

Crime and Punishment

Learning Objective:

To explore crime and punishment in the medieval and Tudor periods.



43
to
410

Roman Britain

410
to
1066

Anglo-Saxons and
Vikings

1066
to
1154

Norman Britain

1154
to
1485

Middle Ages

1485
to
1603

Tudors

1603
to
1714

Stuarts

1837
to
1901

Victorians

1914
to
1918

World War 1

1939
to
1945

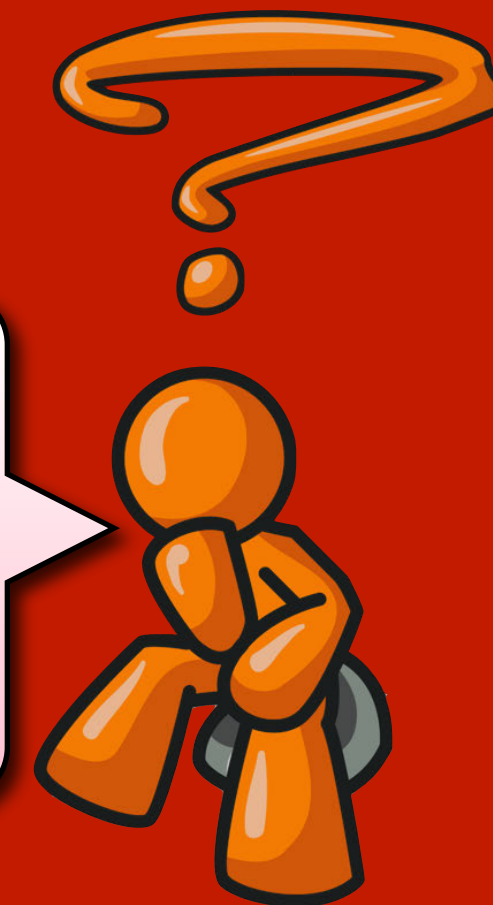
World War 2

2000
to
today

New Millennium

Today we will be looking at the medieval period which spans from the Norman conquest in 1066 up until the beginning of the Tudor period in 1485. We will then also look at changes in crime and punishment across the period when the Tudor family were in power.

Do you know anything about the medieval or Tudor periods?



The Normans came from Normandy in the north-west of France. They were originally Vikings but settled down there after the French king gave them some land.



1066 is the year that William the Conqueror came over from Normandy and won the Battle of Hastings. This began the Norman rule in Britain.

When the Normans invaded in 1066, they brought a new system of laws with them. While they had been in France, the Normans had taken on the laws of the French people around them.

The Anglo-Saxon community-based system of crime prevention, such as the use of tithings, continued for some time after the Norman Conquest but changes were gradually introduced. Harsher punishments were more common and weregild (paying compensation for your crime) was more or less abolished.

The Battle of Hastings



Instead of weregild, people were mutilated (for example, by having their ears slit or their hands cut off), executed or fined for their crimes. However, instead of the money going back to the victim or the victim's family, it would go to the king.



The lord of the manor would be a judge at regular courts and many trials would have juries too.



Trial by ordeal was ended around the year 1200. Criminals who had offended the public were either put in the stocks if you were a man or on the ducking stool if you were a woman. This was called a 'shaming punishment' as it humiliated the offender in front of his or her neighbours.



Forest Law

The Norman kings set up large forests (including woodland, open land and farmland) where they could hunt for deer. Anyone living in the royal forests now had to have a licence to hunt animals or even gather firewood.

25 royal forests had been set up by 1087 and by the end of the medieval period there would be around 80. This covered around a third of England. The New Forest is probably the most famous of these.



