

Fig 1: the Compter Prisons of London and other gaols mentioned in the text.
 Key to sites: A, Bread Street Compter 1429-1555. B, Giltspur Street Compter 1791-1853. C, Ludgate gatehouse demolished 1760. D, Newgate gatehouse demolished c 1778-1781. E, Newgate gaol 1784-1902. F Poultry Compter 1393-1817. G, Southwark Compter – St Margaret’s Church c 1550-1716. H, Southwark Compter – Tooley Street 1717-1852. I, Whitecross Street debtors prison 1815-1870. J, Wood Street Compter 1555-1797.

The Compter Prisons of London

Bruce Watson

FOR CENTURIES London has possessed more prisons than any other English city, partly because of its size, but mainly because of its role as the capital and the home of the central law courts. In 1623 John Taylor, in a poem on London’s prisons, counted 18, including three Compter prisons – two within the City of London and one in neighbouring Southwark¹.

The word Compter is derived from “counter” – the counting or keeping of records. During the 17th century the official spelling was standardised as Compter. The word also referred to local civic law courts run by a mayor or a sheriff, thus it was also used to describe the institutions where the prisoners of these courts were held before trial or for punishment².

1. John Taylor *The praise and virture of a jail and jailers* (1623) quoted in R. Byrne *Prisons and Punishments of London* (1989) 2-3.

2. Oxford English Dictionary vol. 3 (1979) 108.

The medieval Compter prisons would simply have been large town houses, not purpose-built structures. The usual practice was to rent out the management of a prison to a keeper, who housed the prisoners in his own property and was then able to exploit them by practices such as charging rent and selling food. Latterly the Compters were owned or leased by the city authorities who rented out the franchise.

The Compters housed a variety prisoners – of both sexes including “debtors”, “felons” or petty offenders, and “nightcharges” – drunks and vagrants arrested by the nightwatch for disturbing the peace. Sometimes state prisoners were held in the London Compters, for instance the July 1580 Privy Council list of recusant prisoners listed people held in the Poultry and Wood Street Compters³.

By the 18th century the debtors’ accommodation within the London Compters was divided into two categories – the “masterside” for the better-off and the “commonside” for the poor. Thanks to free enterprise the London Compters were run as exploitative hostels until they were reformed during the 19th century.

During the reign of Henry I (1100-1135) the City of London obtained the right to appoint two sheriffs (one for the city and one for the county of Middlesex)⁴. However, both officers appear to have been based in the city and each seems to have controlled a compter prison. From medieval times the City of London authorities also controlled two other prisons – the gatehouses of Newgate and Ludgate – until their demolition (to improve the traffic flow) in the late 18th century (Fig. 1, sites C, D). Newgate was mainly a criminal prison

3. C. Dobb *Life and Conditions in London Prisons 1553-1643* (1952) unpublished B. Litt. thesis Oxford Univ. (Bodleian Library Ms. B. Litt. d. 417).
4. Birch (ed.) *The Historical Charters and Constitutional Documents of the City of London* (1887) 3-4. As the charter gave the city jurisdiction over Middlesex, seems probable a second sheriff was appointed for the county, but this not stated in the charter. The first charter of Henry III – 18th Feb. 1227 refers to the “sheriffwich of London and Middlesex”, Birch *op cit* 21.
5. Newgate gaol was mentioned in a charter of 1327: Birch *op cit* fn 4, 53.
6. Birch *op cit* fn 4, 59-60; D. J. Johnson *Southwark and the City* (1969) 93-129.
7. Dobb *op cit* fn 3, 96.
8. Johnson *op cit* fn 6, 129-130. The site of the church, TQ 3261 8012, is now occupied by Town Hall Chambers, 32-34 Borough High Street.
9. Johnson *op cit* fn 6, 130. The Compter stood along Mill Lane, off Tooley Street: TQ 3308 8023. Since the 1860s its site has been part of the Hay’s Wharf Warehouses, now converted to a shopping centre.

for those awaiting trial or execution, while Ludgate was mainly a debtors prison. Ludgate housed a special category of debtors – Freemen of the City of London and their widows.

