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Understanding from the past

The evil is one of the utmost gravity: female drunkenness and Strangeways Prison, 1869-1875

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Introduction

In his annual report of October 1876, the protestant chaplain of Strangeways Prison, John Galbraith, bemoaned the number of women imprisoned in the gaol for drunkenness. Noting that there had been a yearly increase of such committals since 1870, he stated that ‘the evil is one of the utmost gravity.’¹ He had been drawing such conclusions since the beginning of his tenure.² Two years previously, in October 1874, he reported that, of the 3978 people committed for drunkenness that year, 1324 (33.3 per cent) were women.³ Such views were not uncommon amongst Victorian social commentators. The 1870s were a period which saw increased concern about drunkenness in general, and female drunkenness in particular. Examining data from Strangeways Prison’s registers for females between 1869 and 1875, and using the Lancashire borough of Salford as a case study, it is possible to judge how such concerns played out at a local level. The data examined related to 11693 summary committals between 30 September 1869 and 29 September 1875.⁴ This article will begin by examining concerns about drunkenness, before exploring the impact of committals for the offence on the prison system. Thereafter, it will argue that it was marginal, working-class women who were vulnerable to imprisonment for drunkenness. Social and economic factors played a key role in increasing this vulnerability, rather than moral failing on the part of the individual.

Mid-Victorian concerns about drunkenness

Drunkenness was linked to a variety of social problems in mid-Victorian Britain, particularly crime,

poverty and health. Furthermore, the issue of female drunkenness was bound up in the sexual double standard, amid fears for the sanctity of the home and the welfare of the family. In addition to moral and social concerns, the 1870s saw drunkenness discussed ever more frequently in Parliament, resulting in the introduction of the 1872 Licensing Act. Judicial statistics were used by contemporary commentators to justify their assertions that drunkenness was increasing. These figures showed that the number of persons summarily proceeded against for drunkenness and drunk and disorderly behaviour rose from 105,310 in 1864-5 to 122,310 in 1868-9. Between 1866 and 1869, drunkenness comprised approximately a fifth of all summary prosecutions.⁵ By 1870, this had risen to a quarter.⁶ The number of persons proceeded against for drunkenness rose steadily in the years preceding the 1872 Licensing Act, then rose sharply in the first year of the Act’s operation, from 151,084 to 182,941, before dropping equally sharply in mid-decade before rising again to peak at 205,567 in 1876.

As the number of people proceeded against for drunkenness rose, so did the prison population. In 1869, committals on summary conviction numbered 123,552, an increase on the previous year of 11.4 per cent.⁷ In many cases, drink was blamed. In Liverpool, it was reported that ‘drunkenness apparently flourishes more than ever’ in the town, after a weekend which saw 270 cases of drunkenness appear before the magistrates. Many arrested women were stated to have been kept in local bridewells due to overcrowding in Walton Gaol. Although no proof was forthcoming, this problem was attributed to drink.⁸ Elsewhere in Lancashire, Oldham’s Liberal MP, John Tomlinson Hibbert, reported that the number of committals for drunkenness to Strangeways Prison had risen by 10 per

1. Manchester. Chaplain’s Report on Salford Hundred County Prison, 23 October 1876, Quarter Sessions Petitions, Lancashire Archives (hereafter LA), QSP/3996/9.
2. Galbraith was protestant chaplain of Strangeways from 1870 to 1877.
3. Manchester. Chaplain’s Report on Salford Hundred County Prison, 26 October 1874, Quarter Sessions Petitions, LA, QSP/3950/16.
4. 30 September to 29 September was the annual reporting period for judicial statistics. Furthermore, availability of the prison registers is limited, as only those from 1868 to 1875 survive.
5. *Judicial statistics*. 1869. Parliamentary Papers (hereafter PP) England and Wales [C.195], p. xvii.
6. Morrison, B. (2005) ‘Ordering disorderly women: female drunkenness in England c. 1870-1920’. Unpublished Ph.D. thesis, Keele University, p.109.
7. *Judicial statistics*. 1869. PP England and Wales [C.195], p.xxix.
8. *Liverpool Mercury*, 15 August 1871.

cent from 1866 to 1870.⁹ There was, moreover, a gendered view of prisoners. Women were reported to have comprised the majority of committals to Ripon Prison, where the governor, William Smith, declared that they had 'more frequent habits of drunkenness than men' before adding 'We have a great deal of trouble with them.'¹⁰ Ripon's prison was much smaller than either Walton or Strangeways, but the perceived problem of drunkenness, especially amongst women, was prevalent in both rural and urban prisons of varying sizes.¹¹

