

PRISON BUILDING BY THE COUNTY OF BERKS, 1766–1820

C. W. CHALKLIN

The condition of most English county gaols in the mid-eighteenth century had changed little for hundreds of years. They had often not been built for the purpose, sometimes consisting of part of a castle or a converted house. The accommodation usually comprised several day- and night-rooms and a court with the various types of prisoners of different ages and sex separated (if at all) only at night-time. It was a place of confinement primarily for debtors and those awaiting trial; convicted criminals were whipped, transported or hanged, not given prison sentences. In addition, counties had places of confinement known as 'bridewells' or 'houses of correction', intended for the short-term punishment of minor offenders. Usually these consisted of just two or three rooms. Both types of prison were often insecure, and escapes were frequent. They were often overcrowded, usually lacked a water supply, and the house of correction normally had no court. They were thus frequently the source of disease for the town in which they were situated.

From the 1770s counties were spending increasingly large sums on the building and enlargement of prisons. This was partly a consequence of a prison reform movement, beginning in the mid-1770s under the inspiration of John Howard, and gathering strength in the 1780s. Its aim was to introduce security, health and order into prisons, providing a salaried staff, proper diet and care of the sick, a regular work routine, the rigid separation of prisoners of different types, and periodic inspection by justices of the peace. Increasing numbers of prisoners were also a factor in the growing expenditure on building.

This was partly because of the general growth of population and the corresponding increase in crime, and partly because of the greater use of imprisonment as a punishment. According to a recent authority, "by 1818 those prisoners accused or found guilty of criminal offences accounted for over 80% of the prison population", and the number of gaols containing more than 100 prisoners had increased from eight to seventeen.¹ The new gaols contained separate wards for each type of prisoner, such as male convicted felons, male prisoners awaiting trial, and often cells within them to provide solitary night accommodation, infirmaries, a chapel and a house for the jailer. The cost was met from the county rate, sometimes initially financed by loans.

In Berkshire enlargement and totally new construction by the county quarter sessions were extensive.² In the 1760s in addition to the county gaol in Reading the county also had two houses of correction, one in Abingdon and the other shared with the borough of Reading. About the condition of the county gaol in the

¹ R. Morgan 'Divine Philanthropy: John Howard Reconsidered', *History*, vol. 6 no. 206, Oct. 1977, pp. 399, 406.

² The following study is based principally on the quarter sessions records in the County Record Office, Shire Hall, Reading. The chief source were the sessions order books between the 1770s and the 1820s (Q/SO4-12); while the order books do not appear to record all the decisions of quarter sessions, and accounts are missing apart from some miscellaneous accounts (with correspondence) relating to the building of Abingdon bridewell, it is still possible to piece together in some detail an account of the successive building reconstructions.

mid-eighteenth century one can say little as the first description of it postdates considerable alterations. Debtors and felons were probably separated, but all the men and women felons were together during the day. On 11th December, 1773 it held eleven debtors and eleven felons and on 29th July, 1774 ten debtors and six felons. The Reading bridewell in the former Greyfriars Church, for which the county paid rent to the borough, comprised "a spacious room, with four small dark huts on one side for night-rooms . . . Women and men are together in the day-time. No court: no water . . .". In 1776 there were six prisoners. The Abingdon house of correction was similarly small: "two day-rooms; and two dark offensive night-rooms: that for men 8 ft square; the women's 9 by 8; no chimney: no court: no water. The petty offenders are in irons."³

Between 1768 and the 1860s all three prisons were enlarged or rebuilt. The county gaol in Castle Street, Reading, was extended between 1768 and about 1771. A new bridewell was built on a fresh site in Reading after 1785 and in the early 1790s this was extended to form a combined county gaol and bridewell. A bigger project comprised the construction of the Abingdon bridewell on a new site between 1804 and about 1820. In the mid-1820s and in 1833 the Reading prison was further enlarged, and then replaced entirely in 1845. This paper attempts to describe, so far as the sources allow, the first stages of the rebuildings, involving the county gaol and Reading bridewell between 1768 and 1793, and the Abingdon house of correction in the next two decades.

