

The rise and fall of the prison schoolmaster and schoolmistress in 19th century England

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The Gaols Act 1823 represented the first attempt by a British government to impose some degree of uniformity on regimes in local prisons in England and Wales. It was a response to the diversity of experience of imprisonment, which reformers argued gave rise to abuses and generated high rates of recidivism. Attention focused on the classification of prisoners (to separate the convicted from those on remand, and ‘serious offenders’ from ‘petty criminals’), the provision of employment and hard labour (to prevent idleness and to punish), and religious instruction (to reform or rehabilitate prisoners). Among its various rules and regulations, the following clause stands out: ‘Provision shall be made in all Prisons for the Instruction of Prisoners of both Sexes in Reading and Writing’.¹

The ‘reading and writing clause’ (as it became known) was, to some extent, based on existing practice in prisons. Efforts were already being made at some local prisons, at the new convict prison at Millbank and even on some convict prison hulks to teach illiterate prisoners how to read and write. While a degree of literacy was necessary to read the Bible (and to better facilitate religious instruction), contemporaries also believed that education had a civilising — and thus decriminalising — effect. The clause was also likely devised by educational reformers in Parliament, who were disappointed about the failure of a recent bill for universal education in England and Wales and were keen to get something done.² In the event, the clause was a milestone for both penal and educational reform: it marked the birth of state-funded education in England and Wales. It also drove forward the expansion of prison education in England. By 1848, the majority

of local prisons and all convict prisons had some sort of scheme in place for the education of prisoners. In the wake of the Prison Act 1865, the proportion of prisons with education programmes exceeded 90 percent. By 1880, every prison in England had a formal education programme in which the three Rs — reading, writing and arithmetic — were taught.³ But who was doing the teaching?

This article seeks to answer that question, focusing in particular on the presence of qualified teachers in English local and convict prisons during the nineteenth century. It contributes to a relatively discrete literature on nineteenth-century prison officers, and sheds light on one aspect of a frequently overlooked element of the nineteenth-century penal regime: prison education.⁴ The article begins with an account of the various approaches of prison administrators to the identification and appointment of individuals to teach illiterate (and sometimes innumerate) prisoners in the wake of the Gaols Act 1823. It will explain why the authorities began to show a preference for trained and/or experienced schoolmasters and, to a lesser extent, schoolmistresses, and how, between the 1840s and 1860s, the role became an attractive career prospect. Finally, the article will account for the fall of the prison schoolmaster and schoolmistress in the last third of the nineteenth century, a process which severed remaining connections between the penal and educational world.

Finding teachers

While the Gaols Act 1823 insisted that prisoners should be taught to read and write, it gave no direction on how they should be taught including, crucially, by

1. Gaols, etc (England) Act [Gaols Act], 1823, 4 Geo. IV, c.64, section 10 (10).
2. For an account of the spread of prison education in England, see: Crone, R. (2022). *Illiterate Inmates: Educating Criminals in Nineteenth-Century England*. Oxford University Press.
3. See footnote 2: Crone (2022).
4. Specific studies of nineteenth-century prison staff include: Thomas, J. E. (1972). *The English Prison Officer since 1850: A Study in Conflict*. Routledge & Kegan Paul; Johnston, H. (2008). Moral Guardians? Prison officers, prison practice and ambiguity in the nineteenth century. In H. Johnston (Ed.), *Punishment and Control in Historical Perspective* (pp. 77-94). Palgrave Macmillan; Johnston, H. (2008). Reclaiming the prisoner: the role and training of prison officers in England, 1877-1914. *Howard Journal of Criminal Justice*, 47(3), 297-312. Several other studies contain chapters or information about specific staff, but they do not make prison staff their main focus.

whom. Rules for the management of convict prisons and hulks were similarly vague. Great variety in provision resulted, as institutional officials experimented with a range of different approaches. The quickest, cheapest and most expedient way to meet the terms of the Act was to supply prisoners with elementary books, pens and paper and let them get on with it themselves. Convicts on board the *Hardy* hulk at Tipnor (now commonly known as Tipner, Portsmouth), for example, spent their 'leisure hours after public labour ... very usefully, in mutually instructing each other in reading [and] writing'.⁵ In their annual reports, many prison chaplains reported the benefits of mutual instruction — some prisoners did learn to read and write, and engagement in this useful activity lifted spirits and morals. Others drew attention to the problems of unsupervised learning. The chaplain at Bedford County Gaol complained that male prisoners used the pens they had been given to draw in the books or write secret letters to friends.⁶

