

# OXFORD CASTLE & PRISON

## 2019 PRESS PACK





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# WHAT IS OXFORD CASTLE & PRISON?

Oxford Castle & Prison is a visitor attraction with a past stretching far beyond your imagination. For hundreds of years the site has held both famous and infamous residents, serving time as a religious site, a home for royalty, a centre of justice and as the County Gaol.

Oxford Castle has had a constant presence in key historic moments in Oxford's evolution from its beginnings as a Saxon settlement through to the world-famous city it is today. Visitors can start their Oxford journey at Oxford Castle & Prison and discover 1,000 fascinating years of Oxford's history.

After almost one millennia filled with episodes of violence, executions, great escapes, betrayal and even romance, this ancient castle can now reveal its stories about the ordinary people who roamed the site and the extraordinary tales that connect them to it, unlocking the prison at the heart of the Norman castle.

## NOTES TO EDITORS

To find out more, visit [www.oxfordcastleandprison.co.uk](http://www.oxfordcastleandprison.co.uk)

## OPENING TIMES

Oxford Castle & Prison is open daily from 10.00am to 5.30pm (last tour 4.20pm).

Closed annually on 24th, 25th & 26th December.

## ADMISSION PRICES

Adult: £12.50, Child: £8.50, Senior: £10.50, Student: £10.50, Family: £39.00

## BOOKING

We advise booking tours online in advance at [www.oxfordcastleandprison.co.uk](http://www.oxfordcastleandprison.co.uk)

Any booking queries can be directed to 01904 261262.



# WHAT TO EXPECT? YOUR VISIT TO OXFORD CASTLE & PRISON

*Recommended visit time: 1 – 2 hours*

Having been preserved and redeveloped, Oxford Castle & Prison opened to the public in 2006. Accompanied by a costumed character guide from the castle's colourful history, visitors to the attraction can explore the austere confines of the 18th century Debtors' Tower and Prison D-wing; experience the atmospheric 900 year old underground Crypt, the only surviving remains of St. George's Chapel where, it is said, began the education for which Oxford is famed; marvel at the Mound of the 11th century motte and bailey castle with vaulted well chamber; climb St George's Tower and enjoy the unique 360° panoramic views over the dreaming spires. The oldest portion of the castle - and one of the oldest buildings in Oxford - is the Saxon stone-built St. George's Tower, which would originally have played a defensive role as the West Gate of Oxford.

Visitors to the ancient buildings can journey through the past as they wander around, learning about the real people linked to the site including: Geoffrey of Monmouth, who penned the famous legends of King Arthur and Merlin on-site in 1136; Marshall William Smith, the King's prison keeper, who in the 1600s made Oxford Prison as feared and as notorious as Colditz; Mary Blandy a convicted murderess, who became an 18th century celebrity; Isaac Darkin, a dashing highwayman, who wouldn't wait for the hangman and performed his execution himself; and Anne Green, who survived her own hanging and narrowly escaped being anatomised by an Oxford medical student in 1650!

After the tour, browse a selection of unique gifts and souvenirs to mark your visit. Guests also have the opportunity to take home your very own mugshot, adorned with your very own crime and punishment and available as a photo, fridge magnet or key ring. The neighbouring Castleyard Café provides a delicious selection of hot and cold beverages, light bites and lunch options, many of which are sourced locally.

The visitor attraction has a rolling calendar of enthralling events for visitors to take part in, including England's premier ghost festival Ghost Fest, as Oxford Castle & Prison is reputed to be one of Britain's most haunted sites.



