

The long shadow of the Victorian prison

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The Long Shadow of the Victorian Prison

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This article introduces a new research project that explores the continued operation of Victorian prisons in 20th and 21st century Britain. Over the three years of the project, there will be opportunities for current and former prison staff, currently and formerly incarcerated people, prison managers and contractors, and the general public to share their views and experiences of these historical buildings.

The persistence of the Victorian prison

Over one-quarter of the prison population of England and Wales (22,000) are currently held in 32 prisons with Victorian-era (1837-1901) accommodation.¹ Media reports describe the continuing use of such historic buildings as a 'scandal'.² Yet despite politicians' promises to close these outdated 'relics', Victorian infrastructure remains an integral part of the prison estate.³ Our research project *The Persistence of the Victorian Prison: Alteration, Inhabitation, Obsolescence and Affirmative Design* aims to explore the implications of this 'persistence' of the Victorian prison and trace the long shadows it has cast over prison experiences and penal policy in 20th and 21st century Britain.

The continued operation of these historic prisons attracts attention from policymakers and the media alike, with significant public resources being spent on maintaining and refurbishing such buildings. While prison reform advocates criticise the 'squalid' and 'Dickensian' conditions of many Victorian-era establishments, popular media outlets propose that such deprivations are a fitting punishment for those who break the law, and such views echo across social media.⁴ These contradictions point to a live policy debate about whether Victorian prisons should remain

in operation, for what length of time, and how we will know when they have reached the end of their operational lives. Our project, funded by the ESRC, seeks to understand how prisons continue to function as time passes, and to consider how those buildings have changed over their lifecourses.⁵ This article explores some of the issues we address in the project. We first give an overview of the construction of Victorian prisons, then outline how Victorian prisons have been altered over time, before reflecting on the implications of the persistence of these supposedly obsolete buildings.

Building the Victorian prison

The term 'Victorian prison' covers a diversity of building styles and designs. In the early 1830s, the English prison system was an assortment of facilities, comprising centuries-old gaols, unventilated dungeons, small cellblocks attached to town halls or workhouses, and reformed prisons, built after The Gaol Act of 1823. During this period, two models of prison reform were gathering force in the United States: the Separate or Pennsylvania System, which advocated keeping prisoners in separate cells day and night; and the Silent or Auburn System, which saw prisoners congregate for silent work in the daytime, returning to separate cells at night. By the mid-1830s, the Separate System had garnered significant support in England, and in 1835 a government Select Committee ruled that new prisons would be constructed to deliver the Separate System, while existing prisons would be remodelled to meet the system's demands.

The Separate System necessitated considerable architectural and design planning. Cell spaces needed to be sufficiently 'large, light and airy' for prisoners to

1. Ministry of Justice (2019) *Prison Population Bulletin: monthly Feb 2019*. Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/prison-population-figures-2019>.
2. The FT View (2018) *The enduring scandal of England's Victorian jails*. Available at: <https://www.ft.com/content/28daea7a-fd15-11e7-9b32-d7d59aace167>.
3. ITV News (2015) *New prisons planned to replace Victorian jail 'relics'*. Available at: <https://www.itv.com/news/2015-11-09/new-prisons-planned-to-replace-victorian-jail-relics/>.
4. Independent Monitoring Board (2017) *Annual Report of the Independent Monitoring Board at HMP Manchester for reporting year 1 March 2016 to 28 February 2017*. Available at: <https://www.imb.org.uk/manchester-2016-17-annual-report-published-today/>.
5. Economic and Social Research Council, Standard Grant no: S/T005483/1.

sleep, eat and work alone in their cells.⁶ Cells were built 12ft by 8ft by 10ft high, or 13ft by 7ft by 10ft high, lit by a window 42in by 11in, located high up in the wall, to prevent any view of the outside world. Ventilation was provided by two vents in each cell, through which either fresh or heated air could enter, and stale air would be extracted. Soundproofing was considered essential, to prevent communication between prisoners, and cells were built with '18in walls, double doors, arched ceilings and concrete floors, to prevent the penetration of any comprehensible noise'.⁷ Other design features, such as in-cell sanitation and openings in doors through which meals could be passed, removed the need for prisoners to leave their cells except to attend chapel or school, or to partake in outside exercise or monthly baths. During such activities, separation was maintained through the wearing of masks, to prevent recognition, and the construction of walls between outdoor exercise areas.

