

## Exploring the history of prisoner education

*Systems of measurement: The reception cell (5/7)*

### ROSALIND CRONE:

This rather empty room was used as a reception cell for criminal prisoners arriving here after 1848. New arrivals were required to bathe if dirty. Convicted prisoners were given uniforms. Those awaiting trial were allowed to stay in their own clothes, or, if necessary, were given a different colour uniform. All were examined by the surgeon. Finally, the personal details of each individual were recorded in the prison register.

Prison registers were ledgers kept by gaolers, keepers, and turnkeys which recorded the details of prisoners who had been delivered into their custody. Before 1780, these and other types of criminal justice records contained very little personal information about prisoners. Often, they were just a list of names with release dates and arrival dates alongside.

But at the end of the 1700s, all this began to change. In 1791, the sheriffs of Middlesex and London invented the Criminal Register, a list of prisoners on remand at Newgate Gaol, which included information about age, birthplace, occupation, previous convictions, height, eye and hair colour of each individual listed therein.

In 1794, the register was taken over by the home office. And it was later expanded to cover the rest of England and Wales. From 1810, information in the Criminal Register was used to produce national criminal statistics.

This pattern continued through to the 1860s. Local officials, magistrates, prison governors, prison chaplains would think of new types of information to collect. Clerks at the home office would recognise the benefits of collection, and then orders would be sent to other jurisdictions to collect the same information. Criminal records, especially prison registers, became increasingly elaborate.

This page from the Register of Convicts from the Sessions, kept by the Lincolnshire authorities between 1838 and 1874, shows details about the crime, trial, and sentence for each convict committed to the Gaol, their physical characteristics and their personal history. The register also tells us whether they could read or write, in other words, the education they had received before they came to prison.

For example, Alec Johnson a 26-year-old, originally from Leicester, who had worked as a brick maker. He was convicted of violently and indecently assaulting one Anne Kiel, and sentenced to seven years penal servitude. He could only read, imperfectly. Johnson's accomplice was 23-year-old chimney sweep John Sugden, who could neither read nor write.

Historians have long debated the reason for this new interest in the lives of criminals. Some have argued that such detailed records were used to facilitate the expansion of state control over the lives of individuals.

Others have pointed to a growing desire among magistrates and prison officials to better understand the criminal and the causes of crime. In other words, they argue that the expansion of criminal records at the end of the 1700s can be regarded as the birth of criminology. Whatever the reason, prison officials became increasingly inventive at recording details for posterity.