

Investigation at Bodmin Gaol 7th September 2022

Background

While it may not be immediately obvious to those heading past its walls, the dominance of Bodmin Jail over the surrounding landscape is symbolic of its role in local history and folklore.

Between 1779 and 1927, Bodmin Jail - or to use its alternative name Bodmin Gaol - started life with its construction by prisoners of war, with the prison being the first British prison to hold prisoners in individual cells.

Over the 150 years it was the place where some of Cornwall's more notorious prisoners were incarcerated, as well as F Digby Hardy, a Plymouth born Naval writer, journalist, soldier, career criminal and would-be spy during the Irish War of Independence.

During the First World War the walls of the jail was entrusted with some of Britain's most treasured of national possessions, such as the Domesday Book and the Crown Jewels. More notoriously, the Jail was home to over 50 public executions, with the spectacle it offered being so popular a railway station was built nearby to ferry in spectators to watch the death sentences being carried out.

With 55 executions and hundreds of prisoners within its walls during its time as a prison for crimes from stealing to rape and murder, it's safe to say there is a lot of darkness within its historical walls. The first two inmates to be taken to the gallows at Bodmin Jail were William Lee and John Vanstone, both convicted of burglary.

In July 1909, the final hanging at the jail took place, with William Hampton executed for taking the life of his 17-year-old girlfriend after an argument. He was also the last man hanged in Cornwall.

Here are some of Bodmin Jail's famous prisoners.

Charles Bronson not the actor but the more famous convict from Luton Bedfordshire spent time within these walls in recent times.

Elizabeth Osborne

Scorned and seeking revenge on her former employer, John Lobb, on May 28, 1813, three years after being discharged from his employment, Elizabeth Osborne set fire to Mr Lobb's mow of corn.

It is reported she showed no remorse for her crime, boasting to others of what she had done. While arson now is considered a lesser offence, in 1813 it was considered a capital felony as a serious fire could have had serious consequences for the owner of the property.

On August 16, 1813, Osborne was sentenced to death for her crime, with her cause not helped by a US grain import halt due to the war of 1812-15. Her execution took place on September 6, 1813, with her hanging watched by a large crowd of people.

Sarah Polgrean

Convicted on August 10, 1820, and executed on August 12, 1820, Sarah Polgrean's crime was to murder her husband.

A consequence of an unhappy marriage with a previous life of vagrancy after being abandoned by her parent, on July 15, 1820, she paid a visit to the apothecary to purchase arsenic, claiming it was for poisoning rats in the house.

The intended recipient was her husband. Mixing the arsenic in with a piece of butter spread on her husband's bread, Henry Polgrean died from the poison. Her fate wasn't just sealed after the execution - for the judge also sentenced her to dissection in aid of the medical profession.

The Lightfoot Brothers

It was this execution that attracted one of the jail's biggest crowds with over 25,000 people coming to watch the death of the Lightfoot brothers, on April 13, 1840, for the crime of murdering Nevell Norway, a local merchant by striking and beating him on the head with a pistol and a stick, with Mr Norway dying from multiple mortal wounds.

The public's demand for the execution was so great that 1,100 occupants of a train carriage watched the execution from the train, which had stopped on the railway line adjacent to the jail.

While some crimes have reduced in severity for their consequences in the years that have since passed, such as arson, one crime that hasn't is murdering a child. That's exactly what Selina Wadge was executed for in 1877, becoming one of only four women to be hanged for murdering their child between 1868 and 1899.

An unmarried mother of two illegitimate sons, of which one was partially crippled, Wadge was almost as low in the Victorian social spectrum as it was possible to get. Claiming to be in a relationship with a former soldier called James Westwood, Wadge and her two children hitched a lift with a local farmer to allegedly to get to the rendezvous point. However, she was to return to the workhouse with only one child, her elder child, John.

