What did the Scottish Boot, the Juda Cradle and the Spanish Donkey have in common?

In Tudor and Stuart England, crimes were punished in much the same way as they had been in the Middle Ages. The stocks and pillory were still used regularly but fining a criminal was still the most common way of punishing minor crimes. For serious offences, there were still very harsh punishments. In 1533, a cook was boiled to death in a cauldron for trying to poison the Bishop of Rochester (judges were perhaps trying to make the punishment fit the crime).

Some towns still had watchmen and constables to look out for crooks, and justices of the Peace tried to investigate crimes, gather information and hold trials. However, these government-appointed men were also busy with other duties, such as looking after roads and bridges, checking alehouses and reporting people who continually failed to attend church! As a result, the government sometimes used other ways of getting information, catching criminals and foiling plots. One way was to employ spies but this was time-consuming and costly (you had to pay the spy of course). A much more brutal solution was to use torture!

The Rack
How did it work?
A prisoner was stretched for hours on end. Often, their tendons and ligaments would tear and their shoulders would become dislocated.
Fact: There was only one rack in the whole of England, which was kept in the Tower of London. One famous Tudor rack torturer boasted that most of his victims were a foot longer by the time he had finished with them.

The Press
How did it work?
A prisoner would lay under strong wooden or metal boards whilst heavy stones were placed upon them. If a prisoner failed to own up to their crimes, another heavy rock could be placed on them.
Fact: One press operator once boasted he knew his victim would not be able to hold out much longer as soon as he heard his chest crack.

The Spanish Donkey
How did it work?
Weights were attached to a prisoner’s legs whilst they sat astride the wooden ‘donkey’. More weights were applied until the prisoner confessed.
Fact: A torture first used in Spain, the idea was to destroy a victim’s genitals!

The Juda Cradle
How did it work?
A victim was hung above a cone pyramid and then lowered onto it. The sharp top of the cone was forced up into the area between the prisoner’s legs.
Fact: Visitors are told about this torture on a tour of the Tower of London; it usually gets the biggest gasps!

The Scottish Boot
How did it work?
A prisoner’s foot was placed in a heavy metal boot and wooden wedges would be hammered down the sides. Gradually, the leg and anklebones would be crushed and splintered into pieces.
Fact: A similar contraption called the Copper Boot was sometimes used. For this torture, molten red-hot lead was poured into a boot, giving the victim terrible burns.

Skeffington’s Irons
How did it work?
Specially designed to keep the prisoner in a very uncomfortable position. Either they owned up to the crime… or their back was broken.
Fact: This torture was named after its inventor, Leonard Skeffington, who was once head torturer for Henry VIII.

Source A - Father Gerard, a Catholic priest, was tortured in the Tower of London in 1597.

“Then they took me to a big upright pillar, driven into the top of it were iron staples for supporting heavy weights. They then put my wrists in iron gauntlets [gloves] and ordered me to climb some wooden steps. My arms were lifted up and an iron bar was passed through the rings of one gauntlet, then through the staple and the rings of the second gauntlet. They fastened the bar with a pin. Repeating the steps, they kept me hanging with my hands and arms fastened above my head. The tips of my toes, however, still touched the ground and they had to dig away at the earth from under them.
I began to pray. The gentlemen asked me whether I was willing to confess now.”

WORK
1. a. What were the two main methods used to get information in Tudor England?
   b. Why did the Tudors favour torture over the use of spies?
   c. List as many reasons as you can why we don’t torture suspected criminals today.
2. Look at Source A.
   a. In your own words, describe how Father Gerard is being tortured.
   b. Why did earth have to be dug away from under the prisoner’s feet?
3. Most of this torture equipment still survives today, kept on display in the Tower of London. Design an information leaflet for a young schoolchild to use as a guide on a torture chamber tour. Include:
   • Colourful pictures of the torture instruments
   • Facts about how they worked
   • A background to torture
   • An imaginative title, for example, ‘The Tower’s Terrible Torture Guide’.