Perrie lecture: Making proper use of proper prisons?

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This article is a transcript of a presentation given at The Perrie Lectures in 2025. The Perrie Lectures is an annual event which has the purpose of stimulating dialogue between criminal justice organisations, the voluntary sector, and all those with an academic, legal, or practical interest in people in prison and their families. The theme of the 2025 event was 'The Future of Imprisonment'.

My title today takes its inspiration from a phrase I heard again and again in a recent research project, funded by the Economic and Social Research Council, and undertaken with Matt Houlbrook (University of Birmingham), Yvonne Jewkes (University of Bath) and Jennifer Turner (Universität Trier), with Andy Aitchison as project photographer.[1]

I'm going to try to tell the complex story of how nineteenth-century institutions have not only survived into the twenty-first century but continue to shape the daily realities of imprisonment in a profound and often surprising manner, and to think through what the future might hold for these establishments in a reforming prison system.

Let's start with some basic but striking facts. If we include Dartmoor for now, there are 32 prisons with Victorian accommodation in operation across England and Wales. Almost all of these prisons hold people in cells built between 1837 and 1901. Collectively, they house between a fifth and a quarter of the prison population. Many of these are local prisons, housing people awaiting trial or sentencing. So, very few incarcerated men haven't at some point passed through one.

The press has long described this as a scandal. Politicians and reformers have called for these prisons to be closed. A century ago, it was argued that: 'The only reform to which the buildings can be usefully subjected is dynamite',[2] and 60 years ago, they were regarded as a 'handicap' to reform.[3]

But here we are. Despite repeated promises to close these so-called relics, they remain as arguably the backbone of the estate.

This longevity has often been framed as scandalous — evidence of neglect, inefficiency, or institutional inertia. And yet, these prisons have not merely survived — they have been actively adapted, repurposed, and re-justified. Calls to close them compete with logistical, economic, and even cultural reasons for keeping them open. Our research aimed to understand this tension.

Our work centred on two detailed case studies of HMP Lincoln and HMP Liverpool. We interviewed dozens of current and former staff, prisoners, contractors, and others with long-term ties to these and other institutions. Many retired officers had worked alongside colleagues whose careers spanned the era of executions, and we heard from many people who had 'slopped out.' Most importantly—we listened to the people living and working inside these prisons now. We also accessed architectural records, archives, maintenance logs, and historical plans, giving us a layered picture of both past and present.

This approach allowed us to move beyond abstract criticism or nostalgic idealism. It helped us understand these prisons as complex environments shaped by architecture, history, policy, and human relationships.

What we found challenged many of our assumptions.

Are these places fit for purpose? On paper, often not. These buildings were never designed for the current size or complexity of the population. There were certainly those, both prisoners and staff, who told us in no uncertain terms that these prisons had had their day and should be closed.

Their views about living conditions tally with the countless HMIP reports which point to unsanitary conditions, overcrowding, damp, mould, and vermin in small, cramped cells where prisoners sleep and eat right next to their shared toilet.

There is no doubt that objectively, the living conditions in Victorian prisons compare poorly to cells

1. For a description of this project, see https://gtr.ukri.org/projects?ref=ES%2FT005483%2F1
2. Hobhouse, S., & Brockway, F. (1922). *English prisons today: being the report of the prison system enquiry committee.* Longmans, Green and Company.
3. Howard, D. L. (2023). The English prisons: *Their past and their future.* Routledge.

in the newbuild T60s,[4] and prisoners who had spent time in both knew which they preferred. But it wasn't always the newbuild. Likewise, staff who had worked in much newer prisons often favoured the Victorian estate.

Why? The phrase we heard over and over again was 'A proper prison.'

It referred in part to legality and decency — but just as much to a sense of institutional identity. A 'proper prison' was one with character, structure, and a recognisable atmosphere. But when conditions inside can be poor, what makes these prisons 'proper'?

There is an uncomfortable sense in which the conditions of the Victorian estate are perceived as being all that incarcerated people 'deserve'. Sometimes that sense has been internalised by prisoners themselves, and it definitely pervades wider opinion that the so-called 'Dickensian' conditions of the Victorian estate are appropriately punitive for those perceived as undeserving. That same opinion brands our new prisons such as HMP Five Wells and HMP Millsike too comfortable, or like 'holiday camps'.

But that's not what we're getting at here. 'Proper' meant a complex mixture of things. Some of it was about a prison that fitted the idea people already had in their heads of what prison would be like — whether gleaned from things they had heard from others, or seen on TV, where the cultural effect of Porridge was incredibly far-reaching. The Victorian estate 'looks the part'. As one man at HMP Liverpool told us:

> …when I come onto the twos, onto K Wing and I just looked up, I thought… it's very reminiscent of Porridge for me. That's the thing that sticks in my mind was the metal railings, the brickwork and stuff like that. So, yeah, it is definitely a proper jail. I thought to myself 'you've arrived here, this is big boys' jail.' It's only when you hit here and you think 'this is it.' (Prisoner, HMP Liverpool)

There was also a sense that the Victorian estate defined prison, that as a prisoner you hadn't really served time, or as a prison officer you hadn't really 'done the job', unless you had been in a Victorian jail. Not a badge of honour, exactly, but not far off.

