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**Understanding the Past II**

# Revisiting the Borstal experiment, c. 1902-1982

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## Introduction

**Young adult prisoners have long been perceived as a problem for both society and government. Historically, they have been over-represented in prisons and their re-offending rates are high. Recent inquiries have found that this group of offenders and prisoners remain a significant and ongoing problem for government and have recently been considered a neglected group in the penal system.<sup>1</sup> The Borstal system for young adult offenders (17-21 years, later raised to 23) dominated the penal landscape for most of the twentieth century. The Borstal experiment lasted for over 80 years and yet remains a blank spot in the history of criminal justice and incarceration. The institutions that sprang up have received surprisingly little examination by crime historians. In the decade or so before its abolition in 1982, the system was often depicted as 'violent and oppressive, its staff callous and cruel'.<sup>2</sup> But in its early years, in theory, it offered a beacon of hope for young adult offenders in the early twentieth-century custodial sector. Nevertheless, there has been no full history of the institution from the opening of the first borstal in Rochester, in 1902, until the abolition of the system in 1982. This short article will outline the establishment and development of the borstal system and consider some of the enduring themes to be revisited in an ongoing substantial history of the borstal system. It will consider the distinct stages of its evolution, and the changing practices which ultimately led to its demise in the 1980s.**

## Setting up the borstal system

Borstal was intrinsically linked to the juvenile penal estate, which in the late nineteenth and early

twentieth centuries was composed of the reformatory school system, the semi-penal industrial schools, and some juvenile wards in the adult prison system. The reformatory schools, and what was perceived as their general success, was key in the debates about young adult prisoners at the 1895 Prison Committee, popularly known as the Gladstone Committee. At this Committee the problem of 'young adult prisoners', those aged between 16 and 21, was recognised. As the judicial statistics from 1893 demonstrated, young adult prisoners accounted for a significant amount of the penal population (they were the second highest group below the 21-30 year-olds, who accounted for the largest proportion of offenders).<sup>3</sup> The Committee commented on the shortness of sentences for this class of prisoner, and in contrast advocated a longer sentence to enable a better reformatory experience. It also recommended that the (maximum) age of admission to reformatories should be raised from 16 to 21.

Central to this Committee, was the role of the Prison Commissioner, Sir. Evelyn Ruggles-Brice, who really became the architect of the new system which was to be aimed at those slightly older youths who fell outside the jurisdiction of the reformatory schools. At this stage there was not yet a clear commitment to build a separate young adult estate, but it was suggested that certain reformatories could be set aside for lads and girls according to age and character.<sup>4</sup> Ruggles-Brice believed that an institution should be established that was:

*...a half-way house between the prison and the reformatory. Situated in the country with ample space for agricultural and land reclamation work. It would have penal and coercive sides...but it should be amply provided with a staff capable of giving sound education, training the inmates in*

1. Allen, R. (2013) *Young Adults in Custody: The Way Forward*, [https://www.t2a.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2013/11/T2A-Young-Adults-in-Custody\\_V3.pdf](https://www.t2a.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2013/11/T2A-Young-Adults-in-Custody_V3.pdf)
2. Canton, R. & Hancock, D. (2007), *Dictionary of Probation and Offender Management*. Cullompton, Willan, p. 29.
3. *Eighteenth Report of the Commissioners of Prisons and the Directors of Convict Prisons* (1895), p. 29.
4. DCP, 1895, p. 30.

various kinds of industrial work, and qualified generally to exercise the best and healthiest kind of moral influence.<sup>5</sup>

The first 'experiments' were established in Bedford Prison (1900) and Rochester convict prison at Borstal village (1902), which gave the system its name. The borstal sentence was enacted in 1908 by the Prevention of Crime Act, aimed at youths aged 16 — 21 with previous convictions and/or identified as having criminal habits or tendencies. As Ruggles-Brice noted in a 1900 letter to the Secretary of State:

*...the proposal is to deal systematically with the young ruffian, the hooligan of the London streets, the callous and precocious young criminal on whom the present system of treatment in prison makes no impression, and who graduates through a succession of short local sentences into a fixed career of habitual crime.<sup>6</sup>*

