

## ***Oxford Castle Unlocked* Revealing History Imprisoned for Centuries**

*Oxford Castle Unlocked* is a visitor attraction with a past stretching far beyond your imagination. For hundreds of years the site has held both famous and infamous residents, serving time as a religious site, a home for royalty, a centre of justice and as the County Gaol.

Oxford Castle has had a constant presence in key historic moments in Oxford's evolution from its beginnings as a Saxon settlement through to the world-famous city it is today. Visitors can start their Oxford journey at Oxford Castle Unlocked and discover 1000 fascinating years of Oxford's history.

The oldest portion of the castle - and one of the oldest buildings in Oxford - is the Saxon stone-built St. George's Tower, which would originally have played a defensive role as the West Gate of Oxford. When William the Conqueror invaded and won in 1066, the site was marked by the Normans as the ideal place for a Motte and Bailey castle, alongside St. George's Tower. The castle developed over the centuries, incorporating the tower into its structure, and adding further buildings to accommodate its role as a place of incarceration, from the 13<sup>th</sup> century until the prison closure in 1996.

After almost one millennia filled with episodes of violence, executions, great escapes, betrayal and even romance, this ancient castle can now reveal its stories about the ordinary people who roamed the site and the extraordinary tales that connect them to it, unlocking the prison at the heart of the Norman castle.

Having been preserved and redeveloped, the old buildings were opened to the public in 2006. Visitors to the attraction can explore the austere confines of the 18th century Debtors' Tower and Prison D-wing; experience the atmospheric 900 year old underground Crypt, the only surviving remains of St. George's Chapel where it is said, began the education for which Oxford is famed; marvel at the Mound of the 11th century motte and bailey castle with vaulted well chamber; climb St George's Tower and enjoy the unique 360° panoramic views over the dreaming spires.

The secrets of Oxford Castle's turbulent past have finally been unlocked, and visitors to the ancient building can journey through the past as they wander around, learning about the real people linked to the

site including: Geoffrey of Monmouth, who penned the famous legends of King Arthur and Merlin on-site in 1136; Marshall William Smith, the King's prison keeper, who in the 1600s made Oxford Prison as feared and as notorious as Colditz; Mary Blandy a convicted murderess, who became an 18th century celebrity; Isaac Darkin, a dashing highwayman, who wouldn't wait for the hangman and performed his execution himself; and Anne Green, who survived her own hanging and narrowly escaped being anatomised by an Oxford medical student in 1650!

In addition, the visitor attraction has a rolling calendar of enthralling events for visitors to take part in, including England's premier ghost festival *Ghost Fest*, as *Oxford Castle Unlocked* is reputed to be one of Britain's most haunted sites.

**Oxford Castle Unlocked is open daily from 10.00am to 5.30pm (last tour 4.20pm). See [www.oxfordcastleunlocked.co.uk](http://www.oxfordcastleunlocked.co.uk) or call 01865 260666 to find out more.**

**ENDS**

**For further media information, images or to arrange a visit, please contact: Ellie Morgan on 07713 307925 or [emorgan@oxfordcastleunlocked.co.uk](mailto:emorgan@oxfordcastleunlocked.co.uk)**

#### **NOTES TO EDITORS:**

##### **About Oxford Castle Unlocked:**

*Oxford Castle Unlocked* is open daily from 10.00am to 5.30pm (last tour 4.20pm). Standard admission prices until 31 January 2015: Adult: £10.25, Concession: £8.45, Child: £6.95, Family (2 adults, 2 children): £32.95.

*Oxford Castle Unlocked* is a 1000 year old castle which also served as a prison for over 800 years. The visitor attraction opened on 2 June 2006 and gives visitors the opportunity to learn about the real people who lived and died throughout the site's turbulent past. Visitors are able to walk through the ancient buildings and experience the stories that connect the real people to these extraordinary events.

The guardians of this important historic site, The Oxford Preservation Trust were awarded a £3.8 million grant by the Heritage Lottery Fund to restore the castle and site buildings. The post of Learning and Access Officer is funded by Oxfordshire County Council. *Oxford Castle Unlocked* is operated by Continuum Attractions.