Strangeways Prison

Strangeways was the county prison for the Hundred of Salford, and received inmates from the towns and boroughs of south-east Lancashire. These were predominantly urban and industrialised, although rural townships were also represented. Opened in 1868, Strangeways replaced the aging New Bailey Prison in Salford, which had been built in 1787. Initially, it possessed the capacity for 1100 prisoners, of whom over 300 were women. Men and women were separated within the prison itself, with the *Manchester Guardian* reassuring its readers that between the male and female areas of the prison 'there is the completest isolation.'¹²

The prison registers help to explain why the likes of Galbraith were so dismayed at the number of women committed for drunkenness. Between 1869 and 1875, out of 11693 summary committals, 6319 (54.0 per cent) women were summarily committed for drunkenness. This was by far the most common offence for which women were gaoled. The second highest offence, that of causing a nuisance, comprised only 1452

(12.4 per cent) of committals. The female population of Strangeways Prison, therefore, was dominated by women committed for drunkenness. These conclusions correspond with other findings for the UK and Ireland.¹³ The number of drunkenness committals, especially female committals, to Strangeways caused concern amongst the authorities. In 1873, they provoked Galbraith to note that, 'It is deplorable that this steady annual increase has chiefly taken place amongst the females of whom the drunkards during the past year numbered more than half those committed.' Additionally, he stated that drink was a direct cause of imprisonment for a number of women who had been committed for assault.¹⁴

His concerns were reflected elsewhere. In 1869, Edmund Ashworth, a Rochdale magistrate, stated that the newly opened Strangeways Prison was being overwhelmed by the number of inmates, especially those convicted of drunkenness, or who had committed crimes whilst drunk. 'Nine-tenths of the prisoners in the county gaol', he argued 'could trace their fall, directly or indirectly, to the use of strong drink.'¹⁵ One anonymous temperance advocate was also scathing about the impact of drink on the population of Strangeways. 'We have in Manchester a gaol built at a cost of £40,000' they argued 'which would not have been required if we had been without drinkshops.'¹⁶ In commenting on the rising number of committals

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for drunkenness, Hibbert criticized the short sentences which were handed down for the offence. He felt that the results were that 'those sent in for three days only got a good washing and were made clean and respectable-looking, after which they were turned out again ready to resume their old habits.'¹⁷

9. *Pall Mall Gazette*, 14 January 1871.

10. *Report from the Select Committee on Habitual Drunkards; together with the proceedings of the committee, minutes of evidence, and appendix*, 1872. PP 1872 (242), p.2.

11. Ripon had approximately eighty committals, for all offences, annually by 1872, compared to 6624 committals to Strangeways that year. See *Ibid*, p. 3 and Manchester. Chaplain's Report on Salford Hundred County Prison, 21 October 1872, LA, Quarter Sessions Petitions, QSP/3902/41. As befitted Victorian gender ideology, the penal regime believed female sexuality to produce 'unruly and deviant behaviour', especially in working-class women, see D'Cruze, S and Jackson, L.. (2009) *Women, Crime and Justice in England since 1660*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, p. 122.

12. *Manchester Guardian*, 17 June 1868. Strangeways became a male-only prison in 1963.

13. See Zedner, L. (1991) *Women, Crime, and Custody in Victorian England*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, pp.156-7; Turner, J. (2005) 'Offending women in Stafford, 1880-1905: punishment, reform and re-integration'. Unpublished Ph.D. thesis, Keele University; Turner, J. (2012) 'Summary justice for women: Stafford Borough, 1880-1905', *Crime, History and Societies*, 16.2, pp. 55-77; Curtin, G. (2001) *The Women of Galway Jail*. Dublin: Arlen House, p.71; Curtin, G. (2002) 'Female prisoners in Galway gaol in the late nineteenth century', *Journal of the Galway Archaeological and Historical Society*, 54, pp. 175-182.

14. Manchester. Chaplain's Report on Salford Hundred County Prison, 20 October 1873, Quarter Sessions Petitions, LA, QSP/3926/25.

15. *Liverpool Mercury*, 14 April 1869.

16. *Rochdale Observer*, 15 April 1871.

17. *Pall Mall Gazette*, 14 January 1871.

