Mayhew on London Prisons

HENRY MAYHEW'S *London Labour and the London Poor* in which, it was said, "the respectable portion of the world were for the first time made acquainted with . . . the poorer world of London, of which the upper classes knew comparatively nothing" has achieved the status of a classic. First appearing just over a century ago, in the 1850's, it is still widely read to-day although usually in an abridged form. It was published in five volumes. The first three volumes dealt with "The London Street Folk . . . who daily earn an honest livelihood in the midst of destitution" and the fourth, "Those That Will not Work", dealt with the prostitutes, thieves, beggars and swindlers "who prey upon the health and the property of others". These volumes, or at least excerpts from them, are familiar both to students and the general reader. The fifth volume, completing the series, entitled "The Criminal Prisons of London and Scenes of Prison Life" is however much less well known, although no less fascinating. The first edition (1862) contains in addition to the text over a hundred illustrations, of which a number are reproduced here.

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In this volume Mayhew set out to provide "a complete account of the Criminal Prisons of London, compiled, like the preceding portions of the work, from actual investigations, mostly made within the walls, or supplied by the officers connected with them". He excluded from his survey both Political or State Prisons such as the Tower and the Strong-room of the House of Commons, and also Civil or Debtors' Prisons such as the Queen's Bench and Whitecross Street. This left him with, apart from the Lock-ups or Police Cells and the Hulks at Woolwich, ten establishments. These were, Pentonville, Millbank, Brixton, Holloway, Coldbath Fields, Tothill Fields, Wandsworth, Clerkenwell, Newgate and the Horsemonger Lane Jail. Our reproductions have been selected from the illustrations to the chapters dealing with prisons which are still in use to-day and the text refers to them in the main. At that time Pentonville was a Convict Prison "for transports and 'penal service' men" and Brixton was the Female Convict Prison. Holloway was the City House of Correction and Wandsworth the Surrey House of Correction, both handling short-term prisoners serving up to a maximum of two years. A century ago Wandsworth was a "pleasant and countrified spot" where "the stranger might fancy himself miles away from the Metropolis" because it was "so thoroughly primitive and half desolate", and at the back of Holloway prison lay "some beautiful green meadows and fields of arable land". Brixton on the other hand was set "in the peculiar suburban regions of London where the houses are excruciatingly

genteel" and the description of the "cold and gloomy streets" around Pentonville is not very remote from the reality of to-day.

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It is interesting to see that the pictures of hooded men and veiled women under the Separate system, of prisoners operating the crank and the tread wheel or picking oakum with which the book is so lavishly illustrated are presented as symbols of "modern philanthropy". "It is scarcely necessary" runs the preface "to point out the great contrast which the prisons of the present day present to those of the past century and the early part of the present". As a matter of fact although Mayhew thought the masks gave "a kind of tragic solemnity to the figures", he regarded them as "a piece of wretched frippery and as idle in use as they are theatrical in character"; but he was on the whole favourably impressed by what he saw. His main criticisms of the system—and they have a familiar ring to present day students—relate to recidivism and the work situation in prisons. He cites figures from the Fifth Report of the Inspectors of Prisons for the Home District in which he says that "the old-jail birds so far from being either reformed or deterred from future offences are here shown continually to return to the prisons throughout the country". A major factor he believed was that the system made labour a punishment to the criminal. So far from imprisonment with hard labour "serving to eradicate the antipathy of the criminal to industrious pursuits, it tends rather to confirm him in his prejudice against regular labour" said Mayhew. "'Well' says the pickpocket to himself on leaving prison, 'I always thought working for one's living was by no means pleasant; and after the dose I have just had, I'm blest if I an't *convinced* of it'". If we wished to inculcate habits of industry Mayhew thought this could not be done by making labour "a scourge" but rather by rendering it agreeable and also, by means of the 'mark' system, making it the means of liberation of the prisoner. He had little time for the view, very popular then, expressed by the Chaplain at Pentonville, that "God alone can give good principles and good motives by his Spirit". He didn't deny that supernatural conversions of men from wickedness to righteousness occasionally took place but he said by this approach "we produce a thousand canting hypocrites to one *real* convert".