Mutual instruction, however, was soon eradicated in English prisons as a consequence of the rise in the mid-1830s of two new systems of prison discipline: silence and separation. Under the former, prisoners were kept in association but strict silence was imposed, enforced by a system of harsh punishments. Under the separate system, prisoners were accommodated in individual cells and let out only for exercise, to attend chapel, and for some forms of work, and even then, their separation was preserved through the use of peaked caps and physical partitions. Separation also had a reformatory purpose: strict isolation, it was believed, would break the hardened resolve of the prisoner, preparing him or her to receive Christian messages of salvation through repentance from the chaplain. Both systems marked the final stage in attempts to control interactions between prisoners, to prevent the 'contamination' of potentially reformable individuals by 'hardened

criminals', and to suppress prisoner subcultures which posed a threat to authority.⁷

The spread of silence and separation together with a clause in the Prison Act 1839 which forbade the employment of those accused or convicted of crime as schoolmasters or in the instruction of any other prisoner also put an end to the use of prisoner-schoolmasters (literate prisoners officially appointed to the role and often compensated for it) and prisoners as monitors, or teaching assistants, under an appointed teacher.⁸ Both practices were already on the decline. Officials often struggled to find trustworthy prisoners imprisoned for long enough to appoint as teachers, while the monitorial method (whereby monitors, instructed by teachers, would impart lessons to their group of peers) was falling out of favour both inside and outside the prison.

Other sources of free teaching included philanthropic visitors and the family members of senior prison officers. Not all visitors offered to teach prisoners — most limited their activity to reading the Bible aloud to individuals or small groups — and of those who did teach, most only taught reading. Through the 1830s and 1840s, prison visiting declined, both because it fell out of fashion and because prison authorities were becoming less welcoming, especially to visitors who were Dissenters. Family members of officers, often women, were not always considered suitable or reliable. At

Ely Gaol, the governor's daughter, a little girl of 11, taught the female prisoners.⁹ The head turnkey's wife taught the female prisoners at St Albans Gaol, but was frequently absent owing to successive pregnancies.¹⁰

Senior officers sometimes offered teaching too. While the governor at Wisbech House of Correction found it gave him better knowledge of the prisoners, most were too busy to sustain it.¹¹ Matrons were frequently required to teach the female prisoners as part of their duties because the 1823 Act had forbidden

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5. Parliament. (1829). *Two reports of John Henry Capper, Esq. superintendent of ships and vessels*. Parliamentary Papers [hereafter PP] England and Wales, XVIII.315, 9.
6. Parliament. (1837). *Reports and Schedules Pursuant to Gaol Acts*. PP Eng & Wales, XLV.1, 7.
7. McGowen, R. (1995). The Well-Ordered Prison: England, 1780-1865. In N. Morris & D. J. Rothman (Eds.), *The Oxford History of the Prison: The Practice of Punishment in Western Society*. Oxford University Press.
8. Prisons Act, 1839, 2 & 3 Vict. c.56, section 6 (4).
9. Parliament. (1850). *Inspectors of Prisons, Northern & Eastern District, 15th Report*. PP England & Wales, XXVIII.291, 215.
10. Parliament. (1845). *Inspectors of Prisons, Home District, 10th Report*. PP England & Wales, XXIII.1, 241.
11. Parliament. (1852-3). *Inspectors of Prisons, Northern & Eastern District, 17th Report*. PP England & Wales, LII.1, 13.

the use of male teachers unless they were chaperoned.¹² Because chaplains were responsible for religious instruction, skills teaching was often placed within their department. While some willingly or unwillingly gave lessons in reading and writing, most argued that because of their position and workload, they should be the supervisors of instruction, not the teachers. Finally, subordinate officers, or warders, were sometimes invited to teach, but most had little or no experience, and chaplains and prison inspectors often expressed doubts about their capabilities.

