The Tudors

Learning Objective:
To investigate crime and punishment during the Tudor period.

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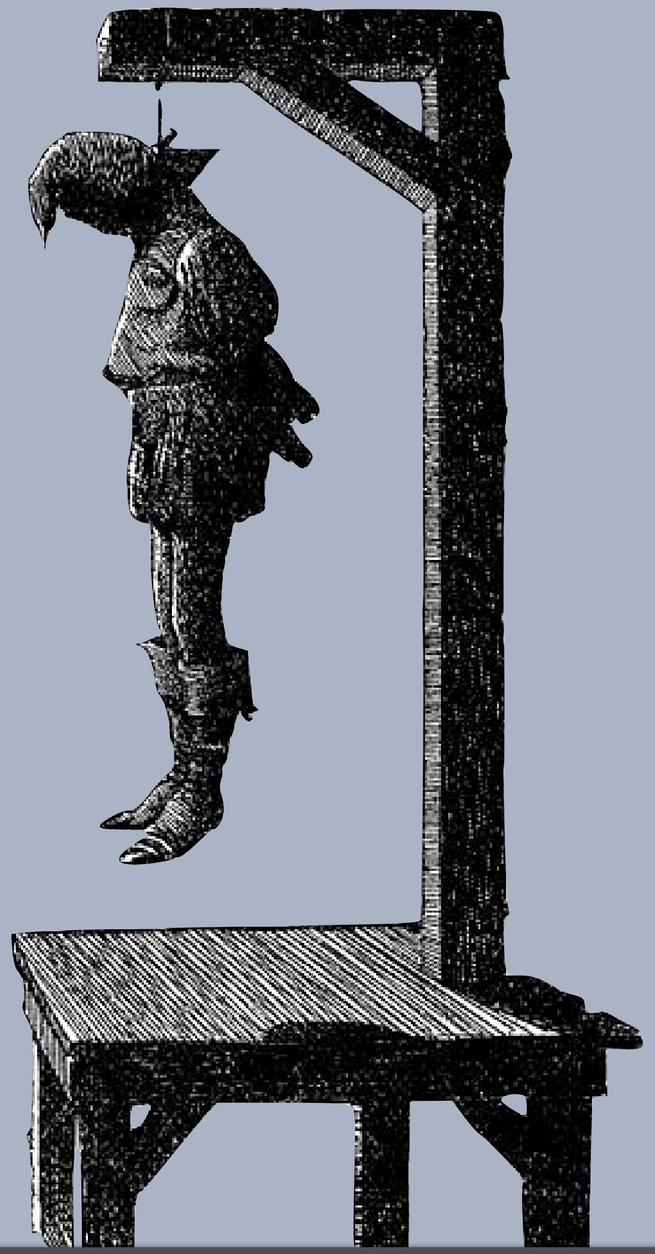


What happens today if someone breaks the law?

In Tudor times, there was no police force. The king or queen would appoint noblemen to be Justices of the Peace, who were responsible for making sure that the laws were kept in their part of the country.

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Life was very hard for the poor during Tudor times. If you didn't have a job or land to grow crops or rear animals, you had no way of earning money or getting food unless you begged or stole from others. However, only the disabled were allowed by law to beg. Some people tried to make themselves look sick or disabled so they would be able to beg but if you were caught begging when you weren't supposed to be, you could be sentenced to death by hanging.



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There were lots of thieves and pickpockets in Tudor times, especially in London. At this time, people kept their money in a purse tied to a belt with string. Thieves called cutpurses would cut the string so the purse would fall into their hands. If you were caught stealing, you could have one of your hands cut off. You would also be branded with a ‘T’ on your forehead. Branding is when a very hot iron is put on the skin to burn it and leave a mark.



This picture shows a pickpocket at a market. Thieves would often practise moving a purse with bells on to see if they can take the money or the purse without the bells making a sound.

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People not only got punished if they broke the law but if they sinned too. Any behaviour that was thought to be impure or against the moral code of society was punished. And there were lots of punishments to choose from!

This woman has been put in a scold's bridle (or brank's bridle) for gossiping. The scold's bridle was like a cage that was put over a woman's head with a bit to put between her teeth. This was very uncomfortable and made speaking impossible. Women were put in the scold's bridle for speaking too freely or for telling their husbands off too much. The husband could then lead her around with a rope attached to the bridle to humiliate her.



