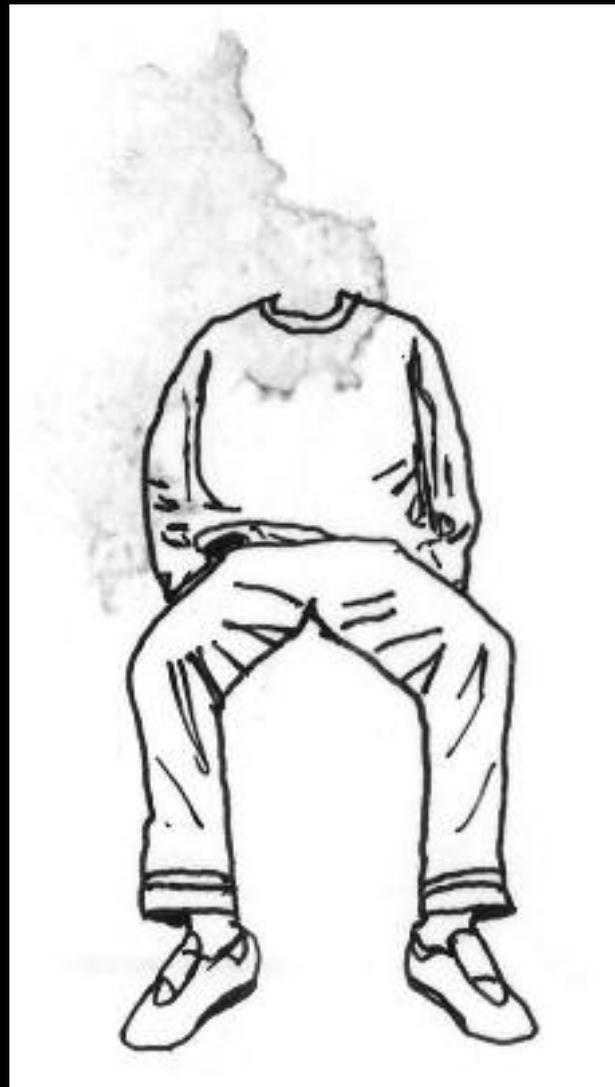


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The Prison and the Public

Review of 'The Prison and the Public' Conference

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'The Prison and the Public' was a one-day conference held at Edge Hill University and co-organised by the Department of History and English and the Department of Law and Criminology. The over-arching theme of the conference was the relationship, primarily one of separation, between the prison and 'the public'. Delegates included a range of academics, criminal justice practitioners, museum professionals, creative writers and artists and their papers provided criminological, historical and cultural analyses of the prison in terms of its connection to a broader 'public'. This paper will provide an overview of the papers presented in the two-keynote sessions and the eight panels that formed the conference.

Representations and Reality: Prisons from the Inside and Outside — Jamie Bennett

Jamie Bennett, Governor of HMP Grendon and Springhill, Research Associate at the University of Oxford, and Editor of the *Prison Service Journal* presented the opening keynote address. In his paper Bennett examined the representation and perception of prison life. He argued that many media depictions are devoid of social context and thus perpetuate a sense of punitivism by presenting the contemporary prison as violent and full of dangerous 'others', yet the regimes as 'too soft'. Using a range of examples, including ITV's documentary 'HMP Aylesbury' (2013), Bennett argued that television documentaries presented a largely decontextualized representation, which served to perpetuate problematic stereotypes endorsed by the public. Bennett argued that as the prison is struggling for legitimacy, 'its failure is its ultimate success'.

In contrast to negative media representations, Bennett discussed the positive media representation of HMP Grendon. Grendon is unique because of its relationship with the public. The prison holds social days when members of the public (including students, MPs, practitioners and celebrities) are able to interact with 'the prison'. Furthermore, Bennett stated that Grendon stands out from the rest of the prison system, because it is concerned with the prisoner's quality of life and supports therapeutic work that reduces

reoffending on release. Therefore the assumptions that underpin the media representation of Grendon are that it is a model to be replicated and that prisoners can change if they are treated in a therapeutic environment. He stated that such factual stories of 'redemption' challenge public preconceptions. However he went on to problematize this representation, particularly because it ignores the fundamental challenges with the wider prison system and instead suggests that minor changes can 'fix' what are deep-seated problems. Using Grendon as a 'role model' is problematic, he stated, because Grendon is an exception. Additionally, the men at Grendon have specifically volunteered for therapy thus the assumption that the approach can be rolled out to other prisons is unrealistic. 'Positive' media representations of prisoner reform as a matter of individual choice and agency ignore wider structural contexts of race and poverty.

