Oxford Castle Unlocked 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 Unlocked and discover 1000 fascinating years of Oxford’s history.

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. When William the Conqueror invaded and won in 1066, the site was marked by the Normans as the ideal place for a Motte and Bailey castle, alongside St. George’s Tower. The castle developed over the centuries, incorporating the tower into its structure, and adding further buildings to accommodate its role as a place of incarceration, from the 13th century until the prison closure in 1996.

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.

Having been preserved and redeveloped, the old buildings were opened to the public in 2006. 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 secrets of Oxford Castle’s turbulent past have finally been unlocked, and visitors to the ancient building 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!

In addition, 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 Unlocked is reputed to be one of Britain’s most haunted sites.

Oxford Castle Unlocked is open daily from 10.00am to 5.30pm (last tour 4.20pm). See www.oxfordcastleunlocked.co.uk or call 01865 260666 to find out more.

ENDS

For further media information, images or to arrange a visit, please contact: Ellie Morgan on 07713 307925 or emorgan@oxfordcastleunlocked.co.uk

NOTES TO EDITORS:

About Oxford Castle Unlocked:

Oxford Castle Unlocked is open daily from 10.00am to 5.30pm (last tour 4.20pm). Standard admission prices until 31 January 2015: Adult: £10.25, Concession: £8.45, Child: £6.95, Family (2 adults, 2 children): £32.95.

Oxford Castle Unlocked is a 1000 year old castle which also served as a prison for over 800 years. The visitor attraction opened on 2 June 2006 and gives visitors the opportunity to learn about the real people who lived and died throughout the site’s turbulent past. Visitors are able to walk through the ancient buildings and experience the stories that connect the real people to these extraordinary events.

The guardians of this important historic site, The Oxford Preservation Trust were awarded a £3.8 million grant by the Heritage Lottery Fund to restore the castle and site buildings. The post of Learning and Access Officer is funded by Oxfordshire County Council. Oxford Castle Unlocked is operated by Continuum Attractions.

About Continuum Attractions:

For more information on Continuum Attractions, please visit www.continuumattractions.com

Continuum Attractions owns, operates and manages cultural attractions across the UK:

- Continuum Heritage Attractions
  - The Real Mary King’s Close, Edinburgh
  - The Canterbury Tales, Canterbury
  - Oxford Castle Unlocked, Oxford
  - York's Chocolate Story, York

- Continuum Icon Attractions
  - Emirates Spinnaker Tower, Portsmouth
  - Emmerdale Studio Experience, Leeds
  - Emmerdale The Tour, Leeds
  - Coronation Street On Tour, Touring

For corporate PR enquiries, please contact Laura Good on 01904 527721 or email lgood@continuumattractions.com
Oxford Castle Unlocked
Events list 2016

October
Ghost Fest
Oxford Castle Unlocked is preparing to welcome daring visitors, ghost hunters and thrill-seekers back this October for Ghost Fest, a month-long Halloween festival, as it returns to the 1000 year old site for the tenth year running. Events include overnight ghost hunts, trick or treating, pumpkin carving, Truth or Dare tours and more!

NEW for 2016, Truth & Dare Tours
Thursdays throughout October from 7.30pm, plus 31 October from 9pm
Guests will embark on a tour of the atmospheric buildings with one of the ghoulish castle characters, learning about the betrayals, executions and rumoured spirits who haunt the historic surrounds before daring to complete the Gauntlet of Terror, with live actors on hand to ensure it will be an experience to remember!
Tickets: £12 for children (aged 11+) and £15 for adults (16+)

Pumpkin Carving – October Half Term
Saturday 22 – Sunday 30 October, 10am – 4pm
Parents – avoid the mess of pumpkin carving at home! Throughout the Halloween half term, children are invited to carve their very own pumpkin at Oxford Castle Unlocked. Create silly, scary and wicked designs and take the finished product home in time to display them on Halloween night!
Included in the Castle admission fee (£7.50 for children); those not taking the tour can complete the pumpkin carving for £2.

