

# Experiment in Holloway

## *A New Approach to Prison Visiting*

This is an account written by a student on his participation in the work of Holloway and it has been thought to be of such general interest that Mr. Sturges was asked whether he would be willing to agree to its publication in the Journal.

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TOWARDS THE END of the summer term in 1962, a cryptic note was circulated among members of the Oxford student society "Crime—a Challenge." It contained an invitation to come and hear something about "working in a penal institution" during the coming vacation.

It sounded a little forbidding, but intriguing none the less, and I went along to be enlightened. Less than a dozen others were there. It was the Reader in Criminology who put us in the picture. The "penal institution" turned out to be Holloway prison for women. This immediately dispelled all thoughts of becoming temporary prison officers; and it soon became clear that "working" had been a little misleading.

There was, we were told, one small wing in the prison where the staff had been experimenting with a relatively permissive approach. This wing contained girls who had failed to meet the

requirements of their licence after release from borstal. Two or three years earlier the Governor and the Senior Psychologist had applied the techniques of group-counseling to the wing, in a determined attempt to face and fight the difficulties which threatened permanent damage to the lives of these girls. (Similar techniques are being practised in certain other prisons and borstals elsewhere in the country).

On four mornings a week a community meeting was held attended voluntarily by the girls, together with the psychologist, all available officers, and occasional outsiders. The purpose of this was to bring to the surface all kinds of problems, feelings, ideas; and the meetings were sometimes very lively.

We gathered that this realistic attitude, this directness, showed itself in many other ways. There were separate meetings of smaller

groups. A girl could at any time have a private chat with the psychologist. A committee of inmates was elected each month, to look after various matters in the wing. The staff, while still commanding discipline and respect, had bridged the remoteness which would have blocked the progress of the experiment.

In short it seemed that the whole approach was positive and personal; and the authorities felt that it might be valuable to the inmates and a help to the staff if a few students went to join the girls informally in some of their free time. Within a few weeks five or six of us met the Governor and her senior colleagues; and in due course we found ourselves behind bars.

It was one Sunday afternoon in August that I went into Holloway for the first time. With me was another student, Jonathan, whom I had previously seen only at those two preliminary meetings.

We find it hard to believe now, but we were an apprehensive pair that afternoon. It was not unlike the feeling a lion-tamer must have at the beginning of his first practical lesson. Indeed, my first vivid impression, once inside those massive gates, was of the two huge stone dragons which glare down at you as you walk towards the main block.

We went in at about 3.30, and were taken across to E wing, the Borstal Recall Wing. I vaguely imagined girls eyeing us with a cold

curiosity, making no move to get to know us. I visualised the two of us trying hard to appear at ease, as we hung in a corner mumbling rather sheepishly to one another.

A friendly senior officer showed us over the wing. There were very few girls to be seen. We had time to get the feel of the place—long, high and hard; a cold, enduring structure of stone, steel and wire. We could hear loud voices emanating from a television set over in a corner room; now and again came a burst of even louder female laughter, or a chorus of derisive groans.

It was soon suggested, admittedly not by us, that we go in and join the girls. It was a small, dark, stuffy room; about thirty heads, perhaps not so many, were intent on the Sunday film, which it is one of their privileges to watch. Our entrance was ignored, apparently. The film became interesting . . . "got a light, mate?" "Yes, sure." "Ta."

As soon as the film was over, they all scrambled out to queue for their tea. Jonathan and I went to the officers' room, where there was a pot of tea and a pile of beef sandwiches for us. We had little to say to each other yet. Before long we were back in the television room, this time to sit through a Western and a children's hour serial. Soon after six the set was switched off again. Everyone went down to the ground floor, to set up the record player and clear a space for dancing. I found myself playing table-tennis with Jonathan and a

couple of girls. A few others drifted in to watch us play. No skill, no concentration. The ball was finding it curiously easy to hit people, and to lose itself behind the heaps of dismantled car-batteries. Our names were being passed around. There were snatches of shy joking and whispering.

