

Norwich Castle gaol, prison and courtroom trail for KS4 Historic Environment

Please click on the underlined blue words to take you to relevant resources. Further information and resources can be found on the [Historic Environment OCR B \(SHP\) Criteria](#) page. Answers to questions can be found at the end of this document.

Welcome to [Norwich Castle Keep](#). It was built by the Normans as a defence and royal palace – for more information, please [watch this Norwich Castle Keep Virtual Keep Tour](#). After city walls were built around Norwich in the 13th and 14th centuries, the Castle's military function declined. Its roof was also falling in so the king, Edward III, gave the Castle back to the city in 1345. Norfolk desperately needed a county gaol and so it became one!

The County Gaol

Gaol then wasn't what we think of a gaol now: it held debtors (people who owed money) and people accused of crimes before the stood trial. If the accused were found guilty at their trial, they were publicly punished or even hanged. As you will study from this [Medieval cell and graffiti](#), someone called Bartholomew scratched a declaration of innocence on the interior walls. However, we know very little about conditions inside the gaol until we get to the 18th Century. [A Bible](#) from that century recorded the baptisms of all the children born in the gaol.

Q1. What might this tell us about how men and women were held in the gaol?

We also know that there was no separation of people regarding the crime they had been charged with so people accused of stealing food may have found themselves next to some charged with murder!

Q2. Why might this be a bad idea?

From drawings, we do know that by the late 17th Century, [a house for the gaol governor had been built on the mound](#). It is also thought that the hall built to the North of the Keep in the 1280s was converted into a [Shirehall courtroom](#) but that it burnt down in 1746 and was [rebuilt in 1749](#).

Q3. Why were fires more likely in the 18th Century than today?

Campaign for change

As the number of people awaiting trial increased, gaols became overcrowded. When John Howard visited his local gaol in Bedfordshire, he was so horrified by what he saw there that he decided to visit other gaols in the country, including Norwich Castle, during the 1770s. Find out more about him at [John Howard and Prison Reform](#).

[Read John Howard's report](#) on the gaol although be careful as what looks like the letter 'f' may be an 's' instead!

Q4. Make your own report from Howard's by listing all the good things (9) about the gaol and then all the bad things (6).

New buildings

Howard's report inspired new gaols to be built. The architect John Soane was employed to design a new gaol inside and around the Norwich Castle Keep. [View a model of Soane's gaol](#) along with an adjacent Shirehall, which housed trials.

Q5. What new features did Soane's gaol have?

Soane's gaol was built in 1790s but it was flawed. For the gaoler, it had too many blind spots, and it was also too small for the number of prisoners. So, a competition was begun in 1819 to design a new gaol at Norwich Castle.

Local architect William Wilkins won the competition (and £100) to redesign Soane's gaol. His winning design was inspired by reformers at the time who wanted to separate the different types of criminal as well as men and women. As you will see from this next photo, taken in the 1880s, Wilkins kept [Soane's cells inside the keep](#) (although he only kept 3 out of the 4 levels due to cracks in walls) and added an exercise yard. He also added new gaol buildings to the North and East of the Keep as you will see from a [model of Wilkins' gaol](#), his [floor plan](#) and the [Norwich Castle Prison Story](#) film.

Visit Wilkins' buildings in the area we now call the [Rotunda](#). You are now standing on the site of the [gaoler's house](#) from which radiated out the cell blocks (now the museum's Archaeology, Natural History and Art galleries). There were now different cell blocks for different types of criminals (see below), and men and women were now separated.

Q6. Why did Wilkins build cell blocks radiating from the central gaoler's home?

New punishment

The new gaol coincided with a massive change to the justice system in this country. Due to pressure from aforementioned reformer Howard and others, the Home Secretary during the 1820s, Robert Peel, decided to replace a lot of publicly humiliating punishments and hangings with imprisonment to attempt to reform the criminals' character. The gaol now became a prison.

The new prison: Silent or Separate?

As most prisoners were now in prison because they had been found guilty of their crimes, decisions were made on how they should be treated. One of two systems were chosen: the Silent system and the Separate system. The prison first employed the Silent System – prisoners worked together in Day Rooms at the Rotunda end of each cell block but weren't supposed to communicate with each other.

However, from 1850s, the prison replaced the Silent System with the Separate System which meant that prisoners stayed in their cells (the Day Rooms converted into more cells) to work apart from attending chapel (which was on top of the gaoler's house), school (which is where the present-day [shop](#) is) and to exercise.

Q7. Why do you think the prison preferred the Separate System instead of the Silent?

Exercise and hard labour

Visit a former exercise yard, which is now an [Art gallery](#). This would have been open to the air when the site was a prison. Prisoners also forced to do pointless and hard work such as the treadmill. It was like a giant hamster wheel, but for humans. Three were

located in these [front rooms](#). The energy created by these mills was first used to grind corn for bread and then used to turn the water prison's water system. But once that had been done, the energy did nothing.

Q8. The energy created by prison treadmills was not supposed to be put to use. Why do you think this was the case in most prisons?

