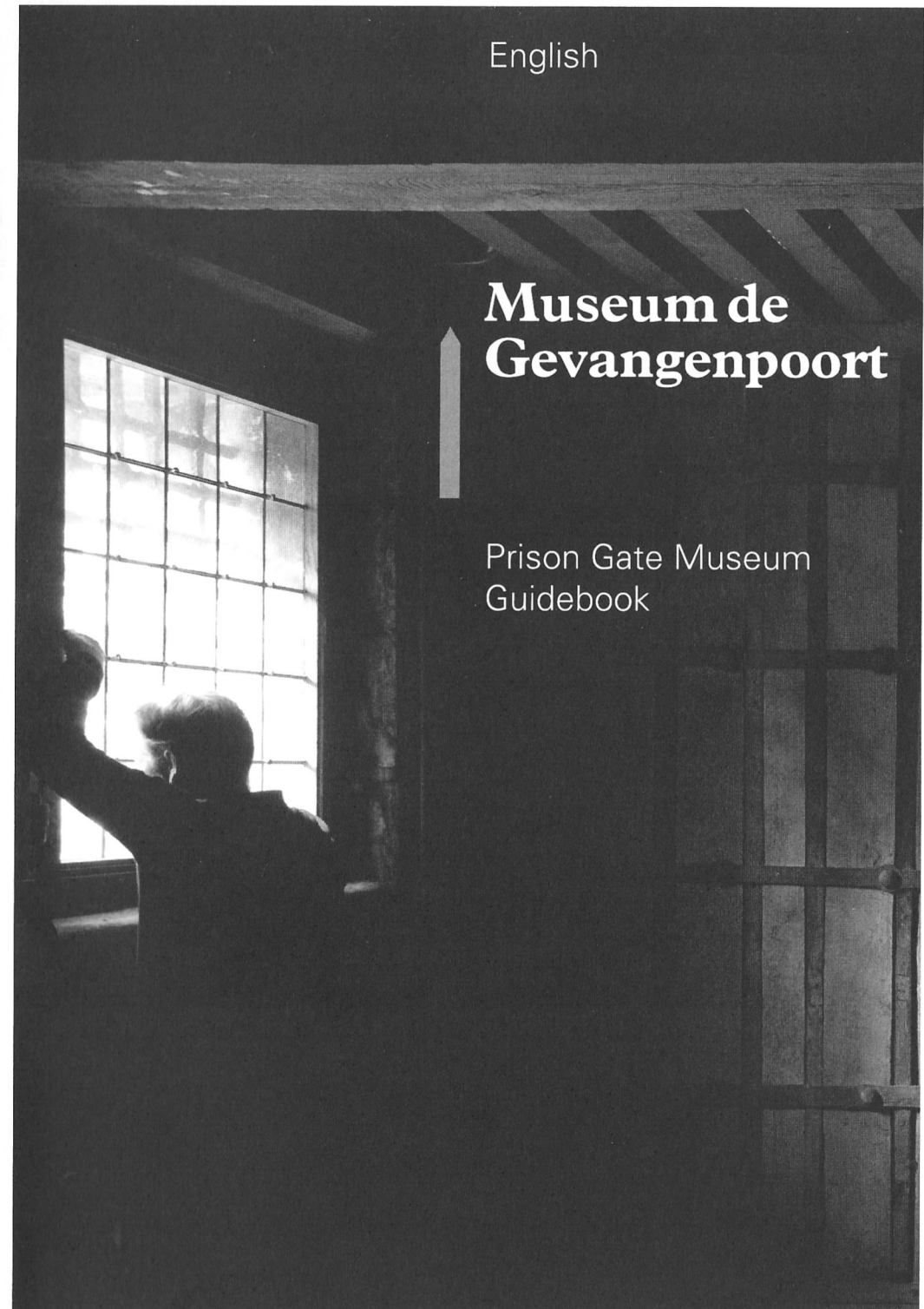




Museum de Gevangenpoort
Buitenhof 33, 2513 AH Den Haag
www.gevangenpoort.nl
info@gevangenpoort.nl
070 346 08 61



English

Museum de Gevangenpoort

Prison Gate Museum
Guidebook

The Prison Gate, a unique 700-year old building!

In the 13th century, the Prison Gate served as the main gate of the count's castle, the 'Binnenhof'. During the 16th and 17th centuries, the building attained its present shape. As early as the 15th century, the law court of the Court of Holland used the Gatehouse as a prison. This continued to be the case until the beginning of the 19th century. The building has been open to the public since 1882.

