



THE NORTHGATE: TERRORS UNDER LOCK & KEY

WORDS: MATTHEW BRIDSON IMAGE: BRITISH LIBRARY ARCHIVE

Cheshire's Northgate stands on the highest point in the city, and commands views across the many spires and rooftops, above the glittering waters of the Dee, and over to the towering hilltops of Wales.

This article, however, has nothing to do with these lofty heights. Instead, it concerns the Northgate's dark and terrible depths.

Scratch just beneath the surface of this picturesque city, and its dramatic and grisly history is revealed. Scratch deeper still, into the bedrock itself, and you'll uncover forgotten horrors more disturbing than any siege or battle.

Up until the beginning of the 19th century, the word 'Northgate' would have filled the heart of every Cheshire resident far and wide with dread. You see, for the best part of a millennium, an imposing Norman gate stood on this spot, described in historical accounts as 'a dark and narrow passage, under a pointed arch'. Upon and, most notably, beneath this claustrophobic gatehouse, was the source of all that fear: 'a mean and ruinous gaol' (i.e. jail).


Here, in this terrible place, prisoners suffered conditions and punishments as medieval as the walls that surrounded them.

A visiting prison reformist arrived to Northgate Gaol in the late 1780s to find the convicts and those awaiting trial 'in irons at the neck, hands, waist and feet, and chained to the floor.' There was even a terrifying pair of iron gloves, ready to encase someone's hands at a moment's notice.

Only a single, measly portion of bread was given to prisoners each day – so measly, in fact, that the gaol's felons and debtors were permitted to beg passers-by for scraps.

The city archives are full of coroner's reports recording the "natural deaths" of the gaol's inmates; there's little doubt that a good deal of these were brought about by the ill treatment received there.

Nevertheless, with our law enforcing ancestors clearly possessing >>



a proclivity for locking people up, fresh inmates weren't ever in short supply. From rape and assault, down to petty theft, religious preaching, and even the baking of substandard bread, the hand of the law in Chester applied a pretty much all-encompassing approach when it came to passing sentence, whatever the crime.

As a result, a large majority of the county's convicted criminals would wind up at the Northgate – if they'd somehow managed to avoid the ever-popular noose, that is.

Where thievery was concerned, Cestrians were thrown into gaol for pilfering a motley array of goods, through the ages: purses, dishes, cloth, silver spoons, horses, boots, barley, hats, petticoats, pieces of beef... The list goes on and on.

In 1555, one John Newall was fined £10 and imprisoned for three months, for the distinctly curious crime of having worn a velvet cap with a silk mantle, which, for a man of his humble social standing at that time, went against an act of parliament.

For most of its existence, Northgate Gaol was overseen by the city's two Sheriffs, over whom the mayor held authority. Shameless abuse of power was normalised behaviour amongst officials and citizens were basically at the mercy of the Mayor's fickle whims.

A prime example of this is the unfortunate case of Mr Edward Morgan. This 17th century Cestrian decided to complain to the Mayor about abuse he'd received from a drunken man. However, because he didn't take off his hat whilst he did so, the Mayor had him tossed into a prison cell. The drunk, apparently, got off scot-free.

During a person's incarceration in the Northgate, justice was thoroughly dispensed in the most inhuman ways imaginable.

One account, describes a 'horrible dungeon', known as Dead Man's Room, located in the rock-hewn bowels of the gaol, some thirty feet beneath street level, 'to which the only access of air was through pipes, which communicated with the street. In this frightful hole, prisoners under sentence of death were confined – itself a living death.'

Though it was usually reserved for the condemned, a poor soul was once laid in irons and thrown into this pit, in which 'a snake, and other venomous creatures, were seen', for a period of over thirteen gruelling weeks, 'until the stench and nastiness of the dungeon had well-nigh suffocated him.'

If you think the Dead Man's Room sounds bad, though, it gets far, far worse. The most notorious cell of all for Chester's

incarcerated went by the name of Little Ease.

A small cavity carved out of the rock face and covered by a heavy door, its proportions reveal the horrifying depravity of its design: less than 3 feet across, 4 ½ feet high, and 7 inches from door to back wall, with an additional inch at head height and an extra inch and a half at chest height. If this weren't bad enough, a sadistic system of wooden boards also meant that the alcove's height could be reduced even further, to just three feet.

This hellish recess was a place in which inmates would be torturously left in irons for hours at a time. The agonising physical pain and unimaginable mental trauma of confinement in the utter blackness of such a monstrous cell must have been enough to break even the strongest of spirits.

Over the course of 1657, an outspoken Quaker named Richard Sale was repeatedly shut up in Little Ease. Being what a chronicler described as 'corpulent', it took four men to violently force him into the narrow cavity, 'in doing which they crushed him, till the blood gushed out of his mouth and nose.' Unsurprisingly, after weeks of bodily suffering, he later died of his wounds.

Northgate Gaol served the city until as late as the first years of the 19th century, when the new City Gaol was built on the site of what is now the Queen's School. The ancient, crumbling, and utterly detested former gaol was finally demolished. In its place, the elegant, Neo-Classical gateway we see today was built, and the Northgate's dreaded subterranean dungeons were filled in, forever burying this dark passage of Chester's history.

Today, the only visible clue of the gaol's existence is an inconspicuous stone footbridge that spans the canal beside the current roadway. Leading nowhere, this easily missed arch was used by Northgate Gaol's condemned. Shortly before their execution, they would cross here to pray for the forgiveness of their sins in a chapel that once stood on the site of the Blue Coats School.

Prisoners having to face up to the reality of their fate on this stone crossing earned it the macabre nickname, the Bridge of Sighs. Local legend dictates that the sighs of the condemned can sometimes still be heard on the wind by those by that stop and listen long enough.

So, the next time you're passing through the Northgate, think on those grim, sunless places deep beneath your feet, and be grateful for the times we were born into, for the sun on your face, and for the fresh air you breathe. 🐉

