

ARTHUR GRIFFITHS

THE CHRONICLES OF NEWGATE



TRUE CRIME THROUGH THE CENTURIES

Arthur Griffiths

The Chronicles of Newgate (True Crime Through the Centuries)

Published by

MUSAICUM

Books

- Advanced Digital Solutions & High-Quality eBook
Formatting -

musaicumbooks@okpublishing.info

2021 OK Publishing

EAN 4064066382889

Table of Contents

[Volume 1](#)

[Volume 2](#)

Volume 1

[Table of Contents](#)

Table of Contents

PREFACE.

INTRODUCTORY CHAPTER.

CHAPTER I. MEDIAEVAL NEWGATE.

CHAPTER II. NEWGATE IN THE SIXTEENTH CENTURY.

CHAPTER III. NEWGATE IN THE SEVENTEENTH CENTURY
(DOWN TO THE GREAT FIRE).

CHAPTER IV. NEWGATE IN THE SEVENTEENTH CENTURY
(AFTER THE GREAT FIRE).

CHAPTER V. IN THE PRESS-YARD.

CHAPTER VI. EXECUTIONS.

CHAPTER VII. ESCAPES.

CHAPTER VIII. THE GAOL CALENDAR.

CHAPTER IX. THE GAOL CALENDAR (continued).

CHAPTER X. THE GAOL FEVER.

CHAPTER XI. THE NEW GAOL.

PREFACE.

[Table of Contents](#)

WHEN I undertook the work of which these two volumes are the result, I scarcely realized the extent of the task before me. Now at the termination of my labours, which have extended over a period of nearly five years, I cannot give my work to the public without regret that it has not been accompanied by deeper study and more widespread research. But I have, in truth, been almost overwhelmed by the mass of materials at hand. These always increased enormously with every digression, and I found at length that I *must* be satisfied with what I had instead of seeking for more. Even with this restriction I have often been compelled to reject much, to epitomize and perhaps unduly abbreviate what I have used. A really copious and detailed history of Newgate would be a most voluminous affair. This well-known prison, which has stood for centuries upon the same site, is in itself an epitome of the criminal history of England; to have traced its chronicles down from epoch to epoch, closely and minutely, would have been wearisome to the reader. There is a family resemblance in crimes in all ages; when, therefore, the more prominent cases have been selected for description, a general impression will have been conveyed of the whole. I have followed this principle throughout, and have endeavoured to present a general, but not too detailed, picture of the various criminal periods through which Newgate has passed.

But the claims of Newgate on the public interest are not limited to the melancholy histories of those whom it has held in durance. Newgate, as the annexe of the Old Bailey, or great criminal law court of this city, has ever been closely connected with the administration of justice in this country. In its records are to be read the variations of our Statute Book. We may trace at Newgate the gradual amelioration of the penal code, from the days of its pitiless ferocity, to the time when, thanks to the incessant protests of humanitarian and philanthropist, a milder system of punishment became the rule. All this has found more than a passing mention in my pages. Again, Newgate, the city jail, the chief prison of the chief town in the kingdom, might have been expected to lead the van in prison reform; that it remained constantly, from the first and almost to the last, one of the worst-kept prisons in the kingdom, reflects but little credit upon those responsible for its management. The fact, however, that crying evils were constantly present in the great jail, brings Newgate at once into close connection with the whole subject of prison reform. To represent Newgate as it existed even before Howard commenced his crusade, and long afterwards, has naturally, therefore, fallen within the scope of my work. Nor have I confined myself strictly to this prison, but I have endeavoured to trace the slow progress of improvement throughout the whole country from first to last.

I cannot conclude these brief remarks without adding a few words of thanks to those who have assisted me in my undertaking. I have received much valuable information from Sidney Smith, Esq., the last Governor of Newgate; from

Mr. Mapperson, its last chief warder; and from many other officials of the prison. But most of all am I indebted to my friend, William Linton, Esq., formerly Governor of Petworth and Nottingham prisons, who has long rendered me the most cordial assistance and co-operation. I am also very grateful to my friend, Colonel Goff, for many of the original illustrations which embellish the book.

