

## Exploring the history of prisoner education

*Inside the prison school (3/7)*

### ROSALIND CRONE:

This was a day room, located on the ground floor of the Victorian prison at Lincoln Castle Gaol.

In the late 1840s, it was used as a schoolroom. You can see a representation of that behind me here. We have prisoners using slates and pencils to do their work, and the stern figure of the chaplain standing over them.

Schooling wasn't a consequence of the renovations of the Gaol, nor of the imposition of the separate system of prison discipline here. Rather, it was a continuation of what had been going on before.

In the mid 1820s, criminal prisoners in the old Gaol had been encouraged to teach each other how to read and write. And the chaplain had been allowed to supply them with schoolbooks.

In the 1830s, the turnkeys or prison officers began to help the prisoners in their efforts to learn. And by 1837, the matron had begun to teach the female prisoners.

A turnkey interviewed by the home office prison inspector on his first visit to Lincoln Gaol in 1837 explained that some of the prisoners delighted in learning, while others found it a bore.

Older prisoners were less inclined to learn and were more difficult to teach. In general, the prisoners were most anxious to learn to write.

In 1841, in his annual report, the chaplain wrote that of all the prisoners committed in the last year, 24 had improved in reading, writing, and the catechism, eight had been taught to read and repeat the catechism, and just four were unwilling to learn anything.

In 1849, the prison authorities advertised for a school master. A Mr Rollins Heron, a 40-year-old Master of a Church of England Elementary School, was employed to teach the prisoners reading, writing, and arithmetic in the newly-built prison. He devoted four hours a day to lessons, and the prisoners made good progress.

But after just three years' service, the school master resigned. The chaplain and the matron took over his duties, and instruction was moved out of the schoolroom and into the cells. This arrangement continued until the closure of the prison in 1878.

This potted history of the school at Lincoln Gaol has been pulled together from a range of official sources.

But what's missing are the voices of the prisoners. What was their motivation for learning? Why did some refuse to learn? How did they respond to the religious instruction embedded in lessons? What did the acquisition of literacy, and later, numeracy, mean to them? And crucially, what impact, if any, did prison education have on their future?