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The Prison and the Public

Presenting Prison History at Norwich Castle

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This article falls into two main parts. The first part contains a brief history of Norwich Castle as the County Gaol for Norfolk up until its closure in 1887 and conversion to a museum. The second part will look at the way this history has been presented to the public since that date.

In 2000-2002 the Museum buildings were refurbished. Galleries were stripped out revealing traces of cells and dayrooms, presenting a unique opportunity to record, previously unknown, detailed information about the buildings. Following this, two displays on the history of the Gaol were produced. The first display set up in 2002 was replaced in 2009-10 by another, more complex one, informed by my PhD research on the later history of the gaol. An account of this project will be included in the second part of the article

The Norfolk County Gaol

From the early-twelfth century the Castle stood as a prominent symbol of Royal and County power, the seat of administration and justice. Built as a sumptuous royal palace, the great stone tower was probably finished in 1121 when Henry I spent Christmas in Norwich. However, by the middle of the fourteenth century much of the extensive outer defences had decayed and the Keep was uninhabitable. It is from about this time that the building began its life as the County Gaol for Norfolk. Over the following centuries it was adapted to the needs of the prison. The roof and floors were removed and exercise yards created at basement level. Accommodation for prisoners was built against the inside of the outer walls and above the basement strong-rooms. In the eighteenth century the gaol was rebuilt following the work of John Howard and the establishment of new standards for the management of prisons and design of their buildings. This new gaol, incorporating the shell of the Norman Keep, was designed by John Soane in 1789. However, it soon became overcrowded and inadequate for the recommended classification and separation of prisoners current in the early-nineteenth century. A larger and more complex building replaced it in 1822-27, designed by William Wilkins jnr. Although well received when

new, it proved difficult to adapt to the constant experimentation in prison regimes that characterised the nineteenth century. In 1887 the prison closed and the prisoners were transferred to a new building outside Norwich.

From Prison to Museum

Following the closure of the prison the Castle became the property of the city. Mark Knights, a local reporter and writer of historical and topographical books, toured the empty prison and published an account of his visit. He writes that,

Years ago a glimpse of the interior of the lodge aroused the curiosity of the many promenaders of the walk. They cast furtive glances into it should the door happen to be opened as they passed; for there then hung upon its walls objects which suggested the horrors of a prison — waist and leg irons, and various kinds of shackles.¹

Even after the regular use of irons and ‘shackles’ had declined, the collection had become part of a Black Museum within the prison, presumably valued for its psychological impact on those entering its doors.

Following closure, John Gurney suggested using the redundant Castle prison as a new home for the Norwich Museum and this idea found widespread support. Local architect, Edward Boardman, carried out the conversion by gutting the cell blocks to form galleries and demolishing the central gaoler’s house to create a garden.² This done, the prison blocks retreated behind a veneer of studwork and plaster, their outer walls clothed in creeper.

In c1883 the chains had been loaned out for an exhibition by Mr Haggard, the chairman of the Visiting Justices for the prison. He accompanied his consent ‘with an expression of the hope that the borrower would ‘improve the occasion’ by ‘making it understood by the public that the *utility* of their exhibition is to exemplify the more humane system of punishment existing now to what then used to be’.³ However, when

1. Knights M., *Norwich Castle As It Was*, Jarrold and Sons, London, c1888, p.2. The ‘walk’ was the top of the mound around the outer wall of the prison, popular for its views over the city.
2. Southwell, Thomas, F.Z.S., *The Official Guide to the Norwich Castle Museum*, 3rd edition, Jarrold & Sons London, 1903, 13.
3. *Ibid*, 209, 210.

the prison closed, the chains became the main focus of Dungeon tours in the museum and any higher philosophical aspirations faded into the background.

