

who escaped were recaptured, but a fair number got clear away; John Longland, the Bishop's gaoler, lost 28 prisoners in the three years 1534, 1539 and 1544. William Basiate, a convicted thief, was, therefore, clearly out of luck when he escaped in 1276; having taken sanctuary in the church he abjured the realm and made for the coast, but the Constable, Philip de Burne, possibly over-zealous, but more likely afraid of the heavy fine that might be imposed upon him, sent men in pursuit, who, catching up with Besiate, beheaded him on the spot.

As well as criminous clerks, religious dissidents were lodged at Banbury Castle. In 1415, the year of Agincourt, the Archdeacon of Oxford was ordered by the Bishop of Lincoln to hand over any Lollards to the Constable of the Castle, while during the religious troubles of Elizabeth I's reign recusants were housed there. They were better provided for than the ordinary prisoners, in fact their provisions allowance was increased in 1596 in step with rising prices – not necessarily indicative of excessive charity, of course, as they were expected to contribute to their own keep. Generally, they were leniently treated, but changes in the political-religious barometer in the latter half of the sixteenth century meant changes in the official attitude towards recusants; in quieter times parole was allowed, but in 1592, 1596 and again in 1599, letters were directed to the Constable from the Privy Council ordering him to exercise stricter vigilance over his charges. However, such restrictions were soon eased, and we find Thomas Throgmorton, detained along with fifteen other recusants “of qualitie and calling”, in 1589, regularly being allowed out on parole, either to settle some apparently recurring legal business, or, as in 1593, for five months because of ill-health. Accommodation for the recusants seems to have presented no problem until 1612, when Lady Stonor and five other gentlewomen were committed to the Castle, and a tenant, Downes, who had leased apartments there from Lord Saye and Sele, was, very much to his annoyance, turned out to make way for the ladies.

For over five hundred years Banbury Castle had pursued its un-military way, but with the outbreak of the Civil War in 1642, it entered very much into the thick of things, and it was certainly rapidly placed on a war footing, so that Joshua Sprigge, writing immediately after the second siege of the Castle in 1646, could say that it had been “recovered and revived by art and industry unto an incredible strength, much beyond many places of greater name and reputation.”