Anxieties about the effect of drunkenness on the prison population were by no means restricted to Strangeways. In Liverpool in 1871, Walton Gaol was considered to be full to capacity. It was reported that, as a result, some 900 women had had to be imprisoned in local bridewells. The prison's Catholic chaplain, and temperance campaigner, Father James Nugent 'declared his conviction to be that the gaol is overcrowded more by drunkenness than by crime' and he stated that longer sentences needed to be handed down to 'women who showed a tendency to become habitual drunkards.'¹⁸ Further afield, in Yorkshire, committals for drunkenness to Wakefield Gaol more than doubled between 1867 and

concentrations of inns and public houses in the Manchester conurbation during the 1870s. Nearby, Manchester's Deansgate, another key thoroughfare, also had many such establishments. In 1869, Chapel Street had nearly thirty licensed premises, Deansgate had thirty-two. By 1873, these numbers had decreased slightly, to twenty-nine and twenty-seven respectively. Importantly, both Chapel Street and Deansgate were a short distance from each other and inhabitants of both areas would have had easy access to both streets. Additionally, Salford had a large number of beerhouses, which numbered 336 in 1869, with neighbouring Hulme having 416, the highest number in Manchester.²²

Table 1: Number of women committed to Strangeways Prison, for drunkenness, from Salford, 1869-1875

Year	1869-70	1870-71	1871-72	1872-73	1873-74	1874-75	Total
Number committed	238	211	340	410	512	514	2225

1873. That year, 31 per cent of the prison population had been convicted of drunkenness.¹⁹

Salford

Through the lens of a local case study, the borough of Salford, it is possible to examine national concerns about female drunkenness at ground level. The borough court committed 2225 women to Strangeways for drunkenness between 1869 and 1875, the highest number from all the boroughs in south-east Lancashire. The proximity of Manchester, Briggs' 'symbol of a new age', here, was crucial, due to the large number of people living in the area.²⁰ The 1871 census stated that, in the conurbation containing Manchester, Salford and Chorlton, there were nearly 600,000 people.²¹

Furthermore, the boundary between Manchester and Salford was easily crossed by the number of bridges spanning the River Irwell, which allowed the inhabitants of both boroughs to reach the large number of public houses in the two. One of the key thoroughfares in Salford, Chapel Street, had one of the highest

Sir John Iles Mantell, Salford's stipendiary magistrate, was the sole committing magistrate for the majority of committals for drunkenness from Salford's borough court.²³ As Table 1 shows, the number of women sent to prison from Salford more than doubled from 1869-70 to 1874-75. The majority of these women had been sentenced by Mantell. His abhorrence of alcohol was due, in no small part, to his belief that drink and violence were inextricably linked.²⁴ Magisterial prejudice in Salford, therefore, played a major role in the number of women sent to prison for drunkenness.

Vulnerability to imprisonment

So, who were the women who were caught up in the authorities' drive against drink? They were, overwhelmingly, the poor, marginalised working-class. Also, not all of them lived in Salford. The borough's proximity to Manchester had a large influence on the number of women who were processed through its magistrates' court. Although the majority of women committed, 1451 (65.2 per cent), did live in Salford, nearly

18. *Liverpool Mercury*, 27 October 1871.

19. Jennings, P. (2012) 'Policing drunkenness in England and Wales from the late eighteenth century to the First World War', *Social History of Alcohol and Drugs*, 26.1, pp.69-92.

20. Briggs, A. (1977) *Victorian Cities*. Harmondsworth: Penguin, Ch.3.

21. *Census of England and Wales. 1871. (33 & 34 Vict. c. 107.) Preliminary report, and tables of the population and houses enumerated in England and Wales, and in the islands in the British seas, on 3rd April 1871.* PP 1871 [C.381], p. xv.

22. Woodman, D. (2011) 'The public house in Manchester and Salford, c1815-1880'. Unpublished Ph.D. thesis, Leeds Metropolitan University, Ch 2.

23. Mantell was the sole committing magistrate for 1955 (51.9 per cent) committals from Salford. These included 1097 (49.7 per cent) committals for drunkenness. William Goulden had the second highest number of committals, with 120 (5.4 per cent). As a lay magistrate, he would have sat with two colleagues.

24. *Second report from the Select Committee of the House of Lords on Intemperance; together with the minutes of evidence, and an appendix, 1877.* PP 1877 (271), p.33.