The records of the Borstal Association contain personal files for a number of former-Borstal boys.<sup>7</sup> The earliest Home Office case-files date from 1908 and include the records of 100 or so boys who entered Rochester Borstal in the years leading up to the First World War. Most of these boys went to the front, and many of them died at the front, or subsequently of injuries sustained in combat. A deliberate policy of releasing young prisoners to serve in the war had been instituted early in the conflict. In the Report of the Prison Commissioners for 1916, it was noted:

*Since the outbreak of war, about 1,000 ex-Borstal lads are known to have joined the Forces. Two have been awarded the*

*Distinguished Conduct Medal, 91 have received non-commissioned rank, while notification of death has been received in 37 cases. Including charges of desertion and minor offences, only 96 have been reported upon unsatisfactorily. As regards the 201 lads discharged direct to the Army from Borstal Institutions this year, only 7 have provided unsatisfactory; the remainder, 96 per cent., are doing well.<sup>8</sup>*

How many boys actually went to war from the early Borstals, and how many died, we have yet to confirm. In his book, *Boy Soldiers of the Great War*, Richard Van Emden noted that of the 336 boys released from Borstal institutions in March 1915, 150 were in the forces, and some 600 former borstal boys were known to be serving overall.<sup>9</sup> In fact Feltham Borstal would be closed due to low numbers in February 1916, presumably because of the declining male crime rate during the war, and the fact that youths were being diverted into the forces.<sup>10</sup>

These boys include Richard Whall.<sup>11</sup> Richard was convicted at the Essex Quarter Sessions in July 1912 at the age of 17, having stolen a bicycle. He had held down a job as an errand boy for a while but had left his job after falling out with his

father, whom the records state, 'was always swearing at him'. He had also helped his father with his boot-shining business. He received a three-year sentence in borstal, where the Chaplain described him as 'quite a nice lad, but not robust, especially in character'. During his time in the prison he seems to have knuckled down, and he was discharged into the care of his father in early March 1915. A week later the borstal agent, Mr. McKenna, received a letter from Richard stating that he would prefer to join the army,

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5. Ibid., p. 20.

6. The National Archives, Kew (hereafter TNA) TNA: HO 45/10046, letter to Sir Digby by Ruggles-Brice, dated 30 June 1900. Cited in Menis, S. (2012), 'More Insights on the English Borstal: 'shaping' or just 'shaking' the young-offender?', *International Journal of Criminology and Sociological Theory*, 5/3, pp. 985-998, p. 990.

7. TNA HO247, 1905-1977.

8. 1916 [Cd. 8342] *Report of the Commissioners of Prisons and the directors of convict prisons, with appendices.*, pp. 14-15.

9. Van Emden, R. (2005), *Boy Soldiers of the Great War*. Headline Book Publishing, p. 138.

10. *The Times*, 19 February 1916, p. 5.

11. TNA: HO247/71, Case-file, Richard Whall.

and he had enlisted in the Essex Regiment. He thanked Mr. McKenna for his help and wrote that he hoped that he approved of his actions. During 1915, Mr. McKenna kept in touch with William, receiving a letter from him in May, which noted that he'd 'not touched a drop of drink since he'd been in the army'. The Borstal Association wrote to William 'for news' in late May and July; finally, in August, they received news from his parents that he'd been killed in action. A newspaper cutting from the *Essex County Standard*, with a picture of William in his uniform, is clipped to the file, and tells us that William was killed at Gallipoli on the 5th August. He was aged twenty.

