

The Heytesbury Blind House

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The children of Heytesbury have been anxiously watching as the village Blind House recently underwent repairs. It has been swathed in scaffolding and plastic sheeting for some weeks and everyone wondered if it would be ready in time for the annual incarceration of Guy Fawkes before he was dragged to the bonfire at the Red Lion.

Eventually the repairs were completed and all was well on the night. This episode will have made the residents of Heytesbury even more aware of our heritage. Dotted around Wiltshire, in a variety of locations, there are more of these little stone buildings in various states of repair. None of them have windows; all have tiny grills in their stone walls and heavy, nail-studded wooden doors. These are Blind Houses and were built as simple village gaols, or lock-ups. Most of them date to the 18th century.

Blind Houses were cold and damp with the only light and ventilation coming from the small grills, usually above head height. There would be a simple, smelly earth closet in one corner and a wooden bench strewn with straw acting as a bed. There was usually an iron ring embedded in the wall so that violent prisoners could be chained during their imprisonment. They were places of dread and often used to restrain drunks; tramps; felons or “women of the night”. Some housed criminals awaiting transportation to larger, county gaols and some, like Shrewton, were sometimes their last resting place before being hung on the nearby gibbet.

Wiltshire’s best known Blind House is part of Town Bridge in Bradford on Avon, where it sits above the river. This prison probably dates from the 17th century and may, originally, have been a chapel for the nearby leper hospital of St Margaret’s. It was divided into two cells when demand increased. There was then a brief period when it became a toll house for farmers taking their livestock to market.

The Blind House in Steeple Ashton was sometimes called the Guard House. It was built in 1773 at a cost of £19.18s and is 9 feet in diameter and 12 feet high with a stout oak door. Into this door an iron grill is set and the gaoler could cover this grill with a small iron flap. Thus plunging the inmate into total darkness.

Shrewton’s Blind House is in a prominent position on the A360 and was carefully moved, stone by stone, when the road was widened in the 1970s. In Lacock the Blind House is built in East Street at the end of the Tithe Barn. It is a solid structure with its original iron staples still attached to the inner walls. A cold, cheerless place with an aura of hopelessness.

Unusually the Blind House in Bromham was made of wood on brick foundations. It is built into the wall of the churchyard and cost £16 when built in 1809. Other Blind Houses can still be found on the A4 at Box; inside the Yelde Hall in Chippenham; on the A361 at Hilperton and on the Bristol road at Luckington. Malmesbury has a fine example by the Market Cross and Trowbridge has a large one on the bridge. In the last few months the one in Warminster has become visible as surrounding buildings have been demolished, not far from the Obelisk.

Our Blind House in Heytesbury is a more modest affair than some and is set into a garden wall. Inside there is the traditional wooden bench with a rusty chain hanging from one end. The door is made of strong English oak and the small grill above the door is the only source of light and air. It is now looking as good as new with it's clean roof slates and large stone ball above.....although a little askew I feel! The two restorers discovered an interesting collection of rubble acting as insulation between the old roof and the stone walls. They even found a small canon ball of uncertain vintage which they have carefully replaced underneath the new roof. It is now a gaol fit for such a notorious, and dangerous, man as Guy Fawkes and will surely stand in our village for many years to come.

Sarah Buttenshaw
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Blind Hse Before Repair 1.2.jpg



Blind Hse Before Repair 1.3.jpg



Blind Hse Before Re...



Blind House, Aug 07 ...



Blind Hse Day 1.1.jpg



Blind Hse Day 1.2.jpg



Blind Hse Day 2.3.jpg



Blind Hse Day 2.5.jpg



Blind Hse Day 2.7.jpg



Blind Hse being Repaired 1.JPG



Inside the Blind Hse 1.JPG



Inside Blind Hse 2.JPG



Roof Repaired 1.JPG



Roof Repaired 2.JPG



Nearly Finished.JPG



Blind House Repaired 2.JPG