

Crime & Punishment

Throughout history, crime and punishment has changed...a lot!

During the 1500s, 1600s and 1700s, there were some bonkers punishments that would make your stomach turn. There were also cruel crimes that do not exist anymore.

The Royal Armouries collection still has some of the objects that were used in these historical punishments. Keep reading to discover these gruesome objects and see if you can stomach the history of crime and punishment...



Additional resources

To see more objects visit our Collections Online website:
collections.royalarmouries.org

Search 'punishment'

Parental guidance is advised for younger learners.

Watch a video all about Crime and Punishment on our YouTube channel.

Off with their head!

Chopping off a criminal's head was a very common punishment in the past. The Tudors were famous for chopping people's heads off, especially King Henry VIII. He even chopped off the heads of two of his wives and some of his friends.

If you were charged with the crime of 'treason', a crime against the country or the monarch, and found guilty you would be sentenced to death.

Chopping off heads was a form of punishment for hundreds of years.

The block and axe in our collection are very similar to what would have been used to carry out the executions. Some beheadings happened in public for everybody to see... a truly gruesome day out! However, the axe was not always the best way of chopping off a head, just ask Thomas Cromwell. He was executed for treason in 1540. However, it took more than one blow of the axe to take off his head... how grisly!



Just a little pinch

In times before there were police forces and forensic evidence, often the only way to find a person guilty of a crime was for the criminal to confess they had done it. Sometimes criminals were forced to confess... and lots of gory ways to do this were invented.

Have a look at these thumbscrews from the 1700s, they would squeeze the criminal's thumbs until they confessed or gave information – can you imagine how painful that would be? There are even records of them being used on people accused of witchcraft.



A bit over the top

By the 1600s there were new ways to punish people rather than crushing their thumbs and chopping off their heads. This strange looking thing is called a 'scold's bridle'. This particular one is from Germany but they were used in Britain too at the time. It would be placed over the criminal's head and they would be paraded around the streets to shame them. If that was not punishment enough many scold's bridles had a piece of metal that went into the mouth. This metal would cut the tongue of the criminal if they tried to talk. All of this, for silly crimes like GOSSIPING! That's right! Can you imagine how many people would have to wear one of these if this punishment was still in place today?



Activities page

All the drama...

Write a play set in a courtroom where the fate of someone accused of a crime is being decided.

For your play you will need to create the following characters and details:

1. The person charged with a crime
2. Details of the crime
3. Descriptions of the judge and jury
4. Barrister 1 to defend the person accused
5. Barrister 2 to prosecute them
6. Evidence against the accused
7. Evidence used in their defence
8. The observers watching the trial
9. The verdict
10. The punishment if found guilty

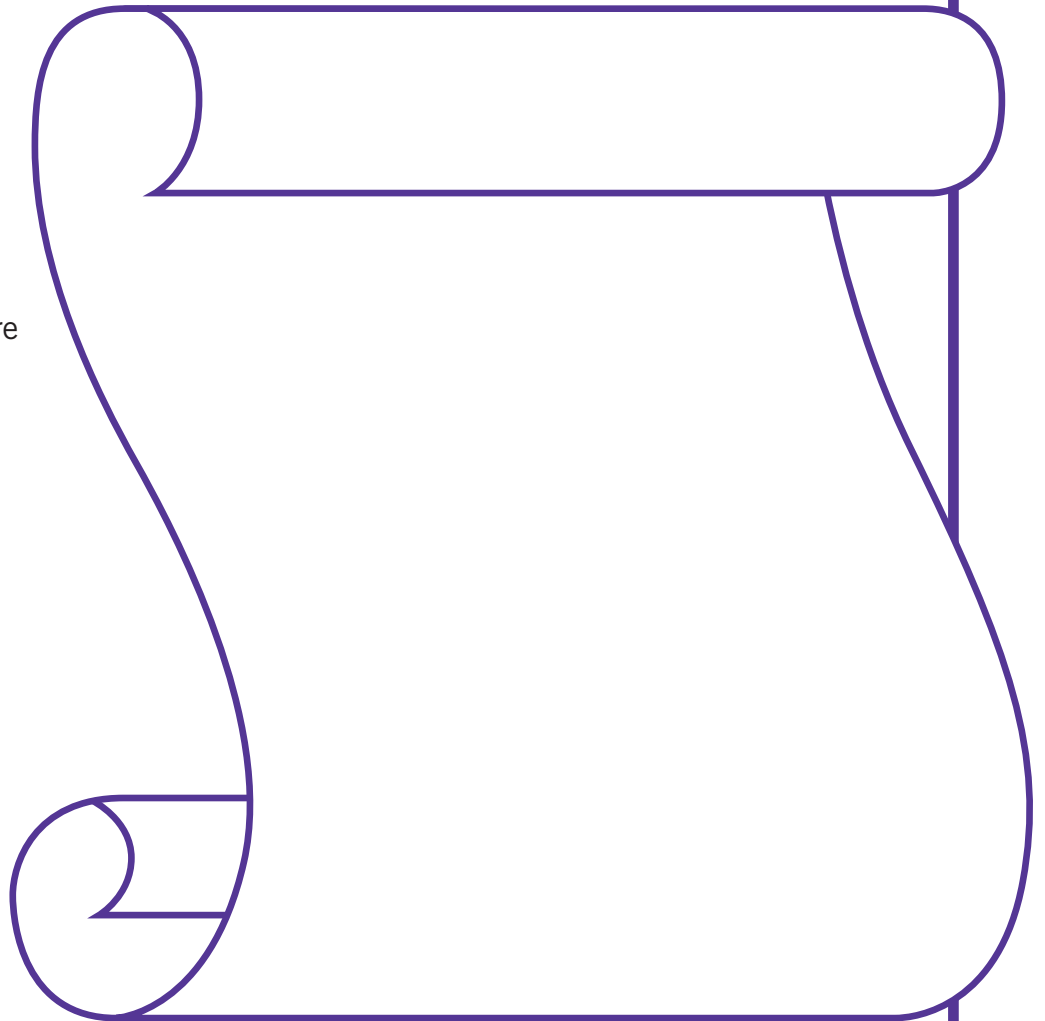
Don't forget to write stage directions and how your characters should perform their lines.

Hear ye! Hear ye!

Imagine a new crime and a punishment.

Design a poster declaring all the information.

Put this poster up in your home and declare that the law is now in effect to everyone in your house. Use your most booming voice.



Home truths

Ask your family what was the silliest thing they ever got into trouble for as children. They might surprise you!

Keep in touch

We would love to read your courtroom drama.
Please email them to educate.leeds@armouries.org.uk