

# A Prison Governor's Journal

*edited by Mrs. J. E. Kelley, Assistant Director, Women's Establishments*

*(From the journal now in possession of Mrs. Hagger, the Matron at Dover Borstal)*

JOHN EDIS was the governor of Cambridge Town Gaol from 21st December 1839 to 31st January 1865.

His great grandniece, Mrs. Norah Hagger, is a borstal matron, and she inherited the governor's journal, which covers the period from 1st October 1843 to 31st January 1865.

It was a period of change in penal treatment. In 1839 a new Prisons Act had repealed most of the classifications provisions of the 1823 Act and substituted permission to adopt the system of solitary confinement. It was not, however, until 12th July 1851 that Mr. Edis reports taking 10 single cells into use.

In 1850 another Prisons Act introduced a three stage penal system, 12 months separate confinement, a period of labour in association and finally a ticket of leave to the colonies.

The Home Secretary was empowered to appoint a director of convict prisons and a central administrative body was introduced.

In 1853 an Act was passed substituting sentences of penal servitude for sentences of transportation in sentences of 14 years or less.

Transportation finally ceased in 1867, but the last transportee in Cambridge Gaol was in 1860.

A second Penal Servitude Act in 1857 allowed "release on licence".

In 1863 a committee of the House of Lords reviewed the situation and came down firmly on the side of deterrence—"hard labour, hard fare and a hard bed".

In 1865 a further Prisons Act was passed, and gaols and "houses of correction" were formally amalgamated into "local prisons"; eventually, in 1877, the Home Secretary took charge of all prisons and the Prison Commission was formed. Fifty-seven local prisons were closed, Cambridge among them; it was finally demolished in 1878. Although it was rather over full in the 1830s, by the 1860s its population had dwindled to about 20.

The first recorded prison in Cambridge was the Spinning House for women, opened in 1628. By 1688 this had also taken over the functions of the Bridewell and served to house both vagrants and felons. In 1788-90 a new gaol was built on an adjacent site, but this was soon derelict. After the Gaol

Act of 1823 (which placed the responsibility for local gaols on the justices and introduced reforms such as the abolition of gaoler's fees and irons and the introduction of inspection by justices) some gaols, among them Cambridge, were rebuilt.

In 1829 the new gaol opened, on Parker's Piece; it cost £25,000, held about 50 prisoners, and served to house vagrants, women, children, remands in custody, felons awaiting transportation, drunks, misdemeanours, etc.

The Spinning House, however, was still used for prostitutes and Mr. Edis records in his journal on 30th September 1854 that he housed 33 females in the gaol, committed by the vice-chancellor during the rebuilding of the Spinning House.

The governor's journal is written in a leather bound book on 412 foolscap pages. The governor did not make an entry every day, but generally two or three a week. He did not start keeping his journal until 1843, after the visit of an inspector of prisons who, one suspects, may have instigated it. The inspector visited about once a year after this date. (An Act passed in 1835 empowered the Home Secretary to appoint inspectors of prisons.)

A typical day in the journal reads:

22nd January 1844. Read morning prayers in chapel—had occasion to speak to the female prisoners who were, in my opinion, behaving themselves improperly on entering chapel. Visited

S. in solitary confinement. Called the attention of the surgeon to convict C. under sentence of transportation, who appears to me to be somewhat out of health.

In 1850 the governor started giving population figures and committal numbers on the last day of each month and for some years he also gave the daily average population monthly. He always recorded his own attendance at quarter sessions and assizes; also the number of prisoners, their sex, nature of offences, sentences or acquittals.

#### A DAY AT THE SESSIONS

For example, the general quarter sessions were held on 5th and 6th January in 1846. The governor records: "Absent the greater part of each day. The calendar contained the names of 15 prisoners for trial—the following is the result, viz.:

	Males Females	
Convicted and sentenced to transportation ...	3	1
Convicted and sentenced to one year's hard labour	3	—
Convicted and sentenced to six months' hard labour ...	1	—
No true bills (three in one case) ...	4	—
Acquitted at the bar	3	—
	—	—
	14	1
	—	—

"The female convict had been in this gaol six times during this past

year and was a most abandoned and wretched girl. One of the male transports was a soldier on furlough, but had been twice convicted before joining the Army. The other two were in the employ of the prosecutors and had been frequently in custody before. The number of commitments during the quarter amounted to 68, being an increase of six on the corresponding quarter last year."

