Crime And Punishment In Early Modern England
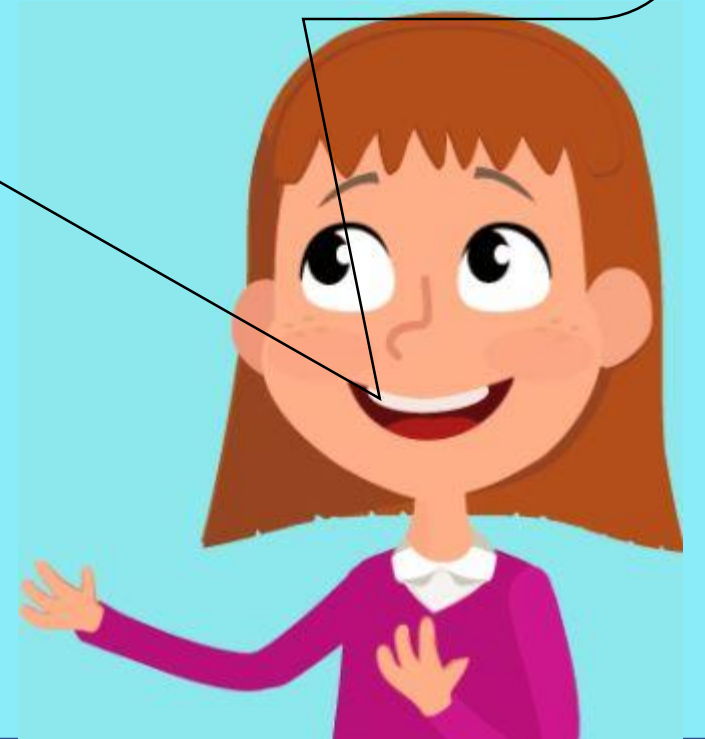
The early modern period started with the first Tudor monarch, Henry VII, who became king in 1485. In ended in approximately 1750, at the start of the industrial revolution.

In Tudor times, there were no police which meant crime was widespread. However, punishments were harsh, in the belief that it would stop others from committing the same crime. Poverty was a key reason for this crime.
The population grew steadily and therefore food had to be shared between more people. An increased population also meant more people were seeking jobs and there often weren't enough.

When Henry VIII came to power, he said that all the barons in his land were not allowed to keep their own private armies. This meant the solders lost their jobs, meaning even more people were looking for work. There were monasteries across the land and one of their key roles was to provide support for the poor. However, when Henry VIII came to power he closed many of the monasteries down meaning it was even harder for poor people to survive.

People were still dependent on a good harvest if they were to survive. When there were bad harvests, the price of food went up making it harder for poorer people. The lack of jobs and food meant there was a temptation to turn to crime to survive. Many poor people turned to begging to survive. They came up with lots of different ways to get money out of people.

HENRY VII (1485-1509) - Henry VII treated beggars as petty criminals and would have them sent to the village stocks or pillory for three days. After the three days were up, he ordered them back to the village of their birth or where they had most recently lived.

Henry VIII (1509 – 1547) was the first Tudor monarch to understand that some people chose to become beggars and others did so because they did not have any other option. Those with no option were called worthy poor and were given a licence to beg. If you begged without a licence and continued to do so the punishments became harsher. On a few occasions this resulted in execution.

EDWARD VI (1547-1553) and Mary I (1553-1558)

The law against begging was made harsher during this period. For a first offence you would be branded with a letter V on the forehead. This meant for the rest of your life everyone saw you were a criminal. Being caught a second time resulted in execution.

Elizabeth I (1558-1603)

For most of her reign the law was unchanged but towards the end a poor law was introduced. This meant money was collected in taxes to help the poor people.

Whipjack - A beggar with a sad story which was often made up. These sad stories focused on the theme of being involved in a shipwreck.

