

## Am I ready to study the MA in History?

### Self-assessment diagnostic test

Before taking the self-assessment test, please ensure that you are familiar with the [entry requirements for the MA](#). This test is designed to help you evaluate the extent to which you are adequately prepared to take the MA in history. The qualification focuses on local history, which requires some core skills to study it successfully at postgraduate level, several of which are tested in this diagnostic exercise.

We do not wish to discourage you from doing the MA, but we would like you to be fully prepared for what being a postgraduate on this module entails. It is not in our interests or yours if you sign up to the module and subsequently find mastering its contents a time-consuming struggle. The MA represents a considerable investment of both time and money and you are strongly advised not to sign up for it until you are confident that you are ready for the challenges involved in academic history at this level. If you do not have a good first degree and/or have never studied history before, then the amount of time that you will spend studying could be considerably greater than average.

There are three parts to this test:

Part one: Some basics in history study

Part two: Primary sources

Part three: Secondary sources

After each, you can click through to a page of feedback in order to compare your answers with those we've provided as exemplars. Don't worry if you don't get every answer spot on, but do try to reflect on the way in which you answered the questions and why they diverged from the exemplars. That should enable you to make an honest judgment about your readiness for postgraduate study.

## Part One: Some basics in history study

This section is designed to test your understanding of a few underlying concepts that you'll need in order to embark on successful postgraduate study in this discipline. We would expect anyone with an undergraduate history degree to be able to answer these relatively easily. If you do not possess a first degree in history or a related subject, then this part should give you a sense of whether you understand some of the rudiments of the subject. Try to answer all the questions to the best of your ability and then check what you've written against the feedback this section.

1. What follows is a list of statements. Identify which are true and which are false.
  - a. The most important task of the historian is to uncover exactly what happened in the past.
  - b. Historians should be concerned to explain the past's continuities, as well as its changes.
  - c. Historians confine themselves to studying the written record of the past.
  - d. The terms 'history' and 'the past' are synonymous.
  - e. It is the historian's job to use hindsight to explain where things went wrong in the past.
  
2. Imagine that you are researching strikes by trade unions in the last decade of the nineteenth century. In particular you're trying to discover how ordinary trade unionists viewed industrial disputes in this period (for the purposes of this exercise, it doesn't matter if you know very little about this). You have in front of you seven sources of different types, which are listed below. Which would be most valuable to you and which least? Try to justify your selection.
  - a. A letter from a working man to one of his family explaining why he has gone on strike (1893).
  - b. An excerpt from the diary of a Cabinet minister that talks about the rise of trade unions and industrial disputes (1898).
  - c. A district trade union branch meeting's minutes, discussing work conditions in a local factory (1911).
  - d. A textbook published by Oxford University Press called *The Advent of Trade Unionism: 1868-1926*.
  - e. The transcript of a speech by the Prime Minister that discusses the trade union issue (1888).
  - f. A blog post, hosted by Tumblr, entitled 'The Triumphs of Socialism through the Ages', in which the author offers an opinion on British trade unions in the First World War.
  - g. A union poster urging its members to come out on strike (1892).
  
3. Although sometimes people get a bit too bogged down in dates, nonetheless we'd expect anyone progressing to a postgraduate degree in history to possess a reasonable idea of chronological development. This question tests that skill.

British women were first given the right to vote in parliamentary elections in 1918. Many sources of information exist to help us understand the development of the campaign they waged to achieve that right. Look at the following list and place these sources in their correct *chronological* order.

- a. A journal article by a historian about campaigners for women's enfranchisement refusing to fill in their 1911 census forms.

