

THE 'SEPARATE SYSTEM' OF PRISON DISCIPLINE AT WANDSWORTH AND ELSEWHERE;

A RADICAL EXPERIMENT IN SOCIAL, CIVIL, AND MECHANICAL ENGINEERING

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The question of the balance of deterrence, rehabilitation, and punishment in the prison system is one that vexed social reformers in the 18th and 19th centuries, and to an extent vexes us still today. One possible solution, an extraordinary and quite unique system of discipline, was operated with great enthusiasm for a few decades in the middle of the Victorian era.

The *Society for the Improvement of Prison Discipline and Reformation of Juvenile Offenders* was formed shortly after the end of the Napoleonic War, and produced a number of reports in the following years that were highly critical of the existing prison regime. It charged that British prisons were 'undermining morals by uncontrolled association, idleness, lack of reformatory programmes, and the poor quality of staff.'¹ In 1833 Viscount Melbourne, Home Secretary in Earl Grey's reformist Whig administration, commissioned William Crawford, founder member and secretary of the society, to travel to the USA and assess the various disciplinary systems in use in American prisons. He reported that Auburn Prison in New York operated the 'Silent System'; prisoners worked and ate together, but talking among them was forbidden under pain of flogging. At the Eastern State Penitentiary in Philadelphia, they operated the 'Separate System'. Prisoners were held effectively in solitary confinement, visited only by the prison chaplain and 'teachers and trade instructors.' Crawford hailed the Separate System as perfect: it could 'deter by its awesome severity, and reform by its irresistible impact on the individual conscience'.² It seems that the system had its origins in England. The idea had been advocated by the great prison reformer John Howard together with Sir William Blackstone, and

was the 'subject of an Act of Parliament of 1778' (this was probably the Penitentiary Act, 1779); an appropriate House of Correction was built at Gloucester.³ According to Burt, prisons 'in which solitude was more or less enforced' were also built at Horsham and Petworth, but 'these model prisons were over-crowded, and the separation was broken down.'⁴ Henriques claimed that the commencement of transportation to Australia in 1787 'diverted the government's interest.'⁵

In 1835, Crawford and Rev Whitworth Russell, chaplain to Millbank Prison, were appointed Inspectors of Prisons for the Home District. Two years later, 'On the presentation to Parliament of the very able papers drawn up by [Whitworth and Russell]', the then Home Secretary, Lord John Russell, 'recommend[ed] the separate system of penal discipline' to the magistracy 'for their consideration'.⁶ In April 1840, work commenced on a new model prison at Pentonville designed by Major (later Major-General, Sir) Joshua Jebb R.E., specifically around the requirements of the system. 'The Model', as it was known locally, opened for business in 1842, and progress there was the subject of much interest.

In 1845, Surrey magistrates formed a committee to consider whether the new system of discipline could be applied in the houses of correction in their county, where men, women, and children were sentenced to between seven days and two years' imprisonment, with or without hard labour.⁷ The magistrates concluded that the Separate System could not be used without the 'entire reconstruction' of their prisons, which were in an unsatisfactory state and did not conform to the recommendations of the prison inspectors, nor

even in some cases to the law. Before long, they said, either the existing buildings would have to be extensively altered, or an entirely new prison based on the separate principle would need to be built. On prison discipline they observed:

the current system of discipline neither operates as a punishment nor as a means of reformation ... we are of the opinion that the separate system offers the means of a great improvement on both these points.

Having endorsed the new system, the committee cautioned against the large capital expenditure needed to implement it before the 'experiments which are now in progress in other counties have been more fully tested.'

Six months later the situation had got worse. In Brixton, prisoners were sharing three or four to a cell with a floor area of only six feet by eight feet; each man had in some cases no more than 15 inches width in which to sleep. In these circumstances contagious diseases spread uncontrollably - as had happened in the winter of 1845. Overcrowding at Brixton was so acute that between 20 and 40 inmates were obliged to sleep on straw in the school room, and 35 prisoners had been pardoned by the Home Secretary and released early in order to ease congestion.

Another committee was hastily formed to address the problem. They reported that there was an estimated shortage of 440 prison cells in the county. It was concluded that a new house of correction holding 750 prisoners should be built - to a design suitable for any system of prison discipline - and that the existing three at Guildford, Kingston, and Brixton should be closed and disposed of.⁸ The recommendation was accepted and the committee was reappointed to oversee the planning and construction of the new prison. The Home Secretary gave his permission for Jebb, who was now Her Majesty's Surveyor General of Prisons, to be retained as a consultant. A 26 acre site on Wandsworth Common was purchased, and contracts were awarded for the buildings. The total cost was £140,000, and financing was provided by a loan from the London Life Association at 5%, using the county rates as collateral. Henry Mayhew and John Binny visited the prison a few years later, and commenting on its location observed:

The situation is admirably chosen for the health of the inmates ... upon a large tract of open country ... [and] furze-tufted Common ... the view embracing a panorama for many miles around ... in the distance the Crystal Palace may be seen shining like a golden bubble ... looking towards the Metropolis, the Victoria Tower looms with exquisite grace from out the grey background of the London smoke.⁹

In 1847, the Board superintending Pentonville having reported great satisfaction with the results of the Separate System there, Surrey magistrates made the decision that the new prison at Wandsworth should be designed around separation. The main buildings were to consist of four wings arranged in a St Andrew's Cross with a central hub.¹⁰ There would be cells for 708 prisoners, together with 24 reception cells and 22 punishment cells. Provision had been made for a fifth wing to be added later, providing accommodation for a further 250 prisoners.

