

Removing the death penalty did not lead to a 19th century crime wave:

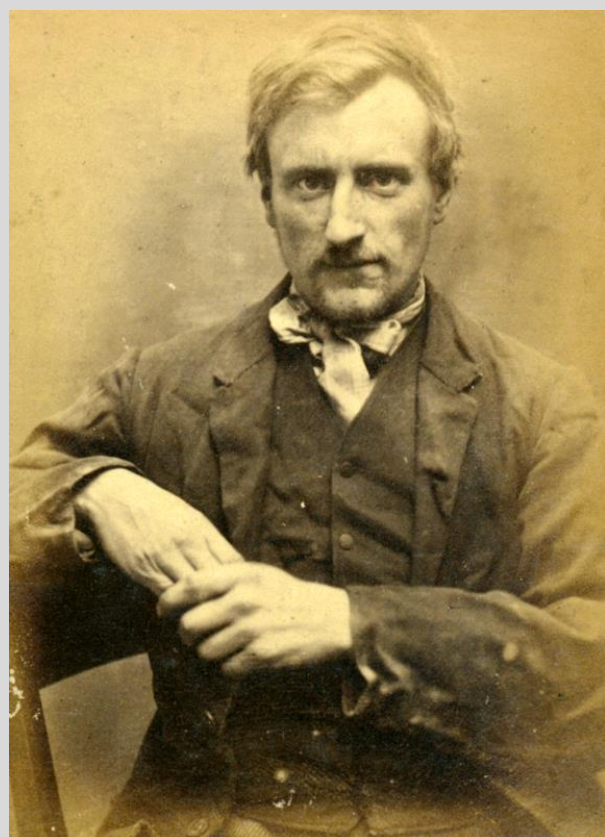
Serious crime in York, 1832 to 1862

Introduction

The number of crimes in England and Wales carrying the death penalty decreased from sixty in 1832 to four in 1861. Many people feared this would result in a crime wave, and with more minor crimes leading on to more violence. This was also the time when local police forces were becoming more organised and better regulated – and hopefully more effective.

Aims

Using York as a case study, the aim of this project was to explore whether there was an increase in those crimes no longer carrying the death penalty. The question of whether there were any knock-on effects on the level of violent crime was also examined. Finally, changes in the city police force were also considered in terms of whether they had any noticeable effect on the number of serious crimes committed and brought to trial.



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Method

Background Reading

- Laws
- Court procedures
- Development of modern police force

National Archives

- Assize court records
- Coroners' inquisitions records

British Newspaper Archives

- Reporting of crimes committed
- Proposals, reports, and opinions on York's policing