When the game was finally over, I wandered into the next room and was soon twisting with one or two, usually two, of the girls. Jonathan was dancing too. How self-conscious we both felt; we were attracting several pairs of eyes and a good deal of thinly-concealed amusement. After an hour's dancing I had picked up a few names, and asked and answered some of the obvious questions: "What do you think of this place?," "Do you live in London?," and so on.

All too soon it was 7.30 and time for us to go. The girls went up to their cells: "Cheerio! . . . Thanks for coming . . . See you next week." We collected our things. Thanks for coming! It was obvious that we were both exhilarated. My heart was thumping, and Jonathan's hand shook as he lit his cigarette. I remember the way we talked, once outside the prison: "Did you dance with the dark-haired one in green?" . . . "What was the name of that pretty one with the tattoo?" . . .

Four or five Sundays came and went. Each time there was the same pattern of events, but each time it was easier to relax—to hear the records but listen to them as well;

to look around and notice things going on, while at the same time chatting to someone; to talk naturally, not trying to cover up traces of an educated voice.

About the sixth time, Jonathan was ill, and I went alone. It surprised me how at ease I felt.

There are usually between 25 and 30 girls in the wing; sometimes considerably fewer. All have of course been to borstal at least once, and a number have been through approved schools as well. This means that some have spent many years "inside." One told me that she was going to spend Christmas at home for the first time in five years.

We seldom get to know exactly why they are in Holloway, but the psychologist who ran the wing told us of the frightful domestic and environmental problems with which some of the girls have had to cope. And sometimes a girl will chat freely about the sort of life she has been leading, and how she originally got into trouble.

During the evening free time some will be dancing with great gusto (often without a partner), or shouting at someone, or coming up to us with a joke or a witty remark. A small group may be thoughtfully working out the latest dance-steps, as explained over Radio Luxembourg, while others sit around in small groups, doing nothing. Some will be up in their cells, or chatting to an officer, or busy with odd jobs around the wing. Altogether we

have ample opportunity for mixing and talking.

Their clothes are limited mainly to red, blue or green shapeless cotton dresses and cardigans, yet somehow they all manage to look different. They emphasise their individuality by producing different hairstyles almost every week. Length, style or colour can be so drastically altered that it may take some time to recognise the girl underneath. Other decorative effects include the daubing of eyes and eyebrows with real and makeshift cosmetics, and the patterning of hands and arms with inky lines and self-inflicted cuts.

By the end of the vacation we had spoken with most of those in the wing and we found them far more open and friendly than we ever expected. There are, of course, great fluctuations in the atmosphere. Sometimes the girls are lively and talkative, sometimes very heavy and depressed, sometimes neither one thing nor the other. If one of the more popular girls, who is something of a leader, has got into trouble, the effect on the wing is a kind of emotional caving-in; and everybody looks fed up and bored. At times like this they do not resent our coming, but simply have little to say.

The general tension of the place is most clearly illustrated by the noise. There is nearly always a raised voice somewhere in the building, more often cheerful than angry. The girls always want the record-player several decibels

higher than the officers can be expected to bear. Not infrequently, just to break this tension, a girl will "smash up"—push her fist through a pane of glass or damage something in her cell. It is alarming to hear the off-hand way in which they refer to this.

At the same time they do comfort and help each other: and then they can be so sympathetic. Whenever I see this, it shocks me to think of the unspoken myth that all criminals are cold and heartless. What we are doing is to transfer the epithets befitting these awful buildings to the people we put inside them.

I am not sentimentalising the young delinquent. I am fully aware that we may well be dealing with someone who has committed a vicious crime, feels no guilt, shows no shame, is hard, scornful, aggressive, rebellious; whose immaturity and inadequacy is hidden behind a facade of ostentatious insolence; and who makes you feel that your offer of friendship is futile. My concern is simply to show that there is a great deal more to be said.

Indeed, E wing is full of surprises: some of the girls are highly intelligent; and I never anticipated a flourishing art class, or conversations about opera or the paintings of Georges Braque. Generally their repartee is sharp and their wit quick, and they never miss a thing.

We soon learnt the need for complete honesty. And I mean

more than just telling the truth. Whatever we were – solemn, sleepy, shy, square, scatterbrained – we had to be ourselves, which really *is* almost as easy as it sounds.

