Hands On Learning
with Reading Museum Service

READING MUSEUM SERVICE

STOCKS, PILLORY & DUCKING-STOOL

H 73/C

Today people found guilty of crime face a fine, community service or, if the crime is serious, they may be derived of their freedom by being sentenced to prison. Prisons are very expensive to run and, up until the nineteenth century, tended to be used to hold people who had been charged with a crime before their trial. When the trial was over those found guilty could face some form of fine, physical punishment and public humiliation. A sentence of death was much more common for a range of crimes which are today dealt with much more leniently - it had the advantage, at least, of being cheap!

The models in this box illustrate some of the methods, which combine shame with pain, that were commonly used across Europe to deal with those found guilty of crime. The combination of shame and pain was also used in British schools until recently. British school pupils were regularly caned for bad behaviour until the practice was banned in 1982. There is continuing debate about whether parents should be allowed to smack their own children. Public shaming fell out of practice earlier, but the use of a dunce's cap or other form of humiliation for failure in school tests was widespread in the nineteenth century. In Wales in the same period children were punished in some schools for speaking Welsh by having a placard with 'Dim saesneg' ('Can't speak English') tied around their necks for the day.

Stocks and Pillory



Fastening someone up public, so that their crimes can be announced to the community and so that the community can be allowed to jeer at and torment them is an ancient practice. The eleventh century *Domesday Book*, for example, mentions a 'Cathedra Stercoris' being used in Chester. *Cathedra Stercoris* means Dung Chair in Latin - which suggests the kind of thing that was thrown at the person tied into it!



Both the stocks and the pillory are instruments that allow this kind of punishment. Each consists of large, hinged, wooden boards into which the offender is locked. With stocks, boards are placed around the legs or the wrists, whereas in the pillory they are placed around the arms and neck and fixed to a pole. Often a placard detailing the crime was placed nearby; these punishments generally lasted only a few hours.

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A criminal in the stocks could expect to be abused, but his life was not threatened. A prisoner in the pillory would be presumed to have committed a more serious crime and accordingly got a more angry crowd reaction. With hands trapped, he or she could not protect themselves from anything thrown at them, either harmless items like rotten food, or even heavy stones. The criminal could also be sentenced to further punishments while in the pillory such as the shaving off of some or all of the hair, or even branding or the cutting off of ears.

The model stocks in this box also doubles as a whipping post. There are manacles attached to the side-post so that the offender could be stood upright to be flogged.

Such punishments were decreed by magistrates, but sometimes the community took the law into its own hands. Wife-beating husbands, abusive women and cheating tradesmen might be made to Ride the Skimmington - forced to straddle a pole or ride a donkey backwards, and then paraded around the village to the sound of clattering pots and pans and cursing.





Above: A seventeenth century woodcut of a cheating trader being forced to Ride the Skimmington.

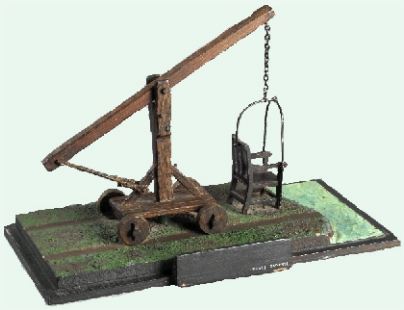
Top: A sixteenth century woodcut of a travelling musician being punished in the stocks - though his friend seems to fetching him a pot of beer!
Below: The pillory in use in the late seventeenth century.

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Ducking Stool



The Ducking Stool (sometimes called a Cucking Stool) is a variation of the Stocks/Pillory in that its purpose is to fasten a person down so that they can be abused and humilated. They were usually of local manufacture and there was no standard design. Most were simply chairs into which the victim could be tied and exposed at their door or the site of their offence. Some were on wheels like a tumbrel so that they could be dragged around the parish. Some, like this one, were put on poles so that they could be plunged into water.

Ducking stools are sometimes called Scolds Stools and associated with the punishment of women in particular. In fact, up to the seventeenth century the ducking-stool could be used for both sexes - indeed, unruly married couples were occasionally bound back-to-back and ducked. The device was most commonly used for the punishment of dishonest brewers and bakers.

By the early nineteenth century, however, the ducking stool seems to have become an instrument of community rough justice and the last known victims were all women. A Mrs Ganble was dunked at Plymouth in 1808; Jenny Pipes, a notorious 'scold', in 1809; Sarah Leeke in 1817. These last two were both punished in Leominster, Herefordshire. In the last case the water in the pond was so low that the victim was merely wheeled round the town in the chair.



Above: A seventeenth century woodcut of a ducking stool being used.