The sacrifice of the Borstal boys remains a little-known story of the Great War that deserves to be remembered, although it should be said that the war service of these boys did not go completely unrecognised as we've seen from the 1916 Prison Commission. The Commission also received testimony from the Borstal Association, which had kept in touch with ex-prisoners serving in the Forces, a testimony from the Visiting Committee of Bristol Prison, which had a Modified Borstal System, commented: 'If one fact stands out more clearly than another as a lesson of the War, it is the magnificent material of which the working-class of this country is composed'.<sup>12</sup>

### Development of the interwar borstal

The early system came under a fair amount of criticism, mainly that borstal was little different from mainstream prisons. However, the critics of the early borstal system, would be appeased in the later 1920s, when the influence of the new Prison Commissioner, the iconic penologist, reformer, and youth worker, Alexander Paterson is seen as having had a profound impact on social policy in interwar Britain. Paterson's modifications to borstal referred to the adoption of a 'moral system', which included physical

training, extended education, sports, and the introduction of the house system — which was based on the belief that youths should have an allegiance and identity shaped by their house, and by loyalty to their house master — emphasising the 'personal influence of the members of staff upon the boys'.<sup>13</sup>

By the mid-thirties there were eight borstals; The two earliest borstals for male prisoners were Rochester, and Feltham in west London, which was founded in 1910. In 1909, Aylesbury Women's Prison became a borstal for girls. In the 1920s and 30s there was an expansion of the borstal system, with the

opening of Portland (1921), Sherwood (1932) and Camp Hill, on the Isle of Wight (1931), and the two open borstals, Lowdham Grange (1930) and North Sea Camp (1935). These institutions specifically catered for borstal youths. Some, like the open borstals, were purpose built. Others, like Aylesbury (a women's prison) and Feltham (an industrial school), had previous incarnations as institutions. Other types of borstal experience were established in mainstream adult prisons. Borstal Allocation Centres, also known as Reception Centres, selected trainees for open and closed institutions. Unsurprisingly, open borstals were reserved for youths who were believed to have the most potential to

respond to borstal training. By 1946 there were three Borstal Allocation Centres, within Wandsworth and Wormwood Scrubs in London, and at Feltham borstal in Middlesex.<sup>14</sup> There was also a purpose-built centre at Latchmere House in Kingston-upon-Thames. There were also Recall Centres, which according to former Prison Commissioner, Lionel Fox, were 'for the further training of those who have to be brought back, since it is on many grounds undesirable for these failures to mix with the ordinary trainees'.<sup>15</sup> The Recall Centre moved around a number of mainstream prisons up to the Second World war, including Canterbury (1911-23), Wormwood Scrubs (1923-31), and Wandsworth (1931-40). From 1948 Portsmouth Recall Centre was

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12. 1916 [Cd. 8342] *Report of the Commissioners of Prisons and the directors of convict prisons, with appendices.*, pp. 13-14.

13. Bailey, V. (1987), *Delinquency and Citizenship: Reclaiming the Young Offender, 1914-1948.* Oxford, Clarendon, p. 198

14. Hood, R. (1965), *Borstal Re-assessed.* Heinemann, p. 225.

15. Fox, L. W. (1952), *The English Prison and Borstal Systems.* Routledge & Kegan Paul, p. 397.

the first purpose-built Recall Centre. Finally, some mainstream adult prisons also had borstal wings, including Liverpool, Wormwood Scrubs, Durham, and Holloway women's prison.<sup>16</sup>

During this period of expansion, the borstal has been argued to have been a considerable success in achieving the rehabilitation of its youthful inmates. This has been generally associated with the stewardship of Alexander Paterson, during his time as Prison Commissioner, and in particular, the introduction of the house system. In 1973, reflecting on the more recent fortunes of the borstal system, John Warder and Reg Wilson noted:

*During the 1930's Borstals appear to have enjoyed outstanding success, rehabilitating a claimed 70 per cent of trainees. During this period the house-master system, promoted by Alexander Paterson and self-consciously modelled on the English middle-class 'Public School' (i.e., private), clearly responded to many of the needs of the overwhelmingly working-class boys.<sup>17</sup>*

However, other contemporaries were rather less sanguine about the training on offer. For example, the Reverend Digby Bliss Kittermaster, who was the chaplain at Rochester Borstal from 1937, kept a diary (from 1938) in which he recorded his interactions with the inmates and the staff.<sup>18</sup> As Melanie Tebbutt has shown in her study of Kittermaster's diary, he was very aware of the many contradictions of the system, and often critical of some of the rhetoric which underpinned it. Moreover, he was frequently

frustrated in the limitations put on his pastoral role and wrote about the poor psychological state of many of the inmates as well as the punitive and often brutal regime that underlay the rhetoric of public-school ideals.<sup>19</sup>