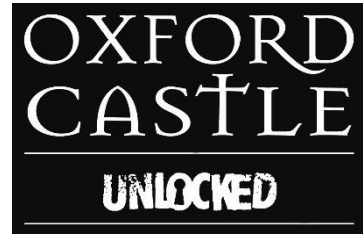
##### **About Continuum Attractions:**

For more information on Continuum Attractions, please visit [www.continuumattractions.com](http://www.continuumattractions.com)

Continuum Attractions owns, operates and manages cultural attractions across the UK:

- Continuum Heritage Attractions
  - The Real Mary King's Close, Edinburgh
  - The Canterbury Tales, Canterbury
  - Oxford Castle Unlocked, Oxford
  - York's Chocolate Story, York
- Continuum Icon Attractions
  - Emirates Spinnaker Tower, Portsmouth

For corporate PR enquiries, please contact Laura Good on 01904 527721 or email [lgood@continuumattractions.com](mailto:lgood@continuumattractions.com)



## Oxford Castle Unlocked

### Events list 2016

#### Tuesday 29 March – Sunday 10 April

##### Kids for a Quid

Don't miss the Easter holidays at Oxford Castle Unlocked when kids will be treated to £1\* entry to the attraction, to learn all about the castle's 1000 years of fascinating history, during which it served time as a castle, royal residence and a prison. Sample Victorian hard labour with the interactive treadwheel and crank handle, plus discover what crime and punishment you might receive with your souvenir mugshot\*\*.

Book online in advance at [www.oxfordcastleunlocked.co.uk](http://www.oxfordcastleunlocked.co.uk).

\*Terms and conditions: One discounted child per full paying adult. Not valid in conjunction with any other offer. Offer not valid between 25 and 28 March 2016.

\*\*Mugshots are available for an additional cost of £7.95.

#### Wednesday 27 April

##### Evening of Shakespearian Broadside ballads

Broadside ballad specialists Alva will perform two Shakespearian ballads from the 16th century, King Lear and Titus Andronicus, using the Castle courtyard and the ancient Crypt as their sets. Spaces are limited so early booking is advised for what will be a very atmospheric musical telling of two of the Bards grimmest tales.

#### Saturday 28 May – Sunday 5 June

##### Kids go Half Price

Families are being urged to ensure Oxford Castle Unlocked is in the diary as a must-do activity this May half term as the visitor attraction offers children half price entry^ for the holidays! Plus, on selected days, children can complete castle themed craft activities to take home as a memento of their visit.

^ Price valid for one child when accompanied by a full paying adult

#### Monday 20 June – Saturday 13 August

##### Oxford Shakespeare Festival

Following a successful debut festival last summer, Oxford Castle Unlocked is delighted to be playing host to the Oxford Shakespeare Festival once again in Summer 2016. The Oxford Shakespeare Festival will see 8 weeks of scintillating theatre performances in the attraction's historic Castleyard.

**Tickets:** Adult £15, Concessions £13

The line-up includes:

- Monday 20 June – Saturday 2<sup>nd</sup> July (excluding Sunday 26 June)

**Taming of the Shrew, presented by Don't Hate the Players**

- Monday 4<sup>th</sup> July – Saturday 16<sup>th</sup> July (excluding Sunday 10 July)

**Much Ado About Nothing, presented by Tomahawk Theatre**

- Monday 18<sup>th</sup> July – Saturday 30<sup>th</sup> July (excluding Sunday 24 July)

**The Tempest, presented by Siege Theatre**

- Monday 1<sup>st</sup> August – Saturday 13<sup>th</sup> August (excluding Sunday 7<sup>th</sup> August)

**Macbeth & A Midsummer Night's Dream, presented by BMH Productions**

Hour long versions of two Shakespeare classics!

**Monday 25 July – Thursday 1 September**

**Kids go FREE**

Families out and about during the summer holidays, listen up! This summer at Oxford Castle Unlocked, children will enjoy FREE entry, taking a tour with the whole family, exploring the 1000 year old castle prison with a compelling costumed character tour guide. This offer is valid on weekdays only from Monday 25 July to Thursday 1 September^^.

