

More serious crimes were dealt with by county courts. These were sometimes known as Shire courts or Royal courts. A judge appointed by the king, would travel to each county (perhaps twice a year) to deal with any crimes thought too serious for the local lord to deal with. Working with advisors, the judge would work through the evidence, listen to witnesses and come to a verdict. If the case was unclear, the judge may order a **trial by ordeal** as a way of letting God (who everyone believed in) decide on someone's guilt. Trial by ordeal, the judge felt, was a good way for God to help the innocent... and punish the guilty.

The most common ordeals were by fire, by water and by combat:

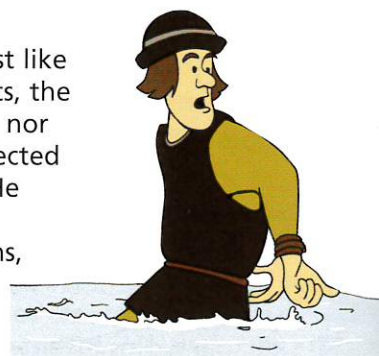
ORDEAL BY FIRE

- Step 1** The accused carries a red-hot iron bar for three steps, or takes a stone from the bottom of a pot of boiling water.
- Step 2** The prisoner's hand is bandaged, and he returns to court three days later.
- Verdict** If the wound has healed, God must think the prisoner is worth helping and so he must be innocent. If the wound is infected, God must think the prisoner is not worth healing and so he must be guilty. He must be punished by being put to death.



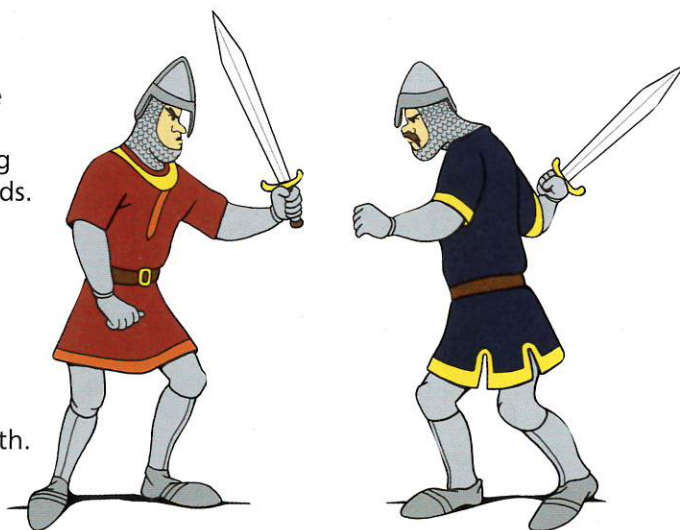
ORDEAL BY WATER

- Step 1** The accused is tied up.
- Step 2** He is thrown into a lake or river.
- Verdict** Water is pure, just like God. If the prisoner floats, the water doesn't want him, nor does God. If God has rejected him, he must be guilty. He was put to death. If the prisoner sinks and drowns, God must want him in heaven. He must be innocent.



ORDEAL BY COMBAT

- This was a trial for rich people. The accuser would fight the accused. It was possible to get someone called a champion to fight for you. For some people this was their job, earning huge amounts of money fighting on behalf of different lords.
- Step 1** Both sides should select their weapons. These would be made from wood and bone.
- Step 2** The accuser and the accused (or their champions) must fight for as long as possible, starting at sunrise.
- Verdict** People believed God would give the winner extra strength. The first person to surrender was thought to be guilty and therefore must be punished by being put to death.



Thankfully, trial by ordeal didn't last long. They were stopped early in the thirteenth century, when church leaders objected to them. Instead they were gradually replaced by a system still used today – trial by **jury**. The jury was a group of 12 local men who had the job of saying whether the person was telling the truth or not. The judge then decided if the person was guilty. In later years, the jury would decide on a guilty or innocent verdict – something that still survives in today's crown courts.

Punishment fits the crime

The most common form of punishment, usually for minor crimes was a fine. After, all this was a good way for a local lord or the king to raise money. But the punishments for the more serious crimes could be brutal. Murderers, for example, would be executed – in any number of different ways! The most common form of execution was to hang the offender from a tree but some areas used more vicious methods. In Kent, a murderer might be buried alive, in Portsmouth they would be burned to death and in Pevensy they might be thrown off the bridge into the harbour to drown! And all punishments, including execution, took place in public as a warning to others.

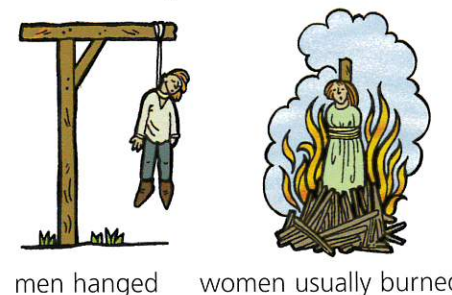
CRIMES AND THEIR PUNISHMENTS

The most serious crimes are at the top, the least serious at the bottom.

High treason
(a crime against king or country):



Murder, manslaughter, stealing anything worth a lot of money:



Smaller crimes like fighting, drunkenness or small thefts:



WISE-UP Words

jury
pillory
stocks
trial by ordeal

In fact, public humiliation was thought the best way to 'teach' offenders a lesson – and the best way to discourage others. A drunk or a pair of street fighters, for example, might be sentenced to spend some time in the **stocks** or the **pillory**. And punishments were often thought up to fit the crime. For example, a fishmonger who sold bad fish might have his rotten food tied around his neck whilst he was dragged through the streets on a wooden sledge. Passers-by would be encouraged to throw rotten fruit or shout abuse at him. Thieves might have a few fingers chopped off!

Work

- 1 Match each word or phrase in List A with the correct definition from list B.

List A	List B
Tithing	A loud noise to make people chase a criminal
Hue and cry	A group of 10 people responsible for each other
Jury	An official who looked after law and order
Stocks	A group who watched over a town
Constable	A wooden frame used to hold prisoners
Watch	A group of men who decided if a prisoner was telling the truth

- 2 Look at source B.
- a What crimes has Amos Walter committed?
- b Why do you think Amos was punished in this way?
- 3 a List the three types of ordeal.
- b Why do you think people in the Middle Ages believed that ordeals were the best way to find out if a person was guilty or not?
- c Do you think ordeals were a good way of finding out if someone was guilty? Why do you think that punishments in the Middle Ages were so brutal? Give reasons for your views.

MISSION ACCOMPLISHED?

- Can you explain what is meant by the terms 'hue and cry', 'trial by ordeal' and 'hung, drawn and quartered'?