

# CRIME AND PUNISHMENT

# IN CAMBRIDGESHIRE

**A**rticles and letters in national and local newspapers often express concern and indignation at present day leniency to law-breakers. But do we really wish to see the harsh sentences of the old days return? Long terms of imprisonment, transportation to the penal settlements in Australia, execution, were penalties imposed for, in many instances, minor offences, and although imprisonment might be thought the least terrible of these punishments, the conditions of gaols in the past increased the severity of the sentences.

The first Town Gaol in Cambridge adjoined the Guildhall — or Tolbooth. It housed both felons and debtors, while later on the Spinning House, founded by Thomas Hobson on part of the site now occupied by the present Police Station, served as the Bridewell to which young or first offenders were committed. In 1790 a new Town Gaol was built behind the Spinning House and this, in turn, was replaced in 1827 by another erected in Gonville Place, overlooking Parker's Piece. This was demolished in 1878, after which, until 1916, short-term prisoners were committed to the County Gaol.

There had been a County Gaol as early as 1317 in part of the Castle on Castle Hill; nearby, in the Castle Yard, was the Bridewell. A new prison was built in 1802 and pulled down in 1929.

Descriptions of both gaols in the past make painful reading. John Howard, the Bedfordshire sheriff, shocked by the conditions he found in the prisons which he had to visit officially, set himself the task of inspecting and reporting on all the prisons in the British Isles, a mission which did not always endear him to the gaolers.

Between 1773 and 1782 he visited Cambridgeshire six times. In the Cambridge Town Gaol he found a small room, 7 feet by 21 feet, known as "The Hole", in which hardened criminals were confined, and above it "The Cage" where debtors and felons were huddled together. There was no exercise yard and no water supply, amenities which he found lacking also at Ely and Wisbech. In the Cambridge Bridewell he found a case of gaol fever, the highly infectious disease which resulted from the insanitary, overcrowded living conditions and which frequently caused death among the prisoners.

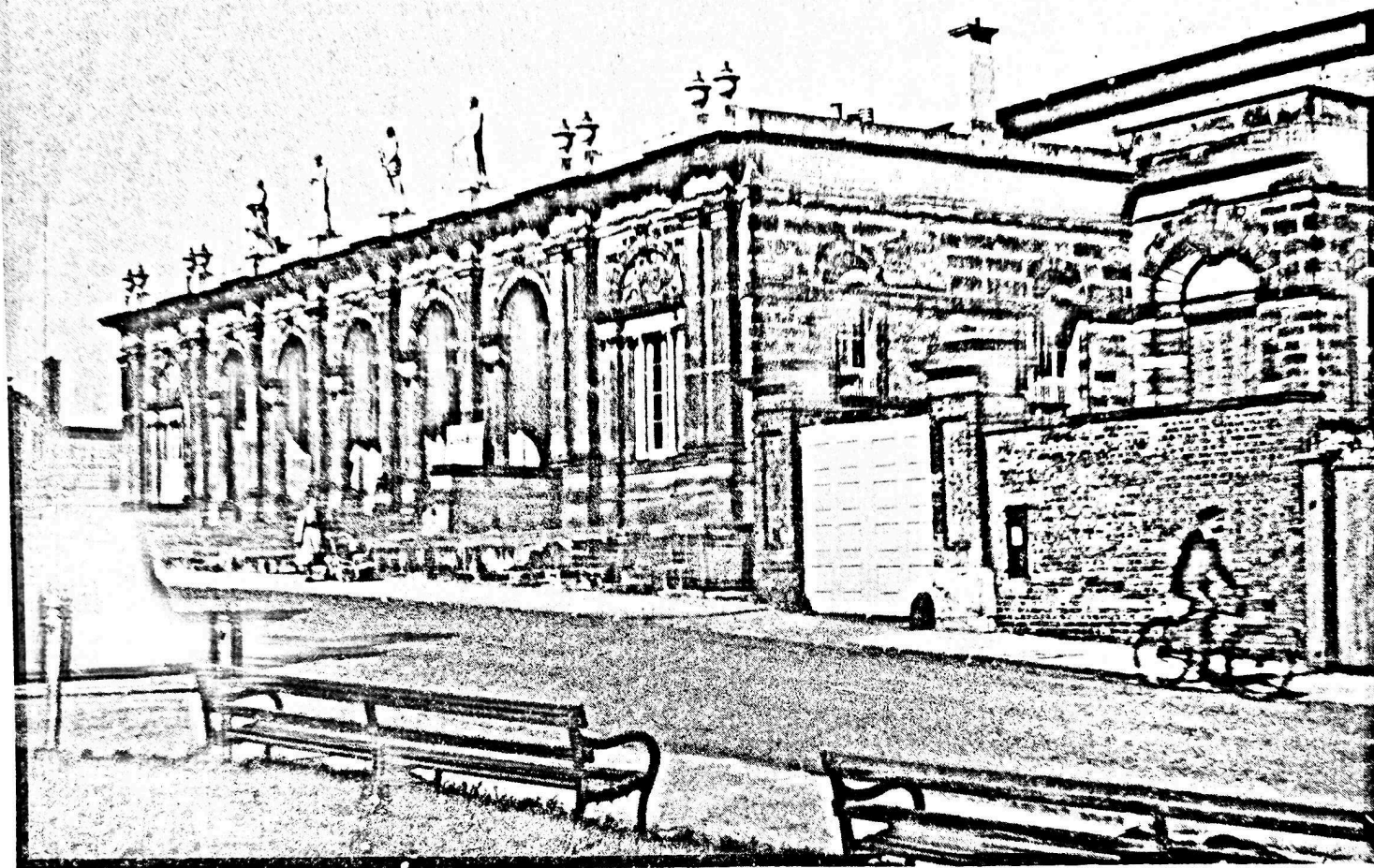
Things were little better in 1800 when a Mr. Neild, who also visited the gaols throughout the country, came to Cambridge. There was by this time, however, a water supply in the Town Gaol and he was able to report: "I had the pleasure to find the Cage had fallen into the Hole and both were a heap of ruins." But he found the Bridewell dirty and in a bad state of repair. Both Neild and Howard were able to write more favourably on conditions in the County Gaol and Bridewell, but even here, despite regulations drawn up in 1808 to improve prisons, a treadmill for grinding corn was installed in 1821. It was reported to the Home Office that it was good for maintaining discipline although the prison surgeon claimed that it increased the sickness rate among the prisoners.