November, 1883.

INTRODUCTORY CHAPTER.^[1]

Table of Contents

Brief survey of Newgate—The first gaol—Its antiquity—Its inmates and general condition—Whittington's prison—Rebuilt after the Fire—Misgovernment, neglect, and injustice—Capital convicts and executions—First dawn of reform—A new Newgate built by Dance—State of interior continues deplorable—Mrs. Fry—The first inspectors of prisons—Amelioration long insisted upon introduced at last—Newgate closed in 1880.

IN antiquity and varied interest Newgate prison yields to no place of duration in the world. A gaol has stood on this same site for almost a thousand years. The first prison was nearly as old as the Tower of London, and much older than the Bastille. Hundreds of thousands of "felons and trespassers" have from first to last been incarcerated within. To many it must have been an abode of sorrow, suffering, and unspeakable woe, a kind of terrestrial inferno, to enter which was to abandon every hope. Imprisonment was often lightly and capriciously inflicted in days before our liberties were fully won, and innumerable victims of tyranny and oppression have been lodged in Newgate. Political troubles also sent their quota. The gaol was the halfway-house to the scaffold or the gallows for turbulent or short-sighted persons who espoused the losing side; it was the starting-place for that painful pilgrimage to the pillory or whipping-post which

was too frequently the punishment for rashly uttered libels and philippics against constituted power. Newgate, again, was on the high road to Smithfield; in times of intolerance and fierce religious dissensions numbers of devoted martyrs went thence to suffer for conscience' sake at the stake. For centuries a large section of the permanent population of Newgate, as of all gaols, consisted of offenders against commercial laws. While fraudulent bankrupts were hanged, others more unfortunate than criminal were clapped into gaol to linger out their lives without the chance of earning the funds by which alone freedom could be recovered. Debtors of all degrees were condemned to languish for years in prison, often for the most paltry sums. The perfectly innocent were also detained. Gaol deliveries were rare, and the boon of arraignment and fair trial was strangely and unjustly withheld, while even those acquitted in open court were often haled back to prison because they were unable to discharge the gaoler's illegal fees. The condition of the prisoners in Newgate was long most deplorable. They were but scantily supplied with the commonest necessities of life. Light scarcely penetrated their dark and loathsome dungeons; no breath of fresh air sweetened the fetid atmosphere they breathed; that they enjoyed the luxury of water was due to the munificence of a Lord Mayor. Their daily subsistence was most precarious. Food, clothing, fuel were doled out in limited quantities as charitable gifts; occasionally prosperous citizens bequeathed small legacies to be expended in the same articles of supply. These bare prison allowances were further eked out by the chance seizures in the markets; by bread

forfeited as inferior or of light weight, and meat declared unfit to be publicly sold. All classes and categories of prisoners were herded indiscriminately together: men and women, tried and untried, upright but misguided zealots with hardened habitual offenders. The only principle of classification was a prisoner's ability or otherwise to pay certain fees; money could purchase the squalid comfort of the master's side, but no immunity from the baleful companionship of felons equally well furnished with funds and no less anxious to escape the awful horror of the common side of the gaol. The weight of the chains, again, which, till quite recently, innocent and guilty alike wore, depended upon the price a prisoner could pay for "easement of irons," and it was a common practice to overload a new-comer with enormous fetters and so terrify him into lavish disbursement. The gaol at all times was so hideously overcrowded that plague and pestilence perpetually ravaged it, and the deadly infection often spread into the neighbouring courts of law.