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Nevertheless the chief attraction of the book lies not in the general discussions of penal policy nor the tables of statistics, which Mayhew admitted to be unreliable, but in the manifest veracity and the vividness of the reporting. In sharpness of observation and the selection of significant detail as well as skill in presentation few writers before or since have equalled Mayhew. He was a persistent and assiduous visitor. He turned out at 5 a.m. with "the cold March morning winds blowing so sharp in the face

as to fill the eyes with tears" to witness the departure of prisoners from Pentonville to Portsmouth and he was still at the prison at 10p.m. in the warders' mess "where we found another officer raking out the remains of the mess-room fire for the night". He talked with everyone from officials like the chief warder at Wandsworth ("a noble specimen of a prison officer. Though in mature life and his hair silvered he is a man of great energy and intelligence") to the countless prisoners whom he visited in their cells carefully recording their stories. It is notable that he didn't make the mistake not uncommon even amongst present day social scientists of romanticizing the prisoners whilst presenting the staff as a homogeneous mass of forbidding ciphers. Members of staff at all levels spoke quite freely to him and many were remarkably enlightened and compassionate in their attitudes. Thus the Lady Governor or Superintendent of Brixton speaking of the women on ticket-of-leave says, 'We have sent away altogether upwards of 200 women on ticket-of-leave and only four have come back and even with those four we can hardly believe them to be guilty: the police are so sharp with the poor things . . . The police are very severe with them I think; and I can't help feeling an interest in the wretched creatures, just as if they were children of my own."

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To read a book like this is a useful corrective to those sentimental chronicles which make nonsense of the history of prisons by considering them in a vacuum without regard to their contemporary social context.

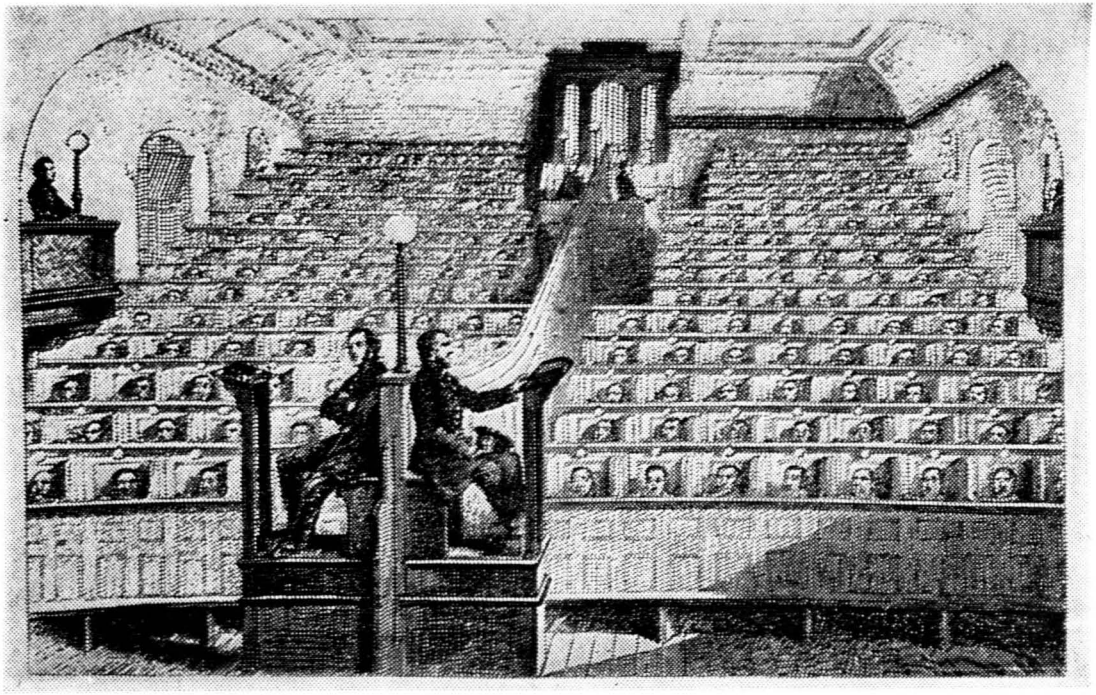
It is true that conditions were frequently harsh and Mayhew does not hide this. He was present at adjudications in most of the prisons he visited and always made a point of visiting the punishment or dark cells. In Wandsworth he found, in one of them "a little girl of twelve years of age . . . who had been singing in her cell against the prison rules . . . She was drumming in passionate mood at the door of her cell, with only one garment wrapt round her, and her blue prison clothes torn into a heap of rags by her side. After we left, she continued to beat the door in a violent manner . . . From her card we found she was under confinement for picking pockets." On the third day of his visit he returned to see the girl again, and found her "reading a book . . . quiet and subdued in her manner' She had been subjected to a punishment of bread and water for two days". It is notable that Mayhew who is clearly a man of warm human sympathies reports all this quite dispassionately with none of the sentiment or "tears stinging our eyes" which, by contrast, the Convict Nursery at Brixton had provoked in him. Yet if one reads the earlier volumes of *London Labour and the London Poor* with their detailed descriptions of the conditions under which the *honest* poor of London were living at the time it is not difficult to understand why the author found much to admire in the London prisons. It is not without significance that the most troublesome of the women convicts at Brixton (an establishment which Mayhew