The rise of the prison schoolmaster (and schoolmistress)

The increasingly restrictive nature of the penal environment — the desire to limit contact between prisoners and to exclude outsiders who were not answerable to the authorities — and the unsuitability of many existing categories of staff combined to necessitate the employment of a prison schoolmaster and sometimes a prison schoolmistress. On the face of it, the evidence suggests that, in local prisons at least, the first generation of prison schoolmasters employed in the 1830s were rarely qualified nor had any prior experience in teaching. However, given the lack of teacher training opportunities before c.1840, this was not unusual even among elementary school teachers. Prison schoolmasters often came from other areas of employment; they had been tradesmen (for example, millwrights, woollen drapers, carpenters) or soldiers. A significant number worked part-time, combining prison

teaching with another occupation. For example, in the late 1830s, the schoolmaster at Shrewsbury County Gaol was a local publican who taught prisoners in the morning and pulled pints in the evening.¹³ They tended to be older men, aged in their forties or fifties, and their salaries, between £30 and £50 per annum, fell short of the average salary of an elementary schoolmaster (£60 to £70 per annum).¹⁴

From the late 1830s, changes in mainstream education and penal policy led to an increase in the number prison schoolmasters, a new interest in their qualifications for the role, and the creation of the post of prison schoolmistress. Concerns about the quality of teaching in elementary schools prompted the establishment of new teacher training colleges and, in 1846, a state-financed pupil-teacher system through which certificates were issued to qualified teachers.¹⁵ In 1835, the Home Office devised a new policy which required the appointment of schoolmasters in prisons where daily populations exceeded 50.¹⁶ New regulations for local prisons published in 1840 further specified that schoolmistresses should be employed in large prisons.¹⁷ During the 1840s, prison inspectors began to insist, in their reports, on the appointment of 'properly qualified' full-time schoolmasters. In 1842, subordinate officers in local prisons, including schoolmasters and schoolmistresses, gained the right to petition for a pension when leaving their post due to old age or ill-health. This was a benefit denied to most elementary school teachers which made prison teaching more attractive.

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12. Gaols, etc (England) Act [Gaols Act], 1823, 4 Geo. IV, c.64, section 10 (3).
13. Parliament. (1839). *Inspectors of Prisons, Southern & Western District, 4th Report*. PP England & Wales, XXII.217, 202.
14. Smelser, N. J. (1991). *Social Paralysis and Social Change: British Working-Class Education in the Nineteenth Century*. California University Press.
15. See footnote 14: Smelser (1991); Rich, R. W. (1933). *The Training of Teachers in England and Wales during the Nineteenth Century* (chapters 3-5). Cambridge University Press; Bischof, C. (2019). *Teaching Britain: Elementary Teachers and the State of the Everyday, 1846-1906*. Oxford University Press.
16. The National Archives [hereafter TNA] (1835). HO 21/7: HO Circular, to the Visiting Justices of all Prisons in England and Wales, 12 October 1835. This new policy was based on a recommendation from the 1835 Richmond Committee: *Select Committee on Present State of several Gaols and Houses of Correction in England and Wales (1835)* PP Eng & Wales, XI.495, iv-v.
17. HM Government. (1840). *Regulations for Prisons in England and Wales*. London, rule 178.

These reforms were reflected in recruitment patterns. Advertisements for prison schoolmasters in local and national newspapers called for applicants who were 'accustomed to tuition' or 'competent to give instruction in reading, writing and arithmetic'. Some sought men 'of irreproachable character', or who were members of the Church of England.¹⁸ Salaries ranged from £50 per annum at Worcester County Gaol to £80 per annum at Holloway Prison.¹⁹ Surviving collections of application letters suggest that men with teaching qualifications and/or experience, sometimes extensive, applied for these posts. Successful candidates at Aylesbury County Gaol and Lincoln County Gaol had previously taught adults.²⁰ The average age of schoolmasters on appointment also decreased, suggesting that prison schoolmaster was becoming a career choice rather than a way to make ends meet.²¹

The rise of the local prison schoolmistress was frustrated by the typically small populations of female prisoners at many institutions. This meant that some posts remained part-time. Although advertisements for schoolmistresses rarely mentioned qualifications or experience, two surviving applications from the period were both submitted by women who had taught before.²² Advertisements expressed a preference for single or widowed women, presumably to avoid the interference of family life. Some salaries were competitive and attractive, especially when compared with those of trained schoolmistresses in elementary schools who could expect to earn between £35 and £70 per annum. The schoolmistress at the Westminster House of Correction was paid £62 8s per annum, but this prison had a large number of female prisoners.²³ By way of comparison, authorities at Chester County Gaol

offered applicants for the post of schoolmistress at £25 per annum but also free lodging.²⁴

In the convict prison sector, the professionalisation of schoolmasters and schoolmistresses was much more rapid and complete. This was partly because convict prisons were under the direct control of policymakers in the Home Office and were funded by the Treasury, not by local rate payers (the latter made local authorities very budget-conscious). Convict prisons typically had larger populations of prisoners. Because they accommodated those convicted of serious offences serving long terms of imprisonment either prior to or in lieu of transportation to the Australian penal colonies, there was also more time for schooling and, therefore, potential reformation. However, while scepticism about

the value of educating prisoners serving short terms might have influenced some decisions on the appointment of professional teachers in local prisons, it was certainly not universal. The authorities and senior staff in many local prisons were committed proponents of the potential of education as a reformatory tool.