We gained nothing by trying to adjust our personalities so as to make them “go down better” with the girls. Actually I am perfectly sure, after seeing quite an assortment of students in the wing, that however odd his face, voice, clothes, a person will soon be warmly accepted – provided he remains his natural self.

It is certainly true that for the first few weeks the girls were asking themselves why we had bothered to come; and they did not hesitate to ask us why. But it did not take them long to get used to the idea, unfamiliar though it was, that we were neither sociologist investigators, nor surreptitious psychologists, nor even enterprising journalists: They accepted the fact that we simply liked coming.

Jonathan and I were soon being asked all sorts of personal questions. The girls are genuinely interested in the sort of lives we lead and the outlooks we have. The curiosity that remains does not contain the element of suspicion that was present at the beginning; it is of a more pleasant, relaxed kind. “Is that your only pair of trousers?” “What are you studying for?” “What’s your girl-friend like – is she nice?” “That college where you are; do you have many rules and that?”

Conversation is easy and amusing. It is not often that one is called upon to explain the distinction between Oxford and Oxford Street, or has the privilege of a first-hand account of the techniques of soliciting in modern Soho.

Because they are shut away from a normal life, and see very few men, one or two are liable to take male visitors a little too seriously. It is possible to hurt a girl’s feelings by quite inadvertently talking to her less than the previous week. It is important not to confine one’s attention to any particular girl, not to be continually occupied with the bolder and brighter personalities. Circumstances could cause an infatuation to spring up in no time.

We know that we have been the cause of one or two minor upsets. But this by no means makes us regret our visits; on the contrary, it makes us all the more anxious that this kind of visiting should be an established thing, and not an occasional event causing surprise, amusement or even excitement.

There is a great deal of loneliness among people in prison: the numerous close friendships formed between inmates must not obscure this important fact. This loneliness is probably most marked in those who have led lives of prostitution. Often such girls have never known a steady relationship with a man; or they have been bitterly disillusioned. Some are pregnant and utterly alone. There are girls of seventeen or eighteen who have

had to give away a baby. Others get letters telling them that boy-friends have gone off with other girls, or that mothers or relatives will not have them back this time.

Which do we honestly believe to be more helpful to a girl with such deep emotional problems? To shut her away from society, in this most atypical of communities, or to allow her contact with people from the real world? Are there not a great many of us who tend to forget that the delinquent in custody is a real person with very real needs?

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From time to time there is raised in public the eager cry that we must cut our prison population. We are reminded of the overcrowding; we are reminded of the uselessness of sending the inadequate offender behind bars again and again; and we are called upon to build better prisons, to enlarge the possibilities of the probation system, and generally to show greater imagination.

It would be a sad thing if such voices were never heard. The trouble is that it is pointless simply to call for more probation, more psychiatric treatment, when our probation officers are already grossly overburdened and our mental hospitals under severe pressure for accommodation.

And yet I think it can be shown that there is a still more serious weakness in this apparently sound approach—a weakness that is fundamental. It is easy to have in

front of you the various alternatives to imprisonment that are recognised today, and to proclaim how we should deal with this and that category of offender. But these suggestions fall short in one vital respect: they bring us no nearer to the actual offenders themselves.

For there is still a wide gulf of hostility and deep distrust, which sheer ignorance is keeping alive. If you need convincing that this is really so, discuss delinquents with a probation officer, or a psychologist, or a social worker. Notice the way he talks about them; how he sees the funny side of his experiences, though his job is hard, underpaid, and often thankless. Then discuss delinquents with somebody who has had no experience of them; watch his face—listen to the tone of his voice. Compare the two sets of observations: the difference is striking.

Numerous reasons have been advanced to explain the persistence of this criminal stereotype in our advancing society. The most obvious of these is that we are afraid, though this seems plausible in only a limited number of cases. Another theory, which we should perhaps countenance more often than we do, is that we are jealous. A broader psychoanalytic interpretation is that, as Colin Ward has put it, "society needs its criminals to act out and serve as scapegoats for its own anxieties and deviant fantasies." I myself, while accepting that all such theses carry some truth, believe that there

is a straight line linking primitive taboo customs, the principle of solitary confinement, and the prejudice which still holds us physically and psychologically apart from offenders.

