Your notes

GCSE History: revision notes

Crime and punishment in Britain, c1000 to the present

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c1000–c1500: medieval England

- Anglo-Saxon law enforcement relied on the community. **Tithings** were groups of ten men responsible for each other's behaviour. The **hue and cry** made everyone chase a suspect. When guilt was unclear, **trial by ordeal** (hot iron, hot water or cold water) left the judgement to God.
- Punishments included fines (the wergild, paid to the victim's family), mutilation and execution.
- The Normans added the murdrum fine (paid by the whole area if a Norman was murdered), forest laws that made hunting in royal forests a crime, and trial by combat.
- Later, royal courts and travelling judges grew. The Church had its own courts: **benefit of clergy** let clergy be tried in Church courts, which didn't use the death penalty, and **sanctuary** let fugitives shelter in churches. The Church stopped priests taking part in **trial by ordeal** in 1215.

c1500–c1700: early modern England

- Religious changes created new crimes of heresy and treason, such as the Gunpowder Plot (1605). Vagabondage (the wandering poor) was treated as a crime. Witchcraft was made a capital crime; Matthew Hopkins, the 'Witchfinder General', led witch-hunts in 1645–47.
- Enforcement was still mainly local, with town constables and night watchmen. Punishments included hanging, burning for heresy, the stocks and pillory, whipping and fines.

c1700–c1900: the 18th and 19th centuries

- The **Bloody Code**: by 1810, over 200 crimes carried the death penalty. It was largely dismantled in the 1820s and 1830s.
- **Transportation** sent criminals to America, then to Australia from 1787, until it ended in 1868. Public executions also ended in 1868.
- Policing: the Bow Street Runners (1749), set up by Henry Fielding; the Metropolitan Police (1829), set up by Robert Peel; and police forces in every county by 1856.
- Prisons: Elizabeth Fry campaigned to improve women's prisons. Pentonville (1842) used the **separate system**, keeping prisoners apart and silent.
- The Tolpuddle Martyrs (1834) were transported for forming a union, but released after public protests.

c1900–present

- New crimes include car crime, drug crime, cybercrime, people trafficking, terrorism and hate crime. Some actions were decriminalised, such as homosexuality, partly in 1967.
- Policing uses fingerprints (from 1901), DNA evidence (from the late 1980s), CCTV, specialist units and Neighbourhood Watch (1982).
- The death penalty for murder was suspended in 1965 and abolished in 1969. Controversial cases such as Derek Bentley (hanged in 1953; his conviction was quashed in 1998) and Timothy Evans (hanged in 1950, pardoned in 1966) influenced this. Prisons now aim at rehabilitation, and borstals (from 1902), probation and community sentences are used. Conscientious objectors were punished in the First World War, less so in the Second.

Historic environment: Whitechapel, c1870–c1900

- Whitechapel in London's East End was overcrowded and very poor, with lodging houses, workhouses, alcohol, prostitution and gangs. Irish and Eastern European Jewish immigrants lived there, and there was tension.
- It was policed by H Division of the Metropolitan Police. Beat constables walked set routes, but the narrow, badly lit streets, overcrowding and distrust of the police made the job hard.
- During the Jack the Ripper murders (1888), the police, including the CID (set up in 1878), used house-to-house searches, witness statements and photographs of the victims. The killer was never caught, and the press criticised the police.

Key terms

Tithing	A group of ten men responsible for each other's behaviour.
Hue and cry	The duty of everyone in the community to chase a suspected criminal.

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Trial by ordeal	A test, such as holding hot iron, that left God to judge guilt.
Benefit of clergy	The right of clergy to be tried in Church courts, which didn't use the death penalty.
Sanctuary	Shelter in a church, where a fugitive couldn't be arrested for a time.
Bloody Code	The laws that made over 200 crimes punishable by death.
Transportation	Sending convicts to live and work in a colony, such as Australia.
Separate system	Keeping prisoners apart, in silence.
Social crime	A crime that many people didn't see as wrong, such as poaching or smuggling.

Your notes

Quick questions

Cover the answers and test yourself: remembering is what makes it stick.

1. What was a tithing?
2. What was the hue and cry?
3. What was trial by ordeal?
4. What was the murdrum fine?
5. What was benefit of clergy?
6. Who was the 'Witchfinder General'?
7. What was the Bloody Code?
8. Where were convicts transported to from 1787?

Answers

1. A group of ten men responsible for each other's behaviour
2. The duty of everyone to chase a suspected criminal
3. A test, such as holding hot iron, that left God to judge guilt
4. A fine on the whole area if a Norman was murdered
5. Clergy could be tried in Church courts, which didn't use the death penalty
6. Matthew Hopkins
7. Laws that made over 200 crimes punishable by death
8. Australia

What to do next

Practise 13 questions on this topic

Try 4 exam questions, with mark schemes

Read the lesson, one step at a time

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