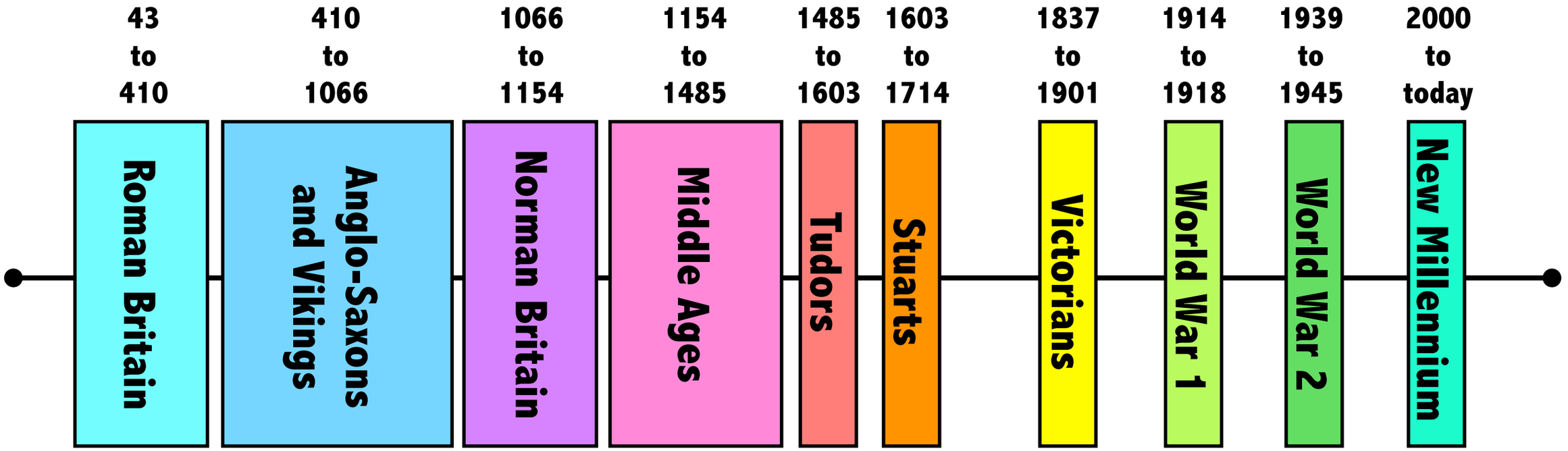
Crime and Punishment

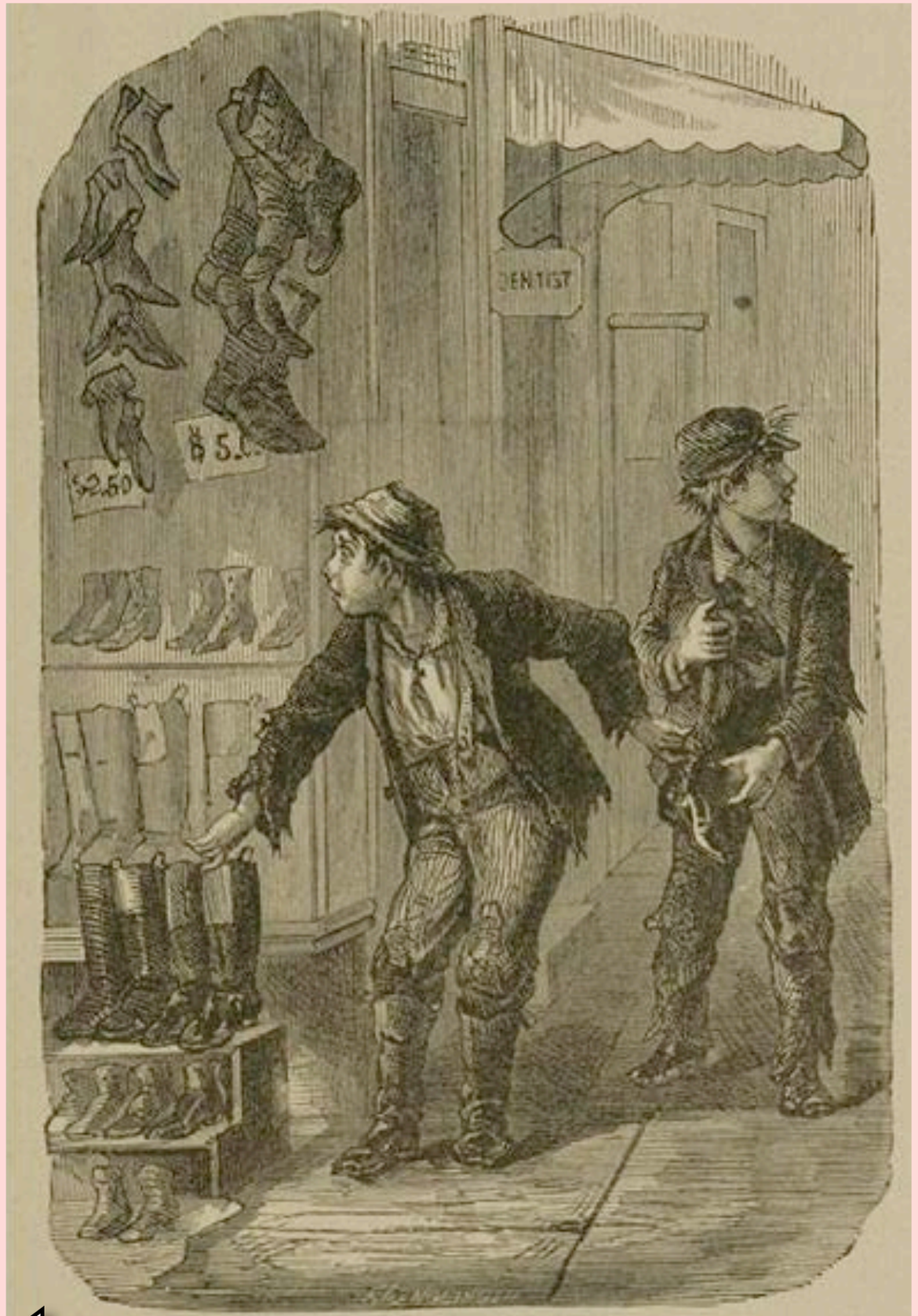
Learning Objective:

To explore crime and punishment in the Victorian period.

Do
you know when the
Victorian era was?



Queen Victoria reigned from 1837 to 1901. While she was in power, Britain developed a huge overseas empire. In Britain itself, the population grew quickly and there were lots of changes in society. Industrialisation meant that more people were living in towns and cities which became busy and crowded.



THE FORTUNES OF A STREET WAIF.

Theft was still the most common crime, only now it was often on a bigger scale as there was a lot of trade abroad and goods were stored in warehouses. This meant there was more to steal. Pickpockets and petty thieves were rife in towns and cities.

A lot of the crimes of the early modern periods (1600-1800) became less common.

