

Reforming from inside: How prisoners and prison staff transformed London prisons, 1770-1820

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The late 18th century has long been seen as a transformative period in English prison history. It witnessed the blossoming of a prison reform movement, spearheaded by John Howard, and it saw unprecedented investment in and restructuring of prisons across the country as enthusiasm for reform caught fire. Reformers had broad objectives: to make prisons healthy, secure, orderly, and capable of effecting the moral transformation of prison inmates—or at the very least to avoid making them worse. Administrative change was key to this wider programme. As Howard explained in his popular work, *The State of the Prisons in England and Wales*, ‘without a due attention to the economy [sic] and government of a prison, it is evident that no contrivance of structure can secure it from being the abode of wickedness, disease and misery’ (p. 49).¹

Responsibility for prisons lay with sheriffs and justices of the peace, the monarch’s representatives in the counties and cities. In practice, however, these authorities delegated their power to prison keepers. These men (and some women) assumed financial responsibility for the prisons, including paying for most repairs and for hiring assistants. Typically, they did not receive a salary from the county; rather, many frequently paid for the privilege to run the institution. To recoup their costs, and ideally make a profit, keepers charged prisoners various fees, such as for locking and unlocking prison gates on a prisoner’s commitment and discharge, and sold them various goods, including food and alcohol, bedding, and higher-quality rooms. In operating prisons, keepers were guided by

parliamentary and local injunctions, though these mainly focused on detailing and restraining the type and amount of fees that could be demanded from prisoners. Within these broad guidelines and with relatively little oversight, keepers and their small staffs were left to govern prisons as they saw fit.² Against this, reformers and their allies on county benches sought to make prisons rule-bound, public institutions. Prisons, they argued, should not be run as private or commercial enterprises. They pushed for local authorities to draw up written rules to govern all aspects of prison life, for prisons to be funded by government authorities and staffed with salaried public servants, and for authorities to play a larger supervisory role.³ These proposals took time to implement, and implementation varied across the country, but historians generally agree that most elements of the ‘Howardian’ reform programme had been adopted in most of the larger and many of the smaller prisons in England by the mid 19th century.⁴

This article reconsiders the origin of reform ideas and explores the impact of such ideas on those working and living in prisons, both prison staff and prisoners. It focuses on the period from 1780 to 1820 and on prisons in the London metropolis, which in this period included the City of London, the City of Westminster and part of the counties of Middlesex and Surrey. In addition to shedding light on the actual experience of officeholding and incarceration, this article makes a case for seeing prison officers and prisoners as agents of reform, playing an important role in crafting of the reformed prison. To get inside the prison and recover day-to-day interactions, this piece draws mainly on internal prison records and on local government

1. Howard, J. (1777). *The State of the Prisons in England and Wales*. London.

2. Though prisoners, notably, crafted and enforced their own ordinances, at least in London. For pre-reform prisons in London, the best study remains Sheehan, W. J. (1975). *The London Prison System, 1666-1795* [Unpublished Ph.D. thesis]. University of Maryland; See also DeLacy, M. (1986). *Prison Reform in Lancashire* (ch. 1). Stanford University Press; See also Ignatieff, M. (1978). *A Just Measure of Pain: The Penitentiary in the Industrial Revolution, 1750-1850* (ch. 1). Pantheon Books.

3. Mehta, K. (2025). *To Detain or To Punish: Magistrates and the Making of the London Prison System, 1750-1840*. McGill-Queen’s University Press.

4. See for example: McGowen, R. (1998). The Well-Ordered Prison: England, 1780-1865. In N. Morris & D. Rothman. (Eds.), *Oxford History of the Prison* (pp. 71-99). Oxford University Press.

accounts, including minute books and reports authored by magisterial prison committees, letters sent to or from prisons, and the journals of prison officers.

The story of prison reform is usually told from the perspective of individual reformers, like Howard, who fought against established practice and apparently pressured those who administered and operated the prisons to change. Such accounts, however, neglect the important role played by prison staff, many of whom saw clear benefits to administrative reform and pushed actively for these changes.

Prison officers, for instance, had long urged local authorities to assume more of the financial burden of running prisons. As the cost of operating prisons increased and the profits from prisoner fees contracted in the 18th century, such efforts intensified. Keepers in Middlesex regularly petitioned the county bench for assistance with paying for prison repairs, alleging their inability to afford the cost themselves.⁵ Keepers in Surrey, south of London, successfully convinced the magistrates to provide them with additional income to hire extra assistants to manage the prison.⁶ Other officers, including surgeons, pleaded with magistrates to formalise their roles and to provide them with proper remuneration for their services.⁷ Howard's calls to make prisons properly public institutions, then, found ready support amongst some prison staff, who in previous decades had pressed, sometimes successfully for greater public support. Reformers' efforts marked an escalation and organisation of this earlier, uncoordinated campaigning.

