

Gillingham Town Lock-up

This small rectangular building, the former parish lock-up known at one time as the **Blind House**, is situated in South Street, a street once called South Back Lane. The Lock-up is one of only three remaining in Dorset, the others being at Lyme Regis and Swanage.

This site was no doubt chosen as it would have been in public hands, being a part of the old Free School. It also abuts onto the old Phoenix Hall that is now the Band practice room. It was built about 1750 by the parish authority, then governed by the Vestry Meetings, and administered by the churchwardens for use by the town constable. It is built of stone quarried locally at either Stock or Milton, with lime mortar made from road dirt. The front elevation is of cut and dressed Todber stone, with a label mould over the doorway. The roof is of local plain tile, but could well have been thatch originally, as tiles were not made in any quantity here until the mid-nineteenth century.



The front door is of original design being studded and hung on hook and band hinges direct to the stone jambs. A sympathetically designed oak barred window was added in the east elevation in 1987 to give a small amount of light for storage use. There would have been no windows whilst in use as a Lock-Up, and this led to its alternative name of the 'Blind House'.

A plaque on the front reads: 'The Old Town Lock Up. In use c.1760-1890'. The Lock-up is a Listed Building with this description:

Lock-up, early C19. Coursed, squared rubble with gable-ended, tiled roof. Single storey. No windows. Central bay projects slightly. Unmoulded, central doorway with 4-centred head and simple pitched label. Studded plank door. Grade II.

The building was also included in the survey of monuments in Dorset by the Royal Commission on Historic Monuments:

Small single storey building 19.25 x 10.75 ft. Squared rubble with tiled roof. Probably of early 19thC. Narrow doorway in south side has four-centred head under simple pitched label; no other openings. Interior lined with brickwork.

Inside are plain whitewashed walls and a brick pitched floor; perhaps when it was in constant use straw would have been thrown on the floor. Local tales say that at one festive day in the 1880s the Town band were thrown in, instruments and all. They were let out at about five in the morning. The band were all capable of consuming large quantities of beer, particularly on celebration days.

By 1890, a purpose-built police Station and Magistrates Court, complete with cells, was built in School Road, and the Lock-up was no longer used. The churchwardens sold the Lock-up to the brewing and corn milling company G B Matthews. Until 1978 it served as a store to the occupants of the shop that had been developed in the old school premises.

In 1978 the History Society obtained a 21-year lease on it for use as a Museum annexe from its owners at the time, Hall and Woodhouse, brewers of Blandford and successors to GB Matthews. Hall and Woodhouse sold the Free School premises in 1997, and as part of the deal the Lock-up was included. A local businessman had made an offer to purchase the building on behalf of the History Society, but this was not achieved, and at the end of the lease in 1999 the Lock-up passed to private owners.

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