Until comparatively recently the written history of the Castle was almost exclusively the history of the Norman and medieval period. The following centuries of prison history were often reduced to a few brief notes, any associated objects being merely curiosities. The 1903 museum guidebook describes the display of chains and other irons as being in a dungeon room in the basement of the Keep. Outside the dungeon was displayed part of Mr Stark's phrenological collection including 'casts of the heads of several murderers, idiots, etc.' with recent additions that 'appear to be the effigies of those who have attained an unenviable celebrity by (to use a significant expression) dying in their shoes'.⁴ These death masks were added after the original collection was presented to the Norwich Museum in 1839. Therefore, objects relating to the history of the prison were reached by passing by this 'ghastly-looking collection' no doubt raising the pulse rate of the visitor ready for the 'fearful fetters' and 'terrible iron bars' awaiting in the next room.⁵

Dungeon tours

Most information on the history of the prison was delivered in the form of 'Dungeon' tours which by the 1950s and 60s had become a familiar part of museum life. Museum front-of-house staff acted as guides, basing their scripts on tried and tested stories of torture and incarceration. The extensive collection of chains from the old Black Museum formed the backbone of the displays. The emphasis was on the violent and ghoulish. It drew on received wisdom, influenced by stories from the Tower of London and Newgate, with a few notorious local criminal cases. This said little about the nature of the Norfolk County Gaol. Experience showed that tried and tested stories of notorious inmates or brutal torture were guaranteed to elicit a favourable response from visitors. 'We tell them what they want to hear' was the policy of one 1970s tour guide. Entertainment was the overriding criteria. Little mention was made of the later gaol (except perhaps the tread mill); no 'ordinary'

prisoners' lives were considered interesting. This predilection for the sensational can also be seen in local press coverage relating to the prison. Even the article on the new prison displays in 2010 was headed 'Exhibition gives grisly insight into prison life'.⁶ Although undoubtedly more balanced than some of its predecessors, the article still favours aspects of the display about grim conditions and the executed murderers and omits to mention sections dealing with the staff or prison reformers.

Changing attitudes

By the 1980s attitudes had begun to change. Against a background of the growing interest in family history and a greater emphasis on 'bottom up' social history, the lives of prisoners in the castle gained some currency. There was a growing willingness of families to accept a convict ancestor. In Australia convicts transported on the 'first fleet' were gaining almost aristocratic status. Descendants came to visit the Castle wanting to know what life had been like for their relatives in prison. Most of the enquiries concerned later eighteenth- and nineteenth-century inmates. Initially these questions were difficult to answer as little local research had focused on the

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County Gaol and no history of the later prison had been published.

Whilst working at the Castle I had undertaken some informal research to answer enquiries about the gaol and in 2002 I was encouraged to formalise this in a PhD programme, choosing to look at the period 1764 — 1887. Most surviving prison buildings on the Castle mound originated from that period and a large part of my research was aimed at placing them in a wider historical context. My subsequent study showed that in the eighteenth century the Norfolk magistrates had been in the vanguard of reforms. Despite the dilapidated state of the Castle they had installed 'airy rooms for the sick' in the Keep in 1764, some years before Howard's visits and subsequent legislation.⁷ Other reforms included an early Penitentiary style regime in Wymondham Bridewell, cited by a group of Pennsylvania Quakers as an example of best practice.⁸ It

4. Ibid, 206.

5. Ibid, 207, 208.

6. *Eastern Daily Press*, Friday, December 3rd, 2010.

7. Howard, J., *The State of the Prisons in England, Scotland and Wales*, 4th edition, London 1792.

8. *Report of The Society for Alleviating the Misery of Public Prisons*, Philadelphia, 1790.

was also clear that in the early-nineteenth century the powerful London evangelical and Quaker lobby had played an important part in the rebuilding of the Castle prison in 1822. At that time contacts existed between Norfolk and members of the London pressure group, The Society for the Improvement of Prison Discipline. Members such as Samuel Hoare and Thomas Fowell Buxton had married sisters of Elizabeth Fry (née Gurney of Earlham Hall near Norwich). Their friend and fellow society member, Edward Harbord, in his role of Norfolk county magistrate, took a close interest in the design of the new prison and worked hard to overcome opposition to rebuilding.⁹ The new prison was more extensive than its predecessor, encompassing the entire top of the Castle mound. Three-storey cell blocks radiating from a central gaoler's house were connected at their outer ends by two-storey blocks arranged in a ring, broken only by the Castle Keep. Although incorporating state-of-the-art design, the buildings soon became obsolete as first the Silent and then Separate systems were introduced. Both staff and magistrates strongly influenced the running of the prison. For example George Pinson (governor from 1843-1877) had definite views on managing his gaol, rejecting the use of dark cells and the crank, and professing a preference for open seating in chapel rather than the iconic Separate system layout surviving at Lincoln Castle.¹⁰ Norwich Castle prison had its own unique history that warranted interpretation to the visiting public.

