

1945

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L. W. Fox

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### Recommended Citation

L. W. Fox, Prison Management, 36 J. Crim. L. & Criminology 184 (1945-1946)

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# PRISON MANAGEMENT

L. W. Fox

We are deeply indebted to the Chairman of the Prison Commission for England and Wales, L. W. Fox, M.C., for this unusually interesting account of British prisons in wartime. The article has been written for the exclusive use of this *Journal*, through the kindness of the British Information Services. It is evident that the prisons in England and Wales, hard as the years of war have been, may yet have some measure of profit from their hard experiences. Prison officials in our own country will find some useful suggestions in these pages.—EDITOR.

Looked at, as one may now happily say, in retrospect, the war experience of English penal establishments has been on the whole the fortunate one of plucking grapes from thorns and figs from thistles.

A certain amount of cell accommodation was lost by enemy action, but that may be regarded as no more than an anticipation of a long overdue program of reconstruction. Even so, it seemed rather hard that one of the last V2 rockets to fall in London should have fallen on one of the largest prisons! Casualties in the blitz were fortunately light, and the experience, though bitter at the time, proved again and again the fine team-spirit that animated the staff, their efficient organization, and selfless devotion to duty. If that spirit persists after the war, reinforced by the return from the Forces of those hundreds of members of the prison service who have been using it in the more direct winning of the war, we shall start with that prime foundation of a good prison service — a good staff.

## *Population and Its Sources*

This introduction suggests at once the darker background of the picture, of which the two keynotes have been, and still are, overcrowding and understaffing. But it is not because we have lost some cell-blocks and one or two prisons that overcrowding has become a serious difficulty; it is because, in the last few years of the war, the prison population shot up to levels unknown since 1914. In the years before the war, the daily average population was about 10-11,000; during the last six months, it has been well over 14,000. The female prison population, which has increased more than the male, is now more than twice what it was before the war, it is impossible to predict, for, until full statistics are available, it cannot be certainly known what factors have caused it. It may however be hoped and assumed with reasonable certainty that purely wartime conditions were chiefly to blame.

Among younger people, several factors have been remarked. The conditions caused by air-raids in 1940 and 1941 — evacuation, closing and destruction of schools, loss of homes, and

uncontrolled existence between shelters and ruined streets — accounted for much. Then there is loss of family control through the enlistment of fathers and elder brothers and the calling up for national service of mothers and elder sisters. And at a higher age level, the ability to earn more money than is good for a youngster has often led to delinquency.

Among women the offences which have noticeably increased are: shoplifting, a reflection of strict clothes rationing; neglect of children, the broken home; brothel-keeping and other cognate offences, the "Armed camp" atmosphere; and industrial "absenteeism" a purely wartime offence.

Abnormal additions to the male population of prisons have included large numbers of interned aliens, persons detained under Defence Regulations, and conscientious objectors; but these are no longer significant. A more recent problem is the large and growing number of soldiers sentenced by courts martial to terms of penal servitude which must be served in civil prisons.

While, therefore, the post-war population level must depend on social and economic factors which cannot be predicted, it may be hoped that a substantial number of the present prison-filling factors will be removed with the war's end.

#### *Understaffing and Overcrowding*

Understaffing may be regarded as another aspect of the problem of overcrowding. Some 20 per cent. of the pre-war staff was called up for active service, but by reversion, to a single-shift timetable, entailing a reduction in the prisoner's working day and longer hours in cells, the situation was kept in hand until the population began to rise beyond the pre-war level. Meanwhile, as the war years lengthened out, wastage from sickness and retirement in the regular staff increased, and the recruitment of temporary War Auxiliaries has failed to keep pace with the wastage even in quantity though the loss in quality is even more disturbing. Although certain reserve cell accommodation exists, overcrowding could not be relieved by taking this into use, because there was no staff to man it.

But even from the thistle of overcrowding, it has been possible to pluck certain uncovenanted fruits. At several prisons, in the early days of the war, temporary hutments were put up for use in case of extensive destruction of cells by bombing. They were not required for that purpose, but later on, to relieve pressure on cell space, prison governors were authorized to use them as dormitories and dining-rooms. These hutments provide no sort of security — except that they are inside the prison wall — and they are practically unsupervised; yet, while several men have painfully hacked their way out of "secure"

cells, no-one has troubled to walk out of a hut, and the general standard of behavior has been very good.

Again, on two occasions it has become necessary to use, for the accommodation of adult prisoners, certain "open" establishments which were designed as Borstal Institutions, with fully communal living rooms and dormitories, and each experiment has been most successful. There can be no doubt that the lessons learned from these experiments as to the amount of trust that can be reposed in men under detention will be fully reflected in the lay-out of the post-war system.