The central tenet of the Separate System was that no communication was allowed between the prisoners. This served to increase the severity of the punishment, emphasise the reformatory effect of contact with the prison chaplain, teachers, and 'trade instructors', and:

[the prisoner] is excluded from the society of the other criminal inmates of the prison, because experience has shown that such society is injurious, and he is urged to make his conduct the subject of his own reflections.¹¹

In other words, seasoned criminals, the 'old lags', were prevented from teaching the tricks of their nefarious trade to first-time offenders. Under existing conditions, prisoners had been able to talk to each other when sharing a cell, during communal meals, while washing, doing prison labour, at chapel, and during exercise. Under the Separate System, cell sharing was eliminated and everything except outdoor exercise, some forms of labour, and attendance at church service or group educational classes, took place within the cell. As a result, the cells had to be capable of almost continuous occupation and this requirement was the main feature of the design of the new prison. Cells needed to be ventilated, heated and lighted,

and have provision for eating, washing, sleeping, working, and study or general reading. They also needed lavatory facilities.

The prison was provided with its own supply of water. Even before building started, a substantial well was dug several hundred feet through the London clay to reach the chalk aquifer. The plans provided for 'cisterns' on the roof to accept water from the well; a pump was connected to a series of 24 (later increased to 36) crank-handles, each one operated by a prisoner on hard labour in the pump house. One revolution of the crank produced around a gallon of water; between five and six thousand gallons per day initially were pumped into the roof cisterns. Water was then distributed throughout the prison buildings via pipes. There was also a 37,500 gallon tank for collecting rainwater.

Ventilation and heating was provided by Mr Haden's apparatus.¹² Jebb included a diagram of the heating and ventilation layout at Pentonville in his book *Modern Prisons*,¹³ and from the description of the system given by the prison engineer at Wandsworth, a similar arrangement was used there.¹⁴ Each cell was connected to two flues via grilles in the walls. Fresh air was drawn into the basement of the building via a large duct from outside. The air was heated in winter by hot water pipes threading the duct. The hot air passed up into the fresh air flues from whence it was ducted into each cell through a grille set high in the wall. Foul air from the cell, was displaced through another grille, set at ground level, and then into the foul air flue which passed up the outside wall of the building into a large chimney. Air flow was driven by the rising hot air produced in the basement. During summer when the basement heating was off, a fire was lit at the base of the chimney, above the level of the cells. As the hot air passed up the chimney, it produced a draft that 'pulled' fresh air through the system from the basement. The flues for fresh and foul air were embedded into the cell walls, and would have provided extra heating in winter. The system was surprisingly effective. Jebb produced figures from Pentonville showing that during the winter of 1844, when the outside temperature was 25°F (-4°C), the temperature inside the prison was not less than 50°F (10°C).

Figure 1 illustrates a cell from the new Surrey House of Correction with the prisoner working at a labour machine.¹⁵ Also shown is a side elevation and plan view of a similar cell from Jebb's *Modern Prisons*, and a detail of the lavatory or 'soil pan trap' plumbed in to the cell. The cells were 13 feet long, 7 feet wide, and 9 feet high with a glazed window. In the corner can be seen a lavatory with a wooden lid which could be used as a seat. Emptying into it is a drain from a wash-basin, fed with water from a so-called water box. A separate pipe connected to the lavatory bowl provided rudimentary flushing facilities. The output from the lavatory was plumbed into a central drainage system using the 'best Staffordshire earthenware', and thence into storage tanks. Once more, reference to Jebb's book makes it clear that this was a proper, modern lavatory pan with a 'bottle' type trap - he called it a 'soil pan trap' - see figure 1. For sleeping, a hammock was slung between hooks or eyes in the wall; this was rolled up and kept on a shelf during the day. The rectangular panel on the door, above and to the left of the door lock, is a small covered hatch which was used to convey food to and from the cell. On the wall is a copy of the prison rules, the prisoner's diet, and a warrant detailing the prisoner's personal details, offence, and length of sentence. There was also a small table and stool - not shown - and above the table is a gas jet to provide the prisoner with light. The final report does not mention explicitly a gas factory or gasworks within the prison for manufacturing the coal gas. It does talk about two 'large gas meters', one of which was faulty, and it seems probable that the term referred to 'gasometers' or 'gas holders' which would be needed for an on-site local gasworks.¹⁶ Pentonville certainly had a gas factory, and it is very likely that Wandsworth had one also; the new prison was effectively out in the country and would have been nowhere near a commercial gas supply.

On shelves (unseen in the picture) are a tin plate and 'pannikin' - small metal drinking cup - a wooden spoon, salt cellar, comb, towel, brush, and soap box. Prison rules required the prisoners to wash every day, and wash their feet once per week. When Mayhew and Binny visited the prison, they observed a Bible, prayer book, and various library books on the shelves.