The foregoing is an imperfect but by no means overcoloured picture of Newgate as it existed for hundreds of years, from the twelfth century, indeed, to the nineteenth. The description is supported by historical records, somewhat meagre at first, perhaps, but becoming more and more ample and better substantiated as the period grows less remote. We have but scant information as to the first gate-house gaol. Being part and parcel of the city fortifications, it was intended mainly for defence, and the prison accommodation which the fate afforded with its dungeons beneath, and garrets above, must have been of

the most limited description. More pains were no doubt taken to keep the exterior strong and safe against attack, than to render the interior habitable, and we may conclude that the moneys willed by Whittington for the re-edification of Newgate were principally expended on the restoration and improvements of the prison. "Whit's palace," as rebuilt by Whittington's executors, lasted for a couple of centuries, and was throughout that period the principal gaol for the metropolis. Reference is constantly made to it in the history of the times. It was the natural receptacle for rogues, roysterers, and masterless men. It is described as a hot-bed of vice, a nursery of crime. Drunkenness, gaming, profligacy of the vilest sort, went forward in the prison without let or hindrance. Contemporary petitions, preserved in the State papers, penned by inmates of Newgate pining for liberty, call their prison-house a foul and noisome den. The gaoler for the time being was certain to be a brutal partisan of the party in power, especially bitter to religious or political opponents who fell into his hands. But too frequently also he was a rapacious, extortionate, over-reaching despot, whose first and only thought was to turn the prisoners into profit, and make all the money he could out of those whom the law put completely in his power.



With occasional, but not always sufficient, repairs, but without structural alterations, Whittington's Newgate continued to serve down to the seventeenth century. About 1629 it was in a state of utter ruin, and such extensive works were undertaken to re-edify it that the security of the gaol was said to be endangered, and it was thought better to pardon most of the prisoners before they set themselves free. Lupton, in his 'London Carbonadoed,' speaks of Newgate as "new-fronted and new-faced" in 1638. Its accommodations must have been sorely tried in the troublous years which followed. It seems to have been in the time of the Commonwealth when "our churches were made into prisons," and demands for space had greatly multiplied, that Newgate was increased by the addition of the buildings belonging to the Phoenix Inn in Newgate Street. The great fire of 1666 gutted, if not completely destroyed, Newgate, and its reconstruction became imperative. Some say Wren was the architect of the new prison, but the fact is not fully substantiated. Authentic and detailed information has, however, been preserved concerning it; it is figured in a

familiar woodcut which may be seen in every modern history of London, while a full description of the interior, both plan and appropriation, has been left by an anonymous writer, who was himself an inmate of the gaol^[2]. The prison was still subordinated to the gate, which was an ornate structure, with great architectural pretensions. But as a writer in the 'Gentleman's Magazine' well put it about a century ago, "The sumptuousness of the outside but aggravated the misery of the wretches within." Some effort was made to classify, and the Newgate of that day contained five principal divisions or sides: there was the master's side, for debtors and felons respectively; the common side, for those same two classes of prisoners; and lastly the press yard, for prisoners of note. The right to occupy the master's side was a luxury dearly purchased, but the accommodation obtained, albeit indifferent, was palatial to that provided for the impecunious on the common side. The only inmates of the Newgate prison I am now describing who were comparatively well off, were those admitted to the press yard; a division composed of "large and spacious rooms" on all the three floors of the prison, and deemed by a legal fiction to be part of the governor's house.

How desperate was the case of the bulk of the inmates of Newgate will be amply set forth as my narrative proceeds. A few brief facts will suffice here to give a general idea of this foul prison house. The whole place except the press yard was so dark that candles, "links or burners," were used all day long; the air was so inconceivably disgusting, that the ventilator on the top of the prison could exercise no

remedial effect. That malignant disease, the gaol fever, was chronic, and deaths from it of frequent occurrence. Doctors could be got with difficulty to attend the sick in Newgate, and it was long before any regular medical officer was appointed to the prison. Evil was in the ascendant throughout; wickedness and profligacy prospered; the weakest always went to the wall. Tyranny and oppression were widely practised: not only were the gaolers extortionate, but their subordinates, the inferior turnkeys, even the bed-makers, and the gate-keeper's wife levied black mail on the pretence of affording relief, and with threats or actual ill-usage when payment was withheld. Certain favoured prisoners wielded recognized authority over their fellows. Unwritten but accepted customs suffered the general body to exact "garnish," or "chummage," from new comers, fees for the privilege of approaching the fire, and generally for immunity from persecution, the sums thus raised being forthwith expended in strong drink. The "cellarmen" were selected prisoners who could sell candles at their own prices, and got a percentage upon the liquors consumed, with other advantages. Other prisoners were employed in the distribution of food; in the riveting and removing of shackles; even in the maintenance of discipline, and when so acting were armed with a flexible weapon, "to the great terror and smart of those who dispute their authority." Into these filthy dens, where misery stalked rampant and corruption festered, unhappy prisoners brought their families, and the population was greatly increased by numbers of innocent persons, women, and even children, to be speedily demoralized and utterly lost.

