

Historical Punishments

Law-makers often thought that the best way to stop people committing crimes was to make the punishments severe. There have been lots of strange and cruel punishments in history. How many of these punishments from around the world have you heard of? Can you imagine what the crime must have been for some of them?

Birching

Hit somebody across their bottom, shoulders or back with a bundle of birch twigs, and it hurts. Birching involved doing just that. It was a common punishment in Victorian schools; often handed out for breaking one of many rules. The courts might also have punished you with birching for minor crimes. It was abolished in Britain in 1948.

Branding

A red-hot iron would be pressed against somebody's skin during branding, leaving a scar in a particular shape. This would mark the criminal permanently as having committed a crime: it also hurt a considerable amount. Branding was used for things like petty theft or for being a vagabond (somebody who didn't have a house or a job).



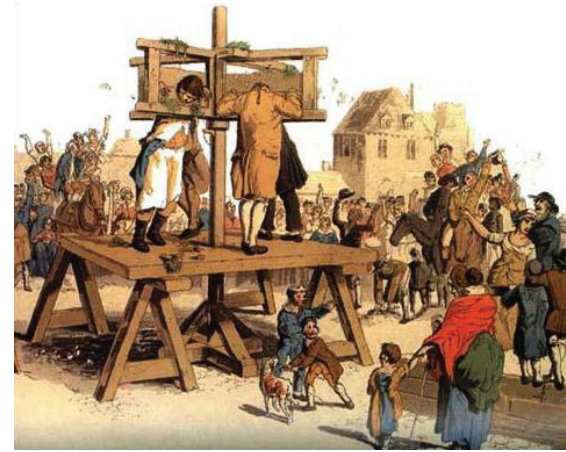
Scold's Bridle



To scold somebody meant to argue with or harass your neighbours or the authorities. If a woman was accused of scolding, she might have been placed in a scold's bridle. This was a leather strap that fitted over her head with a metal plate that held her tongue down. It meant that she couldn't talk. People were encouraged to mock her to increase the level of humiliation.

Stocks and Pillory

People often confuse these punishments. Most people think of stocks as a block of wood that holds a criminal's head and hands in place. They were then pelted with rotten food. In fact, this was a pillory. The stocks were similar but held the criminal's ankles in place instead. This meant that the person would have to be sat down on the floor to be placed into stocks.



Ducking Stools



A ducking stool was a seat attached to the end of a long piece of wood. The criminal would sit on the end and be lowered into the water as a punishment. This punishment was used on witches or women who had conned other people. The number of times a woman was dunked was decided by the judge. How long she was held under the water for was up to the people doing the dunking. The women were powerless to stop it. It was quite common for women to die during the ordeal.

VOCABULARY FOCUS

1. What is a law-maker?
2. What does the word "ordeal" tell you about the ducking stool?
3. If something was "abolished", what does that mean?
4. Find a word that means to be hit by something.
5. Which word or phrase in the text tells you that somebody wasn't able to control something?

VIPERS QUESTIONS

I

Why was the scold's bridle designed to humiliate the woman?

S

What is the main difference between a stocks and a pillory?

S

Explain how the scold's bridle stopped a woman from arguing or gossiping.

R

Which form of punishment involved hot metal?

R

When did Britain stop using birching?

Answers:

1. Somebody who makes and decided on new laws
2. It was very unpleasant and took a long time.
3. It was made illegal/stopped being used
4. Pelted
5. Powerless (to stop it)

I: She was unlikely to do it again if she was embarrassed

S: A pillory traps a person's hands and head, a stocks traps their ankles

S: It held her tongue down so she couldn't speak

R: Branding

R: 1948