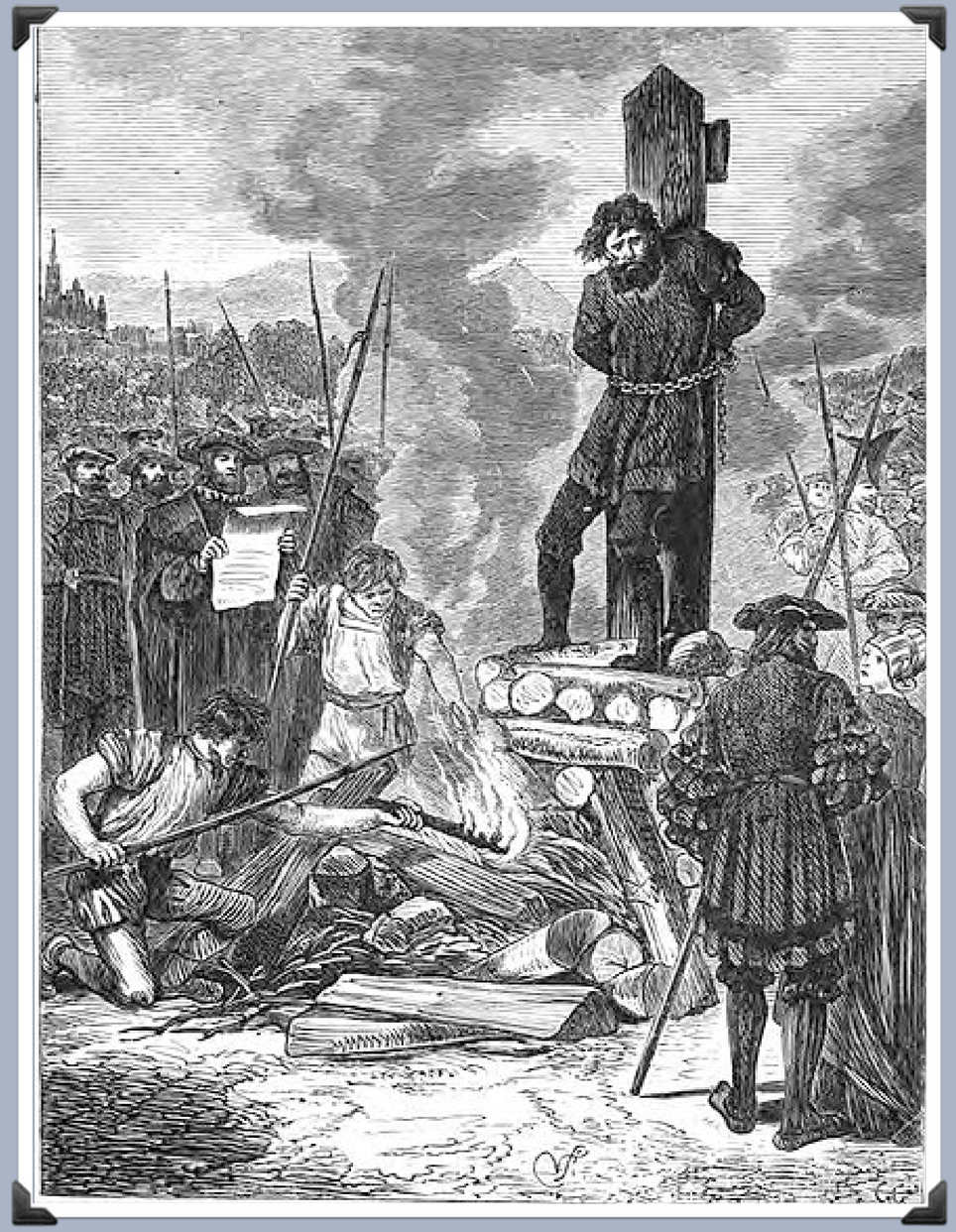
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Another punishment for women only was the ducking stool. Women who were suspected of being a witch were put in the stool and then dunked into the water.



If the woman was innocent, she would sink to the bottom of the water and drown. If she was guilty, she would float to the top of the water. She would then be burned at the stake for witchcraft. Either way, if you went into the ducking stool, you didn't come out of it alive.

