

PRISONS IN BATTLE



The prison in Lower Lake was technically not a prison or, for most of its short life, even a lock-up, but a *house of correction*. The distinction was always a little blurred, with overlaps between a house of correction, a poorhouse and a prison, but it was formally abandoned only in 1865. Houses of correction were originally established under an Act of 1576, though it took more than thirty years for one to be erected in Battle. Their purposes were for confinement after conviction (but for periods not exceeding one month), for paupers refusing work and for vagrants (including dissolute women: though no separate mention was given of dissolute men). It followed that very few inmates would be there for long.

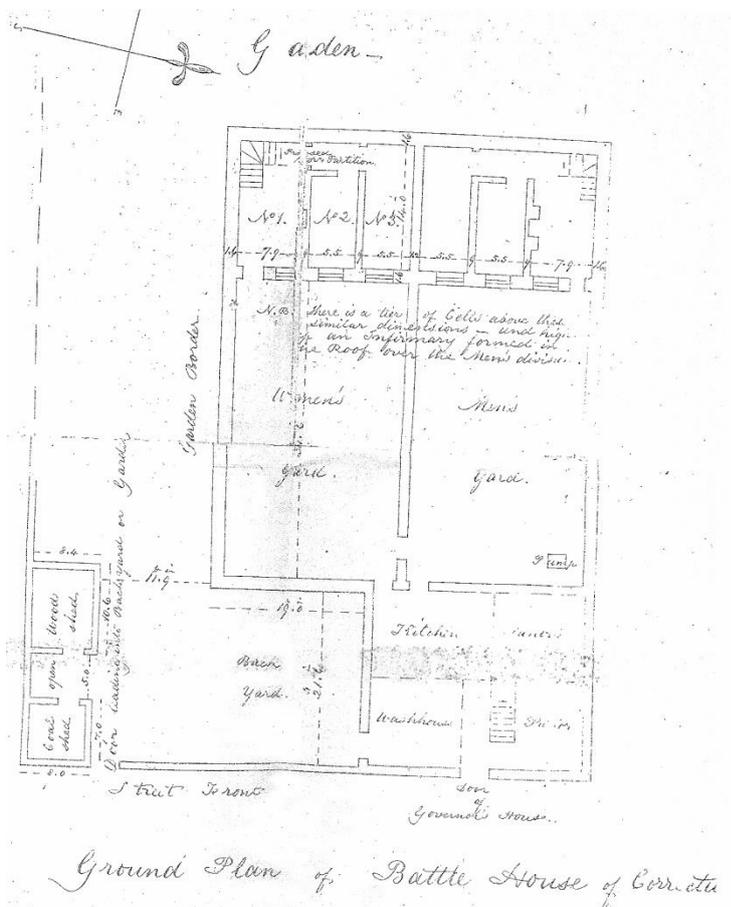
It is not clear where the original house of correction stood. When put up for sale it was described as between the dwellings of Thomas Barton (to the west) and of William Cruttenden (on the east), with the Websters' lands to the north. This makes it hard to place, even by reference to the William Cruttenden who survived to enter the 1841 census. We know that it composed a keeper's dwelling as well as the house itself, and that by 1820 it was in very poor condition, so much so that the magistrates determined on replacing it.

The existing site would be sold, which helped the finances, and £750 was set aside above this income. They hoped to use some of the materials of the building to defray the costs of the new one, but ultimately this proved impossible: they were unusable. All they would salvage from the original house were the moveable objects: beds, blankets, tables, water pails, for example.

After a search, it was determined that the best new site was towards the foot of Lower Lake, where the auction house now stands, and it was purchased for £250 from Charles Laurence the powder-maker. *The Lewes Mail* carried an advertisement for tenders on 30 December 1820.

Early in 1821 the Clerk to the Peace at Lewes (William Balcombe Langridge) began to consider the tenders received.¹ He was quite clearly too busy, and perhaps technically too inexperienced, to handle this process, and nothing was agreed. The tenders survive, showing that much work had certainly gone into defining what would be needed (60,000 bricks, for example), and they came from far and wide, the farthest being from a man at Dorking offering to sell grey lime for the mortar.

By May 1821 the delays were noticeable. John Barton, a Battle man who had been appointed to supervise the work and who was probably responsible for drawing up the specification, warned the Clerk that so much interest had been aroused by the project that a fresh and formal tendering process was advisable, and a second advertisement duly appeared in the *Lewes Mail* a few days later. This restarted the process. The decisions on the tenders, as to who supplied what, were again for the Clerk to make.



This is the 1821 plan for the new house of correction. There are faults in the reproduction, most obviously on the long left wall, an error has resulted in there being an apparent kink about halfway down.

Lower Lake is at the foot of the diagram. The scale is such that the coal shed at bottom left is eight feet across and seven feet deep.

The long script reads:

N B There is a tier of cells above (?them of) similar dimensions – and higher up an Infirmary formed in the Roof over the Men's division.

Some further delays took place, but building started later in the year. By April 1822 the new house of correction was complete and could be used, though the magistrates still held out, awaiting formal certification that it was fit for purpose. It opened in June 1822. Four inmates were then transferred from the old house: Katharine Reed, John Corninge (a soldier), Francis Bovis and Richard Barnet. The new ones in 1824 give a good example of the kind of person to expect:²

Phillip Lee. Found 23 November 1823 in a certain lodge or outhouse, in the parish of Battle, and not giving a good account of himself.