1. THE FIRST ENLARGEMENT OF THE COUNTY GAOL

Some time before the January Sessions in 1767 (presumably in 1766), the county acquired buildings adjoining the existing gaol in Castle Street, Reading "for enlarging better

securing and improving of the County Gaol". In October 1767 the quarter sessions followed the normal practice of having a plan drawn of the necessary additions "with a particular of the height and thickness of the walls scantlings of the timbers and other particulars", and tenders based on these specifications were sought. On 2nd March, 1768, it was decided to employ a Reading builder Joseph Collier. He was to take down the old buildings recently purchased and provide labour and materials for the new additions, working under the directions and inspection of the London surveyor, Robert Taylor. There is no evidence as to what accommodation was provided, but the amount of money paid out suggests that a considerable enlargement was involved. Payments to Collier on account of £200 and £450 in October 1768 and October 1769 respectively were ordered and there were final orders for payment to Collier of £56 5s. 10½d. at Midsummer Sessions 1771 and of £142 14s. 3d. to Taylor the following January. This makes a total of £849 os. 1¼d., and there is a distinct possibility that not all the payments to Collier were recorded.⁴

Minor alterations involving the setting up of a room for sick men and another for women were ordered in January 1775. Accommodation now consisted of a debtors' and felons' court separated by iron rails. The former had a kitchen and many master's side rooms, that is, for debtors who could afford to pay. Felons had a day-room and separate night-rooms for men and women. There were three or four other small rooms including the infirmary and a chapel.⁵ Apart from the small changes made in 1775 the size of the payments to Collier and Taylor between 1768 and 1771 suggest that much of the accommodation was the result of that enlargement, and that the original building was very small. The alterations of 1775 were the direct result of the reform movement of the mid-1770s, inspired by the publicity given to Howard's investigation into

³ J. Howard *The State of the Prisons in England and Wales*, Warrington, 1780, pp. 299-300.

⁴ Berkshire Record Office: Q/SMg5.

⁵ Howard, p. 299

the condition of English prisons, which led to an act in 1774 directing (among other things) that separate sick rooms be provided in prisons.⁶ But the enlargement of 1768-71 predates the influence of Howard, and like the reconstruction of Newgate and the Essex county gaol at the same time, was clearly inspired just by the need for greater security, and probably, the overcrowding of existing premises.

II. READING HOUSE OF CORRECTION

The immediate cause of the reconstruction of the Reading house of correction was the act of 22 George III c. 64. regarding the administration of houses of correction. This was another act inspired by the prison reformers, requiring that accommodation should be provided so that prisoners might be grouped according to the nature of their crimes and punishments, and so that work might be provided for those committed to hard labour. As in other counties the Berkshire justices immediately ordered inspections of their two bridewells. At the Midsummer Sessions in 1782, three justices were appointed to examine the state of the house of correction at Abingdon, and three others the Reading house of correction. Both groups of magistrates made highly critical reports. At the next sessions the Court was told that Abingdon bridewell "is not equal to fulfil the purpose of the said Act" and that the site was too small to allow the necessary additions to be made. The Committee inspecting the Reading house of correction made two reports; the first spoke in terms of enlargement and reconstruction, the second in terms of alteration. In January it reported that "the same in its present state of building is by no means calculated to fulfil the purposes of the act of parliament, but that the same must be greatly enlarged and rebuilt"; in April it reported that a place of closer confinement was needed for refractory prisoners, that male and female prisoners

needed separating, and the provision of materials for work was required, and the Court ordered the Committee to execute the report. In fact no action is recorded about any of these reports, and the Abingdon bridewell was not rebuilt for another twenty years.⁷

In April 1784 complaint about the ruinous state of Reading house of correction led to the appointment of a larger Committee to treat with the Borough of Reading as the owner about repairing or improving it. The Corporation offered to build a bridewell to receive both county and borough prisoners, but the Sessions evidently changed its mind about co-operating with the town and decided that it would be better to erect a building of its own. On 14th August a specially adjourned Midsummer Sessions considered the nine plans and estimates for building a new bridewell elicited by an advertisement in the *Reading Mercury*. These ranged between schemes for 32 and 120 prisoners and estimates between £2,270 and £6,000. The Court decided that the bridewell should be able to hold at least 60 prisoners, and chose as 'most eligible' the plan of the well-known architect Robert Brettingham, to hold 60 prisoners at an estimated cost of £4,000, in preference to another plan for 60 prisoners produced by a Reading builder, William Collier, for £3,300. Brettingham was accordingly appointed 'surveyor for the business'. Between July and October a site for the new building was sought by the Committee and Brettingham; four possible ones were inspected, and a position on the east site of the Abbey near the Forbury was chosen, then a little way outside the inhabited part of the town. The Court confirmed its choice in December in spite of a petition from the inhabitants of the Borough against the choice of the site.⁸

Meanwhile, at the October Sessions it was agreed that Brettingham should leave the plan

⁶ S. and B. Webb *English Prisons under Local Government* (English Local Government, 6), 1963 edn., p. 38.

