

Crime and Punishment in the Early Modern Period

In the early modern period (1600-1800), England became a richer country, mainly based on the use of slaves. Some people became very well off indeed, as you can tell from the fine houses and parks they built, which you can still see in our towns and countryside today.



Most of the medieval forests were enclosed as huge parks attached to country houses. The common people who were living there were evicted, sometimes even whole villages were abandoned. This forced more people to go and live in towns, which were becoming more and more crowded. Anyone caught sneaking into these new parks to get food was punished as a poacher.



As well as restricting where people could live and work, governments tried to restrict trade and promote British products. However, they also wanted to raise money from imports. In order to do this, they raised the taxes for bringing goods into the country. This meant that smuggling became more common as it was more profitable to sneak goods into the country than it was to declare them and pay hefty taxes.

The rich people of the time carried their wealth around with them as there were very few banks during this period. This made them easy targets when they were travelling on unguarded roads. Because the country as a whole was getting richer, poorer people could afford horses and it was easy to set up a profitable, but risky, business as a highwayman. This involved holding people up, often at gunpoint, and demanding they hand over their money, jewels and any other riches.

There was a lot of religious conflict too. Not only were Catholics feared by the mainly Protestant population and accused of rebellion and treason, but various different types of Protestants were also in conflict. Puritans believed in witches and increasing suspicion between people in a growing population meant many women were accused of witchcraft and burned at the stake. Women at the time would mix herbs and potions as medicine to help heal and look after their families. This was often mistaken for mixing magic potions to cast spells.

