

the house of correction

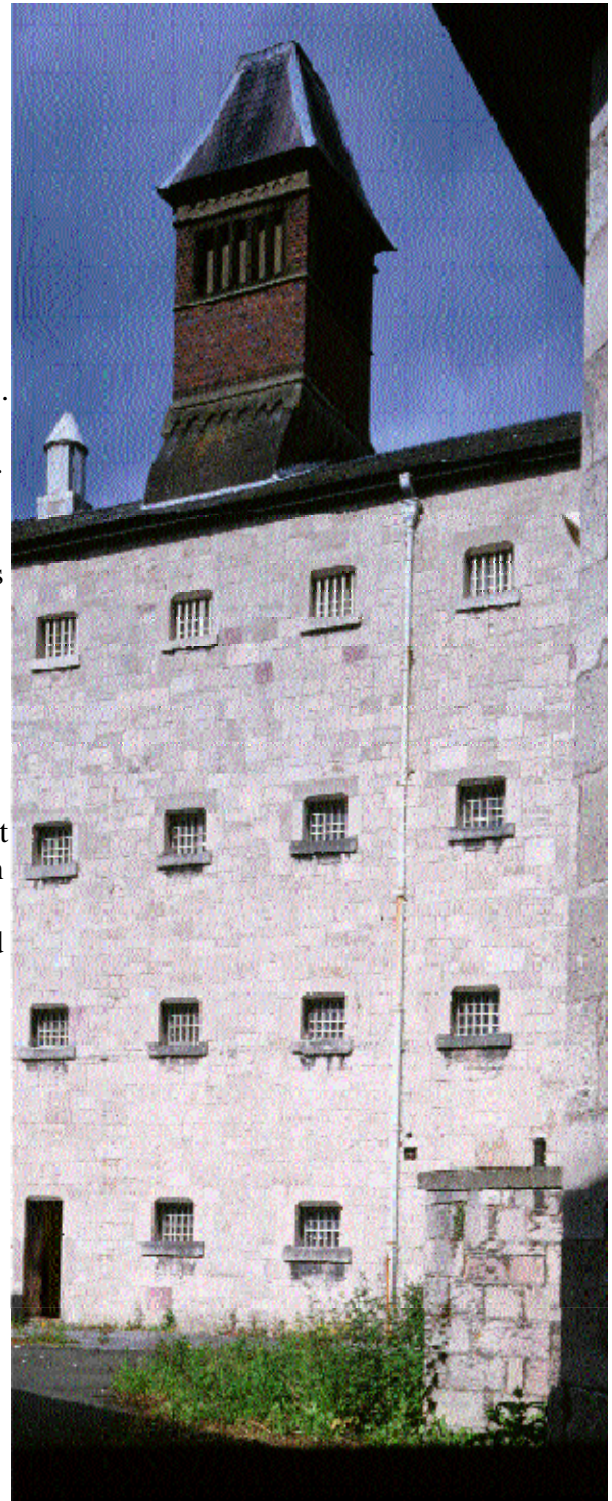
By the late sixteenth century people were imprisoned for non-payment of fines, vagrancy and debt. Often, the unconvicted awaiting trial were held with those already found guilty in crowded, unhealthy conditions. Men, women and children were imprisoned together and disease and immorality were rife.

In 1576 an Act enabled Houses of Correction or "Bridewells", administered by local justices of the peace, to be built where able-bodied idlers and the unemployed were sent and put to work.

Justices in Denbighshire were ordered by the judges of the court of Great Sessions to build the first county House of Correction in 1654 at Ruthin. Built at the bottom of Clwyd Street on the site of present gaol buildings, its first master Harry Davies of Ruthin, was appointed a year later.

In 1699 building additions led to the demolition of part of the town's ancient watergate.

"Pentonville Block" built 1866, before its recent renovation.



