

Visiting Dartmoor

Help for Prisoners' Families

HELEN HORTON & ANNE WRIGHT

THE Dartmoor Accommodation Scheme is the name given to the overnight stay centre in Princetown for the families of the inmates of Dartmoor prison. Dartmoor is one of the least accessible prisons in the country and is no longer served by any means of public transport. It also has an unfortunate reputation which, though out of date, still creates much anxiety amongst wives planning their first visit. This, as well as the growing concern on the part of the Prison Welfare Department over the increasing number of broken marriages amongst inmates, led to the setting up of a management committee to look into the possibility of a local site for a family centre. It was not before time that an overnight stay centre was opened in Princetown in July, 1974. A survey of 46 different families using the Centre in the first nine months showed that 56 per cent were undertaking a journey of up to six hours in order to visit and a further 37 per cent were travelling for up to 12 hours. 44 per cent of the families were visiting as frequently as they were permitted to, i.e. once a month, while a further 24 per cent were visiting at two monthly intervals. 74 per cent of families were travelling with children, mostly under the age of five years. Similar figures can probably be produced by other prisons. The need for more visiting facilities is common to many and over the last few years several centres have been established.

LOCAL HOSTILITY

From the beginning, the emphasis of the scheme was on local and voluntary involvement, despite the statutory provision for such centres contained in the Criminal Justice Act, 1972, and a Home Office grant was administered by the lay management committee and supplemented by donations from voluntary bodies and local people in order to cover the capital outlay. Due to the hostility towards the scheme felt by some Princetown people, much of this support in cash or kind came from the wider Devon area. Princetown is a small, bleak place in the middle of the moor.

Its population of 1,800 consists of local people and prison officers and their families. The prison dominates the village and at regular intervals throughout the day its life spills into the streets as officers leave work to go home, to their club in the square, to the shops, and public houses. Due to the isolated position and insular nature of the community it is difficult to be free from the prison's influence. It is not surprising therefore, that the suggestion of setting up a Centre for families did not meet with whole-hearted approval. A small group of prison officers, however, most of whom did live in the village, resisted the pressure from their own colleagues and local people to carry out the neces-

sary conversion work to the local Methodist church. Sadly, the inmates themselves were not involved in the practical stages of the project.

THE HOSTEL

Five families and a resident housekeeper can be accommodated at any one time in the single storey building. The physical structure of the hostel has greatly affected the development of the scheme. The appointment of a resident housekeeper in the first place was something of an accident rather than planned policy and her informal approach developed essentially from a lack of separate living facilities for her, which brought her into contact with visitors all the time, whether by sharing the cooker or watching the same TV programme. She is responsible for the day-to-day running of the Centre, having a basic housekeeping role to perform in providing adequate board and lodgings and in creating a warm, welcoming atmosphere. Families enjoy the privacy of separate bedrooms but they share a lounge, kitchen and bathroom and are expected to cater for themselves. This sharing of community facilities brings them into continual contact with one another and thus the Dartmoor Centre has evolved a strong element of self help whereby wives are able to rapidly break through the barriers of fear, isolation and prejudice and to offer one another friendship and encouragement. Many wives have commented on their feelings of isolation and their inhibitions while staying with small children in conventional bed and breakfast establishments. Some visitors at the Centre are able to meet others "in the same boat" for the first time and where families have become socially isolated (a problem for many), the children have an opportunity to meet and mix with other children. All kinds of subjects are covered in conversation, nutrition, children, marriage, sex, Social Security, etc., and ideas and advice exchanged. The Centre, however, differs from a prisoners' wives group in that the combination of people is different each night, each personality having something to contribute; it serves to introduce wives to the idea of being in a group and hopes to encourage them to join one in their home areas. Most visitors are known to enjoy meeting other people at the hostel, some contact each other between visits and many travel together.

The role of the housekeeper has never been rigidly defined, thus offering opportunities for adapting to the needs of the visitors. Although she is employed



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as a probation ancillary, this is largely for administrative convenience, and the housekeeper enjoys a high degree of autonomy (she can't remember ever being told strictly what to do!) whilst having the support of the Probation Service to back her up where necessary. There is close co-operation with the Prison Welfare Department, the housekeeper acting as a link between the prisoner's family and the prison authorities, by explaining the internal mechanism of the prison to bewildered visitors and, where appropriate making known to the authorities etc. the needs of families concerning visiting arrangements. The presence of the hostel has aroused an interest among some prison officers in the family aspects of a prisoner's welfare and this is an encouraging development. It is accepted that resistance will persist by some to the concept as a whole, by others to the location of the Centre in Princetown, but it is hoped that a peaceful co-existence is possible and that continuing contact will break down some of the barriers which remain.

