

The New Blundeston Prison

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THE NEW PRISON building programme gave rise to an urgent need for new thinking on the design of new penal establishments, and it was decided therefore that a Design and Development Group should be set up for the purposes of research and discussion into the requirements of modern penal planning which would combine matters of general principle and constructional policy, all to be considered within an economic framework of giving value for money expended.

In September 1958, the first meeting of this Group was held, consisting of representatives of the Prison Commission, Ministry of Works, and Treasury.

Resulting from the Group's discussions an entirely new design for a prison unit was evolved; the first new establishment to be wholly planned on this basis will be at Blundeston in Suffolk.

Blundeston Lodge, approximately three miles West of Lowestoft, was one of the many sites drawn to the Commissioners' attention during 1958. It is an attractive site of about 90 acres of meadows and woodland, with a large natural lake, and an old dilapidated mansion.

The site was ultimately considered suitable for the Commissioners' needs and after protracted planning meetings with the County and Local Authorities, the various objections put forward were over-

come and completion of purchase was obtained in December 1959.

A good deal of thought has been given to the siting of this new security prison for 300 men, and due regard has been made to the contours and the natural features of the landscape. The County Planning Authorities were most anxious to keep the prison buildings screened as effectively as possible from the public highway and the village of Blundeston; the latter is reputed to have associations with Dickens, and the author made it the birthplace of David Copperfield though, in fact, he called it "Blunderstone". This was naturally one of the reasons why the parishoners of Blundeston were apprehensive about a prison being adjacent to their village and its possible effect on the tourist trade. Only time will tell whether their fears are justified, but it is to be hoped that the advent of a well-laid out architecturally designed prison, with its staff housing built in the form of a modern village unit, preserving many of the existing fine trees, will prove an asset to the village of Blundeston.

The prison buildings and exercise yards, enclosed by a security perimeter, will cover an area of about $8\frac{1}{2}$ acres, and adjoining on the West side is a further enclosed compound area of about 5 acres planned for the inmates' recreation and market gardening activities.

A new tree belt is proposed to be planted around the North and West sides of this compound to form a screen for the staff housing area, which has been planned in the North-West corner of the site and giving direct access to the public road leading eastwards to the village and southwards to Lowestoft.

65 houses will be provided for staff; those for basic grade officers will include six quarters of four-bedroom type for officers with larger families.

A modern, well-designed hostel for eight bachelors, together with an Officers' Mess, will also be incorporated in the layout.

The prison itself will be sited in the North-East corner of the estate, conveniently situated in relation to the existing agricultural cottages, barn and walled garden, which will form the nucleus of a small farm unit necessary to work the remaining land outside the security area.

The large natural lake running from East to West on the southern side of the site drains out to the Oulton Broads, and it is visualised that a good deal of work for inmates can be found in cleaning the lake of weeds and silt, and opening up the inlet and outfall channels; this will not only improve the landscape, but will stabilise the flow and levels of the water.

Blundeston Prison will not have the traditional, high surrounding security wall, which is not only extremely costly to build, but is considered unnecessary for security during the day-time when prisoners

are under adequate supervision. At night-time the security of the prison will be contained within the main prison block where the standards of physical security are designed to be much higher than in our existing prisons.

Consequently, in place of the security wall it has been decided to surround the $8\frac{1}{2}$ acres of prison building area with a 12 ft. high security fence, constructed of reinforced concrete posts at 8 ft. centres with a "hockey-stick" overhang at the top. The 8 ft. bays will be covered with strong expanded steel mesh galvanised panels, securely fixed to the posts at the sides, and to a continuous concrete kerb at ground level. The "hockey-stick" overhang will be covered with stout chain link meshing, with an added inner security measure of Dannert barbed wire coils.

Running around the outside of this security fence will be left a 15 ft. wide walkway, round which an 8 ft. high opaque fence will be built to provide privacy for the inmates working or exercising in the yards or compound.

So much for the general layout of the site. I will now turn to the design and planning of the prison itself.