- b. The law stating that married women were allowed to own and control property in their own right (a critical early objective for supporters of women’s emancipation).
  - c. An autobiographical account, written when she was in her 70s, of a leading suffragist (member of the National Union of Women's Suffrage Societies, which was a prominent organisation in the female suffrage campaign).
  - d. A report from the first meeting of the Women’s Social and Political Union (another, more radical, group in the pro-suffrage campaign, whose members were called suffragettes).
  - e. A newspaper account of a suffragette chaining herself to the railings outside No 10 Downing Street.
  - f. The statute that ensured equalisation of the franchise (i.e. women permitted to vote on the same terms as men).
4. In the course of the MA, you will be expected to engage with and interpret a few statistics. This question tests your ability to draw concrete inferences from some relatively simple data. The table below is based on Edwin Chadwick’s research into public health in 1840s’ Britain and its effect on mortality. It depicts the *average age of death* in different localities in 1842. Examine it and then answer the three questions below. You are welcome to use an internet search engine to look up the locations mentioned in the headings.

	Manchester	Leeds	Liverpool	Rutland
Gentlemen and professional people	38	44	35	52
Tradesmen	20	27	26	41
Labourers	17	19	15	39

- a. What can we infer from this table about the health of different classes of people?
  - b. What can we conclude about health in different areas of the country?
  - c. What factors might help to explain why the figures are, in some instances, so low?
5. Historians insist that the literature with which they engage in order to develop their knowledge and arguments should be sufficiently scholarly. Which of these would they be confident to use as a secondary source? If you are unsure, you may use an internet search to look up these texts. (Each of these references is relevant to one or more of the themes that you might study on the MA.)
- a. David Englander, *Poverty and Poor Law Reform in Nineteenth Century Britain, 1834-1914* (London: Longman, 1998).
  - b. Philippa Gregory, *A Respectable Trade* (London: Harper Collins, 2006).
  - c. Constance Miles, *Mrs Miles's Diary: The Wartime Journal of a Housewife on the Home Front*, ed. by S. V. Partington (London: Simon & Schuster, 2013).
  - d. Philip Richardson, ‘The Structure of Capital during the Industrial Revolution Revisited: Two Case Studies from the Cotton Textile Industry’, *The Economic History Review*, 42 (1989).

e. Amy Bell, *Murder Capital: Suspicious Deaths in London, 1933-53* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2014).

## Part One: Feedback

### 1. True or false?

a. The most important task of the historian is to uncover exactly what happened in the past.

This is false. Whilst there's no doubt that historians have to discover what occurred in order to provide an interpretation of past developments, and it's probably the first thing that they need to do when embarking on a project, it is not their most important task. Historians would be more concerned to answer questions of *how and why* things happened in the way that they did. Neither do historians think it even remotely possible to uncover *exactly* what happened. There is, for one thing, just too much missing evidence to allow them to do that.

b. Historians should be concerned to explain the past's continuities, as well as its changes.

This is true, although it is forgivable (at this stage) to think that it might be false. Whilst most historians do concentrate on the reasons for change (perhaps because revolutions, wars, great social reforms, and so on are ostensibly more exciting) that does not take away their responsibility to explain continuity.

c. Historians confine themselves to studying the written record of the past.

To a limited extent this is true, because history as a discipline is primarily defined by historians' focus on using written records to uncover the past. However, most historians working today would say this statement is false. Though there are historians who do confine themselves to the study of written records alone, and some topics that lend themselves to that approach, they increasingly employ all sorts of different records and sources to construct their interpretations. This is particularly so in the case of local history, which is the focus of our MA. Photographs, cartoons, ephemera, films, paintings, buildings, maps, and oral history are all used regularly in the practice of the discipline.

d. The terms 'history' and 'the past' are synonymous.

False. 'History' is often mistaken for 'the past', but it is something different. History is the *study* of the (human) past; we *examine* the past's traces and then *write* history. In consequence of this process, though historians try to be objective in their studies, history cannot wholly eliminate an element of subjectivity in its construction.

e. It is the historian's job to use hindsight to explain where things went wrong in the past.

False. Most historians would say that hindsight is a very dangerous way to look at the past, because it unfairly imposes our current values onto people and societies which were very different to ours. That said, historians are curious about events or plans in the past which, for those who were involved with them, did not go according to plan. But it is not really up to them to place a moral judgement of 'good' or 'bad' onto those plans. Sometimes historians are asked to write history for people or institutions in order to help them understand past mistakes. But historians, particularly at universities, are under no such obligation.

