of survival.⁹¹ Was horse theft committed for similar reasons? It is

Note 83 continued.

See P. King, 'The rise of juvenile delinquency in England, 1780-1840: changing patterns of perception and prosecution' in his *Crime and law*, pp. 73-113.

⁸⁴ King, *Crime and discretion*, pp. 176-83.

⁸⁵ D. J. Steffensmeier, E. A. Allan, M. D. Harer and C. Streifel, 'Age and the distribution of crime', *American J. Sociology* 94 (1989), pp. 803-31.

⁸⁶ NLW, Great Sessions, 4/516/1.

⁸⁷ NLW, Great Sessions, 4/611/6.

⁸⁸ NLW, Great Sessions, 4/381/4.

⁸⁹ NLW, Great Sessions, 4/272/4.

⁹⁰ R. Wells, 'Sheep-rustling in Yorkshire in the age of the industrial and agricultural revolutions', *Northern Hist.* 20 (1984), pp. 127-45; J. Rule, 'The manifold causes of rural crime: sheep-stealing in England, c.1740-1840', in J. Rule and R. Wells (eds), *Crime, protest and popular politics in southern England, 1740-1850* (1997), pp. 237-54, draws similar conclusions.

⁹¹ M. Freeman, 'Plebs or predators? Deer-stealing in Wychwood Forest, Oxfordshire in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries', *Social Hist.* 21 (1996), pp. 12-13, suggests that hardship was occasionally a reason for deer theft.

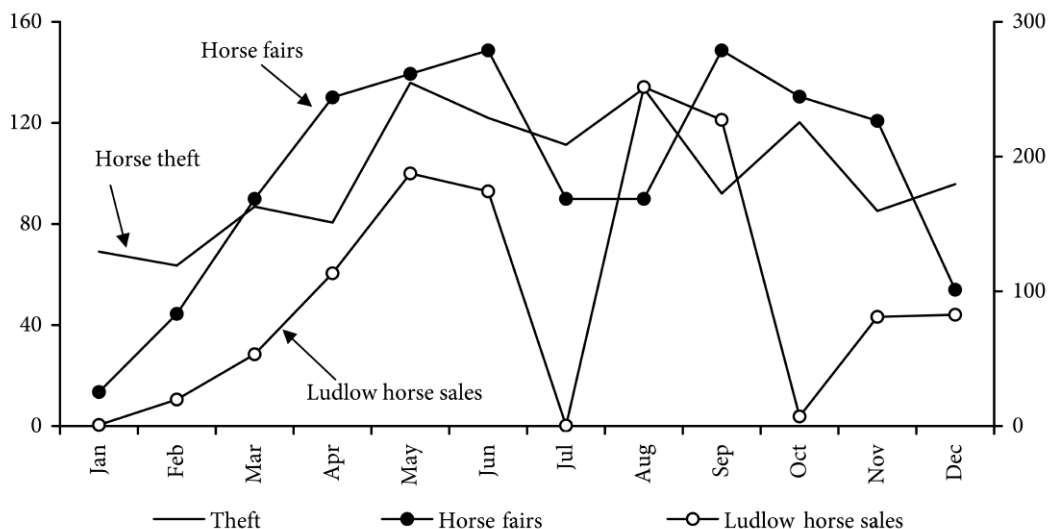


FIGURE 3. Horse theft, horse fairs, Ludlow horse sales: seasonal indexes

Sources: Theft, NLW Gaol Files database; Fairs, Shropshire Archives, 522/10/85; Sales, see Figure 1.

difficult to be sure.⁹² Horse flesh was rarely, if ever, eaten in Britain and, although they were marketable, horses could not be turned into immediate cash. In contrast to either food theft or burglary, circuit judges rarely used distress as a mitigating factor when making a recommendation to commute a death sentence for horse-stealing.⁹³ In addition, there are relatively few cases in the NLW database where distress was or could be used as an explanation for the crime. One possible exception is the case of Thomas Williams, a 36 year old Breconshire labourer who stole a horse from a Radnorshire farmer. On being confronted with the crime, Williams had claimed that he needed money for his children who were ill with smallpox.⁹⁴

The seasonal pattern also casts doubt on the claim that horse-stealing was sensitive to economic hardship. We find that the winter months were the peak time for a number of rural

⁹² Further support for this claim comes from the Irish Famine of the 1840s. At this time, most crimes increased, and horse-stealing was no exception, although, in contrast to cattle and sheep convictions, which increased rapidly, there was little change in its relative importance. See N. Woodward, 'Transportation convictions during the Great Irish Famine', *J. Interdisciplinary Hist.* 37 (2006), pp. 59–87.

⁹³ For example, in the case of John Severn, the judge pointed to his previous good character and to his usefulness as a sailor (TNA, HO 47/11/23). In the case of George Harding, his deep penitence and religious observation were mentioned (TNA, HO 47/8/2). It is also worth noting that, in appeal cases (these can be found

in TNA, HO 78), it was very unusual to argue that distress was the cause of the crime. Instead appellants tend to stress that the criminal had been led astray by either hardened criminals or alcohol, that he had extensive responsibilities, and that he had been wrongly convicted. An illustrative exception is William Rose, a Derbyshire farmer, who was convicted of stealing a mare in 1828. His appellants testified not only to Rose's good character, but argued that the crime had been motivated by his own financial distress, the loss of his own horses, and his large number of dependants. For a general discussion of pardoning see King, *Crime, justice and discretion*, pp. 297–333.

⁹⁴ NLW, Great Sessions, 4/395/1.

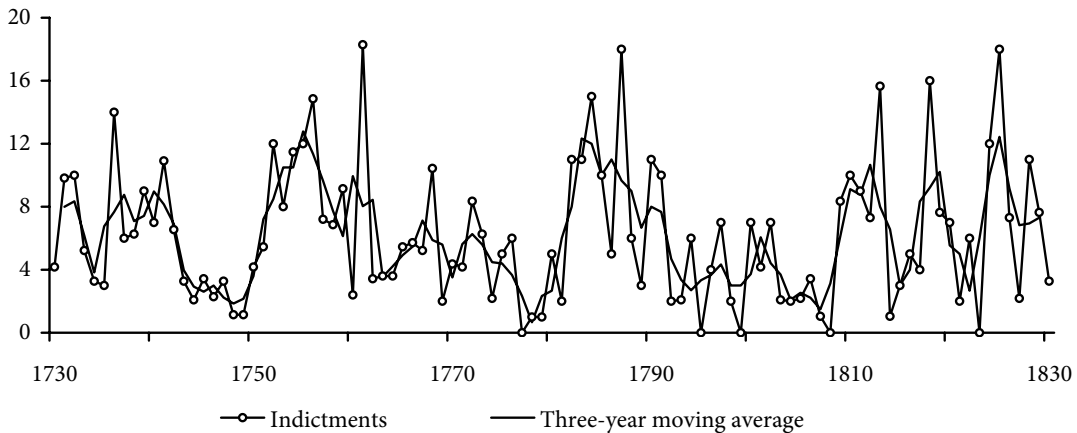


FIGURE 4. Indictments for horse-stealing: Wales

Source: NLW Gaol Files database.

crimes – wood and grain theft, sheep-stealing and certain types of poaching.⁹⁵ This, of course, was a time when wages were at their lowest and unemployment, which provided both an incentive and opportunity to steal, was at its highest. However, the pattern for horse-stealing was quite different. Far from being a winter crime, it was prevalent in the late spring, summer and early autumn (Figure 3).

Why was horse-stealing so uncommon in the winter? It was a not consequence of low prices; indeed, judging from the Ludlow evidence, horse prices were at their highest in the winter months and at their lowest in the third quarter of the year. Rather, it was probably due a combination factors. Judging from the incidence of fairs and the volume of sales, horses were more difficult to dispose of during the winter months (Figure 5). These were also the months when agricultural labourers were relatively immobile and had fewer opportunities to steal horses. Valuable horses were more likely to be stabled during the winter months, offering them some protection against theft.

Even if it was concentrated into the summer months, it is still possible that horse theft was more common in years of hardship. Figure 4 shows the annual pattern of prosecutions. It seems to suggest there was no marked long-term trend in horse-stealing. This is a little surprising, because we might have expected an increase over the period. After all, this was a period when the horse population was growing nationally and, with transport improvements and the growth of private sales, one when stolen horses could have been disposed of with increasing ease. There are two possible explanations for why this did not happen. First, any increase in the incentive to steal horses may have been countered by a greater security-consciousness on the part of owners.⁹⁶

⁹⁵ T. Shakesheff, 'Wood and crop theft' p. 4; A. Howkins, 'Economic crime and class war: poaching and the Game Laws, 1840–1880', in B. Harrell-Bond, *The imposition of the law* (1979), pp. 280–81; H. Osborne, 'The seasonality of nineteenth-century poaching', *AgHR*

48 (2000), pp. 27–41; Woodward, 'Seasonality and sheep-stealing'.