goes out of his way to commend—"all at Brixton was done more gently and feelingly and yet no less effectually, than at other prisons") were those who had been sentenced to transportation just prior to the passing of the Act which substituted imprisonment in this country for expatriation. Some of them had pleaded guilty merely in order to get sent abroad. Their reaction when they became aware that they were not going to be transported is described in the report of the Directors of Convict Prisons as follows: "Disappointment rendered them thoroughly reckless; hope died within them; they actually courted punishment; and their delight and occupation consisted in doing as much mischief as they could. They constantly destroyed their clothes, tore up their bedding, smashed their windows and threatened the officers with violence . . ." Prison historians who regale their readers with stories of the horror and inhumanity of transportation usually neglect such details as this.

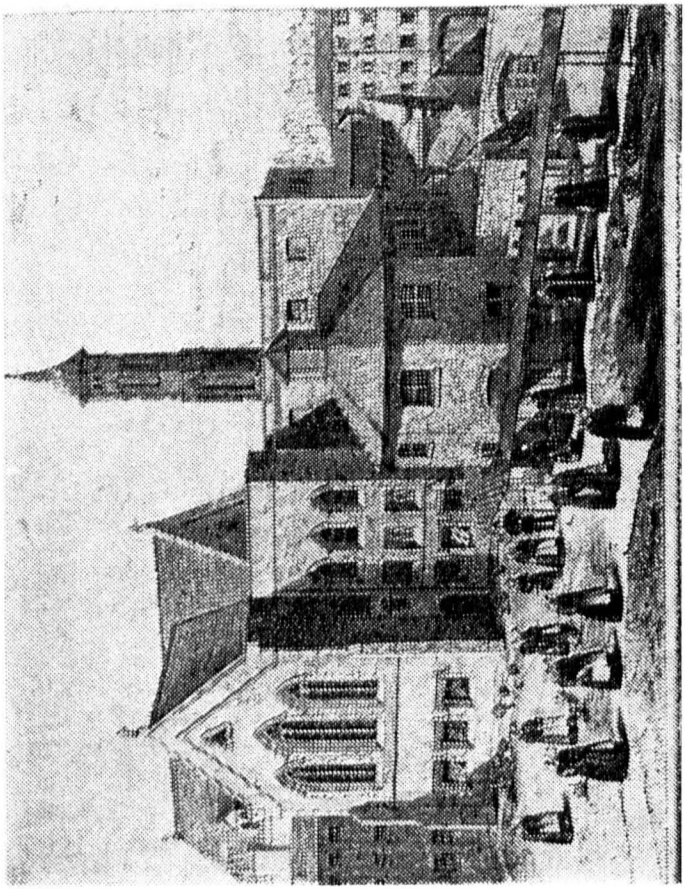
GORDON HAWKINS

Male Convict at Pentonville Prison.