But 'proper' meant more than this. It was mainly about how these prisons worked, and that in turn had a lot to do with their design, and its effect.

Architecturally, many of these prisons are based on the 'separate system,' which gained favour in the 1830s. Prisons with radial, hub-and-spoke layouts were designed to isolate prisoners physically and morally — enforcing reflection, silence, and hopefully redemption. Over time, of course, they have evolved. Multiple renovations have introduced electricity, plumbing, and so on, but the core structures remain much the same.

These buildings shape movement and interaction. Long wings, central hubs, narrow cell doors—these aren't neutral design choices. They produce certain behaviours, certain hierarchies of surveillance and control. The architecture disciplines in ways that continue to matter.

And they're not just old—they're storied. These prisons have deep roots in their local areas. Many are prominent urban landmarks. They appear in local folklore, media, and collective memory. Staff and prisoners often spoke about the buildings as though they were characters in their own right — we heard the term 'My Victorian Lady'.

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Many staff were the second- or even third generation in their family. And for some prisoners, the institution had a family history too. Another man at Liverpool told us

> 'The first time I met my dad was in this jail … And then my granddad and my uncle was in here. So, my granddad and his two sons were in here.' (Prisoner, HMP Liverpool)

There was a strong sense of continuity—even connection—across time. Many prison staff saw themselves as the current custodians of prisons handed down to them by previous generations. A member of staff at HMP Lincoln explained:

> '1872 this prison opened the door, you feel as though the ones who came here and worked here and set the place up, they handed it over to the next lot, who handed it over to the next lot, eventually it came to me. So, you feel as though you're kind of generation after generation after generation, you're walking landings.' (Staff member, HMP Lincoln)

4. The T60 is the x-shaped houseblock design that is currently being built in new and expanding prisons in England and Wales, such as HMP Millsike.

There was an affinity with 'all the people who have walked these landings before me'.

We had expected staff to feel an affection for these establishments, perhaps born of long service, or camaraderie, or a sense of their identity bound up with their profession and their workplace, and we definitely found it.

What we didn't expect to find was the same sort of attachment on the part of some — and I stress that it was by no means all — prisoners.

Many were aware of the history, were both curious about and felt connected to those who'd been there before them. Many told us they'd often thought about the people who'd sat on their bed, looked out of their window, and worn down the threshold of their cell. Many felt unease at the things the walls of the prison had seen in their time and imagined the stories they could tell. For others, there was a sense of comfort in this shared history; that they were not the first and would not be the last.

The age of the buildings, and the evidence of the passage of time, adds to this sensation. Prisoners paid close attention to their environment and had noticed where candle alcoves have been bricked-in and painted over, where there used to be doors and windows, where generations of hands and feet had worn away at brick and stone. The knowledge that others had survived these prisons without TVs, phones, and even electricity, was meaningful.

These are places that people know about, have opinions about, and feel an attachment to. In this sense they are quite different places from more modern newbuild prisons on industrial estates, blending in to a more generic form of unremarkable architecture. In the Victorian estate, incarcerated people feel as if they are somewhere, rather than experiencing the rootless dislocation of the anonymous nowhere that can characterise the modern estate and can enhance the feeling of being cast adrift. At Liverpool, one man put it like this:

> 'When I was up on the fives, people drive past beeping their horns. Like say ten cars will go past, five of them will beep their horn. It's just part of the city, isn't it? Walton, HMP Liverpool…' (Prisoner, HMP Liverpool)

But any small degree of affection some prisoners felt for the Victorian prison struggled to survive exposure to its crowded conditions. Almost every HMIP report notes that Victorian cells were designed for single occupancy but are shared. This is not new. Within just months of opening, these prisons were full. The population pressures we see today were very familiar to the Victorian Prison Commissioners, and Governors who were already complaining, back in the 1850s, that there were two or three women or men in cells intended for one. In 1857, the Inspector of Prisons wrote of HMP Liverpool:

> 'The Governor states that the gaol was built for separate confinement, but the system has been departed from in each of the two years it has been occupied, because of it being too small for the number of prisoners confined to be treated on this principle.... The excess of prisoners has been provided for by sleeping …two, [or]... three, in a cell, in the number of cells required.' (Inspector of Prisons, 1857, p47)

The in-cell sanitation originally installed in many of these prisons was removed by the 1890s to enable cells to be shared.

