CHAPTER ONE

Felons, traitors and the faithful: some highlights from stories of Medieval and Tudor escapes

Medieval prisons housed those awaiting trial, those awaiting execution, and sometimes those being punished, for some statutory offences. There was a pattern of increase, over the medieval period and into the time of the Tudor monarchs, in what sorts of conduct could result in a spell in prison. Latterly, of course, a variety of religious offences might lead to seriously adverse consequences, and both Catholic and Protestant supporters found themselves imprisoned for too open or too firm support for their 'side'. They also showed great ingenuity in their escapes.

Not all medieval and early modern prisons were terrible,[1] but some were wretched, crowded and unhealthy. Fourteenth century sheepstealers Hugh Maidenlove and William Clerk escaped from their imprisonment in Norwich castle, but not before William's feet had been rotted away by the terrible conditions in the prison.[2] Prisoners in Northampton jail died of hunger and thirst in 1322-3. For those of us none too keen on either violence or creeping things in our immediate vicinity, another shudder-inducing description is that of French nobleman Henriet Gentian, who complained of imprisonment (for ransom, rather than as a convict or suspect) in 1440, and had his teeth smashed out with a hammer, amongst other cruelties, as

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[1] https://legalhistorymiscellany.com/2020/08/18/law-enforcement-officials-and-the-limits-of-violence-in-medieval-england/
[2] Packe, *Edward III*, 56.

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well as being obliged to stay in a dungeon crawling with snakes and other unpleasant creatures. In medieval Egypt, the city of Cairo had a prison called the 'jubb', meaning 'pit', which was apparently both stinking and crowded with bats. Some of these conditions – and of course the possibility of capital punishment lying at the end of the legal process – surely encouraged thoughts of escape. Some relied on their own ingenuity, skill or strength. Others had considerable help from outside or inside the prison. And yet others failed in sad and spectacular fashion. Escapes posed a risk for escapees who did not get clean away, as they might be killed in pursuit, and their flight would be taken as an indication of guilt. It was also a worry for jailers, who, following an escape, had to take steps to raise the hue and cry, and might face a penalty for their negligent keeping, or their collaboration.[3]   Some felt this was unfair, if the premises being used were in a state of disrepair. This was the complaint of John D'Engayne, sheriff of Huntingdonshire, in a petition of 1377. asking to be pardoned for escapes which he put down to the 'feebleness' of the jail.[4] Anyway our focus is the escapees rather than the problems they caused those locking them up (not an academic article, doesn't have to do nuance – what liberation!), so without further ado, here are some top medieval and Tudor escape episodes – mostly from jails, but a few of them are 'jailbreak adjacent' adventures, with people getting out of other sorts of trap or confinement, which show use of some of the same strategies for departure from a tight spot.

Agility and strength

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[3] Pugh, *Imprisonment*, 227.
[4] TNA SC8/44/2190.

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There is something pleasing and ... pure, almost, ... about the escape which depends on a physical feat. Not all of those who accomplished climbs and leaps were in the best of shape, mind you. Portly prelate Ranulf Flambard, imprisoned by Henry I in 1101, made a daring escape from the Tower of London climbing down a rope smuggled into his rm in a wine cask. He skinned his hands on the way down, but rode to the coast and got away to Normandy.[5] Not all escapes in the class 'stout gent on rope' worked out, however. A Welsh prince, Gruffydd ap Llywelyn, was locked up in the Tower of London by the English king, Henry III, for no good reason. In 1244, tired of waiting for the king of England to let him out, or guessing that Henry never would let him go, Gruffydd decided to escape. It's not surprising that he was sick of being banged up – he had had previous 'stretches' inside, as a hostage, and then as a prisoner of different Welsh factions. Perhaps he had heard of Ranulf Flambard. He decided to climb out of the Tower using a rope which he made from cloth and bedlinen. The problem was, though, that his long captivity had left him, well, rather hefty. His weight was too much for the home-made rope, and he crashed down to his death.[6]

