



Prison Registers in Institutions And Organisations

Prisons were often in old buildings, such as castles. They tended to be damp, unhealthy, insanitary and over-crowded. All kinds of prisoners were mixed in together, men, women, children; the insane; serious criminals and petty criminals; people awaiting trial; and debtors. Each prison was run by the gaoler in his own way. He made up the rules. If

you could pay, you could buy extra privileges, such as private rooms, better food, more visitors, keeping pets, letters going in and out, and books to read. If you could not, the basic fare was grim. You even had to pay the gaoler to be let out when your sentence was finished.

Law and order was a major issue in Victorian Britain. Victorians were worried about the huge new cities that had grown up following the Industrial Revolution – how were the masses to be kept under control? They were worried about rising crime. They could see that transporting convicts to Australia was not the answer and by the 1830s Australia was complaining that they did not want to be the dumping-ground for Britain's criminals.

Discovering your ancestor in prison records doesn't necessarily make them a hardened criminal, nineteenth century law was harsh and children as well as adults were imprisoned for minor misdemeanours. These records are often very detailed and can include physical descriptions of height, weight and eye colour.

	Surname	Given Names	Age	Trade or Occupation	Degree of Instruction		
Accused	Bath	Thomas	24	Labourer	Reads and writes imperfectly		
Birth Year	1859						
	Surname	Given Name	Title	Address			
Committing Magistrate	Saunders	T. B.	Esq.	The Priory, Bradford-on-Avon			
Court Held at	Marlborough						
Name of Victim (1)	Comley	Eliza					
Date of Warrant	1883	25-Jul					
When Received into Custody	Bailed on Committal			Date of Trial	1883	18-Oct	
Offence as Charged in the Commitment	Indecently assaulting and ill-treating Eliza Comley, at Westwood, on the 10th July 1883						
	Surname	Given Names	Address				
Before Whom Tried	Smith	Thomas Chaloner, Esq.	Chilton House, Hungerford, Chairman				
Verdict of Jury	Pleaded Guilty of a common Assault						
Sentence or Order of the Court	Imprisonment with hard labour for seven days						

OPC Note:

The Devizes County House of Corrections was opened in 1817 after taking seven years to build, and was the replacement for The Old Bridewell. It was located on the west side of Devizes, near what is still called Prison Bridge over the Kennet and Avon Canal.

The prison, designed by Richard Ingleman, was a polygon of brick and stone with the governor's building in the middle. There were 210 cells, 16 yards, two infirmaries and a chapel. After a report identifying the lesser treatment of women, new cells were built in 1841 for them, as well as a laundry room, day room and separate infirmary. From 1823 the prison also featured a treadmill that milled corn outside the prison walls. Cells measured 10 feet high, 7½ feet wide and 8½ feet long; women's cells were slightly smaller. Labour included treading corn, whitewashing, baking, cooking and cleaning. Later additions to the facility include a schoolhouse in 1842, ten additional cells and an extension to the chapel in 1867.

Devizes Prison again became the only prison in Wiltshire after the closure in 1868 of Fisherton Anger gaol, just outside Salisbury. The prison was handed to the state in 1877. Between 1912 and 1914 the prison was used only for prisoners on remand. It was a military detention barracks from 1914 until 1920, when it fell completely out of use. In 1921 Devizes Prison officially closed. The building was sold the next year and demolished in 1927.

Most prisons had a treadmill or tread wheel installed, where the prisoner simply walked the wheel. In some prisons, such as Bedford in the earlier part of the 19th century, the treadmill provided flour to make money for the gaol, from which the prisoners earned enough to pay for their keep. However, in later times, there was no end product and the treadmill was walked just for punishment. It became loathed by the prisoners.

Another equally pointless device was the Crank. This was a large handle, in their cell, that a prisoner would have to turn, thousands of times a day. This could be tightened by the warders, making it harder to turn, which resulted in their nickname of 'screws'. These punishments were not abolished until 1898.