The Southwark Compter

The Southwark or Borough Compter served the five parishes which comprised the borough. It appears to have been established soon after 1550 when the Bridgemasters (the Bridgehouse estates) took control of the city’s properties in the borough. The city had already been granted peace-keeping rights in Southwark in a charter of 6th March 1327⁶. The appointment of a keeper of the Southwark Compter is documented in 1559⁷.

In the late 16th century the Southwark Compter lay within the former parish church of St Margaret’s, which also housed an assize and admiralty court (Fig. 1, site G)⁸. In 1608 the Compter was enlarged by converting an adjoining house. In 1676 it was destroyed in the Borough High Street Fire and rebuilt in 1685. In 1717 a new prison was built in Tooley Street (Fig. 1, site H)⁹.

The Tooley Street Compter had an inscription over the gate, dated 1716, that described it as the “Borough Court”, implying that originally it served dual func-

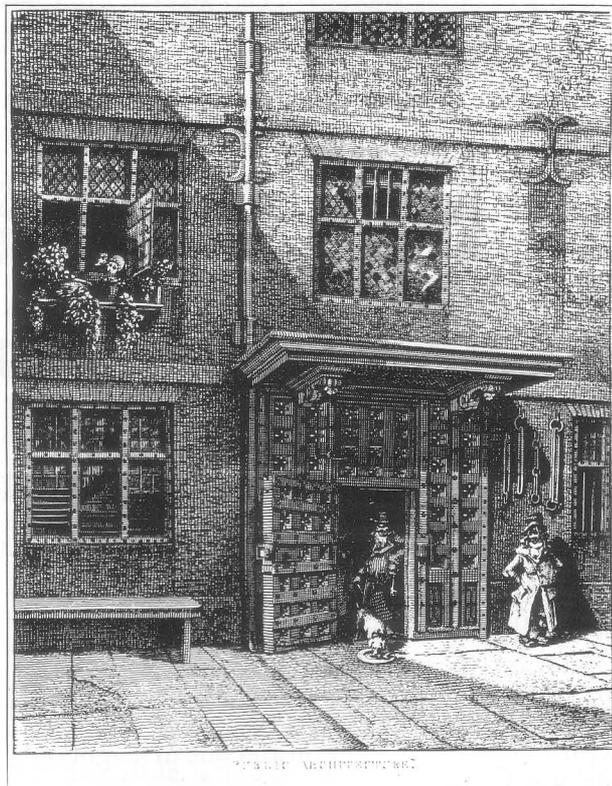


Fig. 2: the entrance to the Poultry Compter in 1811. (source: *Some Account of London*, Pennant)

tion as both court and prison. In November 1776 it housed 15 debtors and 1 felon. It was described as “much out of repair, and ruinous”¹⁰. It was burnt down by the Gordon rioters in 1780.

The Poultry Street Compter

The Poultry Street Compter is first documented in 1393, it was rebuilt between 1387-1401¹¹. In the late 16th century it was described as “some four houses west from this parish church of St Mildred” (Fig. 1, site F)¹². It was extensively rebuilt in 1615, only to be destroyed in the Great Fire of 1666 and was rebuilt before 1682¹³. In December 1776 it housed 53 debtors and no felons. The masterside debtors occupied 15 rooms and the commonside debtors 6 rooms or wards. There were 3 additional wards for felons. Eight prisoners had their wives and 19 children living with them¹⁴. From 1804 due to its ruinous condition the Poultry Street Compter was only used for the detention of nightcharges (Fig. 2). It was demolished in 1815¹⁵.

Dr Smith who kindly provided medical care to the inmates of the Poultry Street Compter wrote in 1776 :- “the prison is very dirty, old, confined and extremely unhealthy ... Men and women, felons and disorderly people, are crammed together in one ward in the day, and at night lie on dirty boards in filthy holes almost unfit for swine. In this prison riot, drunkenness, blasphemy and debauchery echo from the walls; sickness and misery are confined within them.”¹⁶.