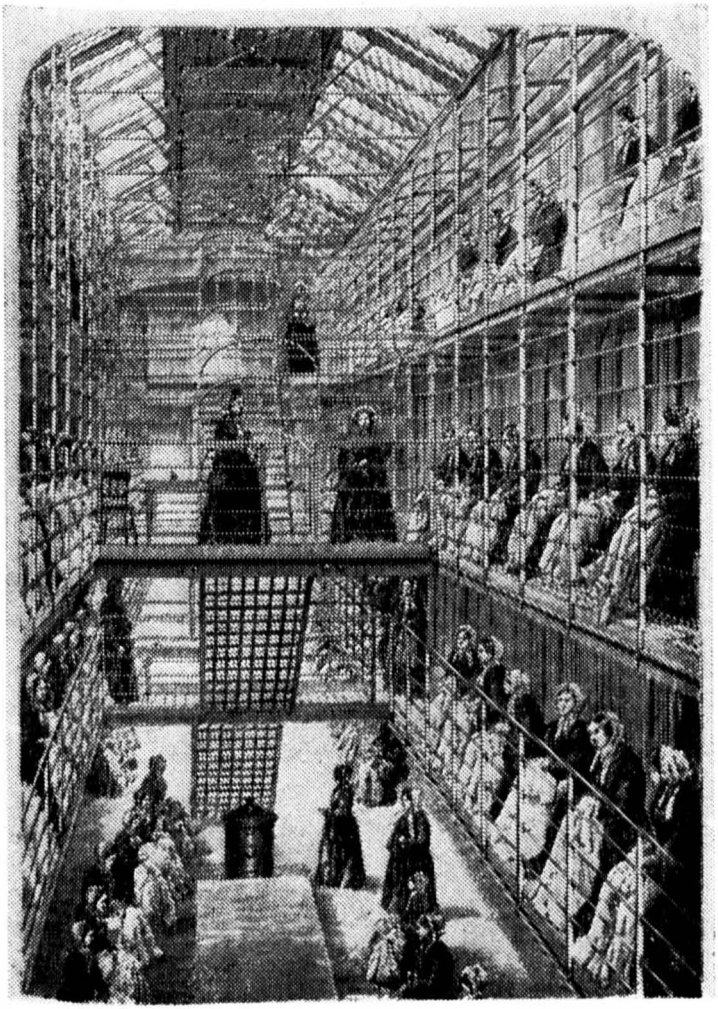
Chief Warder at the Pentonville Prison.



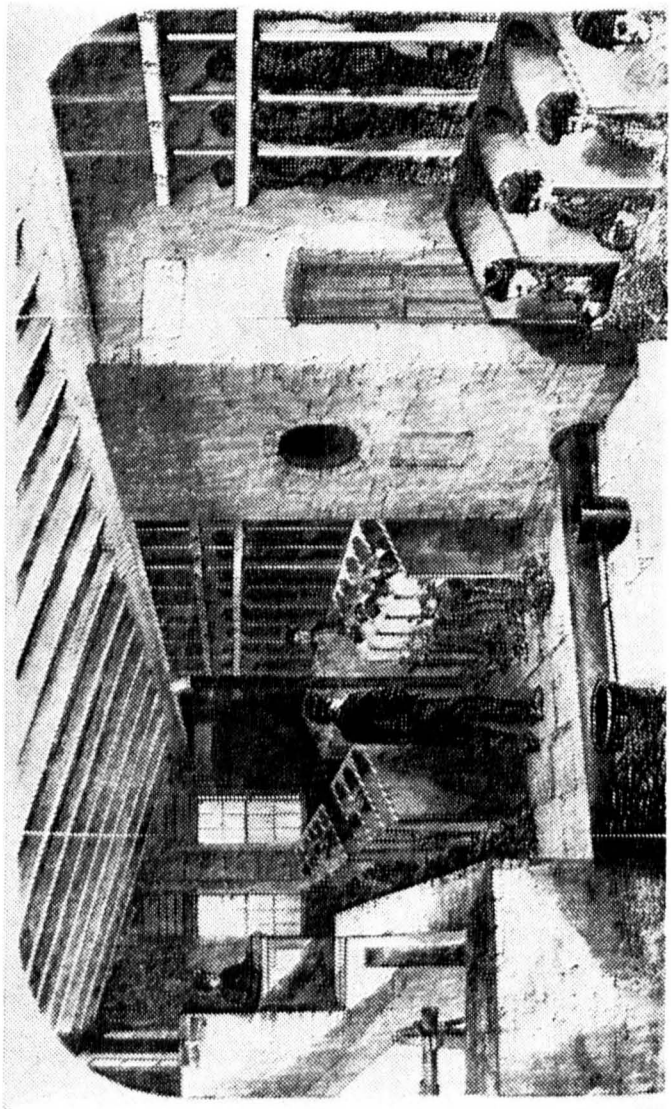
The Chapel, on the "separate system," in Pentonville Prison, during divine service



