

# 1. crime & punishment

Lawlessness has always been a characteristic of London life. And, in the days before the establishment of an effective police force, casual criminality was rife. For those scraping a living in the city's filthy slums, the money and status afforded by a life of crime was more than worth the threat of a spell in prison or even – in a world where few lived past 30 – dangling from the gallows. London's magnet-like status for itinerant provincial workers also guaranteed a regular supply of vulnerable souls to be preyed on by unscrupulous villains. And it's telling how many of the crimes highlighted in this journey were at the expense of those attempting to come to terms with the bewildering metropolis. London's landscape may have changed, but the grisly spectres of the past still stalk the city streets. You just need to know where to look.



**Start point:** Wapping overground

**End point:** Whitechapel tube

**Duration:** 4 hours

● Come out of **Wapping overground** and turn left down Wapping High Street. This docklands district still maintains the seafaring spirit of its 18th-century heyday and its association with pirates goes back to the 1500s. Turn left down King Henry's Stairs and walk along the bridge. The Captain Kidd pub, just downstream, is situated above the site of **Execution Dock**, which is where all pirates, smugglers and mutineers sentenced to death in London – including Kidd himself in 1701 – were hanged. Those who sailed under a skull and crossbones were reviled by Londoners, who relied on sea trade for much of their livelihood, so the punishment for piracy was particularly grim. A short rope meant victims suffered from slow strangulation rather than a broken neck and, as they were left hanging while three tides washed over their heads, most died from drowning.

● Walk back to **Wapping overground** and catch the westbound **100** bus from the stop right outside the exit. The bus turns left at **The Highway** – scene of the infamous Ratcliff Highway Murders in 1811, in which two families were slain in their own homes 12 days apart. The supposed murderer, a sailor lodging at a nearby pub, committed suicide before providing any kind of testimony, and his body was buried at the junction of Commercial Road and Cannon Street Road – just a few blocks northeast of here – with a stake driven through his heart.

● The bus continues past the **Tower of London**. The use of torture and axe-wielding executioners here has been much exaggerated, but both were certainly employed – most notably on 17th-century gunpowder

plotter Guy Fawkes, who was subjected to the rack in order to gain a confession. King Henry VIII's wives Anne Boleyn and Catherine Howard, as well as 'nine days queen' Lady Jane Grey, were all beheaded within its walls. **Tower Hill**, just visible from the bus behind the tube station, was where the public executions of more than 100 prisoners were carried out.

● Get off the bus at the **St Paul's Station** stop, walk back up the street and turn left into Little Britain. Bear right when it meets King Edward Street and carry on along Little Britain as it passes through St Bartholomew's Hospital. You will emerge into **Smithfield**, where the open-air executions of heretics took place in medieval and Tudor times. Hundreds of religious dissenters were burnt at the stake here, many of them during the reign of the zealous Mary I. Convicted 16th-century forgers suffered an equally gruesome fate – they were boiled alive in oil.

● Turn left across the front of the hospital and stop at the **memorial to Sir William Wallace**. This Scottish patriot – portrayed by Mel Gibson in *Braveheart* – met his end at Smithfield, too. As punishment for leading a rebellion against the English, he was dragged here through the streets by horses, then hung, drawn and quartered. His head was placed on London Bridge as a warning to other would-be traitors.

● Continue across the front of St Bartholomew's Hospital and walk down Giltspur Street. On the right, on the corner of Cock Lane, you will see the Golden Boy of Pye Corner. The statue was originally built into the wall of **The Fortune of War** pub, which was infamous for its connections with London's bodysnatchers. Surgeons at London's hospitals had always relied on the corpses of executed criminals for

anatomical research, but as the numbers of those sentenced to death dwindled in the 18th and 19th centuries, there was a shortage of bodies to dissect. Into the breach stepped the resurrection men, who stole bodies from graves to sell on to doctors. At The Fortune of War, which stood here till 1910, corpses were laid out in the upstairs rooms for surgeons from nearby St Bartholomew's to purchase.

