



Bizarre Laws

Every society has its own laws that people must obey. These laws change over time as people's opinions on things change. We can be grateful that some of these old British laws aren't in place today.

Being a Catholic (or a Protestant)

Nothing has divided the British over the past few centuries as much as religion. It was the Catholic Church's responsibility to punish heretics. Heretics were people who didn't agree with something that the Church told them to do: anybody who wasn't deemed to be Catholic was arrested and executed.

In 1534, Henry VIII was declared the only leader of the Church of England, which meant that the Protestants were in power. As a result, Catholics were rounded up and executed. All of this changed back again in the 1600s when King James II took the throne and favoured Catholicism. It reverted again in the 1700s! No wonder people didn't know what to believe!

Being a Witch

It was very easy to be a witch in the 16th and 17th century. Are you a single woman? Witch! Has a black cat been seen near to you? You're a witch! Do you have a wart-covered or crooked nose? You guessed it - witch! It didn't matter that you hadn't performed any magic. People back then were incredibly superstitious and afraid of bad luck or curses. They didn't want to take the risk of a witch living near to them. Unfortunately, there was only one known cure for being a witch: death. Most witches were burned alive at the stake. Ouch!

Playing football

Yep! Football was banned by King Edward II in 1314. If you dared to play it, you'd be sent to prison! It's important to remember that football back then wasn't the same as now. It was often played between two villages or across the centre of a town. Hundreds of people would run around trying to kick and throw the ball forward, and fights would break out all over the place. Injuries were common occurrences.



Eating Mince Pies at Christmas

It was originally a pagan custom to eat mince pies at Christmas. Thomas Cromwell introduced a lot of new laws forbidding paganisms, and this was one of them. Pagans were feared more than most other religions; there were strong links between magic and Pagan rituals. Thankfully, this law was eventually removed by Charles II.

Wearing Posh Clothes

It is a ridiculous notion, but poor people were often considered to be bad. This was because there were many more poor people than there were rich people. Rich people wanted to control the poorer people. One way to do this was to introduce laws which dictated what they could and couldn't do. These were sumptuary laws. They set out what colour clothing people could or couldn't wear, along with things such as whether you were allowed to wear fur. They also limited the number of courses you could have for a meal, depending on how rich you were.

RETRIEVAL FOCUS

1. Which religions kept swapping power during the 1500s and 1600s?
2. Who was declared the only leader of the Church of England?
3. What might you be guilty of if you were chasing a ball through the streets?
4. What did Thomas Cromwell do?
5. What was the name of the laws that stopped people wearing certain clothes?

VIPERS QUESTIONS

V

What does a "ridiculous notion" mean?

I

Why do you think rich people didn't want poor people wearing certain clothes?

V

Which single word is a synonym for "changed back"?

I

Some sumptuary laws were introduced to stop expensive fabrics coming in from Europe.
Why might the king or queen have done this?

S

Choose one of the sections. Explain how this law has changed today.

Answers:

1. Catholics and Protestants
2. Henry VIII
3. Playing football
4. Brought in laws banning pagan customs
5. Sumptuary laws

V: An idea that is so silly/daft as to be unthinkable to most people

I: They wanted to keep the best things to themselves/they wanted to be able to spot who was poorer than them

V: Reverted

I: Because they wanted the money to stay in England/they wanted tax/look for any answer that suggests it was about keeping it for themselves.

S: Accept answers that discuss the changes in the chosen section.