Initially claiming her boyfriend had taken her younger son, Harry, and drowned him in a well while threatening her and John, the crime was rumbled when her son told workhouse nurses that his mother had killed his brother and put him in a pit. A police search for Harry saw them discover his body in three feet of water at the bottom of a 13-foot well shaft in Mowbray Park. Later, Wadge confessed to the murder, but said that Mr Westwood had persuaded her to kill Harry in return for marrying her if she did, a claim he strenuously denied.

Upon her trial in July 1878, it took the jury merely 45 minutes to find her guilty, with a recommendation for mercy on account of how she'd previously looked after her children ignored by Mr Justice Denman, who sentenced her to death. Her execution was the first private execution at Bodmin Jail, with Wadge's last words being "Lord deliver me from this miserable world".

Matthew Weeks

A prisoner for merely ten days before his execution at the jail, Matthew Weeks was convicted of murder in one of the most notorious crimes to rock Victorian Cornwall.

On April 14, 1844, a body was found on the desolate and bleak Bodmin Moor. The body, of Charlotte Dymond, 18, a pretty domestic servant working on a farm near Roughtor brought scandal to a rural location. It's said that Weeks was the spurned lover - Dymond had attracted another suitor, Thomas Prout, 26, the nephew of Penhale Farm's owner, where she worked.

Days after Dymond was declared missing, suspicion fell on Weeks for her disappearance - he'd returned on that day alone with a torn shirt and muddied trousers. He told the household Dymond had been offered a position in Blisland and had set off with the intention of staying at an acquaintance's house on the way.

A week later, Dymond's body was discovered, with the cause of death a deep cut to her throat from ear to ear. A warrant was issued for Week's arrest, but he'd disappeared to Plymouth, planning to flee to the Channel Islands. It was a crime that shocked the community who demanded justice.

After being located, Weeks pleaded not guilty to the murder, but the jury returned a guilty verdict, with a sentence of hanging.

On August 12, 1844, Weeks was hung in front of a crowd of several thousand outside the Jail and buried in the prison's coal yard. While the local community were in no doubt of his guilt, some in the years since have questioned the guilty verdict, claiming the murder was suicide and his 'confession' dictated due to his illiteracy was fabricated.

Until recently, there was a mock courtroom experience in the Shire Hall, formerly the crown court in Bodmin where visitors could watch a re-enactment of the trial and decide his fate for themselves.

The Executions

With 55 executions taking place within the walls of Bodmin Jail, it's little wonder that some have claimed that the walls are a hotbed for the paranormal.

Early executions prior to the jail took place at Bodmin Common, to the edge of the town. It was in 1802 that executions came to the jail, with drop gallows being used in the field outside of the front of the jail.

Early executions were more a form of torture before death rather than the instant death many people associate with execution, with a new method called 'standard drop' or 'short drop' being used between 1834 and 1856. This method ensured a slow, painful death for those being executed, with it not breaking the vertebrae in the neck, it left the condemned to die by strangulation.

The initial drop used was declared illegal by the Inspector of Prisons due to the fact the hangings weren't public enough, with the main gate pointing to the North East, it wasn't visible and this led to the drop being moved to the South Wall to allow for large numbers of people to witness the executions from the nearby Asylum Hill.

In 1868 the law changed again, with all executions required to take place in private, bringing to an end to the spectacle of public execution.

Later changes to executions at the Jail saw the introduction of a more instant method of death, with the prisoner's neck being broken instantly at the end of the drop, resulting in death from asphyxia while unconscious, known as a 'long drop' and pioneered by William Marwood.

New gallows were constructed in 1897, with a new execution pit being housed in an execution shed, with the pit still remaining to this day and forming part of the attraction. It was restored after being discovered during renovation works in 2005.

Reference: <https://www.cornwalllive.com/news/cornwall-news/dark-evil-bodmin-jail-history-4550188>

Paranormal Background

Bodmin Jail has inspired many ghost stories, attracted paranormal researchers, and ghost walk events are held for tourists there.