Although the movement for prison reform had broad popular support, the translation of ideas into practice was a contested and drawn-out process. County authorities were reluctant to increase the burden on ratepayers—that is, local taxpayers—by

assuming full financial responsibility for prisons, and some were also disinclined to create extra work for themselves by playing a larger role in daily prison operation. Prisons, after all, were only one of magistrates' many areas of responsibility. Consequently, in London, prison staff played a key role in pressuring local authorities to embrace elements of Howardian administrative reform.

Take, for example, the introduction of detailed, written regulations to govern prisons. At some prisons, namely houses of correction, which primarily held prisoners who had been sentenced to imprisonment as a punishment, magistrates readily embraced the call to establish codes of regulations and took the lead in drafting these. As reformers like Howard had hoped, these rules laid out in considerable detail the obligations of prison officers, the routine and expected conduct of prisoners, and a system for magisterial supervision. Yet magistrates took a less active approach to managing prisons that mostly held individuals before trial, gaols (now commonly spelled jails) and compters (originally created to hold sheriffs' prisoners). They did not draw up new, written rules, and as a result, keepers and their inferior officers were left to decide how to run the institutions within the broad, pre-reform-era guidelines.⁸

This lack of instruction frustrated some officers, who were forced to find ways to manage increasingly large and heterogenous populations with little support from local authorities and whose management styles were increasingly exposed to public and parliamentary scrutiny. In 1813, for example, the Newgate keeper, John Addison Newman, wrote to the City magistrates about the 'real need for specific, detailed regulations' (p. 233).⁹ In the absence of such instructions, Newman had devised his own, an arrangement which seems to

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5. London Lives, 1690-1800 [hereafter LL], www.londonlives.org. LMSMP501900023-4 (December 1720). Petition of Gilpin Marwick; LL. LMSMGO400010178 (27 August 1723). Orders of the Middlesex Quarter Sessions; LL. LMSMGO556010202-3 (8 September 1737). Orders of the Middlesex Quarter Sessions.

6. The London Archives [hereafter TLA], London, United Kingdom. cl/032/01/034 (1783). Copy of Letter from Gibbs to Templeman

7. Surrey History Centre, Woking, United Kingdom. QS2/6/1757/Misc[II]/41 (1757). Petition by Prison Keeper.

8. For a detailed discussion of prison reform in London see footnote 3: Mehta (2025).

9. Sheehan, W. J. (1977). Finding Solace in Eighteenth-Century Newgate. In J. S. Cockburn (Ed.), *Crime in England 1550-1800* (pp.229-245). Methuen.

have worked fairly well for several years, but which was now under threat, with some prisoners publicly challenging Newman's authority to enact new rules. Newman begged the City magistrates to either confirm his rules or adopt others.¹⁰ Yet, a new code for Newgate had still not been approved in 1817, at which point Elizabeth Fry, a Quaker prison reformer, and a new keeper, William Brown, acted to fill the gap. While Fry assumed responsibility for drawing up rules to govern female prisoners, Brown deemed it 'his indispensable duty' to issue 'temporary orders merely for the present regulation and government of the gaol'.¹¹ Not only, then, were prison officers essential in convincing authorities of the need for written rules, but at times they had the most influence over the content of those rules.

In addition to shaping the adoption of written rules, gaol and comptroller officers in the 1810s played a leading role in pressuring local authorities to raise staff salaries, procure additional staff, and provide supplies for prisoners. The fight over staff salaries is illustrative of these wider struggles; it also highlights the ambiguous effects of the policies, and the diverse attitudes held towards them.

Howard initially took up the cause of prison reform after seeing people discharged in court nevertheless returned to prison due to their failure to pay the fees they owed prison and court officers. The abolition of fees, and the substitution of staff salaries in their place, was consequently a central plank of his reform programme.¹² London authorities in the late 18th century were broadly supportive of calls to provide salaries for prison staff; indeed, some officers had long been paid stipends.¹³ However, views on abolishing fees were more mixed. While authorities banned most fee-taking at houses of correction, they