He always recorded prisoners discharged on bail or fines, taxes, rates or debts that had been paid and the prisoner discharged. He had a good many deserters from the Army for whose keep he was given sixpence a day by the War Office.

The governor often had to prove pre-convictions in court, or to identify someone. On two occasions all the officials had to go to court: one of these was on 18th July 1851: "Myself with the turnkeys S. and G. were all obliged to attend Huntingdon Assizes consequent upon an action brought against the Corporation of Cambridge relative to their seizure of the property of the W.s who were convicted of arson at the last assize and transported for life. I procured the assistance of a policeman and of B., who assists at the gaol occasionally, and found all right on our return".

#### MORE DAYS OUT

In 1854 he mentions taking a prisoner to the new prison at Pentonville; he also takes one prisoner in this year to the House of

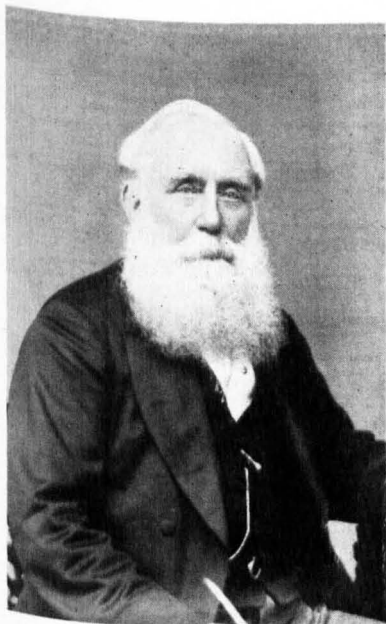
Correction at Wakefield, and Parkhurst and Dartmoor are once or twice mentioned. The rest of the long-sentence prisoners are taken, as before, to Millbank.

He personally always escorted prisoners to Millbank, or elsewhere, as directed, after sentence. If they were women he always took one of the two matrons with him.

An attempt was made in 1839 to institute a uniform dietary, but this failed and diets varied over the country from one pound of bread a day, to bread, meat, soup and gruel every day. In 1843 the Graham dietary was introduced, specifying three meals a day, two of which should be hot. Although this was not enforced, it seems to have been pretty generally carried out.

There were only three recorded cases of the Cambridge prisoners complaining about their diets, two in 1843 and one in 1851. In each case the governor and later the magistrates investigated.

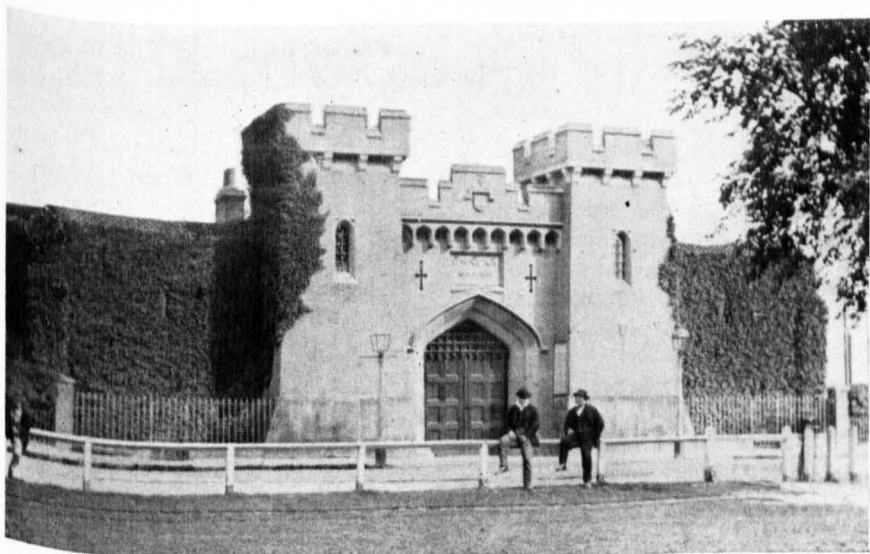
30th November 1843. J.R., E.B., B.J., sent their potatoes back to be weighed—found all of good weight. On R. receiving his back, he threw both meats and potatoes about the yard, and on my remonstrating with him, he made use of most abusive language. I now ordered him out of the day-room, when he refused to go, and afterwards assaulted and violently resisted myself and the under turnkey. He was subsequently removed and placed in the refractory



*Mr. John Edis*



*Mrs. J. Edis*



*Cambridge Gaol*

cell, there to be kept for three days.