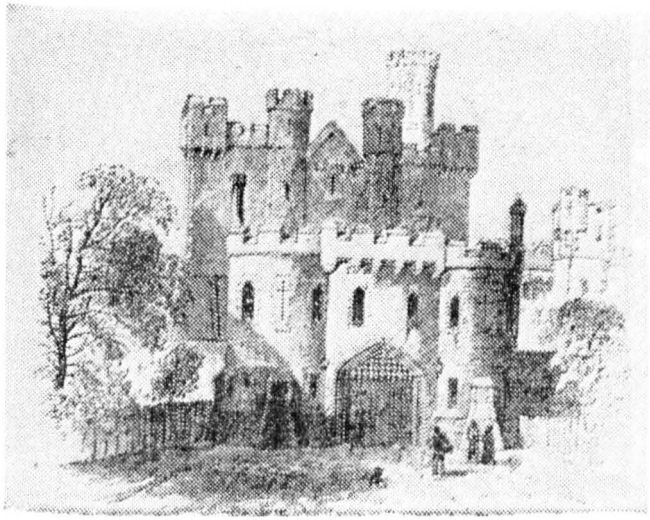
Female Convicts exercising in the airing yard at Brixton Prison.



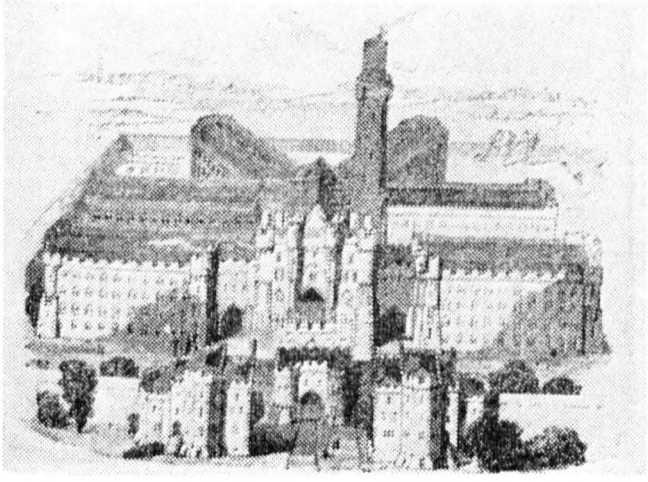
Female Convicts at work, during the silent hour, in Brixton Prison.



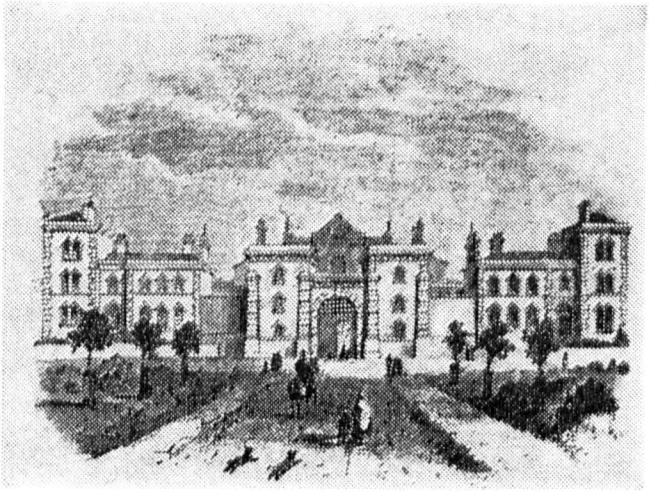
Tread-wheel and Oakum-shed at the City Prison, Holloway.



