

THE NORTHLEACH HOUSE OF CORRECTION

Ann-Rachael Harwood.

"By reform I mean nothing less than an entire correction of the principle of our modes of imprisonment, the construction of our prisons, as well regarding those for the lesser as for the greater crimes, their police; and the plan of their future superintendance." (1) So wrote Sir George Onesiphorus Paul, the inspiration and driving force behind the building of Northleach House of Correction and its counterparts at Littledean, Horsley and Lawford's Gate, Bristol.

Houses of Correction were a novel idea in the 1780s when prisons were in an appalling condition - with minor offenders herded together with hardened criminals in overcrowded, unhealthy gaols. John Howard, Sheriff of Bedfordshire, was the first to prick the public conscience with a nation-wide survey of prisons. (2) Gloucestershire was typical of most counties - with the County Gaol described as 'ruinous'; rampant disease, caused by no baths, or sanitation, and inadequate food. Unpaid gaolers sold alcohol to their charges; and demanded fees from those with any money. The small town "Bridewells" were little better. St. Briavels had 'no yard', no water, no allowance, no firing. One of the two sickly objects had been confined a 12 month and never once out of that dismal room! Worst of all was the magistrates' unconcern for the prisons - their attitude even deterred the chaplain from visiting Gloucester Gaol. Change could only come with dynamic leaders, fired with the cause of reform, and undeterred by apathy and entrenched ideas.

Sir George Onesiphorus Paul, a wealthy landowner from Rodborough, was to be the man. After his election as High Sheriff in 1780, he made the customary visit to the County Gaol and was so horrified by what he saw there that he determined to espouse the cause of reform. He was a far-sighted thinker - not content with short-term measures. It took two years of campaigning to convince county officials of the need to fulfill these aims, and especially that the considerably monetary investment would be of value. He succeeded despite opposition, and in 1785 the Gloucestershire Act for building a new gaol, a penitentiary House and certain new houses of correction became law. (3)

Northleach was one of the houses of correction - prisons for petty offenders. William Blackburn, a prize-winning architect, was selected to design all the new buildings to Paul's specifications. Locations were decided on by proximity to Courts, population ratios and adequate roads. Northleach, serving Cheltenham Crown Court, was selected at a meeting in October 1788; and the site itself was given by Lord Chedworth.

Paul demanded 2 cells per prisoner, plenty of fresh air, and room to exercise in, infirmaries, a chapel, workrooms, and total segregation of the different categories of prisoner.

Blackburn met these requirements with a polygonal radial - the Keeper's House at the hub, with exercise yards radiating out from it to the cell blocks at the ends. It proved to be his most original design (4) - one that was copied at Cherry Hill Penitentiary at Philadelphia and later at Pentonville Model Prison in London.

The prison was intended to house 37 prisoners - each of whom had 2 cells: a day-time cell on the ground floor, and a night-time cell on the first floor. Each cell had double doors - an iron grille door and a heavy wooden door, which could be pinned back so leaving the prisoner secure but allowing fresh air. Windows were relatively large, but high up and grilled, rather than glazed, so that air circulated even when the double doors were closed. Inside, each prisoner was provided with a bed, made of sheet iron punched with holes, laid on blocks of stone, softened by a horsehair or straw pallet, hemp sheets and a blanket. He also had a cube of stone for a seat, and a chained drinking cup.

The ground-floor cells opened directly onto exercise yards. These were subdivided by iron fences, and each yard was allocated to a different category of prisoner. Pumps were placed in the centre of each for washing and drinking.

Beside the 2-storey cell-blocks there were 3-storey pavilions at either end of the cell wings - and a central block opposite the Keeper's House. The left-hand pavilion (looking from the Fosse) was the medical block, with a fumigating room complete with hot and cold baths to dowse the prisoners on arrival; a uniform store to kit them out; and infirmaries for men and women. The other pavilion was a store-house and offices, whilst the central block contained workrooms and cells. Day-cells were also used for work: useful, creative activities such as spinning, straw plaiting, wooden skewer making, and chair-bottoming were encouraged, as Paul believed that equipping prisoners to lead useful lives outside was an essential part of the correcting process.

The Keeper's House was separated from the rest of the site by a stream channelled through the centre of the yards and then around the house. Prisoners entered the house once a day - to go to the chapel which was the middle room on the first floor. Blackburn devised a way of bringing the prisoners inside without going through the officers' living quarters. Spiral staircases ran down either side of the building at the back, and a door led from each of these onto the balcony, which in turn had a door either side of the central projection into the chapel.