### **Borstal in Post Second World War Britain**

The post second world war was a period when young male adults were subject to intense scrutiny. As Louise Jackson as argued, between 1945 and 1970, a primary object of surveillance and intervention by the police and state agencies was the white working-class adolescent; this is equally true of those young adults caught between the conflicting states of adolescence and full-adulthood within the Borstal system.<sup>20</sup> It was also a period during which such youth would become of increasing interest to academic investigations into delinquency and crime.<sup>21</sup> The academic study of Borstal youth seems to have provided a golden opportunity to address and measure key questions about crime, background and environment, and recidivism. It is no coincidence that this was an era of significant experimentation in Borstal institutions; Borstal inmates were a captive test group who could be subject to

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study by various psycho-metric, bio-metric and socio-metric approaches.<sup>22</sup> This wasn't entirely new but post-war growth of sociology in universities was crucial to the contemporary understanding of penalty.<sup>23</sup>

In this period, the social and cultural role of borstal would also undergo some transformation. In part that was due to a greater visibility of the borstal

16. Ibid.

17. Warder, J. and Wilson, R. (1973), 'The British Borstal Training System', *The Journal of Criminal Law and Criminology*, 64/1, pp. 118-127.

18. Tebbutt, M. (2019), 'Questioning the Rhetoric of British Borstal Reform in the 1930s', *Historical Journal* (in press).

19. Ibid.

20. Jackson, L. (2014), *Policing Youth: Britain 1945-1970*. Manchester University Press.

21. For example, Rose, A. G. (1954), *Five Hundred Borstal Boys*, Basil Blackwell; Gibbens, T. C. N. (1963), *Psychiatric Studies of Borstal Lads*. Oxford University Press; Stratta, E. (1970), *The Education of Borstal Boys: A Study of Their Educational Experiences Prior To, and During, Borstal Training*. Routledge & Kegan Paul; Hood, R. (1966), *Homeless Borstal Boys: A Study of Their After-care and After-conduct*. Bell.

22. Taylor, A. J. W. (1968), 'A Search Among Borstal Girls for the Psychological and Social Significance of their Tattoos', *The British Journal of Criminology*, 8/2, pp. 170-185; Kahn, J., Reed, F. S., Bates, M., Coates, T. and Everitt, B. (1976), 'A Survey of Y Chromosome Variants and Personality in 436 Borstal Lads and 254 Controls', *British Journal of Criminology*, 16/3, pp. 233-244; Hollin, C. R. and Wheeler, H. M. (1982), 'The Violent Young Offender: A Small Group Study of a Borstal Population', *Journal of Adolescence*, 5, pp. 247-257

23. For example, the (later discredited) work on delinquents by the psychologist Cyril Burt in the interwar period, Burt, C. (1925), *The Young Delinquent*. University of London Press.

experience in popular culture. The Irish playwright Brendan Behan's, *Borstal Boy* (1958) stands as the most significant personal account of the borstal experience in twentieth-century Britain. Alan Sillitoe's *The Loneliness of the Long-Distance Runner* (1959), was the title story from a short-story collection, which would later be adapted into one of the most iconic films from that period. *The Loneliness of the Long-Distance Runner* wasn't the first film to depict the experience of borstal. In 1949, Gainsborough Pictures released the prison drama, *Boys in Brown*, starring Richard Attenborough, Dirk Bogarde and Jack Warner. However, the film's depiction of borstal youths contained little critique of the system, and in contrast reflected a nostalgia for the interwar period, the essential decency of Jack Warner's Governor echoing the masters of the Paterson-era Borstal.