The Bread and Wood Street Compters

In 1412 one of the Compters was situated within the “Broken Seld” in West Cheap, a property described as a tavern in 1325¹⁷. By 1429 the Compter had moved to west side of Bread Street — behind a house

called the “Rose”, where it remained until it was relocated to Wood Street in 1555 (Fig. 1, site A)¹⁸.

The reason for the relocation of the Compter was ill-treatment of the prisoners by the keeper, Richard Husband. In 1550 Husband was sentenced by the Lord Mayor to a spell in Newgate gaol as punishment for his cruelty. However, this spell in gaol did not reform him and in 1552 it was discovered conditions in the Compter had not improved and that the keeper was offering overnight accommodation to prostitutes (banned from residing within the city) and thieves. The situation was only resolved in 1555 when the city authorities removed the prisoners from the Bread Street Compter to new premises in Wood Street — a converted house¹⁹. John Stow, who had been a juror in the 1552 inquiry, commented on the incident “that gaolers buying their offices will deal hardly with pitiful prisoners”²⁰.

Sadly the move to Wood Street did not stop the corruption and cruelty for long. In 1616 William Fennor was imprisoned in the Wood Street Compter. His recollections entitled “The Counter’s Commonwealth” describe how the gaolers exhorted money from prisoners for food, for lodgings and even as part of their discharge. He also described how the debtors, such as attorneys, cobblers and physicians plied their trades within the Compter to maintain themselves²¹. In 1814 nightcharges held in the Giltspur or Poultry Compter had to pay three shillings, six pence to their captors as a release fee. In the Southwark Compter the same fee was only two shillings²². This practice was abolished by 1818.

10. J. Howard *The State of the Prisons* (1777) 209.

11. A. H. Thomas (ed) *Calendar of Select Papers and Memoranda of the City of London 1381-1412* (1932) 203.

12. H. B. Wheatley (ed) *John Stow — The Survey of London* (1956) 235. St Mildred’s church was demolished in 1872. Today the site of the Compter, 31-33 Poultry: TQ 3262 8115 is occupied by the headquarters of the Midland Bank.

13. The date of this rebuilding is uncertain, but it happened before 1682 as the Poultry Compter was shown on Morgan’s map of this date as building No 582.

14. Howard *op cit* fn 10, 72.

15. *Brit. Parlia. Papers — Prisons vol. 7* Report on gaols in the City of London (1814) 265; J. Timbs *Curiosities of London* (1868) 691.

16. W. Smith *State of the Gaols in London and Westminster and Borough of Southwark* (1776).

17. C. L. Kingsford ‘Historical Notes on Medieval London Houses’ *London Top. Record* 10 (1916) 76.

18. K. Rogers ‘Bread Street, its Ancient Signs and Houses’ *London Top. Record* 16 (1932) 74.

19. Wheatley, *op cit* fn 12, 313.

20. Wheatley, *op cit* fn 12, 313.

21. Quoted in Byrne *op cit* fn 1, 52-4.

22. *Brit. Parlia. Pap. op cit* fn 15, 266-267.

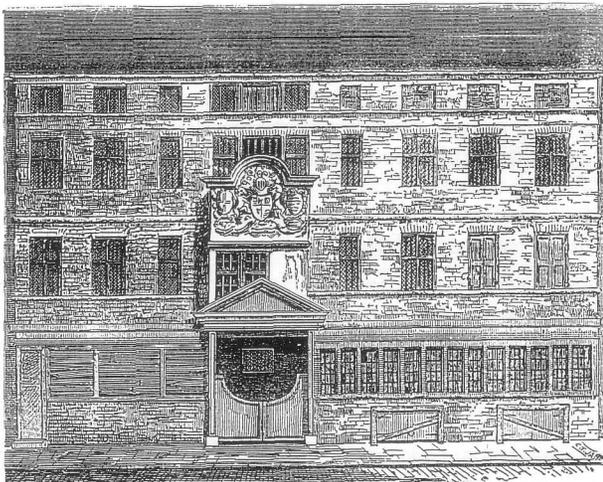


Fig 3: the facade of the 1670 Wood Street Compter in 1793. (source: copy of an engraving from *Antiquities of London*, Smith)

