

The Blindhouse in Trowbridge

Blindhouses were built to be used as lock-ups, to confine wrongdoers for short periods. They were called blindhouses because they have no windows.

Trowbridge Blindhouse is usually dated at 1758, because of the date carved in bold numbers high on an interior wall in the left hand cell, but there are references to the blindhouse much earlier, from around 1690.

There are references in court records to stocks and pillory in Trowbridge as early as 1615. The stocks were

Stocks or Pillory? What's the difference?

The culprit would stand at the pillory, confined by neck and wrist, but sit in the stocks, confined by the legs.

still there, overgrown with weeds in 1857. There is also reference to the ducking stool, a punishment generally used for women, or "scolds", whereby they were ducked into the river, usually from a bridge.

Wrongdoers locked up in the blindhouse would have ranged from serious criminals who would be held until they could be put before a justice and committed to trial, to drunks, who would be released in the morning when they had sobered up.

Sympathetic bystanders would fetch beer and feed it to the prisoners by using one of the long 'churchwarden' pipes pushed through a slit in the wall.

In the 1800's, the youths of Bradford used to invade Trowbridge on Saturday evenings. They were known as "the Gudgeons", while the youths of Trowbridge, who would run to repel them, were known as "the Knobs".

There are other blindhouses in several nearby towns and villages, notably Bradford on Avon, Steeple Ashton and Hilperton. On the top of the domed roof of the Trowbridge blindhouse a large stone ball or "knob" can be seen. The roof of the blindhouse in Bradford on Avon is also adorned, but in that case by a fish known as a "gudgeon".

There was a riot in the town in 1826, about the local fixing of higher prices for potatoes. One of the leaders, who was arrested and put in the blindhouse, was rescued by his supporters taking off the roof.

In 1854 a County Police Station was built in Stallard Street, so the Blindhouse was no longer used to confine prisoners, though it was still used after this time to provide overnight accommodation for vagrants, who would have been sent on their way in the morning.

A police report from 1864 tells how a young man from London was put in the Blindhouse with a rug to wrap himself in. In the morning he was given a loaf and P.C. Dallimore was detailed to see him out of the town. Dallimore noticed that the tramp had torn off part of the rug to wrap his bread in, and for that he got two months hard labour.

In 1895, there were proposals to demolish the Blindhouse, but it was formally adopted by the Urban District Council instead.

In 1942, the same German bomb which destroyed part of Bridge House took the Blindhouse roof off. The roof was finally restored in 1950 after a lot of local debate.

In 1974, ownership passed to the Town Council, which carried out a restoration as part of the Jubilee celebrations of 1977.