⁹⁶ T. J. Philipson and R. A. Posner, 'The economic epidemiology of crime', *J. Law and Economics* 29 (1996), pp. 405–33.

TABLE 9. Average number of horses stolen

<i>Phase</i>	<i>Average</i>
Peace 1730–8	6.9
War 1739–48	4.9
Post-war 1749–50	2.7
Peace 1751–5	9.6
War 1756–63	8.2
Post-war 1764–5	4.5
Peace 1766–75	5.4
War 1776–83	4.6
Post-war 1785–5	12.5
Peace 1786–92	7.9
War incl. Peace of Amiens, 1793–1815	4.5
Post-war 1816–17	4.5
Peace 1818–30	7.6

Source: NLW, Gaol Files database.

There is no compelling reason to suppose this did happen, although the emergence of prosecution societies, the *raison d'être* of which was often to counter horse-theft, is suggestive. Secondly, it is possible that, because of changes in prosecution practices, the indictment figures are an unreliable indicator of long-term trends in horse-stealing.

Annual fluctuations in recorded horse thefts probably provide a more reliable indicator of short-term movements, although even these may have been affected by the impact of panics on prosecution rates.⁹⁷ Horse theft figures displayed considerable amplitude from one year to the next, pointing perhaps to the importance of casual opportunists. The figures also display a degree of bunching, which is likely to reflect changing economic conditions. There is considerable evidence from the nineteenth century that short-term fluctuations in property crime were positively related to both food prices and unemployment.⁹⁸ Both Beattie and Hay have offered a similar explanation for fluctuations in property crime in the eighteenth century too. Thus, they show that the number of thefts tended to increase when either grain or consumer prices were high, with a correspondingly high cost of living.⁹⁹ They also show that crime figures

⁹⁷ Some historians have suggested that at times when crime is rising, or is anticipated to rise, prosecution rates will rise as a deterrent. As a result, prosecutions may not tell us much about real changes in criminal activity. This, however, is only partially convincing. In particular, the argument makes no allowance for the possibility that at such times property owners will become more security-conscious, protecting their property more intensively as well as prosecuting more readily. Under such circumstances, at least part of the rise in prosecutions is likely

to reflect higher levels of criminality.

⁹⁸ The evidence is summarized in S. Hurwitz and K. O. Christiansen, *Criminology* (1983), pp. 147–62.

⁹⁹ This interpretation may need to be modified. Periods of high food prices were often, although not always, due to harvest failures. These, in turn, simultaneously created both high food prices and unemployment. Harvest failures were equivalent to what an economist would refer to as a supply-shock.

TABLE 10. Correlation matrix

	Horse theft	Sheep theft	Food theft	Food theft –(1)	Mobilization	Consumer prices –(1)	Wheat prices –(1)	Horse prices
Horse theft	1.00							
Sheep theft	0.186***	1.00						
Food theft	0.200**	0.413*	1.00					
Food theft –(1)	0.225**	0.287**	0.440*	1.00				
Mobilization	–0.201**	–208**	0.19	–0.05	1.00			
Consumer prices –(1)	0.16	0.08	0.12	0.488*	–0.16	1.00		
Wheat prices –(1)	0.241**	0.11	0.274**	0.363*	–0.30	0.691*	1.00	
Horse prices	0.384*	0.230***	0.20	0.480*	–0.54	0.464*	0.449*	1.00

Note: *, **, *** denotes statistically significant at 1, 5 and 10% level. Consumer, wheat and horse prices were measured as the per cent deviation from a seven-year moving average; mobilization is the number mobilized deflated by an index of the total English population.

Sources: Grain prices, BPP, Population Census, 1831, 1833, XXXVI; consumer prices, B. R. Mitchell and P. Deane, *Abstract of British historical statistics* (1971), pp. 486–9; population, E. A. Wrigley and R. S. Schofield, *The population history of England, 1541–1871* (1981), pp. 533–4; number in armed forces, BPP, *Annual armed forces manning levels based on numbers borne into navy and number of men voted for army, 1868–69*, XXXV, pp. 1177–86.

were low during periods of war, which they attribute to the impact of mobilization on male unemployment, although they suggest, too, that recruitment may have been selectively targeted at those with high levels of criminality.¹⁰⁰

Did horse theft follow this general pattern? There is some evidence that horse-stealing was influenced by the level of mobilization. As Table 9 shows, horse-stealing tended to be less common during wartime periods than in the surrounding peacetime years. There is also a negative correlation between the degree of mobilization and horse theft (Table 10). It is

¹⁰⁰ This interpretation too may be partial. Some authors, such as J. Innes and J. Styles, 'The crime wave: recent writing on crime and criminal justice in eighteenth-century England', *J. British Studies* 25 (1986), pp. 391–93, and P. King, 'War as a judicial resource. Press gangs and prosecution rates, 1740–1830', in N. Landau (ed.), *Law, crime and society, 1660–1830* (2002), pp. 97–116, have suggested that the relationship may be at least partially spurious because impressment was often used as an informal sanction against thieves. Another complication is that, during wartime periods, the supply of potential targets declined as wartime finance diverted resources from the household to the military sector. There is some empirical evidence to support this hypothesis. See P. Deane, 'War and industrialization', in J. Winter (ed.), *War and economic development: essays in memory of David Joselin* (1975), p. 99.

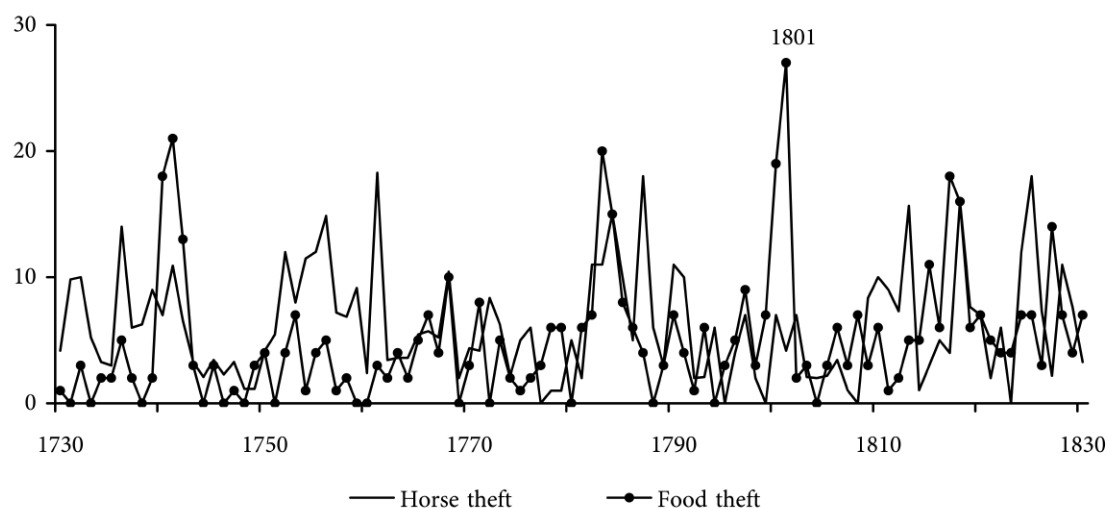


FIGURE 5. Indictments for horse and food theft

Note: Food theft excludes indictments committed under riot conditions.

Source: NLW Gaol Files database.

interesting to note, however, that there was no tendency for horse theft to rise in immediate post-war years – with the exception of the American Revolutionary wars. The evidence also suggests that numbers of horse thefts tended to be higher in years of high food prices; both lagged consumer and wheat prices are positively correlated with horse-stealing. Thus, it seems that the crime tended to be highest in peacetime periods when prices were rising; the least propitious conditions were during wars when food prices were falling.¹⁰¹ It is also interesting to note that there was a positive association between horse-stealing and horse prices, which points to the possible strength of the resale motive.