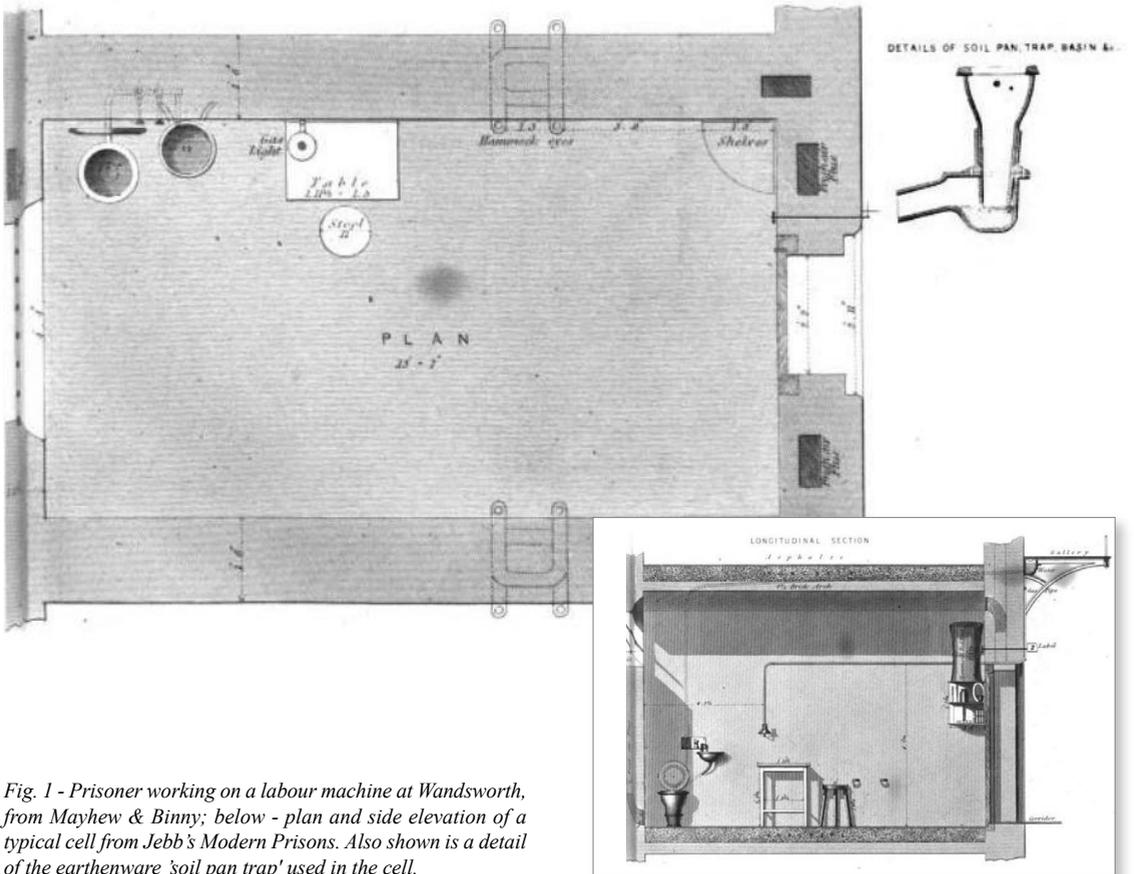
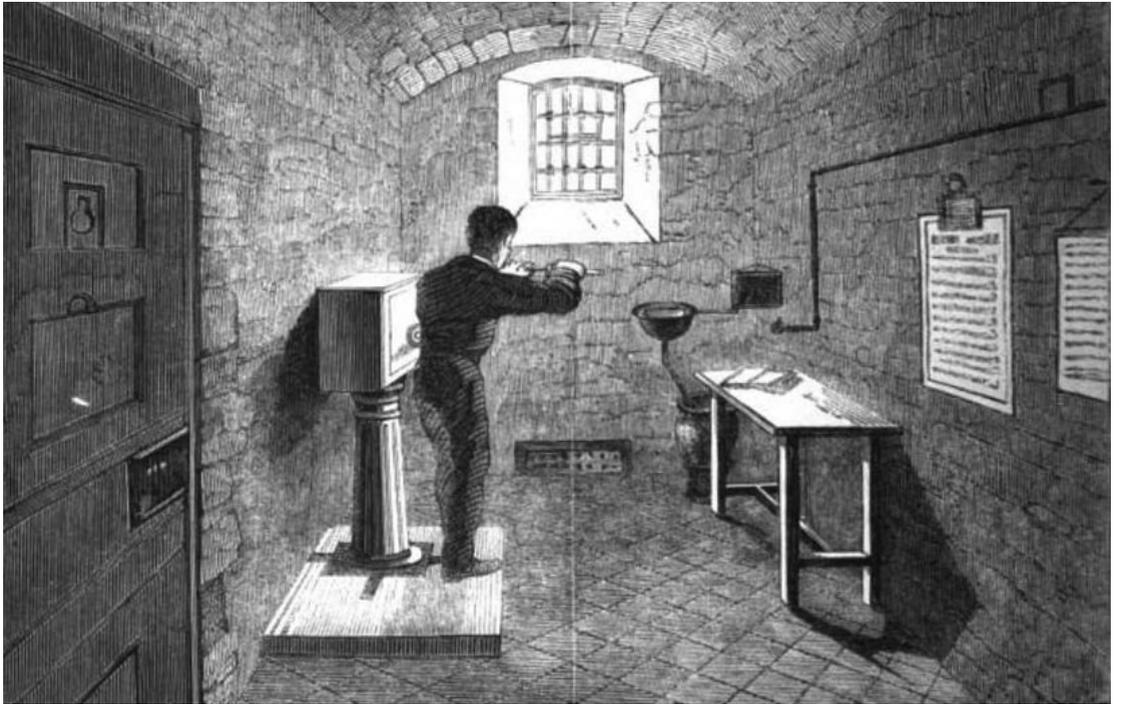