The security core of the prison has been designed from the point of view of providing good prison administration embodying efficient inmate control. To meet these conditions, all accommodation regularly used by prisoners outside working hours, such as classrooms, chapels, association, gymnasium, dining rooms etc., have been planned as a contiguous unit to the

four cell blocks, thus forming a secure group of buildings where all evening activities can be carried out under conditions of full security and supervision by the minimum number of staff.

This group of buildings is based on an "H" plan, as is clearly shown on the photograph of the model herein. The ground floor, which is entered from the exercise yards at the ends of the four legs of the "H", provides separate bathing facilities for each cell block unit of 76 men, together with association and quiet rooms for each unit. The linking corridors on the ground floor lead to the large combined assembly hall and gymnasium—common to all cell blocks—and the spine of the "H" block consists entirely of classrooms, hobbies rooms and the central library.

A single-storey annexe attached to the South side of the central security block provides the punishment cell accommodation, also the oil-fired boiler plant for the whole institution.

On the first floor, over the central classroom block and approached by a staircase at each end, is the main kitchen, with four separate dining rooms conveniently situated to serve the four cell blocks. The same staircases continuing up to the second floor provide access to the Church of England and Roman Catholic chapels.

In each of the four security cell blocks, sited at the four corners of the "H" unit, the sleeping accommodation on the first and upper

floors is reached from the ground floor by a separate staircase.

The unique feature of these three-storey cell units is that the long, nave-like wings of our existing Victorian prisons, generally four or five storeys high, have been discarded in favour of small, self-contained floors, "T" shaped in plan, of which each arm has a maximum of ten cells only, arranged five each side of a central corridor which is closed at the end by a steel security gate.

The two top floors of each cell block have in one arm of the "T" a dormitory for eight men, plus one cell, instead of a unit composed entirely of cells. These dormitories are each provided with night sanitation.

At the junction of the arms of the "T" on each floor are the ablution rooms with a hot and cold water service and sanitary accommodation adjoining.

The benefits from such an arrangement are that by breaking the number of cells down into small units within their own wings, a more efficient control and supervision of the inmates is provided; also, central heating and ventilation of these short wings can be more effectively and satisfactorily provided than in the high open wings of our existing prisons, with their draughts, noises, smells and poor natural lighting. In fact, the new cell block has a "domestic" feeling, perhaps more like the atmosphere of a modern, small hospital wing, but with full security provided in an inconspicuous manner.

An added new feature designed to give even closer supervision is the proposal to experiment with closed circuit television, which will give screen vision of all movement taking place within the corridors of the cell blocks.

The cells themselves have been very carefully re-designed, based on experiments carried out in special "mock-up" cells set up near Horseferry House. The cells of our existing old prisons were designed for the occupant to work, eat and sleep in, and it was decided at Blundeston that, provided the size of the cell was adequate for sleeping and equipped for reading and writing during the relatively few hours between "locking up and lights out", a cell smaller than the traditional type would be sufficient.

After much consideration and experiment, the final cell size has been designed to the dimensions of 8 ft. 3 in. \times 7 ft. 1½ in. \times 7 ft. 6 in. in height. Special built-in cell furniture has been designed to fit snugly between the walls, thus giving a clear and unrestricted floor space in the centre of the cell; in fact, there is no "dead" or unusable floor space, and all that unoccupied by wall furniture is available for movement. The result is that even though we have a smaller cell than hitherto, the occupant's impression is one of increased spaciousness.

As a good percentage of the buildings in a prison is given over to cellular accommodation, the new cell design has resulted in a considerable saving in overall costs—not only without material loss of living space, but in fact, as will be seen from the following details, with improvements in the cell amenities.

To make the cell even more of a habitable room rather than a place

of incarceration, not only will pastel shades of hard gloss paint be spattered on the walls, but the old small cell windows have been replaced with larger ones of more domestic appearance, and incorporating pivot-hung opening sections. Guard bars to the windows have also been eliminated, as the latter have now been designed with manganese steel strip insets welded to the mild steel frames and sash members, and are therefore virtually impossible to cut through without special tools and considerable labour.