^^ Offer valid for one free child when accompanied by a full paying adult. Online booking only.

**Saturday 10 & Sunday 11 September**

**Oxford Open Doors**

FREE

Oxford Castle Unlocked participates in the annual Oxford Open Doors event, a FREE event when Oxford Preservation Trust invites everyone to celebrate Oxford and all that makes it special – its places, spaces and most of all, its communities. Oxford Castle Unlocked will open its prison wing, museum space, mound and stunning crypt for visitors to explore without charge, whilst tours of the incredible Saxon Tower will be available for a small fee throughout the day.

**Sunday 1 October – Sunday 6 November**

**Ghost Fest**

Join Oxford Castle Unlocked for their Halloween festival, Ghost Fest, from Sunday 1<sup>st</sup> October to Sunday 6<sup>th</sup> November. Explore the 1000 year old castle prison after-dark and pick from a spine-chilling selection of events as the attraction stakes its claim as the spookiest festival in the UK calendar and the place to be this Halloween. **NEW for 2016**, the Truth & Dare Tour will see guests embark on a tour of the atmospheric buildings with one of the ghoulish castle characters, learning about the betrayals, executions and rumoured spirits who haunt the historic surrounds before daring to complete the Gauntlet of Terror, with live actors on hand to ensure it will be an experience to remember! Other events include a Halloween Murder Mystery night on Friday 28 October, Trick or Treating down the spooky prison wing on

31 October from 5pm, Overnight Ghost Hunt opportunities and a Ghost Trail with Bill Spectre starting from the Castleyard and spanning the darkest corners of Oxford during a 90 minute walking tour.

### **Saturday 22 – Sunday 30 October 2016**

#### **Kids for a Quid**

Kids can discover over 1000 years of spooky history for just £1 this October half term at Oxford Castle Unlocked. Costumed character tour guides will weave family-friendly ghost stories into their 50 minute tours, based on the ghoulish characters of the castle prison's past. Tours leave every 20 minutes between 10am and 4.20pm throughout the week with a purely historical tour available on the hour. Terms and conditions apply.

### **Monday 31 October 2016, 5pm – 8pm**

#### **Trick or Treating**

A ghoulish line-up of inmates will be locked up in the old cells of Oxford's former prison this Halloween to put the fun and frights into trick or treating at Oxford Castle Unlocked. Visitors are invited to don their Halloween costumes and dare to knock on the doors of the creepy inhabitants for a scarily good treat!

### **Weekdays from 19 December 2016 – 30 December 2016**

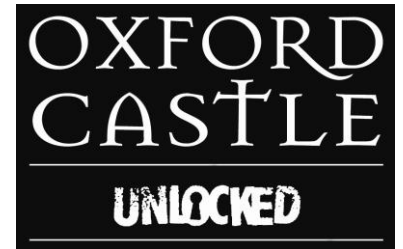
#### **Kids go Half Price**

Half price entry for children during the Christmas holidays! Terms and conditions apply.

#### **Dates TBC**

#### **Christmas at the Castle**

NEW for 2016, a festive treat for all the family at Oxford's 1000 year old castle, exploring Christmas celebrations and traditions through the centuries. More details will be revealed soon. To be kept up to date, please email [emorgan@oxfordcastleunlocked.co.uk](mailto:emorgan@oxfordcastleunlocked.co.uk)