York City Archives

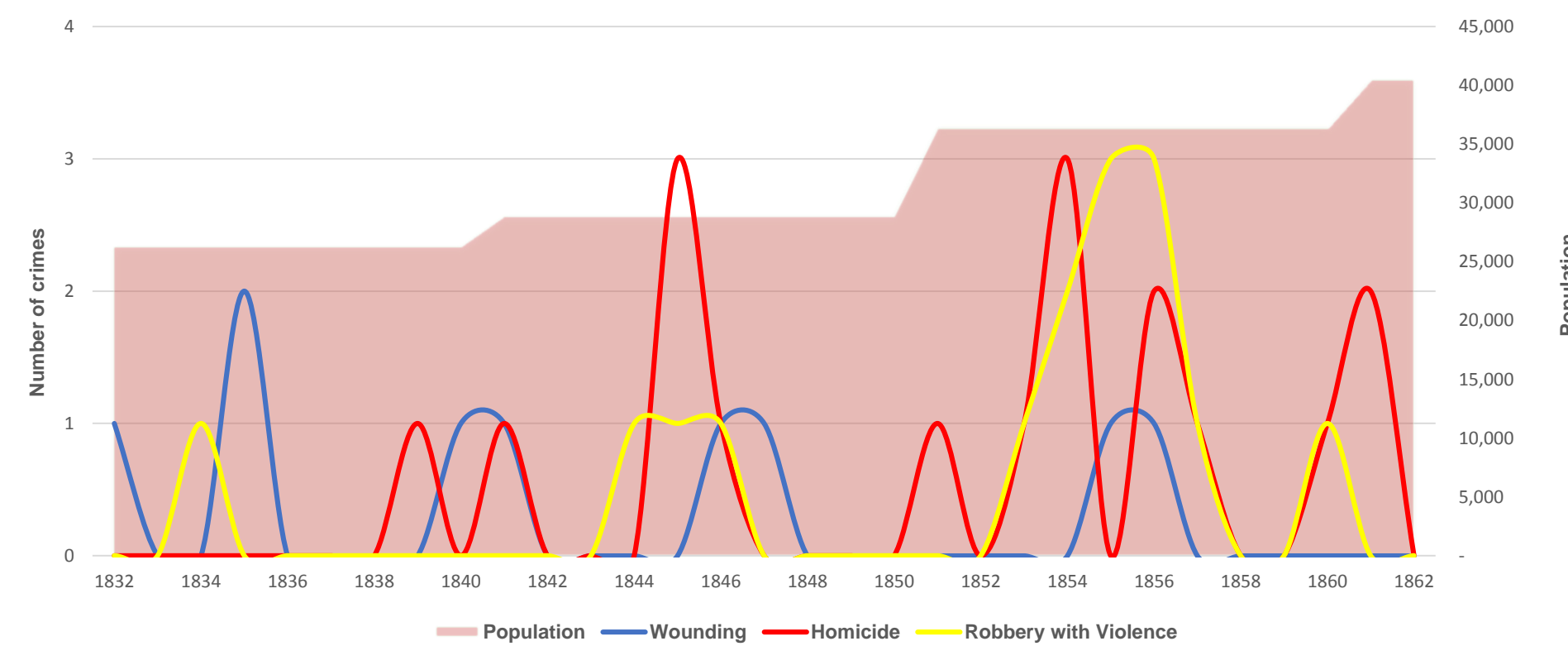
- Population censuses
- Maps

Results

Removal of death penalty

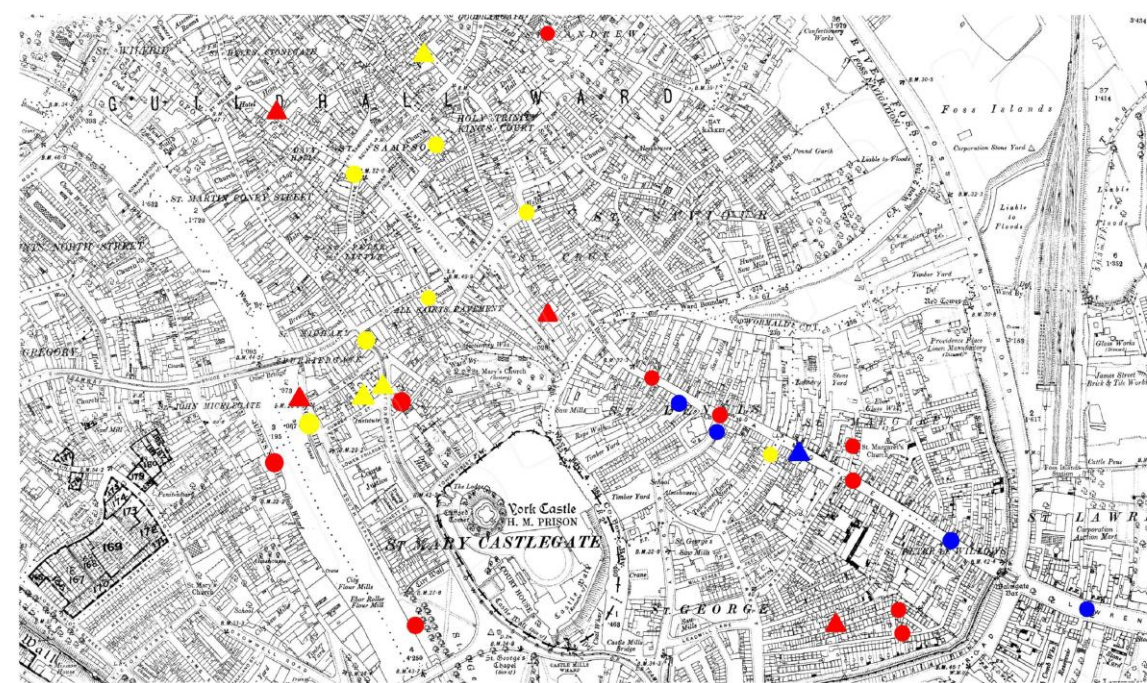
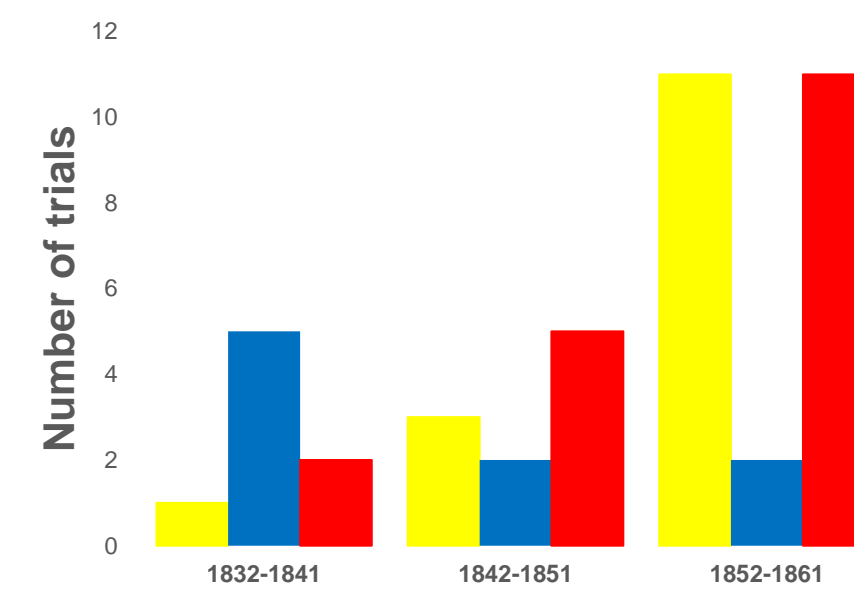
The number of crimes committed within the city and tried in the assize court was calculated and set against population levels.