The first schoolmaster appointed at Millbank Penitentiary in 1824 was paid £100 per annum; this would have been a handsome salary for a trained teacher at an elementary school.²⁵ When the separation of prisoners intensified in the late 1830s, the

teaching team at Millbank was expanded to include two more schoolmasters (each paid £70 to £80) and two schoolmistresses (each paid £60).²⁶ The growth of teacher training in mainstream education coincided with the establishment of new convict prisons at Parkhurst (for juveniles), Pentonville and Portland. The management committee of Parkhurst sought advice from leading educational experts on the appointment

The establishment of the Convict Prison Service in 1850 standardised and further professionalised the role of the convict prison schoolmaster or schoolmistress.

18. For example: [Article title unknown]. (1840, March 28). *Leicester Chronicle*. [Article title unknown]. (1842, July 9). *Leicester Chronicle*. [Article title unknown]. (1843, June 10). *Leeds Mercury*. [Article title unknown]. (1849, November 23). *Essex Standard*.

19. *Berrow's Worcester Journal*, 16 July 1846; *Morning Chronicle*, 29 January 1853.

20. Buckinghamshire Archives, Q/AG/68: Papers regarding the appointment of a schoolmaster Aylesbury County Gaol, 1841-2; Lincolnshire Archives, CoC/4/1/22: Applications for the post of schoolmaster at Lincoln County Gaol, March 1849. Profiles of schoolmasters in annual and inspection reports from the 1840s and 1850s often contain references to previous teaching experience.

21. See footnote 2: Crone (2022).

22. Devon Heritage Centre, 2065M/22: Ellen Budge, St Leonard's Exeter, to the Visiting Magistrates, applying for the post of schoolmistress at Devon County Prison, 2 November 1855; Gloucestershire Archives, Q/AG/30/17: Letter of application from Mary Whiting for the post of schoolmistress, 19 January 1848.

23. Parliament. (1845). *Inspectors of Prisons, Home District, 10th Report*. PP England & Wales, XXIII.1, 430. From 1850, Westminster House of Correction only accommodated females and juvenile males. In 1861, it became a women's prison.

24. *Liverpool Mercury*, 11 December 1846.

25. The National Archives (1824). HO 21/6: Letter from Home Office to Millbank Management Committee approving request of Committee to employ a schoolmaster, 22 July 1824.

26. Parliament. (1839). *Inspectors of Prisons, Home District, 4th Report*. PP Eng & Wales, XXI.1, 13; Parliament (1840). *Inspectors of Prisons, Home District, 5th Report*. PP Eng & Wales, XXV.1, 192.

of schoolmasters. The first principal schoolmaster, David Smith, was appointed on the recommendation of David Stow, educational reformer and inventor of the Glasgow Training System, which emphasised moral instruction, comprehension and learning through play. In 1842, another schoolmaster, E. C. Daintree, was sent to the Battersea Training College to learn new methods of instruction.²⁷ The principal schoolmaster at Pentonville was paid £150 per annum and given lodgings. He also had three assistant schoolmasters.²⁸ From 1847, full-time, professional schoolmasters were employed on convict hulks and at Portland Prison.²⁹

The establishment of the Convict Prison Service in 1850 standardised and further professionalised the role of the convict prison schoolmaster or schoolmistress. Control over the appointment and dismissal of all officers was transferred from institutional management committees to the Directors of Convict Prisons. Staff were organised into a new hierarchy which applied across the sector. Some roles were subdivided into classes with standardised pay. Over time, officers were awarded pay increments and could achieve promotion. Those who remained long enough were entitled to a civil service pension on departure.

Schoolmasters and schoolmistresses were divided into three classes. New teachers were typically appointed as third-class schoolmasters (or mistresses). Through increments and promotions, a third-class schoolmaster who joined the service on £80 per annum could, over the course of his career, achieve an annual salary of £150.³⁰ Schoolmistresses were paid less, but even their salaries exceeded those of female elementary school teachers. Schoolmasters and mistresses who lived outside the prison were also given an allowance for accommodation.

