



"What, ho, I say! Peace in this prison!"
H.M.P. Leyhill, (formerly Tortworth Court.)

Learning Through Liberty An Exercise in Living

J. L. WARHURST

WHEN, IN 1946, LEYHILL was opened as the first self-contained open prison it became fashionable to speak of the 'Leyhill Experiment'. It is the misfortune of the said prison that this label still adheres. To speak of life in Leyhill today as experimental is to deny to it recognition of its established place in the English prison system.

There were two phases in the original experiment. The first can fairly be said to have ended when it was established beyond doubt

that men could be imprisoned without the aid of high walls and bars. The second phase was less predictable. Could a small community, freely moving within well-defined limits, produce a social code of its own strong enough to maintain order and a sense of well-being within the framework of an imposed discipline, itself rigid to conform with prison regulations? Under the guidance of an imaginative Governor and staff, themselves working under a sympathetic

Authority, it soon showed that it could. What has happened since then has been a natural growth and an almost inevitable development. Expressed in another way, it can be said that this new community has merely followed the pattern set by mankind since the beginning of history; it has recognised its responsibilities, assessed its limitations, exploited its advantages, and co-ordinated effort.

Why, then, is the open prison assuming such an important place in the field of Prison Reform? The answer lies, of course, in the nature of the life that such a prison permits. If it is accepted that the primary task of the prison authorities is to ensure that no man in custody shall be allowed to deteriorate mentally, morally or physically (and what process of reform can exist without this essential prerequisite?), then this answer is easier to understand. The more nearly the artificial society of the prison approximates to the natural society of the world at large, the better the chance of the individual to retain his mental faculties and his moral attributes. If this should be considered too negative a view, the case can be taken further. Fitting himself into the social pattern of the nation is what we ask of every prisoner as we release him. The more remote from reality we make the conditions of his imprisonment, the more difficult becomes the adjustment we ask him to make. If, on the other hand, men can be led to see themselves as still being members of Society, as is possible in an open prison of this type, and, if, while still prison-

ers, they can continue to practise this membership, with all that this entails, then release is more a matter of change of circumstance than transition from one form of life to another. Leyhill takes on a certain prominence because it is the oldest establishment of this type, and therefore the one with the longest established code of its own.

It would be a mistake, however, to assert that in Leyhill lie the answers to all the problems. At its best, Leyhill is but a pale reflection of the world outside. With fewer than 400 men, many of its problems are little other than minatures of the real thing. Within its boundaries Liberty takes on a new meaning, and Responsibility a new focus. It is a society without its most important social unit—the family. The pressure of the community is greater, and the opportunity for privacy much reduced. Entertainment is too easily come by, and rewards gained at too small a price.

Nevertheless, it is a valid claim that an open prison of this type can provide, in large measure, the three essentials of a free life: Freedom of Choice, Freedom of Movement, and Freedom of Expression. Here is its great advantage over the closed establishment. Stone walls may not a prison make, but they have a very distinct hampering effect on the man who decides that he would like to go and pay a social call on his friend in another wing. It might be argued that none of these freedoms is absolute, and that therefore the difference between the closed prison and the open one is in reality only

a matter of degree. To the purist, this is indisputable: but to the prisoner freedom means something much simpler—a chance to do something *as and when he wants to do it*, even if he has to accept limitations in the process.

Each of these freedoms is worthy

possible, and guidance permissible. Choice must also, if it is to make any pretence to reality, be a matter of the moment as well as a determinant in long term planning. This is how we free citizens live our daily lives. What we shall do when all the day's duties and engagements



"Why have you suffer'd me to be imprisoned?"

of examination. Each is limited by the circumstance of imprisonment, and therefore each is in danger of appearing as a travesty of the real thing. In no case is the danger greater than in that of Freedom of Choice. It is here that Authority has to discipline itself very severely. The temptation to say to men: "We expect you to take part in our activities. Choose what you will do." is very great. But this is not choice: it is selection. Choice must involve a principle, and must start with the man's own decision to do something or to do nothing, for this is the base on which a free life is built. After that selection is

are finished is usually what we shall decide to do when that time of leisure arrives. It was not planned this morning, or last week, or at the beginning of term. Freedom of choice begins to mean something to a prisoner when, at the start of any leisure period, he can say to himself "I will do this," or "I won't do that," knowing that whatever his decision prison administration is not going to be disturbed and himself the victim of a searching enquiry. That wrong decisions are too often made is less important than the fact that they are made at all. Class registers show an infuriating smattering of

noughts: but they show an even larger collection of ticks, which are now invested with a significance they would never possess under a system of compulsion or sanctions. It is the misfortune of the closed prison that the meeting of any class involves an elaborate system of unlocking, collection and moving of men, with extra elaboration being caused by every absentee. At the best he senses disapproval; at the worst, he knows he is to be called to account. The open prison is free from this restraint. As in any evening school or institute outside, the class meets if and when the students turn up. If they don't, it doesn't.

