

“Go down the nine steps!”:

The Stocks, Pillory and Sessions House in 18-19th century Armagh City

by Catherine McCullough

The Armagh Stocks

Many years ago, while helping a researcher in the Museum library, I came across an unusual pen and ink drawing by Mr TGF Paterson, the first Curator of Armagh County Museum. The drawing, entitled *The Armagh Stocks*, was tucked into the back of a notebook which he seems to have kept in the 1940s. In the past, stocks and the pillories were used as a form of punishment. They were made from wood and constructed to hold the ankles and wrists of an offender who sat on a bench in full

ridicule and humiliation. Today, we still remember these forms of punishment in our use of the word “pilloried” to refer to someone who is exposed to public scorn for their views or actions.

The drawing gives a very clear indication of what the Armagh Stocks looked like, along with notes as to size and materials. Paterson notes that the *Drawing (is) from Paddy Grimes recollections of the stocks as they were before being completely destroyed and is dated 1913 with the initials “GP” at the bottom (George Paterson)*. He also noted that the stocks were *made of black oak and carved with initials of a many famous*

*and infamous Armachians.... and held two people*¹.

On the reverse of the drawing, Paterson gives the following details – (the stocks) *lay in bottom of (the) Market House until completely broken up. Had lamp standard attached to one of the uprights. This was a lantern-shaped adornment on a pole and was made to enclose a small oil lamp. It was square in shape and made of*



This drawing of the Armagh stocks intrigued me and led me on a journey into the past, using some of the fascinating sources available to the local historian.

The law on stocks and pillories

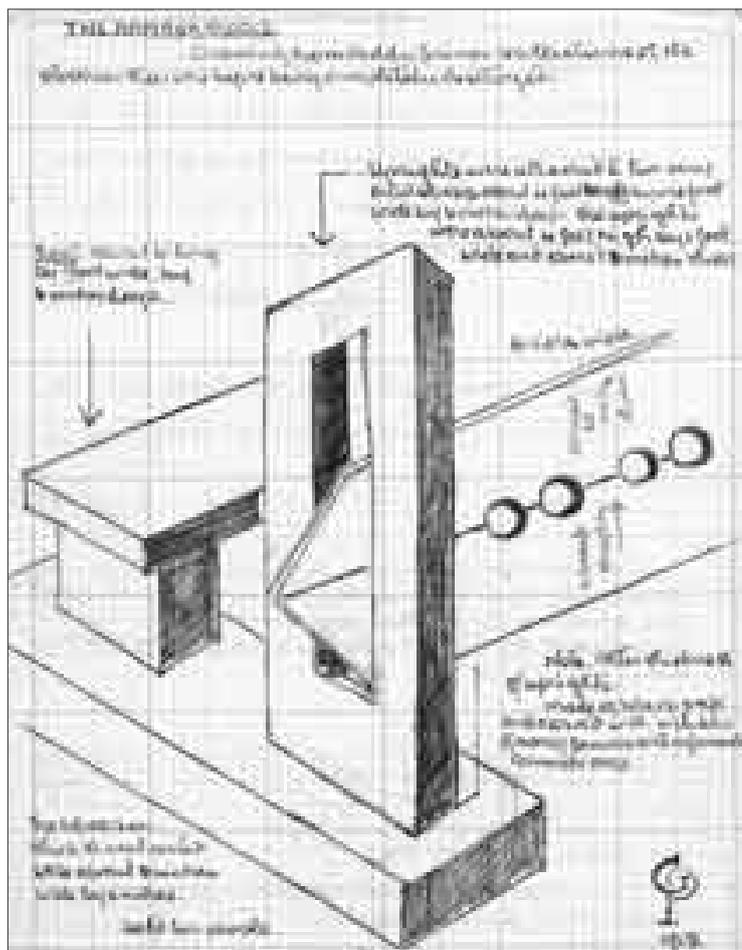
The first Act of Parliament which mentions this type of punishment was “An Act against witchcraft and Socerie” dated 15862. This was a time when belief in witchcraft was part of everyday life and it was seen as a real threat to society. The Act said that

If any persons shall use...any witchcraft...whereby any persons shall happen to be wasted, consumed, or lamed in his bodie or member...every such offender...once in every quarter shall in some market towne, upon the market day, or at such time as any faire shall be kept there, stand openlie in the pillorie for the space of six houres, and shall there openly confesse his or theirre error and offence...³.

There are no records of witches being held in the Armagh stocks. However, by the 18th century, this type of punishment was used for disorderly behaviour, drunkenness, using incorrect weights and measures or providing poor quality foodstuffs. In the first year of the young Queen Victoria’s reign, *An Act to abolish the Punishment of the Pillory*⁴ was passed on 30 June 1837 although the use of the stocks was not outlawed by this Act.

