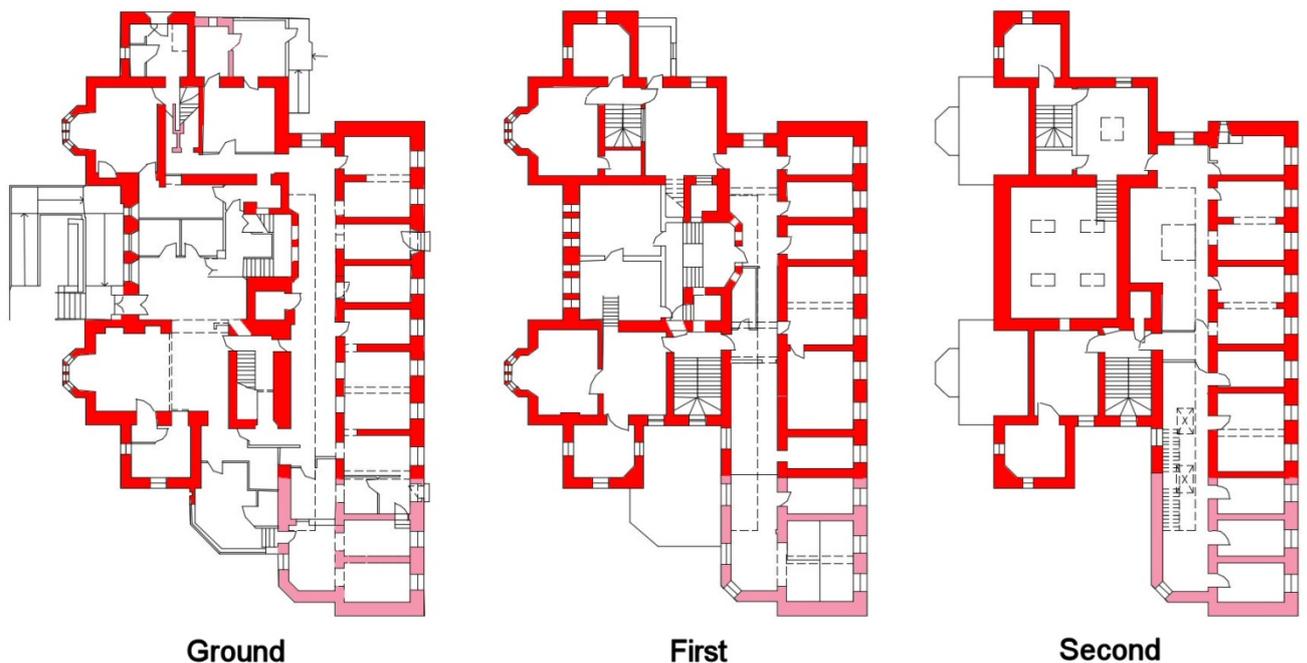


Berwick Prison and Court House, Wallace Green, Berwick upon Tweed

by Robin Kent

Berwick Prison and Courthouse was constructed between 1844-9. Designed by the well-known Scottish architect, Thomas Brown of Edinburgh (1806-1872)¹ it is described in the RIAS Architectural Guide to *Berwick and the Borders* as a 'Jacobethan former borough court and gaol complete with lively chimneyed skyline and castellated bays'. Adjacent to Berwick's outstanding Elizabethan ramparts, rare Commonwealth-period Parish Church, and close to the unique 18th century Barracks (all Scheduled or Grade 1 listed) the prison makes an important townscape contribution to the Berwick Heritage Conservation Area.

As architect to the Prison Board for Scotland from 1837, Thomas Brown published standard designs for prisons² and designed or worked on over twenty prisons and courthouses throughout Scotland,³ as well as important country houses and churches. Berwick is unique as his only prison and courthouse in England. It is an innovative and unified design, which follows original plans in the National Archives of Scotland and Northumberland County archives. Comparing Brown's original plans with the existing building shows that almost all of the original fabric survives:



Berwick Prison and Courthouse. Original fabric of 1844-7 is highlighted in red. Cells added in 1867 by local Berwick architect W J Gray in pink; modern alterations uncoloured (© Robin Kent).

¹ http://www.scottisharchitects.org.uk/architect_full.php?id=200146

² For example, 'Plan of Gaol No.7, Containing keeper's house, thirteen cells, two rooms for debtors, washing house, keeper's office, exercising gallery etc. Probable cost of £1,500. This prison may be enlarged by extending the corridors, and adding to the number of cells on the sides of them.' (Woodhorn Archives N2/9).