⁷ Berkshire Record Office: Q/SO5 pp. 80, 98-9, 117, 141.

⁸ Berkshire Record Office: Q/SO5 pp. 208, 230, 236, 238-9, 250-1, 254.

PRISON BUILDING BY THE COUNTY OF BERKS., 1766-1820

for inspection by intending contractors for the building at the George Inn. He was to be in personal attendance on 20th November to explain the scheme fully to any interested workmen, and all proposals for contracting were to be submitted before 4th December. At this point Brettingham appears to have altered his plan, for when the proposals were duly examined it was found that all the estimates by the intending contractors far exceeded the sum intended to be spent. Of the seven tenders, the lowest, that of Collier, was £6,768, and the highest, that of Rolfe of Abchurch Lane in London was £9,269.⁹

Matters were therefore adjourned until 11th January when Brettingham was ordered to produce the original plan approved on 14th August and 30th October. Further estimates appear to have been obtained, for on 11th January (in the words of the order book) "Mr William Collier having delivered in an estimate for building the house of correction at the lowest expence (namely) 5073£—Ordered that he be employed to execute the same at that sum, to be completed so as to be habitable at Michaelmas 1786 ...". The Justices present were appointed a Committee to see to the execution of the work, and Brettingham was to appoint a Clerk of the Works to provide constant supervision.¹⁰

Making use of powers under 24 George III c. 55, which enabled counties to borrow to pay for building bridewells, the construction was to be financed by loans so that the building might be completed within two years. The money was borrowed in stages by £50 and £100 bonds at 5% interest as the payments to the contractor fell due:

Date	Payments to Contractor	Loans
Immediately on contractor giving security.	£600	£600
Easter Quarter Sessions 1785	£600	£800
Midsummer Sessions 1785	£600	£600
Michaelmas Sessions 1785	£600	£600
Epiphany Sessions 1786	£600	£600
Easter Sessions 1786	£600	£600
Midsummer Sessions 1786	£600	£600
Michaelmas Sessions 1786	£873	£1,200
	£5,073	£5,600

The first £600 was borrowed immediately, £550 of it from two gentry, George Vansittart, a justice of the peace, and Henry Vansittart. The first additional county rates to repay the loans was ordered in July 1785. The justices were at pains to show that over a fourteen-year repayment period the rate burden would be very light, as the following advertisement by them in the *Reading Mercury* makes clear:

"January 16 1786: County of Berkshire, Town-Hall, Reading, January 10 1786. An exact calculation having been made in several parishes in this county, of the charge which will be born by an occupier of one hundred pounds a year, for the purpose of building a new house of correction at Reading, the Justices this day assembled at the Quarter Sessions, have directed it to be made public for the general information of the county.

The highest sum to be levied on the county in any one year for principal and interest, will be from Michaelmas 1786, to Michaelmas 1787, and will amount to 6801. and the charge on 1001. a year will be as follows:—

	s.	d.	
In Bray.	2	6½	From Michaelmas, 1787 this
Bisham.	3	3½	charge will annually be
Clewer.	3	1½	diminished twenty pounds,
Farrington.	2	6¾	and at the end of fourteen
Wantage.	2	5¼	years will totally cease.
			JAMES PAYN.
			Deputy Clerk of the Peace

In fact the Justices appear to have raised eight 'quarters' gaol money on the county each year until Midsummer 1793, or £869 8s. od., each quarter supplying £108 13s. 6d. Thereafter the same amount continued to be levied, but partly also to deal with the further debt incurred in building the County Gaol.¹¹ The building was duly completed by the end of September 1786. No contemporary plans survive, but, the basis of the building scheme was the confinement of prisoners in separate

⁹ Berkshire Record Office: Q/SO5 pp. 251-2, 255-6.

¹⁰ Berkshire Record Office: Q/SO5 pp. 256, 260-2, 267, 300.

¹¹ Berkshire Record Office: Q/SO5 pp. 261-2, 267; Q/SO7 p. 274.

cells according to the recommendation of Howard. In the words of the *Reading Mercury*, 2nd October, 1786:

"This prison is built on the solitary principle recommended so repeatedly of keeping culprits to themselves; every prisoner having a separate cell, and a distinct yard to walk in".

