The State of Prisons

John howard

The most important prison reformer in the Enlightenment was the English Quaker John Howard (1726-1790). In 1777 he published The State of the Prisons in England and Wales, *from which this selection is taken. Along with his indictment of the "distress in prisons," he offers proposals for humane reform. Noteworthy is his suggestion, informed by his Quaker belief in the silent working of the inner light, that prisoners sleep alone in their own rooms.*

There are prisons, into which whoever looks will, at first sight of the people confined, be convinced, that there is some great error in the management of them: their sallow meager countenances declare, without words, that they are very miserable. Many who went in healthy, are in a few months changed to emaciated dejected objects. Some are seen pining under diseases, "sick, and in prison"; expiring on the floors, in loathsome cells, of pestilential fevers, and the confluent smallpox; victims, I must not say to the cruelty, but I will say to the inattention, of sheriffs, and gentlemen in the commission of the peace.

The cause of this distress is, that many prisons are scantily supplied, and some almost totally destitute of the necessaries of life.

There are several bridewells (to begin with them) in which prisoners have no allowance of food at all. In some, the keeper farms what little is allowed them: and where he engages to supply each prisoner with one or two pennyworth of bread a day, I have known this shrunk to half, sometimes less than half the quantity, cut or broken from his own loaf.

It will perhaps be asked, does not their work maintain them? for every one knows that those offenders are committed to hard labor. The answer to that question, though true, will hardly be believed. There are few bridewells in which any work is done, or can be done. The prisoners have neither tools, nor materials of any kind: but spend their time in sloth, profaneness and debauchery, to a degree which, in some of those houses that I have seen, is extremely shocking.

Some keepers of these houses, who have represented to the magistrates the wants of their prisoners, and desired for them necessary food, have been silenced with these inconsiderate words, Let them work or starve. When those gentlemen know the former is impossible, do they not by that thoughtless sentence, inevitably doom poor creatures to the latter?

I have asked some keepers, since the late act for preserving the health of prisoners,

why no care is taken of their sick: and have been answered, that the magistrates tell them the act does not extend to bridewells.

In consequence of this, at the quarter sessions you see prisoners covered (hardly covered) with rags; almost famished; and sick of diseases, which the discharged spread where they go; and with which those who are sent to the county gaols infect these prisons.

The same complaint, want of food, is to be found in many county gaols. In above half these, debtors have no bread; although it is granted to the highwayman, the house-breaker, and the murderer: and medical assistance, which is provided for the latter, is withheld from the former. In many of these gaols, debtors who would work are not permitted to have any tools, lest they should furnish felons with them for escape or other mischief. I have often seen these prisoners eating their water-soup (bread boiled in mere water) and heard them say, "We are locked up and almost starved to death...."

Many prisons have no water. This defect is frequent in bridewells, and town gaols. In the felons' courts of some county gaols there is no water: in some places where there is water, prisoners are always locked up within doors, and have no more than the keeper or his servants think fit to bring them: in one place they were limited to three pints a day each: a scanty provision for drink and cleanliness!

And as to air, which is no less necessary than either of the two preceding articles, and given us by Providence quite gratis, without any care or labor of our own; yet, as if the bounteous goodness of Heaven excited our envy, methods are contrived to rob prisoners of this genuine cordial of life, as Dr. Hales very properly calls it: I mean by preventing that circulation and change of the salutiferous fluid, without which animals cannot live and thrive. It is well known that air which has performed its office in the lungs, is feculent and noxious. Writers upon the subject show, that a hogshead of air will last a man only an hour: but those who do not choose to consult philosophers; may judge from a notorious fact. In 1756, at Calcutta in Bengal, out of a hundred and seventy persons who were confined in a hole there one night, a hundred and fifty-four were taken out dead. The few survivors ascribed the mortality to their want of fresh air, and called the place Hell in miniature.

Air which has been breathed, is made poisonous to a more intense degree, by the effluvia from the sick, and what else in prisons is offensive. My reader will judge of its malignity, when I assure him, that my clothes were in my first journeys so offensive, that in a post-chaise I could not bear the windows drawn up; and was therefore obliged to travel commonly on horseback. The leaves of my memorandum-book were often so tainted, that I could not use it till after spreading it an hour or two before the fire: and even my antidote, a vial of vinegar, has, after using it in a few prisons, become intolerably disagreeable. I did not wonder that in those journeys many gaolers made excuses; and did not go with me into the felons' wards....

The evils mentioned hitherto affect the health and life of prisoners. I have now to complain of what is pernicious to their morals; and that is, the confining all sorts of prisoners together: debtors and felons, men and women, the young beginner and the old offender; and with all these, in some counties, such as are guilty of misdemeanors only; who should have been committed to bridewell to be corrected, by diligence and labor; but for want of food, and the means of procuring it in those prisons, are in pity sent to such county gaols as afford these offenders prison-allowance.

Few prisons separate men and women in the daytime. In some counties the gaol is also the bridewell: in others those prisons are contiguous, and the courtyard common. There the petty offender is committed for instruction to the most profligate. In some gaols you see (and who can see it without sorrow) boys of twelve or fourteen eagerly listening to the stories told by practiced and experienced criminals, of their adventures, successes, stratagems, and escapes.

