

Changes in Crime and Punishment in Britain, c.500 to the present day – 16th and 17th centuries

How did these issues result in crime being committed?

There was nowhere for sick or desperate people to go when they needed help.

Changes in farming meant there was less demand for labourers - people were unemployed.

What problems were there?

In 1547 Henry VIII dissolved the monasteries (he closed them down).

Big changes to farming. Many farmers stopped growing crops and kept sheep instead.

16th and 17th centuries

Between 1500 – 1600 the population doubled.

Rising inflation (things cost more than they used to).

There were many bad harvests during this time.

More demand for food/clothing/housing – people result to crime.

Wages were worth less than before - people's money did not go far enough.

Steep rise in the price of food.

Common crimes in this era:

While minor crimes such as petty theft and some violent crimes remained common, this period witnessed the growth of specific crimes associated with vagrancy and heresy.

Vagrancy



- Numbers of vagrants increased due to a sharp rise in poverty.
- Vagrants were beggars who turned to crime.
- Used tricks to get money from people e.g. soap in the mouth.
- The usual punishment was flogging.

Heresy



- Increase in number of heresy cases due to the Reformation.
- Tudor monarchs kept changing religion – people who refused to follow were criminalised as heretics.
- Religion was fundamental to society – people died for their beliefs!

Treason



- Tudor/Stuart monarchs knew that dissatisfaction was growing due to poverty and continuous religious changes.
- Henry VIII changed the Treason Laws in 1534.
- Key example of treason is the Gunpowder Plot of 1605.

How was the law enforced during the 16th and 17th centuries?

Justices of the Peace (JPs)



- Organise and oversee local parish constables and watchmen
- Maintain law and order and punish those who disobeyed the law
- Carry out orders of the Privy Council
- Administer local government

Parish Constables



- Appointed by JPs, carried out the role for a year
- Still had to do their day job
- Main role to make arrests and take accused people to prison.
- Ensure that taxes were paid punctually.

Town watchman



- Patrolled the towns at night.
- Had powers to arrest suspected criminals.
- There was no uniform, but most carried a bell, lantern and weapon.

1663 – Charles II created the first force of **paid watchmen** called Charleys. Pay was low.



Petty sessions

Local courts which 2 or more JPs would hold to deal with minor cases so as to not overwhelm the quarter sessions.



Quarter sessions

Courts held every three months by JPs to deal with more serious cases.

Hue and cry still used, although it become less effective in busier towns.