III. THE COUNTY GAOL

During the American War of Independence Berkshire suffered along with other counties from the stoppage of transportation to the American colonies and the difficulty of housing the increasing number of convicted prisoners left in their charge in the county gaol. In November 1783 the high sheriff and grand jury acting on behalf of the county petitioned Parliament that they "in common with the rest of the kingdom have suffered during the late war by the difficulties which have arisen in inflicting the due and accustomed punishment on offenders not sentenced to die . . . their gaol is inconveniently full of convicts, from whence much danger arises of escapes and of infectious distempers that may spread".¹² But no major reconstruction was undertaken for several years, probably on account of the more pressing need for a new house of correction and the burden which its building placed on the county rates. Between 1787 and 1789 quarter sessions considered the rebuilding of the gaol on a new site. Overcrowding was now not the main problem, because more convicted prisoners were being transported, but by this date debtors were no longer being separated from felons and the prison needed to be more secure. There was discussion of the possibility of enlarging the existing gaol, or of using a new site. At Easter Sessions 1789 a Committee recommended ground on the west side of the new bridewell, especially because prisoners could be used to dig the foundations. However, the wish to avoid financial commitments in addition to the existing bridewell debt led to

the abandonment of the scheme for over two years.¹³

The matter of a new gaol was reconsidered on 1st August, 1791. The justices decided unanimously that the existing prison was in a bad state of repair and that the debtors and felons needed separating, so that a new building was needed. The ground adjoining the present bridewell and such part of its existing site as could be spared was thought to be most convenient for the buildings, the intention being to attach the new gaol to the bridewell. As the official advertisement summoning the justices to the meeting makes clear, the aim was to provide new accommodation as cheaply as possible; "the attendance of the Magistrates of the whole county is particularly requested, in order to take into consideration the expediency of adding to the present Bridewell, in such manner as to prevent the expence of a New Gaol".¹⁴ Past numbers of prisoners in the gaol and bridewell suggested that it would be sufficient if additional accommodation was provided adjoining the bridewell buildings for thirty felons and thirty debtors.¹⁵

Brettingham was appointed surveyor for the scheme, working under the inspection of three justices. On 25th August he produced a plan for a building of thirty-six cells for felons against the south wall in the airing ground of the bridewell and another for a building of forty cells for debtors on the north side of the bridewell. Next January it was agreed that the first plan should be executed at a cost not exceeding £3,000, and that the second project should be carried out when the money became available. Following advertisements in newspapers three tenders for the building work were received. One came from the local builder William Collier, who proposed the highest figure of £3,020. The other proposals came from London contractors: Storer and Fisher, builders in Green Street, Grosvenor Square

¹³ Berkshire Record Office: Q/SO6 pp. 95, 158, 172, 179, 215, 262, 302.

¹⁴ *Reading Mercury* 18th July, 1791.

¹⁵ Berkshire Record Office: Q/SO7 pp. 47-8.

¹² Webb, *English Prisons*, p. 51.

submitted a tender of £2,806, and William Wingate, a carpenter of Lower Street, Islington one for £2,480. In the event the county had no choice. First Wingate, whose tender was originally accepted, declined to sign the contract because he had made an error in his calculations; then Storer and Fisher explained that their offer of erecting a building for £2,806 was to include rough arches instead of gauged arches, making a difference of £70; as this was a departure from the original proposals and they refused to do the work according to the original plans and conditions Collier was chosen at a price of £3,000. There was a further few days' delay when it was discovered that the conditions of the contract prepared by Brettingham differed from those originally available for people tendering. A further private meeting of Collier and Brettingham and then a meeting of the justices were needed to decide the details of the contract.¹⁶

Brettingham was paid the usual 5% on the amount spent on the building and his Clerk of the Works £1 2s. od. per week. The additional land cost £280. The £3,000 needed to pay the contractor was borrowed at 4%, of which £1,000 was lent in July by a Reading mercer, Thomas Glead. In August 1793 when the building was almost completed arrangements were made for liquidating the two loans on the bridewell and the gaol over the following years: it was agreed that the special rates should continue to be raised to pay first and second the interest on the bridewell and the gaol loans, and then the principal of the bridewell and gaol loans in turn. The completion of the building was marked by dissatisfaction on the part of the county at the work of Brettingham and Collier. According to the report of a committee "chosen to investigate the nature of the defects in the new gaol" which was considered by quarter sessions on 25th January, 1794, the roof

leaked, the gaol was insufficiently secure, and the structure not completed according to the contract in every detail. This was said to have been the result of defects in the contract which Brettingham had prepared, and his insufficient supervision of the work. Accordingly it was decided not to satisfy the additional demands of Brettingham and Collier for extra payments, and Brettingham was never to be employed by the county again. Other craftsmen were hired to remedy the defects.¹⁷