*Please help us protect the Prison Gate from damage.
Do not touch anything during the tour!*

*Photography without flash
Switch off telephones
No graffiti
No chewing gum
No food or drink*

*The building and objects look sturdy, but are
actually very fragile!*

The Gaol

awaiting punishment

Prisoners awaiting sentencing were locked up in these dark and often cold cells. At times as many as fifteen persons of all sorts were in one room. Some prisoners had committed capital crimes such as murder or forgery while others had committed minor offences such as theft. The court passed sentence on the basis of the bailiff's demand and the evidence. In simple cases (drunkenness, brawling and theft) this could take place soon after imprisonment, sometimes even after a week. But in complicated cases the examination of a suspect could take a long time, and one would often be imprisoned for months before a verdict was reached. The punishment could be in the form of a fine, humiliation, banishment, corporal punishment or capital punishment.

It was not until the seventeenth century that imprisonment was used as a form of punishment. To this end so-called houses of correction were set up, where the prisoners had to work for their keep.

A stay in the gaol must have been very unpleasant. It was dark and cold. There was only a little straw on the floor to sleep on. And the food was pretty dreadful, too. A chunk of bread to share, and water from the court lake. This was heavily polluted, because the privies emptied into it and horses were washed in it.

Tips

- *The oak wall in the cell was intended to prevent breakouts.*
 - *Look at the double bars on the windows and at the walls, which are at least a metre thick.*
 - *As you walk back through the passageway, look out for the massively thick cell doors.*
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The Knight's Chamber

a 'hotel' you could not leave

Richer prisoners were often given their own cells, of which the Knight's Chamber was one. This was a deluxe cell with its own privy or 'secreet', furniture brought from home, an open fire and good food and drink. You paid for this 'luxury' yourself.

It was in this cell that the Prison Gate's most famous prisoner of all was held: Cornelis de Witt, **Ruwaard** of the island of Putten in Zuid-Holland and mayor of Dordrecht. In 1672 he was arrested because the **barber-surgeon**, Willem Tichelaer, accused him of plotting an attempt on the life of Prince Willem III.

Ruwaard (reeve) = a person who ruled a territory in the absence of the sovereign.

A **barber-surgeon** performed minor medical operations as well as cutting hair.

His stay in the Gatehouse was short, two weeks. Since he was a prominent political prisoner he received the best wine to drink and had a fireplace and candles at his disposal. He did have to pay for this; the total bill for his stay in the fancy 'Ridderkamer' (Knight's Chamber) was 227 guilders. In those days that was the yearly income of an artisan.

The last two days of Cornelis' imprisonment must have been a hell. He endured terrible tortures about which you will read more later on in 'the torture chamber'. Despite lack of proof, the day after his torture, Cornelis was convicted of perjury. As punishment he was relieved of all his offices and banished for life from the province of Holland. Since he could barely walk after the torture, he asked his brother Johan to come and get him. After Johan arrived at the Gatehouse, a large number of agitators and a troop of militia (in those days the police) gathered in front of the Gatehouse. When the warden refused to open the door of the Gatehouse the hinges were shot off and two smiths shattered the lock with sledgehammers. Johan and Cornelis were dragged outside and in the direction of the stone scaffold, the 'Green Sod'.

A metre and a half high, the place of execution stood between Vijverberg and De Plaats. It was popularly known as the 'Green Sod', because grass grew on it. This was mown prior to an execution. Afterwards, sand was strewn over it to soak up the blood.

Cornelis died halfway under the blows and thrusts of muskets, swords and pikes. Johan was shot to death. Their corpses were then hung from a stake

at the 'Green Sod'. Limbs were cut off and the intestines of the brothers De Witt were cut out and sold for a five-cent piece.

Tips

- *The prisoner could look out over the Green Sod from his window.*
 - *In 1918 a statue of Johan de Witt was erected on De Plaats, at almost the exact spot where he was murdered.*
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The Women's Chamber

a cell with a view

This is the oldest room in the Prison Gate. It is directly above the 13th-century 'Voorpoort van den Hove', one of the gates to the Binnenhof.

In the past, aristocratic female prisoners were probably kept here. It is certain that rich prisoners, who were often imprisoned on political grounds, were kept in this room. They were allowed to take books and writing tools with them so that they could, while imprisoned, continue to work normally.

