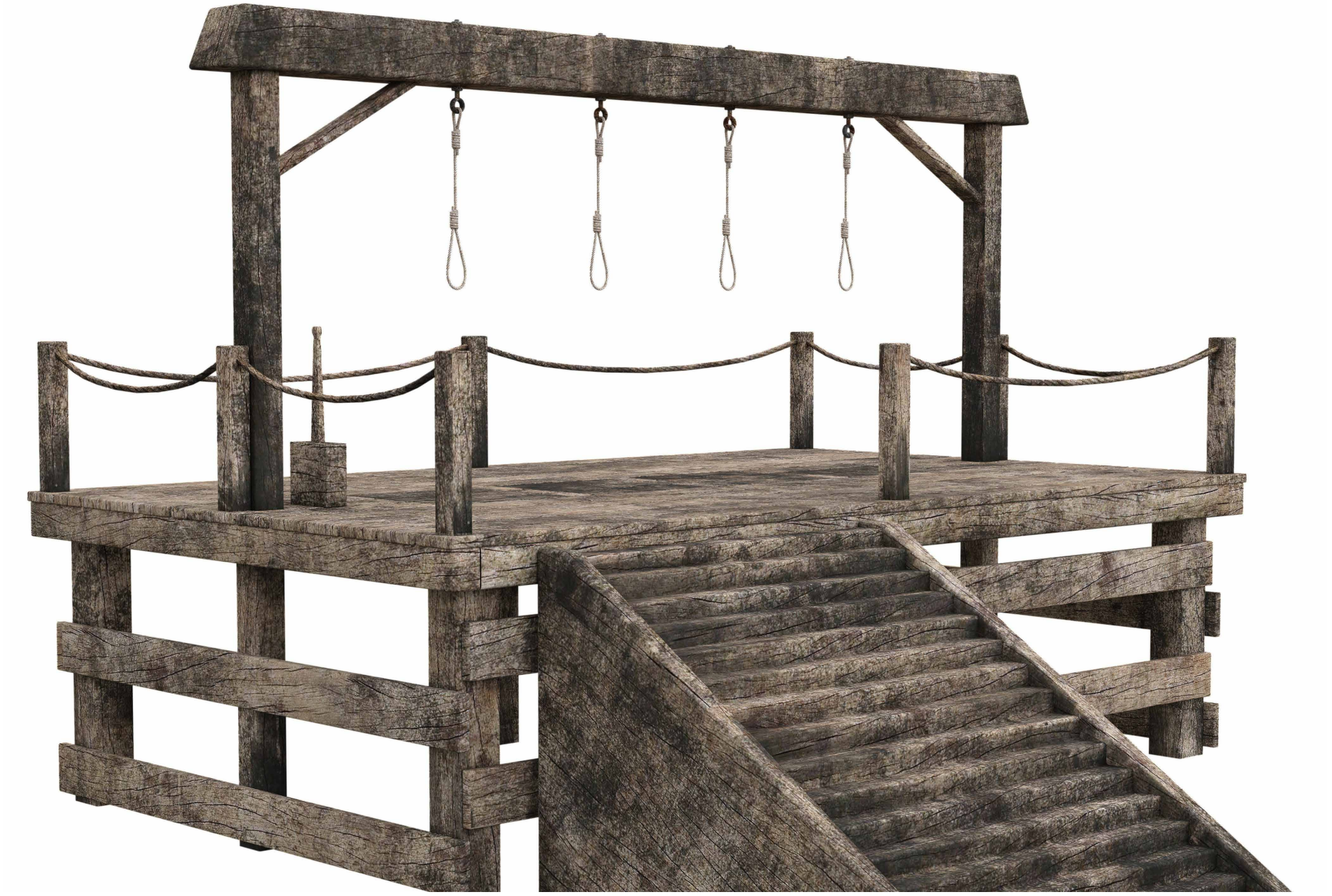

II and ended up facing incompetent executioner Jack Ketch. The duke asked Ketch to finish him in one go in July 1685 but the axeman failed in the task, despite landing five blows and finally resorted to a knife, after horrified spectators saw the duke still getting up.

Tens of thousands of spectators attended all these public spectacles held eight times a year, which were a boon for pickpockets and prostitutes as well as food and drink purveyors who sold gin, potato, beef, mutton, eel and fruit pastries.

Large crowds also visited gibbets from the macabre practice of tying the corpses of those who had committed crimes like murder, smuggling and piracy in body chains and suspended them on tall posts to rot for years. The decaying flesh proved a tourist attraction with spectators buying sausages and gingerbread while gazing at the remains until the practice was stopped in 1834.

Surgeons had been granted a supply of corpses for medical examination since Tudor times, which caused fights when a family tried to stop them claiming the criminal's body. When demand outstripped supply in the 18th century the 1752

Gallows (above) were once typical (photo: Adobe)

Silk vest (right) believed to have been worn by King Charles I at his execution

Murder Act gave surgeons the bodies of executed murderers for public dissection, which the public paid to watch.

The body of Earl Ferrers, who was hanged in 1760 for shooting dead his steward, was not only the last peer to be hanged but the first peer to be dissected, being taken to Surgeons' Hall in a satin-lined coffin, where "great number of spectators" came to watch surgeons "anatomise" him. His body was cut open and his bowels removed but was spared dissection on account of his nobility.

Executioners were neither skilful nor well paid but Richard Brandon, who inherited the job from his father Geoffrey, was an exception, becoming London's Common Executioner during the Civil War, earning £30 (£750,000 today) for beheading King Charles I in 1649.

Some were criminals themselves. Hangman John Price was arrested for debt on his way to perform an execution, later hanged in 1718 for killing a woman, while William Marvel, who'd also been arrested for debt when travelling to Tyburn, was convicted in 1719 of stealing ten silk handkerchiefs before being transported to America.

William Calcraft was Britain's most prolific hangman, killing 400 people between 1829 to 1874. He doubled up as cobbler and extolled the short-drop method of execution with a three feet fall that slowly strangled a criminal to death.

Changing attitudes eventually brought the gruesome spectacle to an end in the Victorian period. Calcraft performed the last public execution of Fenian Michael Barrett in 1868 for killing 12 bystanders when blowing up parts of Clerkenwell prison.

Thereafter, capital punishment was carried out behind closed prison doors with the last hangings on the same day in August 1964 at Manchester and Liverpool prisons of two murderers for killing a laundry driver.

Visitors to the Docklands' exhibition, which runs until March, can see a huge array of both grisly and compelling objects, many not shown before, telling this 700-year story.

By the end, you're reminded that in central London you're never more than three miles - or 500 yards in the City of London - from a nightmarish execution site! Details can be found at Executions (museumoflondon.org.uk) website.