### 2. Assess the value as evidence of the sources.

For this question, a starting point of either *a* or *d* would be most appropriate. If you were right at the beginning of your enquiries, then *d* (the textbook) would be best, because it should give

you an overview of any debates in the topic area and the background information necessary to contextualise your primary research. If you had already established that context, though, then *a*, being the only source from the 1890s directly composed by a rank-and-file trade unionist, would probably be most valuable. In terms of the others, much would depend on the content of each and what exactly you want to discover. *g* would almost certainly also be useful, because it should show the types of things that would appeal to a trade unionist audience. You would have to know who the cabinet minister was and what position he held in order to make an assessment on the value of *b* (it might be helpful, for instance, if the minister was at the Board of Trade). *c* would be very valuable if it was from the time period that you're researching, but sadly it isn't, so unless it made references to previous industrial disputes from the 1890s, I'd relegate it quite far down the list. *e* is probably the least relevant *primary* source – both because it comes from slightly outside of the time period and – more importantly – because it is a 'top down' document that is unlikely to say anything about the views of rank-and-file union members, except perhaps in a highly generalised way. *f* poses all sorts of problems and should be avoided at all costs. Its title is horribly overblown and biased (usually a giveaway that it's not written by a scholar) and it's not hosted by a reputable educational site. The chronology it covers is also outside of your research area. It is possible, though unlikely, that the author might have something valid to say about trade union history, but it would depend greatly on what evidence they offered and whether their inferences were sustainable – and, frankly, trying to make that sort of assessment would be a waste of your time.

As you can see, other than putting *a* or *d* at the top and *f* at the bottom, you could make a case for a few slightly different ways of ordering the list. Ultimately, *it depends on what you want to know* – and if you made that point then you should be especially pleased. For instance, if you were investigating the *state's* responses to trade union activism in the late nineteenth century, then sources *b* and *e* would probably shoot to the top of the list.

3. Place these events in the correct chronological order.
  - a. The law stating that married women were allowed to own and control property in their own right.

This would be first in the list chronologically. There were several Married Women's Property Acts in the late nineteenth century – each expanded on and corrected the flaws of its predecessor – they were passed in 1870, 1882, 1884, and 1893.
  - b. A report from the first meeting of the Women's Social and Political Union.

The WSPU was formed in 1903 as a more militant breakaway organisation from the National Union of Women's Suffrage Societies.
  - c. A newspaper account of a suffragette chaining herself to the railings outside No 10 Downing Street.

Suffragettes waged an increasingly obstructive and violent campaign for their cause, and this was one incident amongst many. It occurred in 1908.
  - d. The statute that ensured equalisation of the franchise (i.e. women permitted to vote on the same terms as men).

We hope you weren't fooled by the mention of 1918 in the question. Women did not get the national vote *on equal terms* with men until 1928, through the Representation of the People (Equal Franchise) Act.

- e. An autobiographical account, written when she was in her 70s, of a leading suffragist.

It doesn't really matter who this was – several suffragists and suffragettes wrote memoirs of one kind or another – the point is that it probably should come after the 1928 Act.

- f. A journal article by a historian about campaigners for women's enfranchisement refusing to fill in their 1911 census forms.

As a secondary source, this would almost certainly come last in the list.

#### 4. Interpreting statistical data.

- a. What can we infer from this table about the health of different classes of people?

In all four locations, life expectancy was poorest amongst the lowest class (labourers) and highest in the top class (landed and upper-middle classes). We may infer from this – though we would need more evidence to be certain – that the health of each class was directly related to its economic position.

- b. What can we conclude about health in different areas of the country?

In contrast to Rutland – a very rural area – all three industrial cities had relatively low average ages of death across all classes. Even rural (agricultural) labourers from Rutland had better life expectancy than the highest class in Liverpool. From this, we might conclude that the rural populace's health was generally much better than that of people who lived in urban industrial areas. (Do note, though, that the table does *not* give us any indication of *why* that was – we would need to consult other sources to ascertain that.)