Fig. 1 - Prisoner working on a labour machine at Wandsworth, from Mayhew & Binny; below - plan and side elevation of a typical cell from Jebb's Modern Prisons. Also shown is a detail of the earthenware 'soil pan trap' used in the cell.

Outside the cell was a hinged plate displaying the cell number which was connected to a bell operated by a bell-pull inside the cell. By ringing the bell a warder could be summoned; the indicator would spring out showing which cell had rung. The water box was a shield which covered the water-tap, 'to prevent the prisoners tampering with it.' Evidently the prisoners signalled their need for water via the bell pull. There is no mention in the literature of how the gas lights in the cells were lit. The risks of allowing the prisoners to possess matches and have access to the gas controls are too obvious to state, and it is likely that the gas tap was either external to the cell, or likewise shielded to prevent mischief. In any event the warders would have needed to enter the cell to light the gas jets when required.¹⁷

Also visible in the cell is a labour machine. The prisoners were required to work, the amount and severity of which depended on the nature of the sentence. Many of the tasks concerning the day-to-day running of the prison were undertaken by the prisoners: general labouring, cleaning, cooking, gardening, and laundering. There was also profitable labour that could be done within the prison cell, like shoe making, mat making, and oakum picking.¹⁸ Operating the water-pump cranks was considered hard labour, as was working the mills for grinding grain for bread, but these were insufficient to occupy the large number of prisoners whose sentences included hard labour. The labour machines filled that gap.

The notorious treadmill, or *treadwheel* when no useful work was being performed, had been used for prisoners on hard labour. At the design stage of the new prison, the Surrey magistrates considered whether the existing treadwheels already in use at Brixton could be rebuilt at Wandsworth, but were told that the cost per prisoner would be around 18 pounds. There was also the more important problem of preventing communication between prisoners when several of them were using the wheel. The magistrates decided to investigate the use of a labour machine which could be installed inside individual cells. The machine consisted of a box with a large crank-handle, an indicator on the outside of how many turns had been executed, and a mechanism inside the box which allowed the

force needed to turn the handle to be varied. No useful work was performed, except that in turning the handle around 12,000 times per day, the prisoner was put to the 'hard labour' required by his sentence.

The Surrey magistrates were particularly proud of their labour machines, known colloquially as 'The Crank', and devoted a considerable part of their final report to an account of the procurement process.¹⁹ After inviting tenders, five machines of different designs were offered. Of these, three were assessed by a consulting engineer, Charles May, who favoured a machine using an iron wheel with a friction belt over it adjusted by weights. Captain Williams, Inspector of Prisons, endorsed the decision. One hundred of the machines were duly purchased at a price of £8.10s each. When in use, the prison surgeon advised on the setting according to the prisoner's state of health and strength. The magistrates noted that 'their' machine was 'Made by Mr Botten, but invented by Mr Appold, and exhibited by him at the Great Exhibition [of 1851].'²⁰

The New Surrey House of Correction, like Pentonville, was revolutionary in many aspects of its design although the ideas were not new. It has been noted that Howard and Blackstone had advocated the idea of separation in the 1770s. Furthermore, in 1787, a series of letters from the philosopher Jeremy Bentham had laid out *his* ideas for an ideal prison, the *Panopticon*.²¹ He noted that the object of a penitentiary house was 'safe-custody, confinement, solitude, forced labour, and instruction'. In Bentham's plan, the prisoners were separately confined, one to a cell, with the cells built on the circumference of a circle. In the centre was an 'inspection lodge', separated from the inner circumference of the cells by an appropriate distance. The inner wall of each cell was composed entirely of a 'light iron grating', and this allowed warders in the lodge to observe each prisoner in every part of their cell. Prisoners were always under observation, and as a result would be deterred from breaking the prison rules. And recognizing one of the consequences of confinement for extended periods, Bentham proposed that there should be a lavatory in each cell plumbed into a central waste disposal using 'glazed

earthenware pipes'. He had also suggested heating and ventilation using air ducts.