## UNLOCKING THE FACTS...

- The Castle was built in 1071 by Robert d'Oilly, a Norman baron and close ally of William the Conqueror, although St. George's Tower is widely thought to have been built earlier, making it the oldest secular tower in England and the oldest building in Oxford.
- In addition to the Saxon St George's Tower, d'Oilly's castle at first consisted of a motte, or earthen mound, crowned with a timber tower and a strong encircling wooden fence. A moat, fed by water from the river, flowed around the outside of the bailey.
- St. George's Tower is four storeys high and has 101 steps.
- Oxford Castle & Prison was being used as a gaol as early as the 12th century, but it wasn't formally constituted as a county gaol until much later, in 1531.
- For four years in the 1640s, Oxford rivalled London as the capital city of England. Oxford Castle played a pivotal role in the Civil war at that time, used by King Charles I as a prison for rebel Parliamentarians.
- During the 18th century, the list of offences punishable by death grew from around 50 to more than 200. There were 56 public executions at Oxford Castle in the hundred years up to 1800, for crimes ranging from sheep-stealing to arson to spying.
- The last public execution at Oxford Prison was that of Noah Austin, for murder, in 1863.
- The modern prison was born around the end of the 18th century. The new prisons were dedicated to disciplining hearts and minds rather than bodies. They would cure the prisoner of crime as though crime were a disease.
- Daniel Harris was appointed to the role of Prison Gaoler in 1786. The former Clerk of Works, a keen archaeologist, draughtsman and prison reformer, Harris transformed Oxford Gaol, enlisting the prisoners to rebuild the derelict prison buildings.
- By the 19th century, the prison population had risen steeply, and Oxford Prison was expanded to cope with the demand. New wings were added so that prisoners could be divided by age and gender and be kept in individual cells.
- Hard labour was at the heart of the Victorian prison regime. The 1877 Prisons Act introduced a nationalised prison system with back breaking and demoralising work as its central plank.
- The castle was used as a prison until 7 September 1996.
- Oxford Castle was redeveloped during 2004 into flats, a luxury hotel, restaurants and bars, and an art gallery. The redevelopment also saw the transformation of St. George's Tower and Crypt, the castle mound and the Debtors' Tower into Oxford Castle & Prison.
- Oxford Castle & Prison was officially opened by the Queen on 5 May 2006.

# CASTLE CHARACTERS

## DANIEL HARRIS

**Role:** Clerk of works at Oxford prison, promoted to Governor

**Dates:** Clerk of Works in 1785, Governor from 1786 - 1809

Beginning his career at Oxford Prison as the Clerk of Works in 1785, Daniel Harris was quickly promoted to Governor the following year. He swiftly began his reformation of the prison conditions and put the prisoners to work, hiring the convicts out to complete public works as part of the prisoners' rehabilitation.

Daniel Harris possessed a number of skills as a builder, carpenter, draughtsman and architect. One of his greatest passions was archaeology, and subsequently, he was the first person to carry out serious excavations at Oxford Castle, during which he discovered a vaulted well chamber concealed within the mound and St. George's Crypt, both of which are available to view as part of the Oxford Castle & Prison experience.



## ANNE GREEN

**Role:** Survived her own hanging

**Date:** 1650

Anne Green, a servant, was hanged at Oxford Castle in 1650 for the murder of her new-born child, though in all likelihood the baby had been stillborn. To spare her any unnecessary suffering, Anne's friends pulled on her legs to hasten her death. Yet astonishingly, on being taken down she displayed signs of life. Doctors laboured to revive her, and she eventually made a full recovery. It was a miracle Anne Green survived to tell her tale – she lived for 15 years after her 'execution' and went on to have three children.



## EMPRESS MATILDA

**Role:** Fought with her cousin Stephen at Oxford Castle over the crown of England

**Date:** 1142

In the 12th century, King Stephen, grandson of William the conqueror, and his cousin, the Empress Matilda, fought for the crown of England. Matilda was the daughter of Henry I and a legitimate claimant for the throne. Matilda and Stephen's supporters took it in turns to lay siege to one another's strongholds.

Oxford Castle played an important role in these events, for it was here in 1142 that the tide of war turned in Stephen's favour. The previous year Matilda had adopted the castle as her headquarters. In the autumn of 1142 Stephen's forces surrounded it, blockading the Empress and her garrison inside. The siege lasted for three months. Matilda finally escaped one freezing night in December; according to legend, she wrapped herself in a white cape and fled through the snow to Wallingford Castle.

Stephen eventually won the battle but cunning Matilda won in her own way by negotiating with the King that her son would become his successor and therefore claiming a long-term victory.



## MARSHALL WILLIAM SMITH

**Role:** Terrorised prisoners of the civil war as Charles I's prison keeper

**Date:** 1640s

During the civil war of the 1640s, Charles I took up residence at the college of Christ Church, and Oxford Castle was used for holding Parliamentary prisoners of war. It soon attracted the sort of fearsome reputation that prison camps like Colditz and Changi would attract in the 20th century. Survivors emerged with horror stories about the appalling conditions inside and the gratuitous brutality of the King's prison keeper, Marshall William Smith. Soldiers were warned to fight to the death rather than fall into the hands of Marshall William Smith.

The tyranny of Marshall Smith was short-lived. In 1646, following the siege, Oxford fell to the Parliamentary General Sir Thomas Fairfax and King Charles fled.



## MARY BLANDY

**Role:** Middle-class murderer, convicted and hanged at Oxford Castle

**Date:** 1752

Not all prisoners in the castle were drawn from the lower classes. One case scandalised Oxfordshire's polite circles because it involved a young, middle-class woman. Her name was Mary Blandy.

