

Name \_\_\_\_\_

Date \_\_\_\_\_ Period \_\_\_\_\_ **Baby Farming**



One of the more distasteful aspects of Victorian England was the practice of taking in unwanted babies, and, in return for a commercial fee, either over-crowding them, or killing them. It was known as baby farming.

Sergeant Richard Relf became the first Metropolitan Police investigator semi-officially recognized for his expertise in relation to a specific type of crime. Relf's investigation into 18 dead infants found in Brixton over a short period of time led to baby farmer Margaret Walters being executed for the murders. Relf then became an advisor for other similar enquiries until his retirement.

Charles Dickens had reported on the Tooting baby farm run by a man called Drouet ten years beforehand, but the case which perhaps gained most notoriety was that of Mrs. Dyer, who was executed in 1896.

The investigation started when two bargemen on the River Thames found a parcel which had been weighed down, but disturbed by their barge pole. Inside was the dead body of a baby, but the paper in which the body was wrapped led police to the "respectable" Mrs. Dyer of Reading. She was known as a "benevolent old lady with a motherly heart, whose one pardonable weakness was a pronounced fondness for babies of all descriptions."



The police then started dragging the river and found yet more bodies of babies in that part of the river, each of which had been weighted with a brick.

Two babies were identified as Doris Marmon and Harry Simmons.

In January 1896, Miss Marmon, a barmaid in Cheltenham, had found herself unable to care for her child properly, and answered an advert from a "Mrs. Harding" seeking a child for adoption. "Mrs. Harding" duly arrived, took £10 as a fee for looking after the child, and made Miss Marmon happy that her child's future was now secure, especially with such an apparently motherly figure to look after her. Miss Marmon identified "Mrs. Harding" to the court as none other than Mrs. Dyer.

[http://www.historybytheyard.co.uk/baby\\_farming.htm](http://www.historybytheyard.co.uk/baby_farming.htm)

**What is the main idea of this article?**

---

---

**What is baby farming? How do you feel about it?**

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---



The infants in this picture are emaciated. What do you think the word emaciated might mean?

---

---

"The darkest, most ghastly shame in the land" wrote the Reverend Benjamin Waugh, Honorary Director of the National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children, in describing baby farming. It was, he went on to say, "a trade which has grown up, and is in full swing in the land—the undertaker for the unwanted baby's death."

In *Oliver Twist*, the eponymous hero spends a portion of his youth in a baby farm. Here, under the watchful eye of Mrs. Mann, he "contrived to exist upon the smallest possible portion of the weakest possible food." ...

Who were the clientele of these nightmare establishments and how did they know to send their unwanted children there? Illegitimacy, particularly amongst the middle-classes of Victorian England, was considered a sin of the blackest sort. It was, moreover, a sin largely laid upon women. While there was little that could be done to mitigate a pregnancy, it could be kept as far away from the family and friends of the sinner as possible. Then, when the baby was born, it could be farmed out and, hopefully, forgotten. It is likely that because of the costs involved in farming a baby out, baby farms were reliant for survival on clients capable of paying to have their unwanted offspring removed as far from the mother as possible...

For someone looking for a baby farm, the papers advertised them quite blatantly with only the most minimal attempt to "code" the notice. James Greenwood, in *The Seven Curses of London* quotes from a number of advertisements for "Adoption." In *The Times*, there appear, over the Victorian period, numerous notices with headings such as "Child Wanted to Nurse," "Care of child wanted by married couple without children," "The care of a child wanted," etc. Most of these advise that the advertiser is "respectable" and can provide "references." ... Among the most vicious in the trade was Margaret Waters, tried, convicted and sentenced to death at the Old Bailey in September of 1870. Waters was believed to be responsible for the deaths of as many as nineteen infants. *The Times* summed up the business in an article published on 12 October 1870.

The word adoption is used ironically. It does not actually mean adoption. What does the word adoption *really* mean in this case? How do you know?

---

---

The wretched woman and her sister were proved to have systematically published advertisements offering to "adopt" children for a remuneration which no one in his senses could believe to be adequate,. In other words, they offered to the parents of illegitimate children a means of getting rid of charges at once burdensome and shameful to them.

A sergeant of police painted a picture of what he found at the baby farm. Here "some half-dozen little infants lay together on a sofa, filthy, starving, and stupefied by laudanum."

In the Coroner's court, a fourteen-year old housemaid testified that children at the house had been "taken away at night and not brought back." She had been told that the children were being taken home.

Pick a word you don't know from the article and define it here.