# Crime And Punishment

The Anglo-Saxons didn't have a police force. They didn't have prisons either but they did have laws. These strict laws were decided by the king. Everyone helped enforce them. For example, if someone was being robbed, he or she would call out. Anyone who heard had to come to help. All men over the age of 12 belonged to a tithing. A tithing was a group of ten men. They were all responsible for each other. If one of the ten committed a crime, the other nine had to bring him to the court for justice. If they did not, they would all be held guilty!

Some Anglo-Saxon laws are the same as today. For example, theft and murder were against the law. It was also illegal to challenge the power of the nobles or kings. When England became a Christian country, there were laws to make sure people obeyed Christian teachings.

The Anglo-Saxons used a jury system. A jury is a group of people who decide if the person is guilty or not. Today, the jury do not know the person they are judging. This is so that they decide based on the evidence they hear. In Anglo-Saxon times, this was different. The jury were people who knew the accused person. They would also use their knowledge of the person's character to help them decide.

Sometimes the jury could not reach a verdict. In those cases, the accused would be made to do an ordeal. It could be walking on hot coals, putting their hand in boiling water or being thrown into an ice-cold river. If they survived and healed, it was a sign from God that they were innocent. If not, they were guilty!

Next, the punishment was decided. At the start of the Anglo-Saxon era, people could take revenge themselves. By the end of the Anglo-Saxon times, most crimes were punished with a fine. This was called Weregild. Different crimes came with different fines. Some of those rules might seem a bit unfair. Killing a

nobleman would get you a far higher fine than killing a peasant! The money would go to the person or family who had been the victim.

There were harsher punishments for serious crimes. Guilty people could lose a hand, a nose or an ear. This could also happen if people were found guilty more than once or could not pay the fine.

## RETRIEVAL FOCUS

1. How many men were in each tithing?

2. Give one example of an Anglo-Saxon law.

3. What is a jury?

4. What was the most common punishment?

5. What might happen if you could not pay your fine?

## VIPERS QUESTIONS

**V** What is the word that is used for a *decision about whether someone is guilty*.

**V** What is an 'ordeal'

**V** What word in the final paragraph means 'more severe'?

**S** Summarise the differences between how crimes are dealt with today compared to in the Anglo-Saxon times.

**E** Which parts of the way Anglo-Saxons deal with crime does the writer find surprising or shocking?

**E** Do you think the Anglo-Saxon approach is fair? Use evidence from the text to explain your view.