Freedom of movement is obviously greater in the open prison than it is in the closed one. Men move without escort, singly or in groups, over the whole of the area placed within bounds. This may appear a small concession, but experience suggests that its effect on the prisoner's outlook is considerable. Possibly he sees in it a mark of the trust accorded to him: more likely he looks on it as a status symbol — the privilege of the red band in the closed establishment. This is only conjecture; the hard fact is that on those infrequent occasions when expediency has required men to be escorted in groups the obvious resentment has been quite disproportionate to the small amount of inconvenience caused. As with Freedom of Choice, Freedom of Movement has to be continuous. Very few citizens in the outside world will devote the whole of an evening of leisure to one activity, and one only. To condemn men,

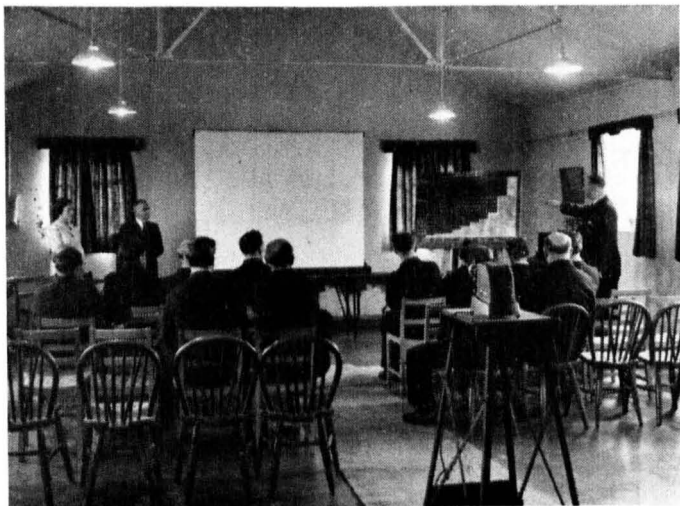
because they are imprisoned, to such a restriction merely emphasises the difference between their life now and the life they once knew. It is the misfortune of the closed prison that it must, in large measure, impose such a limitation. It is the good fortune of Leyhill that it can vest this process of recreation with an air of reality.

Freedom to express one's self is vital. It cannot be claimed that the open prison has any great advantage here. Too often, unfortunately, the new entrant from a large establishment such as Wormwood Scrubs has had to be informed that the outlet he had found so beneficial to him there is closed to him whilst he is here, since a smaller establishment cannot offer the variety of a larger one. On the other hand, he is making one great gain, since the pattern of activity is at all times fluid. The men working in the Art Studio at seven o'clock may be replaced by an entirely different group at eight o'clock, and the individual finds himself on the common ground of a shared activity with a much larger number of men. The continuation of this process at all times, and in all places, results in a much healthier communal spirit than would be possible without this flexibility.

It is only too easy to grow pontifical when enumerating the advantages of an establishment with which one is closely associated. By the same token one tends to gloss over its defects and dangers, whilst playing down the virtues of any rival institution. Nevertheless, one feels in an unassailable position

in one respect, namely, in the assertion that an open prison is unrivalled as an exercise in responsibility and trust. If this is conceded, then the role of Authority at Leyhill takes on a definition which makes it both easier and more rewarding. It must be, at all times,

certain conditions be even more important in prison than it is in the free world, since, with the exception of those in training, few prisoners are looking on their daily work as steps in a career. The framework within which leisure occurs is very relevant. Here, at Leyhill, are five



"My words are as full of peace as matter".

Mrs. Allen (Marriage Guidance), the author, and
Rev. W. J. Price (Chaplain), with Pre-Release class.

to inspire and nourish; to foster the atmosphere in which the tradition of the place can grow and strengthen; and, always, to make it abundantly clear that the strength and well-being of a community lies in its ability to control itself by the social code growing from within in contrast to the superimposed system of discipline imposed from without.

