

Exploring the history of prisoner education

Uniformity in prisons and prison education: Nationalisation (7/7)

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In 1878, Lincoln Castle Gaol was closed. It's true that from about the 1860s, prisoner numbers had been declining. In 1873, there were only, on average, 13 prisoners in occupation at any one time. But the county authorities kept it going. They still believed it had a role to play.

Its closure was a consequence of the nationalisation of local prisons following the 1877 Prison Act. Through that legislation, control for local prisons passed from the county and borough authorities to the home office.

The supporters of nationalisation argued that the management of prisons by local government was inadequate, that deterrence was impossible when the experience of imprisonment was different at each institution, and it gave rise to abuses. But by the 1870s, few local prisons were badly run. Lincoln Castle Gaol certainly wasn't.

Historians now recognise that the nationalisation of prisons was a means of fulfilling an election promise to lower local rates. The financial burden of punishing criminals was transferred to the exchequer. It was accompanied by a plan to close prisons and amalgamate populations, which was deeply flawed. Some prisons became dangerously overcrowded, and the provision of education suffered temporarily.

The prisoners from Lincoln Castle Gaol, as well as those from the city Gaol, were relocated to the county prison on Greetwell Road, which had been built in 1872 and is still in use today. There, they were subjected to a new regime in which the rules contained in the 1865 Prisons Act on hard labour, diet, and separation were strictly enforced. Education was limited to a small number of prisoners under tightly-controlled conditions.

What of the Castle Gaol? Well, its closure in 1878 and the protection that was afforded to it by being within the castle complex meant that we have before us a well-preserved example of a mid 19th century prison, really one of a kind.

The buildings tell us a lot, especially about ideals and intentions. But what I have tried to show over the last few weeks is that it is what went on inside the prison, daily life, that really mattered. Realities did not always fulfil expectations.

I hope that the story of Lincoln Castle Gaol, as a way into the history of imprisonment and prison education, has challenged some of your preconceptions about prisons and prisoners in the 1800s. Over the next two weeks, you'll have an opportunity to reflect on what you have learned, and ways that you can use your new knowledge.