As employees of the Convict Prison Service, teachers were sent by the Directors of Convict Prisons to prisons where they were needed. Promotion, which was dependent on vacancies, also often meant that those who were selected had to be transferred to another prison, and some locations were better than others. An anonymous convict prison schoolmaster, who published his memoirs in the early 1880s, described his reaction when informed of his promotion to first-class master at Dartmoor in the 1860s: 'My countenance just then would have made a picture of

mingled disgust and astonishment. Dartmoor! The thoughts of such a move were anything but pleasant.'³¹

Despite this, conditions for convict prison schoolmasters continued to improve, making the post an attractive proposition. In the 1860s, schoolmasters were given 3 weeks' annual leave each year, pay was increased (up to £160 for first-class masters), and the rank of third-class master was abolished.³² At the same time, pay for teachers in elementary schools declined as a consequence of the introduction of the 1862 Revised Code and 'payment by results', and they remained without any pension entitlement.³³ Negative perceptions of prisons would have dissuaded some from applying. The anonymous convict prison schoolmaster explained that when he applied 'the Education Act had not then passed, and the pay of masters of National Schools was in many cases miserably poor. For nearly a year after leaving training college I sought a situation, and took a post in a convict prison as a [last resort].'³⁴ He later expressed satisfaction with his career choice, even after his transfer to Dartmoor.

Some convict prison chaplains described the role of prison schoolmaster as highly specialised. Reverend Arthur Hill from Portland Prison wrote that the 'office of a prison schoolmaster is not one which any person can fill ... it requires a large amount of educational training, tact, patience, mental ability, and knowledge of life to be successful'.³⁵ Professional teachers in both local and convict prisons brought with them their training and experience from outside the prison, ensuring that there was some alignment of curriculum and pedagogy in prison and mainstream schools. But there were also significant differences. Despite their professionalism, prison teachers were not autonomous, and significant control was exerted by the authorities over what and how they taught. Prison chaplains proved to be vigilant superintendents of instruction. Some became micromanagers, telling their teachers what to teach, to each pupil, every day. Ordained members of the Church of England were never this involved in teaching outside the prison. It allowed chaplains to shape the experience of education, sometimes in ways that could be detrimental to prisoners' progress.

Similarly, systems of prison discipline made teaching in the prison unlike just about anything experienced outside. In some prisons, silence was enforced in the classroom and well before silent

27. The National Archives. (1839). HO 20/8: Letters on the appointment of schoolmasters for Parkhurst Prison, from April to November 1839.

28. Parliament. (1844). *Commissioners for the Government of Pentonville Prison, Second Report*. PP Eng & Wales, XXV.53, 46.

29. The National Archives. (1849). HO 21/12: Contains appointment letters for schoolmasters for hulks and Portland in 1849.

30. *Extracts from Circulars and Correspondence Explanatory of Different Subjects referred to in the Rules and Regulations for Convict Prisons* (1862) London: HMSO, 73-5.

31. 'Sketches of convict life.' (1881, April 2). Leicester Chronicle.

32. *Index to Standing Orders*. (1870), London: HMSO, SO78 and SO85; see footnote 2: Crone (2022).

33. Sylvester, D. W. (1974). Robert Lowe and Education. Cambridge University Press; See footnote 15: Bischof (2019).

34. 'Sketches of convict life.' (1881, November 29). Dundee Courier.

35. Parliament. (1871). *Directors of Convict Prisons: Reports, 1870*. PP England & Wales, XXXI.1, 172.

classrooms became a feature of mainstream elementary education. Dialogue between teacher and pupil was replaced with physical signs and writing.³⁶ Teachers at Preston House of Correction and Brixton Female Convict Prison experimented with Charles Baker's Graduated Reading, a scheme for teaching those with hearing impairment to read.³⁷ In prisons where separation was imposed, some teachers were required to instruct their pupils in partitioned chapels or schoolrooms.