To persons unfamiliar with the Victorian prison system, the existence of air-conditioned, heated cells with en suite facilities, gas lighting, and room service, might seem surprising. A cartoon in *Punch* in 1849 entitled 'How to make culprits comfortable: or hints for prison discipline' provided a contemporary view. A number of prisoners are shown relaxing and being waited on. There is a notice on the wall that says: 'Those gentlemen who prefer washing, are informed that hot water is always ready, or a warm bath can be had at five minutes notice.' (warm water was available for the baths prisoners were obliged to take on entering the prison.) One prisoner is seen relaxing in an armchair with his feet up and smoking a pipe. A lad dressed as a bell-boy is saying to him: 'The governor wished to know sir what exercise you take today - whether you will pick a little oakum or take a turn on the mill?' The prisoner replies: 'Oh give my compliments to the gov'nor, and say I shan't come out today, I don't feel very well...'

It was necessary that the prisoners should leave their cells from time to time. Those whose labour included cleaning, cooking, laundering, and gardening, and the hard-labour men sent for duty on the water pumps and flour-grinding mills needed to get to their stations without communicating with any other prisoner. The Surrey Magistrates adopted the system that had been used successfully at Pentonville for nearly ten years. On admittance to the prison, each person was given a unique number displayed on the left arm of the prison jacket. A number above this, from 1 to 7, indicated the diet he or she was to be given according to the nature of their sentence. On the left breast was a hook with a plate on which the cell number, corridor and division was displayed. Thereafter, inmates were referred to only by their number, and could be instructed or ordered without using their names. To prevent recognition by other prisoners outside the cell, the prison cap was modified by the addition of a flap affixed to the front entirely covering the face. Two eye holes allowed the prisoner to see, and an aperture, covered in 'alpaca' over the nose and mouth 'assist[ed] respiration'. The women wore veils, and silence was insisted upon whenever the prisoner was outside his or her cell.



Fig. 2 - Masked prisoners on outdoor exercise at Pentonville Prison, from Mayhew & Binny.

There were two prison activities that stretched the ingenuity of the planners in maintaining separation; these were outdoor exercise and religious worship. Outdoor exercise was deemed essential, and Mayhew and Binny described the way it was done. Three large concentric circles were marked on the ground in the middle of the prison's vegetable growing area. One file of masked men walked around the outer circle; men of lower physical stamina followed the inner circle. Prison guards patrolled the circle between. Social distancing was practised - each man being separated from the one in front and the one behind by around four yards - thus making any sort of surreptitious conversation between them impossible. The officers barked instructions at any stragglers. Around 50 men could be exercised at a time, and the process lasted for an hour per day, per prisoner. Figure 2 shows prisoners at Pentonville exercising in a similar regime; the scene is reminiscent of a print by Escher, where grotesque figures follow each other in nightmare landscapes.

Far more problematic than exercise was Sunday worship. The prison chaplain played an essential part in the reformation of the prisoners. He was the highest paid member of the prison staff after the governor, and communal worship might, therefore, be expected to be a priority and an essential part of moral education and rehabilitation. The chapel was built with accommodation for 400 persons largely to the design already in use at Pentonville. Of all the ingenuity displayed in designing the prison, the chapel represented the pinnacle. It was thought desirable that the prisoners' faces should not be covered while at worship, and in order to maintain separation, each prisoner was placed in a vertical coffin-like structure or stall with only their head and shoulders visible. These boxes were ranged like seats in a theatre gallery with each row higher than the one in front. The sides of each box separated the prisoner from their neighbour on either side, and the back of the box prevented any contact with the person behind. Figure 3 shows the arrangement at Wandsworth; approximately half of the chapel is shown. Each box was numbered and a record of which prisoner was in which box was kept in order that any troublemakers could be immediately identified. Access to each box was via a door from the adjacent one.

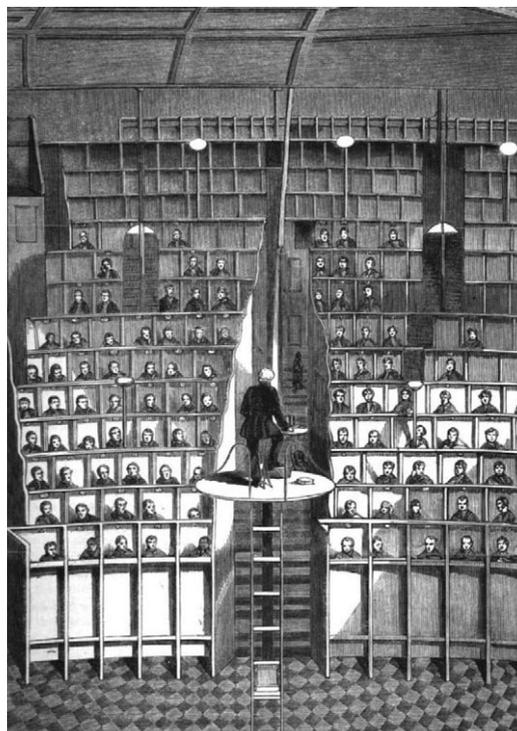


Fig. 3 - The chapel at the New Surrey House of Correction from Mayhew & Binny.

