

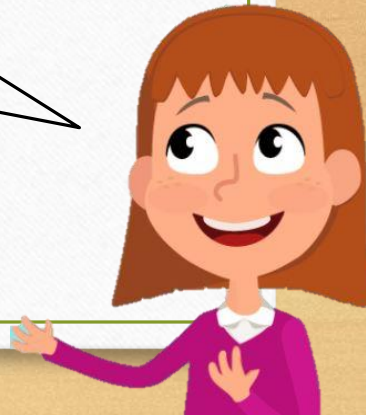
# Crime And Punishment In Anglo Saxon Times



What do we mean by Anglo Saxon times?



This covers the time from when the Romans left Britain until the Norman invasion of 1066. England's population in 1000 was between around 1,700,000 and 2,000,000. About 9 out of 10 people lived in the countryside in small and scattered villages, very few people lived in towns. It was these villages and the church that were responsible for upholding law and order in Anglo Saxon times.



How were laws made in Anglo Saxon times?



As successive kings gained more control of the land, law and order, which had been very local, more often became led by the king. He relied on his advisors to uphold the law across the land.



**KING** - Rules the country and decides new laws.

**NOBLES** - Given land by the king. They were wealthy and powerful. Some could advise and persuade the king when he makes new laws.

**SHIRE REEVES** – Appointed by Nobles to make sure people follow the king's law. Responsible for maintaining law in their local area.

**FREEMEN** - They could rent or own a small piece of land. They had no say in making the law.

**SERFS** - They couldn't own land and had to work for others for very low pay. They had no say in making the law.

What was crime like in Anglo Saxon times?



**TOWNS** – As people began to move into towns, there was more opportunity for crime to take place. Lots of valuable things, proved irresistible to thieves. There were many people in close contact, who didn't know each other well, which made it easier to get away with a crime in a busy town.





**VILLAGES** - Most people still lived in villages where everyone knew one another, making it easy to identify and catch a criminal. Local communities were responsible for upholding the law and each area had a Reeve whose job it was to carry out any decisions made by the courts.



Who enforced the law in Anglo Saxon times?



Anglo Saxons believed it was up to the victim to seek justice and the responsibility of everyone in the community to deliver justice. The Anglo Saxons didn't have a police force. In Anglo Saxon times, land was divided into 'Hundreds' and in each Hundred the land was divided into 10 Tithes. One man from each hundred, and one man from each Tithing had to meet regularly with the King's Shire Reeve. These people were responsible for maintaining law and order in their communities.



Anyone in the community who saw a crime taking place could raise a 'hue and cry' which was a shout for help and anyone who heard it was expected to chase the suspects. Anyone who did not join in with the hue and cry could be fined and punished.

Anyone who was accused of a crime could take an 'oath' where they said they were innocent. They could call on people in the community (oath helpers) who would give support to the accused. If someone was a second offender or had been caught in the act, then they would not be given the opportunity of taking an oath of innocence.



What kind of punishments were given out in Anglo Saxon times?



Religion was very important in Anglo Saxon times and the church was very powerful. An accused person could also be tried by the church in a 'trial by ordeal'. These were ways of letting God decide if a person was innocent or guilty.



**Trial by hot water** – a person's hand was placed into boiling hot water. If after three days, the wound was healing then they were judged not guilty. If it wasn't healing, then they were judged to be guilty and hanged.



**Trial by hot iron** – A person had to carry a hot piece of metal and walk nine paces. If after three days, the wound was healing they were judged not guilty. If it wasn't healing, then they were judged to be guilty and hanged.





**Trial by cold water** – A person was tied up and thrown into water that had been blessed by a priest. If they floated they were innocent. However, if they sank and drowned, they were guilty.



What happened if an Anglo Saxon  
killed or hurt someone?



**Wergild** - Murder or hurting a person was punished by paying a fine called a wergild to the victims family. The amount of wergild depended on the person who was killed. The higher the social status, the more wergild to be paid.



## Examples of wergild

- Killing a Prince - 1500 shillings
- Killing a Yeoman farmer - 100 shillings
- Killing a Serf - 40 shillings
- Cutting off a nose - 60 shillings
- Cutting off an ear - 30 shillings
- Cutting off a big toe - 20 shillings
- Cutting off a little toe - 9 shillings

If a person could not afford to pay, then they became a slave.

What about punishments for other crimes?



Some crimes received punishment called corporal punishment where they were physically punished for committing a crime. For example, a thief may have his or her hand cut off or someone saying untrue things about another person may have their tongue cut out.



**The stocks** – Some public punishments included being placed in the stocks (feet) or the pillory (arms and neck). People would be placed in the centre of the village or town. They would be exposed to bad weather and other people throwing rubbish or verbally abusing them.

