

The Curious World of Old -Time Punishments.

Ian Morgan July meeting

“Curious” isn’t the word I’d use to describe some of the punishments Ian Morgan outlined for us today! Fortunately, with a blend of quirky humour (sister-in-law on a broomstick) and Q&A sessions, he managed to lighten the mood. He is obviously a very knowledgeable speaker, having appeared on many radio shows including here in Lincolnshire. This experience showed today as he kept us engaged for the whole hour’s talk. His official title is Freelance Crime Historian.

He began by outlining what a law is—simply a rule to prevent one person upsetting the lives of others. Law Enforcement as such was done in local Courts of Assizes which governed things like weights and measurements. One of these, which measured bread and ale, was only abolished when we went metric. It began in 1275! In Saxon times, the villagers themselves had to create a “hue and cry” to catch criminals, then society progressed to having Night Watchmen. Punishments were brutal. At one time it was believed that there were as many as 285 crimes punishable by hanging, ranging from murder to breaking a sapling tree! Then came the “Peelers” or first policemen, formal courts and larger prisons.

Ian promised he wouldn’t go into the goriest details, but those he outlined were bad enough! For example, the use of the birch, usually on young men, was only abolished in 1948 in this country! Flogging, on the other hand, was largely used on prisoners. We learned the difference between the pillory (standing) and the stocks (sitting.) You could be tied to a cart and flogged for having an illegitimate child and heaven help you if you were regarded as being a nagging wife. For this, you would have a metal frame over your head with a metal plate on your tongue, held in place by a spike through the tongue, and be paraded through the village. As if this wasn’t gory enough!

I suppose we had to move, at some point, from corporal to capital punishment. Nobles were beheaded, commoners were hanged, better known as “The Short Drop.” But it took William Marwood, a local Horncastle lad, to make this process less barbaric, using The Long Drop method to ensure the prisoner’s neck broke and death was usually instantaneous. An exception was Half-Hanged Smith, who survived to tell the tale. Other punishments included pressing, where a prisoner had weights placed on his chest to make him answer the plea and thus his case could go to court. Punishments for high and low treason, arson and more serious crimes included the brutal “hung, drawn and quartered” method, which I won’t describe, to the gibbet and transportation when the prisons were full., even for stealing to feed your family (No wonder the Aussies like to beat us at cricket!) Hard labour included walking on a treadmill for endless hours at a stretch or turning a pointless lever in the wall. The warders could tighten the screws to make this more difficult, hence their nickname.

This could have been a depressing hour—but it wasn’t, because of Ian’s humorous delivery and engagement with his audience. It did, however, make us very glad that we live in less barbaric times and have more humane courts and sentences. Thank you, Ian, for your enlightening glimpse into the past and let’s hope The Committee don’t adopt any of these methods to get us to pay our annual fee!

Barbara Pearce

