**Law and order**

Anglo-Saxon royal justice was very aggressive. They had brutal corporal and capital punishments at their disposal, including 'the ordeal' and grisly mutilations. And they also tried to enforce allegiance with the common oath. Like many traditional societies, the Anglo-Saxons placed a high value on a person's word, their sworn promise.

At the heart of the tenth-century state was the oath, taken by all freemen from the age of 12, to abstain from and denounce any major crime. This common oath enshrined the sense of social community and responsibility that underpinned the law. In this light, theft was seen as an act of disloyalty. If you had broken your oath and committed a serious crime your entire kin could be punished. The presiding officials of these courts were, in effect, local agents of the king – the Shire Reeve. Local cases would be heard in the hundred courts and it was the obligation of the hundred to find the criminal and bring him back to face justice and, if necessary, to punish the family.

The hundred would organise the pursuit of notable criminals who fled, and punishment could include exile - you could be transported with your kin group to a completely different part of the country. Harsh methods, to be sure, but these were harsh times.

With brutal punishments at their disposal, it would have been easy for a king to respond with an iron fist. However King Athelstan, for example, is reported saying to his councillors that he was actually concerned about the number of young people being executed under the death penalty, 'as he sees everywhere is the case'.

In his day, the penalty could be enforced on anyone 12 years old or over, but the king raised the age of criminal responsibility to 16 because, as he said simply, 'it is too cruel'.