

NEWPORT BRIDEWELL & THE COUNTY HOUSE OF CORRECTION

From at least the 17th century onwards, Newport would have had a parish “cage” in Church Street (then part of Cage Green), and later a pillory, for detaining minor offenders. Those committing more serious offences would have been sent to the Bridewell in Belmont Hill. The building was small and dilapidated and despite many renovations had no exercise yard.

Newport constables were accused of allowing “rogues” to pass through the town unpunished and prison reformers pushed for better conditions for the inmates. In 1774 the adjacent house and yard were purchased, the existing Bridewell was demolished and rebuilt on a much bigger footprint, as the County House of Correction (The Links). It included staff apartments, magistrate’s committee room, brew-house, separate lodgings for male and female inmates, workrooms and exercise yards.

The intention was to “confine and correct” the “idle, disorderly and vagrant behaviour” of minor offenders, and avoid the cost of sending them to larger gaols further afield. Most were serving short terms for relatively petty offences, in many cases the result of suffering abject poverty. Recently widowed Elizabeth Brookes (of Newport) was sentenced to 3 months hard labour for stealing fire wood.

NEWPORT BRIDEWELL & THE COUNTY HOUSE OF CORRECTION

In its early years, the prison was in fairly good condition, overseen by salaried full-time staff: a keeper, chaplain and matron. A surgeon visited regularly to check for signs of contagious diseases.

Despite housing ever more “hardened and dangerous convicts,” by 1830 the prison had fallen into disrepair. There were calls to close it immediately, but poor harvests resulted in riots, which bought them a reprieve. The gaol eventually closed in 1841, with the remaining prisoners transferring to Springfield County Prison (Chelmsford) and a smaller lock-up was established in Saffron Walden. The former House of Correction re-opened as a police station. In 1886, it was sold to the Grammar School to use as a boarding house. In the 1950s it was converted into flats.

On display here in the local history gallery you can see the Pillory whipping post from Newport dated pre-1850.



The Links, built in 1774 as a House of Corrections, or Bridewell.