Prison daily life

[See a reconstruction of a prison cell](#) from 1851. As you will see, it:

- Is only 10 feet by 6 feet
- Has a hammock so the prisoner can roll it away and use the cell to work
- Has a stool
- Has a slop bucket

[Read a day in the life of poacher Fred Rolff](#).

Activity: compare your day with Fred's day – before lockdown and during lockdown!

Staff

[View Prison job descriptions in 1829](#).

Q9. What jobs can you read? What do you think each of these jobs entailed and which one would you have preferred to do?

Q10. [William White's description of the gaol in 1845](#) tells us there were how many cells in the new prison buildings and how many in the Keep? And how many altogether?

Courtroom

As Wilkins' new buildings took up nearly all of the Castle mound, new Shirehall courtrooms were built at the bottom North-East area of the mound. They were linked with the prison via a spiral staircase of 56 stairs and [a tunnel](#) behind these [doors](#) in the former Treasure, Trade and Exotic gallery.

Q11. Why do you think this staircase and tunnel were built? Why not just take the prisoners outside and round the Castle to the courtroom?

[Look at this photo of one of the courtrooms](#).

These courtrooms remained places for trials until 1988 when the courts moved to new buildings between the Cathedral and river. They were used as storage by Norfolk Museums Service until 2013 when we received a grant to refurbish one of the rooms. It was refurbished to how it looked in 1822: most of the furniture is original but the fixtures and fittings are copies of the originals, created using old drawings of the courtroom.

Q12. Can you figure out where the following people sat, A-E?

- Judge
- Jury
- Defendant(s)
- Witness
- Lawyers

Trials

In April 1848, the most famous trial of this courtroom took place. It was of James Bloomfield Rush and he had been charged with double murder! To find out what happened, [read John Bloomfield Rush's story](#).

Place of execution

Hangings took place at various points outside on the mound whilst the Castle was a gaol and a prison so that thousands of people could watch from below or from the baileys which, by the 1730s, had been [levelled out](#) and become a cattle market. [Read Rush's execution report](#) – we think a record-breaking 20,000 people watched him die.

Q13. Why do you think hangings done in public where thousands of people could come and watch?

Hangings were carried out in public until 1868 when they moved into a private area near what is now our [Decorative Arts/Teapot galleries](#).

Q14. Why do you think the government stopped public executions?

Place of burial

Murderers were not allowed to be buried in a churchyard in order to ensure their souls did not get to heaven. Instead their bodies were brought back up to the prison and buried along the West wall. Their graves are marked with their initials and year of execution.

[View the wall and Rush's grave marking](#).

The museum today

Despite having been re-designed and re-built in 1822, by the 1880s the prison was outdated. It was decided to move the prison to the former army barracks on Mousehold Heath in Norwich (which is still a prison today) and convert the old buildings into a museum, which opened in 1894.

The museum's collections today are designated as being nationally significant and include archaeology, fine and decorative arts, natural history and geology. For a trail of the museums' highlights, please visit:

[Objects of local, national and international significance](#)

Answers to questions:

Q1. Men and women were not separated.

Q2. People who were innocent or charged with very minor crimes may well become influenced by those charged with serious crimes.

Q3.

Good things	Bad things
Pump Bath Airy, separate rooms for the sick Humane and respected gaoler Prisoners can sell own wares to earn money Matron Surgeon Good bread Sermons	Flooded dungeon Women and men not separated when 'delicacy would most of all require it' Fees for inmates to stay in the gaol Fee ('garnish') to leave Fees to enter Fees for a bed or to share a bed with one or two others!

Q4. People used candles and fire to light and warm the rooms.

Q5. Soane's new features included separate cells and yards for men and women as well as debtors, a gaoler's house, a chapel and a Shirehall (for trials).

Q6. The gaoler's house was in the middle of the gaol so he could oversee all the prisoners.

Q7. The Silent System was incredibly hard to police.

Q8. The energy created from treadmills wasn't supposed to be used for anything as a reminder to prisoners of how futile their crimes had been.

Q9. Prison jobs:

Turnkeys: they would have quite literally have turned the keys of the cells, locking or unlocking the cells.

Taskmaster: they would have overseen the hard labour tasks prisoners were forced to partake in, such as the treadmill, oakum picking, etc.

Schoolmaster: this man would have taught inmates basic reading, writing and maths skills. The schoolroom was where the current museum shop is.

Porter: this man would have moved anything that needed moving around the prison.

Miller: this man was responsible for milling the corn from the treadmill (when it was used for such) for the prisoner's bread.

Q10. There were 240 cells in new the prison buildings and 36 in Keep so 276 in total.

Q11. A tunnel and staircase was built to link the cells with the courtroom for convenience but also for security – the prisoners may have escaped or been attacked when taken around the outside.

Q12.

A = Jury box

B = Judge

C = Witness box

D = Lawyers

E = Dock

Q13. Governments thought holding public executions would deter people from committing crimes. It also became a form of entertainment!

Q14. The government realised that public executions didn't deter criminals and could cause public disorder such as riots, or more crimes, such a pickpocketing.

Norfolk Museums Service is a partnership between Norfolk County Council and Norfolk's District Councils, funded through council tax, earned income and grants.