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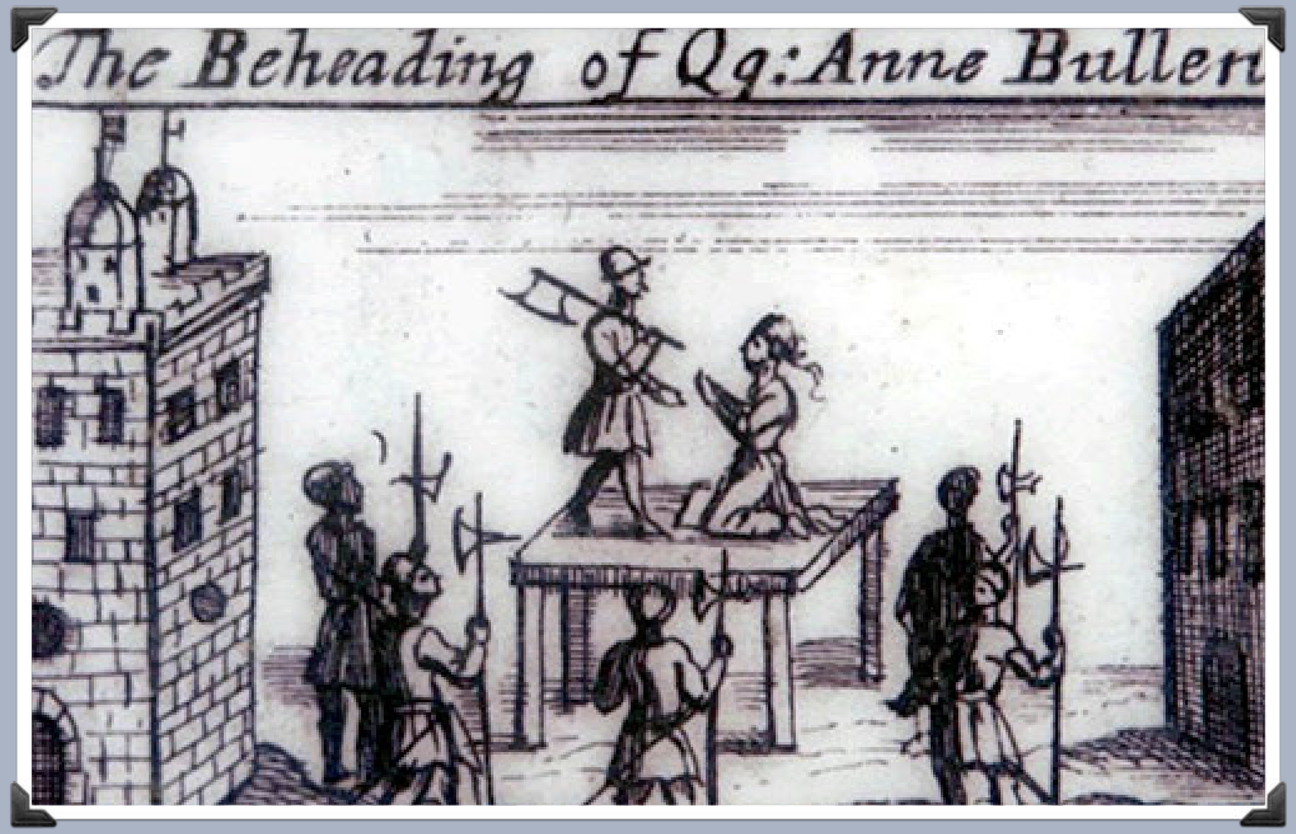


People were not only burned at the stake for witchcraft. You could be burned at the stake if you were charged with treason or petty treason. Treason means going against your king or queen, and so going against your country. If you believed something different to the monarch or tried to harm the monarch or their servants in any way you were convicted of treason. Petty treason was when you murdered someone you owed allegiance to, such as a husband or master.