At the same time, these spaces remained strikingly familiar to those acquainted with elementary school classrooms. Many were furnished with large blackboards, and the walls were adorned with moral maxims, the letters of the alphabet and maps of Britain and the world. On his visit to Cold Bath Fields Prison in the late 1850s, Henry Mayhew remarked that 'in ordinary schools the desks are notched and carved with names and initials, or covered all over with writings and drawings; but in this felon academy they were as white and free from ink or incisions as the top of a buttermilk's counter'. He gave the following account of a lesson in this 'silent' prison:

'The schoolmaster is assisted in his duties by two prisoners, who, by their proficiency and good conduct, have been raised to the position of hearers — and to them the scholars repeat their lessons. A big sailor-looking man, with red whiskers growing under his chin, advanced to the hearer's desk. Not a word was spoken as the copy book was handed in. The prison-tutor pointed in silence to a mistake, the pupil nodded, and, on another signal, began to read aloud from what he had written, 'Give every man that asketh, and of him that taketh away thy goods ask him not again.' ... Once the headmaster had occasion to speak. A lad with ruddy skin, and light hair, had a defect in his speech, and could not pronounce his 'r's,' so that he read out, 'Whatsoever is wight that shall ye weceive.' 'Do try to pronounce your r's better,' said the master kindly; and thereupon there was a shuffling of feet from the other pupils, as if the only method of laughing under the silent system was with the shoes'.³⁸

From the mid-1860s, prisoners were increasingly taught in their cells, each receiving between 10 and 20

minutes of individual tuition once or twice a week. Educational apparatus became largely confined to textbooks, slates and pencils. Individual, cellular instruction in prisons was entirely counter to trends in mainstream elementary education where the experience of school and large classes was increasingly the norm. Any potential benefits, such as the tailoring of instruction to individual needs, were rarely realised. Despite this, it could be argued that professional teachers in prisons became experts in adult education and, especially in institutions where attendance at school was compulsory, teaching learners with diverse and complex needs. Unfortunately, the nature of the 19th century prison meant that this valuable experience was rarely shared with educators outside the prison.

The fall of the prison schoolmaster (and schoolmistress)

Systems of prison discipline made teaching in the prison unlike just about anything experienced outside.

While significant advances had been made in the professionalisation of convict prison schoolmasters and schoolmistresses, the position of teachers in the local prison remained precarious. From the 1840s, new disciplinary requirements meant that full-time employees were preferred to part-time appointments. This was much easier to achieve in prisons with large populations of

male or female prisoners. Any time left over after teaching could be used for related duties, such as managing the library, recording the details of newly arrived prisoners, and clerical work for the chaplain or governor. Schoolmistresses might also take on library work and write letters for illiterate prisoners. But these additional tasks rarely filled the time in most prisons which had small populations of female prisoners, and so matrons, and occasionally wardresses, continued to take on the burden of teaching.

Schoolmasters willing to perform warder duties (and vice versa) continued to be appointed, especially in smaller prisons.³⁹ They were rarely qualified or even experienced teachers, and some chaplains complained about the quality of their teaching. Some men who had been appointed as full-time schoolmasters were ordered by the prison authorities to take on duties typically performed by discipline officers. In 1858,

36. See footnote 2: Crone (2022), 133.

37. Parliament. (1853). *Inspectors of Prisons, Northern & Eastern District, 17th Report (1852-3)*. PP England & Wales, LII.1, 46; Parliament (1864). *Directors of Convict Prisons: Reports, 1863*. PP England & Wales, XXVI.209, 225.

38. Mayhew, H., & Binny, J. (1862). *The Criminal Prisons of London and Scenes of London Life*. Griffin, Bohn & Co., 319-320.

39. [Article title unknown]. (1851, January 9). *Nottinghamshire Guardian*. [Article title unknown]. (1865, January 31). *Standard*.

Samuel Parker, lately schoolmaster at Newgate Gaol, sued his former employer for unreasonable dismissal after he complained about the new duties required of him, which included cleaning the chapel, schoolroom and water closets and occasionally serving as warder. Summing up, the judge said 'that he thought a schoolmaster would be degraded in the eyes of his pupils, if, in addition to acting in that capacity, he officiated as a turnkey, and was compelled to clean out closets'. Parker won his case and was awarded 6 months' salary (£45).⁴⁰ This did not, however, establish a precedent. Schoolmasters who performed clerical or warder duties were often put in uniform and became indistinguishable from other discipline officers. As the demands of their other roles increased, they also struggled to devote the time needed to teaching. The continued presence of male and female officers with teaching duties not only hampered full professionalisation in the local sector but also proved to be the thin end of the wedge, foretelling the demise of the prison schoolmaster and schoolmistress.