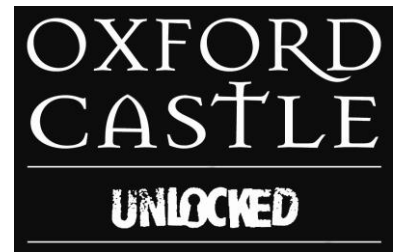


## Unlocking the Facts

- ✘ The Castle was built in 1071 by Robert d'Oilly, a Norman baron and close ally of William the Conqueror, although St. George's Tower is widely thought to have been built earlier, making it the oldest secular tower in England and the oldest building in Oxford
- ✘ In addition to the Saxon St George's Tower, d'Oilly's castle at first consisted of a motte, or earthen mound, crowned with a timber tower and a strong encircling wooden fence. A moat, fed by water from the river, flowed around the outside of the bailey
- ✘ St. George's Tower is four storeys high and has 101 steps
- ✘ Oxford Castle Unlocked was being used as a gaol as early as the 12th century, but it wasn't formally constituted as a county gaol until much later, in 1531
- ✘ For four years in the 1640s, Oxford rivalled London as the capital city of England. Oxford Castle played a pivotal role in the Civil war at that time, used by King Charles as a prison for rebel Parliamentarians
- ✘ During the 18th century, the list of offences punishable by death grew from around 50 to more than 200. There were 56 public executions at Oxford Castle in the hundred years up to 1800, for crimes ranging from sheep-stealing to arson to spying
- ✘ The last public execution at Oxford Prison was that of Noah Austin, for murder, in 1863
- ✘ The modern prison was born around the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century. The new prisons were dedicated to disciplining hearts and minds rather than bodies. They would cure the prisoner of crime as though crime were a disease
- ✘ Daniel Harris was appointed to the role of Prison Gaoler in 1786. The former Clerk of Works, a keen archaeologist, draughtsman and prison reformer, Harris transformed Oxford Gaol, enlisting the prisoners to rebuild the derelict prison buildings
- ✘ By the 19th century, the prison population had risen steeply, and Oxford Prison was expanded to cope with the demand. New wings were added so that prisoners could be divided by age and gender and be kept in individual cells

- ✘ Hard labour was at the heart of the Victorian prison regime. The 1877 Prisons Act introduced a nationalised prison system with back breaking and demoralising work as its central plank
- ✘ The castle was used as a prison until 7 September 1996
- ✘ Oxford Castle was redeveloped during 2004 into flats, a luxury hotel, restaurants and bars, and an art gallery. The redevelopment also saw the transformation of St. George's Tower and Crypt, the castle mound and the Debtors' Tower into Oxford Castle Unlocked
- ✘ Oxford Castle Unlocked was officially opened by the Queen on 5 May 2006

# Castle Characters



## Daniel Harris

**Role:** Clerk of works at Oxford prison, promoted to Governor

**Dates:** Clerk of Works in 1785, Governor from 1786 - 1809

Beginning his career at Oxford Prison as the Clerk of Works in 1785, Daniel Harris was quickly promoted to Governor the following year. He swiftly began his reformation of the prison conditions and put the prisoners to work, hiring the convicts out to complete public works as part of the prisoners' rehabilitation.

Daniel Harris possessed a number of skills as a builder, carpenter, draughtsman and architect. One of his greatest passions was archaeology, and subsequently, he was the first person to carry out serious excavations at Oxford Castle, during which he discovered a vaulted well chamber concealed within the mound and St. George's Crypt, both of which are available to view as part of the Oxford Castle Unlocked experience.



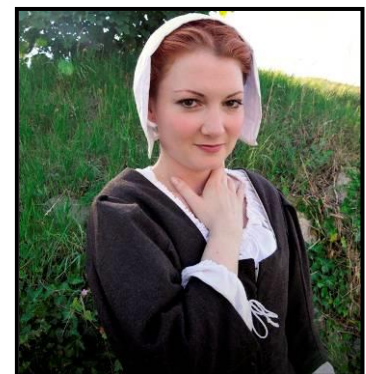
## Anne Green

**Role:** Survived her own hanging

**Date:** 1650

Anne Green, a servant, was hanged at Oxford Castle in 1650 for the murder of her newborn child, though in all likelihood the baby had been stillborn. To spare her any unnecessary suffering, Anne's friends pulled on her legs to hasten her death. Yet astonishingly, on being taken down she displayed signs of

life. Doctors laboured to revive her, and she eventually made a full recovery. It was a miracle Anne Green survived to tell her tale – she lived for 15 years after her 'execution' and went on to have three children.