We can also gauge whether horse-stealing was common in periods of acute distress by examining the relationship with food theft. In contrast to sheep-stealing, the correlation between horse and food theft, although positive, is quite weak. Nevertheless, as Figure 5 shows, there were four periods when indictments for food theft were exceptionally high: the early 1740s, the years immediately following the American Revolution, the early years of the nineteenth century and in 1817–18. It may be significant that three of these peaks coincided with high levels of horse-stealing. The exception is 1800–01. However, this may simply reflect a shortage of suitable targets, the demand for horses being exceptional during the French wars.¹⁰²

¹⁰¹ The average number of horse thefts were as follows: peace, rising prices (i.e. above trend), 8.30; war, rising prices, 6.46; peace, falling prices, 6.17; war, declining prices, 4.13.

¹⁰² K. Chivers, 'The supply of horses in Great Britain in the nineteenth century', in Thompson (ed.), *Horses in European economic history*, p. 33

V

Thus there is some evidence that horse-stealing tended to rise in years of distress, although the figures for food theft prosecutions display considerably greater amplitude than those for horse-stealing.¹⁰³ As both Beattie and Hay imply, one possible explanation for this is that horse-stealing was dominated by professional criminals. This is plausible; it is generally assumed that professionals tend to gravitate towards the most lucrative crimes and are less likely to be affected by the measures introduced by security-conscious property owners and by economic fluctuations.¹⁰⁴ Unfortunately, legal records are far from ideal for examining whether this was the case.¹⁰⁵ Complications also arise from a general tendency to exaggerate the role of the hardened criminal¹⁰⁶ and confusion over the term 'professional criminal', which is often used to describe men who were totally dependent on crime. It is doubtful whether many property criminals satisfy this criterion today¹⁰⁷ and it was even less likely in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries.¹⁰⁸ Egmond has suggested that a better definition might be someone with a long-term involvement with crime.¹⁰⁹ Such people, of course, were more likely to be habitual criminals, to be part of criminal networks, or even possibly part of a gang or a more sophisticated organization, and to be relatively proficient thieves. If horse-stealing was dominated by such people, not only would the crime be less sensitive to economic conditions but it would have been difficult for horse owners to protect their property.¹¹⁰

Nevertheless, although professionals played a part in horse-stealing, it is doubtful whether they dominated the crime. As Patrick Colquhoun put it, 'In some instance, this offence is committed by persons not proselytes to vice, and in others, by persons of the most depraved character'.¹¹¹ It would have been surprising if many were members of sophisticated organizations. Criminal organization will adapt to the realities of the situation so that the thief can secure respectable returns with low risks of detection and prosecution.¹¹² It will be influenced by the existence of entry barriers, such as skill or capital requirements, the advantages of specialization, and the

¹⁰³ The coefficient of variation for horse-stealing over the period was 71.0. For food theft it was 102.5.

¹⁰⁴ BPP, XIX, *Report of Royal Commission on Constabulary Forces* (1839), p. 8, offers some support for this view. However, the evidence referred to certain major urban centres.

¹⁰⁵ Morgan and Rushton, *Problem of law enforcement*, pp. 77–86.

¹⁰⁶ For example, the question was posed in meetings of the *Select Committee on the Capital Convictions* (1819), pp. 40–1, of whether there was an organized trade in the export of stolen horses. This view received short shrift from those who gave evidence.

¹⁰⁷ See, for example, H. R. Holzman, 'The serious habitual property offender as moonlighter: an empirical study of labor force participation among robbers and burglars', *J. Criminal Law and Criminology* 73 (1983), pp. 1774–92.

¹⁰⁸ C. Emsley, *Crime and society in England, 1750–1900*

(1987), pp. 129–37.

¹⁰⁹ F. Egmond, *Underworlds: organised crime in the Netherlands* (1993), p. 43.

¹¹⁰ P. Tremblay, Y. Clermont and M. Cusson, 'Jockeys and joyriders: changing patterns in car theft opportunity structures', *British J. Criminology* 34 (1994), pp. 307–21, have shown that, in Canada, in response to new security methods, such as steering column locks and new lock buttons, amateur car theft declined, while professional theft continued to rise.

¹¹¹ BPP, *Select Committee on Capital Convictions*, p. 26. He was referring to both horse- and sheep-stealing. However, rather stronger support for the claim that horse thieves were relatively professional, at least in urban areas, comes from the 1839 *Royal Commission on the Constabulary*, p. 22.

¹¹² J. J. Tobias, 'The crime industry', *British J. Criminology* 8 (1968), pp. 247–58; M. McIntosh, *The organisation of crime* (1975).

importance of backward and forward linkages. Coining, which enjoyed fairly extensive linkages, centered around a limited number of skilled coiners who would employ trusted associates to supply the metal (sometimes clippers) and dispose of the coin (utterers).¹¹³ The poaching of game birds, by contrast, did not require many skills, but the concentration of game, the employment of gamekeepers and the nature of the activity required the employment of teams, composed of look-outs as well as men to drive, dispatch and sell the birds.¹¹⁴ Horse-stealing, however, was a more prosaic crime. Apart from an ability to work with horses, it did not require many skills; there were few linkages or advantages from specialization; and, with the possible exception of assistance to catch a difficult horse, the employment of accomplices offered few advantages. We might assume that most horse thieves worked alone and had few criminal connections.

The database suggests that slightly less than 90 per cent of those indicted were unaccompanied, although this is probably an overestimate. Some principal offenders may have tried to protect their accessories, and prosecutors may have been more inclined to deal with them informally. Thomas Jenkin, who was believed to have stolen a horse in Llanfigen, Brecon in November 1737 was known to have had an accomplice who was not indicted.¹¹⁵ That most horse thefts were committed by solitary individuals is not to say that criminal gangs were never involved.¹¹⁶ Thus, Henry Thomas, a Carmarthenshire shoemaker, who was convicted in 1810, was part of a gang that committed a series of both highway robberies and horse thefts.¹¹⁷ Another gang was associated with John Astley, an established Bristonian criminal who was in league with a publican, John Morris, who had had the idea that it would be profitable 'to steal small horses from the mountains of Wales, that it might easily be done and kept secret'. Astley, in the company of different men, went on at least three forays into Wales. A third gang, a fairly sophisticated one, was associated with Edmund Marsden and Reece Morris, who were involved in reciprocal cross-border thefts and exchanges.¹¹⁸ Such activity, however, seems to have been unusual.

There is also evidence that some horse thieves were rogues.¹¹⁹ There are examples of horse thieves who were suspected or even convicted of other crimes, such as William Bound (1732), already under a death sentence for burglary, and John Martin (1825), for larceny.¹²⁰ Some thieves were also part of wider criminal networks. Thus, one Breconshire thief was, by his own confession, 'intimately acquainted with several thieves',¹²¹ while another came from a family of known horse-stealers.¹²² The finding that a considerable number of the horses were stolen by habitual horse thieves provides a stronger argument for professional involvement. The database suggests that slightly more than a fifth of the horses were stolen by criminals who had

¹¹³ Morgan and Rushton, *Problem of law enforcement*, pp. 83–4. See also the fascinating account of the 'yellow trade' in John Styles in "'Our traitorous money makers". The Yorkshire coiners and the law, 1760–83', in J. Brewer and J. Styles (eds), *An ungovernable people. The English and their law in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries* (1980).

¹¹⁴ On poaching gangs, see Munsche, *Gentlemen and poachers*, pp. 65–9.

¹¹⁵ NLW, Great Sessions, 4/376/2.

¹¹⁶ For some discussion of gang activity in Wales, see Howell, *Rural poor*, pp. 200, 233–35. Edwards, *Horse trade*, pp. 120–22, also discusses horse-stealing gangs.

¹¹⁷ NLW, Great Sessions, 4/758/1.

¹¹⁸ *Hereford J.* 7 Nov. 1829.

¹¹⁹ NLW, Great Sessions, 4/374/2.

¹²⁰ NLW, Great Sessions, 4/376/4; 836/5.

¹²¹ NLW, Great Sessions, 4/374/2.