Demander for glimmer – was a female beggar who told tales of how she needed money as she had lost her house in a fire.
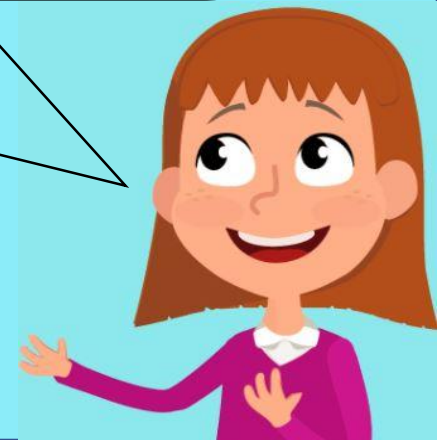
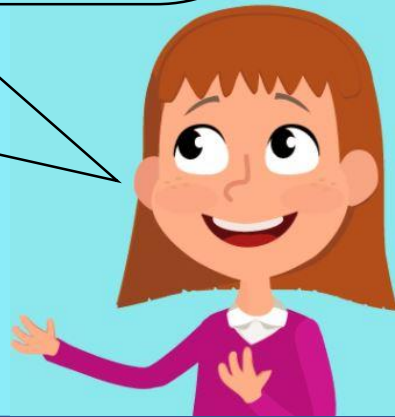Bristlers - Someone who would use loaded dice to run a gambling scam.

Counterfeit Crank - A beggar who would pretend to have violent fits in order to gain sympathy and money from passers-by.

Priggers/Prancers - Someone who stole horses.

Ruffler - Usually ex-military men who beat people up for money.

<u>Public Foister or Judical Nipper</u> - There was a training school for young thieves near Billingsgate in London, where graduates could earn the title of 'public foister' or 'judicial nipper' when they could rob a purse or a pocket without being detected. But if the victim did feel an intrusive hand, he would shout 'stop thief' to 'raise the hue and cry', and everyone was supposed to run after the criminal and catch him. But this was rarely successful, as thieves were skilled at disappearing through a crowd.

Minor punishments

Many offences were punished by the pillory. A criminal stood with their head and hands through holes in a wooden plank. This could be as painful as public opinion decided. Crowds would gather round to throw things at the criminal. Stones were banned but if the public felt angry about the crime this rule was ignored and the offender might not finish his sentence alive.

Sometimes one or both offender's ears were nailed to the pillory, in some cases, cut off.
A sentence of whipping meant that the offender's back was whipped as he made his way through the city.

The brank or scold's bridle was used to punish women who gossiped or told tales. It was a metal cage that fitted over the head and was extremely uncomfortable to wear. Everyone would be made aware that the wearer was a gossip.

Stealing was considered a serious Tudor crime and people could be punished just for stealing a bird's egg. Thieves could have their hand chopped off or even be given the death penalty.

Major punishments

Public executions were extremely popular and people would wait for hours to watch them. Spectators would often take their children with them to watch this gruesome event. Some historians have estimated that about 70,000 people were executed during the reign of Henry VIII. There was a curious list of crimes that were punishable by death. This included: theft of money, stealing hawks, highway robbery as well as treason.

Serious crime often resulted in the death penalty. However, before being put to death, the criminal would be tortured to find out if he or she could give the authorities any information. Types of execution included…

Being boiled alive.

Being burnt at the stake.

Beheading (the preferred punishment for richer people). Often, the severed heads were displayed along London Bridge or other crowded places, as a warning to others.

Being hung in chains in public and then starving to death.

Hanging.

Being hung, drawn and quartered.

For most of the Early Modern Times, power still lay with the monarch and he or she could set laws that people across the land had to follow. During Tudor times, various kings and queens believed different types of Christianity was the true way. This meant more people were put on trial for heresy (following a disallowed religion). It was believed that not following the monarchs religion was an attack on the monarchs power and authority.

Mary Tudor - During her reign she had 280 people arrested as heretics for not following Catholicism. Although many of the people she had executed were hanged, she was known for having heretics burnt at the stake.

Elizabeth I - At first she was tolerant of people following both Protestantism and Catholicism. Towards the end of her reign this changed and she began to execute Catholics for heresy. The punishment was to be *hanged, drawn and quartered*.

These executions were in public and people came to watch them. The idea behind this kind of punishment was to make it very public that the monarch should not be challenged in any way.