*1st December.* The Mayor visited the gaol, and spoke to and admonished the convict R. (see yesterday). The chaplain also visited this prisoner and explained to him the gross impropriety of his conduct. R. having made a most ample apology this evening for his disgraceful conduct, I have been induced to allow him to return to his own cell.

#### IMPROVEMENTS . . . IN 19 YEARS

Christmas is only twice mentioned in the whole period, once, in 1845, when he says: "This being Christmas Day I gave all the prisoners one and a half pints of pea soup and potatoes for dinner. Class 5 chocolate twice and the remainder chocolate once during the day".

And in 1864: "Christmas Day. The prisoners were allowed an extra quantity of meats with half a pint ale each for dinner".

At first he always recorded which prisoners were absent from prayers or Sunday services and whether he or the chaplain took them. This became rarer as time went on and in the last years no mention was made of services other than burial services. There seems to have been three chaplains; the first was often absent and sometimes forgot to tell the governor, so that no service was held; if the governor knew, he took it himself. The second was greatly loved, and when he resigned on

21st November 1852, the entry was: "The Reverend — preached his farewell sermon this morning, to the regret of every officer and every prisoner within these walls".

The third is hardly mentioned, but the governor seldom had to take the service and he and the chaplain seemed to manage very well together over death beds and funerals, so presumably they got on well together.

He always recorded sickness in any prisoner or member of staff and it seems to have been his duty to call in the surgeon when he thought it necessary. From time to time he was sent for in the small hours of the morning, if a prisoner was ill, or a female prisoner was entering into labour. It is not clear if the surgeon changed, though once a surgeon is mentioned as not seeming to care and all other comments are that he was attentive, did everything possible, came with all speed, etc.; so it looks as if for a short time there was an unsatisfactory surgeon.

During the early part of the journal there are a number of references to prisoners being isolated "because they have the itch".

On 25th May 1845 there was a case of smallpox in the prison and the governor wanted the surgeon to vaccinate the other prisoners, or at least the babies. The surgeon, however, thought this unnecessary, and since no more cases were reported, presumably he was right. Smallpox

vaccination was first introduced in 1798 and was adopted as a public health measure in the decades 1810 to 1830; it was made compulsory in 1853.

A certain number of prisoners died in prison over the years, not very many; a few tried to commit suicide. He told of a woman who tried to hang herself, but she had her two children with her and the little girl of eight called for help and so she was prevented. There is only one other mention of children other than babes in arms being in prison with their mothers, unless they were jointly charged.

The governor took a very Victorian view of death and indeed seemed to make it the occasion for taking a great deal of trouble and acting with considerable leniency as regards visiting.

*8th December 1855.* E.C., three months' imprisonment, is so dangerously ill that I have communicated with her parents in London and her husband at Bury St. Edmunds requesting some of them to come and see her immediately.

*9th December.* E.C. has had a very bad night. I therefore telegraphed to Bury as I had heard nothing from her friends.

*10th December.* E.C. is in the most imminent danger. I awaited the arrival of the train but, none of her friends making their appearance, I again telegraphed to Bury. Her husband came to the gaol at 11.30 a.m. having been in the town more than two hours. He saw his wife and returned

home promising to send the poor woman's sister.

*11th December.* Called up at 3 a.m., but before I could get into the room, E.C. was dead.

A special discharge was obtained for a man who was ill before admission and who was evidently dying away from wife and children. A turnkey accompanied him to his home.

A young soldier died in prison and his grandfather asked for his body, which the governor "of course had sent to his home".

#### FORGOT THE FLOGGING

The age of boys and girls convicted and sentenced is always recorded, between nine and fourteen years seemed usual. Very often the governor investigated their backgrounds, and commented on them as a cause of delinquency.

*9th July 1849.* J.H., aged 12, convicted of felony under Juvenile Act, was this day flogged with the birch in the presence of the surgeon and myself. He received what I thought a good smart flogging, but within a few minutes appeared to have forgotten all about it. He is a most hardened boy and has been most grossly neglected by his parents who are far from good. The father and brother have both been convicted of felony.

Before 1846 there is no record of whipping, flogging or birching. After that year juvenile boys are birched on first admission into prison, by order of the court. This went on until 1854, when the Reformatory Schools Act provided that

children of 14 and less should go to a school (after a period of 14 days in prison). They were sent for two to five years to these reformatories, the most usual being the one at Bow. In 1857 the Industrial Schools Act provided places for deprived children where they could be taught useful work.

