



In prison

Prior to the 1800s anyone being held in prison had a very dreadful time. The person in charge of the prison was the gaoler, usually assisted by warders or 'turnkeys'. For running the prison the gaoler would be paid a small salary out of which he had to run the gaol – which included provided food to the prisoners and maintaining the upkeep of the building. When Middlesex magistrates opened a new gaol in 1615, they ordered that the gaoler had to give every prisoner '*fresh straw every month and warm pottage thrice a week*'¹. This was probably more than most prisoners received in gaols.

The gaoler had the right to run the gaol as a business and make his money back by charging prisoners for their food, drink and other services – such as providing bedding and even a release fee! Many gaolers would force inmates to work to produce goods that could be sold to supplement their salary. Such work included picking oakum, spinning yarn, and beating flax. For this prisoners might receive extra food, but usually nothing more than stale bread or extra pottage². Many gaolers sold goods and services to prisoners, including alcohol, extra food and gambling equipment. Another source of income for gaolers was the admission of visitors, who might include relatives of prisoners, prostitutes, the curious but sometimes people wanting to give charity (in the shape of money, food or clothing). One other custom that was prevalent in gaols was that of 'garnish'. This was where a new prisoner was forced to pay a forfeit of a round of drinks to the prisoners or loose his or her clothes. In Gloucester Gaol, the gaoler charged every newcomer 1s 6d (about £5 today) to undertake this.

Inside the gaol, there were usually different sections for debtors (people imprisoned because the owed money and would not be released until this had been paid), Bridewell prisoners/poor and those awaiting trials, who were termed 'felons'. However these were generally only used at night and in the day, prisoners were in one large room or courtyard. The rooms were often small, had little ventilation, little or no light and were usually very overcrowded. The courtyard was often little better. As a rule there was no segregation of sexes, of old or young or old offenders and new offenders. There were no prison uniforms either and in Gloucester Goal in 1776 a visitor to the prison noted that some debtors were half-naked as their clothes had rotted away!

Sanitation inside gaols was primitive and conditions were not surprisingly totally unhygienic. In Gloucester gaol, there was one open sewer for the entire prison. To make matters worse, waste and foul bedding were not removed very often, so the whole gaol became a breeding ground of bugs and insects as well as rats. Medical care was limited or non-existent and the generally overcrowded dirty conditions led to frequent outbreaks of disease, most notably typhus – which was called 'gaol fever'. Typhus was caused by a bacterium spread by fleas, mites and lice and when an outbreak occurred it spread rapidly leading to epidemics inside the gaol. Such



outbreaks often spread outside the gaol and in Oxford in 1577, it spread to the assize courts and over 300 people died as a result. Symptoms included fever, plus red spots over arms, back and chest, ultimately leading to delirium and open sores. Death was more or less guaranteed and in 1759, it was estimated that each year a quarter of the prisoners in goal in England had died from Gaol fever.

The foul conditions meant that there were occasional attempts to escape but if caught, prisoners would usually be put irons – along with anyone who aided escape or even knew anything about the escape attempts. Occasionally a gaoler might put everyone in the entire gaol in irons! Such punishments often lasted for weeks and once, when the prison reformer John Howard visited Durham gaol he found men who had been chained to the floor for so long that it had *'twisted their bodies cruelly and caused great pain'* to them. The reason that gaolers punished potential escapees so severely was that if anyone escaped gaolers were penalised but it was also allowed gaolers to extort more money from the felons as they would charge for removing the irons. Other punishments were meted out at the whim of the gaoler and might include regular beatings, floggings as well as shackling. Only with the introduction of paid gaolers and the campaign for prison reform did the situation start to improve.

With the prison reforms of the late 1700s conditions did began to improve. As well as new prisons being built with better cells, segregation and sanitary facilities, the costs of running prisons were now met by the Quarter Sessions (who levied a general rate on the population to pay for it). This meant that the gaoler no longer had to make a living by charging his prisoners and he was also provided with paid staff. The Quarter Sessions also laid down more formal rules and regulations specifying the quantity and quality of food and drink each prisoner was to receive. At the same time, prisoners were grouped into different classes (according to their sentence) and each class received different amounts of food accordingly. Prisoners also received more in the way of bedding, clothes (in Gloucester Gaol, a uniform began to be issued in 1791) and soap.

By 1790 the prison day followed a timetable, which was roughly as follows:

- Sunrise in winter/6am in summer: Bell rung – inmates to rise and make beds.
- Second bell: Inmate to wash.
- Third bell: Prayers, roll-call and bread breakfast (those who behaved badly at prayers or who were dirty received no bread).
- Work: The aim was that hard-labour prisoners would work for 12 hours. Among the things that prisoner might undertake (according to their class) was: stone-breaking, nail-making, cleaning & sweeping, washing and laundry, mending clothes, spinning, cloth-making, making a range of things including: oakum (for ships), mops, nets, wheel barrows, mouse and rat-traps, beehives, mole traps, garden tools, kitchen utensils, stools and walking-chairs. Perhaps unbelievably, even crossbows and firearms were also made for a time.
- Lunch: 1 hour.



- Work: Treadmill – This device could accommodate 7 men at one time and they were kept on it for 9 hours in summer and 6 hours in winter (equivalent to climbing up and down Gloucester Cathedral tower 46 times and 33 times respectively). The wheel ground corn or other cereals at a rate of 8 bushels a day which was sold at 3½d (62p today).
- Dinner: 1 hour.
- Sunset in winter/7pm in summer: Lock-up bell. Prisoners to beds.

After the reforms of the 1790s prison punishments were much less severe than they used to be and included withdrawal of food privileges for short periods, the dark cell (solitary confinement in darkness from 8am to 4pm), handcuffing, fettering (having shackles around the ankles), leg irons and whippings (up to 36 lashes).

¹ Whiting, J., 1979, A House of Correction, Sutton Publishing, ISBN 0904387275

² Pottage was a staple diet of the poor from medieval times onwards and was essentially a vegetable stew or thick soup made of whatever vegetables were available often thickened with barley or oats. If lucky, a pottage might have cheap cuts of meat.