At the beginning of the nineteenth century the additional buildings erected to form the men felons' section of the combined gaol and bridewell consisted of a spacious courtyard, 150 ft by 75 ft with arcades to provide shelter in wet weather, and a day-room; sleeping accommodation comprised thirty-two cells in two storeys each 10 ft by 7½ ft and 7½ ft high. Part of the original bridewell building now accommodated men debtors, that is, two courts, three day-rooms and six sleeping-rooms on the upper storey. In addition to the keeper's house and adjoining chapel and fourteen more cells there were four other wards, only one of which appears to have been used for bridewell prisoners. Thus most of the accommodation erected originally in 1785 and 1786 for a house of correction appears to have been in use for the county gaol. In the early 1800s there were about thirty-two prisoners on an average, of whom debtors comprised about one-third.¹⁸ But despite the considerable extent and number of the prison buildings in relation to the number of prisoners, there was still considerable room for detailed improvements. In April 1808 the two visiting justices reported at the request of the gaol keeper that the accommodation in the women's ward was inadequate in relation to the number confined there, and an additional day-room and bedroom were built under their direction. Further improvements were made in 1812 costing probably about £1,200 with the

¹⁶ Berkshire Record Office: Q/SO7 pp. 51, 54-5, 88, 117-8, 120-4; the tenders and the problems which they caused are discussed in P. Southerton *The Story of a Prison*, Reading, 1975, p. 16.

¹⁷ Berkshire Record Office: Q/SO7 pp. 130-1, 181, 190, 274, 317-9, 342.

¹⁸ J. Neild *State of the Prisons*, 1812, pp. 495-7.

intention of grouping different types of prisoners. Apart from the enlargement of the debtors' ward a new day ward was built in the men felons' ward and a similar one in the women's ward, to separate those confined for trifling crimes and young offenders from hardened criminals.¹⁹ Altogether, taking into account payment of interest on the loans, between £12,000 and £15,000 was spent during the period 1785–1812 on the bridewell and its later conversion into a county gaol.

IV. ABINGDON HOUSE OF CORRECTION

The years after 1800 saw further increased activity in prison construction all over England. By this time the repayment of the loans for erecting the Reading buildings was nearly complete, and quarter sessions could consider more readily expenditure on a further prison. Despite the inadequacies in the Abingdon bridewell revealed by the justices' inspection of 1782, no steps had been taken to improve it apart from the addition of three solitary cells in 1790 at an estimated cost of £71 6s. 6d.²⁰ At meetings of Quarter Sessions in July and October 1803 it was pointed out that the bridewell at Abingdon was "very unhealthy on account of its dampness and its bad state", and was "not capable of any material improvement on account of its bad construction and local situation". A new building was needed and a committee was appointed to prepare a plan and estimate. The purchase of the site cost £1,492 8s. 6d: the Corporation of Abingdon agreed to accept £500 for the reversion of the White Hart Inn property (on condition that they were able to use the new bridewell for their own prisoners), and £800 was to be paid to buy out the interest of its tenants.²¹

Final arrangements for the new building and the raising of the money were made at Quarter

Sessions on 10th January and 11th July, 1804. The scheme involved thirty-two cells on two storeys, each 8 ft 9 in. by 7 ft 10 in., and 9 ft 6 in. high, in three wings; there were also four courtyards with arcades, each with a day-room, for the different classes of prisoners. At the front of the building was a court house, and there were also keeper's apartments, a chapel, and two infirmaries and four sick rooms. As in other contemporary prisons the keeper's apartments in the centre allowed a watch to be kept over the prisoners in the four courtyards during the day-time.²²

The financial arrangements differed from those adopted in the case of the Reading prisons. £4,000 was borrowed initially, but this only represented a fraction of the total expenditure. Construction was spread out over a much longer period and thus it was possible to pay for it from the rates. Five quarters gaol money, or £543 7s. 6d. was levied every three months.²³

No one contractor was given responsibility for the building. This may represent disillusionment with the single contractor method after the problems produced by Brettingham and Collier ten years earlier. Yet other counties were adopting the same technique in the 1800s, with a group of justices aided by a surveyor actively organising and directing building.²⁴ Instead master craftsmen were employed to provide labour and sometimes materials while most of the stone and lime, and a little of the timber, were bought direct by the county. Between 1805 and 1812 inclusive, when £16,405 9s. 11½d. was spent (including £1,492 8s. 6d. on the site), £5,355 6s. 7d. was paid on the direct purchase of stone, lime, slates, gravel and their carriage, to over fifty people and a canal company, the payments varying from several hundred pounds to as little as £2 and £4.