1836 : death penalty abolished for forgery
 1837 : death penalty abolished for burglary and wounding
 1831 to 1861 : population rose from 26,000 to 40,000



Violent Crime

Whilst trials for assault and wounding (blue) fell slightly, those for homicide (red) and robbery with violence (yellow) increased markedly, particularly in the 1850s.



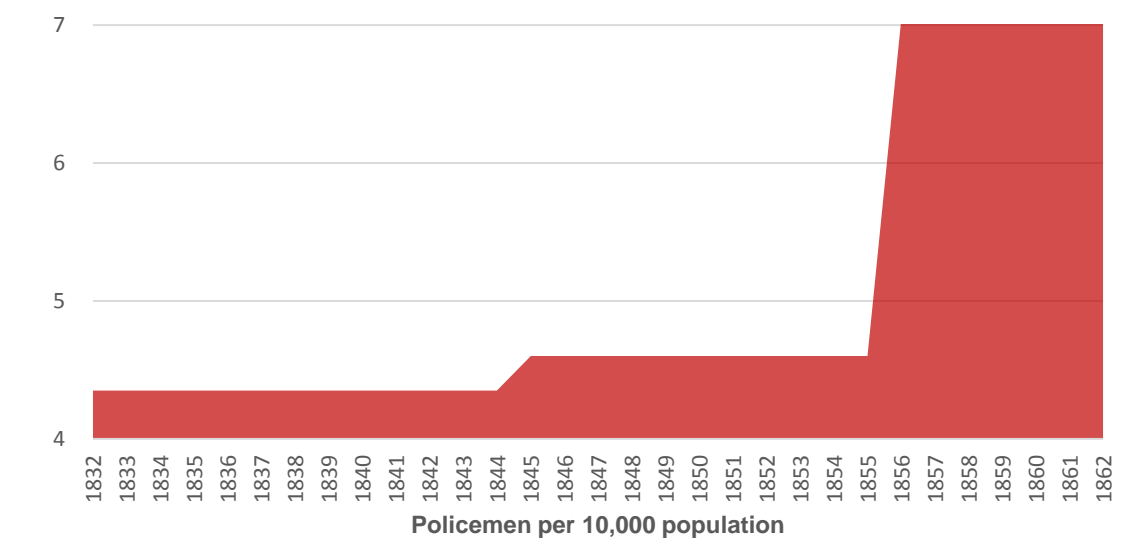
Legend for the crime map:
 ● Robbery with Violence conviction (yellow)
 ▲ Robbery with violence no conviction (yellow triangle)
 ● Wounding conviction (blue)
 ▲ Wounding no conviction (blue triangle)
 ● Homicide conviction (red)
 ▲ Homicide no conviction (red triangle)

Robbery with violence was generally committed in the more affluent areas. Homicide and wounding were most evident in the part of the city which saw the greatest increase in population, and highest levels of overcrowding.

Police

Prior to 1836, York had 12 policemen, answerable to two different bodies. From 1836, the Watch Committee had sole responsibility for policing in the city.

- 1836 – 12 men
- 1845 – 15 men
- 1855 – 28 men¹



From the 1850s the high level of turnover of manpower was greatly reduced, resulting in a more experienced and effective force.

¹ Roger Swift, *Police Reform in Early Victorian York, 1835-1856* (York: University of York, 1988), 15-17.

Conclusion

There was no explosion in levels of crime in York, including those for which the death penalty had been removed. The growth in the number of crimes brought to trial, particularly from the 1850s, is more readily explicable in terms of increased numbers and experience of police officers. The fact that the majority of homicides occurred in the poorest and increasingly most over-crowded part of the city is indicative of the effects of social conditions, rather than legislation, on residents' behaviour.