**When guest house was the county gaol**

HOLIDAYMAKERS visiting Highbury House Guest House near Cardigan town centre may be oblivious to the fact that staying at the premises just over two hundred years ago would have been anything but a pleasant experience – it was the County Gaol.

The Quarter Sessions decided in 1791 to build a new county gaol in the town, on a site at the upper end of Pendre, and commissioned eminent architect John Nash to design the new facility.

Nash was paid the princely sum of £80 pounds and 19 shillings for visits to the town from Carmarthen to supervise construction work on the gaol, which opened in 1797.

Local carpenter Richard Oliver was paid £46 and six shillings for digging the foundations and supplying the timber.

The gaol comprised six day courts, six airing yards, five workshops and facilities for classification of prisoners, 22 of whom could be held in separate cells.

Alternatively 47 could be housed by placing more than one in each cell.

There was also a kitchen, an office for the gaoler, and a chapel, with a medical officer and chaplain on hand for the welfare of prisoners.

But there was no water, which had to be carried a quarter of a mile to the building.

In one of the yards was the hated treadmill, for inmates sentenced to hard labour.

In those early years the gaoler was a man by the name of William Langdon, who was paid an annual salary of £10.

Prisoners were handcuffed to a long chain and marched through the tower to the Shire Hall, where the assizes were held.

As the bedraggled inmates shuffled along Pendre and High Street, large crowds lined the streets, jeering and often throwing rotten fruit at the prisoners.

Sentences were invariably severe. A man stealing a sheep would be sentenced to death, but this could be commuted to deportation to Botany Bay in Australia – for life.

A tramp called William Andrews, who was convicted of stealing clothes at Aberporth, was sentenced to death and hanged in the gaol in 1827.

In 1879 the chairman of the Quarter Sessions announced that the gaol was to close, as the authorities felt the building was out of date, and the cost of renovating and updating it would be prohibitive.