Lunatics raving mad ranged up and down the wards, a terror to all they encountered. Common women were freely admitted; mock marriages were of constant occurrence, and children were frequently born within the precincts of the gaol. There was but little restriction upon the entrance of visitors. When any great personage was confined in Newgate, he held daily levees and received numbers of fashionable folk. Thus Count Konigsmark, when arrested for complicity in the murder of Mr. Thynne, "lived nobly" in the keeper's house, and was daily visited by persons of quality. When political prisoners, Jacobite rebels, or others were incarcerated, their sympathizers and supporters came to "comfort them" by sharing their potations. Even a notorious highwayman like Maclane, according to Horace Walpole, entertained great guests, and it was the "mode" for half the world to drive to Newgate and gaze on him in the "condemned hold."

In sharp contrast with the privations and terrible discomforts of the poorer sort was the wild revelry of these aristocratic prisoners of the press yard. They had every luxury to be bought with money, freedom alone excepted, and that was often to be compassed by bribing dishonest officials to suffer them to escape. They kept late hours, collecting in one another's rooms to roar out seditious songs over innumerable bowls of punch. At times they exhibited much turbulence, and refused to be locked up in the separate chambers allotted to them. No attempt was made to coerce them, or oblige them to observe due decorum and submit to the discipline of the prison. Yet while they thus experienced ill-placed and unjust leniency, others far less

culpable were ground down till they were “slowly murdered there by the intolerable horrors of the place.”

As a general rule the movement of offenders through Newgate was pretty rapid. The period of imprisonment for debtors might be often indefinitely prolonged, and there was the well-known case of Major Bernardi and his companions, who were detained for forty years in Newgate without trial or the chance of it. Some, too, languished awaiting transfer to the West Indian or American plantations by the contractors to whom they were legally sold. But for the bulk of the criminal prisoners there was one speedy and effectual system of removal, that of capital punishment. Executions were wholesale in those times. The code was sanguinary in the extreme. The gallows tree was always heavily laden. There was every element of callous brutality in the manner of inflicting the extreme penalty of the law. From the time of sentence to the last dread moment the convict was exhibited as a show, or held up to public contempt and execration. Heartless creatures flocked to the gaol chapel to curiously examine the aspect of condemned malefactors. Men who had but a short time to live mingled freely with their fellow-prisoners, recklessly carousing, and often making a boast that they laughed to scorn and rejected the well-meant ministrations of the ordinary.

The actual ceremony was to the last degree cold-blooded and wanting in all the solemn attributes fitting the awful scene. The doomed was carried in an open cart to Tyburn or other appointed place; the halter already encircled his neck, his coffin was at his feet, by his side the chaplain or some devoted amateur philanthropist and preacher striving

earnestly to improve the occasion. For the mob it was a high day and holiday; they lined the route taken by the ghastly procession, encouraging or flouting the convict according as he happened to be a popular hero or unknown to criminal fame. In the first case they cheered him to the echo, offered him bouquets of flowers, or pressed him to drink deep from St. Giles's Bowl; in the latter they pelted him with filth and overwhelmed him with abuse. The most scandalous scenes occurred on the gallows. The hangman often quarrelled with his victim over the garments, which the former looked upon as a lawful perquisite, and which the latter was disposed to distribute among his friends; now and again the rope broke, or the drop was insufficient, and Jack Ketch had to add his weight to the hanging body to assist strangulation. Occasionally there was a personal conflict, and the hangman was obliged to do his office by sheer force. The convicts were permitted to make dying speeches, and these orations were elaborated and discussed in Newgate weeks before the great day; while down in the yelling crowd beneath the gallows spurious versions were hawked about and rapidly sold. It was a distinct gain to the decency and good order of the metropolis when Tyburn and other distant points ceased to be the places of execution, and hangings were exclusively carried out in front of Newgate, just over the debtors' door. But some of the worst features of the old system survived. There was still the melodramatic sermon, in the chapel hung with black, before a large congregation collected simply to stare at the convicts squeezed into one pew, who in their turn stared with mixed feelings at the coffin on the table just before their eyes. There was still the

