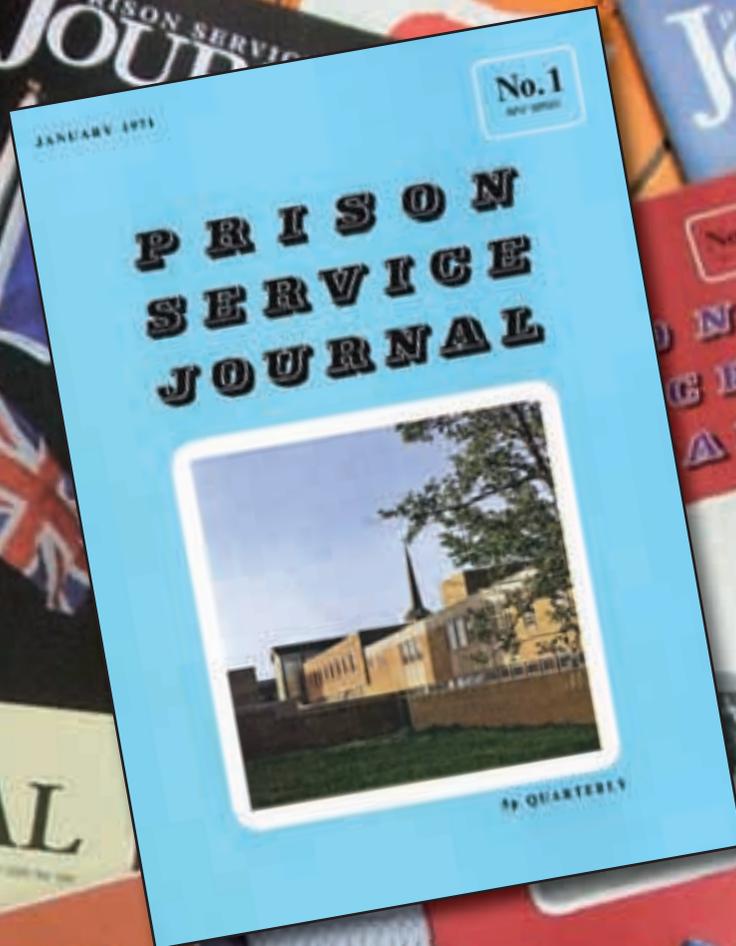


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Future Role of the Prison Officer

At the time of writing, D.W. Mannering was an officer at Grendon Prison.

OUR prison population, in 1970, rose to over 40,000. Most of these prisoners are still housed in 19th century buildings which were designed for correction by oppressive means.

Today, in a more enlightened world, there is much said and written on freeing the minds of our law-breakers from their delinquent habits. This is a splendid ideal, but is rarely supported by realistic suggestions on how it would be realised, especially at a time when we in the Prison Service are constantly reminded that the Chancellor's purse strings control the rate of our progress.

During the past 50 years, prisons have offered convenient employment to men leaving the armed forces. These men have given the Prison Service a distinct military character; a character whose rigidity is still very much in evidence in local prisons throughout the country today.

Prison officers who are so closely connected with the running of penal establishments, can help seek solutions to the problems involved by examining their experiences and analysing themselves. In the past, and to some extent still, we have been suspicious and defensive towards outside criticism, this is both unfortunate and unnecessary. Liberal minorities alone brought about a change of attitude towards delinquents after fully understanding their role, men serving today could have considerable influence on any future changes.

Reduction of 'authority'

Although an authoritarian regime might be necessary for the day to day running of our overcrowded prisons, it is, I think, totally undesirable in a system where treatment is the first essential. It is in this area where great difficulties arise. Can a man, for instance, whose whole background and training has been based on implementing strict rules, be considered suitable to staff a clinic for delinquents where therapeutic knowledge is needed? Are such men fitted for a treatment role? An officer from a discipline prison seeks authority through a rule book and uniform and is dependent upon these things to carry out his job. But surely, in attempting to rehabilitate offenders it is necessary to reduce this kind of authority to as low a level as possible. A quiet self-assurance is needed, certainly, but one based on different assumptions altogether.

Self-discipline

What is the alternative to reduced discipline? It would be essential for staff to attempt to induce self-discipline in their charges, a discipline I can only liken to that which good parents endow on their children. Criticism should be reasoned, effort and talent looked for and encouraged; but equally vital is the need to show that abuse of persons, and the property of others will not be tolerated. The officer is well placed in his daily contact with prisoners to explain certain socio-economic facts, or anything else which might awaken interest or a social conscience. For example, to describe how living in an advanced society demands that we conform to certain rules; the more complex society is, the more rules there are to adhere to, and increasingly, we rely upon each other to enjoy life. I have found that many borstal boys who confess to having had little or no interest during their school years, listen intently when some historical or general topic is explained. I would suggest that here is an area where more could be done to reduce suspicion of authority.