DAN<sup>L</sup> DAWSON.  
*now confined in Cambridge Goal  
on a charge of poisoning Horses at Newmarket.*  
*Drawn from life in the prison.*

*Daniel Dawson who was executed in Cambridge  
in 1812.*

In the Town Gaol in Gonville Place conditions were equally bad. Suicides among the inmates occurred not infrequently, while on many occasions prisoners were flogged. A boy of 13 was so punished for stealing bread, while confinement in the "Black Hole" is recorded as being the punishment for such offences as stealing the prison comb and getting into a clean bed while still wearing boots and trousers. The threat of the "Black Hole" was sufficient to make one prisoner, who had already received 24 lashes for refusing to work, agree to take his turn on the treadmill. Queen Victoria and Prince Albert visited the prison in 1843:



*The Old Assize Courts on Castle Hill, Cambridge, with, on the right, the entrance to the County Gaol.*

one can only suppose that much was hidden from the royal couple.

Over the centuries countless men, women and even children were committed to the gaols of both Town and County, some for serious offences which were to bring them eventually to the gallows, others for petty crimes to which they must often have been driven by the despair of poverty or unemployment. In 1812, for example, a Fulbourn woman, Unity Mott, was imprisoned for stealing two handfuls of gleaned corn; to keep her company were two men in their 60's who had stolen 8 ducks at Histon. In the same year a man convicted at the Assizes of sheep stealing and sentenced to death, had his sentence reduced to imprisonment with hard labour for two years.

At the Cambridgeshire Assizes held in July, 1835, James Disberry of Melbourne, who had been in the County Gaol since April for having cut 4 inches off the tongue of a mare, was sentenced to 7 years transportation, and two Cambridge men were each given a year's hard labour for stealing one silver teaspoon, a sixpence, a linen handkerchief and "a little toy basket". A like sentence was imposed on another

Cambridge man, James Carney, for the theft of a mahogany tea caddy valued at 3/- and a corkscrew worth one shilling.

## **Black Sheep of Cambridge family**

At the Lent Assizes of 1843, among the 38 prisoners tried, was John Frederick Mortlock, the "black sheep" of the famous Cambridge banking family, but a popular hero in the town. He was accused of the attempted murder of his uncle and was transported for 21 years. While in Australia he wrote a diary which was published two or three years ago; it gives a vivid picture of life in a penal settlement. With him was sentenced to 15 years transportation a 13 year-old Burwell labourer, Thomas Bradley, for setting fire to corn and straw stacks in the village.

Richard Culledge, a Cambridge bricklayer's labourer, was sentenced to 6 weeks' imprisonment for the theft of 14 bricks; two 15-year-old labourers of Steeple Morden were sentenced to a whipping and a month's hard labour for the crime of stealing two silk pocket handkerchiefs, and a Little



Eversden labourer was transported for 21 years for entering a house with intent to steal. A butcher of March, John Stafford was given 12 months hard labour for hitting a man on the head with a poker, while a Cambridge girl of 16 was sentenced to 9 months hard labour for stealing four pennyworth of cheese, the same punishment being given to James Reynolds of Cambridge for the theft of a dead hare and two dead pheasants valued at ten shillings. Even as late as 1888 two Cambridge boys, aged 15 and 16, were gaoled for 7 days for stealing fruit. It was their first offence, but a third boy of 16, convicted for the second time of larceny, received a 14 day sentence.