¹⁹ Berkshire Record Office: Q/SO10 ff. 88, 99, 236, 264; *Parliamentary Papers*, Report on Expenditure of County Rates, 1825 (461) vi. 1.

²⁰ Berkshire Record Office: Q/SO6 p. 374.

²¹ Berkshire Record Office: Q/SO9 ff. 134, 145–6.

²² Berkshire Record Office: Q/SO9 ff. 161, 182; Neild, *Prisons*, p.6.

²³ Berkshire Record Office: Q/SO9 f. 182

²⁴ For example, Cumberland in the construction of new courts of justice after 1807.

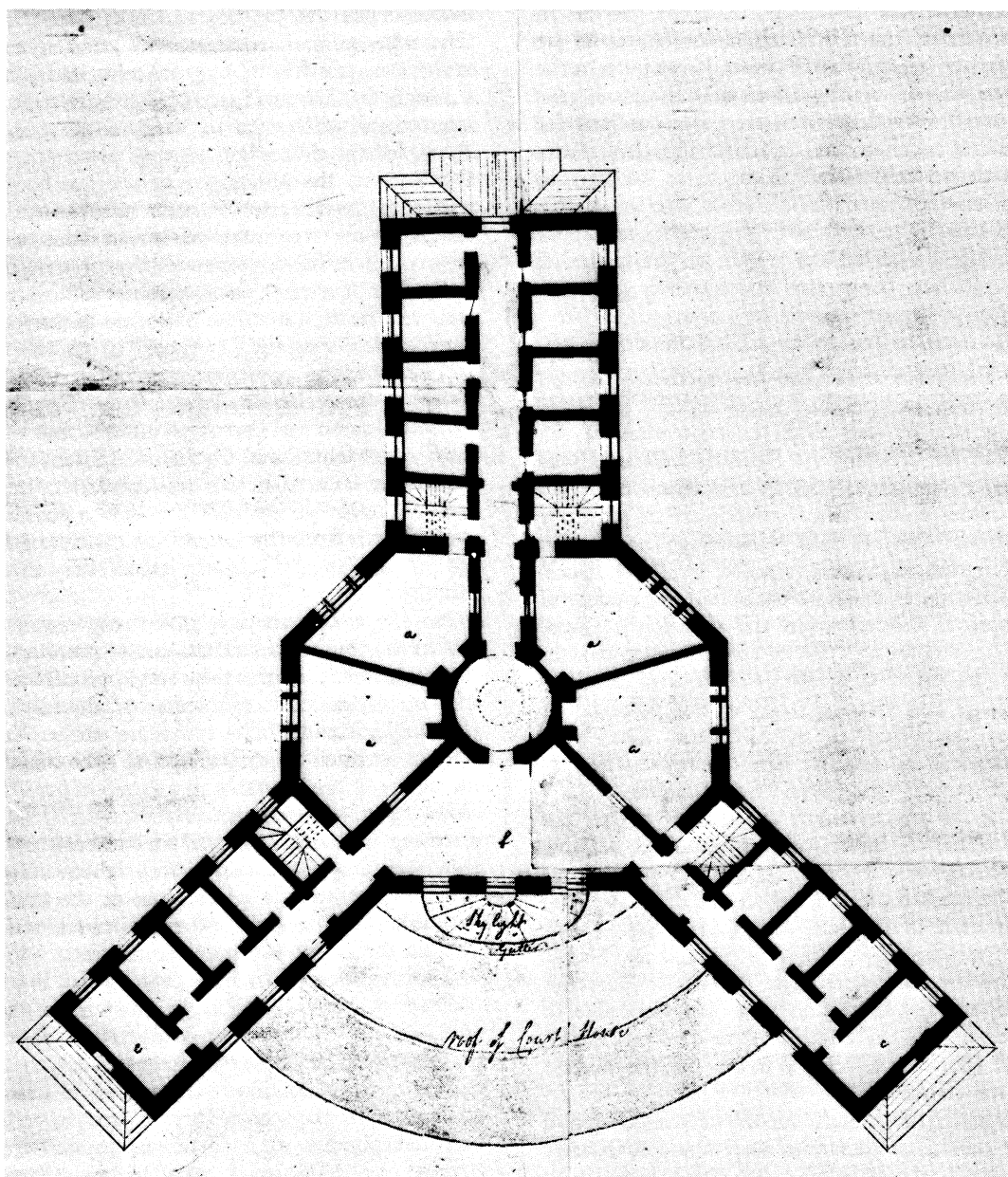


Fig. 1. Plan of the new House of Correction at Abingdon.