a quarter, 523 (23.5 per cent), lived in neighbouring Manchester. Homeless women comprised the third highest category here but the percentage was low, with 150 (6.7 per cent) women stating that they had no settled home. Not surprisingly, the districts of Manchester closest to Salford appeared prominently in the prison registers. The Deansgate area was heavily represented here, with Deansgate itself and the streets surrounding it often featuring in the addresses of women committed for drunkenness. As noted above, Deansgate was a densely populated area, with a large number of public houses. The population of the district alone, in 1871, was 24,173.²⁵ The licensed premises of Salford's Chapel Street, therefore, were easily accessible to a large number of people. Indeed, the streets nearest to Chapel Street were heavily represented, with Wood Street, Cumberland Street, Dolefield, Bridge Street, Trumpet Street, Garside Street, Spinningfield and Hardman Street appearing regularly in the registers. Also within walking distance of Salford was the Manchester district of Angel Meadow, a notorious slum. Addresses of women from this area included Millers Lane, Rochdale Road, Charter Street and Angel Street. Another Manchester district within easy reach of Salford was Hulme, an area which also provided a number of women to Salford's borough court. In total, fifty women committed from Salford had an address there. Furthermore, the manufacturing district of Ancoats was also within close proximity of Salford, and was home to a number of women committed for drunkenness in the borough, although not to the same extent as Deansgate. Hulme, Deansgate, Angel Meadow and Ancoats were all poor, slum areas, with densely packed housing and poor sanitation. It was areas like these which contributed the large majority of women arrested and committed for drunkenness.²⁶

Some of these women were persistent offenders. For example, Maria Riley had twenty-three previous committals by August 1875 and continued to be re-committed after this date. She was committed twenty-one times between 1869 and 1875, with all but one of the offences taking place in Salford. A young widow, she was aged thirty in 1875. Riley gave an address in Hulme for all but her last committal, when she had become homeless. Additionally, Catherine Atkinson was committed twenty-two times during this period, with all the offences taking place in Salford. She lived in the Angel

Meadow district before also becoming homeless. Similarly, Mary Ann Haughton, who lived at various addresses around Deansgate, was committed sixteen times and continued to be committed after September 1875. She was also widowed. All three women lived within walking distance of Salford and were repeat offenders. It was habitual offenders such as these who helped to increase the number of women prosecuted at Salford's borough court. Furthermore, these persistent offenders helped to ensure that, statistically, incidences of female drunkenness appeared to be increasing.

Salford's press was content to apportion blame for any rise in crime rates on people who had migrated, for whatever reason, to the borough. Those displaced by the slum clearances in Manchester's Deansgate were accused of increasing the amount of crime. As Walton, *et al*, have discovered in their comparative study of the Spanish Basque country and north-west Lancashire, such comments were not unusual.²⁷ In Salford, disorderly behaviour at the annual Eccles Wakes was blamed on people travelling to the celebrations from Manchester, whilst the clearances in Deansgate led to an influx of new residents in Salford.²⁸ They had 'greatly swelled the drunkards list', noted the *Salford Weekly News*, in horror, and were 'notable for nothing but drunkenness, vice, and cruelty'.²⁹ The borough's elites, in an attempt to prove their moral standing, were keen to apportion blame for criminality on the shoulders of migrants and outsiders.

The poorer districts of Salford also helped to swell the number of female committals to gaol. The most common addresses of the imprisoned were in areas such as Greengate, Regent Road, Adelphi and the streets and courts on and around Chapel Street. These were densely populated areas and, in the case of the Adelphi, home to a significant number of Irish-born women. These areas were constantly associated with criminality. It was these areas, for example, and those noted above in Manchester, which saw the birth and growth of youth gangs, the scuttlers, from the 1870s onwards.³⁰ As in Manchester, it was the residents of the poorer areas of Salford who figured most prominently in the prison registers.

Moreover, homelessness played a role in increasing a woman's vulnerability to imprisonment. Throughout south-east Lancashire, 640 (10.1 per cent) women committed for drunkenness stated that they had no settled home. In Salford this number was 150 (6.7 per

25. *Census of England and Wales, 1871. (33 & 34 Vict. c. 107.) Population tables. Area, houses, and inhabitants. Vol. II. Registration or union counties.* PP 1872 [C.676-I C.676-II], p. 383.

26. A reporter from the Manchester Evening News produced a series of articles on 'criminal Manchester' in 1874, in which Charter Street and Deansgate were extensively covered. These were reprinted in the 1880s in a bound volume, see *Criminal Manchester, Experiences of a Special Correspondent*. (1874) Manchester: G. Renshaw, reproduced at <<http://library.chethams.com>>[accessed 3 April 2018]. Charter Street was described as 'the headquarters, practically, of the thieving fraternity', p. 1, whilst drunkenness amongst women in Deansgate was deemed to be 'nothing more than an every-day occurrence', p. 11.

27. Walton, J.K, Blinkhorn, M, Pooley, C, Tidswell, D and Winstanley, M.J. (1999). 'Crime, migration and social change in north-west England and the Basque country, c. 1870-1930', *British Journal of Criminology*, 39.1, p. 107.