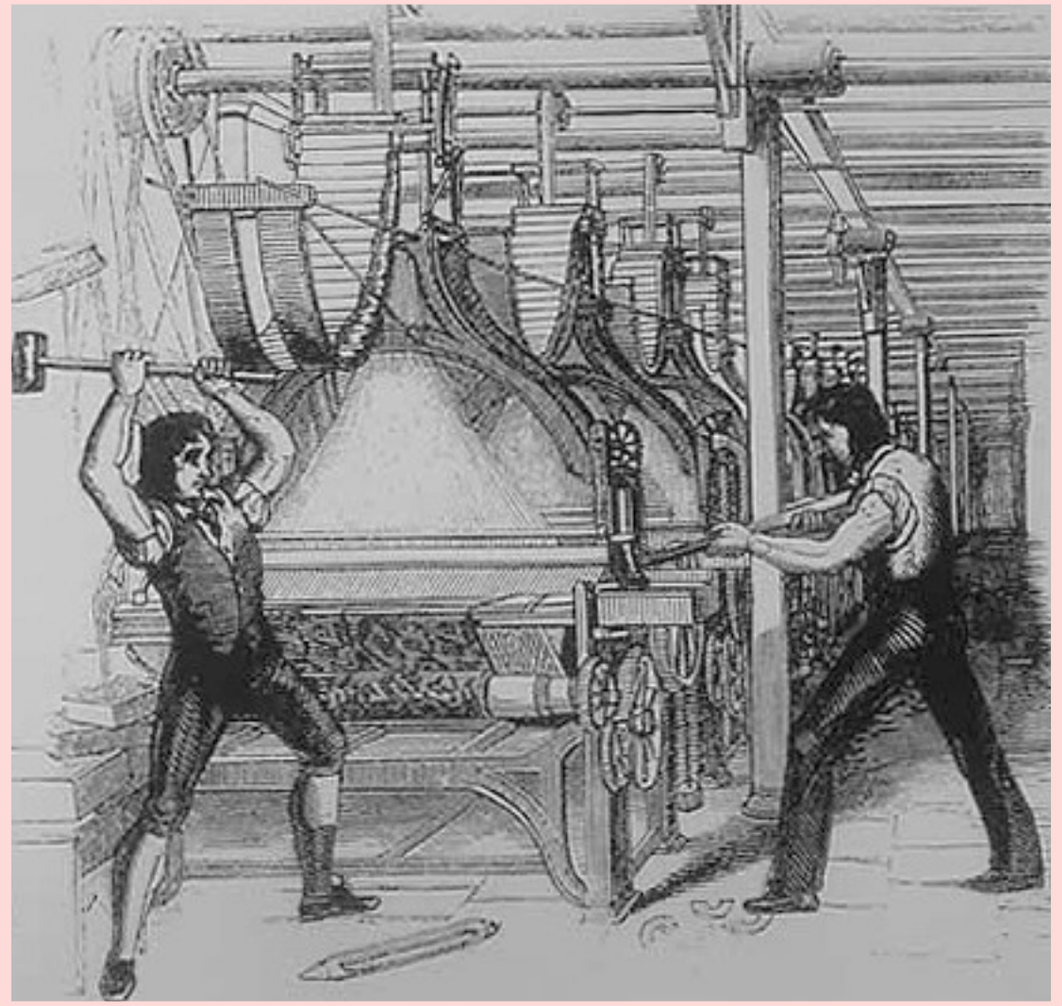
- Smuggling died out as the government cut taxes on importing goods.

- Highwaymen were lesson common because roads were better looked after and, later in the century, people travelled more by train.

- There were fewer traitors as religious conflict lessened.