They received better meals than the common folk in the gaols. For example they ate hot pot, cheese, bread, roasted or salted meat, fish, bread soup with meat and legumes. What was left over in the way of food was served to other prisoners. They also received good beer or wine to drink.

The regular prisoners received water or beer that the warden brewed himself. This was often so bad that it made people sick.

The Hostage Room

debtors imprisoned

Prisoners who could not pay their debts were held in the Hostage Room at the behest of their creditors.

The creditors paid the warder 18 five-cent pieces per day to imprison a defaulter. In those days that was the daily wage, for example, of a bricklayer. They were often rich people who had the money but did not want to spend it. They were treated better than actual criminals. For example, they were allowed to receive guests or their servant would be allowed to stay with them. Prisoners of war were held in this room as well.

Two or three people slept in each of the beds along the side wall. They did so sitting upright, because they thought that otherwise the blood would run to their heads and then flow out of their ears.

To pass the time prisoners carved their name or even buildings and ships in the wood with a sharp instrument.

In actual fact, various persons succeeded in escaping from this room. Once, three hostages plied the warder, who regularly spent the evening with them in the room, with liquor. They then tied him to a chair and took his keys, after which it was a simple matter to escape. Another prisoner hacked a hole in the wall above the window and let himself down on a rope.

Tips

- *Look out for the 18th-century ship on the side panel of the bedstead.*
 - *Above the bedsteads are the letters **ZMDWDVS**. These are the first letters of the days of the week in old Dutch, and enabled the hostages to tell which day it was.*
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Punishment tables and rasps

hard labour as a penalty

A new phenomenon in the 17th century was the appearance of penitentiaries where the prisoners had to work for their keep. These were the so-called houses of correction, which were divided into rasphouses for men and spinning houses for women.

A house of correction and workhouse was established in the Hague in 1659. Women had to occupy themselves with spinning and for men the work consisted of rasping tropical hardwoods, the so-called Brazilian wood. Two rasps, who had to rasp 50 pounds of wood per day, carried this out. The sawdust produced was used as a raw material in the manufacture of paint and ink.

A working day was made up of twelve hours, the same as for any free worker in the 17th century. Troublesome workers were handcuffed or physically punished.

Storage Loft

humiliation, corporal and capital punishments

In this storage loft you can see the humiliation, corporal and capital punishments which were practised until the 19th century. The judges used the punishments to reflect what they considered to be the seriousness of the offence.

The municipal assizes tried crimes committed in the town. The Court of Holland tried crimes against the sovereign. The provinces of Holland and Zeeland fell under its jurisdiction. Those convicted by the municipal assizes could also appeal against that verdict to the Court of Holland.

The most serious crimes were punished by death, such as execution on the breaking rack. Before the coup de grâce was delivered with a hammer blow to the heart, the victim's bones were broken using a club.

Beheading with a sword was a privileged punishment which was reserved only for persons of rank. For men of low social standing there was the gallows. Female commoners were garrotted rather than hanged, so that spectators would not be able to look under their skirts.

Only rarely were people sentenced to the stake and this usually involved cases of sodomy. On average capital punishment was, at most, carried out a few times per year.

The executioner came from Haarlem or Dordrecht to carry out the death penalty. He was also known as 'Master of the Sword' or 'Sharp Justice'.

To further stigmatise the condemned, after execution their bodies were taken to the gallows-field and hanged. The Court of Holland's gallows-field was on the south bank of Trekvliet aan de Laak. That of the Hague Assizes was in the dunes on the far side of Scheveningen Woods.

Most punishments were carried out in public, at the 'Green Sod' or the scaffold in front of The Hague town hall. In those days it was the theatrical performance of the punishments under the eye of a large crowd which was important. In this fashion, minor offenders (thieves, drunkards, gamblers, adulterers, and other men and women guilty of disorderly conduct) were publicly humiliated as an example and the authorities demonstrated their power. They were placed in the stocks or pilloried.

Alternatively, they might be forced to walk around with a block attached to their leg.

The Dutch say that somebody is 'standing at the pole' when they look ridiculous. The expression comes from the days when people were pilloried. Passers-by would throw rubbish at them – anything from dog dirt to rats – spit on them, insult them and even urinate on them. Hence another Dutch expression: 'to be the pisspole', meaning to be a laughing-stock.