## Empress Matilda

**Role:** Fought with her cousin Stephen at Oxford Castle over the crown of England

**Date:** 1142

In the 12th century, King Stephen, grandson of William the conqueror, and his cousin, the Empress Matilda, fought for the crown of England. Matilda was the daughter of Henry I and a legitimate claimant for the throne. Matilda and Stephen's supporters took it in turns to lay siege to one another's strongholds.

Oxford Castle played an important role in these events, for it was here in 1142 that the tide of war turned in Stephen's favour. The previous year Matilda had adopted the castle as her headquarters. In the autumn of 1142 Stephen's forces surrounded it, blockading the Empress and her garrison inside. The siege lasted for three months. Matilda finally escaped one freezing night in December; according to legend, she wrapped herself in a white cape and fled through the snow to Wallingford Castle.

Stephen eventually won the battle but cunning Matilda won in her own way by negotiating with the King that her son would become his successor and therefore claiming a long-term victory.



## Marshall William Smith

**Role:** Terrorised prisoners of the civil war as Charles I's prison keeper

**Date:** 1640s

During the civil war of the 1640s, Charles I took up residence at the college of Christ Church, and Oxford Castle was used for holding Parliamentary prisoners of war. It soon attracted the sort of fearsome reputation that prison camps like Colditz and Changi would attract in the 20th century. Survivors emerged with horror stories about the appalling conditions inside and the gratuitous brutality of the King's prison keeper, Marshall William Smith. Soldiers were warned to fight to the death rather than fall into the hands of Marshall William Smith.



The tyranny of Marshall Smith was short-lived. In 1646, following the siege, Oxford fell to the Parliamentary general Sir Thomas Fairfax and King Charles fled.

# Mary Blandy

**Role:** Middle-class murderer, convicted and hanged at Oxford Castle

**Date:** 1752

Not all prisoners in the castle were drawn from the lower classes. One case scandalised Oxfordshire's polite circles because it involved a young, middle-class woman. Her name was Mary Blandy.



Fearing Mary was on the verge of a life of spinsterhood, her father, Francis, began to broadcast the extent of his worldly wealth in the hope of attracting suitors, somewhat exaggerating his fortune for good effect. It worked. Captain Henry Cranstoun, a Scottish army officer from an aristocratic background, began to court Mary. Mary was smitten, and her father welcomed him into the family home. However, it soon emerged that Cranstoun already had a wife back in Scotland. Francis Blandy cast Cranstoun out and forbade Mary to see him.

To get their wedding plans back on course. Cranstoun sent Mary a quantity of white powder, instructing her to stir it into her father's food. It was, he said, a love philtre, which would persuade Francis to give the marriage his renewed blessing. Instead, Francis began to sicken; and only days later, he died. The 'love philtre' was no such thing. It was arsenic.

Mary came immediately under suspicion. The servants had seen her tampering with his food, and moments before her father's death she had made a tearful confession at his bedside. She was held in Oxford Castle, where her social status earned her special privileges like the opportunity to have friends to tea, although her ankles were to remain discretely shackled. (One of her shackles survives and is on display). Mary Blandy was convicted of murder in March 1752 and hanged, probably in the castleyard, on 6 April.

# John & Elizabeth Lilburne

**Role:** Husband and wife. John spent much of his life behind bars, while Elizabeth was on hand to save him

**Date:** 1642

John Lilburne was a political and religious radical, an outspoken opponent of tyranny and an upholder of the rights and liberties of the English people. He spent his adult life at loggerheads with the authorities, much of it either in exile or behind bars. In 1642, he was in Oxford Castle awaiting trial for treason. He had been taken captive by Royalist forces while valiantly defending a Parliamentary position at Brentford in Middlesex, on one of the main routes into London. Now he and his associates were to be made examples of. If found guilty, Lilburne would almost certainly be sentenced to death.



On 13 December 1642, he managed to smuggle a letter out of the castle to his wife Elizabeth, conveying the news that his trial was set for the following week.



Elizabeth Lilburne was a remarkable character in her own right. Brave and resourceful, she was a seasoned campaigner and had helped her husband to distribute his writings and lobby Parliament, while somehow holding their young family together. Despite being heavily pregnant, she presented herself at the House of Commons to plead for John Lilburne's life. After some deliberation, Parliament resolved that if John Lilburne and his comrades were to be sentenced to death, Royalist prisoners' lives would be taken in reprisal.