same tumultuous gathering to view the last act in tragedy, the same bloodthirsty mob swaying to and fro before the gates, the same blue-blooded spectators, George Selwyn or my Lord Tom Noddy, who breakfasted in state with the gaoler, and so got a box seat or rented window opposite at an exorbitant rate. The populace were like degenerate Romans in the amphitheatre waiting for the butchery to begin. They fought and struggled desperately for front places: people fell and were trampled to death, hoarse roars came from thousands of brazen throats, which swelled into a terrible chorus as the black figures of the performers on the gallows stood out against the sky. "Hats off!" "Down in front!" these cries echoed and re-echoed in increasing volume, and all at once abruptly came to an end—the bolt had been drawn, the drop had fallen, and the miserable wretch had gone to his long home.

The policy which had brought about the substitution of Newgate for Tyburn no doubt halted halfway, but it was enlightened, and a considerable move towards the private executions of our own times. It was dictated by the more humane principles which were gradually making head in regard to criminals and crime. Many more years were to elapse, however, before the eloquence of Romilly was to bear fruit in the softening of our sanguinary penal code. But already John Howard had commenced his labours, and his revelations were letting in a flood of light upon the black recesses of prison life. It is to the credit of the authorities of the City of London that they recognized the necessity for rebuilding Newgate on a larger and more improved plan before the publication of Howard's reports. The great

philanthropist made his first journey of inspection towards the end of 1773; in the following year he laid the information he had obtained before the House of Commons, and in 1777 published the first edition of his celebrated 'State of Prisons.' As early as 1755 the Common Council had condemned Newgate in no measured terms; declared it to be habitually overcrowded with "victims of public justice, under the complicated distresses of poverty, nastiness, and disease," who had neither water, nor air, nor light in sufficient quantities; the buildings were old and ruinous, and incapable of any "improvement or tolerable repairs." It was plainly admitted that the gaol ought to be at once pulled down. But as usual the difficulty of providing funds cropped up, and the work, though urgent, was postponed for some years. The inadequacy of the prison was so obvious, however, that the matter was presently brought before a committee of the House of Commons, and the necessity for rebuilding clearly proved. A committee of the Corporation next met in 1767 to consider ways and means, and they were fortified in their decision to rebuild by convincing evidence of the horrible condition of the existing prison. A letter addressed to the committee by Sir Stephen Jansen stigmatizes it as "an abominable sink of beastliness and corruption." He spoke from full knowledge, having been sheriff when the prison was decimated by gaol fever. In the same year Parliamentary powers were obtained to raise money to rebuild the place, and the new Newgate was actually commenced in 1770, when Lord Mayor Beckford, father of "Vathek" Beckford, laid the first stone. Its architect was George Dance, and the prison building, which still

stands to speak for itself, has been counted one of his finest works. Howard, who gives this historic prison the first place in his list, must have visited it while the new buildings were in progress. The plan did not find favour with him, but he enters into no particulars, and limits his criticisms to remarking, "that without more than ordinary care the prisoners in it will be in great danger of gaol fever." According to modern notions the plan was no doubt faulty in the extreme. Safe custody, a leading principle in all prison construction, was compassed at the expense of most others. The prison façade is a marvel of strength and solidity, but until reappropriated in recent years its interior was a limited confined space, still darkened, and deprived of ventilation, by being parcelled out into courts, upon which looked the narrow windows of the various wards.

