Crime And Punishment In Industrial Britain
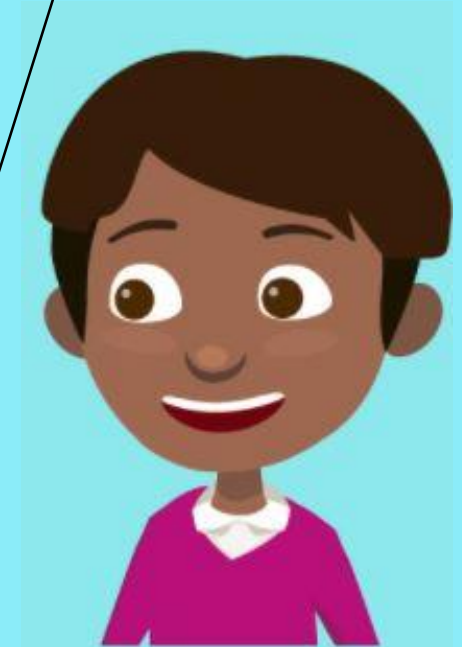
This covers the period between 1750 – 1900 when Britain changed from an agricultural to an industrial society. Huge numbers of people moved from rural areas to seek work in industrial towns.

The crowded industrial towns were ideal for pickpockets. Petty theft was the most common crime but there was a lot of interest in murder. Newspapers like the 'Penny Dreadfuls' printed descriptions of murders e.g. Jack the Ripper and raised the fear of crime in the country. During this period, the public punishments of being put in the pillory or stocks stopped being used and fewer people were hanged.

The public whipping of women was abolished in 1817 and of men in the 1830s. However, as part of a jail sentence, children could be whipped once or twice in private prior to their release. This wasn't banned until 1848!
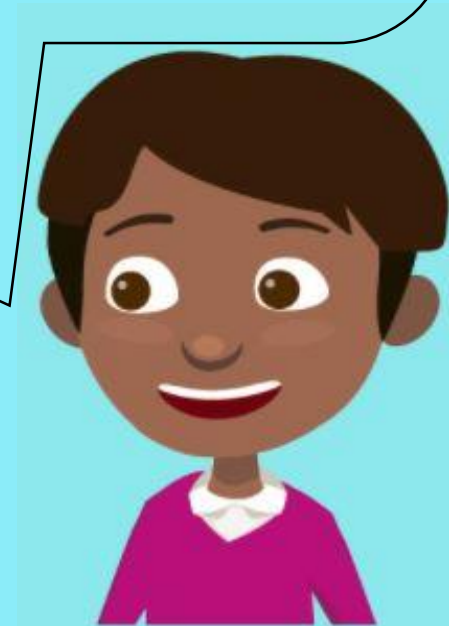
Public executions often became rowdy, lawless occasions, and many people thought they were barbaric. The crowds also provided great opportunity for pickpockets and thieves. They were stopped in 1868 and from then onwards, hangings were carried out in private inside prison.
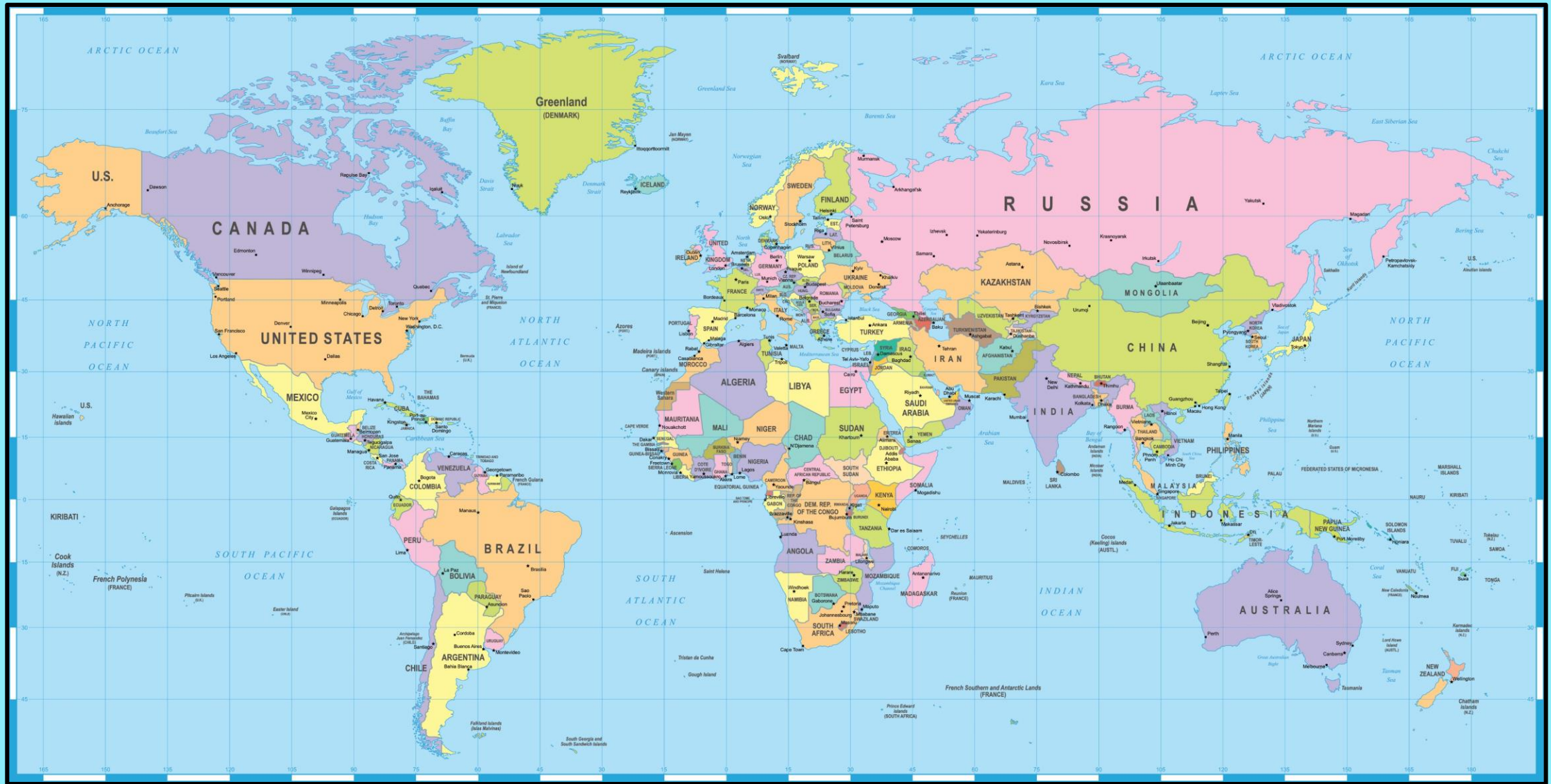
Transportation had been used as a form of punishment since 1717. Courts were looking for a punishment that was more severe than a fine but not as harsh as being hung. Transportation was the answer for this. Under transportation, criminals were sent overseas initially to America and then to Australia.