Administration of the City

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Armagh in the modern period dates back to the Charter of 1614 which established Armagh as *a body corporate or free borough, to be denominated "The borough of Ardmagh"*⁵. By this Charter, the body corporate, or Corporation, consisted of the Sovereign, twelve Burgesses and the assembly of the Borough. The records for the Corporation survive for the period 1738-1840 and are held in the Armagh Public Library in Abbey Street⁶.

The Charter of 1614 created the framework for local government in the Borough of Armagh. Details were given of the powers of the local courts and the seneschal, or Sovereign; the arrangements for the appointment of local officers such as the coroner and clerks of the market and lists amongst other arrangements the right to *have pillorie, tumbri^l*. In Stuart's *History of the City of Armagh*, written in 1819, he describes a tumbri^l as *an instrument of punishment... for the correction of scolds and unquiet women*. It is interesting that he did not feel the need to describe the pillory as it was still part of the street furniture of the City.

The building of the stocks

The keeping of the peace in the City was the responsibility of the Sovereign who according to Stuart *issues his summonses and collects, from the most respectable inhabitants of the city, a jury of twenty-three persons, who, having been sworn to act impartially, continue in office for a period of twelve months*⁸. The duties of the Corporation Jury included the preservation of the public peace and with this duty in mind, the records show the first reference to the stocks and the pillory on

13th October 1738

*We present the sum of sixteen shillings sterling to be levied for the making of a sufficient pair of stocks for the use of this Corporation and that said stocks be joined and fixed in the Pillory. Mr Bannerman and Mr Alex. Morton overseers*⁹.

From this extract, it is clear that in 1738, the Corporation of Armagh was now providing stocks along with the pillory which already existed. In the records for 28 March 1740, *Elizabeth McMullan, servant to Alexander Morton, is a disturber of the peace we therefore present her that she be ban-*

*ished out of this Corporation before the first day of April next*⁰. As the overseer of the pillory for the Corporation, the behaviour of his servant must have been a source of great embarrassment for Alexander Morton!

These stocks lasted 37 years for in 1775, *£2 5s 6d was paid for good sufficient stocks being set down in the place of the old stocks, the same being decayed* and in 1813 another new set of stocks was built¹¹. In an extract from the Belfast Newsletter of 29 May–2 June 1789, the indignation of locals at the perceived lenient use of the pillory is recorded

*A correspondent begs leave to remark that two men who were pillored (sic) at Armagh on Monday last, for the second time, were suffered to have their faces covered - which he conceives to be lenity misapplied to such daring offenders*¹²

Court and Prison: Buildings bringing harmony and joy or remorse and sorrow!

Today, the symbols of crime and punishment are clearly visible to any visitor to Armagh. The classical Court House on a prominent site at the north end of the Mall faces the imposing frontage of the Gaol at the other end. The Court House, built to the design of Ireland's foremost architect, Francis Johnston, was completed by 1809 whilst the Gaol was built in 1780 by Thomas Cooley and was much altered between 1819-1852. In an effort to find the exact location of the stocks and pillory in Armagh, I then turned my attention to the buildings associated with the administration of the law before the modern Court House and Gaol were built.

The origin of the Sessions, or Court House, can be traced to a clause in a legal document of King James I and VI who vested lands from the Primate in 1619

*Excepting and reserving unto us, our heirs and successors, out of the Vicars Choral and Choristers lands of the Cathedral of Armagh, which the said Archbishop shall think most convenient for our service - a portion of ground 80 feet in length by 40 in breadth for a Session House and Gaol in the said town of Armagh*¹³.

This request for a piece of ground in

1619 was fulfilled, for in some of the Archbishop's Rentals which cover the period 1615-1746, mention is made of the Gaol building. For instance, the 1676 Rental notes that John King lives *on the backside of the Gaole in the town of Armagh* and that his tenancy had begun in May 1664 under Primate Margetson. It continues with the entry on *Dorothy Sawefoly ..half a tenement and garden plott in the Scotch Street and one tenement on the backe of the Gaole with a garden plott*. According to Walter Dawson's Rent Roll of the See of Armagh in 1713, Dorothy Sofflew was still living *at the back of the Gaol*¹⁴. This same Roll mentions Lease 24 as being with Edmond Stone for *One tenement and house where he now liveth in the English Street of Armagh at the south end of the Sessions House*¹⁵.

In 1703, Thomas Ashe carried out another survey of the Archbishop's holdings, and Lease 70 to Thomas Read concerns *A Plantation House..it bears the Signe of the Swann and is Situate in the Markett Please of the said Town...and in the Yard is built a Barne which is joyneing to the Gaole*¹⁶. These excerpts give us some idea as to location and importance of these buildings but no details as to the buildings themselves. It falls, as ever, to James Stuart's *History* to paint a vivid picture of the old Sessions House and Gaol in the early nineteenth century:

the old gaol consisted of a dismal suite of subterraneous apartments, directly under the sessions-house, which was situated at the foot of Market-street. A flight of stone stairs led down to these gloomy caverns, where debtors and felons suffered a kind of semi-inhumation. Hence in the middle of the last century (ie.1750), when grave citizens would forbode the fate of any idle or dissolute townsman, they would say "He will go down the nine steps" and when their predictions were verified, the town schoolmaster, Mr Maclean, would sagely shake his head and exclaim-

"Facilis descensus Averni

Sed revocare gradum superasque evadare ad aura

Hoc opus his labor est".