¹²² NLW, Great Sessions, 4/180/5.

stolen two or more horses. For example, Thomas Davies, a Cardiganshire yeoman, who was sentenced in 1783, was implicated in separate horse thefts in Cardiganshire, Radnorshire and Montgomeryshire.¹²³ Similarly, Thomas Sheen, a 28 year old Radnorshire yeoman, was charged in 1824 with stealing 11 horses.¹²⁴ Most of these horses were stolen locally and sold at various places over the border in Shropshire. The most spectacularly habitual horse stealer, however, was Henry Richard Robert, a yeoman from Llangollen, Denbighshire, who was accused of stealing 19 horses in the years between 1756 and 1762. He usually stole his horses, unaccompanied, in the border counties, particularly Montgomeryshire, Radnorshire and Shropshire, before selling them nearer to his home. Robert seems to have had a preference for horses of fairly low value, which were stolen from fields at dusk or at night.¹²⁵

It would seem that, in terms of their professionalism, horse thieves were a mixed bunch; although some warranted the description 'professional horse thief', many others did not. The impression is that most would be described as opportunist or middle-range criminals.¹²⁶ Few were violent men, David Rosser being one exception. He stole a horse in Radnorshire in 1741 and was latter arrested in Llanidloes, Montgomeryshire, armed and described as a highway robber.¹²⁷ Owen Jones, who stole his father's horse, was known to be guilty of family violence.¹²⁸ These men seem to have been unusual. It is possible that horse thieves were generally averse to violence, and were attracted to horse theft because, like burglary, it offered high rewards with little risk of physical danger.¹²⁹

VI

It is evident that most horse thieves were fairly cautious criminals, often adopting tactics that would reduce the chances of detection.¹³⁰ They opted for soft targets, preferring to steal horses off the hills or from fields rather than from stables or yards. Newspaper advertisements suggest that thieves stole a disproportionate number of mares, which were more likely to be pastured. They would make use of inside knowledge, stealing from employers and neighbours.¹³¹ William Peter, a yeoman from Cellan, Carmarthenshire, was sentenced to death in 1811 for stealing a horse from his neighbour, a farmer who was at a chapel meeting at the time of the theft. Samuel Watts, a Pembrokeshire clothier, stole a horse from a previous employer.¹³² Most horse thefts took place within a radius of ten kilometers from the thief's home (Figure 6).¹³³ In those cases

¹²³ NLW, Great Sessions, 4/387/3.

¹²⁴ NLW, Great Sessions, 4/537/2.

¹²⁵ The average value of horses stolen was £3.76. For the database as a whole, the average for 1756–62 was £3.60.

¹²⁶ The distinction between professionals, casual opportunists and middle-range criminals is one made by D. A. Cohen, 'A fellowship of thieves: property criminals in eighteenth-century Massachusetts', *J. Social Hist.* 22 (1988–9), pp. 65–92.

¹²⁷ NLW, Great Sessions, 4/519/7.

¹²⁸ NLW, Great Sessions, 4/254/5.

¹²⁹ Woodward, 'Burglary in Wales', p. 55.

¹³⁰ This was implied by Edwards in *Horse trade*,

pp. 112–13.

¹³¹ J. E. Archer, 'Poaching gangs and violence', *British J. Criminology* 39 (1999), pp. 26–8 suggested that a high proportion of poachers were urban, industrial workers. A similar view was expressed in 1839 *Royal Commission on the Constabulary*, p. 13. This was not the case with Welsh horse-stealers.

¹³² NLW, Great Sessions, 4/823/3.

¹³³ A road map planner was used to calculate these distances. Inevitably the estimates, although indicative, are not strictly accurate, the biases being greatest in upland areas where the planned routes are more likely to be circuitous.

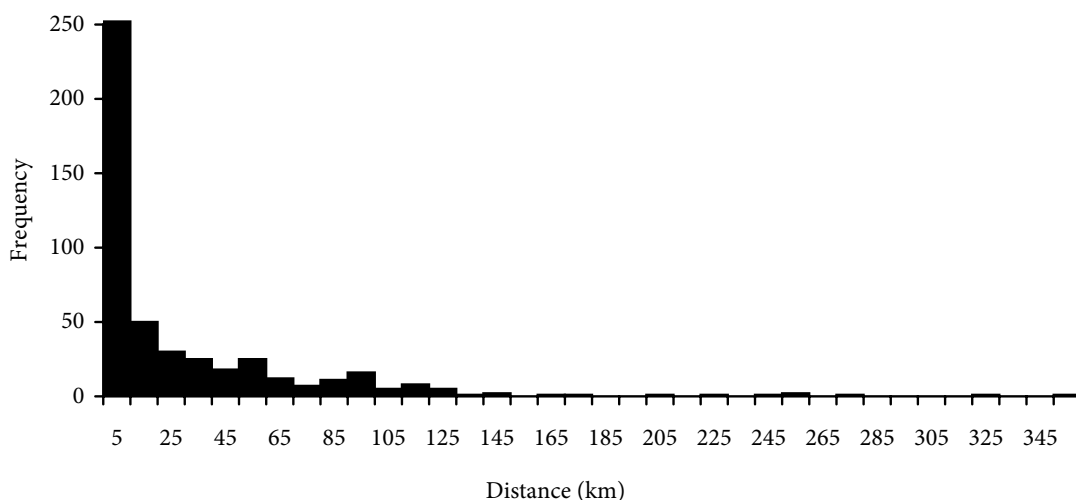


FIGURE 6. Distance between parish of residence and parish of offence

Note: N = 500; mean = 28.8; standard deviation = 46.5.

Source: NLW, Gaol Files database.

where the crime was committed at a distance from home, the thief was often well-informed. Henry Robert, the habitual horse thief mentioned above, travelled widely in the border counties, committing a number of his crimes in the same locality. James Roberts, a London-based livestock dealer who was convicted in 1829 for stealing a horse, returned to the area of his upbringing to commit his crimes.¹³⁴

Having stolen the horse, the thief would occasionally attempt to confuse his pursuers by changing the characteristics of the animal. Sometimes he would use lamp-black to cover up markings.¹³⁵ On other occasions he would dock or shorten the horse's tail. The obvious way to avoid detection, however, was to take the horse well away from the scene of the crime.¹³⁶ Sometimes the thief adopted all of these practices. One interesting case is that of William Taylor, who is one of the few servants in the database. He was persuaded to steal a horse by his employer, William Jones, a farmer from Builth Wells, Breconshire.¹³⁷ Thus, Taylor was given a guinea to cover his expenses, and told to go a considerable distance from home. The following night he reached Canon Norton, Herefordshire, where he caught a cart mare, valued at £15, in the yard of a local farmer. The following day he returned to Builth with the mare. Jones' intention, it seems, was to disguise the horse, using lamp black to conceal a blaze, to hide the mare in Skethrog, almost forty kilometers to the south, and then either sell or use her. However, as Jones and Taylor were indiscrete, the crime soon became common knowledge; Taylor was found guilty and sentenced to death, later commuted, while Jones, the architect of the crime, was sentenced to seven years transportation for receiving.

¹³⁴ NLW, Great Sessions, 4/538/6.

¹³⁵ NLW, Great Sessions, 4/614/1.

¹³⁶ Styles, 'Print and policing,' pp. 57-77.

¹³⁷ NLW, Great Sessions, 4/537/2.

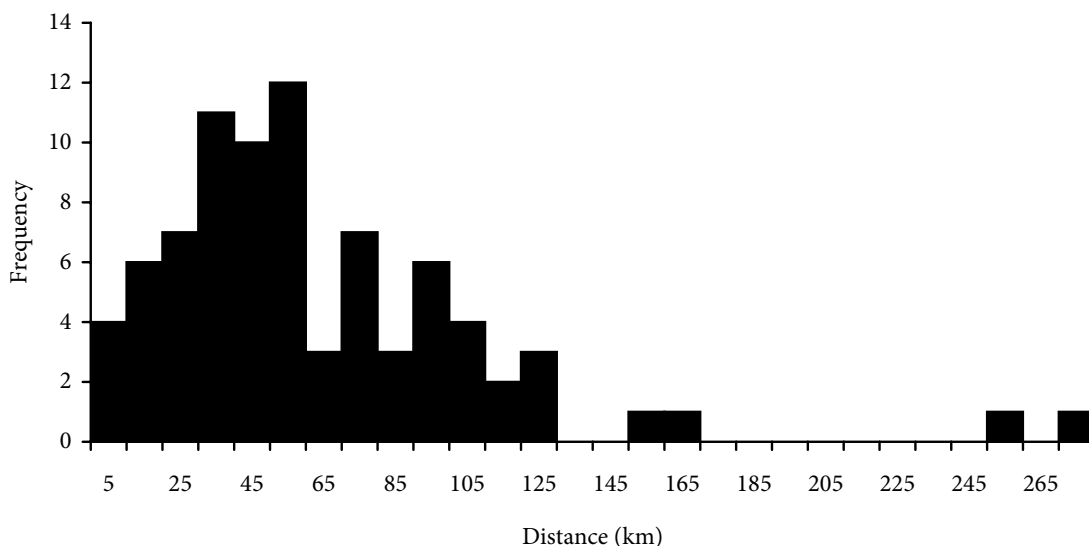


FIGURE 7. Distance between parishes of offence and disposal of horse

Note: N = 83; mean = 64.9; standard deviation = 46.8.