The Wood Street Compter was extended by the addition of several adjoining houses in 1569, making it the larger of the two Compters (Fig. 1, site J)²³. It was destroyed by the Great Fire of 1666, but rebuilt on the same site in 1670 (Fig. 3)²⁴. In January 1777 it housed 85 debtors and 25 felons. It was described in poor repair and very crowded with only two rooms for the commonside debtors, who slept on three tier bunks, while the masterside debtors occupied 23 rooms. The men and women felons were each confined to two rooms²⁵. The hall of the Compter was “hung with the story of the Prodigal Son”, doubtless this was intended to impress upon the inmates the possibility of redemption²⁶.

Another account of the Wood Street Compter in 1776 stated: - “the prison is dark, ... full of filth and vermin. There are no proper divisions for men and women, debtors and felons. This goal is in a very ruinous state²⁷”. The Wood Street Compter was closed in 1797, when its inmates were moved to the new Giltspur Street Compter.

Part of the brick barrel-vaulted cellars of the 1670 Wood Street Compter still remain below Mitre Court²⁸.

The rebuilding of the Compters

In April 1750 the Old Bailey Sessions were completely disrupted by an outbreak of “Gaul Fever” or epidemic typhus, which killed the Lord Mayor, two judges, an alderman, a lawyer, an under-sheriff, several jurors and 40 others²⁹. The overcrowded and insanitary conditions of detention in London prisons, sadly killed many untried prisoners, making a mockery of the judicial system.

The 1750 Sessions were the prime mover in the decision to rebuild the City’s prisons starting with Newgate. In 1769 it was decided to rebuild the prison and the adjoining law courts on the south side of Newgate Street, under the design and architectural direction of George Dance the younger, who had replaced his father as Clerk of Works to the city authorities in 1768³⁰. The new prison was almost complete in June 1780, when it was burnt by the Gordon Rioters, but was finished in 1784³¹. It was demolished in 1902 (Fig. 1, site E).

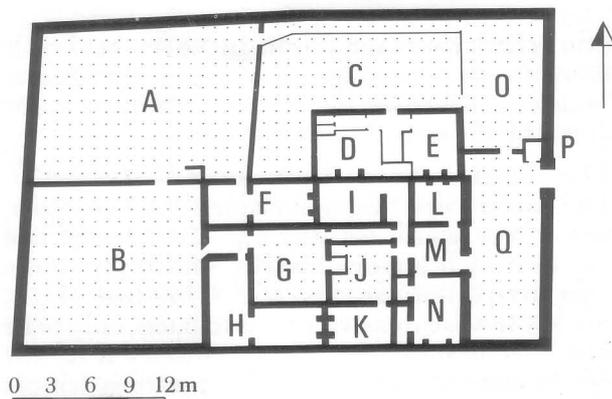


Fig. 4: ground plan of early 19th century Southwark Compter. (source: Guildhall Library L43)

Key: A, yard for misdemeanours and nightcharges. B, men debtors’ yard. C, womens’ yard. D, women felons. E, Matron’s room. F, women debtors. G, men debtors’ yard. H, men debtors’ day room. I, cells. J, men felons yard. K, men felons day room. L, office. M, lobby. N, kitchen. O, yard. P, lodge. Q, court.

The Southwark Compter

The Gordon Rioters also burnt down the Southwark Compter, this was rebuilt on a slightly enlarged site between 1785 and 1788 (Fig. 1, site H)³². The new Compter was designed by George Dance the younger and his first design consisted of one three storey block, containing 12 single cells per floor, each with a privy and a tiny exercise yard, plus communal accommodation for male and female debtors, on the top floor, with their exercise yards above — on the roof. This design was probably rejected by the city authorities on grounds of cost. However the main problem with the Tooley Street site was simply lack of space as it only measured c 27 by 42 m (90 by 140 ft) (see Fig. 4)³³.