Since the exercise of freedom involves the relaxation of other restraints leisure has an importance of its own: as in the outside world, so in prison. It may under

manufacturing shops, four vocational training courses, an extensive market garden, and 135 acres of land, much of it formally laid out as parkland. In consequence, there is no difficulty in providing a reasonably hard day's work for each prisoner. It is outside the scope of this article to do more than pay tribute to the section of the staff that ensures that this provision is made smoothly and efficiently. The point to be noted is that the prisoner can view his leisure time from the same angle as the citizen of the free world—a rest period

from some necessary effort.

There is one obvious danger. 400 men organised during their labour hours can so easily be organised during their off-duty periods, and the temptation to do this is very strong. The uninformed visitor is so impressed by the sight of every man being employed, instructed, entertained, or otherwise sorted out—and so disturbed at the spectacle of a prisoner sitting with his feet up round the fire—that it seems almost a kindness to show him what he feels he ought to see. But to do so could only be at the expense of a tradition that has now many years of growth behind it. Organisation must come from within, and not be imposed from without. There obviously is a place for authority, but its role is that of controller, and not that of inspiring genius. The partnership is perhaps best shown by an example. A group of men, all members of the prison dramatic society, and including in their number one professional actor, decided that their greatest weakness was in the spoken word. Unknown to anyone but themselves they met from time to time to read plays and poetry borrowed from the prison library. Before long this arrangement proved insufficient for their needs, and they asked for the use of a classroom and the loan of a record player with suitable records. When the group seemed securely established it was suggested to them that they might like to prepare something for presentation to an audience. The suggestion was readily accepted. At the time the prison did not possess a tape recorder, and therefore the show

had to be live, though unseen. With the help of the radio engineering group a small room was fitted with microphone and amplifier to serve as studio, and the large reading room hung with loudspeakers, well disguised by foliage. By this time, of course, the staff was deeply involved, particularly with the necessary administrative arrangements. Christmas Eve was chosen for the night of the presentation, and all men later to attend Mid-night Mass were invited as audience. It was an informal, and memorable occasion. Since those days, a number of recordings have been made for the Bristol Hospitals Broadcast organisation, the prison has obtained its own tape recorder, a professional teacher has been engaged from time to time, and the standard of production improved out of all recognition. But never has the thrill of that first unaided performance, with all its faults and make-shift background, been exceeded.

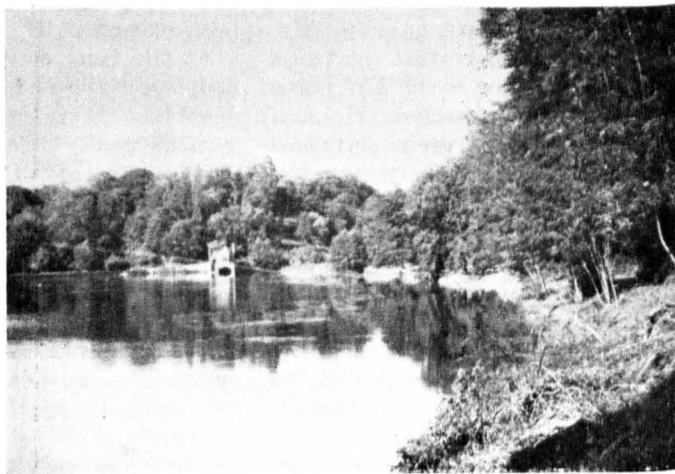
At the time of writing there is no group of this nature in existence, nor has there been for some months past. This is one of the disappointments that has to be borne. The success of any activity is dependent on the level of enthusiasm for it, and, whereas prompting from above can provide a healthy stimulus, only enthusiasm born of a natural desire can thrive on its own. To keep a group alive by artificial means borders too closely on the realm of directed activity, and very brittle relationships are established. There is, after all, very little point in grafting on to dead stock.

The value of a group, as distinct from a formal class, lies, therefore, in its virility, its almost absolute dependence on its own intrinsic merits, its flexibility, and its simplicity. If two or more men wish to share a common interest, let them co-ordinate their efforts, pool their resources, set up their own system of government, and get on with the job. It is no more complex than that. Nevertheless, it is the breeding ground for the larger projects that follow, and the natural source of the inspiration round which the formal education programme is built.

