

## Notes on Southwark Cyclists Healthy Ride 23/9/17

### 3 Prisons & A Ferryman's seat

start – 10.00am Peckham Square - SE15 5DT. (2hr ride flat ride )

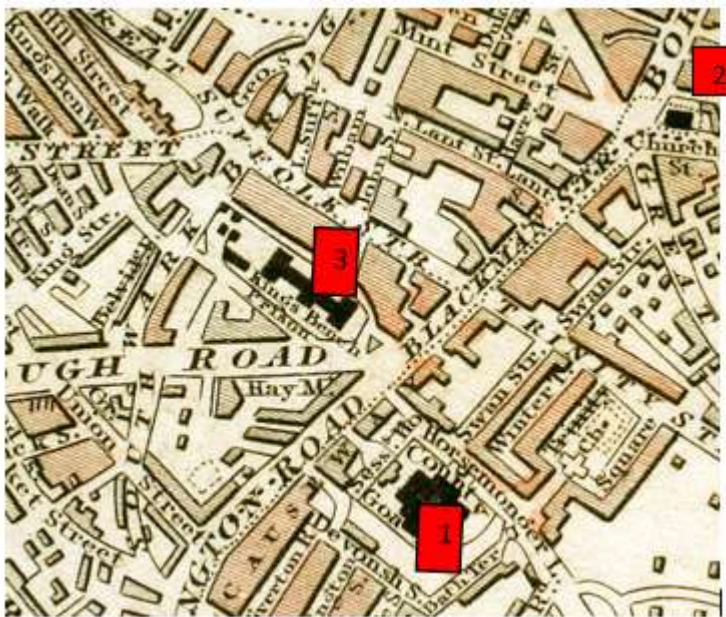
- Along Surrey canal path
- Around the back turnings to reach Burgess park
- Bagshot street
- East street
- New Kent road
- Newington Gardens (Location of Horsemonger Lane Goal)
- Angel Place (Location of Marshalsea Prison)
- Onto Bear Gardens (Location of the Ferryman's Seat)
- Scovell road (Location of Kings Bench Prison)
- Picking up Quietway 1 (Q1) back to Peckham.

The route is 9.5 miles.

Track at [www.mapmyride.com/routes/view/1760844296](http://www.mapmyride.com/routes/view/1760844296)

## Southwark History.

Southwark was settled by the Romans around 43 CE. It served as an entry point into London from southern England, particularly along Watling Street, the Roman road from Canterbury; this ran into what is now Southwark's Borough High Street and from there north to old London Bridge. The area became known for its travellers and inns, including Geoffrey Chaucer's Tabard Inn. The itinerant population brought with it poverty, prostitutes, bear baiting, theatres (including Shakespeare's Globe) and prisons. In 1796 there were five prisons in Southwark - The Clink, King's Bench, Borough Compter, White Lion and the Marshalsea—compared to 18 in London as a whole.



Map Circa 1800's

## 1 - Horsemonger Lane Gaol

Constructed between 1791 and 1799 to a design by George Gwilt the Elder, architect surveyor to the county of Surrey, this was once the largest prison in the county, and was adjacent to Sessions House, a court building also designed by Gwilt. It was built to replace the old county gaol housed at what had been the nearby 'White Lion Inn' on Borough High Street, Southwark (informally called the 'Borough Gaol') dating from the Tudor period.

Horsemonger Lane remained Surrey's principal prison and place of execution up to its closure in 1878. It was a common gaol, housing both debtors and criminals, with a capacity of around 300 inmates. In total, 131 men and four women were executed there between 1800 and 1877, the gallows being erected on the flat roof of the prison's gatehouse.

By 1859, the gaol was no longer known as 'Horsemonger Lane' following the road's change of name to Union Road (today: Harper Road), being renamed Surrey County Gaol (although its alternative name, the New Gaol, the gaol should not be confused with the New Prison, located north of the River Thames in Clerkenwell).

The gaol was demolished in 1881 and the site is today a public park, Newington Gardens.

## 2 - Marshalsea Prison

The **Marshalsea** (1373–1842) was a notorious prison in Southwark, just south of the River Thames. Although it housed a variety of prisoners, including men accused of crimes at sea and political figures charged with sedition, it became known, in particular, for its incarceration of the poorest of London's debtors. Over half the population of England's prisons in the 18th century were in jail because of debt.

Run privately for profit, as were all English prisons until the 19th century, the Marshalsea looked like an Oxbridge college and functioned as an extortion racket. Debtors in the 18th century who could afford the prison fees had access to a bar, shop and restaurant, and retained the crucial privilege of being allowed out during the day, which gave them a chance to earn money for their creditors. Everyone else was crammed into one of nine small rooms with dozens of others, possibly for years for the most modest of debts, which increased as unpaid prison fees accumulated. The poorest faced starvation and, if they crossed the jailers, torture with skullcaps and thumbscrews. A parliamentary committee reported in 1729 that 300 inmates had starved to death within a three-month period, and that eight to ten were dying every 24 hours in the warmer weather. The prison became known around the world in the 19th century through the writing of the English novelist Charles Dickens, whose father was sent there in 1824, when Dickens was 12, for a debt to a baker. Forced as a result to leave school to work in a factory, Dickens based several of his characters on his experience, most notably Amy Dorrit, whose father is in the Marshalsea for debts so complex no one can fathom how to get him out.

Much of the prison was demolished in the 1870s, though parts of it were used as shops and rooms into the 20th century. All that is left of the Marshalsea is the long brick wall that marked its southern boundary, the existence of what Dickens called "the crowding ghosts of many miserable years" recalled only by a plaque from Southwark council. "it is gone now," he wrote, "and the world is none the worse without it."