In the 2000-2002 refurbishment prison interiors hidden for over a century were exposed when some of the museum galleries were gutted. Floors were also removed revealing the foundations of ground floor rooms and cells. Questions that had been previously difficult to answer could now be addressed. For example, the extent to which the Separate System had been introduced into the gaol was not clear from the documents. From the 1850s onward dayrooms were converted into cells and fixed iron-beds removed and replaced with hammocks. These could be packed away during the day, creating more space in the cells for working in solitude. In 2000 hammock loops were found in two of the main radial wings suggesting that much, if not all, of the convicts' side of the buildings had been converted. Only that part of the buildings for prisoners awaiting trial remained unchanged. Here the

beds seem not to have been removed or the dayroom converted into cells, suggesting that they were not subjected to solitary confinement. I was able to record many of these features and feed this new information into my PhD study, providing a rich store of material for future interpretation of the prison.¹¹

The new displays

In 2002 following the refurbishment, the Castle Keep underwent a radical redisplay. For the first time information about the history of the prison was included in the displays. Although light-weight, the display brought the history of the gaol out of the dungeons and into the main museum galleries. Subsequently, this display was dismantled and an opportunity created for a more complex approach to the history of the prison in partnership with the University of East Anglia and funding organisations. This took the form of conventional case-based displays, interactive material and animated film. The target audience included children from seven or eight years upwards and adults. The display area needed to be able to accommodate small groups of adults and school parties as well as wheelchair users.

The new display is located in the southern half of the Keep basement. The room was not a 'blank canvas'. The gallery layout had to take account of a variety of pre-existing structures and two entrances. Opening off this space is one of the original twelfth-century 'dungeon' rooms. This had been set up as a reconstruction of a medieval dungeon in the 2002 display and has been retained. The various display elements had to be worked around these features; for this reason a topic based approach was adopted.

The display content naturally divided into three main subject areas. The first period, covering the pre-nineteenth-century prison, up to the building of Soane's new gaol in 1789-94; a second, small, section about his gaol and the third, and largest, section dealing with the 1822 — 1887 prison. There was also a 'postscript', mentioning the conversion to museum and bringing the Castle prison story up to date. Within the main subject areas displays deal with topics relating to the life and work of individuals associated with the prison. When planning the displays a conscious effort was made to base the information around real people,

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9. Bacon, R.M., *A Memoir of the Life of Edward Third Baron Suffield*, Norwich, 1838.

10. Pinson's evidence to the *Select Committee of The House of Lords on Gaol Discipline*, PP, 1863 (499), IX, 1 3931-4058.

11. Arber, N. J., *The Norfolk County Gaol 1764-1887: 'A good and sufficient prison'?* Unpublished PhD, University of East Anglia, 2009.

and where possible objects were selected which related directly to them. Most of the material available was in the form of documents, such as gaol books, hand bills, calendars of prisoners for trial or newspaper articles. Where appropriate these documents were mounted in the displays to provide detailed information, enabling introductory texts to be kept to a minimum. Thereby, visitors could read the prisoners' stories in the original rather than second-hand in a museum label. The museum collections also contained objects suitable for the displays including prison staff memorabilia, paintings, the chains from the prison Black Museum and architectural details such as windows and doors from the old buildings. It was impossible to ignore the stories relating to the executed murderers as the bulk of the prison collections related to these individuals. This was an interesting area to display given that there was a rich narrative to present to the visitor but a balance had to be found between objectivity and the 'Dungeon' experience mentioned above.

Models are also included. They represent the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century buildings and are of a robust construction that can be handled, enabling visually impaired visitors to share in an appreciation of their layout. Because none of the original cells has survived anywhere in the buildings, explaining what they were like demanded a leap of imagination for the visitor. Therefore it was decided to attempt a full size reconstruction of a typical cell. Following the 2000-2002 building work, information was gained from the exposed prison fabric providing dimensions and detailed layout of the cells. The basement ceiling where the prison displays are located is a little over two metres high, which is lower than in the original cells. However, the floor is of Yorkstone slabs similar to the original cell floors. In the Norwich cells the windows were larger and lower down than later prison examples. Ceilings were not vaulted but flat, composed of large slabs of stone spanning the width of the cell and supported on a ledge in the walls, the whole cell block resembling a house of cards. In 2000 one cell threshold was found below the northern radial floor. It had been whitewashed, preserving the imprint of the door frame and thus enabling the width of the doorway to be measured. After his visit to the Castle, Knights described the interior of a cell, mentioning a 'small table, projecting from the wall'.¹² Socket holes for

