

THE REFORM OF GLOUCESTER PRISON

The reform and rebuilding of Gloucester Prison were largely the work of one man, Sir George Onesiphorus Paul. He was a disciple of John Howard, and endeavoured to put into practice some of that reformer's ideas. Paul's massive new prison is still in use today. Although out of date by modern standards, it stands as a solid monument to his pioneering zeal.

The need for reform was clear to Howard when he visited the old prison in the Castle (1). He found a ruinous and unhealthy building. It served as a combined gaol and bridewell or house of correction, in which different classes of prisoners were mixed together, those guilty of serious crimes with those imprisoned for lesser offences, and men with women and children. Discipline was lax, townsmen coming in to drink with prisoners in the taproom. The gaoler received only £10 a year salary, and the inmates had to pay him fees for their keep, varying from 13s. 4d. for those sentenced at quarter sessions to 17s. 8d. for those sentenced at assizes, and £1 0s. 10d. for debtors. It is true that some felons received an allowance from the county, but there was nothing for some of the obviously needy prisoners, like those imprisoned because unable to pay a fine, and debtors. There was no work, either to relieve idleness, or to give an opportunity to earn some money.

Sir George Paul first made proposals for reform in 1783, believing "that not only the sickness of the prisoners, but that the general increase of immorality and outrage may, in great measure, be attributed to the useless state of the Houses of Correction, and the consequent indiscriminate mode of confinement in the County Gaol". (2) The gaol was so crowded at the time, reported the Gloucester Journal, (3) that there was a shortage of fetters, and the smiths were hard at work forging new ones. Although a correspondent to the Journal (4) complained that Paul's plans for rebuilding were too expensive, and said that the existing prison could be suitably adapted, Paul had his way, and a special Act of Parliament was secured in 1785.

New methods in the treatment of prisoners were being discussed at this time, because transportation had temporarily become impossible. The former American colonies, after independence, refused to take convicts, and the Botany Bay settlement was not begun till 1787. A new sentence of imprisonment with labour was provided by the Penitentiary Houses Act of 1779, and until a national penitentiary was built, J.Ps. were authorised, in another Act in 1782, to adapt bridewells for the purpose.

The rules for the new prison were authorised in 1789, and the building received its first prisoners in 1791. A notable innovation was a governor (Mr. Cunningham), with a salary of £200 a year. Under him came a manufacturer (Mr. Green), who was in charge of the prisoners' labour, and got £50 a year. There were a surgeon (Mr. Wilton) and a chaplain (Rev. Edward Jones), who visited the prison two or three times a week. Two visiting magistrates were appointed each year; but any member of the bench was free to visit the prison, and Paul was often there inspecting and making recommendations.

The prison was divided into four main parts, to make possible the classification and separation of prisoners which Paul believed so vital. The gaol or sheriff's ward provided space for felons and fines (i.e. those imprisoned because unable to pay a fine), and for those awaiting trial. Debtors were accommodated in the magistrates' ward. The penitentiary was the part where the new sentence of imprisonment with labour was carried out. The bridewell or house of correction normally received prisoners for a short spell of about a month.

There continued to be women and children in the new prison. The Justices' and Surgeon's Journals record that various female prisoners gave birth to children (5), and that others were admitted with young children. Some of the prisoners were clearly very young. Stanley Organ, only 16, was ordered to be kept apart from the profligate transports. Thomas Hinton had been brought in for stealing at the age of 12, but despite a stay of two years and being flogged, he went out "the same incorrigible boy". Another boy who spent two years in the prison, Joel Fry, was only 15 when he was discharged.

Solitude was believed by Paul to be most effective in bringing prisoners to repentance and reforming their characters. Complete solitary confinement was a special punishment for misbehaviour, but penitentiary prisoners had little or no opportunity for conversation. They were put in separate cells at night, and although the rules allowed them to work together (6), they were often in fact said to be working in solitude in their own cells. (7) During exercise in the yard silence was the rule. In 1800 it was found that prisoners were holding conversations in the night; the ventilation holes were therefore re-arranged, so that they did not face each other across the passages, and under-floor heating flues were fitted. Prisoners were kept from any contact with the outside world; they were allowed no visitors; and after a penitentiary prisoner found out news from outside and spread it round, it was decided that no penitentiary prisoner should in future be cook.

The rules for discipline show a great contrast with what had gone on before. Liquor, especially spirits, was banned. However debtors might have wine or beer; and the surgeon sometimes ordered beer, or even brandy, for the sick. Tea and sugar also needed the surgeon's authorisation. Attempts to smuggle spirits into the prison were discovered from time to time and severely punished. Smoking was evidently allowed, for the governor was given £1 5s. Od. from the prison charity to buy tobacco for distribution at his discretion. Paul disapproved of fetters, and, reviewing his work in 1809, was able to say, "for many years the sound of a fether has not been heard within the wards of this prison". (8) Irons were used only in extreme cases, for example, to secure prisoners who had tried to escape or who were desperate characters. The surgeon recommended for a particular prisoner an iron collar instead of a ring on the leg. The ultimate punishment for refractory prisoners was solitary confinement, which included "the dark cell". Flogging was used but is mentioned only occasionally; it was to be administered by a person from the town, and not by one prisoner upon another. Debtors who misbehaved were removed to the sheriff's ward. Executions took place in the gaol, and it was considered salutary to gather the prisoners to watch them. (9).

