

Lancaster Civic Vision

Celebrating our Heritage – Enhancing our Environment – Shaping our Future

LANCASTER CASTLE'S FEMALE PENITENTIARY

Lancaster Civic Vision Guide 118

Guide 28 in this series described Lancaster Castle. Its central courtyard is surrounded by separate buildings ranging in age from the twelfth to the nineteenth centuries.

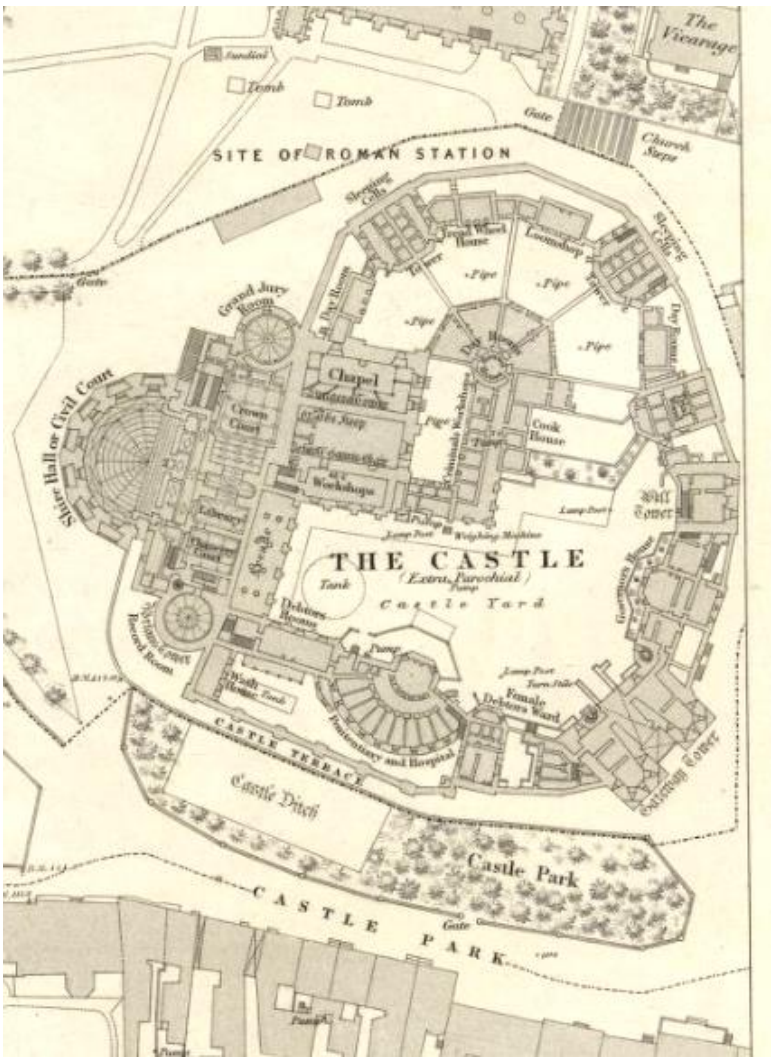
One of the younger buildings, albeit just over 200 years old, is the Female Penitentiary, designed by Joseph Gandy and built between 1818 and 1821, next to the Female Felons' Tower of 1792/3.

The Female Penitentiary is a particularly interesting design for a prison, very different from the 'Pentonville' style of cells in two long rows facing an open area where prisoners can meet.

