



KS4 Historic Environment: Norwich Castle gaol, prison and courtroom virtual trail

Welcome to Norwich Castle! The Castle Keep was built by the Normans as a defence and royal palace. For more information, please [watch this Norwich Castle Keep Virtual Keep Tour](#). [You can also have a virtual look around the Keep](#).

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 the Castle became one!

On the following pages you'll find a virtual trail around Norwich Castle Museum and Art Gallery. Please click on the underlined blue words to take you to relevant resources. Answers to questions can be found at the end of this document.

[You can find further information and resources on the Historic Environment OCR B \(SHP\) Criteria page](#).

The County Gaol

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

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

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

Q2. Why might this be a bad idea?

From drawings, we know that by the late 17th Century, a house for the gaol governor had been built on the mound. [View a drawing of the Keep and governor's house](#). It is thought that the hall built to the north of the Keep in the 1280s was converted into a Shirehall courtroom but that it burned down in 1746 and was rebuilt in 1749. [Take a look at a drawing of the Castle and associated buildings](#) and then [view Norwich Castle and 'Sessions House' in 1786](#).

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 in the 18th century, 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 by reading the graphic panel called John Howard and Prison Reform.](#)

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

Q4. Make your own report from Howard's by listing the nine good things about the gaol and then the six bad things.

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, in 1819 a competition was begun to design a new gaol at Norwich Castle.

Local architect William Wilkins won the competition to redesign Soane's gaol. He also won £100. His winning design was inspired by reformers at the time who wanted to separate the different types of criminal as well as men from women. [View an 1880s image showing that Wilkins kept Soane's cells inside the keep](#) (although he only kept three out of the four levels due to cracks in walls) and added an exercise yard. Wilkins also added new gaol buildings to the north and east of the Keep, as you will [see from a model of Wilkins' gaol](#). You can also see it if you [view his floor plan](#) and [watch the Norwich Castle Prison Story film](#).

[Take a look at how the site of Wilkins' buildings looks now, in the area we call the Rotunda.](#) The link takes you to the site of the gaoler's house. [View an image of the gaoler's house as it was](#). The cell blocks (now the museum's archaeology, natural history and art galleries) radiated out from the gaoler's house. At this time, there were 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 out from the gaoler's house in the centre?

New punishment

The new gaol coincided with a massive change to the justice system in this country. Due to pressure from the aforementioned reformer John Howard and others, the Home Secretary during the 1820s, Robert Peel, decided to replace a lot of publicly humiliating punishments and hangings with imprisonment, in an attempt to reform the criminals' characters. 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 was chosen: the silent system or the separate system. At Norwich, the prison first employed the silent system. This meant that although prisoners worked together in day rooms at the Rotunda end of each cell block, they weren't supposed to communicate with each other.

However, from the 1850s, the prison replaced the silent system with the separate system, which meant that prisoners stayed in their cells to work, except for attending chapel (which was on top of the gaoler's house), going to school (where the present-day shop is) or to exercise. The day rooms were converted into more cells. [View the site of the present-day shop.](#)

Q7. Why do you think the prison preferred the separate system to the silent system?

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 were forced to do pointless and hard work such as using the treadmill. The treadmill was like a giant hamster wheel, but for humans. Three were located in rooms at the front of the Castle. [See the site of the rooms today \(the windows to the right of the Castle main entrance\).](#) The energy created by these mills was first used to grind corn for bread and then used to turn the 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 space in 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 this poster about prison job descriptions in 1829.](#)

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

Q10. [Read William White's description of the gaol in 1845.](#) How many cells were there in the new prison buildings, 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. The courtrooms were linked with the prison via a spiral staircase of 56 stairs and a tunnel. [View the tunnel](#). The tunnel is accessed nowadays by doors in the Decorative Arts and the Wider World gallery. [View the doors in the 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](#).

Trials continued to be held in these courtrooms until 1988, when the courts moved to new buildings between the Cathedral and the river. These courtrooms 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 work out where the following people sat, using the positions marked A, B, C, D and E in the photo?

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

Trials

In April 1848, the most famous trial of this courtroom took place. It was of James Blomfield Rush and he had been charged with double murder! To find out what happened, [read James Blomfield 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. Thousands of people could watch from below the mound or from the baileys which, by the 1730s, had been levelled out and become a cattle market. [View an artist's impression of the Castle and surroundings](#). We think a record-breaking 20,000 people watched Rush die. [Read James Blomfield Rush's execution report](#).

Q13. Why do you think hangings were 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. [View the Decorative Arts and Teapot galleries as they are today.](#)

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 redesigned and rebuilt 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. The museum 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 museum's highlights, [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 might have become influenced by those charged with serious crimes.

Q3.

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

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 very 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 the new prison buildings and 36 in the Keep so 276 in total.

Q11. A tunnel and staircase were built to link the cells with the courtroom for convenience but also for security – the prisoners might 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 as pickpocketing.

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