³ DSA

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Design work started even before the Borough Council had identified a suitable site.⁴ Consequently the original plans had to be adapted when the Wallace Green site was found. Further alterations were made as the work proceeded, ensuring that the building completed in 1849 was thoroughly up to date.

Female prisoners were housed on the ground floor, where there was a wash house and hospital, male on the two upper floors linked with an open iron gallery. The chapel above the police court room was an important central and symbolic feature of the design. The small cells show the early 19th century interest in the use of solitary confinement as a means of encouraging penitent reflection among inmates. The central 'Keeper's Office' at first floor level (over the Matron's Bedroom) had a bay window overlooking the cell hall, with a view of all the cell doors, an example of the 'panopticon' approach to prison design invented in the late 18th century. The building was equipped with an innovative 'passive air conditioning' system of heated ventilating shafts (one can still be seen dominating the roof line), a laundry, hospital and 'Fumigating room'.

Although the original courthouse was converted to offices for the Urban Sanitary Authority in 1891-2, later becoming the Borough Council offices, the overall plan was retained. The cell block and the keeper's and matron's accommodation at the north end of the building were hardly altered. Most changes were reversible. The vaulted ceiling of the Thomas Brown's chapel can still be seen in the second floor attic. Several cells survive intact with doors and barred windows; other windows, shutters, stairs and parts of the prison hall gallery railings survive despite the later inserted floors. It is likely that there is much more of interest that has been covered up.

Almost all of Thomas Brown's prisons in Scotland are listed⁵: Ten at Category A (equivalent to Grade 1) and eleven at Category B (2*). But despite being a popular feature of Berwick's Doors Open Day and now being disused and at risk of deterioration, Historic England has not reviewed it since 2008. Even the lowest category of listing, Grade 2, would acknowledge its local interest and could help to save it.

Before vacating it at the end of 2015, Northumberland County Council carried out a condition report and feasibility study for conversion to apartments. Despite the building being basically sound and in use until recently the council identified £1.75M repairs, mainly due to neglected maintenance. The conversion scheme would 'gut' the building, obliterating the surviving interior layout and historic features. The council has left little time for considering other options.

Taken together with the old town jail in Berwick's Guild Hall, dating from 1754, Berwick Prison could offer important insights into a century of development in crime and punishment and Victorian innovations in prison design. The building could provide a valuable educational opportunity on the subject of contemporary prison design and imprisonment, which are seldom out of the news these days. Other uses that have been suggested so far include much-needed space for the town's important archive collection,

⁴ Letters dated 1836 (Woodhorn archives N2/2-9)

⁵ Following a review of purpose-built Scottish court buildings in September 2015 by Historic Environment Scotland. <http://www.historic-scotland.gov.uk/scottish-courts-preliminary-report.pdf>

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currently displaced from the adjacent council offices and in unsatisfactory temporary storage; a genealogical research centre; a much-needed local heritage hub; a boutique hotel, craft / tourist centre, cafe and restaurant, and holiday accommodation.

There are many precedents for preserving and re-using historic prisons. Thomas Brown's Inverary Jail (1844) is now a popular tourist attraction (www.inverarayjail.co.uk/), while his Dornoch Jail (1842) is a craft and retail hub (www.jail-dornoch.com/). Other examples of prisons that have been preserved include:

- Oxford Castle Jail - An outstanding example of a successful hotel conversion of an important historic prison (www.malmaison.com).
- Canterbury City Gaol - now a wedding venue (<http://www.kentonline.co.uk/canterbury/news/shackled-city-gaol-could-become-28116/>); HMP Canterbury, now part of Canterbury Christchurch Uni. (<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-kent-26934568>).
- Abingdon Old Gaol - converted to a leisure centre and subsequently to flats and restaurants (<http://theoldgaol.com/>);
- Kingston - proposed for a museum and mixed uses (<http://www.portsmouth.co.uk/news/a-look-behind-the-walls-of-kingston-prison-1-5499909#axzz3rw8CG97d>).

The border location of Berwick-upon-Tweed has often left the town hanging between England and Scotland, and the treatment of Berwick Prison appears to exemplify this.

The town has an outstanding heritage and the prison is an important part of this. It should not be overlooked, let alone sacrificed by the dead hand of bureaucracy to the forces of short term speculative development.

Robin Kent IHBC RIAS AABC

rk@robinkent.co.uk

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