Factual and Fictional Representations of Nineteenth-Century Punishment

The three presentations delivered in this panel examined the impacts of various factual and fictional records of the nineteenth-century criminal justice system, specifically in relation to deterrence and portrayals of similarities between the prison and 'the outside'. Despite clear differences in content, the papers revealed similar themes, in particular the deterrence of crime, contemporary attitudes towards criminality and the shaping of penal policy.

John Wallis, of Liverpool Hope University, presented his paper titled *'Dying Guilty and Penitent: The 'Lesson of the Scaffold' in the Norfolk Chronicle, 1800-1867'*. Wallis examined the media coverage of executions and the testimonies of the accused. He focused specifically on examples of testimonies from prisoners who showed remorse for their actions, admitted their own 'wickedness' and demonstrated the belief that they deserved to die. He argued that the visual spectacle of public executions, accompanied with the apparent regret of the condemned individual, were considered important means of deterrence.

Lindsey Ryan of Edge Hill University presented her paper titled *'The Public and the Preston House of Correction in the 19th Century'*. The paper examined

Preston prison reports and the work of prison chaplain John Clay, specifically focusing on the contemporary concerns about the treatment of prisoners and how the prison evolved as a result of these reports. Ryan argued that prison reports aimed to influence policy and public perception. The prevailing theme was that the public had a distorted image of prison, with some commentators believing that prison life was too lenient and therefore not something to be feared. However the reports highlighted the use of hard labour punishments, such as the treadmill (used for pressing flour) and also discussed the social context of contemporary criminal behaviour, such as alcoholism and lack of education.

In the third paper of the panel, titled *Freedom, the Female Body and the Fictions of Sarah Waters: Neo-Victorian Incarceration*, Mari Hughes-Edwards, of Edge Hill University, examined Waters' fictional work *Affinity* (1999) and explored the neo-Victorian form question of past and present. Hughes-Edwards discussed the significance of Millbank Prison, the largest prison in London during the nineteenth-century, as the setting for *Affinity*, particularly how it represented a symbol of surveillance, within and outside the walls of the prison. Using a Foucauldian analysis, it was argued that the female characters of the book were confined and oppressed by Victorian society and culture to such an extent that leaving Millbank only represented the substitution of one prison for another (ie. the outside world). The prison and the outside world act as a means of both physical and psychological incarceration, reflecting the impact of patriarchy on women in Victorian England. However, Hughes-Edwards argued that Waters simultaneously offers a glimpse of freedom in the form of same sex desire.

'Creative Arts and the Prison I'

The panel consisted of Robin Baillie, a senior outreach officer from the National Galleries of Scotland, Hannah Priest, a researcher at Liverpool John Moores University and the writer in residence at HM YO1 Lancaster Farms, Michael Crowley. The panel examined different forms of creative art as methods for offender rehabilitation. Each panellist discussed aspects of the work they had undertaken and the effects of the work

on offenders. The speakers shared concerns about the lack of 'public' support for offender rehabilitation.

Baillie conducts an outreach programme at HMP Shotts, Scotland, which aims to rehabilitate prisoners through art. During the programme prisoners are encouraged to paint self-portraits. In his paper '*Artist or Offender? Braving the Mirror*', Baillie reflected that prisoners often produced negative portrayals in accordance with their understandings of society's perception of them. Furthermore he explained that prisoners were concerned about society's negative perception of rehabilitation. Baillie stated that some offenders were reluctant to create art for the National Gallery, as they feared being further 'monstered' and

criticised by the media. His paper demonstrated that prisoners' fears were legitimate as the media questioned the project's funding and portrayed it as a 'lesson in graffiti'. However, despite media criticism and prisoners concerns, Baillie argued that the art produced on the programme positively changed public perception and represented a means by which to connect prisoners with 'the public'.

Hannah Priest, of John Moores University, presented a paper (co-authored by Tamsin Spargo) titled '*Free to Write: A Case Study in the Impact of Cultural History Research and Creative Writing Practice*'. They analysed the use of creative writing within the prison as a

means to reform offenders, provide a commentary on the prison system and 're-humanise' offenders in the eyes of 'the public'. Taking a historical perspective, they focused on the *Star of Hope* prisoner forum, a platform for prisoner writings published from 1899 to 1917. However strict editorial policies meant writings were not published if they were critical of the prison regime or if they portrayed prisoners as dangerous, thus the representation of the prison was limited. The panellists suggested that throughout the twentieth century, writing and arts became more accepted as rehabilitation. They concluded their paper after discussing a contemporary creative writing project titled 'Free to Write', which began in 2004 and aims to reduce recidivism and improve 'the public's' perception of punishment and rehabilitation.