- c. What factors might help to explain why the figures are, in some instances, so low?

There is nothing wrong with the accuracy of the statistics, so that is not the reason. These data give us the *average age* of death, so what is it that might lower the average? People dying very young. Historians call this 'infant mortality'. So the factor that most likely would explain why, for instance, industrial labourers had a life expectancy in their teenage years, is a very high rate of infant mortality. Other influences might be at play – labourers were more prone to die in industrial accidents than members of the landed class, for example – but none is likely to have had anything close to the impact of a high death-rate amongst children.

#### 5. Identifying scholarly secondary sources.

- a. David Englander, *Poverty and Poor Law Reform in Nineteenth Century Britain, 1834-1914* (London: Longman, 1998).

Yes, this is a scholarly text. It's a broad survey textbook of a single important area of British social history.

b. Philippa Gregory, *A Respectable Trade* (London: Harper Collins, 2006).

This book is set in the eighteenth century and deals with events concerning the slave trade. You may know of Gregory, since she is one of Britain's foremost historical novelists. Although she has a doctorate in eighteenth century literary history and is renowned for the historical accuracy of her books' background context, *A Respectable Trade* is nonetheless fiction and would not be used by historians as a secondary source in their studies.

c. Constance Miles, *Mrs Miles's Diary: The Wartime Journal of a Housewife on the Home Front*, ed. by S. V. Partington (London: Simon & Schuster, 2013).

This book could certainly be used by historians if they were researching the domestic front in the Second World War, but – despite being recently published – it is essentially a *primary*, not a secondary, source.

d. Philip Richardson, 'The Structure of Capital during the Industrial Revolution Revisited: Two Case Studies from the Cotton Textile Industry', *The Economic History Review*, 42 (1989).

Here we have an article from a scholarly journal. This could definitely be used by historians interested in researching industrialisation, and it is likely that – if you were to enrol on the MA – you would be locating and reading quite a lot of this type of journal source.

e. Amy Bell, *Murder Capital: Suspicious Deaths in London, 1933-53* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2014).

Yes, this too is a scholarly text; its publication by a university press is usually a telling sign. To be exact, it is a monograph which scrutinises a relatively confined topic (murders in London) over a comparatively short time span. The final stage of our MA asks you to write a dissertation, which in terms of its 'look and feel', whilst not being exactly the same, will be most similar to an academic monograph.

Well done in particular if you spotted that these were five different *types* of history text.

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Don't get too worried if you made the odd mistake here. If you answered a fair few of the questions (50% or more) in a way that comes close to our exemplar feedback, you can move with confidence to the next part of the self-assessment test.

If you answered rather less than 50% of the questions, then you will probably need to do some preparatory study before enrolling on the history MA. You could try one of our [undergraduate history modules](#) as a taster for the subject: you can find some details about those online. Although it won't prepare you directly for local history, it should give you a grounding in historical skills like argument and research. Alternatively, if you would prefer to get straight into local history, then we strongly recommend the University of Oxford's [Undergraduate Advanced Diploma in Local History](#). It would also be useful to try out the OU's [skills check for postgraduate study](#), which will give you more generic feedback on studying successfully at this level.



## Part Two: Primary Sources

Primary sources are historians' raw material; we would expect anyone who graduates in the discipline to have a working knowledge of how to analyse them and utilise them in the construction of a historical argument. Whilst we would not expect anyone signing up to our MA in history to have an instant understanding of the variety of primary evidence that they are likely to encounter, you will probably struggle in the earlier parts of the module if you don't have some familiarity with the process of analysis and the generic questions that historians ask of this evidence. The next part of the evaluation is designed to test your ability to understand documents and to interrogate them. Extracts from two local history sources are presented below. Read them and then consider how you might answer the questions that follow.

### Source A

Extract from J.B. Priestley, *English Journey* (London: William Heinemann, 1934), pp.266-7.