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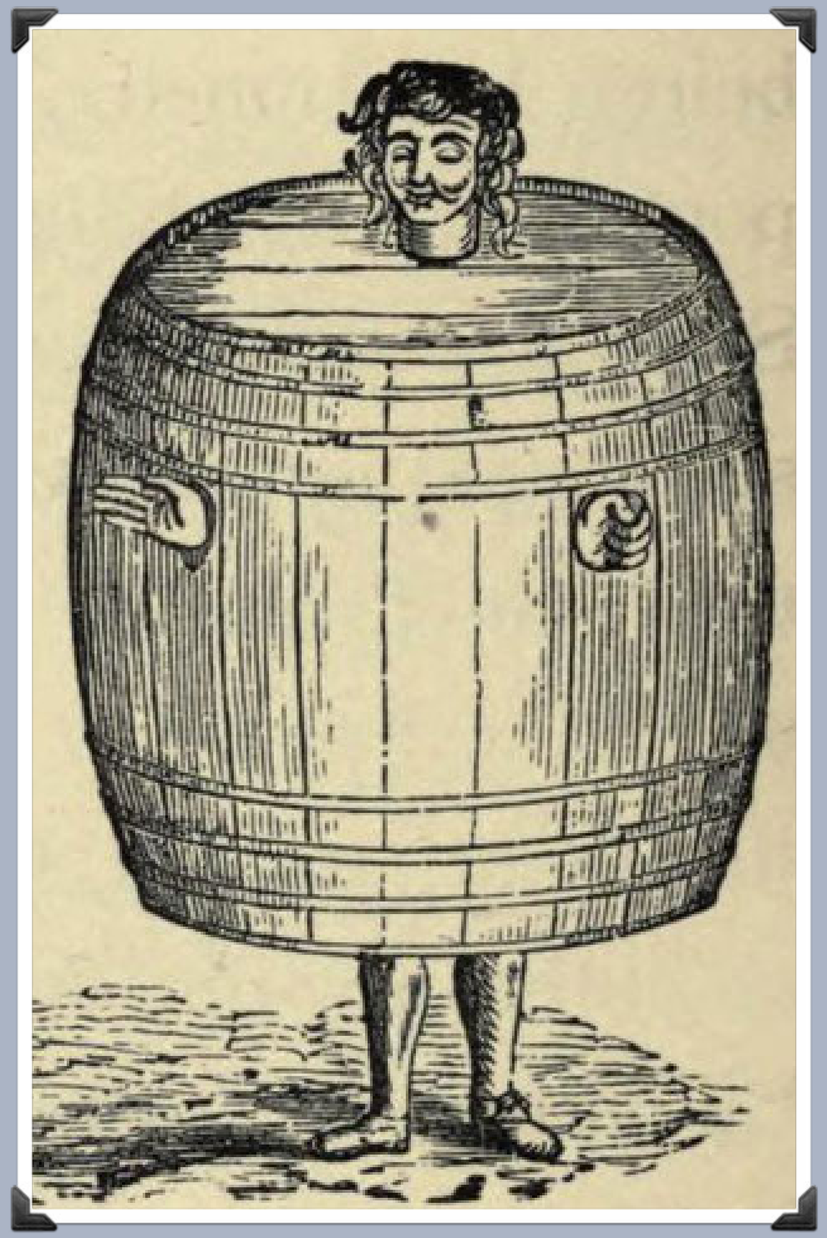
The other main form of execution was beheading. This was generally reserved for nobles or even members of the royal family who had committed treason.

Beheading was quicker than hanging or being burned at the stake and involved having your head cut off with an axe or, if you were lucky, a sword.



Two of Henry VIII's wives (Anne Boleyn and her cousin Catherine Howard) were beheaded for going against the king. Sometimes, the chopped-off head of a traitor would be put on a spike and displayed in public places to remind people of the dangers of committing a crime.

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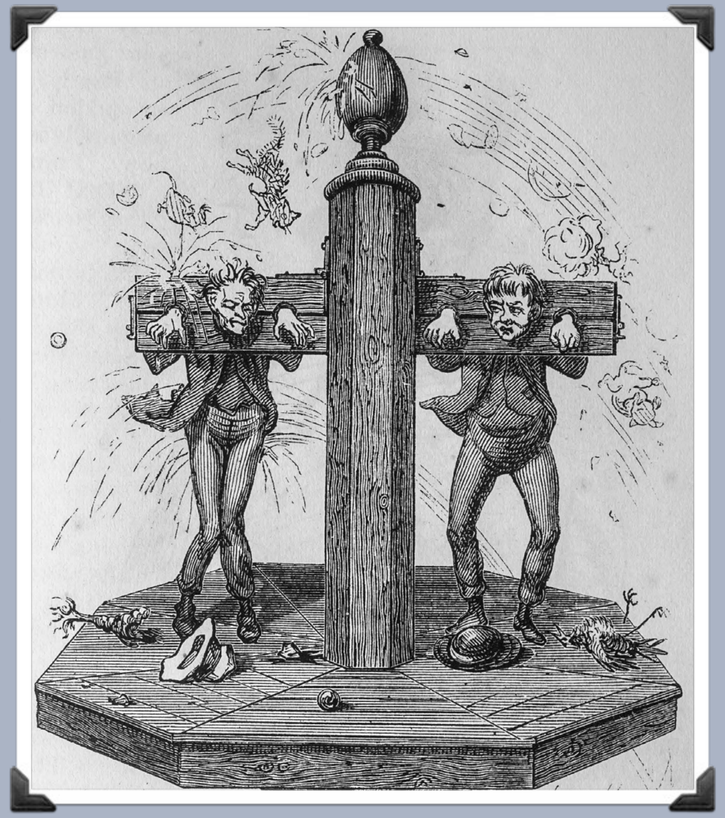