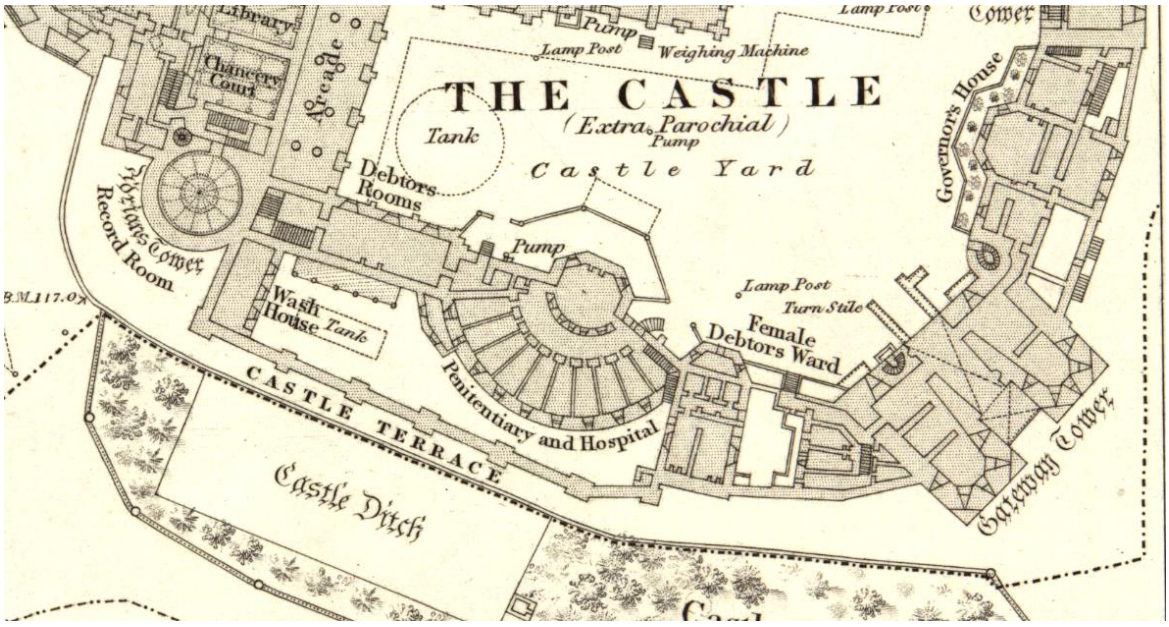
This style of prison can be found in the two floors of A Wing of Lancaster Castle, the Male Penitentiary of the mid-1800s.

The Female Penitentiary, in contrast, comprises five floors, the basement for stores, a ground floor for offices and hospital and above these four floors each with nine cells, these being arranged in a fan-shape.

The first map below shows the whole Castle with the Female Penitentiary on the south wall and the second map shows it in more detail.



All of Lancaster Castle as surveyed by the Ordnance Survey in 1845 at a scale of 1:1056: the fan-shaped plan of the Female Penitentiary is clearly visible on the south side.



The south side of Lancaster Castle with the Female Penitentiary in the centre.
(Source: OS map 1:1056 surveyed in 1845)

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The Female Penitentiary (the Panopticon) at Lancaster Castle (centre)
(Source: the author)

The design, called a panopticon (from the Greek 'all-seeing'), was derived from the writings of Jeremy Bentham around 1797. He was a philosopher and social reformer who believed that the unseen and unsupervised free association of prisoners would lead to bad behaviour.