The practice of moving the horse a considerable distance from where it was stolen seems to have been a common practice. Information about such distances has been recovered for 83 cases. As Figure 7 shows, over half the horses were sold or disposed of more than 50 kilometres away, and some were moved quite spectacular distances. In the case of John Astley (1784), already mentioned, the horses were stolen in either Montgomeryshire or Radnorshire and sold in Bristol. Another Bristonian, Zacariah Jones (1770), stole ponies from the Merionethshire mountains,¹³⁸ while John Francis, a Carmarthenshire yeoman, was accused in 1745 of a stealing a horse in Wells, Somerset.¹³⁹ The need to move the stolen horse a considerable distance explains why certain types of animal were more likely to be stolen.¹⁴⁰ Usually, they stole broken horses, although occasionally they may have been only halter-broken. The theft of working horses, although it took place occasionally, was quite unusual. No doubt this was partly because draught horses and to a lesser extent, pack horses, were less mobile and flexible in upland areas than the smaller riding horses that thieves seemed to prefer.

The most crucial decisions the thief had to make related to the disposal of the animal. First, he had to decide whether to sell the horse or keep it. As the latter increased the risks of detection, it is not surprising that most thieves opted to sell. The second decision was whether to use the services of a fence. Although one or two horses were sold this way, most thieves chose to sell the horse themselves.¹⁴¹ This was because relatively few horse thieves were part of

¹³⁸ NLW, Great Sessions, 4/302/1.

¹³⁹ NLW, Great Sessions, 4/614/1.

¹⁴⁰ These arguments are based on adverts appearing in *The Cambrian* and *Carmarthen J.* from their inception

until 1830.

¹⁴¹ This was not always the case. See BPP, *Report on Commons' Inclosure*, pp. 215–6.

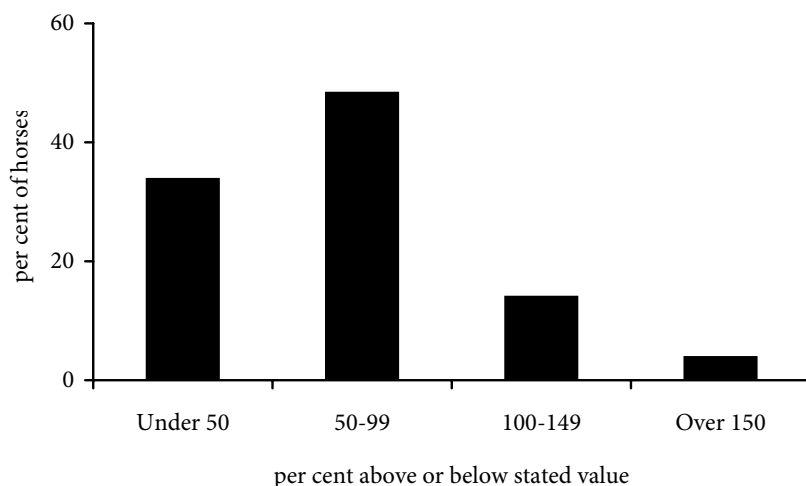


FIGURE 8. Negotiated price of stolen horses relative to value (Old Bailey)

Note: N = 207; median = 57.1; mean = 65.6; minimum = 4.6; maximum = 336.7; standard deviation = 40.4.

Source: www.oldbaileyonline.org.uk.

criminal networks and would have had little information about potential fences. For their part, fences would have been reluctant to deal with casual opportunists or thieves of whom they had little knowledge. The incentive to use a fence is strongest when the turnover of stolen goods is slow and the risks of detection are high.¹⁴² But, as we have seen, the market for horses was an active one and the thief could expect to dispose of his animal quite quickly.

The thief then had to decide what price he would accept. Occasionally the sale took the form of a swap, although usually it was a cash transaction.¹⁴³ Nevertheless, the thief faced a trade-off. If he sold the horse at or near its market value he could earn a considerable amount from his crime, but it might take a long time to dispose of the animal, which would increase the risks of detection. If he sold at discount, the returns would be lower but the speed of disposal would be greater. This trade-off, however, was complicated by the possibility that too low an asking price would arouse the suspicion of a potential purchaser.

What sort of prices did thieves secure? Unfortunately, the gaol files include very little information on this matter, although one or two cases surfaced. For example, Catherine Lloyd, mentioned above, was prepared to accept a discount of 50 per cent. Similarly, Henry Thomas, the Llandeilo gang member, stole a horse worth £15 15s.; his initial asking price was £3 3s., although eventually he settled for 30s., a discount of 90 per cent. The Old Bailey Session Papers include further evidence on this matter and broadly support the conclusion that thieves usually sold at a considerable discount. They suggest that occasionally thieves secured a price above the estimated value of the animal (Figure 8). More often than not, however, they sold at discount.¹⁴⁴

¹⁴² M. McIntosh, 'Thieves and fences: markets and power in professional crime', *British J. Criminology* 16 (1976), pp. 257–66.

¹⁴³ NLW, Great Sessions, 4/517/2; 376/1.

¹⁴⁴ The descriptive statistics were as follows: mean 66; median 57; minimum 5; maximum 340; standard deviation 43.

On average, this was 40 per cent, although roughly one third accepted less than half the value of the animal.¹⁴⁵

Although most horse thieves were cautious, like most criminal groups they displayed varying degrees of proficiency. Some were unlucky, some were too cavalier or too incompetent to make good felons.¹⁴⁶ For example, Jones and Taylor, mentioned above, were overheard discussing their crime, while William Peter, also mentioned earlier, was traced by following the horse's hoof-prints. On some occasions the thieves were identified at the scene of the crime and even in the act of commission. Thus, James Ellis, a Glamorganshire labourer, was accused of two crimes in 1738 – one of cattle maiming, the other of horse theft; on both occasions he was observed.¹⁴⁷ Sometimes thieves aroused suspicion because they did not establish their credibility as horse owners. Thus, one thief was brought before a magistrate because he had been seen riding a horse 'meanly appareled,' another because he rode the horse without a saddle.¹⁴⁸ Suspicion could also be raised by the behaviour of the criminal, who might under-price the horse, appear nervous, or push the horse too hard in an attempt to distance himself from the scene of the crime.

VII

We can gauge roughly who were the victims of horse theft from the status of the prosecutors (Table 11), although it should be noted that prosecutors and victims were not always the same person. For example, land agents sometimes acted on behalf of their employer, and men sometimes prosecuted on behalf of a female relative. It is also possible that relatively affluent victims had a higher tendency to prosecute.¹⁴⁹ Maybe this partly explains why a high proportion of the recorded prosecutors were well-to-do. Farmers, gentlemen and those in trade, commerce and the professions accounted for 49 per cent of the prosecutions. However, because they owned relatively valuable horses, their value share was even greater (58 per cent). There was often a marked social distinction between the thief and his victim.¹⁵⁰ Table 11 also reaffirms the importance of the farming community as the main victims of theft. Sixty-one per cent of prosecutors were farmers, yeomen or husbandmen. The value of the horses stolen from them was about the same percentage of the total, with the value of horses owned by farmers being greater than the other two groups.

Did owners take effective action to protect their horses? Insurance was not an option, because livestock insurance did not emerge until the 1840s.¹⁵¹ Hiring a watchman would have been expensive. The efforts of horse owners seem modest compared with the steps taken

¹⁴⁵ There are a number of cases in the Old Bailey Session Papers of thieves who stole perfectly good horses but who tried to make a quick sale by selling directly to a horse-slaughterer.

¹⁴⁶ J. A. Mack, 'The able criminal', *British J. Criminology* 12 (1972), pp. 44–54.

¹⁴⁷ NLW, Great Sessions, 4/376/5.

¹⁴⁸ NLW, Great Sessions, 4/611/7; 181/1. See also 4/757/4.

¹⁴⁹ King, *Crime, justice and discretion*, pp. 17–81.

¹⁵⁰ There are too many missing occupational labels to construct a meaningful defendant-prosecutor occupational matrix.

¹⁵¹ B. Supple, *The Royal Exchange Assurance: a history of British insurance* (1970), p. 226.

TABLE 11. Prosecutors by status (per cent)

<i>Status</i>	<i>By count</i>	<i>By value</i>
Farmer	33.0	38.1
Yeoman	24.7	20.7
Husbandman	3.6	3.1
Gentleman	13.0	14.9
Trade, Commerce and Professions	3.0	4.8
Women	6.1	5.0
Craftsmen	9.7	8.3
Labourer/Miner	3.6	2.5
Innkeeper/Aleseller	1.7	1.6
Other	1.7	0.9

Note: N = 391.

