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Special Edition
Closing and Opening Prisons

Prison closures:

Thinking about history and the changing prison estate

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As someone interested in prison history, the prison closures announced in recent years and particularly those announced in January 2013, have attracted my attention. Some of these prisons are part of our collective architectural history as well as our social and cultural history, in terms of the hundreds of people who have worked or lived in these institutions over the course of their history. Some of the recent closures — HMPs Shepton Mallet, Shrewsbury and Gloucester, have very long histories and tell us a great deal about the broader history of imprisonment in England, a point I will come back to later in this article. The history of HMP Shrewsbury between 1770 and 1877 was also the subject of my doctoral thesis and therefore is a prison of great interest to me. But these closures also raised questions for me; what will become of the buildings now they have been closed? Should or can we think about how we preserve some of this history? Either in terms of the actual buildings or the oral histories, memories and experiences of those from the prison communities inside. The second element that drew my attention was thinking about how the opening and closing of prisons have shaped the whole prison estate and what we can observe if we stand back and take a much longer view across time. By taking a longer historical view, from the late eighteenth century onwards, in this short piece I will endeavour to highlight some of these issues and illuminate the particular contribution and importance of some of the recently closed prisons in the understanding, and making, of this heritage.

Prison building in the period of 'reform'

There are clear points in the history of imprisonment in England and Wales that demonstrate the expansion or reduction in the use of prisons, and the construction, building or removal of prisons from the estate. Of the prisons most recently closed, HMP Shepton Mallet has been on the current site since the early seventeenth century. The original house of

correction was built in 1625 though the prison was rebuilt in 1790 and then extended and adapted by architect George Allen Underwood in the 1817-1820 period.¹ These alterations and extensions places Shepton Mallet prison, like many other prisons across the country, at the heart of a process of 'reform' that occurred in the late eighteenth and into the early nineteenth century.



Shepton Mallett.

This was the first major prison building period. At this time the central government was only loosely involved in imprisonment and so most of the activity came from the local authorities who administered the prisons through the Quarter Sessions court. The magistrates at these sessions governed their local area and made decisions about prisons, policing, the poor law, lunatic asylums as well as roads, finances and the like in their locality. As Sheriff of Bedford, John Howard the prison reformer, knew that it was to these magistrates that he needed to appeal for change and he was pretty successful in doing so. Between 1775 and 1795, over forty-five new local prisons (or gaols or houses of correction / bridewells as they were called then) were constructed. Though it should be noted that these developments were also motivated by the upsurge in prisoners due to the outbreak of the American War of Independence and fears about 'gaol fever'. The courts had continued to sentence

1. Brodie, A., Croom, J. and J. O. Davies (2002) *English Prisons — An Architectural History*, Swindon: English Heritage.

offenders to transportation during the War, filling up the gaols with those waiting for removal, whilst the government held out hope for a speedy resumption of the process (revival never came and it was not until 1787 that convict transportation to Australia began). Gaol fever was also greatly feared. In 1750 over forty people at the Old Bailey had contracted the disease including high ranking officials, and there was unease about the potential for fever to escape prisons into the wider community. Gaol fever also meant that the criminal justice system became a lottery; in Gloucester in 1782, for example, three times as many prisoners died of fever as were executed. Concern over gaol fever also impacted on the design of prisons, it was thought that the lack of ventilation was the cause of contagion as noxious air remained trapped in the building. Leading architect of the time, Stephen Hales, set about constructing devices to expel the putrid air from prisons and as such bellows and ventilators were installed in a number of prisons including Newgate, Winchester, Bedford and Shrewsbury.²

These late eighteenth-century new prisons were the first purpose built prisons; prior to this, prisons had existed merely to detain. They were largely unorganised; men, women, young, convicted, untried, all mingled in unhealthy, disorderly and neglected conditions. These older gaols though, were much more open, the wider community would come and go freely, to sell their wares, trade and associate with prisoners. The aim of the new prisons, from 1775 onwards was to punish, not just to detain, and the construction of these new and quite expensive architectural projects, were designed to portray a message that prisons were to be 'real places of terror'.³ The prison exterior and façade became 'architectural shields' to mask the true purpose of the prison, making what went on behind the façade appear more terrifying.⁴

Not everyone embraced Howard's vision for the practical or philosophical changes required to these disorderly prisons. However, a substantial number were willing to put the county and borough finances to these projects and we can now observe this as a significant moment in penal history, not just in this country, but also across Europe and in America. At a local level, we can still see the evidence of the mark Howard made; numerous streets near local prisons, or where local prisons have been demolished, across the country were called Howard Street and busts of the reformer were also constructed (notably on the gatehouse of HMP Shrewsbury — see image below).

We can also look at the place of some of these recently closed prisons in this reform period.



John Howard HMP Shrewsbury.