### 3 - The Kings Bench Prison

The King's Bench Prison dates back to the early 14th century and was initially intended to hold prisoners who were going through the judicial process in the King's Bench Court. It was originally sited on the east side of Borough High Street and, along with the Marshalsea, was attacked by rebels in the Peasants' Revolt and Jack Cade's rebellion. In 1561 there were 71 prisoners, 13 of these were debtors and the remainder there for misdemeanours. By 1653, the number of prisoners had risen to 393 and these were mostly debtors. Conditions were not good, in 1624 80 prisoners had died from starvation in the preceding 12 months. Complaints of extortion and overcrowding led to a Parliamentary enquiry in 1754 which found evidence of over-crowding and mistreatment. As a result, a new prison was built on St George's Fields on the west side of Borough High Street.

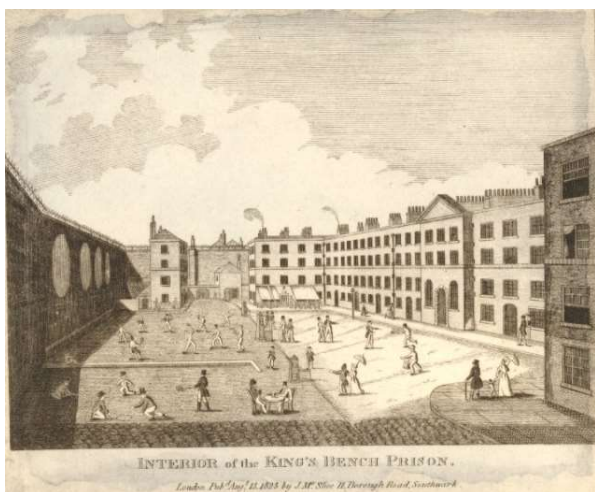
The new prison consisted of 224 rooms with eight large state-rooms and a chapel. The prison did not operate in the way prisons do today and within the prison walls there were a coffee-house, two public houses, shops and stalls for meat and vegetables. It was estimated 120 gallons of gin and eight butts of beer were drunk in a week. The grounds of the prison covered the whole of St George's Fields, an area with a circumference of approximately 3 miles, and known as "the rules". Prisoners who were able paid a sum of money to the keeper and in exchange were allowed their liberty anywhere within the "rules", even to take up a separate residence. Those with less money were able to purchase a "day pass". The system led to a Mr W Smith writing in 1776 that "Many prisoners ... occupy rooms, keep shops, enjoy places of profit, or live on the rent of their rooms a life of idleness, and being indulged with the use of a key go out where they please, and thereby convert a prison into an alms-house for their support."

The prison was burnt down by the Gordon Rioters in 1780 but was quickly rebuilt. The apparent laxness of the prison led to it being described as "the most desirable place of incarceration for debtors in England." But that was for those prisoners with money. Enforcement of the regulations could be lax but equally they could be enforced with violence. It is estimated that whilst perhaps one third of prisoners lived "in the rules", the remaining two thirds lived within the prison walls. By the early nineteenth century, the keeper received £3590 per year: £872 from the sale of beer and £2,823 from income derived from "the rules".

In 1842 the Marshalsea was closed and the running of the King's Bench, now Queen's Bench Prison, came under the jurisdiction of the Home Secretary. All payment of fees was banned and so too were all privileges. A prisoner had to support himself if he was able, those who were unable to do so were maintained by the state. An observer in 1850 wrote that the impression of prisoners "is that of pain and melancholy. Dirt and idleness, with all their attendant vices, meet the visitor at every turn."

The prison closed in 1869 when the imprisonment of debtors was ended. Scovell Road was formed and the cleared site acquired in 1879 by builder J W Hobbs where he built huge blocks of modern dwellings called Queen's Buildings. The blocks were six or seven storeys high, much higher than the previous prison buildings and walls. An entry in St George the Martyr's Annual Report of 1898 described the estate as being built over three acres of land and comprising 700 tenements, a tenement being a "suite" comprising 2, 3 or 4 rooms. The residents were described as nomadic and half the people visited by the church were no longer there seven months later. A quick look at the census shows a mix of artisans, police, the semi-skilled, and labourers. Ventilation was inadequate and the buildings blocked out the sun on every side that rendered the lower floors gloomy even on bright days. The estate suffered some bomb damage in World War II and was demolished as unfit for human habitation in 1977.

Southwark Council acquired the site and built the well-designed, low rise Scovell Road estate. Said to be a quiet and pleasant place to live, it is now part privately owned and part council rented



## The Ferryman's Seat

Located close to Shakespeare's Globe Theatre, the Ferryman's seat is quite frankly a rather unremarkable chunk of flinty stone built into the side of what is now a Greek restaurant. However, what it lacks in aesthetics it more than makes up for in both charm and history. No-one knows quite how old the seat is, but what we do know is that it was used as a resting place for the Ferryman who once operated a water taxi service across to the north side of the Thames and back. This was once a thriving trade, especially up until 1750 when London Bridge was the only other means of carrying passengers and goods across the river. Back then, the south side of the Thames was seen as a relatively lawless place filled with brothels (known then as "stews" because they doubled up as steam baths), bear-baiting rings and – yes – theatres. As a matter of fact, the seat is actually on a street called "Bear Gardens" named after the Davies Amphitheatre, the last bear baiting pit in London. It's not hard to imagine what drudgery these ferryman used to go through, dealing with umpteen rowdy patrons each and every day. Southwark was also a most unpleasant place at the time, full of open sewers and the pong of the nearby tanneries. To make matters worse, these ferryman's seats weren't exactly lazy-boys, more like hard flint perches with not much room to rest even the trimmest of buttocks!



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