Fearing Mary was on the verge of a life of spinsterhood, her father, Francis, began to broadcast the extent of his worldly wealth in the hope of attracting suitors, somewhat exaggerating his fortune for good effect. It worked. Captain Henry Cranstoun, a Scottish army officer from an aristocratic background, began to court Mary. Mary was smitten, and her father welcomed him into the family home. However, it soon emerged that Cranstoun already had a wife back in Scotland. Francis Blandy cast Cranstoun out and forbade Mary to see him.

To get their wedding plans back on course, Cranstoun sent Mary a quantity of white powder, instructing her to stir it into her father's food. It was, he said, a love philtre, which would persuade Francis to give the marriage his renewed blessing. Instead, Francis began to sicken; and only days later, he died. The 'love philtre' was no such thing. It was arsenic.

Mary came immediately under suspicion. The servants had seen her tampering with his food, and moments before her father's death she had made a tearful confession at his bedside. She was held in Oxford Castle, where her social status earned her special privileges like the opportunity to have friends to tea, although her ankles were to remain discretely shackled. (One of her shackles survives and is on display). Mary Blandy was convicted of murder in March 1752 and hanged, probably in the castleyard, on 6 April.



## JOHN AND ELIZABETH LILBURNE

**Role:** Husband and wife. John spent much of his life behind bars, while Elizabeth was on hand to save him

**Date:** 1642

John Lilburne was a political and religious radical, an outspoken opponent of tyranny and an upholder of the rights and liberties of the English people. He spent his adult life at loggerheads with the authorities, much of it either in exile or behind bars. In 1642, he was in Oxford Castle awaiting trial for treason. He had been taken captive by Royalist forces while valiantly defending a Parliamentarian position at Brentford in Middlesex, on one of the main routes into London. Now he and his associates were to be made examples of. If found guilty, Lilburne would almost certainly be sentenced to death.

On 13 December 1642, he managed to smuggle a letter out of the castle to his wife Elizabeth, conveying the news that his trial was set for the following week.

Elizabeth Lilburne was a remarkable character in her own right. Brave and resourceful, she was a seasoned campaigner and had helped her husband to distribute his writings and lobby Parliament, while somehow holding their young family together. Despite being heavily pregnant, she presented herself at the House of Commons to plead for John Lilburne's life. After some deliberation, Parliament resolved that if John Lilburne and his comrades were to be sentenced to death, Royalist prisoners' lives would be taken in reprisal.

Elizabeth Lilburne had two days to get to Oxford and deliver the news. She travelled alone and on foot through a country at war, slipping through enemy lines into Oxford to deliver the letter from Parliament securing her husband's acquittal. She arrived just in time to save her husband's life.



## ROWLAND JENKES

**Role:** Responsible for the curse of the Black Assize

**Date:** 1577

It was at the county court that one of the most infamous events in the castle's history took place: The Black Assize.

The year was 1577, and England was divided by the passions of the Reformation. In Oxford on 6 July, a 'saucy and foul-mouthed' Roman Catholic bookseller called Rowland Jenkes was brought before the assize court to be tried for his allegiance to the Pope. His defence failed to impress the jury and he was sentenced to lose his ears.

On learning his fate, Jenkes was somewhat understandably provoked. Rousing himself to full rhetorical flight, he pronounced a violent curse on the court, the jury and the city.

Almost immediately afterwards, people began to drop dead of a mysterious illness. Around 600 people in Oxford are said to have fallen sick on the day of Jenkes's trial, plus a further 100 who had returned to their homes outside the city.

The infection raged until the 12 August. By then the list of dead included two judges, the coroner, the sheriff, a clerk and many members of the jury at Jenkes's trial. Around 300 died in Oxford and another 200 or so outside of it.

The disease is said to have taken no victims from among the city's women, children or poor – a curious circumstance that led to many observers to impute the events of July and August 1577 to black magic or divine intervention, depending on which side of the religious fence they sat.



# OXFORD CASTLE & PRISON IMAGE GALLERY

High res versions of these images and further images are available [HERE](#).

Please contact Olivia Scammell for any requests

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# CONTACTS

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## WHAT WE CAN OFFER

- Travel features, ideas and itineraries – perfect for “best days out” or “things to do” articles
- Press trips to Oxford
- Historic knowledge on Oxford, prisons and castles
- A unique venue – perfect for group experiences, for example Ghost Hunts and a Murder Mystery evening



# OTHER CONTINUUM ATTRACTIONS

We are the leading name in cultural visitor attractions in the UK. Our unique and diverse portfolio offer the perfect choice for individual guests, families, friends, school groups, social outings, coach parties, corporate events and so much more. From the UK's home of chocolate in the heart of Yorkshire to the dizzy heights and dramatic views of the south coast. Discover castles, coins and Chaucer's tales, hidden streets and TV secrets. Continuum Attractions promise memorable experiences for all, with fascinating stories told in unforgettable ways.