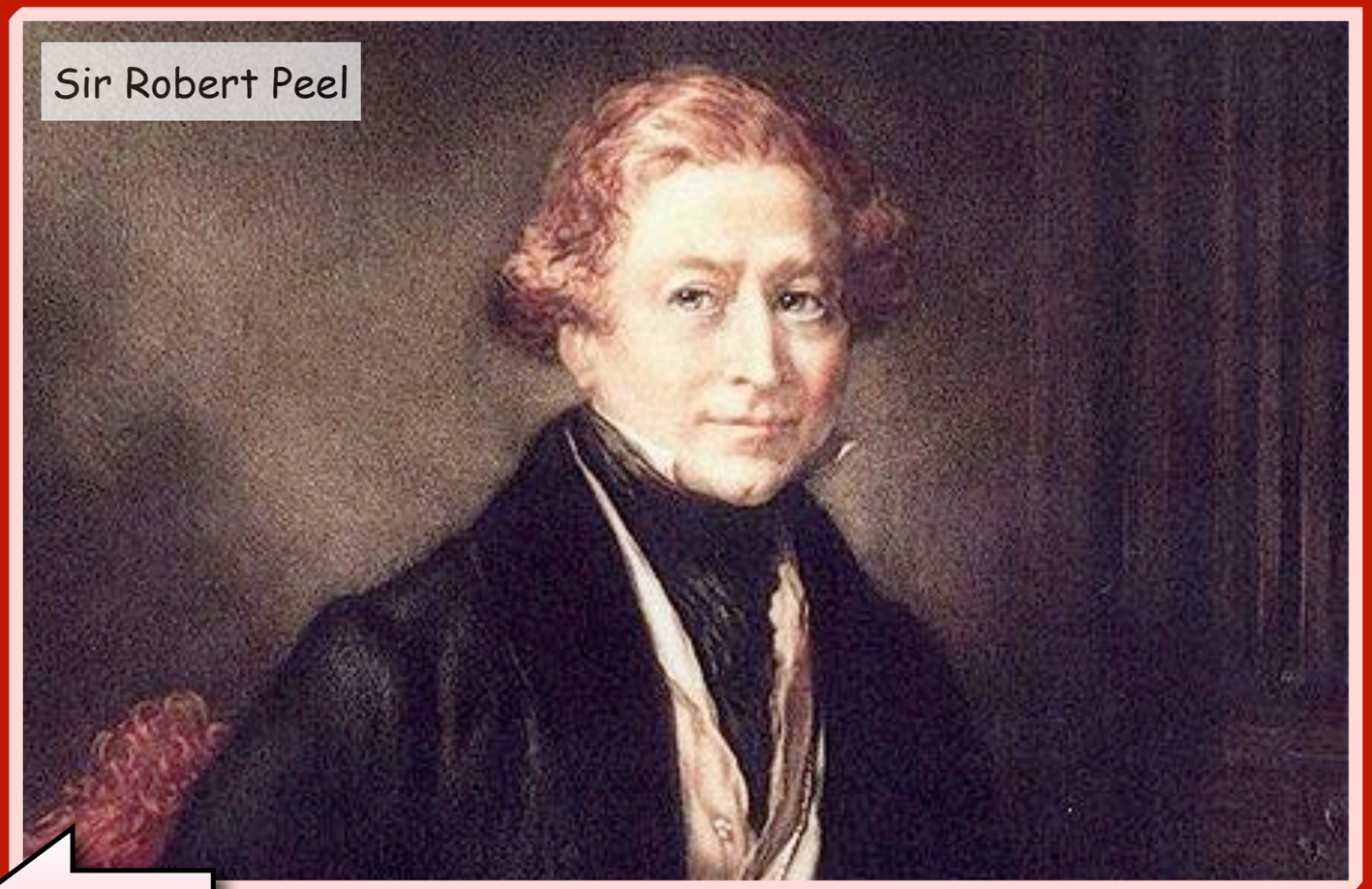
However, there were lots of new crimes that were created with the changes in society. Because of the development of the railways, there were new crimes like not buying a ticket or damaging railway equipment.