THE VISITS

A NACRO report of 1971 pointed out the lack of information wives receive about visiting and the poor facilities which prisons offer to families. The cramped visiting rooms at overcrowded, local prisons and visits of half an hour's duration are the experience which many wives bring with them to Dartmoor. But having once experienced a visit in Dartmoor prison most are pleasantly surprised with the existing visiting arrangements. Visiting is in two

sessions, morning and afternoon which, if taken on the same day, only require one visiting order. The wife may see her husband for three and three quarter hours on one day's visit with one hour less at weekends. The visiting room, although small, is pleasant and rarely full, prison officers on duty are discreet and courteous, earning the praise of many wives who tend to be tolerant of them—"they're only doing their job".

It is worth noting that despite the growing awareness of the problems facing prisoners' families and the provision of a wider range of services such as prisoners' wives groups, most families at Dartmoor rely on the traditional and informal sources of support (relatives, neighbours and friends) with only one respondent to the survey discussing her visits with a prisoners' wives group. This close contact between the housekeeper and visitors has been seen as a great strength of the scheme as it has contributed to a greater understanding between the two than would otherwise have been possible. It is probably unusual to achieve the kind of frankness in discussion, care of premises and response to a postal questionnaire that the Centre has achieved in such a short time. This success might be due to the lack of formal rules, control being discreet, implicit and flexible so that the Centre is able to offer something to the individuals who may have been hostile and uncommunicative in a more authoritarian setting. There have been only two incidents which have given cause for concern; one involved petty pilfering, the other inadequate care of children. Many of the other visitors have been good managers, caring and concerned for their children and with a high degree of self-respect. Many look upon their stay at the Centre as a holiday, and a welcome break from the routine at home, and some evenings the pent-up tension erupts into hilarious high spirits. It may be that many of these women behave quite differently at the Centre from home.

CONFLICTING AIMS

Some guide lines for the development of the housekeeper's role emerged through the perceptions of visitors disclosed in the survey. Visitors felt that their personal life was the housekeeper's concern and that she should be asking about personal matters, yet 42 per cent did not expect her to provide any help.

In spite of this, 80 per cent found the housekeeper helpful when they discussed personal matters with her. Perhaps this confusion arose over differing interpretations of the word "help", with visitors making a distinction between emotional support and practical assistance.

The main focus of the Centre's work has been to contribute towards a constructive visit for all concerned. This has been difficult to define. For a wife, a constructive visit may be solely "to see the release of tension off his face seeing me—that's all the satisfaction I get". For a child it may be the slow realisation that the strange man he has been visiting since babyhood is coming home to be a father to him. For the man in prison it may be a reassurance that his wife and children are sticking by him, providing him with a welcome link with the outside world, as he promises to "go straight" and become a home-centred man in future. A "constructive" visit may bring a husband and wife closer together as they realise their need for one another but this closeness may only exist during the period of the man's imprisonment. For the prison staff, a constructive visit ensures subdued and relaxed visiting rooms, fewer demands for transfers and welfare visits from prisoners, producing a "quiet nick". The prison chaplain and the welfare staff yet again may have different views on what a constructive visit should be.

In the light of these conflicting aims, prison visiting becomes a far more subtle business than many realise. It



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might also be considered a kind of game, the rules of which are perceived and observed by all concerned. Visits are part of the "marking time", which characterises a prison sentence, a period during which life stands still for the man inside. Regular visits can ensure that the family will be there on release but little consideration is given to the kind of family life which may follow. Wives visiting the Centre over a period of time were seen to be becoming more independent as they became accustomed to running their families' affairs and being both mother and father to their children. Some became very competent and even admitted that they were better able to cope, knowing exactly where their money was coming from and no longer being anxious about their husbands being "out with the boys and possibly up to no good". However, being aware of a husband's need to feel indispensable to his wife, many insisted on keeping their new-found competence and independence to themselves, managing to present themselves on visiting days as sufficiently vulnerable and in need of male support, whilst not giving their husbands any undue cause for alarm!