By 1801 the new compter was in need of repair. In 1807 Mr Neild complained to the Lord Mayor about the food, the lack of bedding and washing facilities in the Compter³⁴. Poor security also appears to have been a problem in the Compter, judging by the number of published wanted posters (see Fig. 5). The rewards of ten or twenty pounds offered for the return of prisoners probably reflect the authorities’ embarrassment rather than the seriousness of the prisoners’ crimes. In 1848 the Compter was converted to a female prison — the

not open to the public, but are used as function rooms.

29. R. Evans *The Fabrication of Virtue, English Prison Architecture 1750-1840* (1982) 95.

30. D. Stroud *George Dance Architect* (1971) 81.

31. H. D. Kalman ‘Newgate Prison’ *Architectural Hist* 12 (1969) 51-2.

32. Stroud *op cit* fn 30, 108.

33. Evans *op cit* fn 29, 177-181.

34. *Mr Neild’s Remarks on the Borough Compter* (1807) Southwark Local Studies Lib. ref. PC365.3 comm file.

23. Dobb *op cit* fn 4, 94.

24. Howard *op cit* fn 10, 174, stated this date was inscribed on the facade.

25. Howard *op cit* fn 10, 174-5.

26. Timbs *op cit* fn 15, 704.

27. Smith *op cit* fn 16, 31.

28. RCHM *The City of London* vol. 4 (1929) 96. The vaults at 9 Wood Street: TQ 3232 8126 were formerly the premises of Norton & Langridge, Wine and Cigar Merchants. They are

TEN POUNDS REWARD.

Escaped

From the Borough Compter, Southwark, on Monday Morning, December 3, 1827, between the Hours of 12 and 3 o'Clock, CATHERINE GALLOWAY, otherwise SULLIVAN, otherwise MOORE, 31 years of age, about 5 feet 6 inches high, rather dark red hair, light grey eyes, sallowish complexion, long visage; had on when she went away a dark brown stuff gown, trimmed with red braid, an old chocolate silk handkerchief, white apron with pink flowers, white stockings, and an old light cotton shawl; also an old pair of leather shoes, the hind quarters tied over the instep with black tape.

The aforesaid is a native of Ireland, and has latterly been employed in carrying milk, and occasionally as a Basket Woman in and about the Borough Market and Billingsgate.

Whoever will apprehend and lodge her in any of His Majesty's Gaols, shall receive the above Reward, by applying to the Keeper of the aforesaid Prison.

*Borough Compter, Mill Lane,
Tooley Street, December 3, 1827.*

Robins and Sons, Printers, Tooley Street, Southwark.

Fig. 5: wanted poster for an escaped prisoner from the Southwark Compter.

(source: Southwark Local Studies Library PC365.3)

other prisoners were transferred to Giltspur Street. In 1852 the Compter was closed and it was demolished in 1855³⁵.

The Giltspur Street Compter

With the rebuilding of Newgate in hand, The Court of Common Council reviewed the condition of the Compter prisons, deciding that neither structure was worth repair and that both should be replaced by one new building. In 1787 new premises were acquired on the intersection of Giltspur and Newgate Street³⁶. Construction started later in 1787 and the Compter was ready for occupation by 1791, allowing the Wood Street Compter to be demolished in 1792 (Fig. 1, site B)³⁷.

Like the neighbouring prison of Newgate, the new Compter was designed and built by George Dance the younger. As many of Dances's drawings are preserved in Sir John Soane's collection it is possible to trace the design changes which occurred be-

35. W. G. G. Hunt 'The Southwark Compter' *Trans Guildhall Assoc* 5 (1982) 62-6.

36. Site location TQ 3185 8144. The fabric of the buildings occupying the site was sold by auction on 26th Jan. 1787, Guildhall Lib. pam Fo 5749.