Blackpool [...] has recently built a bathing pool that does not hold mere hundreds of people but thousands, the population of a small town. It has decided that it ought to extend its season into October, while the beds are still aired and the frying-pans hot, and so now every autumn it has the whole front, miles of it, illuminated with coloured lights, not a few thousand coloured lights but hundreds of thousands of them. That is Blackpool. It is a complete and essential product of industrial democracy. [...] The rest of the world [...] is catching up with Blackpool, our first great entertainment caterer to the sixpenny crowd.

### Source B

Extract from Anon, 'War Holiday?', *Us: Mass Observation's Weekly Intelligence Service*, no.8 (23 March 1940), p.62. [Emphasis original]

Far the greatest number of [Bolton residents] who go to any holiday resort go to Blackpool, and more people go to Blackpool than to any other resort in Europe. There are however a very large number of alternative places offered by the railway companies, charabanc firms, hotel and camp advertisers in the [Bolton] press. Why do the majority go to Blackpool? There is a big difference between the holiday that people *say* they want (e.g. in 220 detailed statements by [Bolton interviewees] on "How I would like to spend my holidays") and the actual holiday of fact. Only 24% say they want to go to a popular sea side resort, but 69% actually go there.

Blackpool is the whirlpool which, if it does not draw the hearts of [Bolton] residents, draws at least [sic] their bodies and, above all, their monies. However much they think they want the country, when it comes to the point they go to places where the crowds are, where the rhythm is as fast and the noise almost as great as that of the mill. Blackpool is the fastest, most crowded, noisiest, and the railway and by-pass lead straight there.

*Note: Mass Observation was created in 1937. It was an organisation dedicated to the recording of information about ordinary people's experiences, attitudes, and behaviours. This information was collected by a variety of means – including direct surveys of opinion (referred to in the source), the writing of diaries by correspondents, and reports of everyday life from volunteer 'observers'. Although this journal was published in 1940, this segment of the article refers to the situation in Blackpool before the Second World War.*

1. These sources are of different generic types. What type of document is source A?
2. How would you go about finding information about the author of source A?
3. Why would you need to acquire information about the author of *any* document?
4. What evidence is there in source B that people holidayed in Blackpool because it was conveniently nearby?

5. Do the two sources support one another in the impression that they give the reader of Blackpool? What are the points of similarity?

## Part Two: Feedback

Don't forget, we're not expecting perfect answers here (and, in any case, the exemplar responses to the last two questions are not definitive). What's more important is that you make an honest assessment of how close you came to these answers and whether, in the light of that, you feel confident enough to try part three.

1. These sources are of different generic *types*. What type of document is source A?

It is a piece of travel writing (or travelogue). It is also a *public* source, written for publication.

2. How would you go about finding information about the author of source A?

If you said you'd use an internet search engine, that's not the best answer that you could have given because the likelihood of a search throwing up all sorts of irrelevant or even misleading websites is quite high. On the other hand, at this stage, Wikipedia would be an entirely satisfactory first port-of-call, though better still would be a scholarly reference source such as the *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*.

3. Why would you need to acquire information about the author of *any* document?

This is an important test of your historical awareness. The reason we need to know about the authorship of a source is that it is part of establishing *provenance*, which is crucial for making an assessment of the *value* of the source, understanding *how* it can be used, and extracting the most useful evidence from it. (Other elements in this process include identifying when and where a source was produced, what its audience was, and the purpose for which it was produced.)

4. What evidence is there in source B that people holidayed in Blackpool because it was conveniently nearby?

This was a bit trickier, but you could say that despite the availability of other options (sentence 2) and the fact that most of M-O's interviewees professed to wanting to holiday elsewhere, the majority of them still opted for Blackpool (sentences 4 and 5). One reason for that is hinted at in the final sentence – modern transport networks made it comparatively straightforward to get there. The point of this question was to encourage you to do some close-up reading and extract relevant information.

5. Do the two sources support one another in the impression that they give the reader of Blackpool? What are the points of similarity?