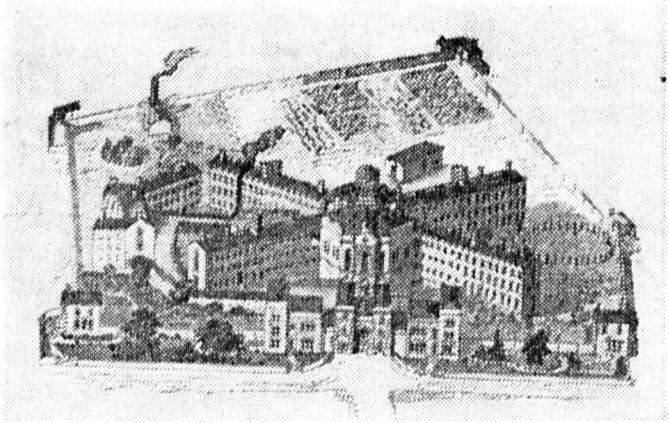
Outer gate at the City House of Correction, Holloway.



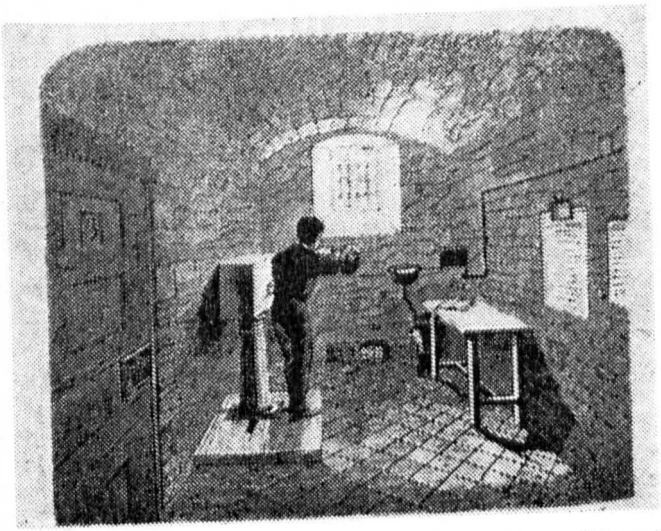
Bird's eye view of the House of Correction for the City of London, Holloway.



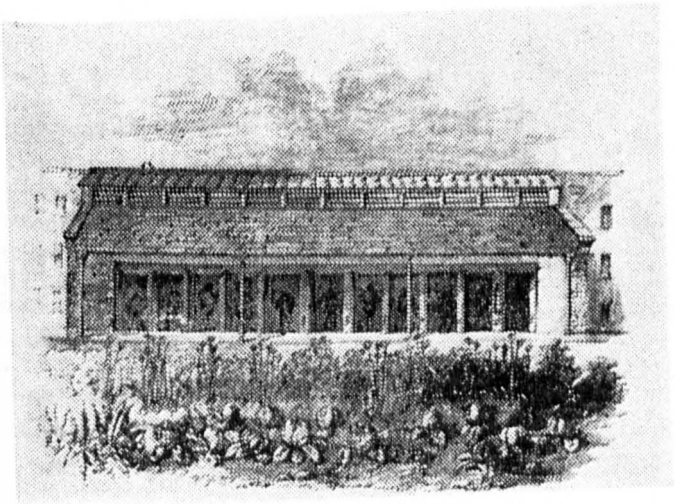
Exterior of the Surrey House of Correction at Wandsworth.



Bird's eye view of the Surrey House of Correction at Wandsworth



Cell, with prisoner at "crank-labour" in the Surrey House of Correction.



Pump-room at Wandsworth Prison.