

Name of collection

Understanding the historical prison discipline of silence and separation

Contributors name:

ROSALIND CRONE

Transcript:

This is the chapel at Lincoln Castle Gaol, which was constructed in 1848 as part of the renovation and enlargement of the prison. You'll see that it's very different from your typical church or chapel. The pulpit is positioned quite high up, overlooking the tiered pews. And can you see that each row of seats has been divided with partitions, so that each prisoner is encapsulated in his own box, unable to see his neighbours, only the chaplain delivering the sermon? This chapel was designed for the separate system of prison discipline.

The 1830s in Britain was a time of social crisis. Poverty was endemic and crime appeared to be increasing at an alarming rate. Imprisonment was failing to deter would-be criminals or to reform the convicted. Association in prisons, meaning the ability of prisoners to mix and talk, contributed to the problem. And many believed that prisons were schools of vice.

Reformers looked to America for a solution, where two experiments in prison discipline were underway. The first, the silent system, was in practise at two prisons in New York State, Auburn and Sing Sing. Here, prisoners were kept in association, but complete silence was imposed, which was enforced by guards and punishments such as whipping and solitary confinement.

At Eastern State Penitentiary in Philadelphia, they imposed the separate system, whereby prisoners were confined to their cells for the duration of their sentences, their solitude mitigated by practical work such as weaving or shoe making, and by the visits of approved moral agents.

The aim was reformative. Strict isolation would break the hardened resolve of the prisoner, preparing him to receive Christian messages of salvation through repentance. Both systems were imported into British and Irish prisons.

The silent system, which was quick to implement and required no modifications to prison buildings, was used in a number of local prisons, including Coldbath Fields in London. But the government expressed a preference for the separate system, and in 1842, built Pentonville Prison as a model for prisons across the UK.

[GENTLE MUSIC]

Between 1847 and 1848, Lincoln Castle Gaol was extended and remodelled for the implementation of the separate system. 24 cells, like this one, were built for the male prisoners, and nine for the female prisoners. They all had running water, toilets, heating, and ventilation. And all opened onto a landing within a large, vaulted gallery, designed not just for surveillance, but in mimicking a cathedral, to reinforce the power of the Almighty.

Separation at Lincoln, as at many other local prisons in Britain, was never fully realised. There were, at times, problems here with overcrowding. So cells were shared and prisoners continue to be brought together for work and exercise. However, separation and silence had a profound effect on the delivery of education in prisons.