George Smith, Thomas Johnson. As an idle and disorderly person, having been found in Herstmonceux wandering abroad, lodging in outhouses, and not giving a good account of themselves.

Mary Bayley. A rogue and vagabond, having been found wandering abroad, lodging in outhouses and in the open air, and not giving a good account of herself, and having been delivered of a female bastard child in an open lodge belonging to ... John Scrace.

A chaplain's report of 1840 analysed the inmates for an unspecified period. The reasons for their confinement were:

Assault	6
Stealing wood	2
Felony	14
Wilful damage	15

Poaching	14	
Larceny	7	
Vagrancy	4	
Misbehaviour in the house		7
Absconding from the house		1
Malicious trespass		1

A further report for 1841 analysed the literacy of the previous year's total of 80 inmates:

Illiterate	39
Limited reading	18
Limited writing	13
Limited both	6
Literate	4

While definitions may differ, these figures were worse than those for the population as a whole, as one would expect for the kind of inmate – just as those of prison inmates today are worse than for the population generally.

The census of 1841 recorded only one inmate at the time, a man, and that of 1851 ten, including one woman. All the men were or had been labourers. In 1843 the Dean had reported that most of the inmates were juveniles.

The cells and yards were set back from the road, behind the keeper's house. Between the keeper and the main building were the yards, one for each sex, with the two-storey house behind. It ran parallel to the road, with its northern wall forming part of the boundary to the next property. It is said that the rear wall to the present auctioneers' parking space is part of the rear wall of the site.

Each section of the house (male and female) was designed with six cells. At least one cell in the men's section, for example, had a three-tier bunk bed. In each section one cell could be used for solitary confinement. Above them was what was termed the infirmary, but it was in the attic and accessible only by a ladder and trap door, which must have made it rarely used.

There must have been a keeper from the moment of opening, but the first known holder of the office did not contract with the magistrates until 1823. He was Samuel Cooke from Ashburnham, then aged about 37 and formerly a miller, who had a wife and at least three children. He remained keeper until 1853, and appears to have performed without complaint. As was common (and practised at the workhouse) his wife Elizabeth was appointed matron in 1825. He received £50 per annum (increased to £70 in 1841), expenses not included, and Elizabeth 2d per week.

Almost from the beginning the house attracted some criticism. Battle was too small to have a house of correction that could function as current thinking demanded. It was too open (one complaint was that tobacco could be thrown over the walls to the inmates), the sexes were not completely segregated and in the early days no work was provided. Nor was there a chaplain until 1833, though for the first ten years the Dean of Battle visited every Sunday and held a service. Battle was too small to be able to finance the necessary improvements.

In 1838 an inspection proposed the closure of the house and the transfer of the inmates to Lewes, but this was not done for fifteen years. Minor changes did happen to reach greater compliance with national standards, even if to a modern ear they are hateful: to provide work two cranks were installed, which were turned by the prisoners to raise weights of varying size. That appears to be the nearest that the house reached towards providing work. And in 1832 Cooke bought a pair of handcuffs – to have been without them for ten years demonstrates that the inmates rarely deserved them.

The conditions in which the house found itself were not that different from other houses in the town: in other words, medically dangerous. The Cresy report of 1850³ noted that

...the prison is located, in the midst of several cesspools, and without any properly constructed drains. Against the north wall is an open receptacle for two large pigsties and a privy...

Closure had to await the building of appropriate facilities outside Battle, and in 1853 Lewes prison was built. Those in the Battle house of correction were transferred there. Already, in 1851 after an agreement in 1847, two of its cells had been set aside as a police lock-up, and in 1853 the whole house was handed over for use as the local police station. Samuel Cooke died in Brighton in the following year. When the new police station and law court were opened at the north end of town in 1861 the house of correction closed for good, and the police sold it to Lord Harry Vane of Battle Abbey for £670.

There are references above to William Balcombe Langridge. He was a Lewes solicitor, and Clerk of the Peace from 1806 to 1831. He was born in 1757; his father was a prosperous carpenter and timber merchant. William was an articled clerk in 1779 and shortly thereafter a solicitor and notary public. He occupied a succession of public offices, one of them being Clerk to the Peace from 1806; his son succeeded him in that post, and in due course his grandson. He became a substantial landowner in and around Lewes and died in 1845.⁴

The building survived, used as housing after the police left. There were, one hopes, adaptations to the interior; but probably only the part next to the street was used. In 1936 it became the local cinema, and after 1968 Burstow and Hewitt, auctioneers. The present interior is clearly an old theatre or cinema; the front, on Lower Lake, is a survival of the house of correction, with a wide entrance created for the cinema and retained by the auctioneers.

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Sources

The main source for this article (including the ground plan) is the closely-referenced document by Jill Kirby: *A study of Battle House of Correction with special reference to the period 1820-1853* (undated typescript at ESRO).

Thanks to Peter Greene for his improvement of the illustration.

Family information from ancestry.co.uk

¹ ESRO Q/2/P/3/5

² Parliamentary Papers House of Commons Cd vol 19

³ Report to the General Board of Health on a preliminary inquiry into the sanitary condition of the town of Battle, December 1850

⁴ ESRO reference LAN.