The journey by ship took between 6 and 9 months

From 1787 to 1857, 162,000 British convicts were transported to Australia. Seven out of eight of these were males; some were as young as nine or ten; some were over eighty. While the convicts were waiting for the prison ships to sail to Australia, they were sent to disused warships called 'Hulks' to wait.

Conditions were awful and one in three prisoners died before leaving for Australia. Once in Australia, the prisoners lived in barracks and worked in gangs. They were forced to build roads and bridges, work on farms or in quarries. If the prisoners behaved themselves, their sentence could be reduced by a "ticket of leave." The majority of convicts decided to stay in Australia at the end of their sentences, recognising that they could make a better life there rather than returning to Britain.

By the mid 1850s, public opinion turned against transportation as it seemed wrong to offer convicts a new chance to rebuild their lives when other people were paying to go to Australia. Prisons were now considered a better punishment than transportation. The Australian government had also started to protest about criminals being sent there. Transportation ended in 1857.

Prisons in the 1700's were dreadful places. Men, women, children, the mentally ill (referred to at the time as lunatics), murderers and debtors were held in the same cells. Prisons were unhygienic, damp, and overcrowded. These awful conditions led to many prisoners becoming severely ill. Prison warders were unpaid and charged prisoners every time they did something for them. The warders charged prisoners for meals, to unlock and lock their door and even to be set free. This meant prison was more bearable for richer people while poorer people relied on families or charity for money.

Many people believed prison should be there just to punish and not to reform. Prisons were based around ideas from America, all designed to make prison a miserable experience for the prisoners. This was called the Separate System and the Silent System. Between 1840 and 1877, 90 new prisons were built across the country.

The Separate System was an approach introduced that meant prisoners were not allowed to see or speak to anyone else. They would eat alone in their cells and during exercise were forced to where a hood. When they went to church, they sat separated from each other. Many people committed suicide in these conditions.

The silent system was an approach of where prison became a period of 'Hard Labour', 'Hard Fare' and 'Hard Board'. This meant that inmates were locked in their cells, given basic food and basic sleeping conditions. Everything had to be done in silence. Prisoners would work on pointless monotonous jobs in total silence such as...

Picking oakum - separating the strands of old ropes so that they could be used again - hence the saying *"money for old rope"*.

The treadmill - a large wheel on which prisoners walked, sometimes to drive a mill, sometimes just to create work.

The crank - This was a large handle in each cell with a counter. The prisoner had to do so many thousand turns a day. Warders could tighten up the crank, making it harder to turn - hence their nickname *"screws"*.

Shot drill - passing cannon-balls one to another along a line.

Several people started to campaign for better prisons. One of the most well known campaigners was Elizabeth Fry.

Elizabeth Fry (1780 – 1845) – In Newgate Prison, Fry saw women and children in prison living with violence and disease. She campaigned for better prisons for women and in 1825 published her ideas about prison reform. With her fame, she gained a political voice and eventually her ideas about how prisons should be changed were adopted. The main changes were that men and women were separated in prisons. From this point on, female jailers looked after women prisoners.

Elizabeth Fry

Large numbers of orphaned and abandoned children turned to crime. When caught, they were treated the same as adults. Children as young as seven could be sent to prison or transported to Australia. 90% of those hanged were under 21, some were as young as 10. Surprisingly, there were no separate prisons for children. This led to reformers arguing it was pointless sending children to prison with experienced criminals who would teach them better ways to steal. Gradually, purpose built buildings were constructed to house children. Following the 1870 Education Act, youth crime declined. The Education Act made education compulsory for children under 10 and took them off the streets.

The first police force in Britain was set up in Glasgow in 1800. By 1829, London also had its first police force. When the police forces were set up, not all the public liked this. This was mainly because there had been nothing like this before and people felt that the police were like snitches or informers. Police officers dressed in blue, to stop them looking like soldiers, who dressed in red.

In the early days of the force, one of the main problems with the constables was drunkenness. 80% of all dismissals from the new force were due to drunkenness, which did little to help the police with their public image. Over time, the popularity of the police increased. People saw that the police were well trained and noticed that in areas where they patrolled crime was reduced.