

Great Historical Escapes

adventures in jail-breaking

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Introduction: The Art of Escaping

'Only rarely do [escapes] succeed.' - A. Dumas, *The Count of Monte Cristo*, chapter 16.

From the earliest days of people organising themselves, making rules and punishing those who break them, there have been jails of some sort. Ancient Egyptians, Babylonians and Hebrews had prisons, while the ancient Greek city of Athens had its *desmoterion* or 'place of chains'.

Being put in prison is never remotely pleasant, and may be terrifying. Most of those who have ended up in prison have dreamed of getting out. Escaping from prison, though, is difficult, as the Dumas quote (from a book with one of the finest escape stories of all) tells us. It is, of course, *supposed* to be difficult.

Over the centuries, however, a small number of those dreaming of escape have actually managed to get away.

Escape stories have always been popular. Whatever the prisoner may have done, and some of those in this book were certainly deeply unpleasant and dangerous, it is hard not to enjoy a good tale of daring escape.

There are Biblical escape stories, such as that in *Acts* 5:18-19, which has apostles being rescued from imprisonment by an angel.¹ In myths and legends, the escape is often helped

¹ See also, e.g. 2 Kings 25:27; Jeremiah 32:2-5, 37:13-16, 21, 6-13.1.

by a hero. In Greek myth, for example, Prometheus, who had annoyed top God Zeus and been chained to a rock so that a great bird could eat his liver over and over again (nice touch), was rescued by the hero Herakles. In Welsh legend, the unfortunate heroine Branwen was lucky enough to have a giant for a brother. This helpful chap, Brân, or Bendigeidfran, rescued her from prison in Ireland. Branwen also made use of a crow to carry a message, and we can see birds and animals helping escapes in J.R.R. Tolkein's *The Lord of the Rings* (which has the wizard Gandalf being rescued from a tower by an oversized talking eagle) and in the Disney film of *Cinderella*, (which shows mice, a dog and a horse helping Cinderella to escape from the room in which the evil stepmother has locked her up). In the fairy tales collected by the Brothers Grimm in Germany, we see a mouse nibbling through a lock to rescue the hero of *The Grateful Beasts* from imprisonment in a box thrown into a river. Magic and a trap door were used by the heroines of the Grimms' *The Twelve Dancing Princesses* to escape their locked room and go off dancing, and a magic purple flower helps the shepherd hero Jorindel to recover the lovely Jorinda from the cage, in which she has been imprisoned by a terrible witch. More realistic (apart from the bit about hair-climbing) is the well-known fairy tale *Rapunzel*, in which our heroine plans to weave a silken ladder, and use it to escape from her tower.

French author Alexandre Dumas probably deserves the title of king of the escape tale, with his adventure novels such as *The Black Tulip*, and, most gripping of all, *The Count of Monte Cristo*, mentioned above. This bestseller, published in 1844, describes the horrible fate of young sailor Edmond Dantès, who is wrongly imprisoned on the island fortress of the Chateau d'If. After years in a stinking dungeon, and a failed attempt at tunnelling out, he escapes in the body-bag of a dead friend.

True escape stories can be just as exciting as fiction, (even if they do not tend to feature friendly talking animals).

Prisons and Criminal Law

Before we get into the escape stories, we need to think a little about the places people have been locked up, because prisons, and prison conditions, have changed a great deal over the centuries.

Today, at least in the UK, the government usually builds prisons, pays prison officers and is in charge of looking after prisoners. That has not always been true. It was only in 1877 that all prisons here were brought into government control. Before that, providing and maintaining prisons might be the job of a fairly lowly local official or a well-off individual. Many jails were run as a way of making money for the jailers, and some were a real shambles. Until the nineteenth century, many prisoners were not fed, and did not get clothes or bedding unless they paid for them. Those without money of their own might have to rely on charity.

As we will see in some of the stories, from the seventeenth to the nineteenth century, Britain made use of a different sort of prison: the prison colony. Many people convicted of a crime were sent out of the country. At first, the usual destination was the British colonies in North America. About 50,000 British convicts were sent to America between 1718 and 1776. From 1787 to 1868, about 150,000 convicts were sent out to Australia. There were not necessarily any walls or chains in these prison colonies, but the guards and the distance from home did the same job of making it difficult to escape. While waiting to be transported, and sometimes when jails in Britain were overcrowded, prisoners might be kept in 'the hulks', run-down ships moored in a river, or on the coast. From the nineteenth century, though, prisons were reformed, both in terms of making them somewhat less wretched, and also in terms of improving security.

It is not just prisons which have changed over time. The law has changed too. Today, nobody who is found guilty of a crime in Britain will be executed. In the past, though, many of those in prison were there waiting to be hanged or beheaded. Being condemned to die obviously made people very keen to escape from jail.

The people we will meet were in prison for a number of different reasons. Some were **convicts**, which means that they had been tried and found guilty of a crime. Some were in prison under arrest and waiting their trial. Some were soldiers taken as prisoners of war. Of those who had been convicted of a crime, and were awaiting execution, some were truly dangerous and unpleasant, but, until the nineteenth century, capital punishment (execution) was the legal penalty for a whole host of offences, including many fairly small thefts. Some convicts awaiting execution or transportation were poor people who had stolen through necessity, or people convicted of practising the wrong religion or holding the wrong political views. Others again may have been innocent of any crime, and convicted through mistake or corruption.

Common features of prison escapes

Prisons may have changed, but some of the basic techniques for getting out of them have remained constant. Most of the escapes we will look at have made use of some of the following strategies:

Disguise - dressing up as somebody else, in order to slip past the jailer

Concealment - hiding inside something, like a barrel, to be carried out of the jail

- Violence** - overpowering the jailer
- Bribery** - paying the jailer money to allow the prisoner to go.
- Break-out** - breaking through the jail building. This might be through the roof, the walls, the window bars, or by using a tunnel
- Break-in** - the prisoner's friends and supporters, or a general mob destroy the prison, allowing the prisoner to get out.

Enough generalisation and analysis – on with the escapes!