A recessed steel-plated wall unit is mounted over the head of the cell bed and combines, on the corridor side, the "observation eye", cell bell indicator and the cell electric light switch, plus a holder for the inmate's record card.

It is worth mentioning that the new cell can accommodate one person only and cannot be used for three inmates, thus the present unfortunate but necessary measure the Commissioners are forced to resort to in some of our existing prisons will no longer be possible in this new establishment.

Cell doors will be flush metal-faced, and made as light as possible for handling by means of a hollow core constructed with special timber blocking pieces. Over each cell door a ventilator grille is provided, designed to provide adequate air changes and ventilation. Cell heating is by low pressure hot water pipes fed from the central oil-fired boiler plant.

The workshop accommodation has been planned outside the closed security section of the prison, but as prisoners will only be passing to and from the shops at times when the prison is fully staffed, it was considered that supervision would

be adequate and did not merit the additional expense of linking up with the main buildings.

The workshop wing consists of five main shops, one of which may be divided and used for painters vocational trade training, and the balance of shops will be for production work such as tailoring and woodworking.

There will also be a laundry, a Works' engineers' store and workshop, and a large central stores building for the Steward.

Sufficient space will be left for further development of workshop accommodation within the area, should this ever be required.

A separate, single-storey 16 bed hospital of modern design is also being provided inside the prison security area, and is sited near the main administration wing for the establishment. This again is designed to a "T" plan, and the stem of the "T" provides accommodation for the Medical Officer, typist and records, and for general daily "out-patients" services such as dental treatment, eye-testing, daily sick parades, minor dressings and dispensary. The other wing includes eight single cells, and an eight-bed general ward, with baths, lavatories, hospital stores and staff rooms. There is also a 28 ft. long, deep verandah for bed patients who can be wheeled out for fresh air and sunshine.

The final building to be described is the main administration and entrance block. It is worth noting that the forbidding entrance gate block, set in the high prison security wall of our existing prisons, is to be a thing of the past. Blundeston has been designed (as will future prisons) with a dignified two-storey entrance block built

into the surrounding security boundary of the prison, and fronting the main entrance driveway.