The nationalisation of local prisons in 1878, whereby control was transferred from local authorities to the Prison Commission (a new subdepartment of the Home Office), and the financial burden from rate payers to the Treasury, provided a fresh opportunity to consider the role of education in prison, and, by extension, the posts of prison schoolmaster and schoolmistress. A Home Office departmental committee chaired by Captain William Henry Fenwick was established to devise a uniform scheme. For the most part, Fenwick's committee reduced the content of education and the conditions of its delivery to the lowest common denominator. They decided that illiterate and innumerate prisoners aged under 40 and sentenced to at least 4 months' imprisonment should receive only the most basic instruction in the three Rs in their cells for 15 minutes twice a week.⁴¹

The process of nationalisation, which had led to the closure of many small prisons, actually increased the proportion of full-time schoolmasters and schoolmistresses across the local prison sector. Despite

this, Fenwick's committee proposed to reintroduce schoolmaster-warders by establishing two classes of teachers: one class of certificated schoolmasters and schoolmistresses, and a second class of uncertificated assistant teachers, appointed from among the warders, who passed an examination, and who would receive an additional £12 per annum.⁴² The Home Secretary, Under Secretary and senior civil servants questioned the need for certificated teachers at all, given the limited degree of education being imparted. A trial of the scheme demonstrated the necessity of having men who were able to teach if education in the prison was 'to be a reality, and not a sham'.⁴³ But the aim over time was to phase out certificated teachers once they had passed on their expertise to their subordinates, leaving a staff of schoolmaster-warders and schoolmistress-wardresses

who would continue to perform some discipline duties alongside their teaching.

Meanwhile, the advantageous position of schoolmasters in the Convict Prison Service was also in decline. Their deteriorating conditions of employment were revealed in the report of a Home Office committee convened in 1883. Promotions from second to first class had been frustrated by the falling numbers of convict prisoners and the closure of some prisons. Many schoolmasters were becoming stuck, for years,

at the top of the salary scale for second-class schoolmasters. At the same time, their salaries had deteriorated in comparison with schoolmasters employed in ordinary elementary schools. The advent of universal elementary education in 1870 had created a new demand for teachers which inflated salaries. According to James Stephen Crees, schoolmaster at Wormwood Scrubs, ordinary board-school schoolmasters were paid between £200 and £300 per year. Crees had worked in National Schools before joining the service, and believed that 'had I remained ... I should have been drawing a larger salary at the present time than I am now'.⁴⁴ The Committee remained sceptical, but in 1890 salaries were increased (up to £200 per annum for a first-class schoolmaster), and from 1893 second-class schoolmasters were

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40. [Article title unknown]. (1858, June 26). *Manchester Times*.

41. Parliament. (1896). *Report of the Departmental Committee on Education and Moral Instruction of Prisoners in Local and Convict Prisons* [hereafter Mitford Committee]. PP England & Wales, XLIV.1, 19, 152.

42. The National Archives. (1880). HO 45/9574/79667: Proposals to fill vacancies in school staff, 25 June 1880.

43. The National Archives. (1880). HO 45/9574/79667: Report of the Departmental Committee on Education in Local Prisons, 15 November 1880.

44. *Report of the Committee Appointed to Enquire into the Position and Prospects of Convict Warders and Broadmoor Asylum Attendants* (1883) London: HMSO, 13-14, 65-7.

automatically promoted to first-class after 20 years' service.⁴⁵

If the persistence of the convict prison schoolmaster (and schoolmistress) offered some hope for the revival of qualified teachers across the penal sector, the 1895 Gladstone Committee provided an ideal opportunity. The Committee has typically been regarded by scholars as a watershed in penal policymaking, signalling a rejection of the punishing and deterrent ambitions of the mid-Victorian reformers and administrators, and refocusing attention on the rehabilitative aim of imprisonment. Improvements to prison education featured among the Committee's many recommendations.⁴⁶ And so, in 1896, a specific departmental committee on education in local and convict prisons, chaired by commissioner Robert Mitford, was convened to consider what could be achieved.

While Mitford's Committee confirmed the continued need for, and the state's commitment to, prison education, their proposals for improvement were modest at best. They recommended a small increase in the time for instruction, and some updates to curriculum to align with what was taught in mainstream elementary schools, but they retained age limits and cellular instruction. Although the Gladstone Committee had recommended that schoolmasters and schoolmistresses in local prisons should not also be discipline officers, and some witnesses expressed concerns about the teaching skills of warders, Mitford's Committee was not persuaded that any reform was required.⁴⁷