Source: NLW, Gaol Files database.

by the owners of large estates to deter poachers.¹⁵² Earmarking and branding were the main forms of protection. Some owners used to secure their horses in stables, sometimes locked. Occasionally, guard dogs were used. *The Cambrian* reported a case in which an owner left the stable door open at night to ensure the circulation of air for his sickly horse and, as a precaution against theft, fastened a large dog to one of the stalls. When a thief tried to steal the horse, the dog barked, the owner was warned and hastened to the stables in time to recover the animal.¹⁵³ Horses in fields were more difficult to protect, but sometimes field gates were padlocked. Pasturing the horse near to the farm or residence might also reduce the risk of theft, but not all horses could be protected in this way. It was difficult, in particular, to protect many of the indigenous ponies that were often pastured on the hills.¹⁵⁴ Indeed, one pessimistic entry in a probate inventory recorded: 'three mountain horses (value fifteen shillings) if they be found.'¹⁵⁵

Not surprisingly, owners were only partially successful at preventing theft. Thieves were invariably active during the late evening or at night and it was difficult to foil a determined thief. Earmarks and brand-marks could be changed and distorted, and it was relatively easy for a thief to ignore a padlocked gate by removing it from its hinges or breaking through the surrounding hedge. Even locked stables could be broken into relatively easily. Thieves often went for the soft option. Although horses were stolen from a range of locations – fairs, markets, stables, even off the street – the vast majority were less-valuable animals, taken from open land or fields. As Figure 9 shows, the gap between Ludlow horse prices and the value of the horses

¹⁵² Munsche, *Gentlemen and poachers*, pp. 71–5; King, 'Prosecution Associations', p. 196, has shown that the oyster-fishing industry also employed watchmen. Very occasionally Welsh farmers employed watchmen too. See

BPP, *Report on Commons' Inclosure*, pp. 142–3.

¹⁵³ *The Cambrian*, 31 May 1818.

¹⁵⁴ BPP, *Report on Commons' Inclosure*, p. 143.

¹⁵⁵ NLW, Wills, BR/1768/85.

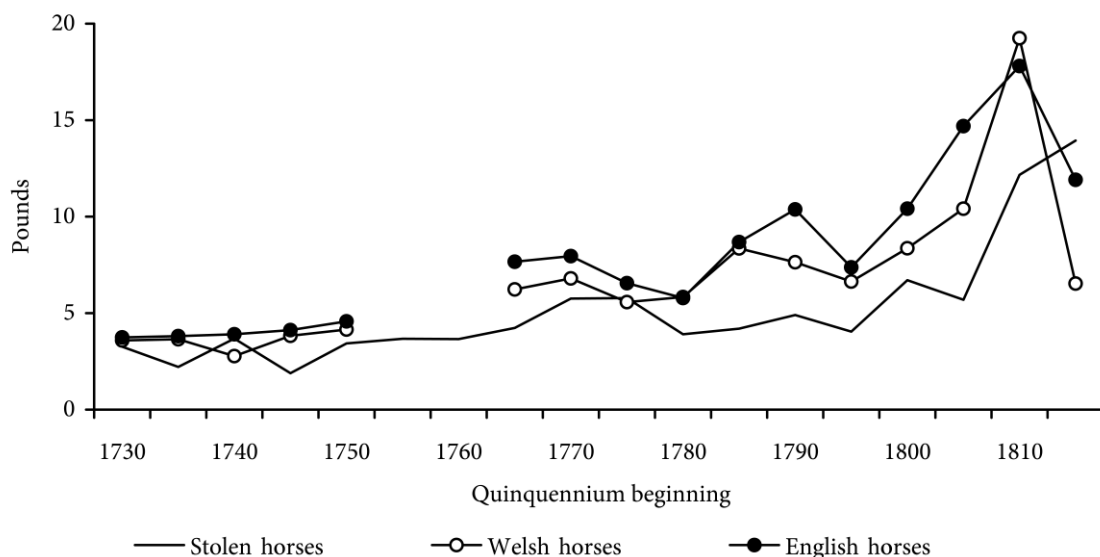


FIGURE 9. Value of horses stolen and average quinquennial prices at Ludlow

Source: NLW, Gaol Files database; Ludlow prices: see Figure 1.

stolen was between 26 and 36 per cent, depending on whether Welsh or English prices are used as the comparator.¹⁵⁶

Why did owners not invest much more heavily in protecting their horses? Although horse theft was relatively common, the risk of experiencing a theft was low.¹⁵⁷ Some owners may have thought that a stolen horse would be easily recovered. They may have been too sanguine, but there is no doubt that occasionally this was true. Horses were sometimes recovered a considerable distance from the place of the crime. For instance, a horse stolen in Brecon was reclaimed in Abingdon, 240 km away.¹⁵⁸ Another horse, stolen in Stoke on Trent, was recovered in Chirk, Denbighshire (72 km).

Stolen horses were found in a number of ways. Many victims simply relied on making person-to-person inquiries. Sometimes they pre-empted the movements of a thief. In 1748, for example, one thief who stole a horse in Shropshire was apprehended at Welshpool fair, where it was anticipated he might try to sell.¹⁵⁹ Some of the methods outlined by Edwards for the sixteenth

¹⁵⁶ The latter were probably quite accurate, but, even if they were not always precise, there was no systematic reason why they should have been biased. This is in contrast to certain other types of theft, such as house-breaking, the proceeds from which were sometimes deliberately undervalued so that the crime did not become a capital offence.

¹⁵⁷ A crude piece of arithmetic will illustrate the relatively low risks. In 1811 there were 80 committals for

horse theft in England and Wales. If we double this to allow for Scotland and (arbitrarily but pessimistically?) multiply the product by 8 to allow for hidden theft, we arrive at 1280 stolen horses. For the same year, Thompson has estimated that the horse population was 1,287,000, which implies that less than 1 per thousand horses were stolen in that year.

¹⁵⁸ NLW, Great Sessions, 4/385/4.

¹⁵⁹ NLW, Great Sessions, 4/183/1.

and seventeenth centuries were used to good effect in eighteenth and nineteenth centuries too.¹⁶⁰ For example, some victims used the horse-toll books to recover their animals.¹⁶¹ Another tactic was to proclaim the loss. Thus, one Montgomeryshire farmer, who had a valuable horse stolen in 1741, had the loss announced in Shrewsbury, Oswestry and Welshpool; this resulted in both the recovery of the horse and the apprehension of the criminal.¹⁶² A similar function was performed by the circulation of handbills. For example, Robert Scott, a labourer who stole a horse in Welshpool, Montgomeryshire, was arrested in Northallerton, Yorkshire, following the distribution of handbills in Manchester.¹⁶³

Edwards also drew attention to the use of newspaper advertisements as a tactic for recovering horses. This method was used even more extensively in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, although it was not until the early nineteenth century that the first newspapers were published in Wales.¹⁶⁴ From their inception, the first of these, *The Cambrian* (established in 1804) and the *Carmarthen Journal* (1810), published advertisements about missing horses. Prior to this, advertisers had to rely on English newspapers, such as the *Hereford Journal*, *Shrewsbury Chronicle* and *Gloucester Advertiser*. Adverts were placed by owners who lived a considerable distance from the place of publication. The *Carmarthen Journal* occasionally carried advertisements from owners in north Wales,¹⁶⁵ while the *Hereford Journal* occasionally took advertisements from Pembrokeshire.¹⁶⁶

The advertisements invariably included detailed descriptions of the horse and, occasionally, the thief. Their potential effectiveness was enhanced by the offer of rewards. The generosity of these varied, depending on whether the information led to the recovery of the horse and whether it also led to a conviction. In the 1770s, the going rate for the former was between a half and two guineas; for the latter it was about five guineas. It is difficult to put this in context, however, because only occasionally did advertisers mention the value of the stolen horse. One owner from Bromfield, near Ludlow, who lost a black gelding worth £15, offered two guineas for intelligence and five for a conviction.¹⁶⁷ Another owner from Baglan, Glamorgan, offered £5 on conviction, for an animal worth £30.

Occasionally, advertisements were successful. For example, a Shropshire saddler successfully recovered a stolen horse in 1741 after advertising in the Birmingham and London papers.¹⁶⁸ On another occasion, a yeoman-labourer from Anglesey was convicted as a result of an advertisement in the *Chester Chronicle*, which was seen by a local druggist who had purchased the horse.¹⁶⁹ Even so, we should not exaggerate the effectiveness of the press. For Essex, the issue has been examined by King, who concludes that although occasionally they were successful, in

¹⁶⁰ Edwards, *Horse trade*, pp. 109–12.

