

Editorial

Exploring the prison: Historical perspectives

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What can historical work bring to a 21st century discussion of the prison? While it may be an oft-repeated aphorism that history repeats itself, and that we therefore learn directly from it, this special historical edition of the *Prison Service Journal (PSJ)* does not follow that somewhat simplistic line. What history can bring to current debates is perhaps better captured by Mark Twain's reputed observation that history does not repeat itself, but that it often rhymes. So, in different ways, we revisit the same patterns, ideas and practices over time. Why does this happen? Entirely new ideas are rare, certainly, but history is not just about the past; it is close and integral to the present, and throughout their history prisons have faced similar social, economic, political and cultural pressures, which have limited the options of policymakers and others. Hence, there is considerable historical evidence, a sample of which we present here, showing repeated mistakes as well as uneven progress. Sometimes the past has been mined with only a cursory glance at the previous impact of particular measures, practices and/or policies, which may already have proven ineffective, detrimental, or even harmful. Of course, institutions operate within contexts that can be limiting and constraining, especially when it comes to financial and other resources, and on the endless list of competing government priorities, prisons have rarely figured highly. Moreover, knowledge of history cannot ensure that mistakes are not repeated, in part because those who possess such knowledge are not the same people responsible for making key policy and resource decisions, and dialogue between the two is largely absent. This edition of the *Prison Service Journal* asserts the need for just such dialogue.

Historical research has located a fundamental shift in the form and purpose of imprisonment at the end of the eighteenth and beginning of the 19th century: it is during this period that the idea of sending people to prison to change their behaviour primarily emerged. Since then, scholars, reformers, practitioners and policymakers have debated different ways to achieve this, along with their potential

consequences. The collection of articles presented here engages with some key themes of contemporary relevance, helping us to explore and unpick the past. Some contributions fill gaps in our historical understanding, while others build a fuller and more developed picture of the continuities and changes faced by prison systems past and present.

Clare Anderson, Tammy Ayres, Mellissa Ifill, Kellie Moss and **Kevin Pilgrim** begin the edition with a consideration of the extent to which current prison systems can be profoundly shaped by their historical development. Their article examines the prison system in Guyana, its structures and operation, and the enduring impact of British colonial legacies. Guyana's prisons, the authors suggest, are haunted by colonialism. They explore the deep entrenchment of colonialism via the experiences of prisoners and prison staff. They conclude by proposing that participant action research can drive important reform in Guyana's penal system, with the potential to tackle deeply rooted and long-standing issues through ethical partnerships involving prisoners, staff and external stakeholders. For the authors, this is about creating a prison system that recognises its past, rather than seeking to eradicate it, and one that works towards 'a more equitable and rehabilitative future.'

Articles by **Anna McKay** and **Julie Brumby** both deal with varieties of the prison ship. McKay looks at England's notorious prison 'hulks' which, established in 1776 in lieu of transportation to the American colonies, survived until 1857, the penultimate article by Brumby examines the maritime versions of the reformatory and industrial training schools established after 1856, aboard which male juvenile offenders and boys believed to be vagrant or neglected sometimes found themselves confined.

Initially conceived as a temporary measure, the hulks, McKay argues, can be viewed in the first instance as a response to overcrowding elsewhere in Georgian England's decrepit gaols. As she shows, their persistence coincided with profound changes to the character of English penal institutions and the way

they were understood. Hence the hulks came to exist in parallel to the nascent modern prison and to be seen eventually as its unacceptable antithesis: filthy, rotten, social and disorderly as opposed to sanitary, sturdy, silent (and/or solitary) and controlled. As such, their end was inevitable: despite attempted reforms from the 1820s onwards, the hulks, McKay observes, 'were simply not compatible with new mid-century ideas of what a prison should be.'