*31st August 1857. G.R.U. aet.* nine years to the reformatory under sentence of five years' detention.

*16th July 1847.* (The governor had to punish a boy.) This has been one of the most distressing cases it has ever been my lot to meet with. This child, now only 10 years' old, had given himself up to every vice. He is destitute of fear and takes advantage of kindness. It is, and ever will be, a source of deep regret to me that he was not sent to the Parkhurst prison in pursuance of the sentence passed upon him.

Since the prisoners were not paid anything, and as there was no remission for good behaviour during this period, the punishments meted out by the governor were: solitary confinement; dietary punishment; and something he describes as "placed in the dark cell", this was for a certain number of hours only, nowhere is it recorded that it was for more than eight hours, except on 14th February 1846, where a man was kept there all night. One, two or four hours is more common. Solitary confinement was for one, two or three days, although in one case it was for seven.

Very often, however, the governor

noted at the end of a day that the prisoner had apologised and so was allowed to go back into associated labour. He always visited a person in solitary confinement every day. His most frequent award was to stop one meal, usually breakfast or dinner. There were only three occasions when a prisoner was put into irons, two for attempted escape and one for extreme violence.

*3rd April 1844. C.G.,* a convict under sentence of transportation for life, was this afternoon detected by the under turnkey secreting a quantity of oakum about his person, and on the officer's attempting to take it from him, he most violently assaulted and resisted him. On my going to his assistance the prisoner most violently assaulted and strongly resisted me and it was with the greatest possible difficulty that we were able to remove him from the yard. I placed him in the refractory cell for the night, but from his continued violence was obliged to put him in irons. (In each case the magistrates were informed and confirmed the order next day.)

The chief offences committed in prison were: shouting, singing and banging in cells after lock-up time; refusing to go to work; breaking the panes of glass in the cell windows; using bad language; bad behaviour in chapel and occasionally fighting.

Only once was it recorded that a man was given strokes with the "small cat" on 30th September 1850, in the presence of the governor and the surgeon. During the first

seven years of the journal, prisoners were kept in solitary confinement for the first seven days of their sentences.

Although there was no pay, there were two mentions of the tobacco ration and once some tobacco was thrown over the wall and intercepted by a turnkey; deprivation of the tobacco ration was once used as a punishment by the Inspector of Prisons and the prisoner blamed the governor for this.

#### TURNKEYS . . . GOOD AND BAD

There appear to have been two turnkeys, two matrons and these with the chaplain, a surgeon on call, a cook, and a schoolmaster seem to have comprised the governor's staff.

He does not seem to have had many staff changes through the years. A matron resigned and he got permission to appoint his wife; an assistant matron resigned and he appointed the wife of a turnkey. One of the turnkeys became very ill and had to be retired, another was appointed in his place, but was not very satisfactory as he swore nearly as badly as the prisoners, was unable to maintain discipline, was suspected of taking too much to drink and so was allowed to resign and another was appointed in his place. Another turnkey retired and was replaced. He was given a pension and his wife, the assistant matron, a golden handshake, of £6 17s. 4d.

5th February 1864. T.S., who has been turnkey of this gaol for 32 years, having resigned in consequence of his serious affliction left the gaol this day, the three months' notice to resign under the

provision of the Act of Parliament having expired. At a meeting of the magistrates holden on the first instant it was unanimously resolved to grant S. a retiring pension of £45 being the half of his salary (22s. a week) and endowments, and to Mrs. S. the sum of £6 17s. 4d. which is the full sum fixed under the Act of Parliament in such cases. My junior warder to take his place; 18s. a week to start. (This is the first time the word warder is used.) A junior warder to take his place at 10s. a week for six months, 11s. for the next six months, 12s. after the first year. The usual allowances and rations. A new matron was appointed at 8s. a week with apartment, bed, light, washing, etc.

The junior warder was to have rations, washing and uniform coat trousers, cap, etc., at a cost not exceeding £4 p.a. "Should he marry, which he is about to do, he is allowed to be absent from the prison alternately with E.K. from 6 p.m. to 6 a.m. the next morning."

The governor was only once absent for as long as a fortnight. He had been very unwell and the surgeon said he must have a change of air.

On about four occasions he took two or three days' absence, with permission, for "private business". On one occasion he mentions he was prevented from attending chapel from the "alarming illness of my child". Two days later he did not go to the Insolvents' Court as his child was so ill.



