

## PUNISHMENT IN THE SAXON AND MEDIEVAL ERA, c. 500-1500

### *The harsh nature of punishment in Saxon and medieval times*

The violence that characterised society can also be seen in the punishments used at this time. Saxon and medieval punishment had several **purposes**:

**Deterrence:** throughout this period it was believed that the only way to keep order was to make sure that the people were scared of the punishments given for crimes committed.

**Retribution:** this can also be seen as revenge – both for wider society and for the victims of the crime. This was a very old idea that went back to Biblical law.

**Keeping order:** the authorities were keen to maintain order and ordinary people in medieval times were also anxious to avoid unrest and the trouble it caused.

The punishments used in this period appear barbaric by modern standards but they were very common and were seen all over Britain. Examples included:

Crime	Punishment
High treason	Hanging, drawing and quartering
Murder	Hanging
Heresy	Burning at the stake
Vagrancy	Flogging or whipping
Theft	Mutilation
Drunkenness	Stocks
Selling bad food	Pillory
Gossiping	Scold's bridle

The majority of punishments were carried out in public. This was to act as a deterrent and also to give the public reassurance that justice was being done. Most towns had a gibbet where the corpses of executed criminals were left as a warning to others.

The level of violence used in these punishments can appear shocking but it was a constant feature of punishment in medieval times and was carried on into the Tudor and Stuart centuries.

### SUMMARY OF SAXON AND MEDIEVAL PUNISHMENT

- Punishment was based on deterrence and retribution
- Most punishments were carried out in public
- Most punishments were violent and barbaric