***What crimes were there?***

The most common crime was theft, of money, food or belongings. Here is a breakdown of all the reported crime in Anglo-Saxon and Viking England.

Theft: 74% of all offences

Murder: 18%

Receiving stolen goods: 6%

Arson, counterfeiting coins, treason and all others: 2%

***How were crimes detected?***

In the early Anglo-Saxon period (from AD 500-1000), criminals were caught and brought to justice by local people. In the 11th century under the later Anglo-Saxon and Viking kings, this was made more official. The king appointed a shire-reeve (sheriff), he appointed a hundredman, who then appointed a tithingman. All these men had the responsibility of keeping the peace and bringing criminals to justice. They also all held courts.

***What happened at a trial?***

At a Saxon trial there were no lawyers and a jury would decide guilt or innocence. The accused could swear an oath and if he could produce 12 men to swear they believed him, he would be declared innocent. Alternatively, witnesses could be brought forward to decide whether a person was guilty or innocent.

Trial by ordeal happened when no witnesses could be found. Trial by fire could include having to walk over red-hot ploughshares. Trial by water was to get a stone from a boiling pot. In all these trials, if the accused was unharmed or had minimal injuries from which they quickly recovered, God had performed a miracle and saved them to prove their innocence. In another trial decided by God, the accused would consume the Eucharist (bread and wine believed to be the blood and body of Jesus) and would choke if guilty. !

***What punishments were there?***

Different amounts of compensation could be paid to the victim or victim's family for the loss of a person, an injury or theft. In Kent in AD 603 the following weregild applied:

Broken tooth – 1 shilling

Broken nose – 6 shillings

Lost finger – 10 shillings

Lost thumb – 20 shillings

Lost foot – 50 shillings

If the crime was very serious, such as persistent and significant theft or murder, a person could be outlawed. This meant they were cast out of society and were not protected by the law. They were to be treated like a wild animal and could be killed without any punishment. A nobleman would be exiled instead which meant that he was sent to a different country.

Punishment by death was very rare but did happen for treason and murder and gradually became more common. Boys as young as 12 had to swear an oath to keep the peace and could be treated as adults if they committed a crime. Around AD 930, King Athelstan of Wessex raised the age of criminal responsibility to 16.