These were the basic features of the new House of Correction as it was designed and built. It opened in 1791 after sundry delays caused by the first contractor, Gabriel Rogers, going bankrupt. J. Fentiman finished the job for £1,000 more than Roger's quotation - the final bill being £5,111 6s. 4d. (5) The Keeper's House, and the perimeter wall at reduced height, are the only survivors of these original buildings. It is quite possible to trace the original plan though, and some of the fittings have been found: there are 2 iron bed frames, and iron plate, and

2 chained drinking cups. The prisoners' entrance doorway can be seen, blocked up in the outer wall, and along with the doorways in the Keeper's House it is remarkable for its narrowness. Single file was the rule, and Blackburn designed accordingly.

The Keeper's House is structurally intact with one of the two spiral staircases still in use. The doors onto the balcony are blocked up, but clearly visible, and the balcony itself, an iron grille structure with stone floor, is in good condition. The chapel was rediscovered in 1981, after several studding walls had been removed, and it has a fascinating roof structure of old ship's timbers. The site is damp and exposed, and repairs were always needed: some were carried out by prisoners, when one with an appropriate skill was admitted, but the rest had to wait for a visiting magistrate's authorization.

Major alterations followed a change in thinking and legislation about prisoners and prison conditions. After Sir George Onesiphorus Paul's death in 1820, the climate was ripe for change, and in 1823 hard labour was introduced - first by means of a hand-cranked corn-mill, and in 1827 by a tread-wheel. (6) The first site for the mill was unsatisfactory, and in 1840 (7) new buildings were erected in front of the hospital block, let into the perimeter wall along the Fosse. The County Surveyor, Thomas Fulljames, designed a wooden shed for the tread-wheel and a stone building for the mill machinery, and they were put up at a cost of £100 by Thomas Bridges of Cirencester. The wheel could accommodate 16 men at once, climbing 8" steps. The wheel and shed have long since gone to a Leicester scrapyard, but the mill-house survives and the arch through which the wheel shaft passed is clearly visible in the side wall of the building.

Just 3 years later the future of the House of Correction was called into question, as the death of a former prisoner sparked off a central Government enquiry into conditions. (8) The report was extremely critical and called for major improvements or closure. The County Officials elected to keep the prison, and set about extending the chapel towards the Fosse and building a new facade to the Keeper's House to allow for the extra space. This was also used by the Matron who had not previously had a special suite of rooms to herself. A new cell block was built for women prisoners in the perimeter wall at the opposite corner to the mill house, complete with a heating system that extended throughout the cells.

The women's cell block is the only remaining group of cells, and it is interesting to compare it with Blackburn's original scheme. These cells have level rather than arched ceilings, and there are plumbing provisions for toilets and wash-basins. A signal system remains outside the doors and part of the piping for the new heating system upstairs. There are cross-shaped windows in the corridors and stair-well.

Despite the heavy cost of these alterations - Thomas Haines of Cheltenham carried out the work for £1,100 (9) - justice was changing and within a few years the number of prisoners gaoled

for petty offences was dropping, and improved transport made it easier to take those that were gaoled to Bristol or Gloucester rather than to remote villages. By the 1850s Northleach House of Correction was passing out of use and in 1857 its status was changed to a House of Remand, and the newly-formed Gloucestershire Constabulary took over the site.

The mill-house was converted to a police station with an office and living accommodation, and a stone plaque placed on the front wall which can still be seen today. (10) The station was busy; it increased in importance, needing stables for a gig and horses in the front yard, and by 1874 more accommodation for personnel. The County Surveyor again set to work - this time to convert the former Keeper's House into police quarters. It was at this stage the the chapel was divided into two, in such a way that the top floor of the building was cut in half so that crossing from one side to the other required a journey down one set of stairs and up the other. This was also the time when the right-hand spiral staircase was incorporated into rooms. Extensions for police cells, and kitchens and bathrooms, were made at either side of the house on the ground floor. These were removed only in 1980 during alterations by the Cotswold District Council.

In the 1930s the site served as a tramp station but the cells gradually fell into disuse and all but the 1844 female block was demolished in 1936-37. Fortunately a photographic record was made (11), but little except a 3-train turret clock by Washborough Hale & Co. Bristol, which was set into the wall of the Workroom Block, was rescued. Stores for Civil Defence supplies were built in the courtyard; but after the War, the station was downgraded from Superintendent to Sergeant status. Fewer personnel were employed and the police abandoned their first station - the mill-house - and withdrew to the main building. The St. John's Ambulance occupied the mill-house but no more structural alterations were made until the Cotswold District Council took over the site. The police moved to a new station in the town in 1973.