Nearly all the rest went on payments to craftsmen providing work and materials, comprising four masons, four carpenters, a smith, ironmonger and plumber. One of the men employed as a carpenter, an Oxford surveyor named Daniel Harris, acted as surveyor under the supervision of a justice at Abingdon, B. Morland, and a Committee. Morland personally ordered some of the materials needed, and held money for payments to craftsmen and for materials. The committee expected to have the work finished by the middle of 1809, but much still needed doing at that time (which was blamed on the neglect of Harris), and the prison was incomplete when the first prisoners were inserted in March 1811. Another £8,000 was spent between 1812 and 1818; making a total of £24,234 10s. 6d. Harris' supervision ended with his insanity in 1812; the services of the famous architect Jeffrey Wyatt were being used in that year, but it is not known whether he continued to act for the county. There were further improvements in 1820 involving payments to craftsmen totalling more than £350, and a remaining payment to Harris' assignees of £1,308 os. 4d. was ordered in July 1823, delayed for many years because of the difficulty of settling the sum on account of Harris' ill-health. Altogether almost £26,000 was spent over nearly twenty years. In comparing the outlay with the amounts spent on the Reading prisons it must be remembered that by 1812 building costs were at least double those of the mid-1780s. Yet the Abingdon bridewell was still by far the largest single building undertaking yet carried out by the Berkshire Quarter Sessions.²⁵

V. CONCLUSION

The growth of county expenditure on prison construction was only one aspect of the increase in the activity of quarter sessions from about the 1770s. Apart from prison

building money was being spent on new court houses and in some counties (from the beginning of the nineteenth century) on lunatic asylums. Whereas in the mid-eighteenth century prisons were run by individual keepers earning an income from fees and the sale of liquor to prisoners, fifty years later salaried staff—gaolers, turnkeys, surgeons, and chaplains—were being appointed in all prisons. A regular diet and special clothing were being provided. As more and more prisoners came up for trial at Quarter Sessions and Assizes and parish police organisation increasingly broke down the costs of transporting prisoners for trial fell on the county. The county also faced increasing expenditure on the prosecution of criminals. As a consequence of these and other new expenditures the financial outlay of every county increased several times in the period between about 1770 and 1820.

It was made possible by the growing number of active justices of the peace in every county, increasingly willing to organise themselves into permanent or *ad hoc* committees to scrutinise expenditure, to supervise construction of bridges or public buildings, or to take their turn as prison visitors as well as deal with the greatly increased number of criminal cases that came before them at petty or quarter sessions. In Bedfordshire barely four justices had attended quarter sessions in the 1710s: by the beginning of the nineteenth century it had become "the thing to go to quarter sessions" for county gentry, between twelve and twenty attending sessions between 1800 and 1810, and later numbers reached thirty.²⁶

In this hugely increased expenditure and among the range of duties of quarter sessions prison construction and maintenance played a central part. In Warwickshire it has been estimated that between 1784 and 1798 about 22% of total county expenditure related to prison construction.²⁷ Special gaol committees

²⁵ Berkshire Record Office: Q/AG2/5 and Q/SO10 f. 264, Q/SO12 pp. 249, 576–7; it is possible that Wyatt had provided plans for the building, but there is no record of any payment to him apart from the one in 1812.

²⁶ J. Godber *History of Bedfordshire 1066–1888*, Bedford, 1969, pp. 370, 422–3.

²⁷ *Warwick County Records*, VII, 1946, p. cxxvii.

were usually formed which met almost endlessly to determine sites, decide tenders, draw up contracts, sometimes order materials and direct workmen, and scrutinise accounts and inspect the structure on completion. In a real sense the prison buildings symbolise the new energy and purpose and willingness to spend unprecedented sums on county activities which becomes apparent by the 1780s and 1790s.