There were also more political crimes, such as striking, rioting or destroying industrial machinery. A group known as Luddites, for example, broke into factories at night to destroy machinery because they were upset about wage reductions and the use of unapprenticed workmen.



Up until the Victorian era, only rich children had gone to school. Children of poorer families had to work to help earn a living. In 1833, laws about child labour were passed, such as making it illegal for children under the age of 9 to work in cotton mills. By 1870, it was also a crime not to send your children to school.

One of the biggest changes in this period was the introduction of the police force. There were still constables and nightwatchmen. There were also the Bow Street Runners which were a group that had been set up in 1749. They were attached to a magistrates court and investigated crimes brought for trial there.


Sir Robert Peel

However, in 1829, Sir Robert Peel passed the Metropolitan Police Act and set up the first real police force in London.

These new policemen were known as Bobbies or Peelers (after Robert Peel).

People didn't like the idea of an armed force controlled by the government telling them what to do so there was a lot of opposition. In 1839, a Provincial Police Act was passed so that police forces could be set up all around the country.

There were lots of changes in the way criminals were punished during the Victorian period. Old shaming punishments, like the stocks and ducking stools, went out of fashion. Public hangings were continued until 1868 but they were very rowdy and so hangings were later done in private in prisons.

Transportation was still used as a punishment but after American independence in 1776, convicts were sent to Australia instead. 162,000 convicts were sent to Australia between 1787 and 1857. Nearly 90% of them were men and some were boys as young as 9.

This is Woody Point shoreline, the site of Queensland's first penal colony.

The voyage to Australia took up to 6 months in dirty, disease-ridden ships and many people died on the way. In the end, the new Australian government started to protest at getting all the convicts. It seemed odd to send criminals when by now people were paying to go to Australia.

