Introduction

During the long nineteenth century new paradigms of organised and professional crime were framed through the changing prosecution of fraud and forgery, coining and other forms of financial crime. As previous chapters have argued, the records provide only fragmentary evidence of criminal networks and confederacies, suggesting that the existence of organised criminal gangs is far from clear-cut. However, from this period, in the records of the police, the press and the writings of social investigators, a language evolved that described gangs of swindlers, coiners and fraudsters through the rhetoric of criminal organisation, perpetuating an increasingly dramatic shadow world of professional criminals. From the later eighteenth century, financial crimes were seen as increasing in pace with the growth of commerce and banking in the metropolis. Thus, in 1796 Patrick Colquhoun lamented, ‘It is not to be wondered at in a country where commerce and manufactures have arrived at such a height, and where from the opulence of the people the interchange of property is so extensive, that forgeries and frauds should prevail in a certain degree.’

Historians have seen frauds linked to the financial innovations of the nineteenth century as ‘middle-class’ crimes, and such ‘white-collar’ crimes have often been viewed separately from the great swathe of working-class criminality. However, this dichotomy between middle-class white-collar financial crime and working-class property crime leaves a gap in our understanding of the mass of swindles, frauds and rackets that can be found in the nineteenth-century courtroom. Certainly it can be argued that white-collar crimes proliferated as a result of financial opportunity and development, not least in the
banking system. The use of cheques or bills of exchange became more common with the regulation of clearing from 1821 (and the establishment of the Committee of London Clearing Bankers). The Clearing House was set up in 1833 and the new joint stock banks were allowed to join from 1854. The first official chequebook was issued by the Bank of England in 1830, although cheques did not circulate fully until the later nineteenth century. Moreover, as John Locker and George Robb have argued, the growth of joint stock companies during the mid-nineteenth century may also have expanded opportunities for fraud. Yet, closer examination of offences such as fraud, forgery, coining and uttering reveal a picture far from the world of company fraudsters and financial shenanigans that frequently constitute historical definitions of white-collar crime. This chapter explores the increasing visibility of financial crimes that was reflected both in the criminal justice system and in the press. Moreover, the establishment of the Detective Branch in 1842 and practices of surveillance that were developed during the period also had an influence on the rhetorical construction of these crimes. Finally, a detailed case study focuses on a form of fraud that was reported in the press from the mid-nineteenth century: long-firm fraud.

Prosecutions of crimes of deception such as fraud, forgery and embezzlement by groups and individuals (as opposed to companies and businesses) had started to increase from the mid-nineteenth century. Whilst the majority of offences tried at the Old Bailey were forms of theft, this changed from the mid-century with the diversion of many thefts to the lower courts. This process, which had already begun in the previous decades, was to be consolidated from 1855 with the passage of the Criminal Justice Act. Crimes of deception (including fraud, forgery, perjury and bankruptcy) were the most numerous of the remaining crimes at the Old Bailey. In each decade from the 1800s to the 1840s, these sorts of offences accounted for no more than 5 per cent of prosecuted crimes at the court, in the second half of the nineteenth century this was to rise, and by the 1890s they represented 21.22 per cent of all crimes. Moreover, forgery and fraud accounted for the vast majority of these crimes during the course of the nineteenth century, with forgery forming 47.13 per cent and fraud 41.75 per cent of the total. Given that crimes of deception amounted to almost quarter of the business of the Old Bailey by the later nineteenth century, their visibility in terms of the rhetoric surrounding the court, and its reporting in print culture, is not surprising. Indeed, this shift is confirmed in Gatrell’s study of the changing landscape of prosecutions in the nineteenth century, where he concluded that prosecutions for white-collar crime, such as