

Handcuffs Encyclopedia Article

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Contents

Handcuffs Encyclopedia Article.....	1
Contents.....	2
Handcuffs.....	3

Handcuffs

Devices for shackling the hands, legs, and torso have existed since ancient times. Handcuffs can be distinguished from earlier forms of shackles and manacles in that they are portable. The first handcuffs took the shape of a figure eight. They were soon replaced by handcuffs that resembled two bracelets joined by a short metal chain. This design has endured with modifications to the present day.

In late eighteenth century, the Hiatt Company began manufacturing handcuffs in Birmingham, England. At the time there was a great demand for the invention for use in the slave trade. Mass civil disturbances during the French Revolution also required handcuffs. Modern police forces in the nineteenth century spurred innovations in handcuff design in Europe and the United States. As steelmaking processes developed, so did handcuffs; they became stronger and lighter than previously possible. Through most of the 1800s, the shackle mechanism had a single locking position. A bar locked into place to close each handcuff's loop. This meant handcuffs only fit one size. Captives with small wrists were able to slip free of the restraints and those with large wrists could not be handcuffed at all. Handcuffs of different sizes could be made, but carrying several pairs at one time was impractical.

Around the turn of the century, handcuffs were developed that could be adjusted to fit any size wrist. The Peerless Handcuff Company of the United States introduced its version in 1914. Half of the cuff's loop was a single strand steel that locked into place between two steel strands that formed the other half of the loop. A ratchet mechanism inside the double strand portion allowed the single strand to lock into a variety of positions and ensure a snug fit. The inside edges of handcuffs are specially machined today to prevent tissue and nerve damage. Like previous handcuffs, they are unlocked with a small steel key.

Although the basic design of steel handcuffs has changed little in the twentieth century, police have begun to use handcuffs made of other materials for special situations. Nylon handcuffs are used by police when large numbers of arrests are necessary, such as during riots. Although disposable nylon handcuffs lack the durability of steel, police favor these lightweight restraints for mass arrests because they are inexpensive, easy to remove without a key, and can be carried in large numbers.