Trick or Treating
Saturday 29 and Sunday 30 October, 5pm-7pm, Monday 31 October, 4.30pm – 7pm
Children have a chance for some fun and frights during Ghost Fest at the attraction’s ever-popular Trick or Treat evenings on Saturday 29 and Sunday 30 October from 5pm plus a special after-school session on Monday 31 October from 4.30pm. The castle’s prison wing offers the ultimate venue for some trick or treating as families – dressed to impress in their best Halloween costumes - are encouraged to knock on each cell door for spooky encounters and sweet rewards!
Tickets are £5 per child with one free accompanying adult. Additional adults are charged at £3.50
NEW for 2016, An evening with Ciaràn O'Keeffe
Friday 28 October, 7pm – 10pm
Best known for Living TV's Most Haunted, parapsychologist Ciaràn O'Keeffe comes to Oxford Castle Unlocked, ready to entertain brave guests with a talk about ‘The Dark Side of the Paranormal’ before leading a ghost hunting tour around the castle site, Most Haunted style. Nerves firmly shaken by the end of the evening, review your spirit searching adventures with a glass of bubbly!
£25 per person (suitable for ages 18+)

NEW for 2016, Halloween Midnight Tour
Monday 31 October, 11pm
On Halloween night, brace yourself for a special spooky tour of the castle encompassing the deepest, darkest corners of the 1000 year old site! Guests will dare to discover the ancient well chamber and underground crypt, climb the 11th century St. George’s Tower and the 18th century Debtor’s Tower, as well as exploring the Punishment Cells, the site of unimaginable horrors from the Georgian era. At the stroke of midnight, the tour will conclude with a glass of bubbly to toast the end of Halloween.
Tickets are £20 (18+ only)

Overnight Ghost Hunts
Select dates during October
Aspiring ghost hunters can explore the austere confines of the 1000 year old castle prison overnight on one of the professionally-led Ghost Hunt experiences held on select nights throughout the Festival. Vigils and paranormal experiments will test the hunters’ nerves as they seek one of the 15 spirits known to dwell in the castle boundaries.

Weekends from Saturday 26th November - Sunday 18th December
Christmas at the Castle
NEW for 2016, a festive treat for all the family at Oxford’s 1000 year old castle, exploring Christmas celebrations and traditions through the centuries.
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 Unlocked 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 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 Unlocked.

Oxford Castle Unlocked was officially opened by the Queen on 5 May 2006.
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 Unlocked 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 newborn 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 Parliamentarian 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 Parliamentarian 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 & 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 Unlocked
Image Gallery

High res versions of these images and further images are available. Please contact Ellie Morgan on emorgan@oxfordcastleunlocked.co.uk or call 07713 307 925

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A range of UK-based attractions provide a wealth of opportunities for individual guests, families, friends, school groups, social outings, coach parties, corporate events and so much more. For those looking for a truly unique place to visit, Continuum Attractions promise memorable experiences for all, with fascinating stories told in unforgettable ways.

**Oxford Castle Unlocked**

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 Cafe 1071 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 Visit Scotland.

**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**

Step back in time at The Canterbury Tales to experience sights, sounds and even smells of Medieval England. With interaction from our costumed characters and an entertaining audio guide, five of Chaucer’s most famous tales are brought vividly to life as you journey to the shrine of St Thomas Becket. 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 already 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 350º 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,’ a Cafe in the Clouds and the Sky Deck open to the elements, where visitors can feel the wind in their hair.
**Emmerdale The Tour**
The live, working TV set located within the Harewood Estate in Leeds, that has played witness to many-a spectacle, is open for limited weekends in the summer months. Sauntering past the familiar haunts of Home Farm, Bob's Café, The Woolpack, the Village Church and rows of stone cottages known as home for over 43 years to your favourite Emmerdale characters, guides will share secrets, stories and reveal fascinating facts behind the making of the, multi award winning, ITV soap.

**Coronation Street On Tour**
For the first time ever outside of the North West, Coronation Street is presented in a purpose built impressive showdome which is be home to iconic sets, authentic memorabilia and abundant with memories old and new from some of the best loved characters and stories. Virtually hosted by a familiar face, experience behind the scenes of the nation’s Street as you wonder through the atmospheric world of Weatherfield.

**Emmerdale Studio Experience**
The Emmerdale Studio Experience will take you on a journey behind the scenes, showing you how we bring the characters you love and stories you remember to life. By shining a light on the production process you’ll get to see how everything fits together. With full scale set reconstructions, preserved props and costumes to the secrets behind stunts and special effects; this is your chance to step into the exciting world of telly.