FRAGILE FRONT

Any tensions which a particular visit engenders are rarely manifest in the hostel. One becomes aware of the carefully prepared, sometimes exceedingly fragile front, which is worn like an overcoat during the visit. Most wives are dignified, self-possessed, organised and slightly subdued during their stay. Some wives were prepared to discuss this phenomenon in more detail in structured group discussions. It became clear that what is happening is that the artificiality of the visiting system, the type of relationship it permits, the location of Dartmoor itself, combine to elicit an artificial response from the visitors. At times this may have extended to their relationships with the housekeeper as well; perhaps the most frank discussion was that which took place between visitors after the housekeeper had retired to bed. The reticence shown by wives in supporting change at the Centre is more easily understood if seen in this context, with a visitor striving to present the "correct" impression in order that her idea of a "constructive visit" is achieved.

There is no doubt that the existence of the Centre in the village takes pressure off the prison staff in the visiting room, with families arriving at the prison more relaxed, having met one another the evening before. Wives making their first visit are less anxious

and the atmosphere in the visiting room is frequently very congenial and lively. Visitors who might have felt hostile towards authority are able to leave after their visit without the same degree of disenchantment that they might otherwise have felt. Repercussions are felt throughout the prison, with many men feeling more relaxed about their wives visiting them. Detailed information about travel, visiting arrangements and the Centre's facilities are given to every prisoner on arrival at Dartmoor through the prison welfare staff. 33 per cent of visitors staying at the Centre had first heard about it through the man they visited with a further 44 per cent receiving information initially through the Prison Welfare Department.

The total of 65 families using the Centre in the first nine months operation is a discouraging figure if compared with a total prison population of over 450 men. But it must be remembered that many men do not wish their families to visit them in Dartmoor since they believe that this may diminish their opportunity to obtain a transfer to a prison closer to their home. Most men at Dartmoor are advanced into their criminal careers and for many, marriage and family life have broken down at an earlier stage. There are others whose wives prefer to visit anonymously and to make arrangements through the Prison Welfare Service or independently to stay outside Princetown. Only one visitor to the hostel has been known not to return because she felt conspicuous entering and leaving the building. On the whole it is wives and children who come to the hostel, not parents and other relatives or friends. All of these different wishes must be respected and the scheme has not sought to direct all visitors to the Centre.

EMOTIONAL SUPPORT

Efforts are made to encourage visitors to return and although this is not necessary in most cases, in some the housekeeper and other residents have a crucial role to play in helping a visitor to decide whether or not she wants to continue to come and to establish a regular pattern of visiting. Carol is a good example of the way in which the sympathetic and supportive environment of the Centre can be used to advantage. Her first visit to the hostel was also her first to Dartmoor. She had not known what she would find and had a great deal to talk over in this respect and was obviously relieved to discover a friendly attitude at the Centre. She was 19 years old and had been married to the inmate for a year, most of which he had spent in prison. Their daughter whom she cared

for a lot was five months old at the time. Carol herself was on probation but she saw her officer, a man, infrequently and did not find him in sympathy with her current difficulties, many of which were concerned with the day-to-day care of the baby. She was living with her family, with whom she did not get on. She found it difficult to join groups and make friends and did not go out much, partly because of the baby and also because she feared getting into trouble or meeting another man. From this visit she was seeking emotional support from her husband, who appeared to be immature and irresponsible, and an undertaking that he would be in no more trouble. It was likely that she would be disappointed on one or both counts, leaving confused and upset, possibly not to return. In the normal course of prison visiting Carol would not have necessarily had an opportunity to share her feelings with anyone. Prison welfare officers do not see families as a matter of routine, only on request, nor is information about visits conveyed to agencies in the home area. It remains to be seen if the Centre's intervention can help Carol in the long term.

The Centre is still trying to determine its future role. Can it do more to prevent prisoners' families from reverting to their pre-sentence pattern of behaviour, after the men's release, as most are known to do? Certainly some of the changes which a wife experiences could make the adjustment more difficult on release unless both partners are aware of and able to honestly face what is happening. Many of our visitors look forward to the release date with some trepidation. Perhaps nearer to this time it would be constructive to direct both husband's and wife's thoughts away from the pretence which exists through the sentence towards a more realistic assessment of the future. Other wives who visit the inmates with long sentences to serve find that planning for a release date can be a futile and frustrating experience; they have special difficulties which merit further thought, not least how they can try to understand the effects of protracted incarceration on a man. The structured discussions which have taken place are essentially different from the informal conversation which occurs giving the wives an opportunity to examine more closely the implications of imprisonment and to develop an awareness of their own circumstances. There would seem to be room for development along these and other lines within the experimental nature of the project, necessarily involving a

greater commitment on the part of both staff and visitors towards defining and achieving a more "constructive" visit. During its first year the hostel has been trying to establish an identity of its own, independent of the different interest groups involved. It would be very easy for it to collude with one or other group which would perpetuate the present visiting system and inhibit the exploration of new ways of rehabilitating a prisoner with his family.

