Tuesday 5th April 2022

Prisons Revision

Prison Reform

The use of prisons was not very common in the 1700s. Execution, transportation, and corporal (physical) punishments were mainly used instead. Prisons were mainly used to hold people awaiting trial or execution.

Prisons in the 18th and 19th centuries (1700s and 1800s) were typically privately owned, and poorly run:

* The were dark, dirty and damp, which led to many prisoners becoming ill from diseases such as dysentery and typhus.
* Prisoners had to pay wardens for food, or to be released. Poorer criminals struggled to pay these fees, so often ended up sharing cells with many other inmates.
* Different types of criminals were locked up together, some people worried that hardened criminals would be a bad influence to the minor criminals, so would end up committing more crimes.

Imprisonment became more common due to the decline of other punishments. By the mid-1850s, transportation had largely ended, and the bloody code had been abolished.

Effort to Improve conditions in Prisons

The government were pushed to make changes to the prison system due to the increasing number of inmates as a result of imprisonment becoming a more popular punishment. In the late 1700s and 1800s, new laws were passed to improve the treatment of prisoners.

John Howard, a lawyer, visited prisons to study the living conditions of prisoners. His findings caused parliament to pass two new acts:

* The first act abolished prisoners paying jailer’s fees. People no longer had to pay to be released at the end of their sentence.
* The second act improved prison standards – jails had to provide a safe a hygienic environment, as well as provide access to medical care.

In the 19th century, Elizabeth Fry (a Quaker) worked to improve living conditions in Newgate Prison. In this prison, women and young children were packed into small, dirty cells. She also campaigned for:

* The separation of Male and Female prisoners.
* The introduction of female jailers.
* The introduction of paid jobs for prisoners to earn some money.

Punishment vs Reform

There were differing beliefs on whether the main purpose of prisons should be punishment or reform.

* Some believed that punishments should be harsh to deter criminals, so they felt that prisons should be unpleasant.
* Others thought that prisons should aim to rehabilitate inmates, to help them to become better people, and prevent them from reoffending.
* Elizabeth Fry believed in giving prisoners the opportunity to reform, leaving crime behind.

Pentonville Prison

Pentonville Prison

Pentonville Prison opened in 1842 in London. It was designed by Joshua Jeb, a prison administrator, and was intended to provide better living conditions than most of the current prisons in England.

It was built due to the Prison Act of 1839, which changed prisons to use the Separate System, which would allow criminals to be reformed.

The Separate System

The separate system placed prisoners on their own as much as possible, to keep them away from the influence of other criminals. When exercising in the yard, they would wear masks to prevent them from communicating with others. They would do “useful work” in their cells, which would prepare them for when they were released.

However, the separate system often led to many prisoners suffering nervous breakdowns and committing suicide.

The Silent System

In the second half of the 1800s, some believed in a “criminal class” – criminals who were thought to be inferior and unable to change. They made people think that it was pointless for prisons to try and reform its prisoners.

The Prisons Act of 1865 made life tougher for inmates. They worked for several hours, were given dull food, and slept on wooden boards. Prisoners were also banned from speaking to each other, which is why this new system was called the “silent system”. The act also put all prisons under the control of the government. They wanted to standardise prisons, making sure that they were a proper alternative for transportation.