In an attempt to reduce the 'them and us' syndrome, which serves as a constant reminder of institutional authority, it has been suggested in Grendon staff-room discussions, that prison officers in a treatment role should wear civilian clothes instead of uniform. As the prime objective of all officers (according to prison rules), is to encourage 'a better and useful life', all officers play a part in treatment, therefore, all uniforms should be discarded. Opposing argument gives the ease of identification as a good reason for the retention of uniforms. At present, this point is valueless owing to prisoners being dressed according to their category. This argument seems to point to the question before of the use of uniforms to assert authority, which has proven largely unsuccessful in reducing prison tensions. Abolishing all prison dress must surely be inevitable, for it is incompatible with enlightened practice.

How often is it suggested that prison security stands in the way of rehabilitative training. Surely security consciousness need not be divorced from the modern prison officer's work? If he follows the behaviour pattern of those he is responsible for closely, he will be aware of the atmosphere which hints at a breach in security. But also the question of security can be overstated, as happened when panicky action brought about by public alarm at newsworthy escapes,

resulting in some unfortunate recommendations in the Mountbatten Report, being implemented. Vast sums of public money have been spent on containing the inmates of our closed prisons. Television cameras are a very expensive way to watch a man escape. Is it really necessary to use so much of our limited resources to keep petty criminals from running home when we urgently need a more constructive programme of community responsibility? Security risk prisoners are quite another matter, with a lifting of blanket restriction covering most men in prison, special attention could be given to men considered dangerous.

Recently, the Association of Probation Officers declared they would like to see after-care hostels and community work projects replace traditional methods of imprisonment. If such a scheme were to be implemented, it could very well widen the possibilities for prison officers to extend their modest start in the after-care of offenders; a start which has produced encouraging results. However, there exists a situation in the Probation Service where officers admit to not being able to do justice to their clients owing to more pressing duties. Prison officers could very well be helping here in carrying out specific tasks in co-ordination with the Probation Service.

Staff training

Staff training needs to be looked at in the knowledge that officers must be better equipped for the specialised work envisaged. Perhaps a two-tier training programme might have advantages over the present 'Introduction Course'; the first could retain much of the present syllabus, but include subjects with social implication, in order that an enlightened attitude be encouraged towards difficult and sensitive topics. Social and economic history could be an appropriate additional subject offered by the training schools. On successfully completing the probationary period, a more academic course, dealing with the aspects of social work a prison officer would be likely to encounter could be arranged either through the Staff College or by an officer's secondment to diploma courses at technical colleges.

As a hospital officer, I have personal interest in seeing nursing training for us extended. Although the hospital officer's course gives a good general outline of the basic concepts in caring for the general and psychologically ill, three months' study in a prison hospital does not equip a man to undertake the

responsibility at times placed upon him. It is not uncommon for officers to undertake work normally done by a casualty officer in accident departments. The initial handling of a mentally disturbed person often falls to the 'sleep-in officer', a situation demanding a man's best. In the large establishments this night duty also entrusts us with assessing special sick complaints, in order that the duty medical officer is not disturbed for trivial complaints. These are some of the realities of our job, whatever the official manual states! Many of the smaller institutions of the Service have only one hospital officer on its staff complement, and men in these posts need to be medically aware, and sound in judgement, as the isolated situation of such places demands; part-time medical officers are not always available when required in an emergency. Such responsibility is readily accepted by most officers and indeed enjoyed, there are hospital officers only too willing to extend their knowledge and satisfy State registration standards.

Here again I feel that change needs to be brought about by education. Without this stimulus, the hospital officer will find it difficult to acquire a professional place in tomorrow's Prison Service, a Service geared increasingly to medical care, ever seeking to improve prognosis of delinquent behaviour.

The ball has been set in motion, today I read of an advisory council on the Penal System which is to urge Mr. Maudling to extend types of punishment other than imprisonment for certain categories of offenders. Lady Wootton's team is known to have looked at weekend prisons in Holland and Belgium. The sub-committee may recommend similar establishments in Britain. The Howard League for Penal Reform plans to hold a major conference entitled 'Penal Policy at the Crossroads', partly to stimulate public debate on penology. It has been forecast that our prison population will rise to 50,000 by 1980, prison officers must be trained now to play a major role in preventing such a rise, these alarming figures emphasise that the problem is reaching crisis proportions; the day of the uniform clad ostrich is over!

The Prison Service needs to keep in line with the rapidly changing world, the whole philosophy of life is altering, and it is in this context that we need to adjust our attitudes. Unsuccessfully, human beings have been asked to adapt themselves to the prison system, when what is required is for the system to be adapted to the needs of men.

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