

Sitting comfortably outside the prisons Mark Leech is describing, there can be a curious feeling attached to reading the first section of *The Prisons Handbook*. Its style has a nagging familiarity: a short history of each

# Book review

**Stephanie Hayman reviews  
'The Prisons Handbook 1997/98'  
by Mark Leech (Pluto Press £45).**

establishment; the naming of the management; the listing of amenities; the advice on how to travel.... Many of us have chosen our holiday accommodation with the assistance of a similar publication and the style of Leech's book subliminally suggests that prisoners have some choice in the type of accommodation offered them; that they are able to peruse this volume and then request the billet that most appeals. This, of course, is not Leech's intention. He has set himself the task of answering the questions he himself wanted answered as he was shuffled about the prison system for twenty years. Judging by a July 1996 Instruction to Governors which he cites, it would seem that he has succeeded in ensuring that the book is available to all prisoners, but one wonders how many prisons will actively publicise its existence when so few Governors or, indeed, Boards of Visitors, bothered to respond to Leech's request for information? Part of the achievement of *the Handbook* lies in its shamefully showing - just by the fact that it is *not* produced by the Prison Service - that much of the information it includes should automatically be made available to a prisoner upon reception into a prison and that this same information should also be made available to families and friends upon request.

Leech has set himself an almost insurmountable task in attempting to chronicle the state of

our prisons, yet the accumulated data is an invaluable resource for anyone attempting to understand how - and if - our prisons work. A quick back-of-the-envelope exercise shows that a large number of institutions are difficult to reach by public transport; that many have inadequate visitors' centres; that there is considerable variation in time out of cell in each establishment; that the average evening meal is served at a time when many on the outside might be contemplating an afternoon cup of tea. Unsurprising, but needing to be repeated again and again. This, after all, is the Service that was able in March 1996 to provide cells in a newly refurbished and reopened Eastwood Park that were below the minimum recommended size. Yet it must also be remembered that inmates and staff are having to co-exist in these often intolerable conditions and a book such as Leech's is not designed to give credit to those staff battling against the odds to provide a reasonable regime.

It is obvious that this edition of *the Handbook* has taken months to prepare. Almost by definition, any publication focusing on the Prison Service and its estate is going to be out of date as soon as it appears. The constantly changing personnel, and the effect that individual Governors may have on establishments, means that what is written one month may not be an accurate reflection of either morale or regimes six months hence. The most recent Inspection Report cited for HMP Holloway is 1992, with no reference being made to the highly publicised walkout by the inspection team in December 1995, yet the preface to the *Handbook* was written in June 1997. There are irritating failures to make information provided in one section correspond to information provided in another as exemplified by page 247, where ten women's prisons are listed. Sixty-three pages later these have increased to thirteen and include one that has closed. This is not to belittle the scale of Mark Leech's achievement because what he unveils demonstrates just how far we have to go before we have a prison system that can even begin to cope adequately with the numbers being squeezed into it. Nowhere is this more evident than in the section devoted to Inspection Reports and the Prison Service's statement in response to each; the

ability to interpret critical reports as being favourable to an institution must require a special civil service skill.

The scale of the *Handbook* suggests that there might be two books fighting each other within the confines of one cover. How much more useful would it be to a prisoner - and those involved with him or her - to have the overviews of each prison perhaps expanded and released in a cheaper form? The £45 cost is prohibitive and other sections such as law, organisations and the newly incorporated forum might justifiably be provided as a separate resource.

Throughout the individual prison listings the absence of sufficient work and education is a constant theme. A look at the Parliamentary Questions listed in the annexe reveals, amongst many, the extent of the overcrowding at individual prisons and the number of mentally disordered prisoners awaiting transfer, while a further annexe lists those who have committed suicide while in custody. Unhappy conclusions will inevitably be drawn by those with the time to cross reference the vast amount of information set before them.

In each prison listing there is the opportunity for a prisoner to comment. In one, following a positive comment by the Governor about the prison's achievements in tackling drug abuse and the innovative nature of the regime, an unnamed prisoner writes: *The progressive regime does not apply to lifers who experience a reduced regime as a result. There is a lack of meaningful occupation, no evening classes ... Education is limited in scope and it is difficult to study ordinary subjects such as English...* (There is) *nothing to eat after 16.30*. At the same prison the Board of Visitors' report concludes thus: *We end by repeating a warning we have already given to the Home Secretary. You cannot buy money and staff and expect standards to remain the same*. It can only be hoped that the next report submitted by the Board of Visitors will find Jack Straw to be a more receptive Home Secretary than was Mr Howard. In providing this refracted view of the prison estate Mark Leech has done us all a service.

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