The design for the new prison had been finalised in 1849, by which time there was seven years' worth of data on the success or otherwise of the Separate System in action at Pentonville. The 'Model' prison was the first to have been designed specifically for separation, and the Home Secretary, Sir James Graham, had appointed a most eminent set of commissioners to oversee its performance. These included Lord John Russell - who was to be a future Prime Minister, the Speaker of the House of Commons, Dr Robert Ferguson - physician accoucheur to Queen Victoria, Sir Benjamin Brodie - soon to be president of the Royal College of Surgeons, Joshua Jebb, William Crawford and Rev Whitworth Russell.

The second report of the commissioners, dated 10 March 1844, stated in regard of the merits of the separate system: 'There exists abundant proof of the religious and moral improvement of the prisoners, among whom a cheerful spirit of industry prevails.' In the third report the commissioners 'strongly urge the advantage of the separation of one prisoner from

another as the basis and great leading feature of all prison discipline.' And in the fourth report in 1846:

The experience of another year ... has more strongly than ever impressed us with the value of this corrective and reformatory system of prison discipline [which is] safe and efficient and capable of general application ... The result of our entire experience is the conclusion that the separation of one prisoner from another is the only sound basis on which a reformatory discipline can be established with any hope of success.

There had been debate regarding the merits or otherwise of the Separate System ever since its inception. In 1842, Charles Dickens' *American Notes* detailed some findings from the author's visit to the Eastern Penitentiary in Pennsylvania - the prison noted by Crawford as operating the perfect system. Dickens was horrified by what he saw; he said: 'I believe that very few men are capable of estimating the immense amount of torture and agony this dreadful punishment ... inflicts upon the sufferers'.²²

Sir Peter Laurie, president of the Royal Hospitals of Bridewell and Bethlem, published a pamphlet in 1846 entitled *Killing no Murder*.²³ The Separate System was, he said, 'Highly injurious to the minds of the prisoners ... Dangerous to their bodily health ... Demoralising ... has failed in America ... [and] is burdensome to the country from its great cost.' Laurie's main objection was the number of lunatics the new system appeared to produce. As president of the Bethlem Hospital - Bedlam - he had first-hand experience of this.

In 1851, Dr Forbes Winslow, a physician specializing in the diagnosis and treatment of insanity, pointed out in the *Lancet* that the number of prisoners at Pentonville who had been declared insane was significantly above the national average of the population at large. Even so, he continued to think that the Separate System 'better than any other plan'.²⁴ The following year John Burt, assistant chaplain at Pentonville, published a 288-page book detailing the results of ten years' operation of the Separate System at Pentonville Prison.²⁵ Brevity was not Rev Burt's speciality, and a review article in the *London Quarterly Review* by Dr Robert Ferguson, one of the commissioners for

Pentonville Prison, is helpful in providing a synopsis of his findings.²⁶ Burt's conclusions, endorsed by Ferguson, were that prisoners subjected to the Separate System as employed at Pentonville between 1843 and 1847 produced model prisoners with rates of insanity no higher than the general population. Prisoners were subjected to 18 months of separation after which they were transported. But in 1847, perhaps coincident with the deaths of Crawford and Russell,²⁷ Jebb had introduced a mixed system, where the term of separation was reduced to 12 months followed by 'associated labour at public works'. In a later report, he commented that this decision was based on 'close' observations at Pentonville and elsewhere.²⁸ This new arrangement, it was said by Burt and Ferguson, led to 'more madness, less reformation.'

Everyone seemed to agree that there was an increased incidence of insanity at Pentonville, and it is important to note possible causes other than the practice of separation. Sir James Graham had decided when the prison was opened that Pentonville should be used as a probationary filter for specific convicts sentenced to be transported. Prisoners were to be male first-time offenders, aged between 18 and 35. They would undergo a term of probation lasting 18 months which would include religious and moral instruction, and coaching in a trade. At the end of the period, they would be sent to Australia. Those who had behaved well, would immediately receive a ticket of leave on arrival; effectively, they would be granted freedom in the new country. Those indifferent performers would receive a 'probationary pass', including some limitations on their personal freedom and only a 'limited portion of [their] earnings'. Those who behaved badly would be treated as convicts and forced to work for no wages. Although a few percent of transported prisoners did return legally to Britain, the overwhelming majority stayed in Australia for the rest of their lives. The young, first-time offenders would have been aware of their fate during this probationary period and, as the Home Secretary himself had observed, they had to 'extinguish the hope of return to [their] family and friends'. Under such circumstances it is perhaps not surprising that some of them went mad with despair, while a few others sought to feign madness in order to be sent to Bedlam rather than overseas.

The practice of psychiatry was in its infancy, the diagnosis of insanity was far from secure, and the supporting statistics from Pentonville quoted by the various objectors were substantially different. Mayhew and Binny claimed that over eight years, the insanity rate at Pentonville was 0.62%, ten times the average rate for all other prisoners. Winslow claimed that it was 1.34% over a similar period. Burt and Ferguson claimed that for the first five years, the insanity rate was no worse than normal, but after Jebb reduced the period of separation - apparently in response to a *higher* rate of insanity - the lunacy rate increased by a factor of eight.