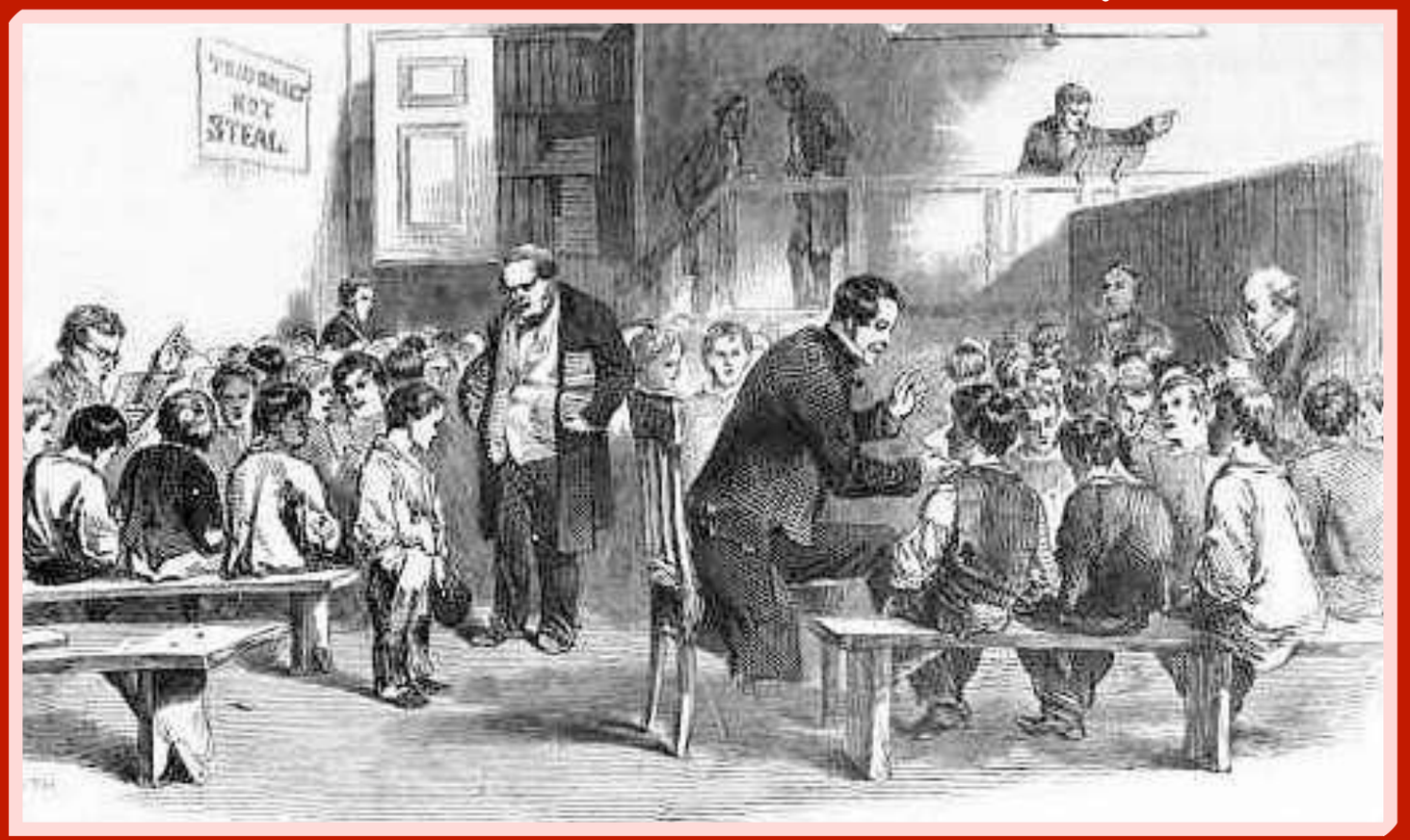
www.planbee.com

Prisons were developed as an answer to the end of transportation. 90 prisons were built between 1840 and 1877. Medieval prisons had been small and used only to hold prisoners who were awaiting trial.

Holloway Prison c.1896

Victorian prisons were reformed. They became bigger, cleaner and were easier to guard convicts. Also, gaolers were paid a wage instead of making money by charging inmates.

When prisons first started being used as a punishment, young criminals would be sent to adult prisons. It was soon recognised that this was wrong and was more likely to turn them into hardened criminals. In 1854, Reformatory Schools were set up to help deal with child offenders and by 1899 it became illegal for a child to be sent to adult prison.



The poor were still thought to cause a lot of trouble for everyone else and no town or village wanted to look after them. The introduction of machinery in the workplace meant that there weren't as many jobs for people. Lots of people were out of work and homeless. This inevitably led to lots of people begging to survive.

Workhouses were used to house the poor. They offered food and shelter in exchange for labour. However, the government didn't want the workhouses to be a place people could avoid getting a proper job so they wanted to make sure they were not easy places to be. Conditions were often harsh and unpleasant.

Perhaps the most famous portrayal of a workhouse features in Charles Dickens' 'Oliver Twist'. Oliver is sold from the workhouse after asking for another portion of gruel.

What do you think
of crime and punishment in
the Victorian era?

How is
it similar or different
to crime and punishment
today?