¹⁶¹ See, for example, NLW, Great Sessions, 4/185/2.

¹⁶² NLW, Great Sessions, 4/181/1.

¹⁶³ NLW, Great Sessions, 4/201/5.

¹⁶⁴ Styles, 'Print and policing', pp. 55–111.

¹⁶⁵ For example, *Carmarthen J.*, 12 May 1810, published an advertisement from a Denbighshire horse owner.

¹⁶⁶ For example, *Hereford J.*, 18 July 1771, advertised the loss of a 14.2 black horse from near Pembroke town on 12 July.

¹⁶⁷ *Hereford J.*, 28 Feb. 1771. In the same year (27 June

1771), an advertisement from a Radnorshire farmer offered a reward of two guineas for information (and five on conviction) about a pair of stolen oxen with a value £20. The advertiser anticipated that the thief would put the cattle into a drove which would pass through Leominster and Hereford. On 15 May 1802, a reward of 20 guineas was offered for the apprehension of a named sheep-stealer.

¹⁶⁸ NLW, Great Sessions, 4/385/3.

¹⁶⁹ NLW, Great Sessions, 4/425/1.

only about ten per cent of cases did newspaper advertisements result in a prosecution.¹⁷⁰ This is not surprising with horse theft, because inevitably there was a lag between the time of the theft and the appearance of the advertisement, which was bound to test the memory of the reader, unless the characteristics of the either the horse or the thief were remarkable. Most owners made every effort to place the advertisement soon after the theft, and most appeared within five or six days. Sometimes, when a horse was taken from pasture, the owner could not be sure whether the animal had been stolen or had strayed. This probably accounts for one advertiser from near Presteigne, Radnorshire, whose advertisement for the theft of a mare from a meadow appeared six weeks after the event.¹⁷¹

VIII

County figures have been used to examine geographical patterns. The county is a clumsy unit of analysis but, given the limited number of thefts involved, it would not have been feasible to disaggregate the data further. The gaol files show that less than ten per cent of the horses were stolen in either Monmouthshire or the English border counties. Within the Great Sessions counties, Anglesey and Caernarvon accounted for only four per cent of the thefts, while at the other extreme Breconshire and Glamorganshire accounted for approximately 15 per cent each. Glamorgan's ranking, however, is a reflection of its large population. To correct for this, county representation coefficients have been calculated, multiplying the quotient of each county's share of thefts to its population share by 100. As Figure 10 shows, the central eastern counties – Brecon, Montgomery and Radnor – were subject to exceptional horse theft. Overall, they accounted for 40 per cent of the horses stolen. The southern counties – Glamorgan, Carmarthen, but not Pembroke – had moderately high coefficients. They accounted for roughly 28 per cent of the horses stolen. The remaining counties – in particular Anglesey and Caernarvon – had relatively low coefficients, the northern counties accounting for 11 per cent of the horses stolen, and the western central counties 20 per cent.

This raises the question: why was the level of horse-stealing so much higher in eastern central Wales? Any discussion is inevitably speculative. One possibility, which cannot be resolved in the absence of appropriate sources, is that, because the border counties were subject to greater population mobility and less social cohesion, the victims of horse theft were more inclined to prosecute. The apparently high level of theft in these counties may be a consequence of local differences in the operation of the criminal justice system. However, although this may explain some of the differences in measured crime rates between the eastern and the western central counties, it is unlikely to account for much of the difference between the eastern central and northern border counties, namely Denbighshire and Flintshire. It is also unlikely to explain why measured horse theft was lower in the more industrial counties, such as Glamorgan.

To sustain high levels of horse-stealing, the eastern central counties must have had a plentiful supply of potential offenders. Why there were so many is not clear. The characteristics of the offenders were quite similar across Wales, although it is true that in the eastern central counties thieves were slightly younger than average. It is possible that the financial attractions of theft

¹⁷⁰ King, *Crime, justice and discretion*, p. 60.

¹⁷¹ *Hereford J.*, 24 Jan. 1771.

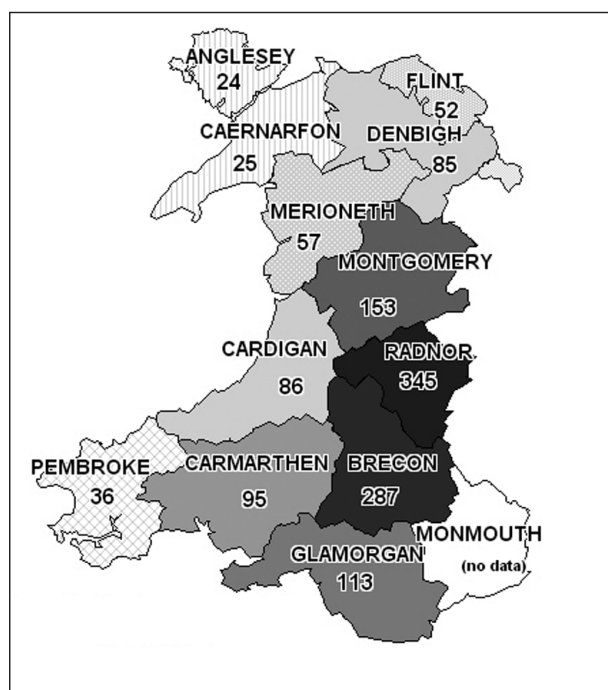


FIGURE 10. County representation coefficients

were greatest in these counties. The *per capita* Poor Law returns suggest that these counties were subject to a high incidence of poverty (Table 12) but, as we have seen, the links between poverty and horse-stealing are tenuous. It is also true that both Montgomery and Radnor had a high dependence on agriculture, and consequently were low-wage counties. This was also the case for much of Breconshire, although there were pockets of industrialization on the southern border with Glamorganshire. However, the *General Views* of the 1790s do not suggest that farm workers – the main perpetrators of horse-theft – in these counties earned particularly low wages. At the same time, the gaol files do not suggest that the stolen horses were particularly valuable. In other words, horse-stealing was no more profitable in the eastern central counties than elsewhere. Thus, the data suggest that in the western central counties the theft of a horse in the 1790s was equivalent to 109 days work. In the southern counties it was 83, and in the eastern central counties 79.¹⁷²

A more plausible explanation, therefore, is that horse-stealing was common in these counties because, in the absence of extensive urbanization and industrial diversification, there were only a limited range of alternative criminal opportunities. Indeed, apart from horse-stealing, the main criminal outlets seem to have been sheep theft and burglary (including housebreaking) and, as Figure 11 shows, there is a fairly strong correlation between county horse-stealing coefficients and the incidence of these other crimes.¹⁷³ But sheep theft and burglary were less lucrative. For example, the average summer daily wage in the eastern

¹⁷² There were too few thefts in the north in this decade to make meaningful estimates.

¹⁷³ The links between rurality and burglary have

also been noted by King, *Crime, justice and discretion*, p. 139.

TABLE 12. Poor law expenditure and summer wages: Welsh counties

County	Poor law expenditure per head			Summer Wages (d) 1790s
	1750	1775	1803	
Anglesey	na	0.6	19.3	16
Brecon	3.6	7.8	32.3	14
Caernarvonshire	na	1.3	17.2	12
Cardigan	0.5	2.1	17.8	8
Carmarthen	3.5	5.7	20.0	10–12
Denbigh	2.4	10.0	33.1	16
Flint	2.9	11.7	34.1	na
Glamorgan	4.0	8.4	32.6	18
Merioneth	1.0	3.4	26.9	12
Montgomery	3.7	12.9	43.3	14
Pembroke	2.3	6.0	26.7	10
Radnor	5.0	11.8	48.2	14

Source: Poor Law expenditure, D. W. Howell, *The rural poor in eighteenth-century Wales*, p. 96; county population totals, J. H. Williams *Digest of Welsh historical statistics* (1985); wages, Board of Agriculture Surveys, various counties.

central counties during the 1790s was 14d. Over this decade, the average value of horses stolen was 93.03s., equivalent to just under 80 days' earnings. By contrast, a sheep-stealer would have earned on average just under 13.5s. from his crime, equivalent to 11.5 days' work, and a burglar would have earned just over 29s., equivalent to 25 days. It is hardly surprising that the would-be thief sometimes opted for horse theft, despite the likelihood that the victim would pursue him more enthusiastically.