Branding with irons which were heated in an oven to 650 degrees Celsius was a punishment which remained in use for a long time. It was not until 1854 that branding with irons was abolished by the government as a form of corporal punishment. Branding took place in combination with another punishment such as, for example, whipping or the cutting off of fingers or limbs with an axe. Cases are known in which a person had so many branding marks that it was decided to hang the person.

Abraham de Wicquefort

a cunning spy

At the tender age of 20 Abraham de Wicquefort was already stationed at the French Court as the envoy of the Elector of Brandenburg.

At the age of 52 he was imprisoned in the French Bastille because he had sent secret messages to Holland. In 1665, after being freed, he was appointed envoy of the king of Poland in The Hague. More than ten years later however, he again landed in prison because of secret communications with England and France.

Under the urging of the Stadtholder Willem III, he was interrogated 36 times but he steadfastly denied the alleged treason. Finally it was decided to have the executioner interrogate the 69 year old Abraham under torture. It was fortunate for Abraham that this did not take place. He was, however, sentenced to life imprisonment and his possessions were confiscated. During his interrogation he remained in the Knight's Room but after he was sentenced, a separate room was made for him in the old attic.

De Wicquefort, who was also known as the 'history writer of Holland', was allowed to continue his writings here. He also exchanged letters with other prisoners via books, which they lent out to each other. His daughter was allowed,

upon payment, to lodge with him now and then. They bought wine, beer, brandy, tobacco, matches, lights, sweet rusks and lemons from the warder.

Rare and expensive, lemons were an exotic delicacy in the 17th century.

After an imprisonment of four years the old prisoner succeeded in escaping from the Gatehouse with the help of his daughter and her servant. On February 11th, 1679, the warder had the evening off. Jannetje, the servant, had been able to get possession of the key and left the Gatehouse with Abraham. De Wicquefort fled to Germany. The warder was fired because of his negligence. The servant was also not able to avoid her punishment. She received only 50 of the 1000 rix-dollars De Wicquefort had promised her. In the end, she was captured by officers when she visited her husband in Amsterdam. She had already spent all the money. After being publicly whipped she was sentenced to 6 years in a house of correction.

The Torture Chamber

extracting the truth

If on the basis of information or testimony it was sufficiently clear that a suspect, in spite of his denials, was guilty, it was possible to apply measures other than verbal interrogation. The bailiff or sheriff could, on the basis of 'apparent proof', request the court to interrogate the suspect under torture. For this procedure, thumb, hand and knee screws were used which were gradually tightened. Or else a suspect could be tied to the rack post and slowly stretched until a confession was forthcoming.

Such interrogations were, however, kept to a minimum; torture was a rather uncommon legal recourse. If torture had to be used, it was done by the executioner. The confession had to be repeated a second time after torture was used so that the verdict always included a statement to the effect that the confession took place 'free from pain and restraint'.

The 49-year old Cornelis de Witt was tortured in this room on August 19th. After Cornelis was stripped, the shin screws were applied to him. Next his arms were tied behind his back and he was hung on the 'palije'. The executioner hung a weight of 25 kilos on the big toe of each foot. The rope which passes through the pulleys was used to hoist

him up and swing him backwards and forwards. While being interrogated in this position by the Councillors of the Court of Holland he is said to have shouted, 'Stretch and tear me to pieces, you will never get that out of me which is not in me.' In order to force a confession out of him he was then laid on the torture bench and tied with thin cords which cut into his body. After being whipped for over three hours he continued to declare his innocence. The treatment was so drastic that the executioner was mentally broken by the experience. Even though he was forbidden to disclose how severe the tortures had been, the executioner, on his deathbed several months later, wrote a letter to Cornelis' widow in which he asked for forgiveness.

Tips

- *The Delft-blue tiles were hung in the Torture Chamber in the 18th century, to make it easier to keep clean. They are misfired rejects and are not intended as decoration, as can be seen from the fact that some have been hung upside down.*

Courtyard

baking and roasting

The kitchen was once situated in this courtyard. The aroma of the food meant for the rich prisoners was very noticeable in the gaols. The wretches in the gaols, however, had to make do with bread and water.

Tips

- *From the courtyard, you have a good view of the gaol with its barred windows.*

The 'Farewell' Chamber

the last night

The chamber where you bought your ticket of admission was once the room where those sentenced to death spent their last night. A last meal was served and they could also say farewell to their loved ones. During the final hours, a priest or – from the late 16th century onwards – a pastor, kept the condemned person company.