This, then is the real justification for the existence of the group, or informal, activity. Initially it provides a ready outlet of expression; ultimately it is the foundation of the complete education programme. At this stage of Leyhill's development it is possible to trace the history of nearly every formal class (except those linked with vocational training) to its origin in this field. The bird-watching group decided to enlarge its scope, and a University extra-mural class in Biology has resulted. Facilities for study-

ing Natural History produced a demand for regular fieldwork meetings. A weekly sing-song led to the engagement of a teacher and the formation of a male voice choir. Men using the hobbies room asked for a chance to do better quality work, and now can attend carpentry classes in the prison, or (in certain cases) a furniture design class at Bristol Technical College. The process also works in reverse. From the tailoring class has sprung a little group practising design. The official orchestra has a splinter group of guitarists. The Art Class formed itself into a sketch club for the Summer months. Sometimes a group appoints an instructor from amongst its own numbers. Then there is a straight transition, and a new class is included in the programme.

A flexibility such as that suggested requires two things. Space, if not unlimited, must be abundant.



*"What country, friends, is this?"
No Illyrian shore, but a Gloucestershire backcloth
for Twelfth Night.*

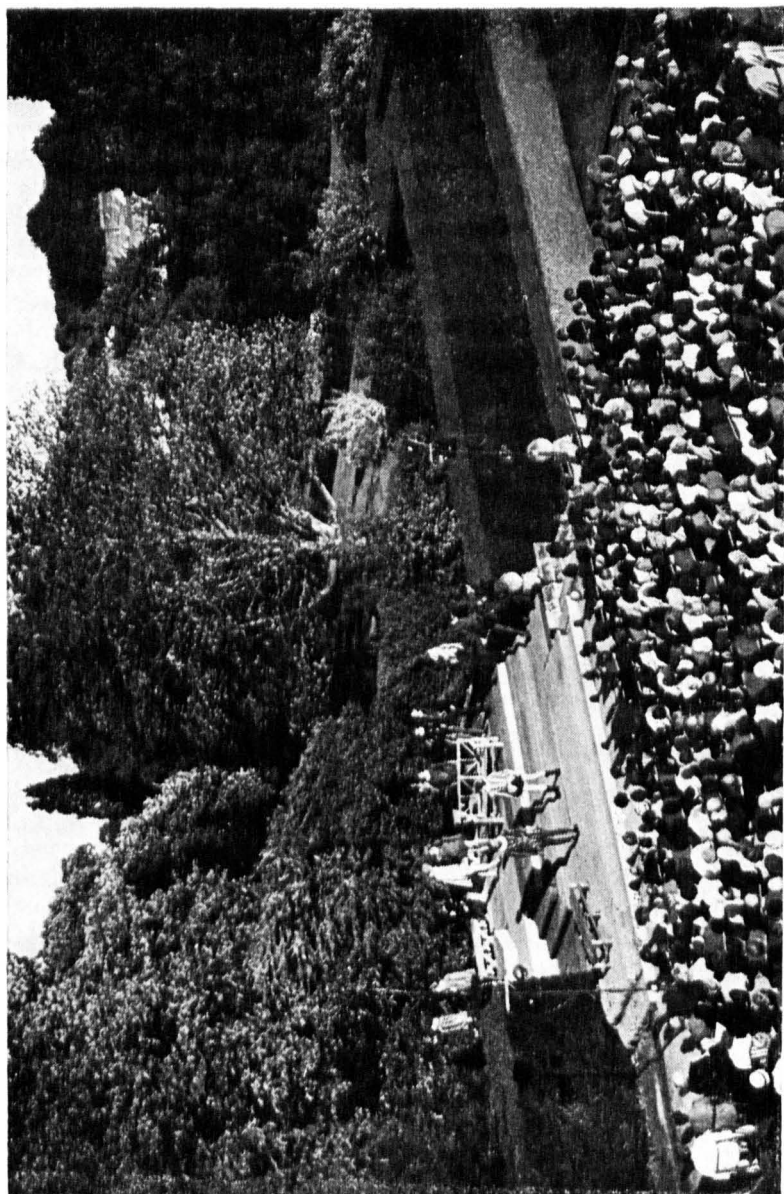
Leyhill is very fortunate. Partly housed in the former country seat of the Earls of Ducie, and partly in a large hutted camp in the grounds, the prison has no shortage of small rooms ideally suited to small group activity. In the second requirement it is equally fortunate. Gloucestershire Education Committee, the Authority responsible for most of the prison classes, takes a very liberal view of prison education, and gives its assistance just as readily to the informal as to the formal side of the work. It is obvious, of course, that the full programme cannot be a one man, or even a one authority concern. Help is forthcoming most readily from Bristol University, Bristol Council of Social Service, the W.E.A., the local churches, and a host of other organisations. Within the prison the Church of England and the Methodist Church both have flourishing men's Societies. The Dramatic Societies turn to the Assistant Governors for help. The Steward captains the Cricket Club. The Governor holds the guiding hand over the prison magazine. Perhaps most important of all, a number of the uniformed staff, following the lead of the Chief Officer whose patronage of the Bird-watching group is as practical as it is invaluable, take a very active interest in many aspects of this work.