More successful in the rope-escape category was William Watson, a Catholic priest and conspirator (1559?-1603). He was arrested for spreading Catholicism. He managed to escape from Bridewell prison in London in 1588, using rope which a female helper, Margaret Ward, smuggled into the jail. It is worth noting, though, that there were consequences for Margaret, who was executed for this later in the year .[7]

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[5] C.W. Hollister, 'Henry I', ODNB.
[6] T.F. Tout rev. AD Carr., 'Gruffudd ap Llywelyn', ODNB.
[7] M. Nichols, 'William Watson', ODNB

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A special mention is deserved by the 1597 escape of John Gerard, Jesuit, from the

Tower of London. This was an impressive bit of rope work, swinging out, over a

ditch, to freedom, despite having been tortured and having seriously injured wrists.[8]

An 'up and down' escape – even more difficult than a straight downward slide, one

would imagine, was undertaken by John de Vere, Earl of Oxford (1442-1513). He

was a supporter of the exiled House of Lancaster in the fifteenth century dynastic

disputes later called the Wars of the Roses. He had been locked up in Hammes

Castle in the Calais region (at that time an English possession). He scaled the wall at

Hammes and jumped into the moat. It is not entirely clear, however, whether this

dangerous exploit was an escape attempt or a suicide bid. In any event, it failed,

Oxford was recaptured, but in 1484, managed to escape with his jailer, James

Blount, and join up with Henry Tudor, soon to be Henry VII.[9]

There are plenty of stories of jail 'breaking' in the most literal sense, that is to say,

breaking restraints, or breaking through the walls. or sometimes floors or ceilings. It

does not suggest a great deal of vigilance amongst jailers when we read of a man

escaping from jail at Northampton in the 1220s, by making breaches in the walls at

three different points, and removed more than a cartload of stone in the process.[10]

Some convicted prisoners who were housed in the city jail in York in 1455 got out by

breaking through the ceiling of the vault they were in. [11] We gave to wonder whether it

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[8] T. McCoog, 'John Gerard', ODNB.
[9] Jacob, *Fifteenth Century*, 640.
[10] Pugh, *Imprisonment*, 219 (1225); CRR XII pp 215-6.
[11] Pugh, *Imprisonment*, 220; *CPR 1452-61*, 273-4.

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was strength or prison dilapidation, or both, which allowed William le Smyth and William de Brusyerd, two men in prison in Lynn, in the reign of Edward III, to work together to break the iron rings and the bonds securing them.[12] The tunnel is another classic, and there are some good examples from fourteenth century Ireland and Salisbury.[13] Tunnels didn't work for twelve men locked up in Salisbury Castle in 1347. They got as far as digging a hole four feet under the wall before their jailers found them out. In about 1356, though, some prisoners in the jail of the Archbishop of Dublin at Swords got out through a tunnel. And we see the beginnings of a tradition of escape through drains and latrines – grim of course, but in the simpler, earlier versions, there was at least a straightforward way out, and I suppose it would not be a popular place to guard too closely.[14] St Wulfhild (d. after 996), said to have got away from English ruler king and noted letch, King Edgar, by crawling through a drainiage channel, then claiming sanctuary,[15] and in terms of actual toilet escapes, we have an account that, in 1357, some prisoners used this route out of the castle jail in Newcastle upon Tyne.[16]

Disguise

We see some early instances of the sort of escape story I like best of all – the escape in disguise. In particular, 'cross-dressing' disguise seems to have been a popular choice. For example, William de Longchamp, bishop of Ely (d. 1197) attempted a getaway in disguise, variously described as monk's habit or women's

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[12] KB 27/343 Rex m. 1.
[13] Pugh, *Imprisonment*, 219, 220; *CPR 1354-8*, 355; JUST 3/130 m. 133.
[14] Pugh, *Imprisonment,* 220 Arch Aeliana NS IV, 127.
[15] B. Yorke, 'Wulfhild', ODNB
[16] Pugh, *Imprisonment,* 220; *Arch Aeliana* NS IV, 127.