Series 6, Episode 1 of *Most Haunted*, a British-made reality TV show, saw the crew attempt their paranormal activities at the jail with presenter Yvette Fielding and medium, Derek

Acorah. After many unsuccessful attempts, the team supposedly made contact with many light and sound entities,
whilst Acorah claimed to have been possessed by a spirit named Kreed Kafer, a South African.

It was later revealed that "Kreed Kafer" was a fictional character, who was created purely by parapsychologist and crew member Ciarán O'Keeffe, to test Derek Acorah and his abilities. The name was created because it was an anagram of the phrase 'Derek Faker'.

Misconceptions about Witches

Misconceptions

Witches were burnt at the stake

False: While it is the case that those convicted of witchcraft were burnt at the stake in Scotland and Europe, in England the method of execution was hanging. The exception to this were those women convicted of petty treason. Petty treason was an act against a social superior, for women, their husbands. This particular crime carried the penalty of death by fire until 1784.

The last person to be burned as a witch in Scotland was Janet Horne at Dornoch in Ross shire in 1727.

Witches were dunked on stools to establish their guilt.

False: The story of the ducking stool is complex and confusing, and subject to various local usages right up to the early 19th century. While in some places women (and some men) were ducked on stools in order to establish whether or not they were witches, the more common means of identifying them was to throw them into the water with a rope attached to see whether or not they floated. Witch swimming, as this was known, was the practice of tying up and immersing the accused into a body of water to determine whether they sink or float. Sinking to the bottom indicated that the accused was innocent while floating indicated a guilty verdict.

Cucking stools or ducking stools were chairs formerly used for punishment of disorderly women, scolds and dishonest tradesmen.

Helen Duncan or Hellish Nell

The last person to be imprisoned under the Witchcraft Act of 1735 (the Act that said there was no such thing as witchcraft, just people who fake it) was Helen Duncan or Hellish Nell in 1944 – Helen was a medium, famous for producing ectoplasm which was later proven to be made from cheesecloth. This act was repealed by the Fraudulent Mediums Act 1951 which prohibited a person from claiming to be a psychic, medium or other spiritualist while attempting to deceive and to make money from deception (other than solely for the purpose of entertainment). In turn it was repealed by the Consumer Protection from Unfair Trading Regulations 2008. This is why shows such as 'Most Haunted' carry a disclaimer at the beginning.

The Daytime investigation begins...

Whilst accompanying a public group touring the location the investigator located behind the group became aware of a partial apparition on the blue staircase behind him. Turning around he was amazed to see a pair of well-polished shoes coming down the stairs where the group had just been as if following the group. Whilst this Apparition was not anywhere near fully formed the shoes themselves were observed to come down a few steps before disappearing altogether.

The investigator did try Stone recording (The **Stone Tape** theory is the speculation that ghosts and hauntings are analogous to tape recordings, and that mental impressions during emotional or traumatic events can be projected in the form of energy, "recorded" onto rocks and other items and "replayed" under certain conditions. The idea draws inspiration and shares similarities with views of 19th-century intellectualists and psychic researchers, such as Charles Babbage, Eleonor Sidgwick and Edmund Gurney.

British archaeologist turned parapsychologist T. C. Lethbridge, who believed that ghosts were not spirits of the deceased, but were simply non-interactive recordings similar to a movie). Unfortunately, on this occasion the investigator was unable to pick anything up near the stairwell.

During the rest of the tour the investigator did pick up on spiritual energy at a outside spot between the buildings leading to the execution chamber and whilst in the execution chamber itself the investigator sensed spiritual energy in the tunnel area leading off from the bottom of the execution pit itself as if trying to tell the public who briefly looked into the pit that it was watching them and an air of sadness was also picked up on.

Whilst the investigator was unable to access other areas that may have produced more activity there was still enough to investigate as daytime investigations go....