Jebb made other changes. In 1852 he submitted some resolutions from the Directors of Pentonville Prison to the Home Secretary, Spencer Walpole, for approval. These included dispensing with the masks and the removal of the stalls from the chapel in order to reduce the elevated mental disease at Pentonville. His rationale was that the masks and use of the chapel stalls did not prevent prisoners from recognizing each other, and the prisoners were, in any case, brought to the prison in free association with each other. The report of the Directors of Prisons for 1859, details the views of some chaplains and governors regarding stalls in chapels: 'the "separate stall" system ... [has] failed altogether in preventing prisoners from communicating with each other, or in affording an effective supervision'.

In the proceedings of the Hampshire Quarter Sessions in 1861, Lord Cholmondeley reported testing the efficacy of the chapel stalls at Winchester prison by having himself locked into one during a service. Previously it had been reported that there had been such a noise in the chapel that 'nothing could be heard'. During his confinement, he said he only heard a lot of whispering. He added that of the 292 stalls, every single one had been defaced 'in the most disgusting manner'. A letter to him from Jebb confirmed that 'after 18 years trial [of the chapel stalls] at Pentonville they had all been removed ... At Parkhurst and Dartmoor the same course had been taken'. Lord Cholmondeley had had communications from 37 prisons operating the Separate System; 11 had removed their stalls, 15 had never had stalls and were very happy with the operation of their chapel, and 11 still used stalls and had no plans to remove them.

Problems were not confined to the practice of separation; a number of the civil engineering innovations were starting to unravel. The efficacy of Hayden's ventilation system was called into question by a report from the same Hampshire Quarter Sessions. The system of ventilation in use at Pentonville (and Wandsworth), 'good in theory, had proved bad in practice.' At Pentonville and Winchester, while the prisoners were at chapel, the cell doors and windows were opened wide; on their return, the prisoners found their cells to be 'aired and wholesome'.

A report (undated) from a visitor to Pentonville stated that the water closets in the cells were constantly blocked, and had been replaced by 'communal vile-smelling recesses'. Mention was also made of (verbal) communication between the cells via the sewage pipes, which seems unlikely;²⁹ the pipes should have been sealed by the soil pan traps. In fact, inspection of Jebb's plans for Pentonville, shows that the ventilation ducts would have made almost perfect speaking tubes between each set of three vertically-separated cells. The principle of the speaking tube was well known at the time, and Bentham had even suggested using this type of communication between his Panopticon inspection lodge and the cells. It is odd, therefore, that this very obvious flaw in the prevention of very easy communication did not seem to have occurred to anyone. Burt gave details of a code, taught to him by a young prisoner, that could be used to communicate between adjacent cells, spelling words out by knocking on the wall; one knock for 'A', two knocks for 'B' and so on. He claimed that the method was 'much less [tedious] ... than one would imagine'.

By the early 1860s, difficulties with the Separate System were coming home to roost. The most serious of these, the apparent increase in insanity, was based on specific conditions at Pentonville, where there was the prospect of banishment to the other side of the world for life. Was the insanity rate increased at the houses of correction? The surgeon at Wandsworth during the 1870s commented time and again that the deaths, illnesses, and insanities among prisoners there were in no way attributable to the 'conditions under which the prisoners were held'. The number of prisoners removed to asylums between 1862 and 1873 averaged 11 per year,

which for an annual throughput of around 4,500 persons is 0.25%. Given the uncertainty in the rates at Pentonville, it is difficult to draw any firm conclusions. Regular visits to the prison, made every few weeks and reported to the Quarter Sessions, were that prisoner 'separation' was being followed. The prison chaplain seemed to be only concerned by the effect of alcohol on criminality. He was convinced that drunkenness was responsible for 95% of prisoners at Wandsworth falling into crime in the first place.

The real question attending any consideration of penal reform is whether it reduces the reoffending rate. Mayhew & Binny produced the figures for all prisoners in England and Wales between 1842 and 1849; they showed that the rate was virtually constant at around 30% over the entire period. The statistics covered a wide range of different prisons using a variety of methods of discipline. The statistics for Wandsworth, for the year ending 29 September 1861, showed that 4,025 prisoners had been received, of which two thirds were male and one third female. Of these, 743 were children under 17 years old, and 18 of the boys were less than 10 years old. Out of 4,025 prisoners, 1,262 were reoffenders, 78% of whom had previously been prisoners at Wandsworth. The rate of reoffending, after ten years of the strictly enforced Separate System, was over 31%. The new system had achieved no improvement whatsoever.

Henriques offered a number of explanations why the Separate System was unsuccessful, of which the obvious one is that it just didn't work - as the above finding confirms. On the failure of reformation and rehabilitation, he suggested that 'the roots of crime grew in areas of social experience outside prison and beyond the reach of any system of prison discipline yet devised.' This seems as good an explanation as any although it is a pity, because the concept of reformation via religious instruction and education was instigated for the purest of motives. Even so, separation vis-a-vis single cell occupancy, continued to be regarded as important. The eighth report of the Commissioners of Prisons, 1885, states: 'experience shows that the separation of prisoners ... is of so much importance in prison management'. The report goes on to praise the benefits of 'cellular' teaching, i.e. one-to-one

instruction in the cells, listing many anecdotes from prison chaplains extolling its virtues.