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clothing (possibly even that of a prostitute).[17] Disguise had been used even earlier by the saintly Christina of Markyate (born c. 1096 d after 1145) to escape from confinement (admittedly not in a prison). She wanted to remain unmarried and had vowed to devote her life to God. Her parents were not keen on this idea, though. They locked her up and treated her cruelly. With some help, she escaped on horseback, dressed as a man. She rode thirty miles to Flamstead and took refuge with a hermit, Alfwen, for two years. Christina obviously had no problem with confined spaces though, because she set herself up in hermit-style in Markyate, spending years sealed into a cell which was too small to let her sit or lie down properly. [18]

According to a Warwickshire roll of 1306, a successful escape by cross dressing was accomplished by Robert de Henynton, a man accused of homicide, who managed to get to a church, out of the clutches of the law, and then, with the aid of his plucky sister Alice, did a clothes swap, before making off, dressed in women's attire.[19]

Less disguise and more camouflage, but still impressive is the story of Matilda, daughter of Henry I, who spent years in the 1100s fighting with her rival, Stephen of Blois, for the throne of England. She made a daring escape from a siege of her stronghold at Oxford in 1142. With a small group of knights, in the depth of a bitter,

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[17] R.V. Turner, 'William de Longchamp', ODNB
[18] C.H. Talbot, rev. H. Summerson, 'Christina of Markyate', ODNB.
[19] JUST 1/966 m. 8.

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snowy winter, she exited the castle, dressed in white for camouflage, and crossed

the frozen Thames, and walked to Abingdon, then to her allies.[20]

Concealment

Escaping in barrels, baskets etc. is a common story in both fact and fiction. There is

a substratum of exciting medieval and early modern escapes in boxes, chests and

the like. A prominent example of this is the Dutch jurist Hugo Grotius (b. 1583)

whose religious views got him into trouble in Rotterdam, and he was shut up in a

castle. His clever wife spotted that there was no inspection of his linen chest as it

went in and out of the building. After holes were put into this chest, Grotius climbed

in, presumably with the used pants, and made his escape. There followed some

disguise (not as a woman but as a tradesman, before Grotius got away to a safer

part of the Low Countries.[21]* In England, John Aylmer bishop of London and tutor of

Lady Jane Grey, allegedly escaped arrest by sea, in a large wine vat with a secret

compartment.[22]

Team efforts

There was some assistance in some of the cases already mentioned - e.g. rope

smuggling, and perhaps more - but some examples show greater team-work. An

exciting tale of aided escape is found in the medieval story *Fulk Fitz Waryn*. Two

Norman noblemen, Sir Ernalt de Lys and Sir Walter de Lacy. were imprisoned in

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[20] M Chibnall, 'Matilda', ODNB.
[21] https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/grotius/
[22] B. Usher, 'John Aylmer', ODNB.

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Ludlow Castle by a rival baron. Ernalt, being a handsome man, managed to charm one of the ladies of the castle, Marion de la Bruere. So keen on Ernalt was Marion that she agreed to help him escape, when he promised he would marry her afterwards. Marion sneaked towels and sheets to the two prisoners, and sewed them into a makeshift rope or sling, in which she lowered the two men down the castle wall. The prisoners got away and Marion waited for Ernalt to come back for her. Ernalt agreed to come to her, but asked Marion to provide information about the castle's defences and measurements, and she did so. She drew up the ladder Ernalt brought with him, expecting a romantic conclusion. But Ernalt had brought an army with him, and the castle was captured, and the garrison slaughtered. Enraged, Marion killed the treacherous Ernalt, and then threw herself out of a high window, to her death.[23]

In the real world of the early fourteenth century, one of the most spectacular escapes was that of Roger de Montfort, a powerful baron and soldier, in 1323. He had fallen foul of Edward II, and had been committed to the Tower of London, Edward seems to have wanted him executed, and so Roger planned an escape. It was an ambitious and sophisticated plan, which needed help both inside and outside the Tower. Roger was well-guarded, and, to get past his guards, he drugged them with a potion which he and one of his servants concocted. The potion must have been very effective, because the guards slept through the noisy work of Roger and some helpers breaking down a wall between the room in which he was held and the adjoining room, which was the king's kitchen. They sneaked through the kitchen, through open

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[23] RS 66 Fulk Fitz Warin, ed. by S. Knight.