● Directly opposite the bottom of Giltspur Street is the **Old Bailey** central criminal court, which is built on the site of Newgate Prison. This notorious jail was the starting point for many a journey to the scaffold, and the route that condemned prisoners took can be followed by crossing the road at the bottom of Giltspur Street, turning right onto Holborn Viaduct and catching the westbound **8** from the **City Thameslink Station** stop. Carts transported those destined for the gallows to Tyburn – now Marble Arch – and the three-mile route would have been lined with onlookers, as well as food-sellers, ballad-hawkers and other tradesmen capitalising on the carnival-like atmosphere of a hanging day.

● Just after the bus passes Holborn tube station, look out for **The Princess Louise** pub on the left. This Victorian bar is one of the places in which serial killer **Dennis Nilsen** used to pick up his victims in the late 1970s and early 1980s. Nilsen targeted homeless men, students or itinerant workers, and took them back to his homes in Cricklewood and Muswell Hill, where he murdered them, cut them up and kept them beneath the floorboards.

● Get off the bus at the **Great Titchfield Street** stop and catch the westbound **7**. Just after it turns off Oxford Street, get off at the **Marble Arch/Edgware Road** stop and cross the road at the lights in front of the Odeon cinema. The island in the middle of the road is situated on the site of the **Tyburn Tree** gallows – a huge scaffold that allowed for mass executions. More than 40,000 people lost their lives on this spot between 1571 and 1783. A simple plaque set into the pavement is all that remains.

● Cross the road, turn left and catch the **23** bus from the identically named stop on the other side. Just before it turns off the Strand into Aldwych, look along the road for the purple flags that hang from **King's College**. It was to here in 1831 that bodysnatching gang the London Burkers brought the corpse of a 14-year-old boy to sell for dissection. When surgeons at the college realised it showed no signs of burial, they called in the police – who went on to uncover a grim tale of opportunism that saw the Burkers targeting lone provincial farmworkers on their way to Smithfield Market and drowning them in a well in order to sell the bodies.

● When the bus enters Fleet Street, look out for the Dundee Courier building at number 186. This is supposedly the site of 'the demon barber of Fleet Street' **Sweeney Todd's shop**. Whether or not Todd existed is uncertain – but the story of the hairdresser slitting his victims' throats with a razor and using their corpses to provide pie fillings for the next-door bakery has endured more than 200 years.

● Get off the bus at the **Fetter Lane** stop, walk back and turn right up Chancery Lane. Turn left into Carey

Street then right up Serle Street, and you will find yourself in **Lincoln's Inn Fields**. This large green space was the site of several executions in the Renaissance period, most notably of the Babington plotters, who planned to assassinate Queen Elizabeth I. They were hung, drawn and quartered here in 1586.

● From Lincoln's Inn Fields, walk up Newman's Row on the far right of the square and through Great Turnstile onto High Holborn. Cross the road and catch the eastbound **25** from the **Brownlow Street** stop. As this heads out of the City and into Whitechapel, look out for Mitre Street on the left as the bus leaves Leadenhall Street and moves onto Aldgate. It was in **Mitre Square** – the entrance to which can be seen about halfway up here – that the mutilated body of Catherine Eddowes, the penultimate victim of serial killer Jack the Ripper, was found in November 1888.

● His first victim, Mary Ann Nichols, was found in Whitechapel, in August of that year. And you can visit the scene of the crime by getting off the bus at the **East London Mosque** stop. Continue on foot along Whitechapel Road, turn left into Vallance Road then right into **Durward Street**. It was on this road that the body of Nichols was discovered on the far side of the railway bridge, on the left-hand side. Despite a huge manhunt, four other women – possibly more – were slain in the area over the next few months. As the killer was never caught, the lurid speculation about the culprit's identity shows no sign of abating in the 21st century.

● At the end of Durward Street, turn right down Brady Street and left back onto Whitechapel Road. The first pub you come to, **The Blind Beggar**, was a haunt of gangsters in the 1950s and 1960s; and it was where Ronnie Kray, one half of the infamous Kray twins, shot dead rival George Cornell 1966 – a crime for which he was convicted and sentenced, along with his brother, to life imprisonment. Don't let this put you off marking the end of your journey with a pint in this atmospheric Victorian boozier.