## **OXFORD CASTLE & PRISON**

Tales of murder, romance, betrayal, escape and execution. We bring Oxford's hidden history to life - climb the tower, descend deep into the crypt, experience the prison regime. Costumed characters will guide you around the colourful past of Oxford Castle from Saxon foundations through to the Georgian prison buildings vacated by the last prisoners as recently as the 1990s. Whether you are looking for a private hire venue, bespoke educational facility or just a relaxing coffee in Castleyard Café, Oxford Castle Unlocked can offer it all.

## **THE REAL MARY KING'S CLOSE**

Beneath Edinburgh's Royal Mile lies the city's deepest secret, a warren of hidden streets that reveal the city's extraordinary past from the 17th century and beyond. For hundreds of years the true story of the Close has remained untold – until now! In the company of an expert guide you can explore this unique site and experience what it was really like for the people who lived, worked and died here. The Real Mary King's Close has been awarded the Five Star Historic Attraction Award by VisitScotland.

## **YORK'S CHOCOLATE STORY**

At York's Chocolate Story you can discover the stories behind the greatest names in chocolate, unwrap the secrets of chocolate making, and even learn the art of the chocolatier for yourself. A fully guided tour and three floors of interactive exploration take you on a journey through the city where chocolate made history. Our attraction also includes a retail shop, a café and the opportunity of exclusive evening hire for parties, corporate events, workshops and demonstrations.

## **THE CANTERBURY TALES**

Meet our costumed guides, walk alongside Chaucer's pilgrims and revel in the recreated medieval scenes as five colourful tales of love, infidelity, intrigue, courtship and death are brought vividly to life. Explore the sights, sounds and smells of 14th century England in this immersive recreation of medieval life; a unique and theatrical introduction to the famous



Canterbury Tales. The Canterbury Tales has become a much loved regional attraction and an essential part of any visit to the garden of England's historic cathedral city.

### **EMIRATES SPINNAKER TOWER**

Soaring 170 metres above Portsmouth Harbour and the Solent, the Emirates Spinnaker Tower has established itself as a national icon for Britain. Britain's best viewing tower stands proud over one of the most fascinating seascapes in the world, offering amazing 350° panoramic views of Portsmouth Harbour, the South coast and the Isle of Wight, stretching out for up to 23 miles. Three viewing decks offer a glass floor where visitors can dare to 'walk on air,' The Clouds café and the Sky Garden - open to the elements, where visitors can feel the wind in their hair.

### **EMMERDALE VILLAGE EXPERIENCE**

Visit the working Emmerdale Village set, located within the picturesque Harewood Estate in Leeds. As the home of Yorkshire's favourite soap, you'll step into the familiar surroundings of the Emmerdale Village and wander the streets that the Woolpack, David's Shop and your favourite characters call home. Open on selected spring, summer and autumn weekends, this fully-guided outdoor walking tour of the exterior Emmerdale sets will give you the chance to explore the village as our guides give you an insight into how the dramatic storylines of Emmerdale make the journey from script to screen.

### **EMMERDALE STUDIO EXPERIENCE**

The Emmerdale Studio Experience will help you to step into the drama as you discover how we create the characters you love and stories you remember, in a two-hour guided tour. Spanning the original Emmerdale Studios on Burley Road and the ITV Television Centre on Kirkstall Road, you'll have the opportunity to interact with replica sets and explore the working sets where episodes come to life. As our guides take you on a journey into soap land, you'll discover industry secrets and, from costumes and props, to stunts and special effects, this is your chance to explore the production process and get immersed in all things Emmerdale.

### **CORONATION STREET THE TOUR**

Coronation Street The Tour gives you the chance to explore the sensational outdoor sets at MediaCityUK. On your fully guided tour of the exterior Coronation Street sets, you'll be able to take in the familiar sights of Coronation Street, Rosamund Street and Victoria Street and recall your favourite storylines as our guides share exciting filming secrets and TELL you how the exciting episodes you watch at home make the journey from set to screen.

### **GREENWOOD**

Voted Best Family Attraction in North Wales for seven years running, days out don't get much better than this! Greenwood is set in 27 exciting acres, and it's easy to see why it's a full day out - discovering woodland adventure, awesome attractions and Forest family fun. Make a splash on the UK's only solar powered water ride, Jump aboard the world's first people

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powered roller coaster or zoom down the longest sledge run in Wales! Discover the Enchanted Wood Barn, full of the latest indoor play. Plus, find extraordinary entertainment in the Forest Theatre or get creative in the craft area and make something unique to take home with you!