Generally speaking, they do, although the purpose and focus of each is slightly different. There are several points that could be cross-referenced here. Most important, perhaps, is the sense of entertainment on a *mass* scale (if you used a term like 'mass society' then that would be especially encouraging). For instance, Source A talks about the 'hundreds of thousands' of lights that cover the seafront of the, according to Source B, most popular resort in Europe (also suggested by the town's extension of its season mentioned in A). The noise, crowds, and speed of Blackpool's season are only hinted at in the first source, but they are unambiguously stressed in the second. You can be especially pleased if you spotted that both sources give evidence that this was predominantly a working-class resort (in source A, the phrases 'industrial democracy' and

'sixpenny crowd' are clues; in source B, we can infer this from the direct analogy between Blackpool's rapid tempo and that of 'the mill') and that its attractions were distinctively 'modern'.

If your answers covered similar ground to those suggested here, then you should feel confident enough to go on to the final part of this self-assessment test. On the other hand, if you feel that you came up short then you probably need to do some more studying to prepare yourself for the history MA. A good place to start would be Jeremy Black and Donald MacRaild's book, *Studying History* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2000). (If you do use this book, we recommend that you begin by reading Part II.) If you feel unprepared for a local history course, then you should consider first studying the University of Oxford's [Undergraduate Advanced Diploma in Local History](#). You could also have a look at these light-hearted takes on the [nature of history](#) and the [analysis of sources](#).

### Part Three: Secondary sources

If you have worked your way through parts one and two with a relative degree of confidence, you should be reassured. You are doing well and would probably manage comfortably on the MA. In this final section, we ask you to read a brief extract from an academic secondary source and answer the three questions below. Don't forget to consult the endnotes to see what kind of sources the author employs. In the MA, this is the sort of academic literature that you will often be expected to read, understand, and use in your own work.

1. In your own words, compose a sentence or two that says what this article is about.
2. Can you summarise the argument that the author makes in this section of his article?
3. What evidence does the author employ to support his argument?

Extract from: William M. Meier, 'Going on the Hoist: Women, Work, and Shoplifting in London, ca. 1890–1940', *Journal of British Studies*, 50, 2 (2011).

Social class differentiated the act of shoplifting [...] Unlike plebeian shoplifters, middle-class thieves rarely stole from draperies and tailors' shops, where the plunder included unfinished linens and silks. Respectable women concentrated their shoplifting on finished fashion accessories available in department stores: stockings, gloves, shoes, hatpins, handkerchiefs, belts, brooches, purses, and scarves. The physical size of these items meant that they were easily concealed and stolen, as in the case of Lily Smith, age 43, a wealthy widow who owned homes in Cardiff and London and who was fined for stealing a handbag from Whiteley's in 1933.<sup>1</sup> In some cases, well-to-do shop thieves hoarded their pickings: Sarah Henney, age 30, of Hammersmith, kept boxes full of stolen items in her home.<sup>2</sup> Annie Barton, age 50, a widow of independent means, was fined for stealing handbags and other items from the Army and Navy stores in 1918; she was judged to be capable of paying a £20 fine. When detectives searched her home, they found numerous stolen items with the tickets still attached.<sup>3</sup>

Working-class thieves, on the other hand, tended to steal unfinished cloth. When they did purloin finished articles of clothing, they tended to do so in bulk or would take high-value items that would fetch a price on the black market. For example, three "old hands" stole fifty-six yards of silk from Debenham and Freebody's in 1897, while another pair of shoplifters pilfered fifty yards of silk from a shop in Hackney in 1898.<sup>4</sup> Esther Joab, age 28, a dressmaker, and her confederate Matilda Greenberg, age 23, shoplifted fifty-five yards of satin from Whiteley's and thirty-four yards of silk from Samuel Lewis's drapery in 1904. The women completed the circuit of stolen property by fencing their spoils to a tailoress near Oxford Street. Joab and Greenberg were well known to the police as notorious shoplifters and therefore came under the observation of Sergeant Frederick Wensley, who followed them from their homes near Whitechapel Road—long infamous for its criminal population—and followed them into the two shops. Wensley recalled in his memoirs that it had taken great skill to steal this quantity of material from under the noses of shop assistants and that when Joab—the more expert of the two thieves—had been searched, "all kinds of things were found down the leg of one stocking, from jewellery to bank-notes."<sup>5</sup> Working-class shoplifters responded to a different set of motivations to steal within the framework of a consumer society; unlike their bourgeois sisters, they stole for material profit.