The erection of the "new and commodious gaol," as it is described in an Act of the period, proceeded rapidly, but three or four years after Howard's visit it was still uncompleted. This Act recites what had been done, referring to the valuable, extensive areas, which had been taken in for the construction of this great prison, and provides additional funds. In 1780, however, an unexpected catastrophe happened, and the new buildings were set on fire by the Lord George Gordon rioters, and so much damaged that the most comprehensive repairs were indispensable. These were executed in 1782. Many years were to elapse before any further alterations or improvements were made.

It was soon evident that Dance's Newgate, imposing and appropriate as were its outlines and façade, by no means

satisfied all needs. The progress of enlightenment was continuous, while complaints that would have been stifled or ignored previously were now occasionally heard. Yet the wretched prisoners continued to be closely packed together. Transportation had now been adopted as a secondary punishment, and numbers who escaped the halter were congregated in Newgate waiting removal beyond the seas. The population of the prison had amounted to nearly six hundred at one time in 1785. According to a presentment made by the Grand Jury in 1813, in the debtors' side, built for one hundred, no less than three hundred and forty were lodged; in the female felons' ward there were one hundred and twenty in space intended for only sixty. These females were destitute and in rags, without bedding, many without shoes. In later years the figures rose still higher, and it is authoritatively stated that there were as many as eight, nine, even twelve hundred souls immured within an area about three-quarters of an acre in extent. We have the evidence of trustworthy persons that grievous abuses still continued unchecked. All prisoners were still heavily ironed until large bribes had been paid to obtain relief. All manner of unfair dealing was practised towards the prisoners. The daily allowance of food was unequally divided. Bread and beef were issued in the lump, and each individual had to scramble and fight for his share. Prisoners had no bedding beyond a couple of dirty rugs. Exorbitant gaol fees were still demanded on all sides; the Governor eked out his income by what he could extort, and his subordinates took bribes wherever they could get them. It was customary to sell the place of wardsman, with its greater ease and power of

oppression, to the highest bidder among the prisoners. Unlimited drinking was allowed within the walls; the prison tap, with the profits on sales of ale and spirits, was a part of the Governor's perquisites. All this time there was unrestrained intercommunication between the prisoners; the most depraved were free to contaminate and demoralize their more innocent fellows. Newgate was then, and long continued, a school and nursery for crime. It was established beyond doubt that burglaries and robberies were frequently planned in the gaol, while forged notes and false money were often fabricated within the walls and passed out into the town.

The disclosure of these frightful evils led to a Parliamentary inquiry in 1814, and the worst facts were fully substantiated.^[3] The prison was not water-tight, rain came in through the roof; broken windows were left unglazed; it was generally very dirty; the gaoler admitted that with its smoked ceilings and floors of oak, caulked with pitch, it never could look clean. The prisoners were not compelled to wash, and cleanliness was only enforced by a general threat to shut out visitors. Sometimes a more than usually filthy person was stripped, put under the pump, and forced to go naked out into the yard. The poor debtors were in terrible straits, herded together, and dependent upon the casual charities for supplies. Birch, the well-known tavern-keeper, and others, sent in broken victuals, generally the stock meat which had helped to make the turtle-soup for civic feasts. The chaplain took life very easy, and, beyond preaching to those who cared to attend chapel, ministered but little to the spiritual wants of his charge. His indifference was

strongly condemned in the report of the Commons Committee. The chapel congregation was generally disorderly: prisoners yawned, and coughed, and talked enough to interrupt the service; women were in full view of the men, and many greetings, such as "How do you do, Sall?" often passed from pew to pew. No attempt was made to keep condemned convicts, male or female, separate from other prisoners; they mixed freely with the rest, saw daily any number of visitors, and had unlimited drink.

