

Pillories

If you are ever tempted to wander, drunk and disorderly, around the little town of Coleshill in Warwickshire, something in Church Hill may make you pause for thought. Half-way up the street and clamped to the wall outside the former police-station stands the town pillory.

The object is a good fifteen feet tall, of sturdy oak, and topped with an elegant acorn finial. Although claims for its age vary, I would be inclined to date it from the early 19th or late 18th Century. It once stood outside the market hall, which was pulled down in 1865.

That pillory would have some tales to tell, if only we could hear it speak. Like some long-suffering taxi driver it would tell of the many unruly customers that it once carried. At the top there is a horizontal transom with holes for the head and wrists of two petty criminals. A few feet below is the platform on which they stood to face the music.

At the bottom are what remains of the chains which once tied a third offender to the whipping-post, and indications of two more sets of stocks that rounded off the whole elaborate device. Room, then, for five offenders at one fell swoop, though it's doubtful whether all five restraints were ever in operation at the same time. Welcome to Coleshill's own little portable prison.

The Coleshill pillory is a very rare surviving example of what was once common in the streets of the Midlands. The local magistrates, sitting at what were called Petty Sessions, had such summary justice at their disposal, should they deem an offence not serious enough to refer to a higher court. Typically it would be applied in cases of drunkenness, vagrancy and such like. If the offence occurred on the Sabbath, it could be the churchwardens who inflicted the punishment.

In most cases the offender could pay an on-the-spot fine, but five shillings (25p) was beyond the pocket of many, who opted instead to take their punishment on the chin. So an hour or two in the stocks followed, and whatever fruit and vegetables, rotten eggs and rubbish, the townsfolk chose to hurl their way.

All this, of course, was justice being seen to be done, and the pillory and stocks were always placed in the most prominent location in town, in the market-place or next to the town hall. The Birmingham pillory, long since lost, stood next to the Welch Cross in the middle of the High Street, while the stocks were situated outside, and later inside, the Public Office in Moor Street. In spite of their obvious medieval origins, they were still in use well into Queen Victoria's reign.

Indeed, a letter to the Birmingham Journal in October 1838 complained of the survival of a form of punishment which was "degrading and outdated", but expressed satisfaction that there was not also a pillory in the town, as there was at Coleshill and at Warwick.

Pillories, then, were relatively rare by the 19th Century, and typically deployed to

punish a moral transgression such as sexual assault or exposing oneself. The offender would be whipped, as well as pelted with objects, before being released. In 1797 the punishment of Thomas Cotton of Birmingham, who was found guilty at the Warwick Quarter Sessions of attempted rape, included a spell at the Warwick pillory. "It will be some time," commented the Birmingham Gazette, "before he recovers from the turnips, stones and brick-ends thrown at him."

You could call it devolved justice, I suppose, or localism in action.

Of course, the success of the pillory depended upon the participation of a baying mob; not every offender was so abused. In 1703 the writer, Daniel Defoe, was sentenced to three spells in the pillory for publishing a "seditious libel", in reality a spoof. Such was the man's popularity, and the sense of injustice, that Defoe was pelted, not with dead rats, but with flowers.

For Daniel Defoe that feeling of resentment lingered long in the memory, and he composed a "Hymn to the Pillory" to highlight what he saw as the selectivity of justice in 18th-century England. "Tell us, great engine," Defoe asks, "how to understand / or reconcile the justice of this land..."

By the second decade of the 19th Century, however, the pillory could no longer be deployed for such offences, and many of the posts must have then been taken down. You can still stand on Pillory Green in Southam in Warwickshire, but can no longer be scourged; the pillory has long since made its exit.

Sets of stocks, on the other hand, were a familiar sight in most parishes, which helps to explain the large numbers of them that remain in existence. In Warwickshire alone they can be found at Berkswell, Southam, Dunchurch, Leek Wotton and Thurlaston. They were, after all, often referred to as "common stocks".

Given that the last recorded use of stocks was as far back as 1872, one wonders whether they were retained as a gentle exhortation to good order. Or perhaps the value of stocks had fallen. They have hung on, rather curiously, as a form of seaside or fairground amusement.

For Daniel Defoe, the legitimate candidates for the pillory should not be the petty criminals, but the crooked bankers. An interesting and rather topical thought. Perhaps the work of the pillory at Coleshill is not yet entirely done.