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## **Newgate: London's Prototype of Hell Transcript**

Date: Monday, 12 October 2009 - 12:00AM

Location: Museum of London

**Tyburn, 1696: with triple tree etc..**



# **Newgate: London's Prototype of Hell**

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## **Early punishments**

Until the nineteenth century prison *sentences* were a comparatively unusual feature of the English penal system. The functions of a prison, as a rule, were twofold. The first was to hold prisoners for a short period awaiting trial before magistrates or, in the case of Newgate, before a judge and jury. Trials were usually short. In the eighteenth century trials at the Old Bailey, which was conveniently situated next to Newgate prison, lasted on average eleven minutes. This process was helped by the availability of witnesses who stood outside the court with bits of straw protruding from their pockets or shoes as a signal that they were prepared to give evidence for whichever side was prepared to pay them: hence the expression 'men of straw'. Following trial the prisoner was either released upon being found not guilty or held for a brief period before punishment was carried out. Typical punishments were flogging, mutilation, the pillory, transportation or hanging.

## **Five Newgates**

There were five separate prisons at Newgate during its long history. The first prison was the gatehouse in London's Roman Wall through which travellers were admitted to the City itself. Its use as a prison dates from the twelfth century and the reign of Henry II, the father of the English legal system. In the fifteenth century the prison had fallen into such disrepair that the mayor of London, Richard Whittington, left money in his will for it to be rebuilt, after which the prison was often referred to as 'The Whit'. In 1628, faced with the enduring problem of prison overcrowding, an 'early release' scheme was instituted by Charles I whereby prisoners could be freed provided that they enlisted in the army or navy. Whittington's prison, which featured a statue of the mayor accompanied by a cat, survived until it was destroyed by the Great Fire of 1666 and by the 1770s its successor, the third prison, was itself in a poor state of repair. A fourth Newgate was therefore built but enjoyed a very brief existence since it was destroyed in the Gordon Riots of 1780. The fifth and final Newgate, which arose from the ashes of the fourth, survived until 1902 when it was demolished to make way for an enlarged Old Bailey. Some of its walls survive behind the Old Bailey itself.

## **'A merciless race of men'**

In the twenty-first century, when the state is responsible for so much of our lives, it is hard to imagine the mentality of governments before the reign of Queen Victoria who considered that their duties were simply to defend the kingdom and administer the monarch's courts. Education, transport, health and indeed the running of prisons were matters to be left to private enterprise. The governor or 'keeper' of Newgate would buy the right to run the prison by paying as much as £5,000 to the government. He would then recover his investment by imposing exactions on the prisoners. For example he would charge them for removing shackles or for moving them from the room where corpses were kept to more salubrious accommodation. Further charges were made for food, beer, bedding or the services of a prostitute. Wealthy prisoners could be accommodated in the governor's own house. Further sources of income were derived from spectators who wished to view the incarcerated prisoners, an especially high price being charged for the entry to the chapel to attend the 'condemned service' the night before executions, when those due to hang the following day would sit in the 'condemned pews' from which they had a clear view of a coffin in the middle of the chapel to remind them of what awaited them. It is not surprising that the jurist William Blackstone described gaolers as 'a merciless race of men, steeled against any tender sensation'.

## **The Newgate processions**

After the service the condemned were led back to their cells, to be woken at midnight by the sexton of St Sepulchre's church,

opposite Newgate, ringing a bell outside their cells and reciting a verse that was designed to instil repentance rather than good cheer:

'All you who in the condemned cell do lie,  
Prepare you, for to-morrow you shall die;  
Watch all and pray, the hour is drawing near  
When you before the Almighty shall appear;  
Examine well yourselves; in time repent,  
That you may not to eternal flames be sent.  
And when St Sepulchre's bell in the morning tolls,  
The Lord above have mercy on your souls'.

