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# REAL LIFE SECRET AGENTS: Oliver 'the Spy' and the Pentrich Revolution



REVOLUTIONISTS

Britain became a parliamentary democracy in 1215, but in 1817 less than 3% of the people had the right to vote. In 1775 thirteen American colonies started a War of Independence from Britain with the idea of creating the first truly democratic country. And in 1779 the French Revolution abolished the monarchy and created a republic.

The British workers read about this in newspapers and were not happy.

**IN ORDER TO VOTE IN 1817 YOU NEEDED TO TICK THESE 3 BOXES:**

- MALE**
- OVER 21**
- OWN PROPERTY OF VALUE**

This situation was made worse by a series of poor crops and a new tax on imported grains that made food very expensive.

The government knew that political groups were forming and asking for a change in the law to give workers the right to vote. So it created a network of spies and informers to infiltrate these groups and give the government information. The government needed an excuse to stop these groups and they were going to make sure they had one.

- **abolished:** officially ended
- **crops:** plants grown for food, like potatoes or wheat
- **grains:** seeds that we eat, like rice and wheat
- **imported:** that come from abroad
- **infiltrate:** become part of a group to spy on it
- **network:** system of connected parts
- **parliamentary democracy:** type of government in which people elect representatives to make laws
- **right:** something the law allows people to do



## Oliver the Spy

William J. Oliver, known as 'Oliver the Spy', infiltrated a group of workers in Derbyshire, in the north of England. He gave information to the government, and he created the excuse that the government needed. He told the men that people in larger cities like Manchester were angry, and that armed workers were getting ready to march to London to force the government to give them the right to vote.

On 9th June 1817 about 300 men left the village of Pentrich, 14 miles north of Nottingham. They marched south towards London. When they reached the village of Eastwood they realised it was a trap: the soldiers were waiting for them. The men tried to escape but 46 of them were arrested for High Treason.

- **deportation:** when somebody is removed from a country by force
- **High Treason:** crime that puts the safety of the country in danger

The government wanted to teach the workers a lesson, so the sentences were very hard: death for three men and deportation to Australia and prison for 23 others. None of them ever came back. Their families were forced to leave their homes. Oliver 'the Spy' went to work in South Africa.

In 1918, after many small reforms, all men above the age of 21 and all women above the age of 30 got the right to vote.

### When you read *The Secret Agent*

Are there any similarities between the story and the Pentrich Revolution?

### Find out more

- What was the Peterloo Massacre?
- What was the Chartist Movement?
- When did women get the right to vote at 21?
- When did all men and women get the right to vote at 18?

- **march:** walk
- **sentences:** punishments for crimes
- **trap:** device for catching animals or people so they can't escape



# The Secret Agent



Mr Verloc



Winnie Verloc



Stevie



Winnie's Mother



Wurmt



Vladimir





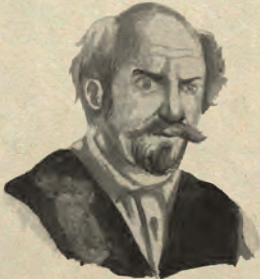
Sir Ethelred



Chief  
Inspector Heat



The Assistant  
Commissioner



The Professor



Alexander Ossipon



Michaelis



Karl Yundt

# BEFORE READING

1 Match the pictures to the characters.



- 1  Mrs Winnie Verloc was young and attractive and looked after her brother.
- 2  Stevie had fair hair, loved his sister very much and got easily lost.
- 3  Winnie's mother's husband was dead and her health wasn't very good.
- 4  Mr Verloc was lazy and fat and had dark hair.

2  Who do you think is most important? Talk with a friend and decide.



Assistant Commissioner



Police Officer



Home Secretary



Chief Inspector Heat



- WEB 3** Match the places on the map A–D with the pictures.  
Use the internet to help you. How many other places can you add to the map?



- 1  The Royal Observatory is in Greenwich Park.
- 2  Mr Verloc's house is in Brett Street, in Soho.
- 3  There's an important Embassy in Belgravia.
- 4  The British Parliament is in the Palace of Westminster on the River Thames.

