

**Part A:** Carry out a historical enquiry**How sound was the murder conviction of Dr Crippen?**

In 1909, Dr Crippen, originally from the USA, was living with his wife, Cora, at 39 Hilldrop Crescent, Camden Town, London. Crippen was not able to practise as a doctor in London, was in financial difficulty and depended on his wife's income as a singer. He was not happy in his marriage and was having an affair with one of his secretaries, Ethel le Neve.

**Mrs Crippen vanishes**

On 15 December, 1909, Mrs Crippen told her bank she was removing all her money. It seems likely that she had learned about Ethel and was going to leave Crippen. In January 1910, Crippen bought large quantities of Hyoscine hydrobromide, a drug which, in these amounts, causes drowsiness. Cora was last seen alive on 31 January. Over the next three days Crippen pawned his wife's jewellery, Ethel moved into the house and a letter was received by Cora's friends saying she had suddenly gone to the USA. On 24 March the same friends received a telegram from Crippen saying Cora had died while in the USA.

**Escape and capture**

Friends of Cora were suspicious. They informed the CID at Scotland Yard, who interviewed Crippen and searched the house but found nothing suspicious. Crippen said that Cora had left him and he had lied to avoid the scandal. The police were satisfied but Crippen panicked. He and Ethel left in secret for Belgium and there caught a ship to Canada. Crippen had shaved off his moustache and Ethel was disguised as a boy.

When the police returned to Crippen's house to check a few facts they found he had left. They were now suspicious and under the brick floor of the coal cellar they found human remains. Meanwhile, the captain of the ship on which Crippen and Ethel were sailing grew suspicious. He thought they looked like the newspaper pictures of two fugitives sought by the police. He sent a wireless telegram to the London police. Detectives caught a faster boat and were waiting for Crippen and Ethel in Canada, arresting them on 31 July, 1910.

**The remains in the cellar**

Only partial remains were found in the cellar. There was no head, arms or legs and no bones, except for what was possibly part of a thigh bone. On one of the pieces of skin there seemed to be a scar, probably the result of an operation. The skin was analysed for the police by a Dr Pepper, assisted by Dr Spilsbury.

**Trial and execution**

Crippen was tried for his wife's murder. The jury took only 27 minutes to find him guilty and he was sentenced to death by hanging. Ethel le Neve was put on trial four days later. She was found not guilty. Crippen was executed on 23 November, 1910.

**Forensic evidence for Crippen's guilt**

The following forensic evidence was used in Crippen's trial:

- The skin tissue showed a scar from an operation like the one Cora had.
- Somebody skilled – like a doctor – cut up the body.
- It was an adult body but the sex could not be established.
- The remains had been buried for four to eight months before being found in July 1910.
- There were traces of *Hyoscine hydrobromide* in the body.

**Source C:** The piece of skin and the evidence quoted by Dr Pepper and Dr Spilsbury at Crippen's trial.



**Source D:** Report written by Dr Spilsbury, a pathologist, on the finding of the remains below the cellar floor. (Note: Dr Crippen purchased pyjamas, identical to the pyjama jacket mentioned in the source, in January 1909.)

Human remains found 13 July. Medical organs of chest and abdomen removed in one mass. Four large pieces of skin and muscle, one from lower abdomen with old operation scar 4 inches long. Impossible to identify sex. *Hyoscine* found 2.7 grains. Hair in curler – roots present. Hair 6 inches long. Man's pyjama jacket label reads 'Jones Bros., Holloway', and odd pair of pyjama trousers.

**Source:** Dr Spilsbury notes on the Dr Crippen case, 1910.

**Was the verdict unsound?**

Not everyone is convinced that Crippen was guilty. Here are some suggestions as to why he might not have been:

- Crippen may have been giving Cora drugs to calm her but killed her by accident.
- If Crippen had successfully disposed of the rest of Cora's body, why bury parts under the floor where they could be found?
- In October 2007, US forensic scientists claimed that DNA evidence showed that the remains found beneath the cellar floor in Crippen's home were not those of Cora Crippen. The body may have been that of a man. The mark on the skin may not be that from a scar.

**Source E:** Recent US research on the evidence questions the guilty verdict. From *The Times* newspaper, 17 October, 2007.

... a team of American scientists who compared mitochondrial DNA from the corpse that was claimed to be Mrs Crippen with that of her living relatives said that the dismembered body was not her... The research team said that a scar on the abdomen of the body, which convinced the jury that the remains were Mrs Crippen's, was incorrectly claimed to be so. But they said that other evidence showed the body could only have made its way to Crippen's house when he and his wife were living there. One of Dr Trestrail's hypotheses is that Crippen was performing illegal abortions and that the body could have resulted from a botched procedure.

**Activities**

7. Design a 'storyboard' to tell the story of the Dr Crippen murder. This will involve: dividing the story into its main parts, drawing a sketch to sum up each part and, under each sketch, writing a caption to explain each part of the story.
8. Work in small groups. From the evidence you have here: do you think it was right to find Dr Crippen guilty of murder? Explain *why* you think as you do and *why* you are not convinced by the opposite point of view. Then present your findings and conclusion to your class. Vote at the end to decide the verdict of your class.

**Your conclusion so far**

From this topic we have seen that:

- While the early police were effective at deterring crime, they had difficulty with detecting it.
  - The CID was set up to solve this problem.
  - The use of forensic science has greatly improved police detection of serious crimes such as murder.
  - Other new technologies also assisted the police.
  - The case of Dr Crippen shows that forensic scientists do not always agree.
  - The 'Yorkshire Ripper' case shows how computer technology is needed to process lots of evidence.
1. From what you have explored in this topic, explain the problems that police detection faced in the 1880s.
  2. Then, identify changes which have improved detection and explain how.
  3. Finally, decide how different investigative policing was in 1990, compared with 1880.