



Prisons were often in old buildings, such as castles. They tended to be damp, unhealthy, insanitary and over-crowded. All kinds of prisoners were mixed in together, men, women, children; the insane; serious criminals and petty criminals; people awaiting trial; and debtors. Each prison was run by the gaoler in his own way. He made up the rules. If you could pay, you could buy extra privileges, such as private rooms, better food, more visitors, keeping pets, letters going in and out, and books to read. If you could not, the basic fare was grim. You even had to pay the gaoler to be let out when your sentence was finished.

Law and order was a major issue in Victorian Britain. Victorians were worried about the huge new cities that had grown up following the Industrial Revolution – how were the masses to be kept under control? They were worried about rising crime. They could see that transporting convicts to Australia was not the answer and by the 1830s Australia was complaining that they did not want to be the dumping-ground for Britain's criminals.

Discovering your ancestor in prison records doesn't necessarily make them a hardened criminal, nineteenth century law was harsh and children as well as adults were imprisoned for minor misdemeanours. These records are often very detailed and can include physical descriptions of height, weight and eye colour.

William Baker 1876

	Surname	Given Names	Age	Trade or Occupation	Degree of Instruction		
Accused	Baker	William	17	Labourer	Read and write imperfectly		
Date of Birth	1859						
	Surname	Given Name	Title	Address			
Committing Magistrate (1)	Lopes	G. L	Esq.	Hardenhuish Park, Chippenham			
Court	Marlborough						
Name of Victim (1)	Reynolds	George Thomas					
Date of Warrant	1876	12-Oct					
When Received into Custody	1876	14-Oct		Date of Trial	1876	17-Oct	
Offence as Charged in the Commitment	Stealing a watch, value ten pounds, the property of George Thomas Reynolds at Christian Malford						
	Surname	Given Names	Title				
Before Whom Tried	Lopes	R. L.	Esq.				
Verdict of Jury	Pleaded guilty of larceny as a servant						
Particulars of Previous Convictions Charged in the Indictment and Proved in Court							Nil
Sentence or Order of the Court	Imprisonment with hard labour for three calendar months in the county prison						
Other crimes Committed		Nil					