37. D. Stroud 'The Giltspur Street Compter' *Architectural Hist* 27 (1984) 127-131.

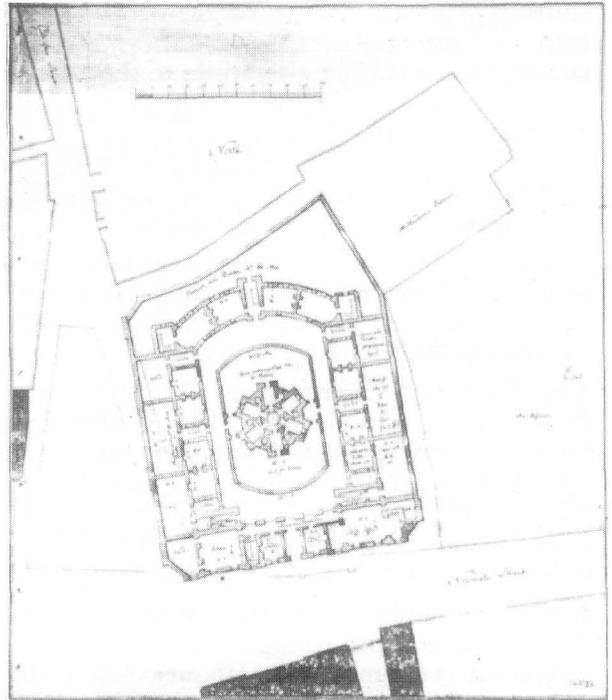


Fig 6: original architect's plan for the Giltspur Street Compter, c 1785.

(source: Dance Collection, Sir John Soane Museum)

tween the preliminary and final design³⁸. One preliminary design consisted of a quadrangle, within the centre of which was tall circular "tower" to accommodate the felons (Fig. 6). Later designs consisted of a large front wing fronting onto Giltspur Street and containing the sole entrance, with a number of other blocks arranged behind. Dance certainly had his problems as the city authorities wanted accommodation for 136 prisoners at a cost of only £15,120: a very small amount considering over £50,000 was spent on rebuilding Newgate before the Gordon Riots³⁹.

Further changes were made to the Giltspur Street Compter during construction – the crenellations were omitted from the facade and the layout of the rear blocks modified (Fig. 7). These changes consisted of the rearrangement of the accommodation for the men/women commonside debtors and men/women felons and were made between the proposed plans of June 1787 and the revised plans of September 1787⁴⁰. However, there are still several unresolved discrepancies between the ar-

38. Sir John Soane Museum, Architectural Drawings, Dance collection D4/3.

39. Kalman *op cit* fn 31, 50-1; Stroud *op cit* fn 37, 29.

40. Stroud *op cit* fn 37 does not mention the Sept. 1787 revisions to the plans. Dance collection *op cit* fn 38, ref. D4/3/3 and D4/3/37.

chitect's plans and the various early 19th century maps of the area (Fig. 8). Possibly these discrepancies are due to further alterations to the prison⁴¹.

In 1992 evaluation excavations on the site of the Compter located portions of the perimeter wall, plus part of the women felons and commonside male debtors accommodation. The ground storey of the debtors block had a shallow brick floored cellar, a feature which was not shown on any of architect's drawings. Some of the brick foundations had been systematically removed or robbed out during the late 19th century⁴².

The House of Correction

In 1815 all the Giltspur Street debtors were transferred to the new Whitecross Street City of London debtors prison in 1815 (Fig. 1, site I)⁴³. The debtors' accommodation at Giltspur Street was then converted to a house of correction. The rest of the prison still housed nightcharges and felons.

A house of correction differed from a prison in that its inmates — such as beggars and vagrants — were subjected to a regime of hard labour as part of their punishment. The men worked a handmill to grind wheat, to produce bread flour. In 1813 a bakehouse was opened, it produced bread for both the Compter and Newgate gaol. Other tasks included "picking oakum" and breaking flax for the women to spin. The women, under the supervision of Elizabeth Fry and her assistants, washed and repaired clothing for all the prisoners and made their own clothing⁴⁴.