There are strong reasons why society as a whole should be concerned to explore such new ways and innovate where possible. The family can be a source of security and stability to a prisoner on his release, and support from them may be the best kind of after-care that a prisoner receives. Attention to this during a man's sentence may help the prisoner and may prevent his children falling into the same anti-social behaviour pattern. The ethos of the Centre has always been to support the family unit and to encourage wives to visit their husbands, but in some cases divorce may be seen as a more realistic alternative, although none of the visitors were known to be seriously considering this. Two, however, are known to have terminated the relationship and have ceased to visit. Where this does arise the resident worker can only help the wife to work out her own solution whilst helping her to take into account the inmate's point of view. The housekeeper, being on the spot, may be the only person familiar with the circumstances surrounding family visits which agencies in the home area may not be in a position to fully understand. Thus the family Centre at Dartmoor has a unique role to play by offering support and friendship as well as insight and expertise, in a relaxed atmosphere which does not overwhelm visitors with an air of professionalism and authority. It must also continue to encourage a more active support from society for the family unfortunate enough to have one of its members in prison.

CRIMINAL JUSTICE IN BRITAIN

A Central Office of Information Reference Pamphlet, 1975 65p

Criminal Justice in Britain is number 129 in a series of pamphlets produced by the Central Office of Information for British Information Services. If I ever need a quick, readable introduction to any of the 128 subjects covered previously, I shall now know where to look. This booklet deals with criminal law, the police service, criminal courts and the treatment of offenders in a concise and interesting way. Its handling of statistics is particularly skilful. It is an excellent introduction for anyone new to the criminal justice field and a very good refresher for those who already have some knowledge.

R. M.

Dear Committee . . .

AN OPEN letter by a serving prisoner to "Them"—one man's attempt to convince those who wield great power that something very important is happening to him.

WHAT I wish to address to you now was originally intended to be addressed solely to the "Category 'A' Committee". I had prepared a statement in such a form as to show that I was addressing several persons. If in addressing it to you, I were to change that form, I believe that it might distort the content so as to make it less emphatic; and for that reason I would like to address it to you now in its original form—with the hope that it does not come into conflict with formality to an unforgivable degree:—

How does one go about convincing someone of what is the truth concerning some matter? More especially that truth which a man affirms of himself, which he needs and wishes others to know?

If a man claimed such-and-such to be a truth of himself one—unless one were convinced by virtue of an intimate knowledge of his truthfulness—might cough in a doubtful sort of way and wait for him to provide that substance which would show that indeed such-and-such was true. It would be proper of us to do that, for most people recognise that merely saying that something is true is a poor way of showing that it is so.

If, however, the man has little more than words to make tangible the truth about himself, what is he to do? When in his mind he is painfully aware that actions speak louder than words—and bemoans his lack of actions—he must choose between the alternatives of saying nothing or saying something. The first will achieve nothing; the second might achieve something of what he wishes to achieve—which is, some acceptance by others of what he accepts to be true of himself. Therefore, though bemoaning his lack of actions, he must speak his words with a dependence upon them to carry conviction; with a hope that they themselves become mouths that speak truth; that truth

independently of the man will so put them together as to reveal, make tangible, that pattern of which we should be persuaded to say, this could only have been knit together with the thread of truth.

The difficult task lies before me of persuading you all that within me something is at work which makes me look around at life and myself in a much better and clearer way that I *could* before. I shall try to carry out that task to such length and in such detail as my ability will allow.

When I observe that Something at work within me, I am reminded of someone being healed by physicians. Something of the sort I believe is happening to me: I am in the process of being healed, *becoming*—being put back together into a newer and more rational thing. That Something is made up of a number of things working together as a whole. Some of them I can recognise clearly, but only vaguely the others. Education and Logic—the physicians if you like—are clearly recognisable; and what besides I see are values which before I could never see, either because of the darkness of an absolute evil, or because of that other kind of darkness brewed in an earlier environment of influences, experiences and limited views of life, all of which confuse the mind and give it false light to make shadows of what is right and true and valuable. But whatever the truth of it is—the darkness is going; much of it has gone: life and the World are in better focus now. I see more clearly. This I affirm and even though affirmations are poor evidence for the truth of what is affirmed, don't they still count for something? Yet, in time, something will show itself I'm sure. As through the process of education I discover more those enlightening values of life which promise to bring one into the warmth and flow of ordinary human existence, as soon will there be seen a more positive show of what I affirm.