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continued to allow the practice at gaols and compters. The salaries provided to gaol and comptroller officers were relatively small, so fees and emoluments continued to make up most of officers' income. In this way, magistrates limited the potential cost of prison operation on the tax-paying public. This situation may have suited some officers, especially those who worked at large prisons or prisons with at least a few well-off prisoners, as they could make sizable (though unpredictable) amounts from fees and other charges. In the 1810s, when City authorities paid the Newgate keeper £450 annually, he also received between £600 and £1,000 from prisoner fees and rents. In the same period, Newgate turnkeys typically made around £220 annually, yet their salary amounted to only a little more than £27.¹⁴ The question of fee-taking was settled in 1815 after Parliament banned the practice.¹⁵ City authorities complied with the legislation, but they did not immediately move to increase officers' salaries. Officers, though, quickly began petitioning the magistrates for compensation. As the principal turnkeys of Newgate noted, without fees and the other traditional benefits, 'the office was not worth holding'.¹⁶ By banding together to insist on greater remuneration, prison officers impelled government officials to raise their wages to satisfactory levels.

So far, we have focused on instances in which prison officers either anticipated or embraced proposals to reform the administration of prisons. Yet reform schemes were not universally welcomed, and some prison officials seem to have mourned the loss of traditional management practices. For example, while some officers encouraged magistrates to assume full financial responsibility for prisons, others regretted the abolition of prison fees that this entailed. Reluctant to

10. TLA. COL/CA/GAC/03/001 (July 1813). Petition of John Addison Newman, Court of Aldermen Gaol Committee Papers.

11. (10 May 1817). Rules Suggested by the Ladies Appointed for Employment and Management of Female Prisoners. Court of Alderman Gaol Committee Papers (COL/CA/GAC/03/002). TLA; (11 July 1817). Orders for Newgate. Alderman Gaol Committee Papers (COL/CA/GAC/03/002). TLA.

12. Howard, J. (1784). *The State of the Prisons in England and Wales* (pp. 29-30). London.

13. Mehta, K. (2025). *To Detain or To Punish: Magistrates and the Making of the London Prison System, 1750-1840* (pp. 107, 114, 116-7). McGill-Queen's University Press.

14. Report on Gaols in the City of London, 1813-14, British Parliamentary Papers [iv.249] p. 7; TLA. COL/CA/GAC/03/002 [no date but c.1816]. Petition of Davis, Smart and Bishop [Turnkeys of Newgate].

15. 55 Geo III c. 50.

16. See footnote 14: (1816) Petition of Davis, Smart and Bishop. See also TLA. COL/CA/GAC/03/002 [c.1816]. Petition of W.E. Hardy; TLA. COL/CA/GAC/03/002 [c. 1816] Petition of William Hutchinson Box.

abandon the old perquisites of prison work, several officers were subsequently accused of continuing to accept gratuities from prisoners. In September 1817, for instance, the principal assistant of Newgate, W. E. Hardy, was charged with accepting money from a prisoner, Mrs Hamilton, to improve the quality of her accommodation. The Aldermen opted not to punish him in this instance, perhaps recognising that old habits might take time to change or perhaps unwilling to let a senior officer go. Still, Hardy was warned that, in future, if he received any money, fees or other gratuities from prisoners, he would be discharged from office.¹⁷

Some prisoners also lamented the abolition of certain prison fees, particularly garnish or ward dues. Traditionally, inmates had been allowed to demand from all new prisoners a small amount of money to help pay for communal goods and services, including fuel, candles, cleaning tools and so on. The ban on fee-taking threatened this system. Some prisoners petitioned the magistrates requesting that, if the ban remained in place, the City take on the burden of providing prisoners with such allowances.¹⁸ Others, though, fought to preserve garnish. As a group of debtors explained in their petition to the City magistrates, 'the exaction of these fees has proved the means of keeping this side of the prison select, and at an expence never likely to be found faults with, because it is optional'.¹⁹ For these debtors then, garnish was a means of segregation. It allowed them to police the boundaries of their ward to ensure that only men of a certain class were admitted, thus preserving their 'respectability'.²⁰ Administrative reform, especially the growing involvement of magistrates in regulating prison practice, was resisted by these prisoners because it threatened prisoner self-governance.

Prison reform in late 18th century England was certainly popularised and propelled forward by elite campaigners, but it was not a movement wholly external to prisons. Unsurprisingly, those who lived and worked in prisons had views on the form they should take, and many had long sought to shape their operation. Consequently, as this section has highlighted, some prison officers used the heightened interest in reform to address long-standing grievances, and some put considerable pressure on government officials to adopt proposals over which they were dragging their feet. Others, officers and prisoners, resisted changes to prison administration and tried to slow down their implementation. Regardless, systems

of prison management and practices of officeholding were not transformed overnight. Some traditional practices continued illicitly, and habits took time to change. In the final section, we will look more closely at the ways that prison staff and prisoners responded to the introduction of administrative reforms, focusing particularly on reactions to changes in the nature of holding office.