This can be translated as:

Descent to Avernus is easy (the lake in the Underworld)

But to retrace your steps and return to

daylight

Takes hard work and determination¹⁷.

Stuart continues his description

The wards of this doleful dungeon were not only arched over with heavy and solid mason work, abutted in front and rear on walls of seven feet thickness, but encircled and completely secured with a kind of massy reticulated iron work, through whose interstices a mouse, or perhaps a rat, (but nothing larger), might have crept. Here, in a kind of "darkness visible", the unhappy inmates sighed away their hours. Balls were sometimes held in the sessions-house, directly over the dungeon in which the condemned felons were deeply immured in solitary confinement. Above, all was harmony and joy. Below, were the horrors of remorse and sorrow, allied to despair – tears which none but God could behold, and groans of unutterable anguish, which he and the unhappy sufferers alone could hear.

The old gaol and sessions-house had been damaged by fire in 1704....¹⁸

Stuart's description of the Gaol would certainly not entice modern visitors with its references to 'darkness visible' but it shows the combined use of the building with the Sessions House directly above the dungeons of the Gaol. It is interesting to note that in the Census of the City in 1770, Reverend William Lodge records a *Mr McClain and wife, School Master, 5 children, Presbyterian, Abbey Street*¹⁹ and this is presumably the same schoolmaster who reminded his listeners of the dangers of idleness!

In his book *A Record of the City of Armagh* published in 1861, Edward Rogers notes that the *Old Session House...has been subdivided into four houses, at present in the occupation of Messrs. Vint, Simpson, Bryson and Burns. The entrance to the Session House was by a flight of steps, on top of which was placed the "Pillory"*²⁰. This is the first indication of the exact location of the pillory and therefore, the stocks, at the foot of Market Street, close to the site of the former Lennox's department store.

Mapping the City buildings

Maps of the City of Armagh are extremely useful in plotting the exact location of the Sessions House and

therefore of the Gaol, pillory and stocks. A City map in the collection of Armagh County Museum which was drawn by Robert Livingston in 1766²¹, and then copied by J.T. Noble in 1835 shows the holdings of all landlords in Armagh. The size of each holding is given in feet and a written Reference to this map exists in Armagh Public Library. Entitled *1766 reference to the Plan of Armagh*, plot number 11 is listed as *Town-Hall & County Gaol: 65 ½ x 67 x 65 ½ feet with one building on the plot and it is described simply as a Strong House.*

In 1760, John Rocque drew a map of County Armagh which includes a street plan of the City. He does not list the Gaol or Sessions House individually but the block of the building can be seen quite distinctly. As we noticed in Stuart's *History*, the building was damaged by fire in 1704. The re-building was underway in September 1735 and it is presumably



the outline of the refurbished building which is shown on this map²², almost 30 years later.

This short article gives some idea of how the wealth of records which exist on the City of Armagh can be used to build up a picture of the past. We have seen how extracts from leases, combined with Paterson's detailed drawing, a newspaper article and the use of maps, surveys and descriptions from a history book can give us a sense of the attitude to crime

and punishment in earlier days. Imagine walking up Market Street today and seeing some poor soul sitting in the stocks, listening to the jeers and shouts of passing shoppers – this was a common site in 18th century Armagh!

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- 6 J. Dean, *Catalogue of Manuscripts in the Public Library of Armagh*, (Dundalk, 1928), p.6
- 7 Stuart, *ibid*, p. 347
- 8 Stuart, *ibid*, p 472
- 9 Paterson Manuscript Collection number 229, *ibid*, loose page
- 10 H D McC Reid, *The Historical Geography of Armagh*, MA thesis, QUB, 1954, pp. 98-99
- 11 Reid, *ibid*, p. 99
- 12 BNL, 29 May 1739
- 13 E. Rogers, *A Record of the City of Armagh*, (Armagh, 1861), p. 32
- 14 TGF Paterson, *Abstracts from the rentals of the Archbishops of Armagh, 1615-1746*, 1952, held in Armagh County Museum library
- 15 Paterson, *Abstracts*, p. 195
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- 17 I am indebted to Mr TR Oakes of Armagh for his Latin expertise!
- 18 Stuart, *ibid*, pp. 529-531
- 19 Rev. W. Lodge, *A List of the Inhabitants of the Town of Armagh for the use of His Grace the Lord Primate, 1770*, copied from original manuscript by TGF Paterson, p. 6, Armagh County Museum Library
- 20 Rogers, *ibid*, pp. 32-3
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