To this experience has been added another, also derived in the first place from an expedient to relieve overcrowding. Hitherto, the policy of transferring selected prisoners to "training prisons", where they were allowed more personal responsibility in comparatively open control, had been confined to the Star Class (broadly, the first-timers). In order to relieve a large London prison, it was decided to send to a prison till then reserved for Stars a certain number of men who, in spite of more than one prison sentence, did not look like "habituals" and offered hope of response to reformatory treatment. The bogey of "contamination" was by-passed, and the more hopeful view taken that the influence for good of a decent majority was more likely to determine the tone of the prison than the other way about. So far, this idea has worked out well, and if it continues to do so it is likely to set the post-war policy for "training prisons". Experience has shown that some 75 per cent. of first-timers do not return to prison; it is the 25 per cent. who do come back who will become "habituals" if every effort is not made at that stage to put them straight.

During the war, though not from any war necessity, the practice has been established of allowing recidivist prisoners of the ordinary class who have reached the third stage of their sentence (i.e., after 40 weeks), to have their meals together.

It seems likely, then, that the post-war lay-out will turn on regional training prisons, to which will be transferred all prisoners with sufficiently long sentences who offer hope of response to fully reformatory treatment; and that when conditions permit of reconstruction, these prisons will be developed on fully communal lines. The use of "minimum security" camps will also be extended, either in connection with the training prisons or as independent establishments.

#### *Prison Employment and Possible Results*

Among the various aspects of training, it is on employment that the effect of war experience has been most striking. Prison industry has been effectively harnessed to the national war effort, and remarkable results have been achieved.

In the general run of industry, the prisons have had the unusual experience of having all the work they could do and being pressed to take more. There has also been a much greater variety of work, not only of simple, unskilled types but skilled and semi-skilled. This has made the prison shops more interesting and has shown that they can successfully tackle all sorts of jobs.

Many shops have been turned over to direct munitions work for Government contractors, who have paid to the Commissioners, for the benefit of the Exchequer, the full approved rates for each job. The contractors have provided the technical supervision, while control and discipline have remained the responsibility of the prison staffs. In more than one such prison shop, the output per man hour has exceeded that of the parent factory.

War conditions have permitted another experiment which may have interesting results on the methods of employment and control of prisoners if peace conditions allow. For the past three years, parties of prisoners have been sent out daily from a large number of prisons to work on farms, by arrangement with the local War Agricultural Executives. They go out in parties of 20 under a single officer, the arrangements for pay and technical supervision being the same as for inside factory work. The same first-class results have obtained, with negligible trouble from misconduct or attempts to escape. This practice has been taken even further in the Borstal Institutions, from certain of which individual boys go out daily on their bicycles to work on neighboring farms, returning at night. The results have been equally agreeable to the farmers, the boys, and the Institutions.

Another war-time development which could be profitably carried over is the vocational training class in skilled engineering. Selected men are given a six months' course, and on discharge are at once placed in skilled jobs by the Ministry of Labor and National Service.

How far all these innovations can be carried over into peacetime conditions depends on political and economic factors which cannot now be more than a subject for speculation. They have been made possible because the whole industrial effort of the country has been geared to maximum output under public control in the public interest: they would not have been possible in pre-war conditions: they may or may not be possible under an effective policy of "Full Employment" — more one can hardly say.

#### *Prison Education and Diet*

The adult education scheme of evening classes, which was developed in pre-war years, was lost with the outbreak of war

as it principally depended on voluntary teachers. From this difficulty arose two more ideas which may well be of continuing value. In one prison, the Director of Education for the County took over the provision of evening classes for the county prison. In others, it was possible through the generosity of certain private persons and institutions, to supply a variety of correspondence courses.

In prison libraries, difficulties due to the serious shortage of books have been largely met by County and City Librarians, who began by helping with loans of books, and then, in some cases, took over the libraries completely as branches of their own.

The County Councils Association has now given its official blessing to these experiments, and they may be much more widely extended.

War rations have had a beneficial effect on prison diets. Instead of adhering to the prescribed diet-sheets, it was decided to let each cook use the rations, which are the same as the ordinary civilian ration, to the best advantage. The result has been better meals, less waste, and fewer complaints. The existence of the Ministry of Food has also enabled the Commissioners to get expert advice on nutritional and catering questions: a recent investigation made by the Ministry at the request of the Commissioners has produced reports of great interest and value, which will have results when conditions permit their recommendations to be fully implemented.

#### *The Borstal Institutions*

The effect of war on the Borstal Institutions has been almost unrelievedly bad. The training of difficult young people depends primarily on having the right people and enough of them to do it and nothing has compensated for the loss of trained and experienced staff. For the first few years, too, loss of accommodation made it necessary to shorten the training, and no sooner had that been made good than the growing population overtook us once more, and the problems to be faced are now as difficult as ever. If, nevertheless, the success percentage has not been markedly affected, that may be due to the fact that the great majority of discharges have gone straight into the Forces, or into steady jobs.