Gloucestershire Gaols, Prisons & Bridewells

Prior to Tudor times, there was actually little need for prisons at a local level. The reason for this was that the normal sentence for those found guilty was death and anyone found innocent were simply set free. If someone committed a crime and were caught, they were usually tried quickly, often on the same day. If they couldn't be tried the same day they could be held in the dungeon of a local castle, a room in the outbuildings of a manor house or occasionally in a church until a trial could be organised.

Because prison was not a punishment as such, this meant that there was no real requirement for a place to keep long-term prisoners. There were however some exceptions, as listed below:

1. **Town Watchmen**: From 1295 onwards Watchmen in a town had the power to arrest and detain strangers they encountered at night. The places used to detain such people were usually cells inside Town gatehouses and these came to be known as 'lock-ups'.
2. **Village lock-ups**: This was a small stone or brick-built building with 1 or 2 small cells where the local village constable could detain people suspected of having committed crimes or drunks. There are good examples of this type of building in Gloucestershire at Bisley, Cirencester and Westerleigh (where it is incorporated into another building).
3. **Crown prisoners**: People ordered to be detained by the Crown were usually held in the dungeons of the castle belonging to the Sherriff of the County. In Gloucestershire, the main county gaol was Gloucester Castle.
4. **Debtors' prisons**: From the Middle Ages onwards, if you became a debtor (i.e. you could not pay a bill or a fine) you could be locked up in what was known as a debtors' prison, which was also known as the 'common gaol'. These were run by the county Quarter Sessions (the judicial system in England that had begun in 1361) usually in the Sheriff's castle. They tended to consist of a single large cell where debtors were held until their families paid their debt. Conditions in debt prisons were terrible and debt prisoners often died of disease. They only received food if it was paid for or provided to them by their families and so many suffered from starvation – as well as abuse from other prisoners. Many debtors remained locked up for years and it was common for their families to fall into poverty.

It was the Tudor period that saw the start of the prison system we are familiar with today. In 1576, an Act of Parliament empowered the Quarter Sessions of each county to raise money and build Bridewells or 'Houses of Correction'. These were named after the old Royal Palace of Bridewell in London which, around 1570, had been refurbished and turned into a place of work for the poor. Their purpose was the reformation of 'idle and disorderly persons' by setting them to work and although initially they acted more like workhouses for the relief of the poor, as time went on they became used for the imprisonment of minor offenders.

A group of 3 'bridewells' were built in Gloucestershire, at Gloucester, Berkeley and Cirencester. The Gloucester bridewell was a new building located inside the old Gloucester Castle and was known as *'the bridewell or new brick buildinge* to distinguish it from the county's 'common gaol', which was known as *'the stone buildinge'*. By this time the castle was in a very poor state of repair being described as *'a ruinous place saveing some few roomes for the keepeinge of common prisoners, the gatehouse and public workhouse, and a small howse for the keeper or deputie of the sheriffe to dwell in'*. Another 2 bridewells, at Winchcombe and at Lawford's Gate (in the Bristol suburbs) were established by the start of the 1700s. In 1707 the Gloucester bridewell was removed from the castle to a building at the City's East Gate, to be shared with the City (Gloucester Borough had its own debtor's prison), and to keep it distinct from the common gaol, *'for the benefitt of the publick'*, but this situation did not last and by the late 1700s it had moved back to a noisome den in the castle.

This place, repaired from time to time by the county, continued to be used until nearly the end of the 18th Century. By this time public interest in prison conditions and the treatment of prisoners was growing, especially as more people were being sent to prison purely for punishment. Gradually the call for prison reform grew stronger with supporters arguing that prisons should be places of reform not just punishment. One man, John Howard, was at the forefront of this movement 1774 he reported on the disgraceful state of prisons to Parliament. Although 2 Acts were passed ordering improvements, little happened and it was left to local reformers to achieve change.

In 1785, Sir George Onesiphorus Paul, an active magistrate of Gloucestershire and a firm follower and believer in Howard's ideas, led the Gloucestershire justices in obtaining a local Act of Parliament that allowed the county to rebuild the county gaol and houses of correction at a cost of nearly £50,000. The first to be rebuilt was the gaol at Gloucester, which saw the old building and what remained of Gloucester Castle swept away. The new gaol was a model of its kind, incorporating individual cells, separation of different classes of prisoner, medical care, exercise facilities and

religious instruction. A lot of this gaol still survives in the fabric of the modern day prison.

Gloucester Gaol was followed by 4 new model houses of correction built at Northleach, Horsley, Littledean, and Lawford's Gate (Bristol). Only the building at Littledean, now a museum, survives intact. That at Lawford's Gate was largely destroyed by fire during the Bristol riots of 1831 and was finally pulled down about 1926; those at Horsley and Northleach have also been virtually demolished. Over the next 40 years Gloucestershire's lead was followed by similar initiatives were pursued in many other counties. Local Acts of Parliament were obtained allowing magistrates to build imposing new prisons in their respective counties. Thr last stage in reform came in 1877, when the government transferred control and day-to-day running of all the country's prisons to the Home Office, in the shape of HM Prison Service.