HMP Gloucester and HMP Shrewsbury have a fair amount in common. Both were built with Howard's vision in mind; Gloucester in 1791 and Shrewsbury in 1793, during this important moment in prison history, though there had been prisons in both county towns before these new constructions. Both Gloucester and Shrewsbury were designed by William Blackburn, as was HMP Dorchester, built in around 1787 and closed in December 2013. Proposals for HMP Gloucester or the county gaol as it was then, and four smaller rural houses of correction across the county of Gloucester were promoted by Sir George Onesiphorous Paul, county High Sheriff and ardent follower of Howard. Paul worked with Blackburn, a leading architect of the time, to translate Howard's ideas into practice. Blackburn designed or was advisor in the construction of around sixteen prisons at the time of his death in 1790, including those above, as well as Stafford, Oxford, Liverpool (Kirkdale), Preston and Salford.⁵

Howard had firm ideas about the health and organisation of prisons but he was also concerned with the location and the architecture of new prisons. Howard, influenced by the views of Hales about health and airflow, wrote in his thesis that prisons should be in open country, close to running water and perhaps in the rise of a hill in order to get the full force of the wind. This also physically removed the prison from the community; 'to take the prison out of this context was to acknowledge that it would no longer relate to the external world in so familiar a way. It was being abstracted from everyday life and made very special.'⁶

One of the recent closed prisons shows us exactly what Howard was trying to achieve and we can see how

2. Evans, R. (1982) *The Fabrication of Virtue: English Prison Architecture, 1750-1840*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
 3. Ibid: 169.
 4. Ibid: 256.
 5. Brodie et al (2002), note 1.
 6. Evans (1982): 113, note 2.

Howard's principles for the construction of an 'ideal county gaol' were realised in the building of Shrewsbury prison, opened in 1793. As noted, the prison was designed through consultation with Blackburn but carried forward by a Shropshire architect called John H. Haycock, and constructed during the time that Thomas Telford was County Surveyor. The prison was built on, and still stands on Castle Hill, near to the River Severn. At the time it was positioned it was slightly removed from town on its south-east side and near to the Castle (though the construction of the railway through Shrewsbury in the late 1840s, early 1850s meant the prison regained quite a central position next to the railway station). The gatehouse itself was designed by Haycock but the plan of the buildings were constructed on Howard's ideas; pavilions raised off the ground on arcades, each holding a different class of prisoner, allowing the air to circulate and space for walking and association underneath. This became the principle design for the eighteenth-century reformed prison.⁷

At Shrewsbury, Gloucester and Dorchester prisons, the buildings (or wings as they later became) were constructed with this arcading form, with sleeping cells above surrounding courtyards, under which the prisoners would spend their days until lock up at night. This is hard to imagine visually now, as during the 1830s and 1840s when the separate system was in its heyday, the walkways round the sleeping cells were filled in to form something similar to the long wings with cells on either side that we imagine of Victorian imprisonment. However, we can have a glimpse of the latterly developed, late eighteenth century arcading at Shrewsbury prison. Though the prison was gradually altered to the separate system across the 1830s to 1860s, and was rebuilt in the 1880s, some of the arcading remains in the underbelly of the prison and holds the pipes and heating system, as shown in the below image:



Arcading Shrewsbury.

At the centre of the prison stood the chapel. The courts had railed galleries around the outside to give access to all of the sleeping cells; some cells also commanded 'a beautiful view of the country.'⁸ It is important to note that these prisons, built by local authorities, were sources of great civic pride; substantial sums of money were spent on constructing them and for those involved, they marked the progress and civilisation of the society in which they were located.⁹

Victorian prison building

HMP Kingston and the wings to be closed at HMP Hull (though this partial closure has recently been rescinded) are 'classic' nineteenth century prisons; 'monoliths to the Victorian penal imagination.'¹⁰ Hull was built between 1865-1869, on a radial design, prominent at the time. A central tower was constructed from which a number of long wings radiated out, at Hull and similar prisons like Reading and Lincoln these were in a cruciform design. But HMP Kingston was a product of the centralisation of prisons in 1877. When the government took the control of all of the local prisons and formed the Prison Commission to oversee both convict and local prisons they closed over 40 prisons across the estate. This was a substantial raft of closures; if we look back to the reform period then estimates say that there were somewhere between 244 and 317 prisons across the country in the period between 1777 and 1819; by 1865 there were 130 and by 1877, 113 local prisons. After the closures at centralisation there were 69 local prisons.¹¹ Kingston, built after the closure of Portsmouth gaol, also had a radial design, though in a star shaped arrangement, and opened in August 1878. Prisons built in this period were designed to be functionally austere; ideas of reform had given way to a more deterrent philosophy of punishment reflected in the bleak austerity of buildings like HMP Wormwood Scrubs built in 1884, to a telegraph pole design. This austere design was also reflected in the redevelopments across a number of prisons in the 1880s. At Shrewsbury, the buildings were entirely remodelled on this basis across 1883-1888 but this was also hastened by an outbreak of typhus in 1882-3. Two parallel wings were constructed; one for male prisoners and the other for females. The male wing had cells both sides of a central open corridor, three or four stories high; the female wing only one row of cells on a shorter corridor, two stories high. However, John Pratt notes that by the turn of the twentieth century, the tide was turning against