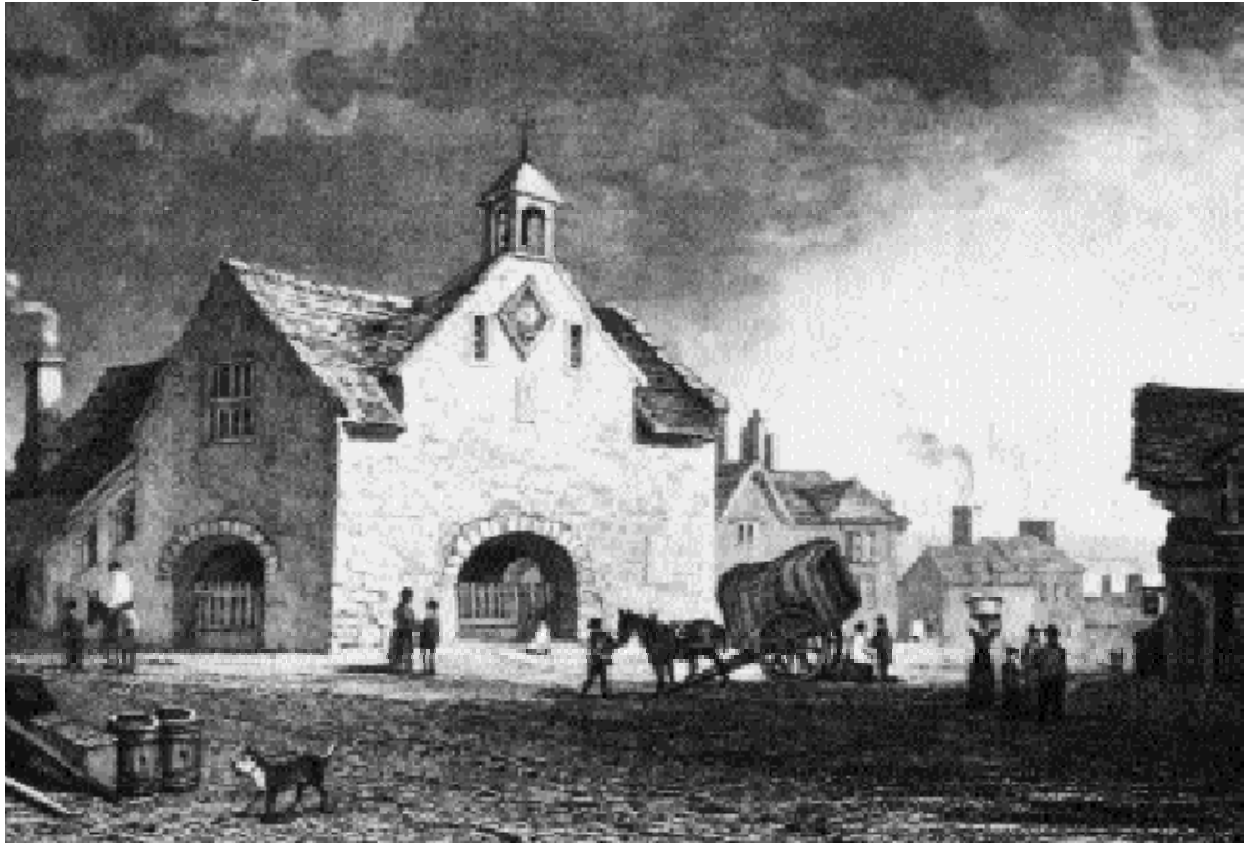
early history

Ruthin's first gaol is thought to have been located in the Old Court House of the Lordship of Ruthin. This half-timbered building, now the National Westminster Bank, was built about 1404 following Owain Glyndwr's attack on the town which left very few, if any, houses standing.

Baronial, manorial and other courts were held; prisoners being detained in cells below the magnificent beamed court room. Richard Gwyn, a Welsh Catholic martyr, spent the last four years of his life imprisoned in the building before his execution at Wrexham in 1584.

Most executions at Ruthin were carried out on St Peter's Square and part of the timber gibbet can be seen on the north-west wall of the court house. It is thought the last person executed was Charles Meehan, a Jesuit priest, who was hung, drawn and quartered in 1679.

The courthouse where the magistrates met at the Quarter Sessions (the old town hall) stood in the middle of the square. Built in 1663 it was demolished in the 1860s.



The old town hall by H. Gastineau, 1830.

prison reforms

Following John Howard's investigations into prison conditions two acts were passed in 1774: the first improved hygiene in prisons and allowed the appointment of prison doctors, the second abolished the practice of discharged prisoners having to pay gaolers on their release.