Lots of punishments were very public to deter people from committing crimes themselves. It was thought that if people were publicly humiliated, people would think twice before committing the crime themselves.

This picture shows a man who was found drunk in public. His punishment was wearing the ‘drunkard’s cloak’ which was a barrel with holes cut for the arms, legs and head. He would have to be seen in public wearing this barrel.



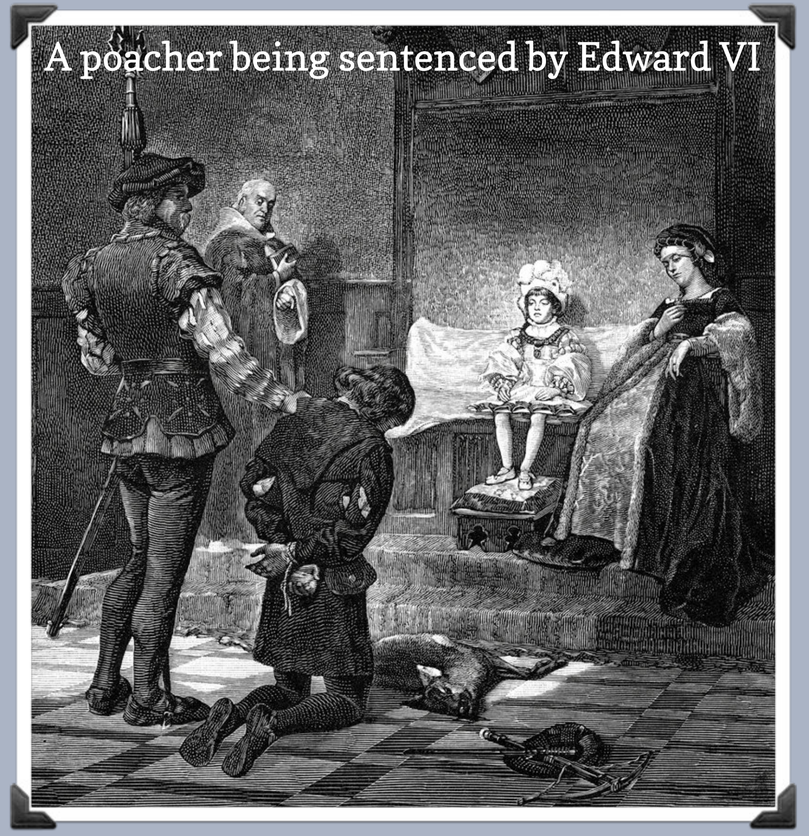
Another very common punishment was the stocks or the pillory. These were wooden contraptions which trapped the people put inside them. Passersby would then throw rubbish and rotten food at them as punishment for whatever crime they had committed. The only different between the pillory and the stocks was that you sat down in the stocks and stood up in the pillory.



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There were many other punishments too, such as being boiled alive in water or oil, whipping, pressing (which involved being crushed with stones) and starvation. Like today, the punishment you received depended on the crime or sin you had committed. Heresy (going against God) was usually punished by death, as was treason.

The time of day was important when poaching (hunting animals on someone else's land) because if you were caught at night you were punished by death but if caught during the day you were given a lesser punishment. Most of the crimes that were committed were due to poverty as the poor had no choice but to get food by illegal means.


A poacher being sentenced by Edward VI

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If you were a poor Tudor who had to steal or beg to survive, what do you think you would have done to not get caught?



How do you think people like this felt when they were caught?

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How fair do you think the punishments were in Tudor Britain and why?



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