## Executions in Castle Prison

The majority of executions in Cambridge were carried out at the Castle prison — the County Gaol; only one man was hanged at the Town Gaol in Gonville Place. In early times, however, the gallows was usually erected on Butt Green; the Corporation Treasurers' accounts contain such items as:

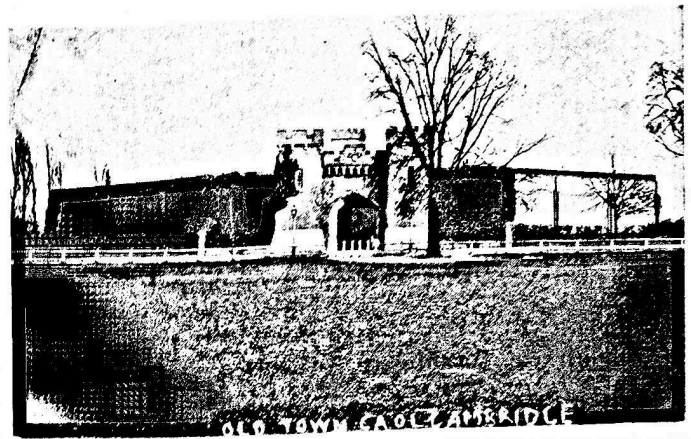
- 1486. Timber bought for making a gallows for thieves to be suspended . . . . . 16d.
- 1564. For carrying the gallows to the grene and bringing them agayne to the tolbooth . . . . 8d.
- or 1592. For setting up gallows & burying the prisoners . . . . xviiijd.

Not all those executed had been convicted of murder. In 1763, for example, William Johnson, aged 20, was hanged at the Castle for committing a burglary at Harston; in 1812 William Nightingale, *alias* Bird, was hanged for forging a £5 note, and in the same year Daniel Dawson suffered the same penalty for poisoning a horse at Newmarket. John Lane was executed in 1824 for rape and William Osborne in 1829 for highway robbery at Elsworth, while three men were hanged in 1830 for arson. Three years later John Stallen was hanged, also for arson. He confessed to having been the cause of ten fires in Shelford over a period of five years, his excuse being that he earned six shillings at each fire for working the engine!

## Godmanchester man hanged

Among those hanged for murder at the Castle was Thomas Weems in 1819. A native of Godmanchester, he deserted his wife two days after the marriage and went to Edmonton where he met and fell in love with another girl. He later returned to Godmanchester and persuaded his wife to go back with him to Edmonton; she agreed to do so but, on their way there on foot, he murdered her in a field at Arrington and hid her body in a ditch. After his execution his body was taken to the Lecture Room in the old Botanic Garden in Free School Lane, Cambridge, where various galvanic experiments were made on it; it was then dissected and, on the following day, exhibited to the public.

People from Cambridge and miles around witnessed the actual hanging, for executions were public spectacles and attracted large crowds. It was estimated that 15,000 came into the town on April 13th, 1850 when Elias Lucas and Mary Reader were hanged for poisoning Lucas's wife at Castle Camps. The last man to be executed in public in Cambridge was John Green in 1864, for the murder at Whittlesey of a girl whose body he attempted to burn in the furnace of a malting.



## Later Executions not public

Executions were later carried out in strictest privacy, but even then morbid crowds gathered to listen to the tolling of the prison chapel bell and to watch for the hoisting of the black flag that was the signal that the hangman's task was completed. Crowds gathered on Parker's Piece on December 14th, 1876 when Robert Browning, the only person to be executed at the Town Gaol and the first in Cambridge to be hanged in private, went to the gallows for murdering a young girl named Emma Rolfe on Midsummer Common.

Twenty-two years elapsed between Browning's execution and that of Walter Horsford at the County Gaol in 1898. A Spaldwick farmer of 26 and member of a well-known Huntingdonshire family, he had seduced his widowed cousin, Annie Holmes, who lived in Stoneley. Two months after his marriage to another girl Mrs. Holmes wrote to Horsford to tell him that she was pregnant; he promised to call on her to see what arrangements could be made.

On January 9th, 1898, Annie Holmes went upstairs to bed, taking with her a glass of water. Shortly afterwards her daughter found her writhing in pain; within an hour she was dead. A post-mortem proved that she had died of strychnine poisoning and her room was searched. Under her mattress was found a paper packet containing a large dose of the poison and bearing the inscription, in Horsford's handwriting: "Take in a little cold water, it is quite harmless", while under the bed was discovered a second packet, half empty, with the words on it, also in Horsford's writing: "One dose; take as told."

On June 14th, 1910 the last man to be hanged at Cambridge County Gaol was James Hancock found guilty of the murder at Chesterton of Alfred Doggett.

People who gathered for the execution were disappointed, the practice of ringing the bell and hoisting the flag having been discontinued. The gallows last used on this occasion was sold when the County Gaol was demolished in 1929; it is now in private ownership at Histon.

After Hancock's crime there were no murders in Cambridge until 1920 when a Miss Lawn, keeper of a little general shop in King Street at the corner of Milton's Walk, was brutally killed with one of her own kitchen choppers. The police were unable to bring a conviction against anyone, but some Cambridge residents, on a visit to London shortly afterwards, were much surprised to see a man standing by a barrow in Oxford Street with a placard round his neck announcing that he was "The Cambridge Murderer."