I must here add, that in some few gaols are confined idiots and lunatics. These serve for sport to idle visitants at assizes, and other times of general resort. Many of the bridewells are crowded and offensive, because the rooms which were designed for prisoners are occupied by the insane. Where these are not kept separate, they disturb and terrify other prisoners. No care is taken of them, although it is probable that by medicines, and proper regimen, some of them might be restored to their senses, and to usefulness in life....

In order to redress these various evils, the first thing to be taken into consideration is the prison itself. Many county gaols and other prisons are so decayed and ruinous, or, for other reasons, so totally unfit for the purpose, that new ones must be built in their stead. Others are very incommodious, but may be improved upon the ground about them, which is occupied by the keeper, or not used at all. Some need little more than a thorough repair. In order to give what little assistance I can to those who must build a new county gaol, I will take the liberty to suggest what hath occurred to me upon this head, in hopes that some more skillful hand will undertake the generous and benevolent task of carrying to perfection a scheme, of which I can only draw the outlines....

A county gaol, and indeed every prison, should be built on a spot that is airy, and if possible near a river, or brook. I have commonly found prisons situated near a river, the cleanest and most healthy. They generally have not (they could not well have) subterraneous dungeons, which have been so fatal to thousands: and by their nearness to running water, another evil, almost as noxious, is prevented, that is the stench of sewers.

I said a gaol should be near a stream; but I must annex this caution, that it be not so near as that either the house or yard shall be within the reach of floods. This circumstance was so little thought of at Appleby in Westmorland, when their new gaol was first building, that I saw the walls marked from nine inches to three feet high by floods.

If it be not practicable to build near a stream; then an eminence should be

chosen: for as the walls round a prison must be so high as greatly to obstruct a free circulation of air, this inconvenience should be lessened by a rising ground. And the prison should not be surrounded by other buildings; nor built in the middle of a town or city.

That part of the building which is detached from the walls, and contains the men-felons' ward, may be square, or rectangular, raised on arcades, that it may be more airy, and leave under it a dry walk in wet weather. These wards over arcades are also best for safety, for I have found that escapes have been most commonly effected by undermining cells and dungeons. When I went into Horsham gaol with the keeper, we saw a heap of stones and rubbish. The felons had been for two or three days undermining the foundation of their room; and a general escape was intended that night. We were but just in time to prevent it; for it was almost night when we went in. Our lives were at their mercy: but (thank God) they did not attempt to murder us, and rush out. If felons should find any other means to break out of this raised ward, they will still be stopped by the wall of the court, which is the principal security; and the walls of the wards need not then be of that great thickness they are generally built, whereby the access of light and air is impeded. Every room should be vaulted; for I have known many poor creatures burnt to death, as at Halstead, etc., who would have been saved if such a precaution had been used. The staircases of all prisons should be stone.

I wish to have so many small rooms or cabins that each criminal may sleep alone. These rooms to be ten feet high to the crown of the arch, and have double doors, one of them iron-latticed, for the circulation of air. If it be difficult to prevent their being together in the daytime, they should by all means be separated at night. Solitude and silence are favorable to reflection, and may possibly lead them to repentance. Privacy and hours of thoughtfulness are necessary for those who must soon leave the world (yet how contrary to this is our practice! Keepers have assured me, that they have made £5 a day after the condemnation of their prisoners). In the Old Newgate there were fifteen cells for persons in this situation, which are still left standing, and are annexed to the new building. The like provision for such as return to society cannot be less needful. Bishop Butler, one of the writers cited in the note, affirms that it is much more so, "since it must be acknowledged, of greater consequence in a religious, as well as civil respect, how persons live than how they die."

The separation I am pleading for, especially at night, would prevent escapes, or make them very difficult: for that is the time in which they are generally planned, and effected. This also would prevent their robbing one another in the night. Another reason for separation is, that it would free gaolers from a difficulty of which I have heard them complain: they hardly know where to keep criminals admitted to be evidence for the king: these would be murdered by their accomplices if put among them; and in more than one prison, I have seen them, for that reason, put in the women's ward.

Where there are opposite windows they should have shutters; but these should

be open all day. In the men-felons' ward the windows should be six feet from the floor; there should be no glass; nor should the prisoners be allowed to stop them with straw, etc.

The women-felons' ward should be quite distinct from that of the men; and the young criminals from old and hardened offenders. Each of these three classes should also have their day-room or kitchen with a fireplace; and their court and offices all separate.

Every court should be paved with flags or flat stones for the more convenient washing it; and have a good pump, or water laid on; both if possible: and the pump and pipes should be repaired as soon as they need it; otherwise the gaols will soon be offensive and unwholesome: as I have always found them to be in such cases. A small stream constantly running in the court is very desirable. In a room or shed near the pump or pipe, there should be a commodious bath, with steps (as there is in some county hospitals) to wash prisoners that come in dirty, and to induce them afterwards to the frequent use of it.