Finally, middle- and working-class shoplifters pled differently when faced with prosecution. Bourgeois thieves deployed [...] variations of the "kleptomania diagnosis" in their defence [...]

[Middle-class women claimed] that shopping helped them to relieve stress: shopping as a pleasurable escape was central to department stores' marketing. In this sense, shoplifting was an extreme extension of that logic.<sup>6</sup> [Other] categories of kleptomania pleas were mental ill-health and physical ailment. Middle-class women advanced a variety of health-related pleas in mitigation of their shoplifting: alcoholism, high blood pressure, impulses, fits, work-related stress, "neurasthenia," strung nerves, estrangement from a spouse, too many aspirin pills, insomnia, a brainstorm, and a "tropical disease."<sup>7</sup> Such pleas were calculated to explain why the woman was especially susceptible to temptation, and they were readily accepted because the excuses all seemed to confirm, in one way or another, prevailing gender stereotypes about the weakness and irrationality of women (especially middle-class women). [...]

The pleas [...] in cases of middle-class shoplifting differed starkly from those of working-class shoplifters. Working women typically pled guilty when brought up in court, perhaps because they did not possess the social or material resources to enlist the services of a doctor, or because they stole deliberately and knew the risks that they took. It is also possible that many working-class shoplifters predicted that a checkered past would tell against them, as when two previously convicted domestic servants, Isabel Ashdown and Charlotte Whitbread, pled guilty to stealing silk from a linen draper in Harrow Road rather than attempt to prove that their characters were beyond reproach.<sup>8</sup> When Nellie Bignell, age 27, pled guilty to stealing a cape from John Barker's in Kensington in 1899, she had already racked up a long list of previous convictions for shoplifting.<sup>9</sup> Other working-class shoplifting defendants shrewdly attempted to game the system. When Detective Wensley arrested Esther Joab, she exclaimed, "Oh, Mr. Wensley, we will plead guilty, do not let us go for trial."<sup>10</sup> [...] Clearly the nature of the shoplifter's transgression—its location, what was stolen and in what quantities, and the cultural perception and punishment of these crimes—differed along lines of social class.

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#### Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> *The Times*, 9 October 1933. See also the cases in *The Times* of Lady Edith Simmons (21 December 1923); Angela Bond (23 August 1924); Alice Brown (23 March 1927); Annie Pilley (13 July 1929); Kathleen Peat (25 July 1929); and Mildred Wilson O'Neill (6 August 1936).

<sup>2</sup> *The Times*, 24 January 1896.

<sup>3</sup> *The Times*, 30 December 1918.

<sup>4</sup> See the case of Sarah Jones, Sarah Johnson, and Beatrice Wilson (*The Times*, 19 August 1897); and of Eleanor Finkelstein and Fanny Rosenbaum (*The Times*, 22 July 1898).

<sup>5</sup> Wensley, Frederick Porter, *Detective Days: The Record of Forty-Two Years' Service in the Criminal Investigation Department* (London, 1931), 145; *Old Bailey Proceedings Online [OBP]* ([www.oldbaileyonline.org](http://www.oldbaileyonline.org), 1 May 2009), November 1904, trial of Esther Joab, Matilda Greenberg, and Rebecca Hollander (t19041114–19); *The Times*, 5 November 1904.

<sup>6</sup> See the cases of "a highly respectable Belgian lady" (*The Times*, 9 May 1918), and of Florence Robinson (*The Times*, 10 October 1918).