7. Jewkes, Y. & H. Johnston (2007) 'The evolution of prison architecture' in Y. Jewkes (ed.) *Handbook on Prisons*, Cullompton: Willan.
 8. Owen (1808/1972) *Some Account of the Ancient and Present State of Shrewsbury*, Shrewsbury: Sandford (1808); Manchester: E. J. Morton republished 1972: 433.
 9. Pratt, J. (2002) *Punishment and Civilisation: Penal Tolerance and Intolerance in Modern Society*, Sage: London.
 10. Jewkes & Johnston (2007): 191, note 7.
 11. Brodie et al (2002), note 1.

this austerity and prison authorities attempted to lessen the severity of the prison look by the introduction of flower beds, fountains and landscaping.¹² At prisons like Shrewsbury, Gloucester and Kingston where the town or urban area had developed around the prison, then this was restricted given the space available.

New penal ideas of the twentieth century

Whilst prison history is often about the substantial changes of the late eighteenth and then the Victorian period, there were also important changes in the twentieth century. The closure of Camp Hill, part of HMP Isle of Wight drew my attention for this very reason. During the early decades of the century, fundamental changes occurred in the criminal justice system: the development of probation and aftercare services, more time to pay fines, a decline in the prison population, but also experiments with specialist prisons for particular groups of offenders. The Victorian prison administrators obsession with the use of classification had come undone, the more they classified prisoners, the more they realised that there were some groups who could not be subject to the same regimes. This led to some experiments with institutions developed for particular groups of offenders; habitual drunkards or inebriates, young offenders, those termed 'mentally defective' and those held under what was then termed 'preventive detention'. Whilst the development of Borstals turned into a much longer project, the other specialist prisons were quite short-lived and HMP Camp Hill was purpose-built as a prison for preventive detention offenders as part of this experiment, opening in 1912. The idea was that at Camp Hill inmates would be placed in cottage blocks surrounding an open area, in a 'garden-village' setting in the forest. The idea of a sentence of preventive detention has had far reaching consequences and we can observe today sentencing policies which allow for long periods of detention beyond or after the initial sentence. Although today these might manifest themselves differently, this was the first Act which really allowed for this kind of provision. That said, the specific sentence of preventive detention was a pretty short lived experiment; across about 20 years only around 900 people were ever sentenced to preventive detention, and Camp Hill was adapted by admitting borstal boys from 1931.¹³

By the twentieth century, prisons were also far more removed from public view, they were increasingly placed in remote locations, away from populated areas

and cut off from the rest of society.¹⁴ There were no purpose built prisons until the new Borstal at Everthorpe was constructed in 1958 and then HMP Blundeston in the early 1960s. Most prisons that were developed in the early decades of the twentieth century were in buildings that had a former purpose; old country houses and estates, army camps, aircraft hangars, military hospitals and as such were often in locations away from the centres of towns. They also had more land which could be cultivated and worked on by the inmates of the new 'open' prisons from the late 1930s onwards. From the end of the Second World War to the end of the century, the prison estate was back on a path of expansion, from 39 prisons in 1945 to 136 by 2000, a 'new wave' of prison building occurred in the 1960s and 22 new prisons were constructed. The first was HMP Blundeston, closed in December 2013, which had been opened in 1963. This prison had four T-shaped blocks for cells and was different to the other 'new generation' prisons that appeared during this phase of expansion.

Conclusion

Whilst it is clear that the Ministers and decision-makers have little time for a historical understanding of these prisons, the interviews with governors, staff and people associated with these prisons paint a slightly different picture. These prisons, sometimes for hundreds of years, have been well established parts of their respective communities. The dilapidated buildings and out-dated physical structures may well have made work difficult, but it is clear, from the interviews reported in this special edition, that it is relationships that staff and prisoners have, within these communities that are just as, if not more important. As well as an understanding of the place of these prisons within their 'wider' communities. This short piece has provided a brief glimpse of changing construction and development of the prison estate across over two hundred and fifty years of history. It has also attempted to locate the narrative histories of some of the recently closed prisons into a broader understanding of their place within this history. I hope that there was time for some of the history relating to these prisons to be preserved by people locally. Finally, I would like to thank Gerry Hendry, Governor of HMP Shrewsbury and his staff for accommodating my visit to the prison in the weeks preceding the closure and to all the other Governors and staff that Professor Yvonne Jewkes (University of Leicester) and I made contact with during this period.

12. Pratt (2002), note 9.

13. Brodie et al (2002), note 1.

14. Pratt (2002), note 9.