The end of the Compters

The period from 1750-1850 marked a major change in the public attitude towards crime and punishment. Terms of imprisonment replaced the death sentence or transportation (discontinued in 1868) as the punishment for many crimes. At the same time

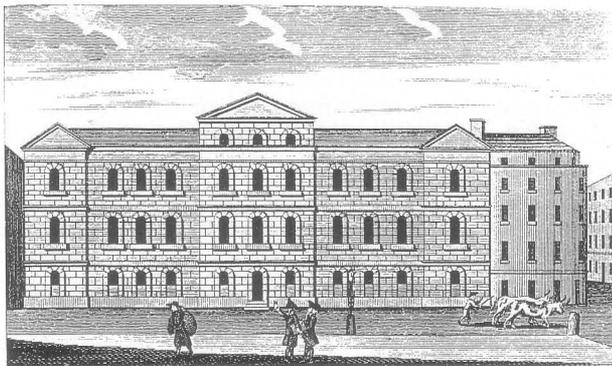


Fig. 7: the facade of the new Giltspur Street Compter in 1789. (source: *The European Magazine* 14 (1788))

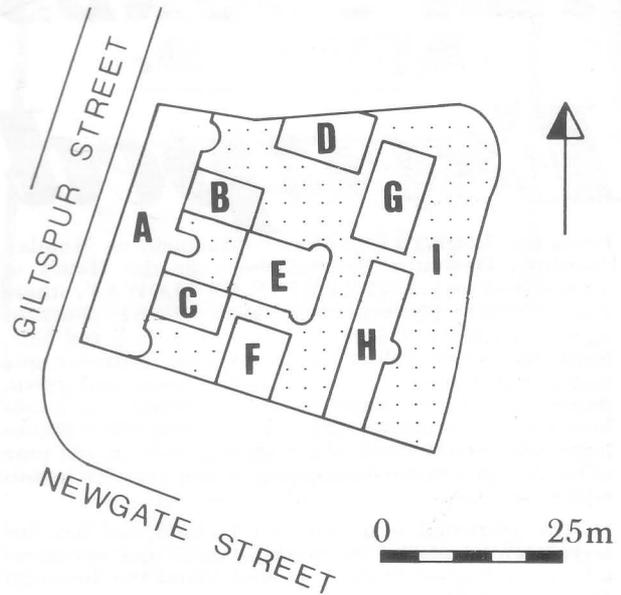


Fig. 8: the Giltspur Street Compter as actually built, based architect's drawings and other data.

Key: A, kitchen, Turnkey and Sheriff's offices, above — masterside debtors and Keeper's house. B, nightcharges men. C, nightcharges women. D, commonside women debtors. E, cell block, above — chapel. F, women felons' cells. G, men felons' cells. H, commonside men debtors. I, yards.

the establishment of regional Police forces greatly increased the rate of arrest.

When the Giltspur Street Compter was built (1787-91) it represented a major improvement on the existing Compters and attracted praise⁴⁵. However, with its fees, communal accommodation and historic divisions into common and masterside for debtors and male felons, it marked a perpetuation of the existing regime.

The emphasis in early 19th century penal design and reform was on the segregation of prisoners

41. B. Watson *King Edward Buildings GPO. West Yard, Giltspur Street, London, ECI* (1993) Post-Excavation Assessment Report, Museum of London.

42. *Ibid.*

43. *George III Ch 209* (1812) An Act for building a new prison in the City of London. The Whitecross Street prison was built in 1813-15: TQ 3239 8180. It closed in 1870 and became part of the Midland Railway Depot in 1877. The Depot was destroyed by bombing in ww2 and the site is now part of the Barbican Arts Centre.

44. *Brit Parlia. Pap. — Prisons* vol. 8 Rep. on prisons within the City of London and Southwark (1818) 159-165.