Elizabeth Lilburne had two days to get to Oxford and deliver the news. She travelled alone and on foot through a country at war, slipping through enemy lines into Oxford to deliver the letter from Parliament securing her husband's acquittal. She arrived just in time to save her husband's life.

# Rowland Jenkes

**Role:** Responsible for the curse of the Black Assize

**Date:** 1577

It was at the county court that one of the most infamous events in the castle's history took place: the Black Assize.

The year was 1577, and England was divided by the passions of the Reformation. In Oxford on 6 July, a 'saucy and foul-mouthed' Roman Catholic bookseller called Rowland Jenkes was brought before the assize court to be tried for his allegiance to the Pope. His defence failed to impress the jury and he was sentenced to lose his ears.



On learning his fate, Jenkes was somewhat understandably provoked. Rousing himself to full rhetorical flight, he pronounced a violent curse on the court, the jury and the city.

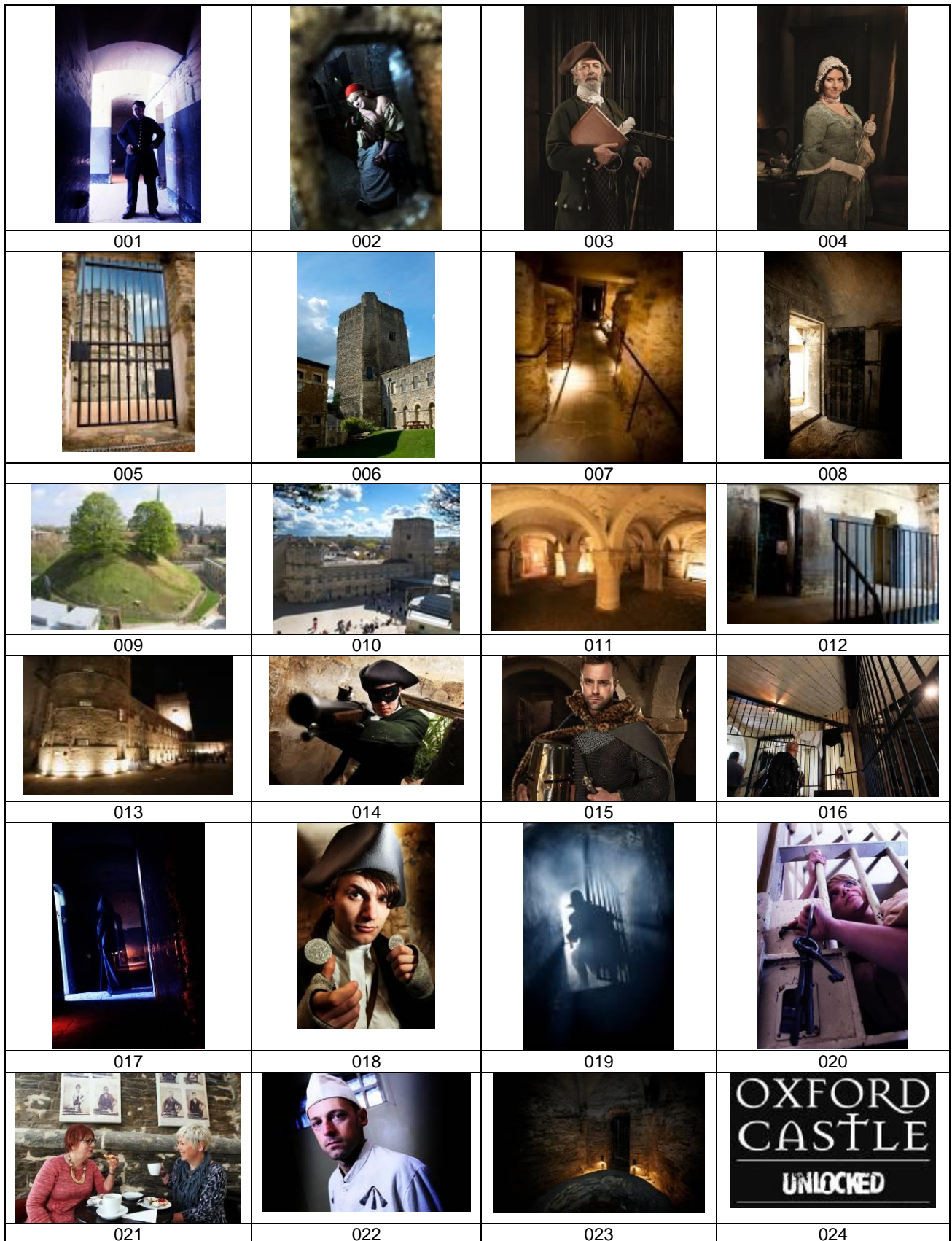
Almost immediately afterwards, people began to drop dead of a mysterious illness. Around 600 people in Oxford are said to have fallen sick on the day of Jenkes's trial, plus a further 100 who had returned to their homes outside the city.