Convicts in the penitentiary wore a uniform of white jacket and trousers, some of which were made in the prison workshop. Only convicts sentenced to six months or more had their head shaved. Clean sheets were provided every six weeks in winter and every four weeks in summer. The food seems remarkably good. In 1797 Paul worked out a new dietary, which allowed each convict a pound of beef, mutton or pork for dinner on Sunday and Thursday. (10) Special meals were provided by the prison charity fund, which, for example, paid 10s. 9d. for 30 lbs. of mutton for Christmas dinner in 1792. The surgeon's regular reports show that the health of the prisoners, one of the reasons why reform was begun, was greatly improved.

The abolition of fees was another great change. In the new prison no criminal paid them, but only debtors. These had to pay 1s. 0d. a week if they brought their own bedding, and 2s. 6d. if not. Often they were too poor to pay, and the fees were remitted; but remission was refused to any debtors who misbehaved and were put in the sheriff's ward. Occasionally men who had paid the debt for which they were imprisoned were detained longer because they owed fees to the prison. This was the situation which had aroused the indignation of Howard, and Paul tried to avoid it. For instance, he recommended that Ellis Jones, who owed £16 8s. 6d. in fees, should be released on payment of £10. Sometimes needy debtors were paid an allowance by the county, having been issued with a certificate that they were "objects of the public bounty". Debtors were supposed to receive help from their creditors, and the justices also issued certificates to them to "sue for their groats".

In place of fees prisoners were expected to work and earn their keep. Felons and fines either received an allowance from the county and paid back half their earnings, or they could give up the allowance and keep three quarters of their earnings. Debtors were not obliged to work, but they were encouraged to do so, and their earnings helped to pay their fees. They were paid weekly, and the visiting magistrates often watched them receive their money. For penitentiary prisoners hard labour was an integral part of the regime; they received no pay, though they might be given up to £3 on discharge. Bridewell prisoners were to be given work if it was available, and they kept a proportion of their earnings which varied according to their class.

Work was intended not only to pay for the prisoners' maintenance, but also to improve their characters. This was a main article of the reformers' creed, and shows a marked contrast to the dangerous idleness of earlier days. The organisation of labour was the responsibility of the manufacturer. Weaving is the occupation most often mentioned, and a spring loom was installed in 1794. The articles produced included sacks, stockings and occasionally prison uniforms. There was also rope making, since oakum was available. One prisoner was taught straw bonnet making by a lady brought in from outside. The setting up of a prison workshop offered risks, for in the early days a prisoner made a key there, with which he effected his escape. From a commercial viewpoint the prison's operations were very successful; a profit of £218 17s. 1½d. was recorded in 1798 (11). But when Paul reviewed the prison's achievements in 1809, he complained that "the late improvements in machinery have so diminished, or rather so annihilated, the objects of work by hand, that the power of supporting a system of hard labour in prisons, to be

productive of emolument, is entirely out of the question" (12). Prisoners also helped in the running of the prison; a prisoner working as a constable got 2d. a day. When a partition wall had to be moved, the work was done by prisoners, which saved £40. There are other references to men working as painters, masons and cooks, and to women acting as nurses in the hospital ward. All this was valuable. But the rules provided that penitentiary convicts should be kept at "labour of the hardest and most servile kind . . . such as treading in a wheel" (13). However there are only very occasional references to the treadwheel - for example, the surgeon said that prisoners should be allowed time to cool off after being on it - so perhaps it was not much used.

Besides earning money by their own labour, prisoners might also get help from the prison charity. This fund, the earliest of its kind in the country, was for long organised by Robert Raikes, whose concern was praised by Howard. Raikes used his newspaper, the Gloucester Journal, to publicise the fund; he printed acknowledgements of gifts, and from time to time expressed the prisoners' thanks. While the prison was in building the large sum of £300 was given by George III to be used to help debtors settle with their creditors. (14) Paul and other magistrates gave much time arranging compositions with creditors. No individual debtor was to be helped with more than £5 5s. Od., and then only if he were willing to surrender his effects. When the new prison was opened the balance of the king's gift was paid into a re-organised charity fund managed by a new committee, which included Paul and Raikes. There were a number of regular subscribers; for example, Paul and the bishop of Gloucester each paid £2 2s. Od. annually. Among individuals making gifts are found John Howard, Matthew Boulton and Lady Hester Stanhope. Boxes were put at the prison gate, but not much money came from them - in 1792 £2 16s. 5d. for debtors and 16s. 6½d. for criminals. The fund was divided into two parts, one "the fund for the relief and discharge of poor debtors", and the other "the fund to encourage penitence and good behaviour in criminal prisoners". More money was spent on debtors than criminals - in 1795-96, for example, £57 11s. 10½d. went on debtors, and £3 0s. 8½d. on criminals. The fund continued to help debtors pay a composition to their creditors, and so secure their discharge. The other prisoners got help in the way of increased comforts, like the tobacco and Christmas dinner already mentioned.