The prison commissioners disagreed. They introduced a new grade of warder — clerk-and-schoolmaster — who could be employed as a clerk, or schoolmaster, or both. Clerk-and-schoolmaster warders were ordinary warders who had attended prison-officer training school, served for at least 1 year, had

knowledge of book-keeping and accounts, and had been certified by the Chief Inspector for the Education Department. After promotion, they were not required to perform discipline duties or to wear uniform and they were paid an additional £12 per annum. The commissioners proposed to replace all male teaching staff in both local and convict prisons with these new officers. At the same time, schoolmistress-wardresses were to be retained. In prisons where between eight and 25 female prisoners were eligible for schooling, schoolmistress-wardresses were expected to perform

discipline duties. None were to be appointed in prisons with fewer than eight eligible female prisoners.⁴⁸ While the plan satisfied the demands of both the Gladstone and Mitford committees, it also led to the removal of the last remaining trained and certificated teachers from the penal world. Professional teachers did not return until the mid-1950s, when tutor-organisers were seconded to prisons from local education authorities to supervise the delivery of education by prison staff.⁴⁹

The aim over time was to phase out certificated teachers once they had passed on their expertise to their subordinates, leaving a staff of schoolmaster-warders and schoolmistress-wardresses who would continue to perform some discipline duties alongside their teaching.

Conclusion

This article has illuminated the rise and fall of the prison schoolmaster and schoolmistress over the course of the 19th century. It has demonstrated that the rise of the prison schoolmaster, and to a lesser extent the schoolmistress, was largely functional, the consequence of the increasingly restrictive nature of the penal

environment which aimed to suppress interactions between prisoners and limit the involvement of those who were not under the full control of the penal authorities. However, the increasing interest in, and appointment of, teachers with qualifications and/or experience is also an indication of the commitment of officials to the educational project, especially in convict prisons but also, somewhat surprisingly, in local prisons

45. The National Archives. (1890 and 1893). HO 45/9720/A51742: Scheme for dealing with ... Schoolmasters of Convict Prisons, 12 November 1890, and Proposals, Schoolmasters of the Second Class in the Convict Prison Service, 30 August 1893.

46. Parliament. (1895). *Report from the Departmental Committee on Prisons*. PP England & Wales, LVI.1, 55, 26.

47. Mitford Committee, Report, 9-10.

48. Parliament. (1898). *Report of Coms. of Prisons and Directors of Convict Prisons, 1897-98*. PP England & Wales, XLVII.23, 24-5, 155.

49. Parliament. (1955). *Report of Coms. Of Prisons, 1954*. PP England & Wales, XXVII.1, 53.

where prisoners served short sentences. Through competitive salaries, pension entitlements and, in the Convict Prison Service, a system of promotions and rights to annual leave, the post of prison schoolmaster and schoolmistress became an attractive career option, especially for young men. However, the persistence of unqualified teachers and warders with teaching duties and the limited presence of schoolmistresses in the local prison sector was a point of vulnerability for the whole project. Opportunities in the last third of the 19th century to push further the professionalisation of the prison schoolmaster and schoolmistress failed to be realised. Nationalisation, which brought uniformity — and certainty — to the provision of education in local prisons prompted a retreat from the appointment of qualified teachers because of the limited ambitions of the new administrators. Despite the new emphasis on the rehabilitative aim of imprisonment in the wake of the 1895 Gladstone Committee, administrators remained unconvinced that education in either convict or local prisons needed to be expanded, and they prioritised prison training and experience over teaching training and experience. At the close of the 19th century, the last remaining professional teachers in the prison service had effectively been removed.

In concluding, it is worth drawing out some important lessons from this account which continue to hold relevance today. The first is the way in which the penal environment shapes the delivery of education in

important ways. In this case, it helped to reveal the need for the employment of staff whose role it was, primarily if not exclusively, to teach, especially if education was to be in any way successful. Throughout the century, female prisoners in local prisons were put at a disadvantage, not because their acquirement of literacy was considered less essential, but because of their small numbers and the persistent use of matrons and wardresses as teachers. The penal environment also made the experience of teaching inside the prison quite unlike that outside; for example, silent classrooms, cellular instruction, and adult learners with a range of needs. The late 19th century prison administrators were not wrong in valuing the experience of dealing with prisoners when arguing the case for the use of warders and wardresses as teachers. But it should never have become an either/or situation. Education in prisons benefits from connections to education outside the prison, as the 19th century experience demonstrates. Equally, education outside the prison could benefit enormously from the expertise developed behind prison walls. Too often the penal environment prevents that sharing of knowledge, and leads to the devaluing of education in prisons.

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