

Exploring the history of prisoner education

Education outside the prison school: The library (4/7)

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As well as a school at Lincoln Castle Gaol, there was also a library where prisoners were able to borrow books. It was established in 1833, when the county authorities purchased a collection of books and tracks from the Society for the Promotion of Christian Knowledge.

The aim was to combat idleness, a particular problem in a prison which held criminal prisoners who were awaiting trial or punishment. By the time of the first home office inspection in 1837, there were 56 titles in the catalogue. Prisoners could select from a list which they were provided. And each time they borrowed a book, a note was made in a special ledger of the date it was sent out, and eventually, the date it was returned.

Prisoners who had been sentenced to transportation and were awaiting their dispatch to Australia generally read Robinson Crusoe, the tale of an explorer who was shipwrecked on an island and made a new life there, while living in solitude, drawing strength from reading the Bible. A deliberate choice? Perhaps, but it was the only novel in the library.

Also popular were John Gay's fables, Defoe's History of the Plague, a book of trades, and several lives of famous men, including Captain Cook, who circumnavigated Australia, and the Duke of Wellington, who defeated the French at Waterloo. Exclusively religious books were rarely requested.

The borrowing record for this prison library sadly doesn't survive. Official journals from the chaplain, the matron, and the governor offer occasional insights into prisoners' interactions with books. On the 15th of April 1854, the Governor John Nicholson wrote that William Messenger had been placed in a dark cell, and on a diet of bread and water for three days for destroying his books.

The surviving evidence fails to communicate the great importance of the library in the 19th century prison. Books provided relief from isolation and boredom. They helped to sustain prisoners' mental health. They were a core component of prison education. Here was a practical application for the skill of reading, which could provide pleasure and expand horizons. Libraries, books, and reading offered one of the best chances for rehabilitation.