

NOTE ON NEWGATE PRISON

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In 1546 Henry VIII granted the Hospital of St. Bartholomew in West Smithfield to the City of London. Full details of this grant were given in the Letters Patent of 27 December of that year from which it appears that the Mayor and Commonalty as Governors of the Hospital had among others the duty to nominate an official called the Visitor of Newgate Prison. The first of these appointments is mentioned in 1553 when James Payne, clerk, was accepted to visit the prisoners in Newgate 'to fulfill the rome in exortacyons and holsome lessens of the scryptures to call them from desparatyce to the lyf everlastyng'.¹

The connexion between St. Bartholomew's Hospital and Newgate Prison was not a new one. In a petition to the King probably dating from the 14th century, 'les chapeleyns le mestre et les freres del hospital de Seint Bartheleu' asked to be exempt from the 10th and other subsidies because of their heavy expenses for the treatment of the sick poor who came to the Hospital to be healed or to die and for 'trouer touz les enfanntz que sont neez en la prisone de Neugate des femmes enditez et deteintes en la dite prisone . . .'.² Newgate Prison first erected in or shortly after 1188,³ was used for the worst type of criminals from the City of London and the county of Middlesex. Conditions were extremely bad and primitive. Gaol fever was rampant and the sexes were hardly separated until the fifteenth century when a special building was erected for female prisoners. Lack of good drinking water caused typhoid and other diseases. In the fifteenth century both the Priory and the Hospital of St. Bartholomew offered their surplus water supply for the use of the prisoners. These Houses received this water supply from the Priory's manor at Canonbury⁴ and when in the early fifteenth century this supply began to fail owing to a breaking down of the pipes, the Hospital decided in 1433 to carry out the necessary repairs. Once the water was flowing through freely again, it was possible to make arrangements for the benefit of the prisoners. To this effect an agreement was made between the Priory and Thomas Knolles, citizen and grocer of London in 1436⁵ followed by a similar agreement between Thomas and the Master and Brethren of the Hospital in 1442.⁶ Thomas made himself responsible for the upkeep of the leaden pipes which would bring water to Newgate Prison having constructed them at his own expense, promising that in times of drought the inhabitants of the Priory and the Hospital were to be served first. Though the support of the Hospital did not turn the Prison into a Paradise, the prisoners received some benefits. Better drinking water was supplied, the Hospital chaplains mentioned in the petition must have looked after the spiritual needs of the prisoners while the nursing Brethren took care of babies and young mothers.

In 1539 the Priory was dissolved and in 1544 its buildings were sold to Sir Richard Rich. Almost immediately trouble arose about the water supply to the Hospital which was withheld by the new owner of the former Priory. The Hospital was no longer in the hands of a Master and Brethren but the City authorities who were now in charge, had appointed a number of Governors mostly City merchants. Some of them visited Lord Rich in 1552 asking for 'the moyte of the water' with which his premises were supplied. Though they offered him a 'fyrkyn of sturgyon' their visit was unsuccessful.⁷ Letters to support them had

to be written by the Lord Mayor and finally an agreement was arranged on 4 August 1561 between Lord Rich and the Mayor and Commonalty of the City as Governors of St. Bartholomew's Hospital, regulating the water supply to the Hospital and to Lord Rich's property.⁸ No mention was made of Newgate Prison.

The events caused by the Reformation endangered not only the supply of necessary drinking water in the Prison but they also deprived women and children of a care which they could ill afford to lose. Only the chaplains found a successor in the Visitor for Newgate but 'holsom lessens of the scryptures' however well intended were hardly a substitute for the total lack of physical comforts.

NOTES

- 1 Archives St. Bartholomew's Hospital. Journal of the Governors Ha 1/1 f. 76 recto.
- 2 Public Record Office. Ancient Petitions. S.C. 8 File 68 No. 3354.
- 3 The Great Roll of the Pipe 34 Henry II, 1187-1188 (London 1925) p. 18. See for further details on Newgate Prison: Reginald R. Sharpe, *Memorials of Newgate Gaol and the Sessions House, Old Bailey*. London 1907.
- 4 E. A. Webb. *The Records of St. Bartholomew's Priory and of the Church and Parish of St. Bartholomew the Great, West Smithfield*. Vol. II (Oxford 1921), pp. 191 *et seq.*
- 5 *Ibid.* Vol. I, p. 212.
- 6 Archives St. Bartholomew's Hospital. Deed No. 1497.
- 7 *Ibid.* Journal of the Governors Ha 1/1 f. 52 dorso.
- 8 *Ibid.* Repertory Book Hc.2/3 ff.96.97.