Of course, the crowding of Victorian prisons is a function of the system as whole, and our research shows that across its long history we have barely ever operated the Victorian estate with the population it was intended to hold. Arguably, it has never been allowed to show what it could achieve.



Image of renovated wing at HMP Liverpool, photo credit Andy Aitchison.

We heard from prisoners and staff that 'the Victorians got the layout right'. Now, there's definitely something here about preferring what you know, but at the same time, officers and prisoners — both primarily concerned with safety — talked about sight lines along and between landings; and acoustics, to which their ears became attuned, so that they could accurately pinpoint the source of sound over a four-level galleried space.

Ironically, it was often when changes had been made to these spaces in pursuit of safety, that these sight and sound lines were disrupted. This image by Andy Aitchison shows a new steel framework fitted to support the safety netting now fixed on every landing, a new wider CandR staircase, and higher railings. The effect was much like standing in a sieve, with impeded sightlines and disrupted acoustics meaning staff felt less able to manage the space, and prisoners felt less safe. Design solutions can introduce new design problems. There's a lesson here about the value of architectural literacy in prison reform.[5]

Victorian prisons are space poor. On-wing offices for staff have to be converted from cells. Staff cannot manage the wings from inside these offices, so they are 'out' on the landings, interacting and in conversation. These are busy places, with lots of issues to deal with, and many lack in-cell tech. Staff therefore have to know how application systems work and what to do when things go wrong. The 'local' function also means they have to deal, as they told us, with 'practically everything that can happen to someone during a sentence'. Staff aren't stationed in pods or behind screens. They're out on the wings, solving problems in real time.

I hesitate to call it a fast-track development programme, but the interaction of function and design means staff can develop expertise and confidence quickly. These spaces are busy, challenging, and complex. But in that complexity, staff learn fast. It can't be a coincidence that many prisoners, such as this man at HMP Liverpool, told us that staff in Victorian jails were more competent and knew the job well, and that accordingly the prison felt safer.

> '[In newer prisons] they have two officers sitting on a console like they're sitting in Tesco serving you. Go through, swipe, that's all they're doing sitting there. They can't see what's going on. But you don't know where they are when they're on here, because obviously you've got the landings and that,… you'll have two down this end, you'll have two in the middle, or you might have two at the top. But either way, you'll have someone walking down a landing … and they know where the trouble is.' (Prisoner, HMP Liverpool)

In short, the buildings teach people how to operate them. These skills were learned and passed on within the same walls over decades. In newer prisons, different layouts and more reliance on technology can limit human contact, increasing tension and distance.

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But there's also a hard truth, that some of these buildings are in a poor condition. Press reports like to describe the Victorian estate as 'crumbling'.[6] This term conjures an image of the prison, almost like a stale cake, falling to pieces before our eyes. The buildings do need maintenance — heating systems are outdated, ventilation is poor — these are not just inconveniences; they can become serious risks. We were able to access the bowels of these buildings (as well as their roof spaces), and saw temporary boilers and pipework intended as a short-term fix, but needing to stay in place for years. Wings take a long time to heat up in winter, and to cool down in summer. With the original plenum systems blocked up,[7] poor ventilation means that buildings cannot shed heat at night, and as for much of the estate, without effective shading, climate change will only exacerbate these problems.

Accessibility is another challenge. For elderly and disabled prisoners, steep staircases and narrow doorways are difficult to navigate, and although it's not impossible to adapt them, this work is expensive.

But the fact is that these prisons, like many Victorian buildings in our towns and cities, are very

5. Architectural literacy is the ability to understand and interpret buildings; their design, purpose, and the ideas they communicate.
6. For example: https://www.theguardian.com/world/article/2024/jun/21/friday-briefing-prisons-are-literally-falling-apart-and-theres-no-plan-to-save-them (accessed 1.7.2025) and https://committees.parliament.uk/committee/102/justice-committee/news/201659/justice-committee-chair-comment-on-prison-capacity/ (accessed 1.7.2025)
7. Victorian prisons often relied on a network of ducts and a "plenum" or a large, shared space to distribute fresh air into cells. These systems were designed to create a continuous airflow, with fresh air entering and stale air exiting through grilles in cell walls, and dedicated ventilation shafts resembling chimneys. Modernisation of these prisons has seen many of the ventilation grilles and blocked up, and the chimney-like shafts removed.

much still standing. It is their very robustness, the sheer quality of the build, the thickness of the walls, their stubborn sturdiness, that brings us to the quandary that we find ourselves in today.

We only have the question 'What do we do with the Victorian estate?' to answer because the Victorian estate is still here. It's still here training new cohorts of prison staff. It's still here acclimatising newly incarcerated people to the system. It's still here shaping what the public think the prison system 'ought' to be like.

The continued operation of Victorian prisons has significant effects beyond their own walls. The prison workforce is deeply familiar with their design, to the extent that arguably our staffing and management practices have developed in and for these buildings — such that we tend towards building new establishments in similar forms.