Our third article, by **Paul Finegan** at the Dartmoor Prison Museum, shifts to the challenges of curating a prison museum, which, he shows, involve navigating visitor expectations, the responsibility to provide a meaningful and educational experience, and the potential to inform public perceptions of crime and punishment. Finegan outlines research conducted among Dartmoor Prison Museum's visitors, while also exploring the concept of 'dark tourism' — that is, visits to sites associated with tragedies, disaster and death — and its relevance in this context. Visitor responses suggest that the museum succeeds in transporting them through two hundred years of prison history, and that it makes effective (and affective) use of its authentic premises and exhibits. While less than half of its visitors had viewed the museum's website, the notoriety of Dartmoor Prison itself appears to have served as its own advertisement. However, Finegan concludes, the museum's visitors are not primarily dark tourists seeking a sensationalist version of prison history but are instead attracted to it as an important historical site.

It has long been accepted that educational attainment levels among prisoners are persistently low; hence the education of prisoners in order to reform them is, historically, among prison policy's long-standing objectives. In her article for the edition, **Ros Crone** charts the developing role of schoolmasters and schoolmistresses in prisons across the 19th century, which coincided with important changes in national education policy and practice beyond prison walls. Crone explores the social backgrounds and working lives of those involved in education in local gaols, new government prisons and, later, the long-term convict prison system. She shows that by the mid-century, the role of schoolmaster or schoolmistress could be an attractive career prospect, providing benefits and allowing professional development. However, by the end of the century prison education had been curtailed and this was no longer the case.

Alyson Brown and **Michael Cawley** explore a topic hitherto neglected by penal historians but, historically, of great importance to prisoners themselves: namely, their use of tobacco. Drawing upon newspaper reports and prison memoirs, Brown and Cawley focus mainly on the interwar decades,

which saw a gradual and uneven shift in tobacco's status in English prisons, beginning in 1922, from outright contraband to key behavioural incentive (and, conversely, means of punishment if and when denied). Following a smoking ban in all English prisons after 2018, this trajectory has now come full circle. Meanwhile, as Brown and Cawley observe, tobacco retains its unique cachet among prisoners, as currency, cultural practice and source of comfort; its blanket prohibition is therefore inevitably fraught.

Kiran Mehta then turns to a key period in prison history, the late 18th and early 19th century, examining the day-to-day management of London's late-Georgian prisons. While research on this period often focuses on well-known elite campaigners and key political voices in the prison reform movement, Mehta instead concentrates on the prisons themselves, looking at their staff, inmates, organisation and administration, and at the ways in which new ideas of reform were implemented. Her approach reveals that prison officers and prisoners had their own views about new penal methods and forms of management, which they sought to influence and shape inside the prisons where they lived and worked.

Brumby's focus is the punishment of juvenile offenders: three reformatory ships moored in the Mersey and the Thames, complemented by ten industrial training ships located at points around the British Isles. She concentrates primarily on the former (reserved for boys sentenced for criminal offences), showing that despite their reputation for demanding labour and harsh discipline, reformatory ships provided young inmates a stable environment, circumscribed opportunity for leisure, and, crucially, education beyond the level they might have obtained on shore. This was because the ships' ostensible purpose was to train boys for a life at sea (believed necessary to maintain Britain's maritime primacy); hence, alongside basic literacy and numeracy, they were taught geography, navigation and mapmaking. In fact, as Brumby demonstrates, only a minority of boys eventually followed this path, although she concludes the article by examining the cases of two who, having graduated from industrial training ships, did go to sea, but whose careers then led to markedly different outcomes.

Concluding the edition, the final article explores issues of race and colonialism. **Elena Ghiggino** examines the experiences of Black people with criminal convictions in the early 19th century. Historical evidence about race or ethnicity in the criminal justice system can be very limited or opaque in surviving early prison records and archival material and is also often shaped by stereotypes and racialised language. Here Ghiggino uses a micro-historical approach, employing two detailed case studies to

illuminate the interactions that two men of African descent had with the penal system. Records from Ilchester Gaol and Stafford County Gaol reveal the men's experience of the courts and imprisonment and suggest that if such prisoners were able to 'fit in' with the perceived goals of prison reform, they would be given opportunities such as early release and subsequent employment, regardless of their ethnicity.

Taken as a whole, the research presented in this special historical edition demonstrates both the salience of the past to current debates around prison

policy and the ways in which new approaches, topics, research methods and archival discoveries continue to extend and enrich our knowledge and understanding of prison history. We hope that PSJ readers find the edition useful, interesting and enjoyable.

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