Whatever account is the most illuminating, the fact of this deep prejudice remains. What shows this so clearly is that every one of us who has been to Holloway, and who has associated with borstal boys under another Oxford scheme, has found the experience completely different from what he expected. Surely it is a very disturbing thing that such serious misconceptions should still be so pervasive.

I am convinced that the fundamentally important task facing us is to make closer contact with the people in our approved schools, borstals, and prisons. "Out of sight, out of mind" – the shame of the tradition of alienation ought to be enough to prompt us to action. We have left undone something which we ought to have done many generations ago.

Furthermore, there is a double purpose in this closer contact. In the first place, it is impossible to conceive of a more effective way of cutting into the roots of this pernicious stereotype which perpetuates our prejudice towards the criminal. You have only to discuss such things as the opposite sex, marriage, moods, painting, music, dancing, writing, parents, television, clothes, drink, cigarettes, nervousness, habits, loneliness,

depression, and so on, to realise how awful it is that criminals should be regarded as different from other human beings.

Delinquency, as we all know, is purely a matter of degree. Which one of us was born a "non-delinquent"? Which one of us was not dominated by some kind of anti-social impulse for a good many years beyond childhood? Some young children bear heavily the burden of a court appearance and all that goes with it; while others enjoy the sympathy of the mal-adjusted children's home or create havoc for long-suffering parents with a welter of delinquent behaviour that never comes under the cold eye of public condemnation.

The second point about this closer contact is that it must surely be the weapon for a really telling attack upon the whole problem of recidivism. There are many who at an early age seems irrevocably hardened into lives of crime and hatred of authority; harsh discipline is ineffective, and very likely to do more harm than good. We are beginning to grasp that if cold makes colder, warmth may release qualities whose existence has not been acknowledged as possible. Indeed it is now realised, in practice as well as in theory, that not only the specialist staff but also the prison officers themselves can and do play a valuable positive role.

Many who are still in their teens have been in institutions for several years. They are very young, in

more ways than one; and for this simple reason they are capable of benefiting from all that our humanity can offer them. It would be dreadful to resign ourselves to the belief that the cement of delinquency has hardened around them.

This kind of metaphor reflects the great dangers in some of our ways of thinking and talking. Often we hear it said that so-and-so has "turned out bad," and we tend to drift into pessimism. The Press carries articles on "The Bad Girls"; and it is chilling to hear girls in Holloway referring to themselves in this way.

What these so-called "bad ones" may need more than anything else is the warmth of friendship and company. If we deny them this, when they are most alone, we deny them too the strength and support which could make all the difference when they are back in the outside world.

Macartney wrote: "The Prisoners' Aid Society does not alter a man's punishment nor diminish it, but merely removes an indirect and regrettable consequence of it. And anyone who thinks that a criminal cannot make this distinction, and will regard all the inconvenience that comes to him as punishment, need only talk to a prisoner or two to find out how sharply they resent these wanton additions to a punishment which by itself they will accept as just."

The only word which I question in this passage is "wanton." The fact is that these "additions" to

the actual deprivation of liberty are for the most part worse than wanton. Their imposition is so wide, so general, so deeply-rooted in our practice that it has ceased even to be conscious.

Macartney is right; while it is painfully true that we do not even notice these additions, it is still more painfully true that prisoners, in the loneliness of their cells, in the strange realities and unrealities of life in a prison wing, are bitterly aware of these extra burdens. And this is why an ordinary visitor is so much appreciated.

Students can make perhaps the most valuable contribution in this way; they are young, and open-minded, and can easily find time for regular visiting, and for discussing their experiences. At the same time, there is nothing magical about students which makes them immune from the problems and difficulties which may arise in the course of this visiting. It is most important that there should be a close and continuous co-operation with those who work on the wing.

The young delinquent needs to be known as a person, with his own name, his own feelings, his own problems; not as an entry on a sheet showing a number, an offence, and a sentence. We must never forget the people we put behind those forbidding walls; and if the day comes when the whole of our prison population is housed in a more imaginative way, we must be no less anxious to maintain contact.