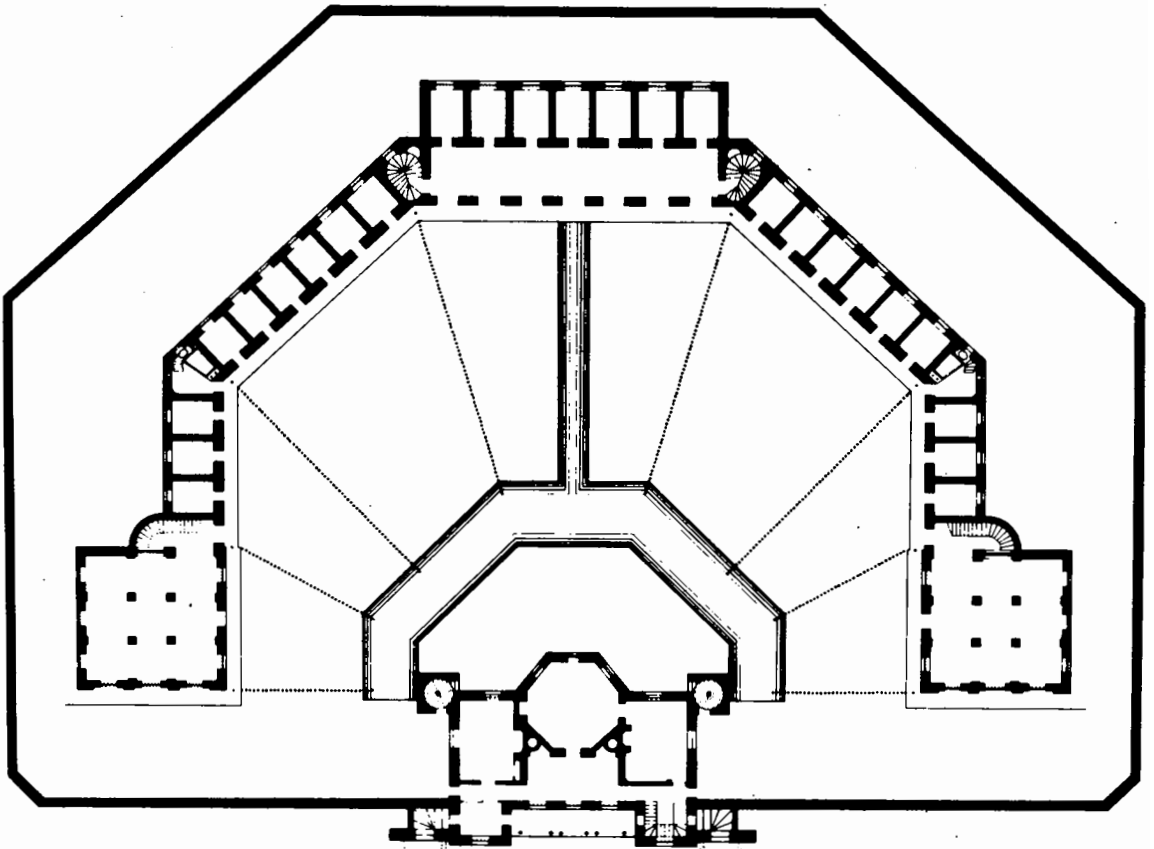
The history of Justice on the site ceased in 1974, when the Petty Sessional Court, which from 1859 had met in a special room, with a magistrate's retiring room off it, on the ground floor of the Keeper's House, moved to Stow-on-the-Wold.

In 1980 the Cotswold District Council acquired the premises for the Cotswold Countryside Collection, a museum of rural life, housing the Lloyd-Baker collection of agricultural implements. This proved a happy choice, as a former Lloyd-Baker, Thomas Barwick, had actually been a visiting magistrate to this House of Correction. The surviving buildings have been preserved, and in the case of the Keeper's House the late 19th century and 20th century additions have been removed to leave the earlier structure. The 1844 cell block now houses displays on the history of the House of Correction, complete with "inmate"; the mill-house is lived in again; and the Keeper's House is being converted into further display areas. A new gallery had been built along the line of the former cell blocks - so a sense of the original layout can be gained once more. After 7 years of disuse a future opens up again for this striking and prominent building.

REFERENCES

- (1) Sir George Onesiphorus Paul, Proceedings of the Grand Jury Magistrates and other Noblemen and Gentlemen of the County of Gloucester on Designing and Executing a General Reform in the Construction and Regulations of the Prisons of the said County. GRO R.O.L.C.5.
- (2) John Howard, The State of the Prisons in England and Wales (1777)
- (3) An Act for Building a New Gaol, a Penitentiary House, and certain New Houses of Correction, for the County of Gloucester and for regulating the same.
25 Geo.III c.10 GRO Q AG 6/2.
- (4) GRO Q AG/5.
- (5) GRO Q AG/7.
- (6) GRO Q CR/29.
- (7) GRO Q AG/8.
- (8) GRO Q AG/22.
- (9) GRO Q AG/9.
- (10) GRO Q C14.
- (11) Negatives held by Butt Studios, Bourton-on-the-Water.

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PLAN OF THE NORTHLEACH HOUSE OF CORRECTION
(By courtesy of the Cotswold Countryside
Collection, Northleach.)