28. *Salford Weekly News*, 27 September 1873.

29. *Salford Weekly News*, 29 August 1874.

30. Davies, A. (2008) *The Gangs of Manchester, The Story of the Scuttlers, Britain's First Youth Cult*. Preston: Milo.

cent). These figures, while portraying the number of homeless women, do not present their personal experiences. Close analysis of these women shows how either their use of alcohol, their experiences of imprisonment, or both, impacted on their lives. Women who claimed they had no settled abode were often committed from more than one borough court, which reflected their transient lifestyles. Others lost their homes and their families after repeated committals. Through close analysis of the data, it is possible to judge how women's lives changed over time. For example, Warrington-born Mary Warburton was committed twice for drunkenness, the first time in November 1872 in Salford and then in August 1873, in Oldham. Warburton stated that she was married at the time of her first committal, although she did not provide a next of kin. She was widowed by the time of her second committal but did provide her brother's name as next of kin.

Women with no settled abode may have moved around in order to avoid detection by the police, especially if they were well known to them. Elizabeth Carter, of Salford, was one homeless woman who may have moved from the borough in an attempt to avoid prosecution, although she was not successful. She was committed to prison six times between March 1870 and May 1875. Four of these committals were for drunkenness, one for using threatening language towards her husband whilst drunk and one for assaulting her husband, William. Reporting on this latter offence, the *Salford Weekly News* stated that Carter had separated from her husband and had attempted to cause grievous bodily harm by throwing vitriol at him.³¹ Her relationship with her husband was fractious, at least three of her committals were for offences against him. All but two of her committals came from Salford, the final two being from Bury and Stalybridge respectively.³² She stated that she had an address only once, in Greengate, Salford, otherwise she had no settled home. Carter may have moved from town to town to escape the attention of the police or to find employment. She appears in the registers as a factory worker but it is unknown whether she actually had an occupation. By her sixth committal her marriage appears to have broken down completely, as she gave no next of kin.

As well as moving from town to town, homeless women were often estranged from their families. In Salford, 109 (72.7 per cent) homeless women gave no next of kin. Only seven (4.7 per cent) gave the name of a husband. Many of these women were widowed, however, so this is not surprising. The majority of these

women had no settled home, no familial support and appeared to live alone and in extreme poverty. Drinking could well have been a release, the 'shortest way out of Manchester', for them. They would have also been more susceptible to a prison sentence, having few funds to be able to pay a fine, or having no one to pay it. It is also possible that prison provided, an albeit meagre, respite to life on the outside. For instance, Zedner has noted that many destitute women would treat prison as a refuge, a place they treated as a welfare agency rather than a place of punishment.³³ Furthermore, Turner has stated that, in Stafford, homeless women had no means to stop offending and there was little possibility to reform themselves without help.³⁴ There is little doubt that this was also the case for homeless women in Salford. These women appeared to have no roots and no familial support, either from their husbands or other family members. Due to this lifestyle, they were more vulnerable to being arrested by the police for vagrancy and drunkenness.

Conclusion

To Galbraith, the rising number of women committed to Strangeways Prison in the first half of the 1870s was an evil, an indication that these women were becoming increasingly immoral and open to corrupting influences, temptation and sin. Like many of his contemporaries, Galbraith did not associate social and economic factors with a woman's vulnerability to imprisonment. Far from being the morally corrupt 'fallen women' denounced by the Victorians, many offenders had no access to support, were desperately poor and in many instances had been widowed. Therefore, grief and poverty were important triggers in a woman's life, which could lead her into drink and, ultimately, imprisonment.

The poverty of incarcerated women was apparent from their addresses. They came from the poorer areas of Salford and Manchester, especially the slum areas. These districts had appalling sanitary conditions which meant that many residents would have spent a great deal of time on the streets. Moreover, they were districts which were perceived, by the press and the police, as being particularly criminal. Therefore, they were policed heavily, which led these women into direct contact with authority on a regular basis. During a period in which drunkenness was perceived as a particular social problem, a combination of police activity, popular prejudice and poverty would have increased a woman's chances of imprisonment for the offence.

31. *Salford Weekly News*, 12 March 1870.

32. Carter was sentenced to three months in Strangeways in July 1870, for using threatening language against her husband. She also appeared in the female description book for New Bailey Prison in July 1867 but there is no record of her offence. She gave an address in Red Bank, Manchester whilst in the New Bailey but was homeless in 1870.

33. Zedner, 1991, p.171.

34. Turner, J. (2011) 'Punishing women, 1880-1905', *The Howard Journal of Criminal Justice*, 50.5, pp. 505-515.