

Exploring the history of prisoner education

The birth of modern prison (1/7)

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This is Lincoln Castle, a fortress built in the wake of the Norman invasion of England in the 11th Century. Its construction included a dungeon just underneath me, where enemies of the crown were imprisoned.

From about the 14th century, a county gaol was located in the grounds of the castle, to hold those who had been accused of crime and were awaiting trial, those who had been convicted of crime and were awaiting punishment, which was not typically imprisonment, and debtors, who couldn't or wouldn't pay their creditors.

The penal reformer John Howard visited the prison in the 1770s and wrote about the conditions he found there. The criminal prisoners were confined in dungeons beneath the debtor's wards. There was some straw on the floor for bedding, but there was no water and no sewer. The smell, he declared, was offensive.

Howard's report led to the construction of a new county gaol, completed in 1788, which meant all prisoners were now accommodated in two wings, each of three storeys, divided into day rooms and sleeping rooms. The new prison was clean and the prisoners were healthy. But by the 1830s, concern began to be expressed about the degree of association that the prisoners had. They occupied the same rooms, day and night, often in idleness, with plenty of opportunity for corruption.

In the mid 1840s, this extension was added to the prison for the accommodation of those awaiting trial and those awaiting punishment, namely hanging or transportation. With its cellular accommodation and separate chapel, Lincoln Castle Gaol was at the cutting edge of prison design.

In just 60 years, Lincoln Castle Gaol, like many other British local prisons, had been transformed from a dungeon into a clean and healthy, and finally, a well-ordered institution.

At the same time, the use of imprisonment as a punishment expanded, replacing bodily punishments such as whipping and branding, and eventually, transportation. Early historians of the prison describe this transformation of the prison as an institution and as a punishment as progress, driven by humanitarian concerns for the welfare of prisoners.

In the 1970s, a new generation of historians argued that it was merely the product of a new form of state power or social domination, a way to control both bodies and minds. More recently, penal historians have highlighted the gap that existed between the intentions of reformers and the reality on the ground. Bringing the provision of education in prisons into play complicates that story even further. But it also offers the real possibility of a deeper understanding of the function and purpose of the modern prison.

So, Lincoln Castle Gaol provides an excellent backdrop for our exploration of the history of the prison, and especially, the history of prison education in the UK.