

COUNTY GAOL AND HOUSE OF CORRECTION

Punishing building with hidden stories in corners

Way we were



David Lewis
Canterbury
Historical and
Archaeological
Society

NOW seems a good time to look back over the history of Canterbury county gaol. Apart from being the year of closure, 2013 is the 200 year anniversary of the visit made to the gaol by Jane Austen – in 1813 she was shown round by her brother Edward who was a visiting magistrate. On a practical level, now the prison is closed, it is at last possible to take photos of the front of this fine building without risking arrest!

The opening of the new county gaol in 1808 did not go well. At 5 am on the morning of December 14, inmates from the old county gaol in St Dunstan's Street were linked by handcuffs and chains and marched in caravan through the city to the new gaol in Longport Street. A thin 17 year old petty thief John Betts, just 5 ft 4ins high, formed part of the group in St Dunstan's but managed to slip his hands through the cuffs. By the time the caravan arrived in Longport, John had given himself an early Christmas surprise and disappeared into the city side streets. A reward of five guineas apparently brought no response.

Architect of the new gaol was George Byfield – his name appears high above the main door. The adjacent new court house was completed in 1810. Both buildings share enclosing railings which have a repeated motif of fasces (bundles of wooden rods) and axe. This ancient representation of magisterial power harks back to Roman times, and gave us the term fascist in the 20th century. Fasces also appear on Debenham's store in Guildhall Street. The gaol governor, Thomas le Breton, had an



DETAIL: Architect's name George Byfield, tucked away in a corner



DECORATION: Axe details on the railings

impressive background in military administration, but also had literary aspirations. In 1822 he went into print with his Thoughts on defective state of prisons, outlining the needs of each category of offender: accomplices giving evidence for the crown, those under death sentence, in the infirmary, in solitary confinement, in debtors' gaol, vagrants, on remand, and so on. He

also commented on the need for radial planning of prison wings, with iron walkways to permit inspection and a means of hearing what prisoners were saying. Canterbury was apparently lucky to have procured Thomas as governor, as he 'matched education and respectability with a thoughtful shrewdness'.

By the early 1820s the gaol had acquired an important addition – the treadmill. In many gaols the treadmill was not attached to any productive process – it existed solely to provide a means of punishment. In Canterbury the mill ran a water pump which resulted in a regular water supply both for the prison and for the nearby Kent and Canterbury Hospital. Later years brought the change to foreign inmates only (2006) and the visit of Princess Royal to mark the 200th anniversary (2008). All that remains is to find a new use for premises with such a fascinating past – another extension of Christ Church University perhaps? For more on the gaol and court house see the CHAS web site at canterbury-archaeology.org.uk