One danger is evident. A constant watch must be maintained to ensure that the weekly programme of some fifty-five formal classes does not suffer from too great an enthusiasm for the more intimate atmosphere of the informal meeting. Experience suggests that this

danger is more apparent than real. At the time of writing (Autumn, 1961), there is an average enrolment of about eleven for each class, with an average attendance of about nine. Of equal significance is the fact that seventy-five per cent of all prisoners attend at least one class per week.

During a seven-day week the average man has nine leisure periods, seven evenings and two afternoons. A survey taken over a period of six weeks shows that of the fifty-four leisure periods enjoyed by the average man during those six weeks, he has spent seven on classes, eight on group work or hobbies, ten on organised entertainment or recreation (including gardening on his own allotment), and twenty-nine pursuing his own devices (including television). The last figure appears rather alarmingly large, until one remembers that it includes all his reading, letter-writing, and studying. It is more true to say that it is unrealistic compared with behaviour outside, where television is taking a much larger toll of the nation's spare time. But it must be remembered that a prison community is one without family ties. The survey is not displeasing when one remembers that the prisoner is all the time free to do something, or nothing, as he himself decides.

How many decide to do nothing? This figure remains very steady at something just short of twenty per cent. These men constitute a very real problem, and the answer is not necessarily that of providing a more extravagant coating of sugar on the pill. Television, films, illus-



"Our play is done, and we'll strive to please you every day."

trated lectures and question-and-answer sessions all help. Even so it remains a serious defect of the system that one man in five deliberately rejects most of what the prison can offer him. On the other hand it would be too sweeping a statement to say that he is getting nothing out of the place, and as an ever-present challenge he is certainly not without value.

Who are these men, the enthusiasts, the die-hards, and all those that lie in between? Not very different from any cross section of the population at large. An analysis of the last 300 discharges showed:

Executives and professional men 4 per cent

Managerial class and small business owners 5 per cent

White collar workers 23 per cent

Artisans 68 per cent

These are ordinary men, with very ordinary occupations and social backgrounds, and not, as popular opinion too often assumes, a collection of stock-brokers, company directors, graduates, and ex-public school boys. The things most of them like to do in prison are the things they liked to do outside. Where there is a deviation from this general principle it is in the right direction. Very few centres of 400 population could support four University Extension classes, as Leyhill does. The prison can, and to some extent does, open new vistas and teach a man to set his sights a little higher. Response, of course, varies. To the most mature, Leyhill is a way of life; to the least so, it appears as a rather peculiar form of imprisonment where advantage can be taken of authority with compar-

ative ease. To the majority, it is somewhere in between.

No less important is the view taken by the outside world of the prison and its work. In one way, Leyhill is suffering from too much good publicity, and as a result, to not a few minds, Leyhill means Shakespeare in the open air, cricket under the trees, exhibitions in Bristol, or Carol Services in the Church. These are the highlights of its life. They set the seal on endeavour, and they link the establishment with the cultural life of the nation. But they are not the essence of the place. Leyhill is not a little world apart, nor its inmates freaks of humanity. They are still members of a Society which cannot reject them, even though it has the power to confine them. It is comparatively easy to make good prisoners, but not so easy to make good citizens. Here they can, if nothing else, put into practice the arts of good citizenship. And if, as does happen from time to time, they can be led to something higher, so much the better. It is with pride that Leyhill quotes the words of a visitor to one of the open-air plays:

"Shakespeare was very close to us that night; for these people of whom all the men were prisoners — and we must not shrink from the word although we forgot it for a couple of hours — did what he wanted his Players to do: they thrilled us, entertained us, and brought us so much nearer to an understanding of his artistry, his poetry and his sense of fun that we were, so save the word, the better educated for our attendance at this unique performance."