It was a little before the publication of the Committee's Report that that noble woman, Mrs. Fry, first visited Newgate. The awful state of the female prison, as she found it, is described in her memoirs. Three years elapsed between her first visit and her second. In the interval, the report last quoted had borne some fruit. An Act had been brought in for the abolition of gaol fees; gaol committees had been appointed to visit and check abuses, and something had been done to ameliorate the condition of the neglected female outcasts. Yet the scene within was still dreadful, and permanent amelioration seemed altogether beyond hope. What Mrs. Fry quickly accomplished against tremendous difficulties, is one of the brightest facts in the whole history of philanthropy. How she persevered in spite of prediction of certain failure; how she won the co-operation of lukewarm officials; how she provided the manual labour for which these poor idle hands were eager, and presently transformed a filthy den of corruption into a clean and whitewashed workroom, in which sat rows of women, recently so desperate and degraded, stitching and sewing orderly and silent: these extraordinary results with

the most unpromising materials will be found detailed in a subsequent page.^[4]

There was no one, unfortunately, to undertake the same great work upon the male side. "The mismanagement of Newgate had been for years notorious," says the Hon. H. G. Bennet, in a letter addressed to the Common Council, "yet there is no real reform. The occasional humanity of a sheriff may remedy an abuse, redress a wrong, cleanse a sewer, or whitewash a wall, but the main evils of want of food, air, clothing, bedding, classification, moral discipline remain as before." But appeals, however eloquent, were of small avail. Time passed, and at last there was a general impetus towards prison reform. The question became cosmopolitan. Close inquiry was made into the relative value of systems of punishment at home and abroad. Millbank Penitentiary was erected at the cost of half a million, to give full scope to the experiment of reformation. Public attention was daily more and more called to prison management. Yet through it all Newgate remained almost unchanged. It was less crowded, perhaps, since having been relieved by the opening of the Giltspur Street Compter, and that was all that could be said. In 1836, when the newly-appointed Government inspectors made their first report, the internal arrangements of Newgate were as bad as ever. These inspectors were earnest men, who had made prisons and prison management a study. One was the Rev. Whitworth Russell, for many years chaplain of Millbank; the other Mr. Crawford, who had written an admirable State paper upon the prisons of the United States, the result of long personal investigation.

The report framed a strong indictment against the Corporation, who were mainly responsible. Well might the inspectors close it with an expression of poignant regret, not unmixed with indignation, at the frightful picture presented of the existing state of Newgate.^[5] The charges were unanswerable, the only remedy immediate and searching reform. As a matter of fact various abuses and irregularities were put an end to the following year, but the alterations, so said the inspectors in a later report, only introduced the outward semblance of order. "The master evil, that of gaol association, and consequent contamination, remained in full activity." Year after year the inspectors repeated their condemnatory criticisms, but were unable to effect any radical change. For quite another decade, Newgate continued a by-word with prison reformers. In 1850, Colonel, afterwards Sir Joshua Jebb, told the select committee on prison discipline, that he considered Newgate, from its defective construction, one of the worst prisons in England. Captain Williams, a prison inspector, was of the same opinion, and called Newgate quite the worst prison in his district. The fact was, limitation of area rendered it quite impossible to reconstitute Newgate and bring it up to the standard of modern prison requirements. Either great additions must be made to the site, an operation likely to be exceedingly costly, or a new building must be erected elsewhere. These points had already been discussed repeatedly and at length by gaol committees and the Court of Aldermen, and a decision finally arrived at, to erect a new prison on the Tufnell Park Estate, in the north of London. And this, now known as Holloway Prison, was opened in 1852.

Newgate, relieved of the unnatural demands upon its accommodation, was easily and rapidly reformed. It became now simply a place of detention for city prisoners, an annexe of the Old Bailey, filled and emptied before and after the sessions. Considerable sums were expended in reconstructing the interior and providing the largest possible number of separate cells for the confinement of the limited number of prisoners who now required to be accommodated. As such it continued to serve until the year 1880, when, under the principles of concentration which formed the basis of the Prison Act of 1877, it was closed. It was found the House of Detention at Clerkenwell had sufficient space to accommodate all prisoners awaiting trial at the Central Criminal Court, and that Newgate prison was not wanted except when the sessions were actually sitting. It ceased, therefore, to be used except as a temporary receptacle at such times, but it is also still the metropolitan place of execution.