'*The Prison, the Public and the Arts*' was the title of Michael Crowley's paper. As part of his role at HM YO1 Lancaster Farms, Crowley encourages offenders to paint, write stories and create poetry as mechanisms of

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reflection. He suggested that creative writing is therapeutic, self-expressive and a means of encouraging self-awareness. He suggested the public's perception of young offenders was inaccurate and that young offenders were concerned with public perceptions. Crowley strongly advocated the use of art for rehabilitation because he believed it was a platform for offenders to communicate their true stories, feelings and understandings. Moreover he stated that the project improved attendance at Young Offender Institution and probation meetings. However he was concerned that the project's funding will cease because all other rehabilitation at Lancaster Farms has been removed.

How the prison system fails and misleads the public — Eric Allison

Eric Allison, prisons correspondent for the *Guardian* Newspaper, a former prisoner and a trustee of the Shannon Trust, a project that promotes literacy amongst prisoners, provided the second keynote of the conference. His paper provided a thought provoking and insightful analysis of some of the failings of the prison, successfully refuting Michael Howard's 1993 claim that 'prison works'.

To illustrate his argument, Allison drew a comparison between the prison system and the National Health Service. He stated that if 60 per cent of patients left the health system more ill than when they entered it, it would not be seen as effective. However, despite high recidivism rates, the prison system is portrayed as 'working'. Drawing further comparisons he argued that if a doctor prescribed all patients the same treatment it would not cure or respond to the patients' individual problems. Similarly the blanket treatment provided by the prison system does not respond to offenders' needs. He criticised 'warehouse prisons' and advocated that prisoners be treated as individuals in smaller units where rehabilitation could be tailored towards the needs of the individual. He demonstrated that the prison fails on many levels: it does not incapacitate (homicides are committed in prison, drugs are dealt and conspiracies are formed) or rehabilitate (recidivism rates are high, particularly among those released from secure training centres with four out of five reoffending). Drawing on his own experiences of custody he argued that prison had not deterred, incapacitated or rehabilitated him, rather it had taught him to commit

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more harmful crimes. Allison concluded his paper by asking how prison could ever be considered to work when the basic premise of this form of punishment is so fundamentally flawed.

Diversity in the Prison Experience

Paul Gavin, a PhD student at Kingston University, presented the first paper of this panel. His paper, *'The Irish Prisoner Population in England and Wales'* provided an interesting and thought provoking insight into public and prisoner perceptions of Irish prisoners. According to Gavin, Irish Nationals are currently the third highest of all foreign nationals within English and Welsh prisons, although he found some were not born in Ireland but had an affinity to the Irish culture. Gavin found high levels of prejudice and discrimination towards foreign nationals including Irish nationals, both within and outside the prison. He stated that as a result Irish Nationals struggled to obtain work and suitable housing, which resulted in urban poverty and a lack of engagement with 'the public'. Gavin concluded that despite being the focus of discrimination, Irish prisoners retained a strong national identity.

The second paper of the panel titled *'Between Arms and Bars: Debates, Oppositions and New Dividing Lines Among Radical Leftists in Prison at the Beginning of 1980s'* was presented by Federica Rossi, a PhD student of Institut des Sciences Sociales du Politique, Paris. The paper analysed divisions between Italian radicals at the start of the 1980s, as a result of political prisoners exchanging information on other radicals, which lead to more than 4000 arrests, for shorter sentences and lesser punishments. Rossi examined prisoners' use of members of 'the public', such as journalists and social scientists, as means to share their stories.

The Public, Prisoners and Civic (re) engagement

The three papers presented in this panel critically analysed the political construction of a dichotomy between prisoners and 'the public'. The papers argued that the concept of 'the public' supports the ideologies of the elite and excludes prisoners and former prisoners. The panel comprised of three speakers from the School of Sociology and Criminology at Keele University: Mary Corcoran a lecturer, and PhD students Andrew Henley and Gill Buck.

The primary concerns of Corcoran's paper titled *'Retrieving the Public from the Public Sphere'*, were the political construction and reshaping of 'the public sphere' and the discourses used to support neoliberal practices, specifically privatisation and the 'contracting-out' of state roles to charitable and for-profit organisations. Corcoran critically analysed the concept of 'the public' and the use of the term in political and penal discourses to gain 'public' support for policies that exclude those that do not act in the interests of the elite, including offenders and prisoners. Mary argued that new right discourses created a caste system where citizens that have 'morals' are at the 'top' and criminalised persons, the 'depraved', are at the 'bottom' and are structurally disqualified from 'the public'. For Corcoran, discourses portrayed offenders and former prisoners as having a denizen status, in order to legitimise the 'hollowing out' of citizenship. The separation causes 'the public' to support the state's violation of offenders' and prisoners' rights.

