



How do UK courts work?

If you've ever wondered what happens in court, here's what you need to know.

When a person commits a crime or there is a dispute between two people, sometimes the case is sent to court. UK courts are extremely important in giving people a fair hearing. The UK legal system is admired across the world.

There have been a lot of high-profile court cases in the news recently. One of these was the case of Charlie Gard, an 11-month-old baby who was very ill. Charlie's parents were fighting for the right to take him to the US for experimental treatment, but British

doctors believed it was kinder to let him die. In the end the parents ended their legal fight.

Another recent case that got a lot of publicity involved a man called Jon Platt, who took his six-year-old daughter to Disney World during term time. The Isle of Wight council decided to fine Platt £120 for taking his daughter away from school, however he refused to pay it. After a long legal battle, the Supreme Court decided that he should have paid and Platt was ordered to pay £2,000 in charges.

Different types of courts

There are several types of court in the UK. Here are four examples.

Magistrates' court

This type of court deals with crimes like shoplifting and speeding in England and Wales. Magistrates are the people who hear the cases. These are usually volunteers from the public who have had legal training.



Crown court

In England and Wales, serious cases, such as murder and robbery, are heard at crown courts by a judge and a jury. The judge in this court wears a formal gown and a white wig.

High Court

This deals with civil cases, which are disputes between two people or groups, and appeals (when a person hopes to overturn a decision made by a different court). Cases are usually (though not always) heard by a single judge.



Supreme Court

This is the most important court for all of the UK and deals with high-profile cases that have often received a lot of media attention. The Supreme Court can overturn a decision that any lower court has made.



TERRIBLE TESTS

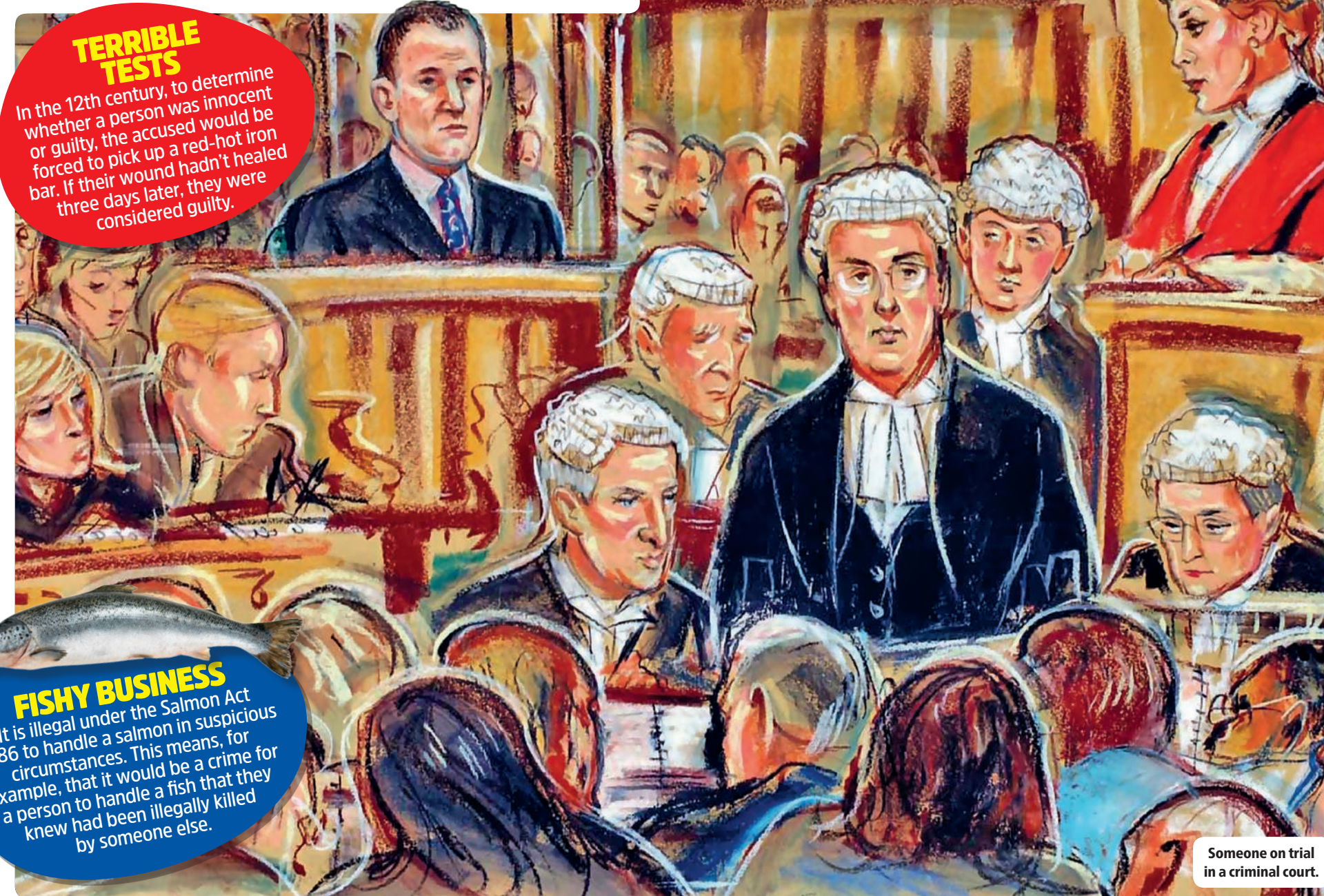
In the 12th century, to determine whether a person was innocent or guilty, the accused would be forced to pick up a red-hot iron bar. If their wound hadn't healed three days later, they were considered guilty.