A final useful service of the new prison was help given on discharge. Well-behaved prisoners were usually given clothes and money to carry them to where they planned to live. For example, "William Malpas's time of imprisonment expiring this day - ordered as his behaviour has been uniformly good - to be allowed on leaving the prison, 1 coat, 1 shirt, 1 pr. breeches, 1 pr. stockings, and three shillings in money to carry him to Wotton Under Edge." (15) Soon after the prison opened Britain was at war, and frequently prisoners were discharged on condition that they enlisted in the army or navy.

Although Paul set himself to improve conditions for the prisoners, he had also to concern himself with their security. There were some critics who believed that Paul was more interested in providing comfort for the prisoners, than in protecting society from their crimes. The new prison started badly, when two men escaped, using ladders left around by workmen completing the building. One of the men who escaped

was persuaded by his wife to give himself up, and returned to the prison the next day. There were not many successful escapes in the following years. Three men got away in 1792, using a key made in the prison workshop. In 1799 three men were caught preparing to escape, and were put in 7lb. irons, the heaviest allowed by the rules. Later in the same year three felons tried to get away, but two of them were stopped by a debtor in the sheriff's ward. Two more escapes were prevented in 1803. A more slippery prisoner was Charles Buckingham, committed to gaol for highway robbery. He escaped at the end of 1808, and the night watch, John Brown, was suspected of assisting him. Brown was put on trial, but acquitted - quite rightly, as it turned out. For about six months later Buckingham was recaptured in London by the Bow Street officers, and told the full story of his escape. He had managed to obtain nails, a knife and an iron spoon, with which he got out of his cell. He used a rope made from his bed clothes to get over the outer wall. Buckingham was sentenced to transportation. However after being sent off with three other transports in the London coach, chained and handcuffed and guarded by three armed men, he and two others escaped at Uxbridge. The two other men were retaken four months later, but not Buckingham.

The results of the reform of Gloucester prison cannot be accurately gauged, but there are certain indications of its success. In 1792 the surgeon wrote, "the felons behave in a very contumacious and refractory manner, and threaten with Horrid Imprecations the life of the Gov^r." (16) By 1806 the Justices' Journal was recording, "several of the prisoners were desirous of expressing the greatest gratitude for the kind and humane treatment they received from the officers of the prison." (17) Some prisoners even asked to stay. In 1798 Mary Bayley was kept by her own consent a fortnight beyond the term of her sentence in the hope of getting a place for her. (18) Ann Warren made a similar request in 1805. She was soon found a post, but was dismissed for misconduct, and asked to come back to the prison, because she had nowhere else to go. "The repeated instances of depravity, which this young Girl was exhibited, afford a strong presumption, that her reformation is very far distant. She seems therefore to be in a peculiar degree a proper object of the Penitentiary discipline, more particularly as she herself desires it". (19) The fame of Paul's reforms attracted many visitors to the prison. Robert Raikes seems to have been eager to make the prison known, for once Mr. Green was censured for taking round a party with Mr. Raikes without an order. (20) Other visitors included the Prince of Orange, the Duke of Cumberland, and representatives of the assembly of Jamaica, who planned to build a prison in Kingston. Gloucester prison was taken as the model when the national penitentiary was at last built at Millbank in London in 1811.

R.K. Howes

References

1. J. Howard, The State of the Prisons (1777, Everyman Edition, 1929)
2. Sir G.O. Paul, Proceedings of the Grand Juries ... of the County of Gloucester, on Designing & Executing a General Reform in the Construction and Regulation of the Prisons (1808)
3. Gloucester Journal, 9 June 1783
4. Gloucester Journal, 6 October 1783
5. Anne Bey pregnant. Betty Yates had a child, Glos. R.O., Q/Gc1/1, 20 July 1792, 8 March 1803. Anne Daniel had a female bastard child, Q/Gc 16/1, 8 May 1792.
6. General Regulations for the Inspection and Controul of all the Prisons for the County of Gloucester (1790), p.68
7. Q/Gc 16/1, 24 April and 16 Sept. 1792
8. Sir G.O. Paul, Address to His Majesty's Justices of the Peace for the County of Gloucester on the Administration and Practical Effects of the System of Prison Regulation ... at their Epiphany General Quarter Sessions, 1809, p.50
9. e.g. the executions of Jonathan Evans, Hannah Limbrick and Hannah Webley, Q/Gc 16/1, 12 April 1793, 22 and 23 Aug. 1794.
10. Q/Gc 1/1, 17 Aug. 1797
11. Q/Gc 1/1, 27 and 28 Sept. 1798
12. Address to Epiphany Sessions, 1809, p.73
13. General Regulations, p.67
14. Q/Gc 18/1, 3 Feb. 1792
15. Q/Gc 1/1, 12 March 1795
16. Q/Gc 16/1, 5 March 1792
17. Q/Gc 1/1, 6 Oct. 1806
18. Q/Gc 1/1, 13 Apr. 1798
19. Q/Gc 1/1, 28 Oct. 1805
20. Q/Gc 3/1, 3 Oct. 1795