



Here at ghost-of, we enjoy a good break as much as the next person.

Whilst on holiday a while back, we stayed in a little place called St. Tudy, which is just up the road from Bodmin, the home of one of the most iconic buildings in the UK, the world famous Bodmin Gaol.

The following text is from [Jackie Freeman's Photography page on Bodmin Gaol](#): it sums things up very well, is very descriptive and frankly says what I can't be arsed to write just at the moment.

In the late 1700's Britain's grim debtors prisons were the most terrible places that convicts or felons faced, side by side with remand prisoners, vagrants, homeless, debtors, miscreants, unmarried mothers and the local riff raff. They were horrible jails with large numbers of prisoners crammed into desperate communal dungeons. Bodmin's debtors prison and sheriff's ward, which was no better than most, would eventually be closed, making way for a brand new Bodmin Jail complex proposed by the forward thinking High Sheriff of Cornwall, Sir John Call. Bodmin's ruling town Burgesses agreed then to provide land for the building of the new Bodmin Gaol, in an area of fields in the town known as Berrycombe, in order to replace the old Bodmin debtors prison and Sheriff's Ward, which stood on the site of what is now the Hole in the Wall Pub in Bodmin. At this time, there was no formal police force to keep law and order in Bodmin. The formation of an official police force was to come much later thanks to PM Sir Robert Peel and it fell to the locally appointed sheriff to keep a watchful eye on any mischief or "goings on" in town.

In 1778, an act of parliament was being passed providing the finances and permissions for a new, purpose built 'house of correction' to be built in Cornwall. Recommendations suggested that it should be built on a site recommended for the jails construction in a town called Bodmin, a garrison town which could provide the prison inmates with 'clean air and pure water.' In 1780, Bodmin's Gaol became one of Britain's first purpose built prisons to be opened. The great British prisons were nicknamed Bridewell's after London's premier Gaol and as Bodmin's Bridewell opened its doors for the first time to Cornish criminals, the name stuck.

It was Sir John Call who saw the Bodmin prison completed by Napoleonic prisoners of war in 1779. It was inevitable that the influence of the French builders would have a major bearing on how the jail would finally look and why Bodmin's Châteauesque features still dominate the Bodmin skyline today.

So it was that the building of Bodmin's new jail, designed according to the great vision of John Howard, began. There was a huge problem to overcome in that the land on which Bodmin's new Jail would stand had never been surveyed by the original architect. Howard's drawings of the prison buildings of Bodmin were set out almost romantically, with perfectly aligned and formal Georgian facades neatly laid out on totally flat land and there was a real situation brewing, because these were the ornamental drawings that were given to the builders!

So, the prison builders of Bodmin had a bit of a problem. Their final interpretation of the new Bodmin Jail was naturally going to be somewhat different to the original plans which weren't really plans at all. In the main, the problem rested with the steepness of the hillside and unevenness of the land on which the gaol was eventually built and from which its stone was quarried.

Bodmin's new gaol of the time was said to be an elegant set of buildings, purpose built to include a Chapel, workshops, an infirmary, an administration block, kitchens and courtyards all built in order to house up to a hundred inmates. However, it rapidly became very clear to the authorities that the new prison buildings at Bodmin just weren't big enough to cope with the demand for prison accommodation. Remember, this was a time where criminal committals to Bodmin jail were increasing rapidly, so over the ensuing years, more and more of the Gaol at Bodmin was constructed and alterations to the old prison buildings made, leaving us with much of what we see today.

Around 1819, a huge increase in petty crime was descending upon Cornwall which was to put even more pressure on the overcrowded prison at Bodmin. The two main reasons for this being simple abject poverty and the prevailing air of gross intolerance amongst magistrates. Another key factor was the Formation of Bodmin Association, essentially Bodmin's first recognisable police force.

By 1836, Bodmin Jail's capacity had increased from just 60 to 177, increasing the population of the prison from 100 men, women and children to over twice what it was designed for, in the event that some cells were double occupied, going against all reformist advisory, protocol and prison rules.

By the mid 1850's it was clear that big changes needed to be made and the prison had to be seriously extended. Much of it was demolished, the materials recovered and reused. Bodmin Jail now had a main kitchen, a mill and a laundry with huge workrooms, administration offices and a Chapel. The Main Civil Prison Block contained a cell block section for males and a separate one for females.

The newly constructed Naval prison block was linked to the main site nucleus by means of a first floor covered walkway. It had its own administration office, store rooms, a further kitchen and an infirmary built over part of the old gaol dungeons. The prison at Bodmin also now had three separate exercise yards.