A central concern of prison reform in the late 18th and early 19th century was the transformation of officeholding. Reformers aimed to minimise the discretionary authority of prison keepers and other staff; they sought to establish new standards of behaviour; and they looked to make officers more accountable to county and city authorities for their actions. Consequently, many of the new rules introduced into London's prisons between the 1790s and 1830s focused on staff conduct. Their roles and responsibilities were newly laid out in great detail, as were the punishments for failing to adhere to them. For keepers, their duties included going each day into every room and cell in the prison, seeing every prisoner daily, and keeping various account books, including a journal of daily occurrences and records of prison labour, amongst many other obligations.²¹ Considerable stress was placed on officers' demeanour. The Middlesex house of correction keeper, for example, was to 'guard against every impulse of personal resentment'; he was not to hit prisoners, unless in self-defence. 'Much less', the rules continued, 'can it tend to any good purpose to give his orders in a violent or insolent tone, or attend with oaths; he should command with temper; enforce his just authority with firmness and punish resistance without favor or partiality'.²²

Some keepers embraced this transformation, seeing benefits and opportunities for themselves, as highlighted in the previous section, but others found it impossible to adapt. For example, although Newgate keepers had long sought greater guidance from the City magistrates, once new rules were implemented in 1817, the recently-appointed Newgate keeper resigned his post, complaining that the new system had created 'excessive labour and anxiety' and 'injured [his] health and spirit'.²³ In a subsequent letter to the City magistrates, he fiercely defended his capabilities and reputation. Not only did he claim to have 'more experience than any other prison keeper in England', but he declared, 'I have reason to believe that I possess all the faculties sufficient to have managed the prison

17. TLA. COL/CA/GAC/01/001 (23 September 1817). Court of Aldermen Gaol Committee Minutes.

18. See footnote 17. Court of Aldermen Gaol Committee Minutes (1817).

19. TLA. COL/CA/GAC/03/001 (6 July 1814). Petition from Newgate Debtors.

20. See footnote 19: (6 July 1814). Petition from Newgate Debtors.

21. TLA. COL/CA/GAC/03/002 (1816-17), Letter Regarding Annuity; TLA. MA/G/GEN/1226 (1794). General Rules and Regulations for Middlesex House of Correction.

22. See footnote 21: (1794). Rules and Regulations for Middlesex House of Correction.

23. See footnote 21: (1816-17). Letter regarding Annuity.

under the former system'. However, the new system marked a radical break from traditional prison management, and ultimately, it demanded too much from him for too little reward: 'the new rules which have been thought necessary for me to adopt ... could never be contemplated by me or I believe I should not have applied to succeed the late [keeper]'.²⁴

While some keepers struggled under the weight of their new responsibilities, others found it difficult to match the new ideals of officeholding—or so some prisoners claimed. Indeed, letters and petitions written by prison inmates to London magistrates in the 1810s suggest that many supported the attempts to improve the standards of prison management and officer conduct, and they readily availed themselves of new systems of prison inspection to improve their experience of incarceration. In 1817, for instance, a considerable portion of prisoners, confined for debt in Whitecross Street Prison, took their numerous complaints respecting the governorship of Edward Kirby to the City of London prisons committee.²⁵ A key concern was Kirby's style of management, specifically his and his officers' demeanour and language in treating with prisoners. The prisoner-petitioners referred to a specific incident to provide a wider picture. As the prisoners told it, one night, when 'peace and quiet reigned in every part of the prison', a 'Gentleman carrying his violin' was requested by another to play a particular tune. The musician 'touched the tune very lightly' at which point Kirby not only yelled loudly 'in very coarse language and in a tone at once taunting and authoritative to desist' but also threatened to hit the musician. Moreover, he continued 'to indulge in a strain of invective and scurrilous abuse — every way calculated to provoke reply and execute tumult'.²⁶

This complaint reads like a checklist marking all the ways that Kirby failed to meet the expectations required of the men running reformed prisons. He used coarse language; he was hot-headed; he lacked control over his emotions and reactions; he was physically violent and threatened the prisoners. In response to such actions, the prisoner-petitioners stressed, they acted

with restraint, obeying his commands quietly. The new standards of officeholding, set out in such considerable detail in new prison regulations, gave prisoners an opportunity to forcefully challenge the conditions of their confinement. As this example highlights, it allowed prisoners to clearly illustrate the ways in which a given officer was failing to meet the conditions of his or her employment, as defined by local government officials, thereby strengthening the prisoners' case against prison officials. More generally, prisoners were well aware of the new rules and they were vigilant, ready to complain to magistrates whenever staff, finding it difficult to adapt to the new responsibilities and standards of behaviour, acted in breach of such regulations.