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doors to one courtyard, used a rope ladder to scale a wall and get into another courtyard, and finally made their way out to the River Thames, to find a boat waiting to take them away to safety.[24]

Less successful in the 'help from friends' category was the attempted escape, also in 1323, of Maurice of Berkeley from Wallingford castle. Guards were invited to a meal with him, and, while they were feasting, one of Maurice's friends, who had been allowed in to visit him, made the constable of the castle hand over its keys. Ten more friends were waiting outside, and they were let in to take over the castle. It looked as if Maurice had succeeded, but a small boy who was staying at the castle managed to let people know what was happening, and two noblemen, the Earls of Winchester and Kent, came and took the castle back for the king. Maurice was destined to spend the rest of his life locked up in Wallingford.[25]

More basic help: A fourteenth century Kent man, locked up and chained up, had the help of some friends to get out of jail. William Westacorm (?) who had been caught with stolen goods, was secured with iron chains. Four people, three men and a woman, three of them with the same surname as his, came to his rescue, with a file, and cut through his bonds, and got away.[26]

At times help from outside might be less targeted. We see this in the attacks by the 'peasants' of the Peasants' Revolt of 1381, who broke the Marshalsea prison in

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[24] Pugh, *Imprisonment*, 221; Abb. Plac 343; Chron Monas S Albani III, 145-6.
[25] Pugh, loc. cit.
[26] KB 27/313 m. 7.

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London and let the prisoners out.[27] They are unlikely to have known who it was they were letting out – that wasn't the point. The same might be true of mass breakouts of prisoners from the Marshalsea prison in 1422 and 1470.[28] And back in 1312, there was an interesting break out/break in combination, as prisoners in the Tower of London caused havoc inside the Tower grounds, and a crowd broke in from outside to rescue some prisoners.[29]

A problem might also be seen in the location of the jail – for example, it was complained in around 1315 that the remote location of the jail in Berkshire made it easy for associates of a felon to ambush the authorities attempting to take felons to the existing jail in Windsor, and to spirit such convicts away from their fate.[30]

Bribery and corruption

A simpler method of getting out of jail was – just like in Monopoly – to pay some money to a jailer. Jailers were widely suspected of taking bribes to let prisoners go. Those who allowed a prisoner to escape – by bribery or negligence – could be fined heavily or even, occasionally themselves imprisoned. Of course it might be worth the risk, if the prisoner was wealthy enough. Thus, Malcolm Fleming was a prisoner of the English after the Scots defeat at the battle of Neville's Cross, but escaped with the help of his captor, Robert Vale, rewarding Vale with land in Scotland.[31]

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[27] L. Radzinowicz and R. Hood, *A History of English Criminal Law and its Administration from 1750* (5 vols London,1948-86) V: 45; Pugh, *Imprisonment*, 223.
[28] Pugh, *Imprisonment,* 224; *RP* VI, 49-50; A Musson and E Powell, *Crime, Law and Society in the Later Middle Ages* (Manchester, 2009), 243.
[29] Pugh, *Imprisonment,* 222; Chrons Edw I and II, I, 215-8.
[30] TNA SC 8/2/67
[31] R.D. Oram, 'Malcolm Fleming', ODNB.

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Fake death

It would be wrong not to mention everyone's favourite medieval nun on the run, Joan of Leeds.[32] Joan was, it is fair to say, not cut out for convent life. Desperate to get away from Clementhorpe, she deployed a dummy to impersonate her supposedly dead body, and organised a mock funeral for herself, to get away and live a secular life (complete with carnal lust, apparently) for some time.

