

Bury St. Edmunds Gaol

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IN WEST SUFFOLK the Borough of Bury St. Edmunds has for many centuries held the position of chief town in the district. But the borough itself was independent from the county, arranging for its own local government and the provision of a town lock-up. Under ancient charter the town's government was provided for under the direction of an Alderman, Capital Burgesses and common Burgesses. Committals to the borough lock-up were confined to the activities of the Alderman and Borough Justices of the Peace and from the Borough Quarter Sessions. From 1733 to 1752 the borough leased a house for a common gaol. The lease signed on 1st May, 1733, for three years commencing from 17th March, 1733, was for a sum of £20 per annum, for a "messuage commonly called the Gaol in Bury St. Edmunds in a street called Great Market between the Woolhall on the south and a messuage called the Red Lion on the north". A new lease was negotiated by the borough for the same premises on 20th April, 1745, At

the same time the person appointed to act as gaoler for the Bury St. Edmunds county division of Suffolk and the borough was authorised "to receive prisoners from the Justices of the Peace, the Steward of the Liberty of Bury St. Edmunds or the Serjeant at Mace of the borough. To be allowed to sell ale, beer, etc., by retail on the premises by licence". In the early nineteenth century the borough provided a common bridewell in premises situated in Bridewell Lane, and later part of the ancient Moyses Hall, now the municipal museum, was used as a lock-up.

Suffolk, before the Local Government Act of 1888, was administered by the Justices of the Peace assembled at Quarter Sessions. Adjourned Sessions were held for the Bury St. Edmunds Division, now West Suffolk, and for the three divisions of Beccles, Woodbridge and Ipswich, now forming East Suffolk. Small towns and parishes made their own arrangements for lock-ups, the county jurisdictions being responsible for the larger houses of correction and penal establishments.

The Justices for the Bury St. Edmunds County Division erected the West Suffolk county gaol on the outskirts of Bury St. Edmunds in 1803-1805. The gaol was substantially enlarged in 1819. On 16th March, 1805, the governor of the gaol was authorised to receive prisoners sent by the Alderman and Justices of the Borough of Bury St. Edmunds, and from the Borough Quarter Sessions to the county gaol. These prisoners were kept at the expense of the borough. The County Quarter Sessions and meetings of magistrates in Petty Sessions committed prisoners freely to the county gaol without any expense to the petty sessional area. The prison was divided into nine departments, each of which had its distinct day rooms, work rooms and sleeping cells. The nine departments were calculated for the confinement and employment of:

1. Master's-side debtors.
2. Common-side debtors.
3. Males convicted of small offences.
4. Males for transportation or convicted of greater offences.
5. Males for trial on charges of felony.
6. Males for trial for smaller offences.
7. Female felons for trial.
8. Female debtors.

9. King's evidence and occasionally males confined for slight offences.

There was besides the gaol, a separate house of correction for females convicted of felonies and misdemeanours. However, the gaol receiving books show that there were few committals to this establishment in proportion to male offenders. Up to the year of enlargement in 1819 there had been only one temporary escape from the gaol, during which time upwards of 4,000 persons had been detained. An 1819 account of the working of the gaol by John Orridge, the governor, states that only one person in 20 was sentenced to a second term in the gaol in the case of felony. Orridge's account of the gaol, together with a plan, was made for the Emperor of Russia, who based his organisation of imperial gaols on the Bury St. Edmunds institution. Orridge said that the gaol had three ends:

1. The security of the prisoners.
2. The preservation of the health of the prisoners.
3. The amelioration of morals.

He claimed that the first of these objectives had been obtained because only one temporary escape had occurred in the first 16 years of the gaol's existence. Prisoners were apparently not put in irons unless there was any manifest indication of an escape attempt.

The gaol had a boundary wall 20 feet high which formed an enclosure, the diameter of which was 300 feet, and the different divisions of the prison were 68 feet from the wall. The space between the wall and the gaol building was used as a cultivated garden. The main gaol building itself was constructed from locally produced red bricks. The turnkey's lodge was a stone building constructed to be impressive and to deter those without from finding themselves in a position to be admitted, and to encourage those within to believe that the prison was secure. It was the entrance through which all prisoners passed into the prison. The roof over the lodge was flat, covered with lead, and was used as the place of public executions.* Adjacent to the lodge was a chapel.

The industrial revolution brought with it a variety of machinery, of which the Bury gaol was especially proud of its engine-house and forcing pump for throwing water into a reservoir on the top of the governor's house. From the top of the governor's house the water was circulated to the prisoners' water closets and other buildings within the boundary wall. In keeping with prevailing penological thought the prison had a mill-house, containing a mill for the grinding of corn worked by a vertical wheel. The

authorities claimed that the employment afforded by the mill produced the very best effects both on the health and morals of the prisoners, as well as inducing habits of industry. The mill was also used as an instrument of punishment in as much that a person could be compelled to work the machinery for long periods, an alternative to which was confinement.

Much emphasis was placed upon the classification of prisoners and in the separation of the inhabitants it was considered best to class them as much as possible by their character and conduct, and not necessarily by the classification of the crime for which they had been committed or were charged with. It was instanced that a notoriously bad character might well be committed for a petty offence, but he was not necessarily placed with the petty offenders, thereby to subject them all to his degree of corruption. He would, in all probability, have been placed in the department for the greater offences. On the other hand a person of hitherto respectable habits and unhardened in guilt who was charged with a serious offence was classified and placed among the petty offenders. It was considered important that every prisoner should sleep by himself, but during those times when this could not be arranged prisoners were placed three to a room so as to lessen the opportunity of moral corruption, which the authorities feared would occur

if there were only two in a room. Efforts were made to employ prisoners in their various trades in order that upon their discharge they could return to the community with prospects of future success.

Committals to the prison were for short term local offenders. Persons sentenced by assizes or for longer terms of imprisonment by Quarter Sessions were invariably removed for transportation to other establishments.† Records show that for the year ending 30th September, 1854, the number of persons admitted to the prison was 601. For the same period ending in 1855 the number was 612. Of this number in 1855, 109 were committals from the militia garrisoned at Bury St. Edmunds, arrangements then existing for the militia to commit defaulters to the civil prison. For the most part military defaulters were committed for being absent from their billet and not for direct insubordination to military discipline. An 1855 report makes reference to the decline in committals for offences against the game laws, which since the enrolment of some poachers into the military service were less. Of the 612 prisoners committed during the year 1855, 339 could neither read nor write. Of this number 41 were taught to read the New Testament by the prison chaplain and 19 were said to have made con-

siderable progress towards that end. Twenty-four were taught to write. The report indicated that 30 others showed their willingness to learn to read and write but were prevented from doing so by their sentences being too short to permit this achievement. The majority of the offenders were committed for minor thefts, drunkenness, unlawful gaming and similar offences and for infringements of the game laws.

In 1819 the governor was paid an annual salary of £550, out of which he was obliged to provide sufficient turnkeys and the bedding for the debtors. The prison surgeon and chaplain each received £60 per annum.

The three county sessional divisions in East Suffolk erected a gaol at Ipswich to serve the needs of their jurisdiction. By an Act of 1877 the prisons were taken from the local authorities and placed under imperial control.‡ The 1877 Act abolished the gaol at Bury St. Edmunds but permitted the Ipswich gaol to continue under the title of "Her Majesty's County Prison, Ipswich". The West Suffolk County Gaol was sold in 1881.

FOOTNOTES

* Public hanging abolished by The Capital Punishment Amendment Act, 1868.

† Transportation abolished by Section 2, Penal Servitude Act, 1853.

‡ Prison Act, 1877.