The following morning the 'Newgate procession' would set out for the place of execution at Tyburn, on the present site of Marble Arch. The prisoners would travel in carts, led by the highwaymen who were the acknowledged aristocrats of the criminal fraternity, followed by murderers, rapists and thieves, with traitors, drawn on hurdles, bringing up the rear. The streets would be lined with spectators, often drunk, shouting encouragement or abuse to the occupants of the carts, throwing missiles (dead cats being particularly favoured for this purpose) and offering to buy drinks for the condemned. The procession would indeed stop at numerous taverns on the route so that, with luck, the prisoners would themselves often be drunk before they reached Tyburn. This was fortunate since, until the introduction of the 'Newgate Drop' in 1760 which brought about instant death by breaking the neck, most prisoners died by strangulation, often taking 15 or 20 minutes to do so and urinating in the process: or, as the spectators called it 'pissing when you can't whistle'.

And the spectators were numerous. An enterprising lady erected stands called 'Mother Proctor's Pews' charging as much as £10, a huge sum in the eighteenth century, for the best seats. Once death had mercifully arrived there would be a stampede towards the corpses amongst which three rival groups could be discerned. First there were those suffering from warts who believed that the 'death sweat' of the prisoners would relieve this condition. They sought to collect the perspiration from the skins of the corpses. Secondly there were the beakles of the College of Surgeons and the London teaching hospitals who wanted the corpses for dissection. Finally there were the friends and relatives of the executed who wanted to spare them such indignities. Fisticuffs were commonplace.

### **'Executions are intended to draw spectators'**

In 1783 executions were moved from Tyburn to a scaffold outside Newgate because of public concern about the disorder arising from the Newgate processions. Dr Samuel Johnson was not impressed arguing that 'Executions are intended to draw spectators. If they do not draw spectators they do not answer their purpose. The old method was most satisfactory to all parties; the public was gratified by a procession; the criminal was supported by it. Why is all this to be swept away?' Not everyone agreed. James Boswell, Johnson's friend and biographer, was 'most terribly shocked' by his experience of watching an execution. Once the hangings were removed to Newgate they continued to be watched by large crowds until 1868 when they were moved to within the prison itself. In the meantime, both Charles Dickens and William Thackeray had witnessed executions outside Newgate and found them degrading. 1,106 men and 49 women were hanged within Newgate between 1868 and the demolition of the prison in 1902. No reliable figures for the earlier period exist but the numbers would have been inflated by the 'Bloody Code' which, by 1830, had made over 300 crimes subject to the death penalty including such bizarre ones as impersonating a Chelsea Pensioner and damaging Westminster Bridge.

### **Reform**

In the 1820s Sir Robert Peel, as Home Secretary, removed the death penalty from many crimes so that by 1860 only four capital crimes remained: murder, treason, arson in the queen's docks and piracy. At the same time a prison building programme began with the intention of imprisoning and reforming criminals. Early attempts to reform were based on the 'Panopticon' prison advocated by Jeremy Bentham and his many followers. These were large prisons in which wings radiated from a central, circular tower, a system of mirrors enabling one prison officer in the central tower to observe all prisoners in their cells on his floor. This was supported by the 'silent' and 'separate' systems of imprisonment whereby prisoners were allowed no contact at all with

other prisoners and in many cases were not allowed to see them either, even the prison chapel being designed so that no prisoner could see his neighbour. These harsh conditions reflected the belief that criminal behaviour could be contagious and pass from one convict to another; whereas isolation would oblige them to reflect upon their wicked ways and reform. In fact many were driven insane by the regime. Diet, on the other hand, was so generous that the huge Millbank prison, on the present site of Tate Britain, was known as 'the fattening house' and the diet had to be cut back.

Eventually more humane counsels prevailed. John Howard (1726-90) campaigned for an end to the process whereby 'keepers' bought their offices and charged prisoners for basic amenities though Howard himself died from an infection acquired while visiting prisons in Russia. Elizabeth Fry (1780-1845) was so moved by a visit to Newgate that she instigated such reforms as education for female prisoners and their children, attracting the support and admiration of many, including Queen Victoria. In the twenty-first century we still struggle to fulfil her vision of prisons which produce better people. Newgate may have gone but many of its grim traditions survive.

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