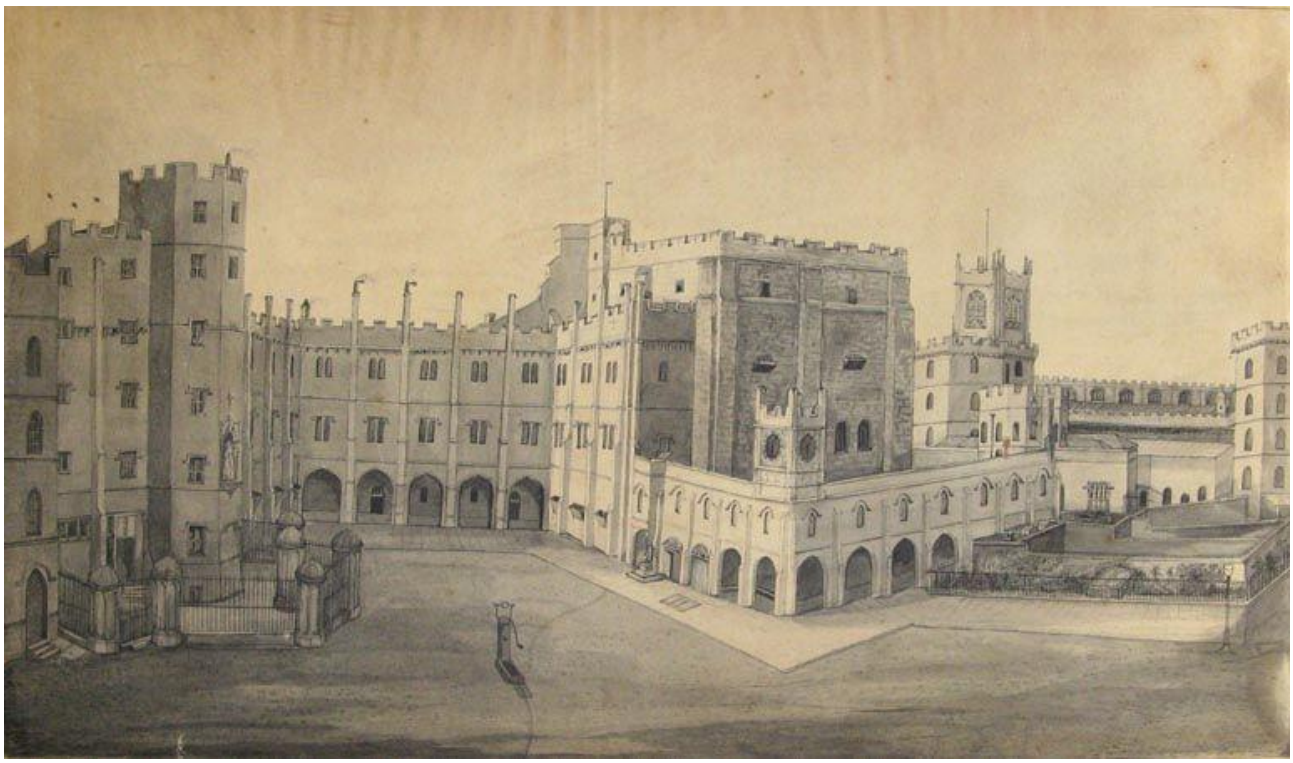
To be kept safe and behaving correctly they needed to be continuously observed by the 'turnkeys' (prison officers). His fan-shaped arrangement of the cells in the panopticon design achieved this.

On each floor one officer could see each cell from one vantage point, from where the sight lines radiated out to each cell. The cells originally had bars not solid doors, so the surveillance was potentially total.

Ideally, he believed, the observers should be hidden from the observed, who would never know when they were being observed and so had to behave properly at all times.



A recent aerial view of Lancaster Castle courtyard, looking west, the Keep on the right and the tall Female Penitentiary towards the left-hand side. (Source: www.bdp.com)



An interior view of Lancaster Castle's courtyard,
the Female Penitentiary on the left-hand side.
(Artist: J Weetman, 1824)



Interior view of cells in the Female Penitentiary

In practice the number of staff required was high and the effect of total surveillance on the prisoners was serious. Also, of course, the turnkeys were equally under total surveillance by the prisoners unless fully hidden, which is difficult to achieve in practice.

The original Benthamite panopticon system of prison design was soon abandoned in the UK and very few such prisons were built; the former Millbank Prison in London was another, opened in 1816 and demolished in 1890.

Lancaster Castle's panopticon is one of very few of this era that have survived and is among the oldest examples. Not dissimilar prison designs have been developed in the USA and other countries in the twentieth century.

However, the need remains to keep prisons under official control and to keep prisoners safe. Prison design still has to face this challenge of balancing control, safety and staff costs. Today, CCTV systems can cheaply substitute for prison officers.

Additionally the issues around surveillance are now found also in public spaces (e.g. crime prevention and detection) and in the workplace, particularly where workers use computers to do their job. Interestingly Bentham knew that his idea of surveillance could be applied far more widely than in prisons – to schools, factories and asylums, for example.

The focus on controlling people's behaviour by intense surveillance remains controversial.

Text – Gordon Clark.
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