'A False Dichotomy: Prisoners versus the Law Abiding Public', presented by Andrew Henley, was concerned with the discursive division drawn, in the media, parliamentary speeches and political discourses, between the 'law abiding' and the 'non-law abiding'. He stated that the separation exacerbates social injustice and reproduces the political construction that there is a law-abiding majority who are threatened by a non-law abiding minority. Henley argued the construction of a 'law abiding public' is false. He highlighted that a large portion of the population could be described as 'offenders' because crime is committed routinely on a wide scale. However, despite the fact that offenders can be victims and vice versa, the categories of the law abiding and offenders are presented as mutually exclusive. Henley stated that political discourses are used to strategically position citizens in different categories and are thus tools of punitive populism. They present politicians as protectors of the rights of the 'law abiding' in order to 'legitimise' and gain support for the violation of the rights of the 'non-law abiding'.

Gill Buck presented a paper titled *'Civic Re-Engagements Amongst Former Prisoners'*, which drew on data collected from interviews with ex-offender peer mentors and demonstrated the problematic

segregation of the prison and 'the public'. Buck stated former prisoners struggle to make the transition from prisoner to member of the public, particularly in terms of employment and education, but additionally with regard to social inclusion and restorative opportunities. Buck supported the use of former prisoners as peer mentors and raised considerations about viewing former prisoners as 'experts' with 'privileged knowledge'.

Prison reform past and present

In her paper *'Talking Justice: Harnessing Public Support for Prison Reform'*, Katy Swaine Williams, Head of Outreach at the Prison Reform Trust (PRT), presented the aims and objectives of the organisation, and particularly focussed upon its aim to liaise with 'the public' to alter the perception of prisons and the nature of offending. PRT strives to reach a wider audience, and to engage, inform, inspire, and equip the public with the facts of prison life. Research into reoffending has revealed that 47 per cent of the people who reoffend have no qualifications. Crucially then, Williams argues, the nature of reoffending is a product of individuals not being properly equipped with the skills they need on the outside world (prisons are punishing but not reforming). The PRT have promoted their objectives via a

multitude of channels, such as newspaper and radio advertisements. They have also bridged the gap with the public by working with educational groups such as the University of the Third Age (U3A) and delivering presentations at conferences.

Biographer Tessa West delivered a detailed an informative abstract of her work on the life of John Howard in her paper *'John Howard Prison Reformer'*. Focusing on his early life West suggested that witnessing the poor conditions in which prisoners were kept was the catalyst for Howard to start visiting prisons across the UK and Europe. As a result of his exploratory work, Howard was commissioned by the House of Commons to compile a report on the conditions of prisons throughout the country. Despite his interests in prisons, Howard did not have a clear opinion on crime. He was cautious about prison staff and emphasised the importance of them being

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'morally upstanding'. West stressed the importance of Howard's work by outlining that his views influenced prison reforms after his death.

of power while being sympathetic to those that have suffered.

Bridging the Gap to the Public

The first paper of this session was titled *'Bridging the Gap: Giving Public Voice to Prisoners and Former Prisoners through Research Activism'*. It was presented by three academics from the Department of Social and Historical Studies at the University of Westminster: Sacha Darke, Andy Aresti and David Manlow. The paper introduced the growing British convict criminology movement and its key features. The movement aims to challenge the separation between 'criminals' and 'experts' and prioritise the prisoner voice as the 'authentic' 'view from below'. It intends to achieve this by: encouraging prisoners and former prisoners to engage with academic study by supporting former prisoners to mentor current prisoners and by conducting collaborative research with prisoners and former prisoners. The overarching aim of convict criminology is to challenge the separation between prisoners and 'the public', by facilitating the involvement of prisoners in criminology. However the speakers highlighted the obstacles former prisoners face in terms of conducting research, particularly denial of access to the prison.

