

PRESS RELEASE

The Role of Oxford Castle Gaol

Ever since its construction in 1071, Oxford Castle has been used as a place of incarceration - originally used by its owner Robert D'Oilly (friend to William the Conqueror) as a private prison, and then later becoming the County Gaol. Early on, the prison was mainly used to house prisoners from Oxfordshire and Berkshire, and also the University's 'rebellious scholars' (as recorded in 1236).

Documentary evidence suggests that throughout the centuries, Oxford Castle Gaol developed a horrifying reputation for the conditions its prisoners endured. Punishment in the 13th century needed to be something quick and visible, for example hanging, branding, beheading and burning. Putting people in prison was not considered a punishment, so only those awaiting trial and debtors were likely to be there. Prison guards therefore had little authority, so friends and family visited frequently and black economies were rife inside.

By the 1500's however, people were beginning to be put in prison as a form of punishment for certain offences. This change strengthened the growing tide of thought that society should be spared from having to put up with wrong-doers. What's more, by the 1600's people were also being locked up for simple laziness or disrespectful behaviour – beggar's cheek by comparison with real villains. But prison was not considered a punishment for beggars as they might actually be grateful for a roof over their heads! Forms of punishment for begging therefore included whipping, tongue-boring, ear-cropping and branding.

Oxford prison in the 1600's was more feared than most. The two classes of inmates mixed together, and the conditions were appalling: Held as a Parliamentary prisoner of war in 1642 following King Charles I withdrawal from Oxford, army officer Edmund Chillenden wrote a pamphlet called 'The Inhumanity of the King's Prison-Keeper at Oxford'. In it he described conditions in which prisoners were being forced to lay up to 4-people deep on top of each other through lack of space. There were 60 to a room, many with smallpox and having to 'ease nature where we lay'. Human filth was deeper than shoes and they went for days without food or water, as once behind bars, prisoners were expected to find the means to support themselves. Men were constrained to drink their own urine and the dead were left to rot with the living.

The king's prison-keeper at this time was Marshall William Smith. His methods were extremely brutal and Oxford Castle quickly became as feared and notorious as Colditz.

Right up until the mid 1700's, the general upkeep of the Oxford Gaol was

Cont...

ignored. In 1388 it was so ruinous that several prisoners escaped simply by pushing down parts of the walls! Epidemics continued to sweep through the prison including typhoid and smallpox and for purposes of exploitation, the unsalaried gaolers were happy to keep the situation as it was. It was not until 1773 that radical reforms began and the appointment of prison chaplains and surgeons became possible.

Oxford was affected by the national desire for reform and started to look at how the whole prison could be changed. In 1784 when a survey of the gaol was carried out, it stated that it was too small to contain the numbers usually confined and that it would be necessary to either build new wards or an entirely new gaol to connect with the proposed new wards. This was in order to deal with the rapid increase in prisoner numbers as a result of the reduction in sentences of capital punishment and a steady decrease in the use of deportation to penal colonies.

In 1785 two new wings for debtors and felons, plus a house of correction with separate wings for men and women were built according to the new Pentonville model. Unfortunately, as elsewhere, crime rose fast and within a few years, they were back to square one. Additional buildings were created in 1820 - a prison infirmary, individual cells and finally the gaolers became salaried. Oxford Gaol was a much nicer and safer place to be, but the old problems came back...

The culture inside the prison, which the reformers had hoped to change, still survived at Oxford. The inmates still had sufficient run of the building as there wasn't enough money in the system to bring in the required salaried gaolers to control it, and health was still an issue. Prisoners also started to take advantage of the 'softer' option of the infirmary and there is a documented report of one prisoner feigning illness and scaling down a wall using bed sheets tied together.

In 1828 Oxford took on board what started out as the new Quaker reforms – the 'Improvement of Prison Discipline', but which ended up advocating less compassion for prisoners, stricter policing and in particular, use of the treadmill. By 1835 the prison inspectorate was dominated by reformers who believed that separation over silence - 'the Austerity regime', was more effective. So hard beds, most of the day in solitary silence, treadmill and other forms of labour, and reduced food allowance ensued. Prison was now a place of punishment.

By the 20th century, Oxford prison had changed from a disorganised, unsanitary ruin largely controlled by inmates, into a regimented institution with a rather positive and friendly reputation, until its closure in 1996.

Oxford Castle – Unlocked is open daily from 10.00am to 5.30pm (last tour 4.20pm). See www.oxfordcastleunlocked.co.uk or call 01865 260666 to find out more!

Cont...

ENDS

For further media information, images or to arrange a visit, please contact: Keira Relton or Heidi Folland on 01904 527700 or krelton@continuum-group.com / holland@continuum-group.com.

NOTES TO EDITORS:

Oxford Castle - Unlocked is open daily from 10.00am to 5.30pm (last tour 4.20pm). Admission prices: Adults £7.50, Children £5.35, Concessions £6.20.

Oxford Castle - Unlocked opened on 2 June 2006 and gives visitors the opportunity to learn about the real people who lived and died throughout site's turbulent past. Visitors are able to walk through the ancient buildings and experience the stories that connect the real people to these extraordinary events.

The guardians of this important historic site, The Oxford Preservation Trust were awarded a £3.8 million grant by the Heritage Lottery Fund to restore the castle and site buildings. The post of Learning and Access Officer is funded by Oxfordshire County Council.

Oxford Castle - Unlocked is operated by Continuum - visitor attraction operators and specialists in the tourism and leisure industry. See www.continuum-group.com