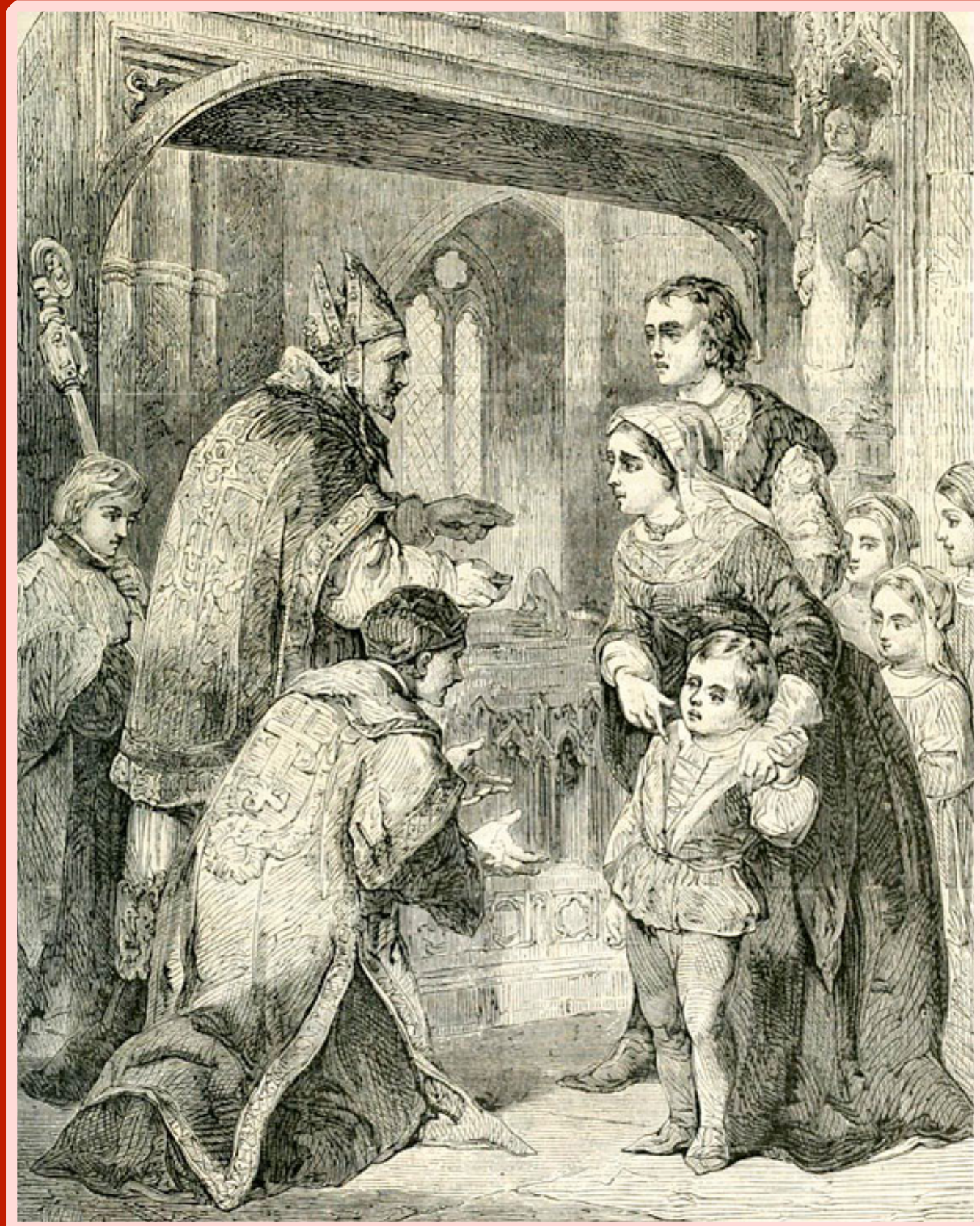
The Church

Throughout the Middle Ages, the Church had its own courts. These tried crimes of a religious nature, such as blaspheming or failure to attend church. In order to get out of being tried by ordinary courts and risking execution, you could pretend to be a cleric by reciting a particular verse of the Bible in Latin.

This proved that you were educated and suggested you were a member of the Church. You could then be tried by the Church instead of the secular courts. The verse became known as 'Neck Verse' because it saved people from hanging.



Anyone on the run from the law could claim sanctuary by going into a church. The pursuers could not follow you and you would then be safe. Once you had taken an oath, you were able to flee the country. This meant leaving your life behind but at least you escaped execution.



This picture shows Elizabeth Woodville claiming sanctuary for herself and her children at Westminster Abbey after her husband, King Edward IV, died suddenly. As her eldest son wasn't yet old enough to be king, they were all in danger from others who wanted the throne for themselves.

Towards the end of the medieval period, towns and communities were getting bigger, which made law and order more difficult. There was also the threat of the 'over-mighty subject'. These were lords who used their power and wealth to terrorise local villages. The community-based crime prevention system was too weak to deal with this.



Towns and communities started appointing their own officials called constables, watchmen or beadles. Gradually, a new position was set up: the Justice of the Peace. JPs were rich and powerful members of the community who were appointed by the king and were in charge of controlling law and order.

The creation of Justices of the Peace was the first time that law enforcement became the role of certain people instead of a job for the whole community.



Tudor Crime and Punishment

After Henry Tudor won the Battle of Bosworth in 1485, the Tudor family ruled Britain until 1603. While the Tudors were in power, law and order remained largely the same. However, there were some specific crimes that related to religion.

During the reign of Henry VIII, England broke away from the Roman Catholic Church and King Henry became head of the Church of England. This caused a lot of problems as not everyone agreed that this was the right thing to do.



Henry VIII

One of the most controversial changes was the closing of all the monasteries. The Catholic monasteries were often used to help look after the poor. Once these were closed, there was no one else to look after them. The poor had to turn to crimes such as theft in order to feed themselves.



The remains of Furness Abbey. It was closed in 1537. A lot of the stone would have been taken to build local houses.

The Tudor kings and queens kept disagreeing about whether the country should be Catholic or Protestant. The religion of the country changed with the kings and queens.



Anyone who disagreed with the changes in the Church was charged with heresy and was burned at the stake. There were also lots of rebellions and many people were executed for treason.



What do you think of the justice system in medieval and Tudor times?

How is it different to the justice system in the Anglo-Saxon and Viking periods?

