

Daylight Robbery

Have you ever felt that you were being cheated out of something in a very obvious way? You may have heard the phrase *daylight robbery* to describe something that is a total cheat or rip-off. Did you ever wonder where the phrase came from?

In 1696, King William III of England (and Ireland too) badly needed money. He needed to come up with a quick way of getting much-needed money from his adoring and not-so-adoring subjects. There was no income tax at the time and the King decided it would be way too difficult to send a whole army of tax collectors from door to door asking people how much they earned. He wisely reckoned that some of his tax collectors might not survive the experience! Most people probably would not cooperate. Tax collectors were not very popular in those days and it was generally considered dangerous work.

People could always conceal how much they earned in order to avoid tax. However, they could not conceal the number of windows in their houses. King William figured that the richer you were, the bigger your house was, and the more windows you had. Simple! He introduced a property tax that made all the

owners of houses with more than six windows pay him a levy. All that his tax collectors had to do was to go around counting windows. This was much safer!

The window tax was duly made a law. It went down like a lead balloon! The wealthy might have had lots of windows but they were not too keen on paying for them. As a result, they began to brick up unnecessary windows to avoid paying so much tax. They called King William's new tax a *tax on light and air*. An outraged homeowner coined the phrase *daylight robbery*. The window tax lasted until 1851. Many of the buildings dating back to those days still have bricked up windows. You can see them in older buildings in many towns in Ireland and Britain. ■

CHECK-UP

- 1 Who introduced the window tax?
- 2 Why was it introduced?
- 3 Do you think the tax was fair? Why?
- 4 What did people begin to call the window tax?
- 5 What did some people do to avoid paying at least some of their tax?