

HERITAGE CIRCLE

Tessa West, A History of Bury Gaol

Tessa West gave a very interesting talk to the August meeting of the Heritage Circle at Rickinghall Village Hall. Her subject was the history of Bury Gaol in the 18th and 19th centuries but she drew interesting comparisons with the modern penal system.

Tessa has a background of working in education in a prison and of being a member of the Parole Board. This contributed to her writing a biography of the penal reformer, John Howard, who visited prisons to study their conditions. He visited Bury Gaol on four occasions between 1774 and 1782. The conditions were very poor. There were two principal categories of prisoners, debtors and felons but other people were incarcerated because of their mental health. The prison, like others of the time, was run as private business. Inmates had to pay for straw to sleep on, food, water and medical care. Felons were chained at night in dungeons. There was no separation of men and women. In 1773 five prisoners died of smallpox. The gaoler sold beer and wine to outsiders as he had no other salary. Howard urged reform to regularise and improve conditions in prisons. In addition to the gaol, Bury also had a bridewell which was a combination of a gaol for petty offenders and a workhouse at what is now Moyse Hall. In 1804 a new gaol was built for Bury which could hold 140 people. John Orridge became the governor of the prison which was designed using the panopticon principle. There was a central Inspection House with corridors leading off from it housing the prisoners. There was a window in each cell and some provision of toilet facilities but a 24 foot wall separated the prisoners from the town.

Orridge believed that the prison's functions were to keep prisoners secure, to preserve the health of the inmates and to 'ameliorate their morals.' He appears to have been successful at least in the first two aims. There was only ever one escape from the gaol and doctors did provide some medical care for prisoners. Prisons in the 18th century had been notorious for their high death rates from diseases such as 'gaol fever,' a form of typhus. Hard labour was proposed to improve the 'morals' of prisoners. In 1819 Bury Gaol became the first prison in Britain to have a treadmill. It was hard, demoralising work. Prisoners spent an eight hour shift walking on the treadmill. It has been calculated that they stepped up about 11,000 feet per day. Much of the work was pointless as the prisoners simply 'ground air.'

Records suggest that many of the people committed to Bury Gaol were charged with offences that appear trivial today. One prisoner had stolen three lettuces, another stole turnips to the value of 1d and a further person had taken two eggs. A vagabond was gaoled along with deserters from the army and a man who thrown stones at a railway carriage. The ages of inmates ranged from 11 years and upwards.

The prison had a flat roof for public executions. In 1828 William Corder, who had committed the Red Barn murder at Polstead, was hanged at the gaol. The last public execution in Bury occurred in 1851. It was watched by a crowd of up to 5,000 people who were mainly women with their children. In 1880 the prison was closed and its remaining inmates were sent to Ipswich Prison.

The next meeting of the Heritage Circle will be at 7.30pm on Wednesday 28 September at The Village Hall, Rickinghall. There will be a short AGM followed by Linda Sexton talking about the History of Shopping. Further information about the Heritage Circle is available on its website, www.heritagecircle.onesuffolk.net.

Gerry Gurhy