<sup>7</sup> For examples of these health-related pleas, see the following cases: On alcoholism, see the cases of Alice Hughes (*The Times*, 14 January 1914) and Alfreda Newman (*The Times*, 12 April 1919; and 11 April 1919, Records of Marylebone Police Court, London Metropolitan Archives, PS/MAR/A/01/057). On high blood pressure, see the case of 60-year-old Annie Pilley, who was fined (*The Times*, 13 July 1929). For impulses, see the case of Meryl Irene Shove (*The Times*, 24 December 1927). For fits, see the case of Lydia Hirschfeld (*The Times*, 30 December 1918). For work-related stress, see the case of Kate Beddowe, a schoolteacher (*The Times*, 4 February 1919). For "neurasthenia," see the case of Clara Neilding (*The Times*, 7 August 1919). For strung nerves, see the case of Emily Caldecott, a 45-year-old married woman (*The Times*, 18 January 1922). On estrangement from a spouse, see the case of Angela Bond, age 29, after she had been caught stealing frocks and a brooch from Whiteley's (*The Times*, 23 August 1924). On too many aspirin pills, see the case of Olive Lilian Ocuneff, a 26-year-old married woman, who said that she had taken too many aspirin pills to know what she was doing when she stole handbags and gloves from Selfridge's (*The Times*, 4 January 1929). On insomnia, see the case of Grace Chandler, age 18, a dancing instructor, who stole from Bourne & Hollingsworth (*The Times*, 3 April 1929). On the plea of a brainstorm, see the case of Ella Ford (*The Times*, 12 July 1929); and on the plea of tropical disease, see case of Marie Cooper (*The Times*, 20 November 1931).

<sup>8</sup> *The Times*, 10 June 1892.

<sup>9</sup> *The Times*, 25 February 1899.

<sup>10</sup> *OBP*, November 1904, Esther Joab, Matilda Greenberg, and Rebecca Hollander (t19041114–19).

## Part Three: Feedback

We wouldn't have expected you to have any detailed knowledge of this period or this topic, but the main purpose of this task was to check that you have the close-up reading skills and ability to extract relevant information that you will need to progress to the MA.

1. In your own words, compose a sentence or two that says what this article is about.

The article is about female shop-lifting in London in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries and class influences on that phenomenon.

2. Can you summarise the argument that the author makes in this section of his article?

The author's main argument is pretty clear from the very first sentence. That, in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, middle-class and working-class female shop-lifting was fundamentally dissimilar. It was different in terms of its motivation, its location, the objects of theft, how the police treated it and public perceptions of it. The author then takes the reader through some of those different aspects to demonstrate in detail how working-class shoplifting differed qualitatively and quantitatively from that carried out by the middle-class.

3. What evidence does the author employ to support his argument?

All the evidence that the author has used in this section of his article is primary. It is of three different types: newspaper reporting of criminal court cases, transcripts of court proceedings (from the Old Bailey and Marylebone Police Court), and memoir (Wensley's published recollections). Most of the evidence for individual cases has been drawn from the *Times*. The author's technique – which is perfectly sound – is to make a general hypothesis statement, then back it up with a selection of detailed evidence (a highly abbreviated 'story' of each crime), before finally drawing a wider inference. Whether or not the evidence he presents is strong enough to carry his conclusions was not at issue here – and in any case the detailed critiquing of secondary source arguments is a skill that we would expect you to develop whilst studying the MA – but if you did make any comment along those lines then you can be especially pleased.

If you felt that you didn't get close enough to the answers we've suggested then it may be that you need to do some preparatory study before embarking on the MA – the best place to go would be Oxford University's [Undergraduate Advanced Diploma in Local History](#). However, we also want to say that if you found all of this test manageable without getting stressed, and you generally felt that you knew what you were doing, then you would probably manage the MA and do quite well. If you have been interested in the questions we've set (and we hope that you have been, because it is important to enjoy the subject that you choose to study) then you could have a look at one or other of the following texts; they will give you a taste of the module content:

Barry Godfrey and Paul Lawrence, *Crime and Justice since 1750* (London: Routledge, 2014).

Lynn Hollen Lees, *The Solidarities of Strangers: The English Poor Laws and the People 1700-1948* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007).