In fact, given the low population densities of these counties, the likelihood that a horse thief would be observed, and hence detected, was probably quite low.¹⁷⁴ A thief in this area could dispose of the horse easily. He invariably lived within striking distance of some of the big English markets or he could choose to take his horse westwards to take advantage of the plentiful number of Welsh fairs and markets. By contrast, problems of disposability and escape may explain why horse-stealing was uncommon in Anglesey, a county with a large number of horses but from which it was difficult to escape quickly, at least until 1826, when the Menai Bridge was opened. Problems of disposing of stolen horses may also help explain why the level of theft was lower in the western counties, where there were a high proportion of Welsh-speaking monoglots whose ability to sell stolen horses in the east may have been constrained by linguistic difficulties. Nevertheless, we probably should not take this argument too far.

¹⁷⁴ Using the 1871 Returns, Radnorshire and Breconshire, followed by Merionethshire and Montgomeryshire, had the lowest population densities in Wales. The correlation between acres per head and the horse theft coefficient is 0.65.

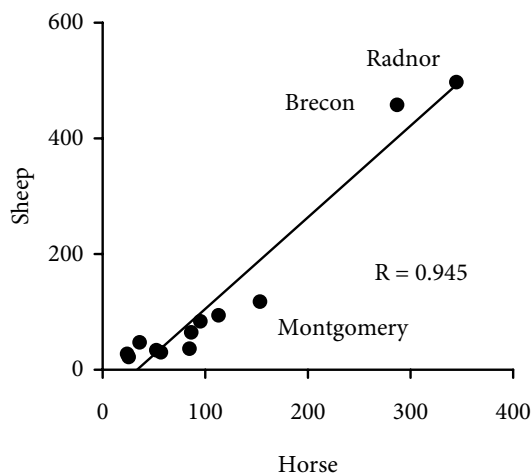


FIGURE 11a. Horse and sheep representation coefficients: Welsh counties

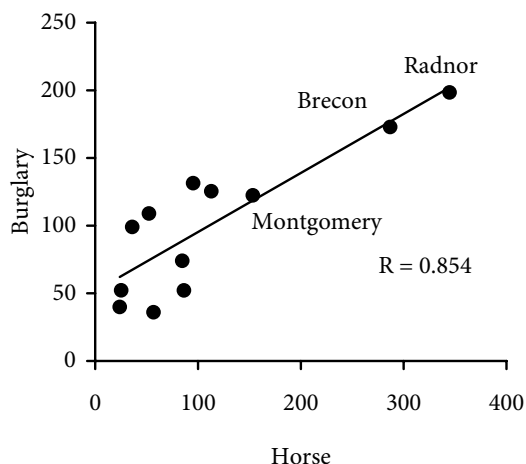


FIGURE 11b. Horse and burglary representation coefficients: Welsh counties

Source: NLW Gaol Files database.

Welsh was still spoken quite widely in eastern counties, particularly at the beginning of the study period. Furthermore, it is evident that Welsh monoglots did not always feel inhibited from stealing horses. This is illustrated by the case of Henry Williams, a Flintshire horse thief who required an interpreter at his trial but who had managed to dispose of his horse in nearby Liverpool.¹⁷⁵

Thus, a number of factors probably contributed to the plentiful supply of offenders in the eastern central counties. Furthermore, we can be fairly sure that these counties provided the horse thief with plenty of opportunities for crime. For example, the probate inventories suggest that these counties had an above average number of horses per farm and, it seems, there was a positive, if modest, correlation between this figure and the county horse-stealing coefficients (Figure 12). The 1871 Returns suggest, too, that, although these counties did not have particularly high horse population densities, they supported a large number of horses *per capita*, and the correlation between this figure and county horse theft coefficients was quite high ($r = 0.6$). Nevertheless, the tenor of the earlier discussion was that the best indicator of criminal opportunities may have been the number of pastured horses, rather than the number of horses *in toto*. Unfortunately, the probate inventories do not allow us to measure the importance of such horses on a county basis. However, the 1871 Returns suggest that these counties, Radnorshire in particular, had a large number of breeding horses *per capita*. Moreover, the correlation coefficient between this figure and the horse theft coefficient is high ($r = 0.8$).

It is possible, too, that opportunities in the adjacent counties may have played a minor role. Although thieves seemed to have preferred to steal horses from the immediate area in which they lived, they did occasionally steal horses elsewhere and the Welsh border thieves may have been in a good position to take advantage of conditions on the other side of the border.

¹⁷⁵ NLW, Great Sessions, 4/1005/6.

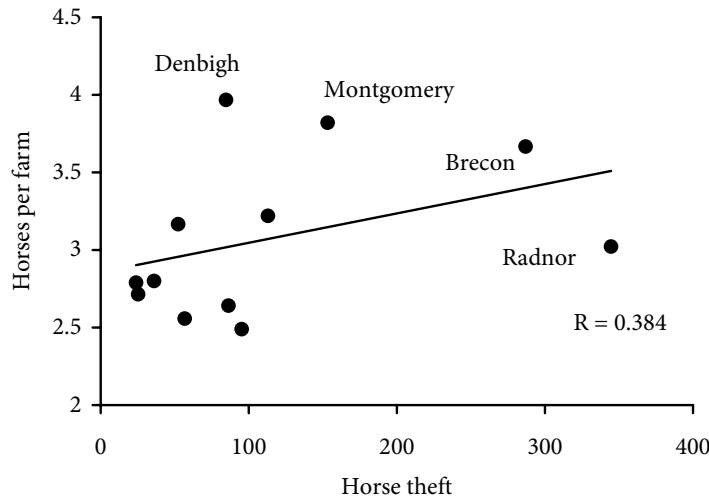


FIGURE 12. Horse representation coefficients and average number of horses per farm: Welsh counties

Source: NLW Gaol Files and wills and probate inventory files.

The cross-border opportunities were greatest for those counties adjacent to either Hereford or Shropshire, two English counties that supported a relatively large number of horses. The 1871 Returns, for example, show that Herefordshire had both high horse population densities and high *per capita* holdings, higher than for Wales as a whole. For Shropshire, the density was quite low but, *per capita*, the number of horses was relatively high. In fact, the level of cross-border theft was quite low. Only 6.5 per cent of the Welsh indictments relate to horses stolen in either England or Monmouthshire, and the figure for Radnorshire was almost identical. However, for Breconshire (8 per cent) and Montgomeryshire (11 per cent) it was higher, and cross-border theft was even more attractive in another border county, Denbighshire, 20 per cent of whose defendants had stolen horses in adjacent Shropshire.¹⁷⁶

IX

Despite impressions to the contrary, serious crime was quite common in rural areas in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries.¹⁷⁷ In Wales, for example, burglary and particularly livestock theft were common. Assuming indictments can be used to approximate the relative importance of various crimes, the latter was dominated by sheep-stealing. But horse-stealing was also quite prevalent.

Why was horse theft so common? It partly reflected the fact that horses and ponies were

¹⁷⁶ This figure includes the serial horse thief, Henry Richard Robert, who lived in Llangollen.

¹⁷⁷ For example, from the appropriate volumes of the *Agrarian History of England and Wales* we might be left with the impression that much rural crime was in the nature of a protest, that – with the possible exception of

poaching – predatory crime was less prevalent, and that – when it did occur – it was driven by rural poverty, taking the form of subsistence crimes such as field theft. However, as Emsley, *Crime and Society*, pp. 78–97, has shown, criminality in rural areas was high.

one of the traditional exports of Wales, especially from the eastern counties. As a result there were plenty of potential targets for the criminal. Horses proved quite attractive to thieves. They commanded relatively high prices and were particularly marketable, at least by mature males. Moreover, when broken – not always the case in upland areas – they were, unlike cattle, extremely mobile. The opportunities for theft also depended upon the extent to which they were protected. Welsh horse owners do not seem to have had a strong incentive to protect their less valuable horses. The risk of theft was not that great and high levels of security expenditure felt to be unwarranted. High-value horses were relatively well-protected and liable to be scrutinized more carefully by potential purchasers, making them less attractive to the thief.

Horses were stolen for a number of reasons. Some thieves stole because of grudges, some for excitement, and some because of economic distress. Thus, it is clear that theft rose in years of high food prices and unemployment, when labourers were on the move, a condition that seems to have been conducive to horse-stealing. But there is no reason to suppose from either the seasonal patterns or the histories of most horse thieves that immediate distress was that important. This is hardly surprising. Horse flesh was not consumed extensively in Britain and horses were, at best, moderately liquid assets. Most horses were stolen as a means of making some easy money. In general, horse-stealing was quite lucrative with low rates of detection, and this may have attracted some professional criminals. But, once allowance is made for the need to sell at discount, the returns seem less attractive and this is why the crime was dominated by the casual and middling-sort of offender.