45. D. Hughson *London; Being an Accurate History and Description of the British Metropolis and its Neighbourhood* vol. 3 (1806) 612; T. Pennant *Some Account of London* (3th edition) (1793) 244.

into numerous categories with the aim of stopping the "bad" being contaminated by the "very bad". This concept led to the development of the "silent system" to stop prisoners conversing, which by the 1840s resulted in a new generation of prisons with single cells, to enforce solitude⁴⁶.

In 1835 the Governor of Giltspur Street admitted that often the premises were very crowded. Some of the communal wards housed 20 prisoners, while three or more people slept in each cell⁴⁷. This situation meant the Compter could not comply with segregation of prisoners into numerous classes as stated in the 1823 Gaols Act⁴⁸. The Giltspur Street Compter was described by Timbs as "one of the worst managed and least secure of the metropolitan prisons, and the escapes from it were the most frequent". However, he did add that the governor, John Teague (1804-41) was considered a humane man⁴⁹.

In 1846 the city authorities decided to replace the Giltspur Street Compter with a new house of correction at Holloway, which was built during 1848-52 and is still in use today as a women's prison⁵⁰. The Giltspur Street Compter closed in 1853 and was demolished in 1854⁵¹. The site was not redeveloped until 1907-09, when it became the west yard of King Edward Buildings Royal Mail sorting office.

Acknowledgements

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46. Evans *op cit* fn 29, 266-342.

47. *Brit Parlia. Pap. — Prisons* vol. 3 First and Second Reports from Select Comm. of the House of Lords on the Present State of Several Gaols and Houses of Correction in England and Wales (1835) 101-102.

48. *George IV Ch 64* (1823) Gaols Act. This act stated that male and female prisoners were to be separated and each gender in

both houses of correction and gaols further segregated into five groups.

49. Timbs *op cit* fn 15, 695.

50. H. Mayhew and J. Binney *The Criminal Prisons of London and Scenes of Prison Life* (1862) 535-7.

51. W. Lempriere 'Appendix One — The Giltspur Street Compter' *Archaeologia* 63 (1912) 330.

Excavations and post-excavation work

City of London. Enquiries to Museum of London Archaeology Service, Number One, London Wall, London EC2Y 5EA (071-972 9111).

Croydon & District, processing and cataloguing of excavated and museum collections every Tuesday throughout the year. Archaeological reference collection of fabric types, domestic animal bones, clay tobacco pipes and glass ware also available for comparative work. Enquiries to Mrs Muriel Shaw, 28 Lismore Road, South Croydon, CR2 7QA (081-688 2720).

Greater London (except north-east and south-east London), by Museum of London Archaeology Service. Excavations and processing in all areas. General enquiries to MOLAS, Number One, London Wall, London EC2Y 5EA (071-972 9111).

Borough of Greenwich. Cataloguing of excavated and other archaeological material, the majority from sites in the borough. For further information contact Greenwich Borough Museum, 232 Plumstead High Street, London SE18 1JT (081-855 3240).

Hammersmith & Fulham, by Fulham Archaeological Rescue Group. Processing of material from Fulham Palace. Tuesdays, 7.45 p.m.-10 p.m. at Fulham Palace, Bishop's Avenue, Fulham Palace Road, SW6. Contact Keith Whitehouse, 86 Clancarty Road, SW6 (071-731 4498).

Kingston, by Kingston upon Thames Archaeological Society. Rescue sites in the town centre. Enquiries to Kingston Heritage Centre, Fairfield Road, Kingston (081-546 5386).

North-east London, by Passmore Edwards Museum. Enquiries to Pat Wilkinson, Passmore Edwards Museum, Romford Road, E15 4LW (081-534 4545).

Surrey, by Surrey County Archaeological Unit. Enquiries to Rob Poulton, Archaeological Unit Manager, Planning Department, Pelham Lodge, Kingston, Surrey (081-541 9457).

Vauxhall Pottery, by Southwark and Lambeth Archaeological Society. Processing of excavated material continues three nights a week. Enquiries to S.L.A.S., c/o Cuming Museum, 155 Walworth Road, SE17 (071-703 3324).

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