The infection raged until the 12 August. By then the list of dead included two judges, the coroner, the sheriff, a clerk and many members of the jury at Jenkes's trial. Around 300 died in Oxford and another 200 or so outside of it.

The disease is said to have taken no victims from among the city's women, children or poor – a curious circumstance that led to many observers to impute the events of July and August 1577 to black magic or divine intervention, depending on which side of the religious fence they sat.

## Oxford Castle Unlocked Image Gallery

High res versions of these images and further images are available. Please contact Ellie Morgan on [emorgan@oxfordcastleunlocked.co.uk](mailto:emorgan@oxfordcastleunlocked.co.uk) or call 07713 307 925



A range of UK-based attractions provide a wealth of opportunities for individual guests, families, friends, school groups, social outings, coach parties, corporate events and so much more. For those looking for a truly unique place to visit, Continuum Attractions promise memorable experiences for all, with fascinating stories told in unforgettable ways.

### [The Real Mary King's Close](#)

Beneath Edinburgh's Royal Mile lies the city's deepest secret, a warren of hidden streets that reveal the city's extraordinary past from the 17th century and beyond. For hundreds of years the true story of the Close has remained untold – until now! In the company of an expert guide you can explore this unique site and experience what it was really like for the people who lived, worked and died here. The Real Mary King's Close has been awarded the Five Star Historic Attraction Award by Visit Scotland.



### [York's Chocolate Story](#)

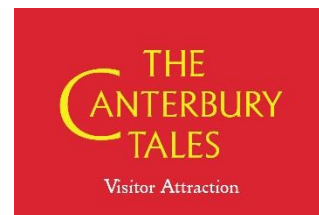
At York's Chocolate Story you can discover the stories behind the greatest names in chocolate, unwrap the secrets of chocolate making, and even learn the art of the chocolatier for yourself. A fully guided tour and three floors of interactive exploration take you on a journey through the city where chocolate made history.



Our attraction also includes a retail shop and a café and the opportunity of exclusive evening hire for parties, corporate events, workshops and demonstrations.

### [The Canterbury Tales](#)

Step back in time at The Canterbury Tales to experience sights, sounds and even smells of Medieval England. With interaction from our costumed characters and an entertaining audio guide, five of Chaucer's most famous tales are brought vividly to life as you journey to the shrine of St Thomas Becket. The Canterbury Tales has become a much loved regional attraction and an essential part of any visit to the garden of England's historic cathedral city.



### [Emirates Spinnaker Tower](#)

Soaring 170 metres above Portsmouth Harbour and the Solent, the Emirates Spinnaker Tower has already established itself as a national icon for Britain. Britain's best viewing tower stands proud over one of the most fascinating seascapes in the world, offering amazing 350° panoramic views of Portsmouth Harbour, the South coast and the Isle of Wight, stretching out for up to 23 miles. Three viewing decks offer a glass floor where visitors can dare to 'walk on air,' a Cafe in the Clouds and the Sky Deck open to the elements, where visitors can feel the wind in their hair.