**4** Match the following elements of the story with the places in Exercise 3.

- 1  the Home Secretary
- 2  the First Secretary of the Ambassador
- 3  the First Meridian
- 4  Mrs Winnie Verloc

## 1 MR VERLOC

1 When Mr Verloc went out, he often left Stevie, his brother-in-law, to look after his shop. And his wife, Mrs Verloc, to look after Stevie.

The shop was small, and so was the house above it. It was like a square box in Brett Street. The shop window showed cheap dusty• items. The customers looked generally as if they didn't have much money.

There was a bell above the door and when it rang, Mr Verloc came from the sitting room at the back of the shop. He was overweight•, had dark hair, heavy eyelids• and an air of having spent the day fully dressed on an unmade bed. He then sold his customer some object at a price that was clearly too high.

Sometimes it was Mrs Verloc who appeared when the shop bell rang. Mrs Winnie Verloc was a young, attractive woman who seemed very uninterested in the customers in the shop and the special visitors who went into the sitting room at the back. The door of the shop was the only entrance to the house.

Winnie's mother also lived with them. She was a heavy woman, with swollen• legs that made her disabled, and she was a widow•. In the past she had a lodging house• where Winnie helped her look after the lodgers•, and that's where she met Mr Verloc. He stayed there every time he returned from his frequent mysterious trips to Europe.

- **dusty:** covered with dust as they have been there for a long time
- **eyelids:** skin that covers the eyes when they are closed
- **lodgers:** people who rent a room in a house
- **lodging house:** house where one can rent a room
- **overweight:** too heavy; fat
- **swollen:** larger than usual and full of liquid
- **widow:** woman whose husband is dead



When they got married, Winnie's mother sold the lodging house because it wasn't convenient• for Mr Verloc's other business. What his business was he did not say. His work was in a way political, he told Winnie once. It was impossible for Winnie's mother to discover anything more.

The couple took Winnie's mother and brother to their new home. Winnie was very fond of her delicate• brother, and Mr Verloc was kind and generous, so Winnie's mother felt that the poor boy was safe in this hard world.

Winnie's brother, Stevie, was 23 years old, of slight• build•, with fair hair, and difficult to look after. He could read and write, but as an errand boy• he was not a great success. He forgot his messages; he was easily distracted by street cats and dogs and he got lost. When something confused him, he stuttered•. He helped his sister with blind love in her household• work. Winnie looked after him like a mother.

Such was the house, the household, and the business that Mr Verloc left behind him on his way towards Hyde Park at half-past ten on that particular• morning.



- **build:** size and shape of a person's body
- **convenient:** easy; practical
- **delicate:** needing care
- **errand boy:** boy whose job is to take messages, goods, etc.

- **household:** house and the people living in it
- **particular:** that one and not any other
- **slight:** thin and not very strong
- **stuttered:** spoke repeating the first sound of words several times



# AFTER READING VOCABULARY

1 Complete the mind-map with the words in the box.

incriminate   confess   confession   investigate   commit a crime  
execution   feel guilt   find evidence   sentence   be a suspect  
trial   go to prison   arrest (n)   arrest (v)   be out on parole



2 Do you know other words you can add to this mind map?



## **P** B1 Preliminary English Test Reading Part 1

- 1 A group of students are making a film version of *The Secret Agent*. Look at the text in each question. What does it say? Tick (✓) the correct letter (A, B or C).

1

**If we want to use my uncle's shop for the scene between Winnie and Heat, we'll have to do it this Saturday, before my uncle comes back from holiday. Let me know if that's OK. Jim**

- A  The scene between Winnie and Heat is going to be done in Jim's uncle's shop today.
- B  If the scene between Winnie and Heat can't be done this Saturday, they will need to find another shop.
- C  Jim's uncle doesn't want them to do the scene in his shop this Saturday.

2

**Old clothes gravel and a pair of unwanted shoes needed tomorrow for the hospital scene. Please be aware that the shoes will be covered in red paint. Please contact Sam.**

- A  The hospital room will be painted red tomorrow.
- B  Sam will play the part of Stevie.
- C  The shoes' owner should expect the shoes to be damaged.