CHAPTER I.

MEDIAEVAL NEWGATE.

[Table of Contents](#)

Earliest accounts of Newgate prison—The New Gate, when built and why—Classes of prisoners incarcerated—Of high degree, as well as all categories of common criminals—Brawlers, vagabonds, and ‘roarers’ committed to Newgate; also those who sold adulterated food—Exposure in pillory and sometimes mutilation preceded imprisonment—The gradual concession of privileges to the Corporation—Lord Mayor constituted perpetual justice of the peace—Corporation obtains complete jurisdiction over Newgate—The sheriffs responsible for the good government of prisons on appointment—Counted prisoners held keys, and the cocket or seal of Newgate—Forbidden to farm the prison or sell the post of keeper—The rule in course of time contravened, and keepership became purchaseable—Conflict of authority between sheriffs and Corporation as to appointment of keeper—Condition of the prisoners in mediæval times—Dependent on charity for commonest necessities; food, clothing, and water—A breviary bequeathed—Gaol falls into ruin and is rebuilt by Whittington’s executors in 1422—This edifice two centuries later is restored, but destroyed in the great Fire of 1666.

THE earliest authentic mention of Newgate as a gaol or prison for felons and trespassers occurs in the records of the reign of King John. In the following reign, A.D. 1218, Henry III. expressly commands the sheriffs of London to repair it, and promises to reimburse them for their outlay from his own exchequer. This shows that at that time the place was under the direct control of the king, and maintained at his charges. The prison was above the gate, or in the gate-house, as was the general practice in ancient times. Thus Ludgate was long used for the incarceration of city debtors. To the gate-house of Westminster were committed all offenders taken within that city; and the same rule obtained in the great provincial towns, as at Newcastle, Chester, Carlisle, York, and elsewhere. Concerning the gate itself, the New Gate and its antiquity, opinions somewhat differ. Maitland declares it to be "demonstrable" that Newgate was one of the four original gates of the city; "for after the fire of London in 1666," he goes on to say, "in digging a foundation for the present Holborn bridge, the vestigia of the Roman military way called Watling Street were discovered pointing directly to this gate; and this I take to be an incontestable proof of an original gate built over the said way in this place." Maitland in this conjecture altogether departs from the account related by Stowe. The latter gives a precise and circumstantial description of the building of Newgate, which he calls the fifth principal gate of the city. There is, however, every reason to suppose that a gate had existed previously hereabouts in the city wall, and the site of the new gate is identical with one which was long called Chamberlain's Gate, because that official had his

court in the Old Bailey hard by. According to Stowe, Newgate was erected about the time of Stephen or the first Henry under the following circumstances. After the destruction of the old cathedral church of St. Paul in 1086, Mauritius, Bishop of London, resolved to build an entirely new edifice upon the site, intending to construct a work so grand that “men judged it would never be performed, it was so wonderful to them for height.”^[6] In pursuance of his great scheme the Bishop enclosed a large space of ground for cemetery and churchyard, and in doing so stopped up and obstructed the great thoroughfare from Aldgate in the east to Ludgate in the west. The traffic now was driven to choose between two long detours: one passing to the northward of the new cemetery wall, and so by Paternoster Row, Ave Maria Lane, and Bowyer Row, to Ludgate; the other, still more circuitous, by Cheape and Watling Street, thence southward through Old Change, west through Carter Lane, up Creadlam north, and finally westward again to Ludgate. These routes, as Stowe observes, were “very cumbersome and dangerous both for horse and man. For remedy whereof a new gate was made and so called, by which men and cattle, with all manner of carriages, might pass more directly (as before) from Aldgate through West Cheape to St. Paul’s on the north side, through St. Nicholas Shambles and Newgate market to Newgate, and from thence to any part westward over Holborn Bridge, or turning without the gate into Smithfield and through Iseldon (Islington) to any part north and by west.”

Of that ancient Newgate, city portal and general prison-house combined, but scant records remain. A word or two in