

BBC Bitesize

The start of the 18th century was a time of huge change in Britain. The Industrial Revolution was turning a mostly farming economy into a manufacturing economy.

People moved from working at home in close-knit communities to working in large mills and factories. Many lived in overcrowded towns and cities and with no amenities like rubbish collection, sewers or toilets that flushed conditions were grim and disease was rampant. Factory work was hard, back-breaking graft, and poorly paid. So some people resorted to crimes like stealing to get food and clothes for their families.

By this time the Christian Church was less dominant and science was becoming more accepted. Laws against witchcraft had been scrapped and the government was focusing on crimes that hurt the economy including highway robbery, poaching and smuggling.

With crime on the rise, the focus moved to catching and deterring criminals. In the mid-1700s brothers, Henry and John Fielding took action and put in place some of the first steps to improve law enforcement and crime prevention in London. Known by locals as the Bow Street Runners, the Fielding's team patrolled the streets, investigated crimes and gave evidence in court. But they were a small team and more needed to be done.

In 1829, the Home Secretary Robert Peel introduced the Metropolitan Police Act creating the first full-time professional police force and bringing over 3000 policemen to London. As part of Peel's reforms, the Bloody Code was abolished. This was the name given to a system that made over 200 crimes, including petty crimes like cutting down trees, and pickpocketing, punishable by death.

Transportation to Australia was now being used as an alternative option to the death penalty. In 1833 when six farm workers from Tolpuddle in Dorset set up a union to fight for better pay and conditions they broke the law by swearing an oath of secrecy. They were arrested, taken away from their homes and families, and transported to Australia. People felt this wasn't fair, so they organised petitions, meetings, and protests. This led to the Tolpuddle Martyrs being pardoned and allowed to return home... eventually!

In the 18th century prisons were privately owned, often dangerous and badly run. The prison wardens weren't paid, so they made money by charging the prisoners for food and medical treatment.

Elizabeth Fry and John Howard were reformers who believed that criminals could be helped to change their ways. They had ideas to improve prison conditions and influenced Home Secretary Robert Peel in creating the 1823 Gaols Act which led to prison inspections, separation of sexes; better food and sanitation; religious teaching; and wages for wardens.

By the mid-19th century crime detection and punishment had also been transformed. Over 200 police services were operating across Britain, transportation had ended and prison was the main punishment for serious crimes leading to many new prisons being built.

London's Pentonville Prison was built in 1842 and was the first model for the separate system. In this system all prisoners were isolated in single cell confinement and did 12 hours a day of boring, back-breaking work. But the separate system didn't lower reoffending rates and was discontinued.

The 18th and 19th centuries were periods of vast change and development. The increasing population led to the creation of new towns and cities, along with the need to establish an official police force. Prisons were changing and the issue of crime and punishment was set to get ever more complex.