



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.

George Ashton 1869

	Surname	Given Names	Age	Trade or Occupation	Degree of Instruction		
Accused	Ashton	George	67	Gamekeeper	Cannot read or write		
Birth Year	1802						
	Surname	Given Name	Title	Address			
Committing Magistrate (1)	Seymour	H. R.	Esq.	Crowood, Ramsbury			
Committing Magistrate (2)	Soames	C.	Rev.	Mildenhall, Marlborough			
Court	Devizes						
Name of Victim (1)	Smith	Abigail					
Date of Warrant	1868	12-Dec					
When Received into Custody	1868	14-Dec	Date of Trial	1869	05-Jan		
Offence as Charged in the Commitment	Assaulting Abigail Smith, with intent to ravish and carnally know her, at Ramsbury, on the 7th December 1868						
	Surname	Given Names	Title				
Before Whom Tried	Lopes	R. L.	Esq.				
Verdict of Jury	Pleaded Guilty of Assault with intent to ravish						
Sentence or Order of the Court	Imprisonment with hard labour for two years in Prison at Devizes						