Yet by the 1950s the borstal system was under strain, with more and more youths being filtered into a much less selective system.<sup>24</sup> This may have been a reflection of the growing concerns about juvenile delinquency. Post-war panics about youth crime emerged in Britain in the late 40s and 50s; anxieties about crime were further fuelled by the growth of new markets for teenagers and growing consumption by young people.<sup>25</sup> In Britain teenagers who had 'never had it so good', spent their money on records, cinema, clothes and other teenage paraphernalia, much to the distrust of their elders who believed that this had contributed to the increase in youth delinquency. The young adult prison population rose in the 1950s, leaving the existing system heaving

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under the strain. For example, at the Annual Conference of the National Association of Probation Officers in April 1959, it was reported that 'the Borstal population had risen from 2,800 at the beginning of 1956 to 4,400 at the end of 1958, an increase of 57 per cent'.<sup>26</sup> New borstal institutions such as Everthorpe in East Yorkshire, and Wetherby (a former Naval Base), both of which opened as borstals in 1958, were established as a response to the expanding numbers of inmates. Yet within a few years borstal would be seen as a failing institution.

By the 1960s, the increasing pressures on the system would be reflected in more critical cultural representations. Between the wars absconding had been a significant issue.<sup>27</sup> However, from the 1940s accounts of violent disorder in borstals would notably increase. For example, in 1945 there were disturbances at Aylesbury girls. The Labour Home Secretary James Ede told the House of Commons, 'The disturbance at Aylesbury was at the Borstal Institution and consisted of a display of indiscipline by 19 girls out of a population of 235. The incident was dealt with by turning the fire hoses on the offenders, who have since been removed to Holloway and punished'.<sup>28</sup> In 1949 a riot at Sherwood borstal involving 200 boys, resulted in the stabbing of a warder; the previous year, in November 1948, a Sherwood

inmate had murdered the matron, 46 year old Irene Phillips; 21-year-old Kenneth Strickson was found guilty and executed at Lincoln Prison in March 1949.<sup>29</sup> In 1951 there was a widely-reported Inquiry into rioting at Portland Borstal; and further disturbances

24. Fox, L. W. (1952), *The English Prison and Borstal Systems*. Routledge and Kegan Paul, pp. 98-99. Also, TNA: CAB/129/95, 'Penal Practice in a Changing Society: Aspects of Future Development (England and Wales), White Paper on Penal Reform, 12th December 1958, p. 278.

25. Cohen, S. (1972), *Folk Devils and Moral Panics: The Creation of the Mods and Rockers*. MacGibbon and Kee; Muncie, J. (1984), *"The Trouble with Kids Today": Youth and Crime in Post-war Britain*. Dover; Horn, A. (2011), *Juke Box Britain: Americanisation and Youth Culture, 1945-1960*. Manchester University Press; Jackson and Bartie, *Policing Youth*.

26. Grant, N. R. (1959), 'In a Time of Change: The Chairman's Address to the Annual Conference of the National Association of Probation Officers, at Southport on 25th April 1959', *Probation Journal*, June, p. 18.

27. Barman, S. (1934), *The English Borstal System: A Study in the Treatment of Young Offenders*. P. S. King. Also, for example, see HC Deb 17 February 1938 v. 331, cc.2051-3.

28. Mr. Ede, HC Deb 13 December 1945 vol 417 c764W

29. *Daily Mail*, 20th May 1949; *Hull Daily Mail*, 19th May 1948; *Daily Mail*, 23rd March, 1949.

were reported at Hull Borstal in 1953 and 1957, Dumfries borstal in 1963, and Reading borstal in 1967. In many of these disturbances alleged mistreatment of inmates by officers was cited.<sup>30</sup>

### Borstal abolished

In 1965, the criminologist Roger Hood, concluded in his study of the borstal system,

*Although, on the surface, the borstal system has made vast progress in the last thirty years, there is little evidence to show that it has come any nearer to the solution of its major problem — the training and reformation of the 'hard-core' of its population. It is to this large segment of the borstal population that attention should be directed, particularly as it appears to be growing in size.<sup>31</sup>*

By the 1970s the failings of the system were becoming ever apparent. The extent to which, as Hood argued, this was to do with the difficulty of managing a large more problematic element of the population is debateable. Other factors also need to be considered. According to Clive Emsley, the training ethos (Paterson's 'Moral System') had largely declined by the sixties and seventies. Increasingly, borstal more closely resembled mainstream adult prisons, with uniformed guards, and the associated problems such as overcrowding and poor facilities.<sup>32</sup> By the late 1970s, the system received more negative attention with the controversy around the banning of the Roy Minton and Alan Clarke play, *Scum*. Originally conceptualized and filmed as a BBC Play for Today, *Scum* was banned through the vigorous interventions of the public decency campaigner, Mary Whitehouse. Two years later

