# Reading: the Great Train Robbery of 1963



Night train

Pic: Phil Sangwell (CC)

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

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

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

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

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

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

By listening in on police radio messages, they soon learned the police had guessed they were still in the area. Concerned that the farmhouse would soon be discovered, they decided to leave immediately and over the next 24 hours went their separate ways. Each man had about £150,000 (nearly US$4 million in 2018). The police found the farm four days later.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

**LIVEWORKSHEETS**

# Word list

| amid | *preposition* | while something is happening; surrounded by something |
|---|---|---|
| **audacity** | *noun* | confidence and willingness to take great risks |
| **defendant** | *noun* | someone who is accused of a crime and goes to court |
| **deplore** | *verb* | think something is very bad, morally wrong etc. |
| **early hours** | *noun* | early part of the day between midnight and sunrise |
| **frenzy** | *noun* | period of great activity and excitement |
| **harsh** | *adjective* | (law, rule etc.) very strict, unkind or cruel; (place, sound) unpleasant |
| **heist** | *noun* | robbery (informal) |
| **iconic** | *adjective* | famous event etc. that represents an idea, period in history etc. |
| **informer** | *noun* | someone who gives information secretly to the police, government etc. |
| **lane** | *noun* | small road, often in the countryside |
| **loot** | *noun* | stolen money or valuable objects |
| **make an example of someone** | *phrase* | give someone a severe punishment to warn others |
| **meticulous** | *adjective* | very careful and precise with a lot of attention to detail |
| **military** | *adjective* | relating to the army or armed forces |
| **notorious** | *adjective* | famous for something bad |
| **sentence** | *noun and verb* | give a punishment in court (verb); a punishment given in court (noun) |
| **sobering** | *adjective* | making you think about serious things |
| **swarm** | *verb* | when insects or people move in large numbers |
| **tip-off** | *noun* | secret information |
| **victims of their own success** | *phrase* | when someone's success causes them problems |

LIVEWORKSHEETS

# Extra exercises : vocabulary and grammar

## The Great Train Robbery - grammar

On 8, August, 1963, a gang of men (1)_____ (steal) over two million pounds from a mail train near London.  Months earlier they (2)_____ (receive) a tip-off from a post office worker.  He (3)_____ (tell) them that a on the 8 August, a mail train would be carrying lots of old banknotes to London for recycling.  After careful research, they (4)_____ (choose) a lonely spot and stopped the train in the middle of the night with a false red signal.  They unloaded the money bags onto trucks and drove to a farmhouse which they (5)_____ (buy) six weeks earlier.  Here they (6)_____ (share) out the money and celebrated before leaving the next day.  Things started to go wrong when a man they (7)_____ (pay) to remove evidence from the farmhouse never turned up.  Four days later the police (8)_____ (find) the farm and discovered the fingerprints of some of the gang.  A few weeks after this, an unknown informer who (9)_____ (be) in jail for another crime revealed most of their names.  By Christmas, most of the robbers (10)_____ (catch), and in 1964 they were sent to prison for over 300 years.  But some of them later managed to escape while the others (11)_____ (not / have) to serve their full sentences.  As for the money, to this day only a small amount of it (12)_____ (ever / recover).

## The Great Train Robbery - vocabulary

On 8, August, 1963, a (1)_____ of men stole over two million pounds from a mail train near London.  Months earlier they had received a (2)_____ from a post office worker.  He told them that a on the 8 August, a mail train would be carrying lots of old (3)_____ to London for recycling.  After careful research, they chose a lonely spot and stopped the train in the middle of the night with a (4)_____ red signal.  They unloaded the money bags onto trucks and drove to a (5)_____ which they had bought six weeks earlier.  Here they (6)_____ out the money and celebrated before leaving the next day.  Things started to go wrong when a man they had paid to remove (7)_____ from the farmhouse never turned up.  Four days later the police found the farm and discovered the (8)_____ of some of the gang.  A few weeks after this, an unknown (9)_____ who was in jail for another crime revealed most of their names.  By Christmas, most of the robbers had been caught, and in 1964 they were sent to (10)_____ for over 300 years.  But some of them later managed to escape while the others did not have to serve their full (11)_____.  As for the money, to this day only a small amount of it has ever been (12)_____.

# Answers

## Comprehension 1

1. False
2. False
3. True
4. True
5. True
6. False
7. False

## Comprehension 2

8  6  1  5  7  9  2  4  3

## Vocabulary matching

**audacity**
confidence and willingness to take great risks

**deplore**
think something is very bad, morally wrong etc.

**loot**
stolen money or valuable objects

**meticulous**
very careful and precise with a lot of attention to detail

**tip-off**
secret information

**harsh**
very strict, unkind or cruel

**sobering**
making you think about serious things

## Grammar

1. knew, was carrying, had told
2. drove, had bought
3. got, had embarrassed
4. escaped, were never caught
5. has never been found

## The Great Train Robbery - grammar

1. stole
2. had received
3. told OR had told
4. chose
5. had bought
6. shared
7. had paid
8. found
9. was
10. had been caught
11. did not have
12. has ever been recovered

## The Great Train Robbery - vocabulary

1. gang
2. tip-off
3. banknotes
4. false
5. farmhouse
6. shared
7. evidence
8. fingerprints
9. informer
10. prison
11. sentences
12. recovered

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