



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.

Jessie Watson

	Surname	Given Names	Age	Trade or Occupation	Degree of Instruction					
Accused	Watson	Jessie	20	Servant	Read & Write Imperfectly					
	Surname	Given Name	Title	Address						
Committing Magistrate (1)	Archer	D.	Esq.	Kingsdown House, Swindon						
Committing Magistrate (2)	Codrington	W. W.	Esq.	Wroughton						
Court	Devizes									
Date of Warrant	1882	30-Nov								
When Received into Custody	1882	01-Dec		Date of Trial	1883	01-Jan				
Offence as Charged in the Commitment	Breaking and entering the dwelling house of Ann Gough at Liddiard Tregoze, on 22nd November 1882, and stealing therein one cotton apron, one case knife, and other articles, her property.									
	Surname	Given Names	Title							
Before Whom Tried	Swayne	H. J. F.	Esq.							
Verdict of Jury	Pleaded guilty of housebreaking									
Particulars of Previous Convictions Charged in the Indictment and Proved in Court										
Sentence or Order of the Court	Imprisonment with Hard labour for four calendar months									