The next day: "My dear child died". A week later: "Absent from chapel attending the funeral of my dear child". This was in fact his only child.

For the greater part of the journal, the governor called his officers turnkeys, and occasionally officers. In 1863 he used the word officer and once or twice warder, but dropped turnkey.

The prison was, as has been said, the responsibility of the town borough of Cambridge, and the mayor was fairly often called in to help, advise and instruct; each year three magistrates are appointed as visitors. The staff selected by the governor were appointed by the mayor and J.P.s and their salaries determined by them. On 5th April 1847 the governor recorded: "The magistrates were pleased to order that from Xmas last I should be allowed £25 p.a. in lieu of all fees or perquisites for the removal of convicts".

In 1851 some of the dormitories or wards were converted into single cells. These are first used on 12th July 1851 and the governor reported that the prisoners in them got on much faster with their lessons. This, and a reference to the schoolmaster, were among the few references to education; once a prisoner was admonished for the misuse of his slate. (Each was provided with slate and chalk, even up to 1947, when I joined the prison service.)

In 1850 "it was agreed by the magistrates that some of the cells should be lighted and warmed (as

suggested by the Inspector of Prisons) as now in operation at Beverley. It was also agreed from the great increase in the number of prisoners, and from the impossibility of keeping up anything like an effective discipline with my present limited number of officers, that C.C. be appointed (on trial) as assistant turnkey and schoolmaster at 6s. a week with lodgings and rations. NOTE. C.C. is by trade a tailor and part of his duty will be to superintend work of that description".

In 1853 the governor recommended more separate cells, both for remands and for the women, and better ventilation for those that existed. This was agreed on 29th March, and the work completed by prison labour on 20th May, and the governor commented on how hard the prisoners had worked.

In 1857 a new workroom was built by prison labour in two months.

Before the cells were heated the governor kept a fire going in the main ward and in very cold weather he allowed association in it all day. In fact, in one place he records that a man who was behaving very badly could not be kept in solitary confinement as he deserved because the weather was too cold and he had to be kept in the room with a fire. On one occasion the prisoners wrote him a letter of thanks on a slate for allowing them this privilege in cold weather.

#### AFTER-CARE

On a number of occasions the governor paid the fare of a prisoner, sometimes by rail, sometimes by

carrier cart, to his or her home. If a woman seemed to need it, a matron went with her.

He also showed considerable concern that no one should be discharged without a lodging to go to. If a prisoner had no home, he arranged either with a hostel, refuge, or with the union, that they should be taken in.

Many things that are described in this journal shock one reading it today: the sentencing and imprisonment of children; the transportation of many men and women to the opposite side of the world; the birching and flogging of juveniles; the number of Army deserters imprisoned and; the poor fare that the allowance of sixpence a day must have afforded them, even in those times. The imprisonment and punishment of the destitute and starving seems even sadder. For example, on 15th May 1845 the governor records: "J.W., a poor emaciated youth of 17 years, was committed this day under the Vagrants' Act. He was in such a filthy state that I was obliged to direct the rags he had on be immediately destroyed".

It is curious to note how very few murder or manslaughter cases there were during this long period and no one was sentenced to death. There were quite a number of assaults, mostly dealt with by fines, and presumably mostly committed under the influence of alcohol.

It is interesting to see how often the governor gave financial help to prisoners on discharge, how often his compassion seems to have been aroused, and also the amount of

investigation of prisoners' circumstances he undertook.

The rapidity with which prisons were built, altered and demolished, arouses a pang of envy. For example, the Cambridge Gaol of Mr. Edis's time took four years to build; a new workroom took only two months. The previous prison had only been used for 35 years when it was demolished and rebuilt.

What, however, seems saddest is how many things are described that have remained unchanged. The insane, epileptics, the subnormal, the inadequate, the deprived, still all too often find themselves in prison. The locking in, the limited association, the dull food, the restricted visits, the punishment by periods of solitary confinement, the breaking of panes of glass, refusing to go to work, etc., all still obtain.

A governor of a closed prison in 1967 would at once feel at home in this prison regime of more than a hundred years ago, and might serve even in the same prison buildings. Cambridge Gaol may have been demolished, but many, many others of the same period are still in use. Of course there have been some improvements, such as the segregation of young offenders, the introduction of approved schools and borstals, open prisons with their greater slant towards rehabilitation, but one does wonder whether penal reform and the constructive treatment of offenders against the law could not have made greater strides in a century that has shown such progress and inventiveness in so many other ways.