Minton and Clarke remade it as a film. Despite being toned down from the original version, the film remained highly controversial in its depiction of violence and bullying, not only amongst the inmates, but also by the prison warders. Whilst this was largely a closed world to investigators, *Scum* reflected the evidence of violence that had increasingly been reported throughout the post-war period. Moreover, the film showed other elements of the borstal experience which had been lacking from earlier depictions. Not least of these was the large number of black inmates who were subject, unsurprisingly, to racism from both other inmates

and the staff. This version of borstal was essentially a prison, the staff who ran the institution were portrayed as 'incompetent, uncaring and unimaginative'.<sup>33</sup> Whilst there is little doubt that the purpose of *Scum* was to directly critique the system, it arguably captured a broader political critique of the borstal system which would gather momentum in this period. Within two years of the cinema release of *SCUM*, borstal would be abolished by the Criminal Justice Act of 1982, and replaced with youth custody centres.

In conclusion, the borstal system is often seen as the iconic institution for young adult justice in the twentieth century, for both its strengths

In conclusion, the borstal system is often seen as the iconic institution for young adult justice in the twentieth century, for both its strengths and weaknesses. As an institutional model it had a huge influence.

and weaknesses. As an institutional model it had a huge influence, and variants of the borstal system spread throughout the British Empire and later Commonwealth. Borstal institutions were established in India, Africa and Canada, for example. Borstal School Acts were passed in a number of Indian states (including Madras, Punjab, West Bengal, Kerala and Bombay). Vancouver in British Columbia, was home to the Borstal Institution New Haven and the British Columbia Borstal Association which was established in 1948

30. *Daily Mail*, 1st January 1951. For Hull borstal disturbances see *The Times*, 7th December 1953 and 18th August 1957.

31. Hood, *Borstal Re-Assessed*, pp. 217-218.

32. Emsley, C. (2011), *Crime and Society in Twentieth-Century England*. Longman, p. 222.

33. Wilson, D. and O'Sullivan, S. (2004), *Images of Incarceration: Representations of Prison in Film and Television Drama*. Winchester: Waterside Press, pp. 44-5.

to help young men to 'move away from criminal lifestyles' and which is still active as a charity today.<sup>34</sup> In Nigeria, West Africa, a borstal system is still in operation today.<sup>35</sup> Indeed Alexander Paterson visited a number of colonial borstals during his tenure as Prison Commissioner, in the interwar period.<sup>36</sup> Borstal then, was a key experience for many young men and women in the twentieth century, and

remains a core experience in cultural representations of penalty. Nevertheless, we know little about the system beyond its earlier years, and whilst some key studies of the system up to the 1950s and 1960s exist, there has been little scrutiny of the borstal system by historians.<sup>37</sup> As currently closed archives become open to the historian's gaze, it is hoped that this lack will be addressed.<sup>38</sup>



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34. <http://www.bcborstal.ca>

35. Sarki, Z. M. and Mukhtar, J. I. (2018), 'The Role of Borstal Homes in Nigeria: Reformation or Remaking Criminality?', *Journal of Advanced Research in Social and Behavioural Sciences*, 12, pp. 17-23.

36. Brown, I. (2007), 'An Inspector Calls: Alexander Paterson and Colonial Burma's Prisons', *Journal of South-East Asian Studies*, 38/2, pp. 293-308.

37. For example, see Hood, *Borstal Re-Assessed*, and Fox, *The English Prison and Borstal Systems*. For historical studies, most notable are Bailey, *Delinquency and Citizenship*, and Conor Reidy's study of the Irish borstal, Reidy, C. (2009), Ireland's 'Moral Hospital': *The Irish Borstal System, 1906-1956*.

38. The author was recently funded by the British Academy to undertake a pilot study on the surviving borstal archives, with the aim of carrying out a longer-term project on the borstal system leading up to its abolition in 1982.