FISHY BUSINESS

It is illegal under the Salmon Act 1986 to handle a salmon in suspicious circumstances. This means, for example, that it would be a crime for a person to handle a fish that they knew had been illegally killed by someone else.

DID YOU KNOW?

It is illegal to shake a rug in the streets of London – however, you can shake a doormat before 8am.



Someone on trial in a criminal court.

Legal language

Sometimes legal jargon can be confusing. Here's an easy-to-understand guide.

Barrister

A lawyer who can speak at all courts in England and Wales, including crown courts and High Courts. In Scotland barristers are called advocates.

Defendant

A person who has been accused of a crime.

Judge

An impartial (doesn't pick a side) decision maker in a law court.

Jury

A group of people (usually 12) chosen at random to hear evidence in court and come to a verdict.

Prosecution

The team of people who start legal proceedings against a person who is accused of committing a crime.

Solicitor

A person who can deal with legal matters for the public. They can also offer legal advice.

Verdict

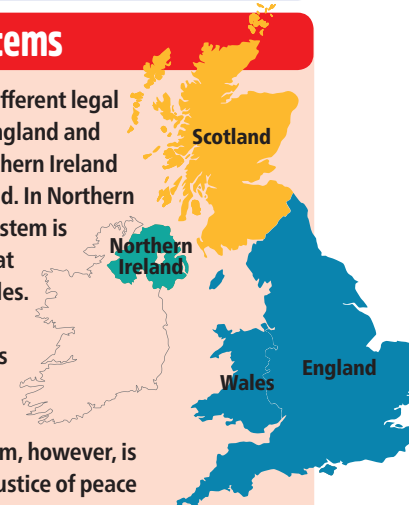
The judge or jury's decision at the end of a court case.

Witness

Someone who is asked to give evidence in a case. Something they might have seen or heard could help decide a verdict.

UK legal systems

The UK has three different legal systems. One for England and Wales, one for Northern Ireland and one for Scotland. In Northern Ireland the court system is pretty similar to that of England and Wales. It has magistrates' courts, crown courts and even its own High Court. The Scottish legal system, however, is unique. There are justice of peace courts in place of magistrates and sheriff courts in place of crown courts. The Supreme Court is the same for all of the UK.



What happens in a court?

If someone is charged with a crime, they must go to court and either admit they are guilty of that crime, or plead not guilty. All criminal cases in England and Wales start in a magistrates' court. More serious crimes – such as murder – will eventually go to a crown court.

Guilty or not guilty?

In a crown court the accused has to plead guilty or not guilty. If they plead guilty, they are given a punishment, such as going to prison. If they plead not guilty, 12 members of the public, known as a jury, listens to evidence presented by two sets of lawyers, one for and one against the accused. Sometimes witnesses give evidence that helps the jury decide the truth.



The accused hearing the verdict.

Reaching a verdict

After members of the jury have heard all the evidence, they must decide whether the accused is guilty or not. When they have reached a decision, a member of the jury will stand up in the courtroom and announce their verdict. The accused is then either acquitted (free from criminal charge) or sentenced by the judge, depending on the verdict.

Acts of Parliament

An Act of Parliament is a document agreed on by Parliament and is the basis of many of our laws. There are other documents that are part of our law. One of the most important for the UK legal system was Magna Carta, signed by King John of England in 1215. The document stated that no one, not even the king, was above the law.



King John signing the Magna Carta.