And even if we had the headroom to close establishments, Victorian prisons are still here in a way that is very difficult to replace.

Maybe we should ask what we would lose if we did close them. Victorian prisons were originally on the outskirts of towns, but urban expansion swallowed them up and many now sit right in the heart of densely populated communities. That limits their potential to expand, but it also places them in close proximity to the communities they're meant to serve. They are accessible to courts, services, families, and post-release support networks. Proximity matters, a lot.

If we stop and think about what we'd really lose by closing the Victorian estate, one thing stands out clearly: location. Now, packing a large number of people into a tight urban space isn't ideal, and in other work, I've shown the benefits of green space, which many of these prisons lack.[8] But even so, being close to community, to home, and to family matters deeply.

Some people told us 'Prison is prison, no matter where it is.' But countless others said they would rather serve their sentence in a Victorian prison near their family than in a newbuild hours away, without decent public transport.

Urban prisons also make sense for staffing. They're closer to large labour markets, making recruitment easier. And city locations often mean better access to housing staff can afford.

When you consider the cost of land in urban areas, it's hard to imagine ever being able to replace this capacity in the same locations. That's something we need to think about very carefully.

What else would we lose?

The continued use of the Victorian prison keeps alive a powerful cultural legacy. These buildings still define what many people think a British prison is. They shape the emotional atmosphere of the system, in ways that are both positive and problematic. Even if we were to close them tomorrow, their shadow would linger for decades. Future generations might look back in disbelief that we kept them open for so long. Yet for some, there would also be a certain nostalgia—for the so-called 'grand Victorian ladies' of the prison estate. But while these prisons remain in use, 'Porridge' isn't just a 1970's sitcom.

> These spaces are busy, challenging, and complex. But in that complexity, staff learn fast.

In many ways, the present prisons crisis is made visible in the Victorian estate. The problems caused by overcrowding are both present in and accentuated by its conditions. The nature of the accommodation and the relative shortage of opportunities for purposeful activity both stem from and are compounded by overcrowding. The robust physical infrastructure, limitations on space and high cost of renovation make these challenging sites to govern.

And yet, Victorian prisons may offer a much more significant opportunity to improve rehabilitation and reintegration than is currently being realised.

Their main practical advantage is proximity to courts and communities. The predominant Cat B local function benefits from this location, enabling transfer to in-person court hearings. However, the use of arguably the worst accommodation in the estate for people awaiting trial, whose guilt has not yet been established, is questionable.

I'd argue that it is vital to reconsider the role of the Victorian prison within the wider estate. Its most effective deployment would limit the negative impacts of poor-quality accommodation whilst maximising the

8. Moran, D., Jones, P. I., Jordaan, J. A., & Porter, A.E. (2021). Does nature contact in prison improve well-being? Mapping land cover to identify the effect of greenspace on self-harm and violence in prisons in England and Wales. *Annals of the American Association of Geographers, 111*(6), 1779-1795; Moran, D., Jones, P. I., Jordaan, J. A., & Porter, A.E., (2022). Nature contact in the carceral workplace: Greenspace and staff sickness absence in prisons in England and Wales. *Environment and Behavior, 54*(2), 276-299.

benefits of an urban location offering some of the opportunities for purposeful activity that cannot be provided within the prisons themselves.

We could reduce the harmful effects of poor living conditions by limiting the time people spend in them. One way to do this is to re-purpose some of our Victorian prisons—either in whole or in part—into Cat D open conditions. When open and closed functions are located on the same site, it's easier to prepare individuals properly, make better decisions about their suitability, and carry out necessary assessments before a recall is considered.

But the open estate is unlikely to ever need the full capacity of the Victorian estate. That means the prisons that remain as closed sites must continue to be modernised. And above all, we must finally tackle the persistent issue of overcrowding. HMIP is right when it says that these buildings were never designed to hold more than one person per cell, and it's time we honoured that original design. Single-cell occupancy should not be an ambition; it should be the standard.

Designed to enable a long-outdated idea of punishment, Victorian prisons have proven remarkably adaptable, and they may not yet have shown us everything they can do.

If we treat them as meaningful sites—historically, socially, architecturally—then we may find ways to use them well. Not as monuments to the past, but as living parts of a prison system that acknowledges continuity while striving for progress.

Victorian prisons endure not because we've failed to replace them, but because we've continually made them work. The issue isn't just whether we should close them—but what it means to keep them open. My question, about whether we can make proper use of 'proper prisons', must be answered on purpose, and with purpose.[9]

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9 . Read more about the recommendations from this project in a policy report (https://howardleague.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/08/ProperUseOfProperPrisons_Amend4.pdf), and view more project photography, alongside prisoner artwork, at https://victorian-prisons.com/