Alana Barton and Alyson Brown, of Edge Hill University, presented the second paper of the session, titled *'Prison Tourism: the Search for Ethical Authenticity'*. The paper focused on the history of 'prison tourism', and issues of authenticity and representation. The speakers stated that tourist interest in prisons is not a new phenomenon. Well-known prisons like Dartmoor have always stirred curiosity amongst the public. But tourist interest raises particular issues. The speakers noted that potentially it could serve as an instrument of penal populism, which encourages the public to support severe punishment where 'justice is seen to be done'. Barton and Brown criticised the focus that prison museums place on prisoner violence, such as riots, whilst silencing stories of prisoners as victims of sexual violence, prison officer violence and self-harm. The speakers argued that dark tourism could be authentic and ethical if it was carried out in a way that provides a political context and an understanding

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Creative Arts and the Prison II

The Creative Arts and the Prison II presented a series of papers to reflect the innovative ways creative arts have been used to bring the prison to 'the public'. The first paper, *'Challenging Perceptions of Value'*, was presented by PhD student Rachel Forster from Leeds University and Liz Knight from Leeds Museum and Discovery Centre. Their study involved taking a number of museum objects into the prison for the prisoners to appreciate and study. The aim was to encourage them to reflect on the idea of value. Prisoners were reluctant to be involved initially, for fear of how the other prisoners would react towards them. Although they had several challenges to overcome, the greatest hurdle was the negative perceptions of those involved in the project.

Sue Pritchard, from the Victoria and Albert museum, in her paper *'Creativity and Confinement: Narrating the HMP Wandsworth Quilt'* discussed a project where the museum worked with prisoners in HMP Wandsworth. The project involved the prisoners drawing on their experiences of prison to design individual hexagonal fabric patches, which reflected the floor plan of the prison. The

patches were sewn together to make the Wandsworth Quilt. Pritchard believed it was a positive experience for prisoners providing them with a sense of control over their selves and their environment, and feelings of purpose and pride. She suggested that the project has reduced conflict amongst prisoners.

The final paper of the panel titled *'Inside-Outside' Discussion of Prison Workshop and the Documentary 'Rasu g.6'*, was presented by artist Anja Westerfroelke, and feminist activist M-Françoise Stewart-Ebel. The paper discussed art workshops for prisoners in an old empty prison that had previously been a church in Vilnius, Lithuania. Using artefacts from the old prison, the prisoners created art and used the site to develop a shared experience between the prison and 'the public'.

The Contemporary Prison

This session analysed the representations of the contemporary prison. The panel consisted of John

Griffiths, from the Independence Initiative Drug Rehabilitation Project in Liverpool, Ian Marsh, a principal lecturer in Criminology at Liverpool Hope University and Helen O'Keefe, assistant head of Primary and Early Years Education at Edge Hill University. The three speakers were concerned with the ways in which portrayals of prisons inform 'the public' perspective, which in turn impact upon policies and practices.

John Griffiths' paper was titled '*Criminal Justice and Drug Interactions: A Public-Private Affair*'. The paper was concerned with the influence of the media, and lack of influence of research, on prison policy and reforms, in particular privatisation. Griffiths drew on the example of the privatisation of probation to argue that although research has demonstrated probation provided by the private sector is less effective in terms of rehabilitation, the media has largely supported the movement and subsequently the public have not challenged it. Griffiths argued that the government intentionally portray the prison negatively in order to gain support for punitive and cost-cutting reforms.

In his paper titled '*The Media Representation of Prisons: Holiday Camps or Boot Camps?*' Ian Marsh stated that the secrecy surrounding the prison means that the public's main source of information about prison is the media. He suggested this was problematic because of the contradictory media portrayal of the prison as both a holiday camp and a dangerous, violent place. He suggested that the media representation prevented positive reform and supported neoliberal interests. Marsh supported Griffiths' view that the prison system was represented negatively in order to gain support for reforms that reduce costs.

Helen O'Keefe's paper was titled '*The Face of Prison in Primary Schools — the Children of Male*

Prisoners and their Schools'. This paper focussed on the impact of prison portrayals on the treatment of children with imprisoned parents. O'Keefe found that some schools literally denied having pupils with imprisoned parents whilst others did not know if they had any such pupils, and if they did, they rarely knew the number of pupils concerned. O'Keefe found that nationwide only two schools trained staff to respond to children and families with an imprisoned parent and many schools blamed poor resourcing for their lack of knowledge and their failure to engage with the issue. O'Keefe concluded that the majority of schools failed to support families with a parent in prison and that such families feared stigmatisation and discrimination by the school.

To conclude, the conference amalgamated a broad scope of issues presented by academics, practitioners and artists concerned with the central theme of the relationship between the prison and 'the public'. Papers explored the variety of means through which the prison is connected to 'the public' but also critiqued the segregation of the two spheres. Many papers championed the use of art as both a means of rehabilitation and connection between the prison and 'the public'. A common concern of delegates was the way in which representation, mainly in the media, of the prison and prisoners is used as an instrument of punitive populism. This was connected to a critique of media and political discourses that construct a separation between 'the public' and the prison. Delegates appealed for the narratives of segregation to be challenged and support for initiatives that ensure greater connection between the 'public' and the prison.