



Contact: Louise Stafford
Bedford Magistrates' Court.
Tel: 01234 319004

www.hmcourts-service.gov.uk

21 August 2006

JUSTICE PAST AND PRESENT

Heritage Week is coming to Bedford with a special focus on criminal justice – past and present.

Housed in the 19th century Shire Hall building, Bedford Magistrates' Court was originally home to the Assize Court – where some of the county's most notorious criminals were tried.

And as part of Heritage Week in September many of these villains will be brought back to life – thanks to a link up between local criminal justice and the Bedfordshire & Luton Archives Service.

The courthouse will host a Heritage Open Day for the public on Saturday September 9, where the Archives Service will demonstrate its Gaol Register – containing a unique photographic record of the Victorian inmates of Bedford Prison.

The courthouse will also be staging a re-enactment of a hearing that took place in Bedford Assize Court in 1872 – when 33-year-old Mary Fiddler ([see photo](#)) was sentenced for theft.

Court staff and police officers will be dressed in Victorian costume, and the case

will be heard before a judge from Luton Crown Court – with members of the audience invited to join the jury and decide the verdict. Then the public can watch a modern magistrates' court in action.

Heritage Week will offer the public an opportunity to see how much criminal justice has changed with Bedfordshire Police mounting an outdoor display to show how modern technology is helping detect and prevent crime

Organised by HM Courts Service and Bedfordshire Criminal Justice Board, the event will be held at the courthouse in St Paul's Square, Bedford, and will be open to the public between 10am and 4pm.

NOTES

The Bedford Gaol Register represents a unique catalogue of inmates at Bedford Prison during the 19th century. It was compiled after the prison governor of the day invested in the new technology of the Victorian era – photography. The register is now held as a computerised database by Bedfordshire & Luton Archives Service.

The Victorian Court will be staged at 10.30am and repeated at 12.00 and 2pm. Photography will be permitted in court on the day – but please inform the court reception that you are a media representative.

The Bedford Assizes and Shire Hall were designed as a Courthouse complex by Alfred Waterhouse and constructed in two phases in 1878 and 1881. They replaced the previous Sessions House which had occupied the St Paul's Square site since 1753. The building is a red brick and terracotta composition in Gothic style. Inside, the hall has a simply detailed hammerbeam ceiling lit by majestic perpendicular windows leading to two fine hammerbeamed court rooms (Courts 1 & 2) retaining almost all their original fittings. It is a Grade 2 listed building. Alfred Waterhouse, 1830 – 1905, is best remembered for his design of the Natural History Museum in London, but was a prolific designer of numerous public and private buildings throughout the British Isles.