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Cars, Crime and Coppers: Combating the ‘Smash and Grab’ Raider

On 24 March 1933 the House of Commons considered the second reading of the Banditry Bill. Its sponsor, the Conservative MP for Dorset East, Mr Hall Caine, sought to prevent ‘the criminal class [taking] advantage of such a wonderful and beneficent new invention as the motor car’. The police were to see their powers of search extended and be given a new right to build barricades across roads while the courts were to be able to impose heavier fines ‘upon anyone who misuses this wonderful invention in order to commit a crime’ in the same way as ‘the Firearms Act was passed imposing a more severe penalty on anyone who perpetrated a crime of violence by the use of a firearm than on one who used a bludgeon’.¹ The seconder, Commander Marsden, painted a lurid picture of brutal motorised bandits robbing helpless women, particularly in the countryside. The bill, he argued, would offer them protection and in so doing would encourage them to live in the country as domestic servants! Perhaps fellow members were unsympathetic to Commander Marsden’s domestic servant plight for the bill failed; but this was not the first, nor the last that was heard of the new banditry. Concern about ‘the new form of crime known as smash-and-grab’, as Earl Beauchamp put it, was expressed on a number of occasions in Parliament in the early 1930s.² Indeed, Sir Herbert Samuel was forced to concede in April 1932 that there had been ‘a lamentable increase in the number of what are called “smash-and-grab raids”… the figure now [April 1932 being] about three and a half times as high as it was seven or eight years ago’.³

Cars had been used for criminal purposes from their earliest days in pre-war Britain, but it was in the late 1920s and early 1930s that something of a panic developed. The epicentre of the problem was London. Newspaper reports emphasised the problem in various districts of the capital but ‘smash and grab’ raids were also reported in other parts...
of the country. From Balham to Bournemouth, from Lavender Hill to Lowestoft, from Knightsbridge to Newhaven and from Tottenham to Thame motorised robbers were striking. Jewellers and furriers were commonly targeted but chemists, stocking cameras and binoculars, also fell victim as did the occasional pawnbrokers. London detectives spoke of ‘very large gang[s] of very desperate men’ using very powerful cars in ‘smash and grab’ raids. Private cars and, even more shocking, a motor hearse were stolen for nefarious purposes. Reports in The Times, not among the more lurid of accounts, emphasised daring raids, large hauls and exciting car chases and (in some cases, at least) struggles between thieves and police. Equally appalling were those incidents in which innocent citizens had been attacked and robbed by people pretending to be motorists in distress. The unfortunate Arthur Cunnington was one such victim. A Londoner venturing up north went to the aid of a young woman apparently pushing a car along the side of the road. Having left his car he was assaulted by two men and robbed of his wallet and papers.

The fear aroused by these audacious crimes led to suggested solutions that varied from the extreme – shopkeepers shooting to kill – to the bizarre – shopkeepers to have glass ‘cricket balls’ filled with vermillion paint to throw at raiders. Equally, the outrage at these crimes also led to demands for firm action, including flogging. One correspondent to The Times made a (not wholly accurate) comparison with the ‘days of “garrotting”’, noting that ‘this pest was wiped out because the Judges made it quite clear that persons found guilty of this objectionable crime, in addition to their punishment would receive a sound flogging.’ He had no doubt that such a policy would be efficacious in 1931. Somewhat surprisingly, Sir Alfred Pease, a member of a distinguished Quaker family from Darlington, a former MP and an ardent fox hunter, was sufficiently incensed by ‘this alarming increase of highway robberies, “smash and grab raids”, and of “hold ups” in banks and post offices’ also to demand more adequate punishment, namely ‘a severe flogging [which] is from the humanitarian point of view far more merciful to the culprit.’ Pease touched a nerve. Other correspondents to The Times bemoaned the fact that prison was no longer a deterrent to violent criminals. For Lieutenant Colonel H. M. A. Hayes, drawing on 25 years of experience as a prison governor, the only solution was ‘the cat’. Likewise, Sir Henry Dickens, one time Common Serjeant in the City of London, advocated birching as the solution to this new and dastardly crime.

At times the worries about the ‘motor burglar’ tapped into more general anxieties. Speaking in the same 1932 debate as Samuel, the Tory MP,