At Wandsworth as early as 1859, the use of mandatory masks was probably abandoned as it had been at the county prison at Horsemonger Lane; the use of masks in all prisons was formally discontinued in 1878. The 'coffins' were not removed from the chapel until 1880, and Wandsworth seems to have been one of the last prisons to do so under instruction from the Inspectors of Prisons. It is not clear when the use of the labour machines was finally abandoned. In 1862, John Perry, an Inspector of Prisons visiting Wandsworth, proposed that they should be removed in favour of 'productive labour', a suggestion which the Quarter Sessions reported as being greeted with indifference by the Surrey magistrates. As late as 1888, 81 prisoners were still employed there on the crank.

It was 1886 before the individual lavatories in cells at Wandsworth were taken out. Inspection of Jebb's 'soil-pan traps', and the anecdote from Pentonville, make it clear that these early plumbed-in lavatories could not have worked without constant blockages until Thomas Crapper invented his famous and effective 'flushing' mechanism. An oft-repeated story that the lavatories were removed to make room for more prisoners, thus abandoning separation, seems likely to be an urban myth since they would have taken up very little more room than the notorious bucket. The closets were removed because they just didn't work.

Separate cell occupancy was not abandoned altogether; a recent Freedom of Information disclosure for Wandsworth reveals that even now, nearly half of the cells at the prison contain only one occupant.

Notes

1. William Crawford, *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, ODNB, online.
2. Crawford, ODNB.
3. *The Criminal Prisons of London*, Henry Mayhew and John Binny, Griffin, Bohn & Co, London, 1862.
4. *Results of the System of Separate Confinement*, John Burt, Longman, Brown, Green and Longmans, London, 1852.

5. *The Rise and Decline of the Separate System of Prison Discipline*, U R Q Henriques, Past and Present, 54: pp.61-93, 1972.
6. Mayhew & Binny.
7. Mayhew & Binny.
8. The Surrey County Gaol at Horsemonger Lane was a so-called convict prison, and was unaffected by the closures.
9. Mayhew & Binny.
10. It is said frequently in print that the St Andrews Cross with a central hub design used at Wandsworth, was Jeremy Bentham's *Panopticon* design. This is not the case; there is a description of the *Panopticon* later in the text.
11. Mayhew & Binny.
12. G & J Haden of Trowbridge.
13. *Modern Prisons, Their Construction and Ventilation*, J Jebb, John Weale, London 1844.
14. Mayhew & Binny
15. Figure 1 is from Mayhew and Binny's book; a ground plan of the prison from the same book indicates that the cell door and cell window are at opposite ends of the cell rather than as shown in the picture. Probably this change was done in order to see the door with its various openings along with all the other features of the cell in one illustration.
16. Coal Gas, or Town Gas, is made by heating coal in an enclosure from which oxygen is excluded. The gas is stored in large cylindrical containers - gasholders or 'gasometers' - of the type that used to be a common sight in towns in Britain.
17. The illustration of a cell at Pentonville in Mayhew and Binny's book shows a gas tap adjacent to the gas jet in the cell.
18. Oakum was old rope from ships, usually saturated with tar. It was picked into individual threads that were used for caulking in shipbuilding, and sealing pipes in plumbing.
19. *Final Report of the Committee of Justices ... House of Correction at Wandsworth Common*, London 1852. Surrey History Centre.
20. *The Great Exhibition Catalogue*, Part II, Machinery, notes on p.230: 429. Botten, Charles, Clerkenwell - Manufacturer. Appold's self-regulating friction-break labour machine for prisons. The resistance of this machine when loaded to any fixed strain on the handle will not vary, whether it be well oiled, and working freely or dry, and with considerable friction. It is adapted for measuring labour in prisons, or ascertaining the amount of work performed by a steam engine and other machines. Patented by J G Appold, Esq., Wilson Street, Finsbury Square.
21. *Panopticon*, p.10, Jeremy Bentham, Dublin and London, 1791.
22. *Pictures from Italy and American Notes*, Charles Dickens, Pollard & Moss, New York 1884; first published 1842.
23. *Killing no Murder*, Sir Peter Laurie, John Murray, London, 1846.
24. *Prison Discipline*, Dr Forbes Winslow, *The Lancet*, 29 Mar 1851, pp.358-359.
25. *Burt*.
26. *The Two Systems at Pentonville*, Robert Ferguson, *London Quarterly Review*, Vol 92, April 1853, pp 258-269.
27. In a grim coincidence, William Crawford had a fatal heart attack in the boardroom at Pentonville, while a few months later Russell, who had money worries and concerns from a report critical of the governance at Millbank Penitentiary, shot himself in the Millbank boardroom.
28. *Report on the Discipline and Management of the Convict Prisons*, Lieut.-Col. Jebb C.B., Eyre and Spottiswood, London 1854.
29. *The English: A Social History, 1066-1945*. Hibbert, Christopher, Grafton Books. 1987, p.667.

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