Inspired by Howard's reforms, justices in Denbighshire decided to build a new prison. By April 1774 Joseph Turner, architect of Chester, had drawn up plans; advertisements to carry out the work placed, and a committee appointed. Work began in January 1775. An inscription over the front door commemorates the building of the new prison:

**THE MAGISTRATES,
SENSIBLE OF THE MISERABLE STATE
OF THE ANCIENT PRISON,
IN COMPASSION TO THE UNFORTUNATE,
CAUSED
THIS BUILDING TO BE ERECTED
IN THE YEAR
MDCCLXXV**

Jos. Turner Architect

Life in gaol was harsh. A report into conditions dated 3rd March 1788 stated:

"COUNTY GAOL AT RUTHIN.

...No proper separation of the sexes... The debtors pay no chamber rent, and have the county allowance of two shillings a week, yet do not keep their rooms clean. One of the articles in the rules of 1785, is, that all prisoners committed for felony shall have irons put on their legs at the discretion of the keeper, and the same not be altered without the order of a justice of the peace'; even women are not excepted."



The gaol held: "Debtors 12, Felons &c. 2. Convicts 7..." The "Gaoler's salary" was £70.

Flint Gaol circa 1950, designed by Joseph Turner and built in 1784-1785. This building was used until 1870 when the county gaol was moved to Mold. It was demolished in 1969. Notice the similarity to Ruthin (Courtesy of Flintshire Record Office).

development

In 1802 the gaol had four cells for felons and nine rooms for debtors. Joseph Turner was asked to enlarge the building. However, old and unwell he was unable to oversee the work and problems arose:

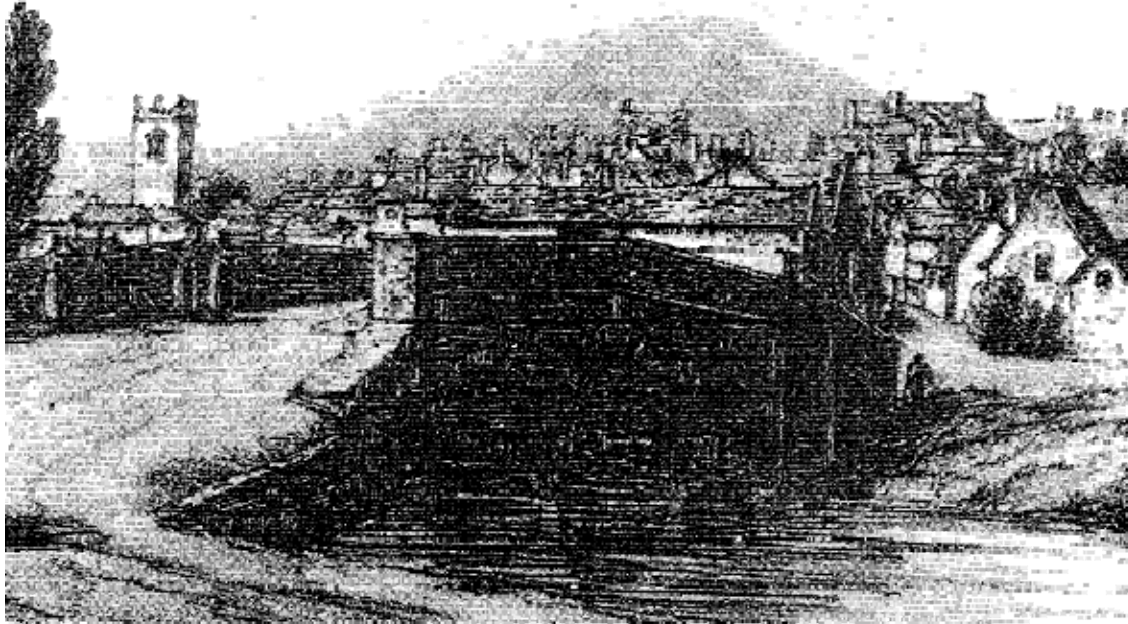


Illustration showing 1803 and 1805 extensions fronting Clwyd Street.

"[The] - inside bricks are soft - stonework not well put together... not having put in a person of sufficient experience... to see the work done properly... progress appears to have been imposed by the bricklayer and limestone mason... Thru some neglect... [a] considerable part of those unfurnished buildings have been insufficiently inspected... - last winter the brick lining of some of the rooms fell in."

The gaol was enlarged again in 1812 to accommodate separate cells, day rooms, female felon and debtors' exercise yards, and three "penitentiary cells" for prisoners. In 1824-1825 the female accommodation was extended and six solitary cells built.

More cells were built in 1837. The prison could now hold up to 58 inmates.