It must be stressed that prisoners were not a homogenous whole and they consequently responded to prison reform in different ways. Some, we have seen, embraced the new standards set out for prison officers' conduct as it held out the promise that inmates would be treated in a more humane manner. There is also evidence that some prisoners appreciated the adoption of detailed, written regulations as these spelled out how both officers and inmates should act. Such rules protected prisoners from being dealt with in an arbitrary manner. Debtors imprisoned in Norwich, for

example, were quick to contact the magistrates to seek assistance resolving 'inconveniences under which we labour by the existing laws of the prison being departed from, and others tolerated by custom rigidly enforced in their stead'.²⁷ They specifically alleged that the keeper was applying rules in an inconsistent manner, such that prisoners were receiving noticeably different treatment. They were also unhappy that the keeper had been adapting the processes for prisoners receiving visitors even though the written policies had not changed. 'We only request,' they wrote, 'such protection to our comforts those rules afford in their present state, and an impartial administration of them, by those who have the power of enforcement'.²⁸ Such comments suggest that the prisoners supported reformist efforts to limit the discretion of prison officers.

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24. See footnote 21: (1816-17). Letter regarding Annuity.

25. TLA. COL/CA/GAC/03/001 (1816). Appendix of Cases of Complaints from Debtors.

26. See footnote 25: (1816). Appendix of Cases of Complaints from Debtors.

27. Norfolk Record Office, Norwich, United Kingdom. C/Saa 1/8 (2 February 1827). Letter from Debtors in Norwich Castle.

28. See footnote 27: (2 February 1827). Letter from Debtors in Norwich Castle.

Other prisoners took a more critical view of efforts to reform prison officeholding and administrative practices. Some were especially concerned with how the new systems curtailed their autonomy and eroded their customary rights and privileges. Traditionally, prisoners had played a central role in governing their own affairs. They drew up and enforced ordinances that gave some structure and order to prison life. They managed and dispensed money and other gifts given to prisoners as charity. They filled important roles within the prison government, helping prison officers to inspect and police the wards, and so on.²⁹ Some debtors in Whitecross Street Prison, therefore, saw the introduction of new regulations not as a means of protection but as a threat to their traditional ways of living. In September 1816, they wrote to the City prisons committee challenging the legality and practicality of many of the new rules. For example, of the rule stating that no provisions or other articles, other than milk and bread, should be sold within the prison, the petitioners declared, 'contrary to law and usage and if persisted in, it will disable many persons who would otherwise subsist in some degree of comfort from having more than one or two precarious meals in a week'.³⁰ For similar reasons, some prisoners regretted the professionalisation of the prison service. As authorities came to see it as inappropriate for prisoners to hold positions of power within prisons, prisoners gradually lost privileged roles and the benefits that came with them. Such positions and perks were highly prized by prisoners, and they fought to retain them.³¹

The new administrative systems introduced into prisons during the reform period looked to transform the operation of prisons. They sought to make prisons

public institutions with set rules, responsible officers, and attentive inspectors. Many of the changes ultimately restricted the autonomy of prisoners to shape the pattern of prison life, a shift which some prisoners—especially those in positions of power within prisons and those with disposable income—clearly regretted and fought against. Nevertheless, reform also offered prisoners a powerful language with which to critique prison staff and prison operation. Many quickly recognised this potential, drawing upon the new rules and the codes of officer conduct to contest the terms of their confinement and shape the nature of incarceration. Likewise, for prison staff, administrative reform presented both challenges and opportunities. Officers were key actors within the reform movement. They devised new policies, and they tirelessly pressed government authorities to enact change. For some, however, the changes were too considerable. Certain officers found the responsibilities newly placed upon them too burdensome and restrictive, especially given the relatively low pay they received. Others found it difficult to abandon practices that had long been tolerated but were now unlawful. The transformation of prisons into properly public institutions and of prison officers into a professional body was an extended and contested process. Those responsible were not just prominent reformers or government officials, but also prison officers and prisoners.

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29. Sheehan, W. J. (1975). *The London Prison System, 1666-1795* (pp.423-7). [Unpublished Ph.D. thesis]. University of Maryland; Innes, J. (2009). *Inferior Politics: Social Problems and Social Politics in Eighteenth-Century Britain*. Oxford University Press.

30. TLA. COL/CA/GAC/03/001 (6 September 1816). Petition of Prisoners on Middlesex Side of New Debtors Prison.

31. TLA. COL/CA/GAC/03/002 (1816-17). Petition of Prisoners on Felon's Side of Newgate.