

## A Pretty Sort of Prison

MERFYN TURNER has had a long connection with prisons in this country, dating back to the period when he himself was committed to prison as a conscientious objector during the last war. In spite of his many other interests and commitments he has continued as a regular Prison Visitor at Pentonville. Much of the material for his new book is derived from these experiences.

*A Pretty Sort of Prison* is a slim, easily readable book, written with obvious sincerity by a man whose sympathies lie, in the main, with prisoners with whom he has come into contact rather than with the administration. Although some members of the staff come in for a certain amount of criticism, this is far less than in the usual book written about prisons and they are isolated incidents described without exaggeration or a sensational bent.

The whole emphasis throughout the book is for more individual attention, treatment and training "... they are all people, and it is as people that they need to be approached" he writes and those who have served in large local prisons will readily appreciate the difficulties involved in approaching this ideal. Nevertheless, even in a prison like Pentonville, there have been great changes in recent years and most important of these has been the change in attitude of the staff in their willingness and eager-

ness to play a more positive role than has been possible in the past.

Towards the end of his book, Merfyn Turner says "If the Home Secretary offered me a present, I should ask for a prison . . . If he gave me a free choice, I would ask for Pentonville." Not many people would envy him his choice.

Mr. Turner goes on to make suggestions as to how he would alter Pentonville within the five years supposedly at his disposal. Most of his suggestions will not be new to most members of the service who will have heard these or similar ideas expounded at conferences, on courses and in informal discussions.

Briefly, his plan is to brick up the ends of each wing at the centre thereby creating four separate prisons with an Assistant Governor in charge. This sounds a simple and sensible solution to a desperate problem but ignores the fact that each Assistant Governor would be responsible for up to 300 men, the bulk of them being short-term prisoners. Whilst there would certainly be more contact than under the present system, even the most hardworking and enthusiastic Assistant Governor could hardly cope with these large numbers with such a rapid turnover and expect to have any real effect upon them. Extensive alterations would also be required to make each wing self-contained for catering arrangements and workshop facilities.

To my mind the immediate answer to the problem of Pentonville is a drastic reduction in the numbers held there. Initially this would mean a reduction to a population of about 800, in other words a single cell for every prisoner. Once this was achieved many of the schemes suggested by the Pentonville staff could be put into operation. The staff are ready and willing to take a much greater part in the training and rehabilitation of prisoners but only a few of the proposed schemes can be started at present because of overcrowding.

The daily average population is now some 200 less than a year ago and this has been brought about largely by the transfer of certain prisoners to other prisons, both open and closed, which have become available. This is in spite of the fact that London prisoners are notoriously reluctant to be moved away from the Metropolitan area. There seems little likelihood of a further reduction until more new prisons are built in the South-East to relieve the over-crowding of, not only Pentonville, but the other local prisons as well.

Looking far into the future, I should like to see only the very short sentence men, unsuitable for open conditions, retained in Pentonville, the remainder having been screened and allocated to other establishments best suited for their needs, where staff of all ranks could play a full part in their training in more suitable conditions.

The present huge buildings could be demolished and, if necessary, the site used for a much smaller modern prison for those who have to be retained, for various reasons, in North London. I am sure that parties of prisoners would work with enthusiasm at the task of demolishing the existing buildings just as, it is reported that, prisoners of an earlier era showed when Newgate was torn down.

Mr. Turner also suggests the erection of a large number of huts in the grounds to act as extension to the present Hostel Scheme. Unfortunately, Pentonville is sadly handicapped by a lack of space between the perimeter wall and the main prison. Any encroachment on this small area is virtually impossible without interfering with the statutory exercise of the prisoners or the few facilities for games which now exist. Even the job of finding a site for a stack of bricks required for building purposes is an acute problem in the present circumstances. Whilst an extension of the Hostel Scheme, even on a modified system, is desirable, the answer may well be to use part of the existing prison, say H wing, for this purpose as a temporary measure.

Whether one agrees with Mr. Turner's suggestions or not, and I have only mentioned the two main ones, there is food for thought for all of us in this book.

M. OLDFIELD

*A Pretty Sort of Prison* by

MERFYN TURNER

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