All these phenomena are illustrated by county work in Berkshire. The greatly increased financial outlay is very evident. Probably in the early 1780s average annual county expenditure was about £1,500. Between the mid-1790s (when figures first become available) and the early 1820s amounts grew as follows:

	Average expenditure annually:
1794-1798	£2,269 11s. 8d.
1799-1803	£2,972 12s. 1d.
1804-1808	£4,343 18s. 10d.
1809-1813	£5,853 8s. 3d.
1814-1818	£5,870 10s. 2d.
1819-1823	£7,253 9s. 4d.

Thus between the early 1780s and about 1820 expenditure increased nearly five times.²⁸ Of the total annual expenditure in the mid-1790s about one-third was being devoted to the maintenance of prisoners (especially the provision of food), the salaries of gaolers, surgeon and chaplain, the conveyance of prisoners to trial and the costs of their prosecution. Militiamen's families and the handling of vagrants were other main items of expenditure. By about 1820 the handling of prisoners (especially food, cost of prosecutions and salaries) was taking half county expenditure. Militiamen's families had ceased to be a cost with the ending of the war but the passing of vagrants remained a major item, and the building and repair of bridges (a negligible item in the 1790s) was costing an average of between £200 and £300 a year.²⁹

The other major item of expenditure in the whole period was prison building. In the forty years between 1781 and 1820 the county raised about £150,000 in rates;³⁰ the two new houses of correction and the Reading gaol (and its additions in 1812) cost about £38,000 or £40,000, or just over one-quarter of the total sum raised. Prison construction combined with the maintenance and handling of prisoners at trial to make crime the major burden on the county rates, just as the increasing numbers of poor made the much greater poor law expenditure the principal burden on parish rates.

Two other features of general interest emerge from this study. The one is the extent of the reliance on loans for construction. The first enlargement of Reading gaol between 1768 and 1771 was paid for out of additional rates, but the construction of the Reading bridewell in 1785-86, a much bigger enterprise involving an unprecedented immediate outlay of county funds for which payment had to be spread over a long period, required the raising of a loan. A similar practice was followed at the same time in neighbouring Hampshire and Wiltshire, where again the unaccustomed burden of expenditure on new buildings involved the raising of a capital sum by the same means. In none of the three counties does the raising of the money seem to have presented any difficulty. Along with the increasing amounts of money passing through the hands of the Treasurer and the payments which he had to make, such aspects of money raising as the advertising of the sum sought and the interest to be paid, the calculation of the sum needed to repay the loan over fourteen years, and the preparation of bonds to provide the lenders with security, all reflect the growing complexity and professionalism of the county financial administration.

There is also the variety of means by which the process of building was conducted. Both buildings of the county gaol, and the bigger construction of the county bridewell in

²⁸ Berkshire Record Office: Q/SO13 p. 54.

²⁹ *Parliamentary Papers*, County rates, ditto.

³⁰ An estimated figure based on the number of levies recorded in the order books.

1785-86, were undertaken by a single contractor, all following the advertisement for tenders. The Joseph Collier who built the gaol between 1768 and 1771 was a carpenter by trade; William Collier, described as a 'builder' was also a brickmaker. As was usual among provincial craftsmen who undertook building contracts, both presumably sub-contracted the craft work which they were unable to do with their own labour. But at least for William Collier in 1785 the winning of the contract involved a considerable temporary expansion of his business. Following the award of the contract at the beginning of January he advertised on 31st for brickmakers in the following way: in the *Reading Mercury*:

"To brick and tile makers. Wanted, ten or twelve brick-makers for a season or two, who may have immediate employ in digging clay, etc and to begin making bricks as early in the spring as the weather will permit of".

That the use of a single contractor had its drawbacks is illustrated by the weaknesses found in the newly completed gaol building in 1795. The problems in this case were defects

in the contract and inadequate supervision of the contractor by the architect. The construction of Abingdon bridewell reveals the workings of the 'direct' method of building by the justices with the help of a surveyor who himself provided some of the craft skill needed on the project. The surviving papers reveal the personal involvement of the justices. Thus they bought a waggon and horses to carry the materials to the site. In July 1807 the justice Morland was corresponding with a firm in Westminster for the purchase of Yorkshire paving stones.

Compared with some other counties in Southern England such as Kent, Sussex, Hampshire and Wiltshire, Berkshire was relatively small both in terms of population and financial resources. Yet in the number and variety of its prison buildings, and in the methods used to raise money and to organise the building process, the history of prison construction in Berkshire between 1768 and 1820 is of special interest both in the history of prison building and of the developing role of quarter sessions.