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timber supports were found in two of the cells indicating that the tables were in fact small, fixed shelves some 470 mm wide and probably about 300 mm deep; just big enough to take meals on and robust enough so as not to be easily broken. As has been mentioned above hammock loops also survived and were recorded. From this and other information we were able to reconstruct a replica of a cell close to the size of the originals, given the slightly lower ceiling. The cell is fitted with a hammock as it might have been in the mid-nineteenth century. The window is a copy of a surviving original from the former radial wings and is backlit with a light box. Visitors are encouraged to enter the cell and try the hammock. The doorway was too narrow for wheelchairs, the original cell doors being only about 660 mm wide. To enable wheelchair access

a sliding panel was built into the side wall of the cell, which when closed maintained the feeling of enclosure. For children to dress up in, reproduction male and female prison dress is located nearby. No reconstruction can ever completely reproduce 'the real thing', but interactive activities such as this can be memorable for visitors of all ages and certainly raise awareness of prison history.

Complex buildings can be difficult to explain especially when they have undergone dramatic changes over time.

Many museum visitors have little time to grapple with intricate cut-away diagrams or lengthy texts. Therefore, to complement the conventional museum displays an animated film was created. It was hoped that it would provide a visitor-friendly medium through which to tell the prison story. It was made in collaboration with the computer regeneration specialists at the University of East Anglia, and includes both stills and 3D computer-generated reconstructions of the buildings. The film is subtitled for visitors with hearing impairment and is unified by a continuous voice-over commentary, which also serves to provide information for the visually impaired. The museum curatorial staff prepared the story line and script for the voice-over. My primary role was the creation of reconstructions of buildings and interiors based on my recent research. This information was then used to inform the computer animations. From a very fruitful working relationship long-lost buildings began to emerge which could be examined via fly-through sequences. Given the obvious limitations of computer graphics on a modest budget, it was still

12. Knights M., *Norwich Castle As It Was*, 8.



A still from one of the fly-over sequences from the Castle prison animated film showing the reconstruction of the 1822 gaol buildings. Norfolk Museums and Archaeology Service and Virtual Past.

possible to get a real 'feel' for what the nineteenth-century buildings were like. Visitors can see how the Castle changed from a palace and fortress to the County gaol. The sequences take them over and into the buildings to see the prisoners in chapel or at work on the treadmill. They are shown how, in the 1822 prison, the Governor, John Johnson, surveyed his charges through his house windows as they exercised in the yards outside; and visit William Cole, an aged debtor, in his room in the western-radial wing. It was hoped that by the use of this medium the gaol could be brought to life as a real working institution.

Epilogue

Of those families who have visited the Castle to see where their ancestors were incarcerated one deserves special mention. In the 1960s members of the Kable family in Australia began researching a family story that their ancestors, Henry Kable and Susannah Holmes, had been imprisoned in Norwich Castle in the 1780s. Here the nineteen-year olds had fallen in love

and whilst awaiting transportation to Australia, Susannah gave birth to a son, Henry, born in the gaol. Subsequent research confirmed the story and since then several family members have visited the Castle. Henry and his family were transported on the first fleet to Australia and once there he established himself as a leading business man in the colony. Their story was ideal for inclusion in the display as the museum has an eighteenth-century bible from the gaol with entries of baptisms for children born there.¹³ Although Henry jnr. is not included amongst the entries, here was an opportunity to introduce the subject of births within the Castle and by extension, the contact between the sexes in the unreformed gaol. The last case in the room contains modern Kable family material bringing their story up to date.¹⁴ The invitation to visitors here is to share their family stories with the museum, to build up a database about the prison and its people. Although still in its infancy, this collection is growing, firmly establishing the history of the prison within the museum collections.

13. Norwich Castle Bible NMAS, 647.969.

14. The Kable story has been told in many forms including a folk ballad opera *The Transports* by Peter Bellamy, recorded 1977.