

# **BBC Bitesize**

This is York, one of the most historically significant cities in England. In the medieval period, it was a thriving hub for trade and industry.

In medieval England, laws were made by the monarchy and the official church of the time, the Roman Catholic Church. Crimes were split into three types. Crimes against the person, for example, public disorder, assault and murder. Crimes against property; including theft and poaching; counterfeiting coins and arson. And crimes against authority, such as treason and rebellion.

Many punishments were carried out in public places, like here at Pavement right in the centre of York. Public punishment was a way of deterring people from committing crimes.

The medieval justice system continued a lot of the practises from the Anglo-Saxon period. As there was no police force, it was up to the community to prevent crimes and catch criminals. Communities were split into small groupings called tithings. People in tithings were responsible for each other. If a crime occurred, a witness or victim was expected to raise the alarm and all the men in the tithing had to join the hunt for the criminal. This was known as the hue and cry.

To make sure people accused of crime went to court, the community appointed a local person as sheriff. The sheriff's job was to ensure justice was served. At court, the accused would face a jury made up of local men, who usually knew both the accuser and the accused.

Back in Anglo-Saxon times, one of the most common punishments had been wergild - this was where fines were paid as compensation to victims. In medieval times, fines continued, but wergild ended and now all fines were paid to the King, not the victim.

Many minor crimes were punished by public humiliation - selling stale bread for example could get you time in the stocks or pillory.

The first Norman King, William I added a new type of fine - a murdrum fine which meant if a Norman was killed, the whole village was responsible for finding the culprit and was made to pay a heavy fine... after the murderer was executed.

William I, also brought in the hated Forest Laws which prevented peasants from using the woodland for food, fuel and building materials. The crime of hunting in banned forest areas was called poaching and could be punished by blinding or execution.

The use of corporal punishment - hurting or maiming the body of the convicted criminal - rose dramatically during the medieval period.

Crimes against authority were most harshly dealt with, usually with capital punishment - being put to death.

For most people in medieval England, religion was very important. Fear of God acted as a deterrent from committing crime. Images like the ones in this medieval window in York Minster reminded believers that an all-seeing God would pass the ultimate judgement when they died.

The Roman Catholic Church also operated its own courts for its clergy members - known as church courts. Punishments were usually not as harsh as in regular courts. This was known as benefit of clergy and church courts never sentenced people to death.

Some churches, like this one, could also offer sanctuary, protection from the law, to non-clergy members. If an accused person knocked on the special sanctuary knocker, they could come into the church and be temporarily safe from the law, but they had to either agree to go to court or swear an oath to leave the country within 40 days.

Sometimes when a jury in a non-church court couldn't decide on a person's guilt or innocence, they might still turn to God and use trial by ordeal. This was when the accused was subjected to an ordeal, such as this one, in which it was believed God would reveal whether they were guilty or innocent.

Over the course of the medieval period, changes in society saw new crimes emerge and types of punishments alter. While the monarchy and religious beliefs had an influence in defining crimes and devising punishments, the community-based nature of society meant most of the responsibility for maintaining order, catching and punishing criminals lay with the local people.