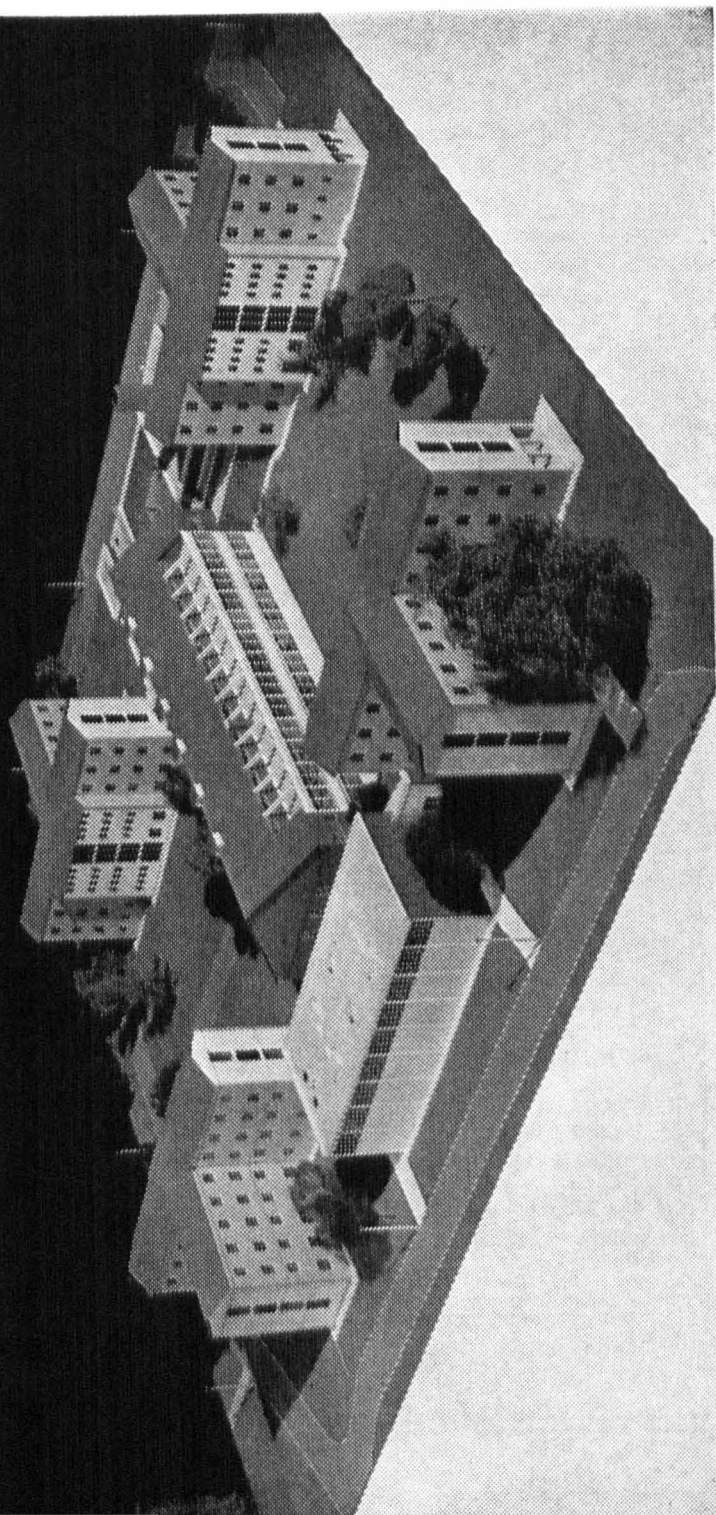
The gateway for vehicles passing in and out of the establishment will be discreetly situated in a splayed side wing at the end of the entrance block. Adjoining this gateway but set in the main facade of the entrance block will be the main entrance for the public visiting the prison, and for the visits of prisoners' relatives and friends. They will consequently not have to enter the actual security of the prison.

The public entrance is through an outer lobby where enquiries can be made of the Gate Officer, who will also control the side gate for vehicles. From here the visitor passes to a well-designed entrance hall off which, on the one side, is a large waiting room for those visiting prisoners, and on the other side is a smaller waiting room for those wishing to see the Governor or other officials.

Adjoining the waiting room is accommodation for open visits, at the end of which are the closed visiting boxes and two rooms for solicitors' consultations.

The remainder of the ground floor, to which no access is available except from inside the main prison, provides the prisoners' reception accommodation and photographic studio, planned to give an easy and logical flow through the various stages of the reception procedure.

An inner ground floor hall contains the main staircase leading up to the first floor, where the Governor's office and other administrative offices are situated. Also on this floor is the Visiting Committee room, staff rest room and senior staff meeting room.



A Model of the New Blundeston Prison.

It will be of interest to know that the Prison Commissioners are carrying out experiments in conjunction with the Ministry of Works and a firm of radar engineers on the possible use of a detector system, either around the security fence or at all external exits from the prison buildings; this would give warning in a central control room of the approach of anyone either seeking to enter the prison from outside, or trying to escape from inside.

In conclusion, it can be said that when Blundeston Prison has been completed, it will be the first English prison to be built in the 20th Century which embodies all the Commissioners' and Ministry of Works' most up-to-date thinking on the design and construction of

penal buildings, where better planning and design, new security measures, modern heating and sanitation all play their part. This is intended to be the prototype of all new security establishments to be built in the foreseeable future, but if phasing of the programme permits, further improvements will be made in later new establishments if, in the light of experience at Blundeston, any chinks in the armour become apparent.

Certainly in Blundeston the Commissioners will have provided an establishment worthy of the maximum efforts of all staff who will work there, and where the concept of Rule 6 of Prison Rules, 1949, can be fully implemented and maintained.

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