



Figure 10
Bradford on Avon The square Round House. The front is built into the parapet of the bridge, and the back is supported by a cutwater. The bronze gudgeon is thought to be the Christian sign, dating from the time when this building was used as a chapel.

Figure 11
Meaux, north-east of Paris

An interesting pepperpot example stands beside the cathedral in Meaux to the north-east of Paris. The base shows where guardians of the peace have, for generations, stubbed their toes whilst incarcerating unwilling prisoners, whose friends have then scraped away the stone around the bolt to release them. With only eight air holes for ventilation no wonder there was considerable effort to escape, apparently successfully.



the round house, the little stone room on the side of the bridge'. That particular round house is square, built into the parapet. Many others are integral parts of larger buildings; a Cheshire example is part of the large base of the village cross. That at Chippenham is within the ancient Yelde Hall.

Purposes and personalities

Blind houses were mainly for the use of parish constables; somewhere to put drunkards, vagabonds, the unruly, and those unfortunates awaiting removal to larger jails before trial. For the latter in particular it must have been an agonising experience unless, like Wesley's friend, they had inner strength.

'...nothing to sit on but a stone...nothing to lie on but a little straw...my body was in prison, but I was Christ's freeman.'

Drunkards at Wheatley (Oxfordshire) felt differently. That particular blind house is a pyramid with thick stone walls only seven and a half feet long at the base. To awaken on the morning after, in darkness, within walls built at such an angle, was hazardous indeed.

Some constables were compassionate. Isaac Gregory wrote in his 1814 diary:

Who can govern a drunken man? He is dead to everything he does, and I always find mild treatment the best.

Dealing with two young boys who had stolen seven shillings from their parents, he left them in the blind house for only a few minutes; another youngster was reformed merely by the rattle of the keys. On another occasion Gregory found a man in a stupor; guessing that companions had been mixing the drinks, he decided against the blind house. For safety, he emptied the man's pockets, returning the contents the next morning. The English constable's beneficent reputation is older than one might suppose.

There is a strangely elegant blind house in Clwyd, built in 1750. A local architect responsible for some important buildings in the district was proud of his upmarket image. Therefore, offenders climbed stone steps to a doorway flanked by classical pillars. Unfortunately the site was beside a tree beneath which local worthies gathered for their evening gossip. They were not amused. 'The disgraceful erection serves only to indicate the sign of the times, viz looser manners and more depraved minds.'

Ancient and modern

The majority of blind houses were built in the eighteenth century, but a few have earlier origins. That in Bradford on Avon was mentioned by Aubrey in the seventeenth century; in his day it was an ancient chapel. The blind house at Chippenham was in use in 1563, when a new key was purchased. Others are mere 'newcomers', dating from the nineteenth century. Whatever the age, similar stories are frequently heard. If the keyhole is outsize, or the grille accessible, prisoners' friends are said to have brought a tankard of ale. The bowl of a churchwarden's pipe went into the drink, and the long stem through the keyhole or grille. Other blind houses have sufficient space under the door for the ale to be passed on a saucer. Either way, it was a merciful act of friendship.

Exact numbers must remain uncertain, because forgotten blind houses are still occasionally brought to light; one was recently discovered in a Swansea store during structural alterations. Though some are still used as store houses, most are carefully preserved as miniature monuments to the pre-welfare state.