A year later, the main gateway and staff quarters had been added, with the addition of stables and a cart house, part of which would one day become an execution shed. There were new houses constructed for the navy's administration officers and impressive Victorian villas built for the two most important men at the prison, the Governor and the Chaplain. These were built outside the prison walls which themselves had by now been strengthened, heightened and massively enlarged.

Today, if you take a look inside the now derelict shell of the old Naval Block, you would find it every inch as awe inspiring as it is dreadful. Once massive slate balconies supported on metal posts, which still can be seen today protruding from the walls, were the only access the prisoners of Bodmin jail had to the 4 floors of tiny cells. To prevent suicides amongst the inmates of Bodmin jail, iron bars and wire mesh was stretched along the length of the balconies and the 2 1/2 inch thick wooden cell doors were reinforced with solid steel.

Life in one of Britain's most secure Victorian prisons, Cornwall's great and austere Bodmin Gaol was hard, harsh and mercilessly unforgiving for its inmates.

Britain's prison reformists had proclaimed that the then dreadfully overcrowded communal jails and sheriffs ward's of England and Wales should be outlawed once and for all and new penitentiaries built to house and isolate their inmates separately in single sex cells. These were designed with each cell contained within large and airy cell blocks and with new stringent prison disciplines upheld. It was an imposed life of strict silence with no communication, the most basic and measured diet and hard labour being the norm.

Men, women and children were caged here cell by cell in Bodmin Gaol in desperately harsh and grim conditions, often their minimal crimes being met with cruel and unforgiving sentences demanded by the local magistrates of the time. So what exactly did penal servitude in Bodmin's Jail mean for its early convicts? Total isolation, ruthless enforcement of absolute silence, the terrible discomfort of a solid plank bed, a demeaning and meagre diet of bread and gruel and perhaps an onion and the deprivation of all previously known human privileges to start! Here in Bodmin's sinister jail, many a prison inmate would see out their days broken and dispirited but for some of Bodmin's Cornish prisoners, young and old alike, their desperate days were rapidly ticking away.

Public executions in the forboding prison at Bodmin were not uncommon and morbidity in Bodmin town bred a strange follower in those times. However, the tens of thousands of Cornishmen and women who were avid supporters of Bodmin's executioners and hangmen were no exception to the rule.

In later years, train loads of people flocked from far and wide across the whole of the west country to witness and mock the terrible ordeal of the condemned prisoners of Bodmin Jail. To ogle and cheer at the crack of the trap and here at Bodmin, the gallows would be erected as it always was, in full view of the jeering public for years to come. Steal a sheep, an apple or some grain in Cornwall and be sure, the hangman's noose could indeed seal your fate.

In Bodmin jail's defence, it's equally true to say that many of Bodmin's condemned criminal element met their end on the gallows for horrendous crimes. No less than 35 souls going to the hangman for various degrees of murder on the Bodmin gallows alone. All in all, at least 69 men and women were put to death here by the Bodmin hangman. Probably more.

Of the balance of executions that took place at Bodmin jail, it's worthy to look back at the sort of crimes that the condemned prisoners paid the ultimate penalty for. Remember that back then, theft of any sort was not to be tolerated by society and was viciously punished.

Perhaps the earliest tantalizing reference to the original Gaol at Bodmin in 1779, appears in the background of an 18th Century oil painting of Sir John Call. Although the image of the prison may be only a representation by its artist & based loosely upon the original designs, its as close as we get. No early drawings or engravings seem to have been made, or survived in history.

Bodmin Jail is run in the present day as a successful Cornish tourist attraction and important historical venue that includes a licensed bar and restaurant with a substantial part of the jail rebuilt and regenerated by the current owners to its original state. Serious ongoing excavations at Bodmin Jail are constantly uncovering more and more British history, with the jail unravelling its secrets and giving up its history to many academics who are drawn there.

One such example is a tunnel lying deep underground: perhaps once a walkway from the old judging rooms of the first prison to the dark holding cells and dungeon or maybe a secret tunnel, only known to the jail's very first officers. It is also a major tourist attraction for ghost hunters and paranormal investigators: such a building as this would invariably be a hothouse of emotional turmoil. The grounded or residual spirit energies of the poor inmates have resulted in numerous paranormal reports and ghost sightings and there are regular ghost walks and overnight ghost watches, run by an in-house paranormal investigator. Bodmin Gaol has been subject to an intensive investigation by TV's Most Haunted, a link to the video of which can be found [here](#).

In this day and age it is ridiculous that with so many vestiges of British history to discover and rediscover here, assistance is not forthcoming for further research and development through either Lottery, Government or National Heritage funding.



































































