



Devon Family History Society
Joint Project Publication with
Devon Record Office



EXETER CITY PRISON - DESERTERS IN CUSTODY

1819-1843

DRO Reference – ECA 279

DFHS Book Reference – D140

Exeter City Prison was founded in the 16th century in the South Gate, at the bottom of South Street. The keeper of the prison lived there and there were rooms for debtors and for those convicted of criminal offences. Those found guilty of misdemeanors were confined either in the House of Correction in Goldsmith Street or in Exeter City Workhouse. Influenced by the movement for penal reform, in 1819 the Chamber of Exeter built a new prison on a site at the junction of Queen Street and Northernhay Street, where the Rougemont Hotel now stands. This combined the functions of the former gaol and the house of correction, housing prisoners awaiting trial, convicted felons, those under sentence of transportation, misdemeanants, debtors and deserters from the armed services. The prison was sold in 1863 and the prisoners moved to Devon County Prison in New North Road, Exeter.

Various records were kept on prisoners in the gaol. ECA Book 279 lists prisoners in custody in date order from 1819, and at the back of the book is a section for prisoners who were deserters from the army or marines during the period 1819 to 1843. The register lists the prisoner's name and regiment and the date he was taken into custody. Although there is a column for his age, this is not filled in for those in prison prior to July 1837. The register also states the date when the prisoner left, and whether he was discharged or marched out of the city as a deserter.

It often happens with family history that an ancestor goes 'missing' and this index will be useful in tracing men who joined one of the armed forces and moved away from the family home. Once a man's regiment is established, it may be possible to find out more about his army career through service records at The National Archives.