Another cunning and unusual ruse, which must have taken some very good acting was performed on the keeper of Cambridge jail in 1452. His prisoner pretended to be on the point of death, and about to make a dying confession. When the jailer was distracted, he ran off.[33]

In the following century, Protestant writer Robert Barnes (1495-1540) escaped persecution and house arrest in a house of Austin Friars in Northampton by writing a fake suicide note and piling his clothes by the river, to make it look as if he had jumped in. He also wrote a letter to the mayor of Northampton telling him to find his body, which had another note on it. He then dressed up as a poor man and fled via London for more Protestant-friendly shores in modern Belgium and Germany. Despite this well-executed escape, things did not end well. Barnes later returned to England, and was burned for heresy. [34]

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[32] Leyser, *Medieval Women*, 202; https://thenorthernway151149306.wordpress.com/joan-of-leeds-her-own-story/
[33] Pugh, *Imprisonment*, 246 Pardon to keeper: CPR 1446-52, 551.
[34] C.R. Trueman, 'Robert Barnes', ODNB

Opportunism

Sometimes, it was down to luck,, and taking a chance when it presented itself. In the reign of Richard I, his younger brother, John went on a bit of a rampage, and he and his army broke down Salisbury Castle. The prisoners inside could hardly believe their luck, and made a swift escape. Also taking his chance, according to a record of 1306 was a prisoner, William Dyn, breaking his bonds, as he was taken to trial at Southwark, and running off into the woods, away from the custody of the sheriff of Surrey.[35] Quick- witted and determined action can also be seen in the story of some prisoners in Winchester in 1441. A jailer's servant clearly took his mind off the job when searching the prisoners, giving them a chance to grab his keys and free themselves from their irons. After that, it was just a matter of beating up some other workers, opening the prison doors and escaping.[36]

Some medieval specialities:

(i)   An excess of chivalry

Sometimes, the jailers of a noble or royal were just a little too chivalrous for their own good. Durng the Hundrd Years War between France and England, both sides were keen to have as their ally the rulers of Flanders. Sixteen year old Count Louis of Flanders preferred the French of Philip VI to the English of Edward III. His people, however, were pro-English, and, when there was a plan for him to marry a pro-French bride, Margaret of Brabant, they kept him 'a virtual prisoner' at Courtrai. Edward III suggested that he marry one of Edward's daughters, Isabella. Louis did not like this idea, since, apart from anything else, his father had recently been killed by the English at the battle of Crecy (1346). He pretended to go along with the plan, though, and this caused his custodians to let down their guard. He was allowed to go hunting with hawks, a favourite noble pastime. With less than a week to go to his

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[35] TNA JUST 1/934 m. 21.
[36] Pugh, *Imprisonment*, 220; *CPR 1436-41*, 489.

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wedding, he asked to go hunting, went out, then rode off at full speed until he reached French controlled territory. Quite soon afterwards, he married Margaret, as he had wished.[37]

(ii) Fancied escapes

Another particularly medieval category perhaps was the fancied escape – the conspiracy theory of its day. Dead kings and leaders were rumoured to have escaped confinement – stories about Richard II, who was probably neglected to death, possibly bumped off, in the enemy stronghold of Pontefract Castle, were especially troublesome for his successor/usurper, Henry IV.[38]

Early modern developments

A lot of the same themes in escapes can be seen over both medieval and early modern periods, but one thing which changed was the global dimention. This adds interest, but also moral complication. Thus, there is an exciting story with an international backdrop in the life of sailor Miles Philips (b.c. 1554). He was at one point imprisoned by the Spanish Inquisition in Mexico, confined in a monastery, made unsuccessful attempts to escape, then got away, and with the assistance of some Native Americans and a friar, travelled to Guatemala, Cuba, Spain (where he dodged the Inquisition again) before managing to get home masquerading as a student. All very exciting and heroic, until we are reminded that the voyage which started the series of adventures, was ... in search of slaves.[39]

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[37] Packe, *Edward III*, 233.
[38] Bower VII p. 407.
[39] M. Makepeace, 'Miles Philips', ODNB

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