

JERSEY AND ITS PRISONS

The treatment of lawbreakers has always posed a problem to society; should they be kept separate from the rest of the community or should they be got rid of, either by sending them into exile or by executing them?

Until the seventeenth century, Mont Orgueil Castle was not only the island prison, it was also the King's Prison and as such it held many distinguished prisoners such as William Prynne, Colonel John Lilburne and five of the men who signed the death warrant of King Charles I. Local prisoners were held in the prison tower in the castle but were tried at the Court House in St Helier. When the court was in session the prisoners were escorted to St Helier by a body of men known as *les hallabardiers* – these were Crown tenants and holders of certain lands in the eastern parishes. As late as 1875 they were summoned to maintain order at an execution.

Elsewhere around the island certain properties owed '*service de prisonniers*' which included the provision of shackles and the obligation to confine wrongdoers until they were taken to court on the Saturday. Once in St Helier the prisoners were held in an iron cage in the Market Place (Royal Square) until they were called to the Court. This was demolished in 1697 when the prison was built at Charing Cross and a new cage was built inside the courthouse.

Sir George de Carteret had a House of Correction built in 1645 on the sand dunes by what is now Sand Street. A master was appointed and in December 1646, the States adopted by-laws for its government. The inmates were to be:- swearers, blasphemers, drunkards, beggars, vagabond, rebellious children, obstreperous servants '*et hoc genus omne*'. However, for the rest of the century the States were continually looking for ways of funding it.

A new prison was needed in the island and a petition was finally sent to King Charles II asking him to allow money to be raised in the normal legal manner - by taxes upon the people. By an order in Council dated 24 November 1682, permission was given to levy a duty of 5 shillings per ton on all French vessels trading with Jersey and using these funds the prison was built at Charing Cross, spanning the road from Broad Street, then known as the Grande Rue, to King Street which was known as the

Rue de Derrière. These names seem to imply that at that time Broad Street was the main thoroughfare of St Helier and King Street merely a back street. The old prison wall still exists and runs from Broad Street to Commercial Street where it turned in an east-west direction to form the sea-wall. All the prisoners were placed in dungeons that were below road level. A stream flowed outside the walls and made these very damp. The cells were comfortless, filthy and liberally infested with rats and other vermin. They had small windows that little light could penetrate. The prison housed not only criminals but also debtors. These debtors were lodged on the second floor and were little better off. They were so badly nourished that, in order to keep alive, they would tie little purses to a length of cord and lower these through the windows to street level in the hope that charitable passers-by would put something into them.

At this time, there were no houses to the west of Charing Cross and so the arch of the prison formed the entrance to the town. To the west were sand dunes and it was across this that criminals convicted of capital offences had to walk to reach Gallows Hill (now called Westmount). The last execution here took place in October 1829, when Philippe Jolin was executed for the murder of his father during a drunken argument. After this, all executions were carried out in the newly built Gloucester Street Prison.

By 1810 the Charing Cross prison was in such a bad state of repair that it was decided to demolish it and to build a new prison in Gloucester Street. As the demolition took place in 1811 before the new building was ready, some prisoners were kept in the General Hospital whilst those who were capable of serious crimes were held at Elizabeth Castle. The new prison opened in 1812 was also referred to as the Newgate Street prison after the famous gaol in London: it cost £19,000. A Gaoler's house was built in 1813 and was used until the Prison Governor bought his own accommodation. It was then converted into a women's block known as 'F' for females, with accommodation for a matron and a room where the Prison Board met.

Reforms at the prison over the years were due largely to the work of Elizabeth Fry who came to the island in 1833 to recuperate from an illness and visited the prison many times. She made a number of suggestions to the authorities including that there should be a full sufficiency of employment for prisoners appropriate to their age, sex, health and ability and that there should be a proper classification including

the total separation of men from women, of debtors from criminals and from the untried to the tried. It was mainly due to her efforts that there was a Home Office investigation and a further block named the House of Correction was built in 1837.

The resulting employment for prisoners introduced in 1834 was oakum picking and stone cracking. Records indicate how many stones specific prisoners cracked. The end product was then sold to the parish of St Helier who used it to make roads.

The Prison Board was formed in 1837 to oversee the running of the prison that was financed with £300 from the Crown, £300 from the Governor, Bailiff and Jurats and any balance required from the States.

In 1838-39 B Block was built with the Treadmill house added in 1839; for 40 years it was used to drive a small mill for grinding peppercorns. In 1937 the treadmill was dismantled and donated to the Jersey Museum where it can still be seen.

A Royal Commission held in 1859 recommended the enlargement of the prison and among other recommendations was one that facilities were to be provided for the treatment of lunatics, both criminal and otherwise.

During 1928, a total of 113 prisoners charged with criminal offences were admitted (103 male and 10 female) as well as 5 debtors. A total of 342 ½ yards of cracked stone and 204 ¾ yards of sifting were delivered to the parish of St Helier.

During the Occupation 'A' block at the north end of the 1st floor was used by the Germans for the deportation of 'rowdies' in 1942. B block was entirely taken by Germans as a military and Organisation Todt prison.

Following the Liberation, the Prison Board invited a Home Office Inspector to visit and report on conditions in the aging prison. The subsequent report of the Prison Commissioners in 1946 stated *'the existing buildings ought not to be retained for any purpose or day longer than is strictly necessary'*. However it was not until 1975 that the new prison at La Moye was built. In this prison there are four distinct areas for male prisoners, women prisoners, young offenders and for vulnerable prisoners. Today La Moye Prison has a capacity of about 150 prisoners but there are currently

about 170, with 25 serving sentences in the UK because of overcrowding on the island.

In order to learn more about the History of Jersey's Prisons, visit or contact Jersey Archive:

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