

GAOL CALENDARS OF GLOUCESTER GAOL 1796 - 1810

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The Gaol Calendars are records of all the prisoners confined within the Gaol, broken down into four main sections. Details of prisoners up at the Quarter Sessions and those who will be committed to the Assizes. Prisoners tried, sentenced and serving their terms in the Gaol and local Bridewells; and those awaiting transportation. These are recorded with their names, age, offence and sentence.

The Quarter Sessions cases chiefly concerned theft of food and clothing, minor theft, assault and Poor Law Offences. In the period of time studied here two-thirds of the committals to court were for theft, but only just over half were convicted and sentenced. In the cases of assault, again, just over half were convicted and sentenced; one interesting case of assault was that of an 80 year old man, Thomas Bayley, who was accused of 'violently assaulting, abusing, beating and putting in bodily fear, Ann Jones' - indeed a remarkable old man. Many Poor Law offences were those of husbands being brought before the court for leaving their wives and families chargeable to the parish. Rogues and vagabonds were usually imprisoned for one day, unless they were 'incorrigible rogues and vagabonds' who could be imprisoned for longer. The cases which often conceal a much more involved story are the ones in which parish Overseers of the Poor brought an appeal before the court concerning those found illegally out of their legal place of settlement; they were often imprisoned for one month. Again, of the committals just over half were convicted and sentenced. Many of these convictions would be served out on the local Bridewells.

From the details given in the Calendars, it would appear difficult for a layman to discover on what criteria it was decided who would appear at the Quarter Sessions and who would appear at the Assizes. Murder and riot was obviously more serious, but in the cases of theft it is not always so apparent. For example, at the Epiphany Sessions on the 15th January, 1805 a man was transported for stealing eleven ducks.

Interesting facts of everyday life emerge even from these gaol records. There would appear to be as many women as men charged with assault. Employers were well protected by law from lazy or careless employees; a person in service was imprisoned for one to three months for staying out of the house two nights; one month for deserting a position; one month for neglecting a master's business. A three-month sentence was imposed upon one young man because he left his mistress's team (of horses) on the highway. On two

occasions the refusal to 'fulfil an engagement to weave a piece of cloth' incurred a sentence of one month and two months.

There was a case of the committal to trial of two Frenchmen charged with being aliens for they 'produced no passport as by law directed'. There was a general feeling of unease at this time because of events in France which led to the Revolution with the result that riot was treated quite seriously, and for this crime in 1801, one man was transported for fourteen years.

At Easter Sessions in 1810 six out of seven committals were for theft of hay, while again in May 1810 there were more committals on charges of stealing hay and wheat, so one is left to wonder whether perhaps either the harvest had been bad or the winter extra severe.

Many small but interesting stories appear - Jonah Hawkins was in Lawfords Gate for one month for threatening to leave his family. In 1798 Thomas Robinson was transported for life convicted of sacrilege; a Mary Robinson, who could have been a relative, was imprisoned for three years for contempt of the consistory Court, and again one wonders what exactly they had done. Two women were imprisoned for breaking down a workhouse door! In July, 1805 four young women were before the court for 'wandering abroad lodging in outhouses'. Hannah Lintern was given three months for neglecting poor children in her care, so it is obvious that the Overseers of the Poor kept a watchful eye on the children boarded out.

Young men were often whipped or pilloried at the end of their sentence, the pillorying taking place in Gloucester on market day between the hour of twelve noon and two o'clock. Poaching was punished by three months in the local Bridewell and the game stolen was usually rabbits or hares, but one reads occasionally of a deer being taken from one of the large estates in the area. On conviction for petty theft some young men were offered enlistment to His Majesty's Forces as an alternative to prison, but one wonders at the attractiveness or not of the idea when young men are also imprisoned for not reporting to the Militia for service, and for being absent without leave.

Given the Gaol Calendars to study one is naturally led to be interested in the Gaol in which the prisoners were confined. The work of Sir George Onesiphorus Paul features largely at the end of the 18th Century and into the 19th Century. He led the Gloucestershire magistrates in the building of a new County Gaol to replace the old goal which had been situated in the old castle. When Sir George first began to be interested in the condition of prisoners he found that their general treatment was very

indifferent. They intermingled together all the time whether or not they were convicted, whether they were men or women, ill or well. Gaol fever was rampant from time to time because of the bad conditions. The plans for the new gaol were carefully drawn and every detail studied. The building was to be divided into three main sections, one for the prisoners awaiting trial, one for felons under sentence of death and one for debtors. Provision was made for an infirmary and a chapel, and the men to be separated from the women. An interesting picture is given by a visitor to the gaol not long after it was opened, his name was the Rev. Samuel Vince, a much-travelled clergyman who came to Gloucester in 1796. He kept a meticulous record of all his journeys and he comments on the social aims of Sir George. The gaol was not only a new building, it was a new concept in the treatment of prisoners, where previously they appeared to be just confined in bad conditions for the term. stated, Sir George aimed to reform to some degree their characters. The Rev. Vince tells us that work was found for them to do, and before their trial one half of their wages was paid to them. Debtors were given the opportunity to work off their debts. However, difficult prisoners were put into solitary confinement on a diet of bread and water, but the Governor was not willing to admit that solitary confinement increases the risk of suicide. He summed up his impression of the Gaol thus, 'Wonderfully calculated for the punishment, penitence and reformation of Criminals who were secluded from society. By the habits of industry, sobriety and regularity which they learn in this confinement must be rendered good members of society. The security of the persons, the regularity of their meals, the method observed in their work, the circulation of air and conveyance of the water render the place most worthy of the observation of the traveller'.

You'll all have heard of Gloucester Gaol
But it would you much surprise
To see the prisoners in the yard
When they're on exercise.
The yard is built around with walls
So noble and so strong
Whoever goes there has to bide
Their time, be it short or long.

(Paraphrase of 'Durham
Gaol' by Thomas Armstrong)
Thomas Armstrong)

Sources

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