Of the 90 prisons built or added to during a concerted building programme from 1842 to 1877, the majority conformed to a radial hub-spoke layout, built in brick and/or stone. All featured small cells intended for single occupancy, arranged along landings three or more storeys high. Galleried spaces and internal atria provided clear sight lines, allowing officers to see and be seen by colleagues on other levels. The radial design was later superseded by the 'telegraph pole' plan, with prison buildings laid out in parallel blocks, as at Wormwood Scrubs, yet internal prison layouts remained largely unchanged from early Victorian designs.

Inhabiting the Victorian prison

Since the end of Queen Victoria's reign, many Victorian-era prisons have been demolished, while others no longer function as prisons, and the 32 establishments that remain have undergone significant alteration. Recent research by geographers of architecture has drawn attention to the 'inhabitation' of

buildings, raising an awareness of the everyday practices through which buildings are used and altered.⁸ As sites in which users and things come into contact in numerous, complex, planned, spontaneous and unexpected ways, buildings shape and are shaped by such encounters, which are often resonant of the power structures that exist both inside and outside them, and which influence their inhabitation.

Given the long operational lives of the 32 Victorian-era prisons, these processes of alteration and inhabitation have been significant and varied. There have been major alterations, in the demolition and replacement of buildings, additions of new sections of buildings, extensions to linear wings, and addition of

new floors and replacement of roofs, affecting both the exterior aspects of the buildings, and their interior configuration. More incremental changes have come with the internal retrofitting of networks of pipes and cables, bringing sanitation, gas lighting and electricity, as well as telephones, switches, alarms and signage. Candle alcoves have been bricked-in and painted over. Steel cell doors replace the wooden originals. Suicide netting stretches across galleried spaces. These prisons have seen more than a century of routine repair and replacement of fixtures and fittings, as well as repetitive cleaning and redecoration, and

unauthorised adjustments by residents, such as graffiti. Weathering, natural decay, and the presence of moss, mould and vermin further alter the appearance of these structures.

Even before the Victorian era was over, its prisons had already been subject to numerous changes. HMP Pentonville was substantially altered during the Victorian period, with the addition of 220 cells in 1867, and removal of the vaulted roof to enable a further storey to be added between 1871 and 1890.⁹ By 1890, in-cell toilets and washbasins had been removed from all but three prisons, as demands on space increased, and prisons were fitted with anti-suicide measures such as raised wing railings and wire netting across corridors.¹⁰ Subsequent decades brought further

During such activities, separation was maintained through the wearing of masks, to prevent recognition, and the construction of walls between outdoor exercise areas.

6. Tomlinson, H. (1980) 'Design and reform: the 'separate system' in the nineteenth-century English prison', in King, A.D. (ed) *Buildings and Society: Essays on the Social Development of the Built Environment*. Routledge: London, 51-65, p.54.

7. Ibid.

8. Kraftl, P. and Adey, P. (2008) 'Architecture/affect/inhabitation: geographies of being-in buildings', *Annals of the Association of American Geographers*, 98(1), 213-231.

9. Historic England (2021) *Pentonville Prison, A, B, C and D Wings, and Chapel Wing*. Available at: <https://historicengland.org.uk/listing/the-list/list-entry/1195491>.

10. Brodie, A., Croom, J. and Davies, J.O. (2002) *English Prisons: An Architectural History*. English Heritage, Swindon, p.159.

changes to historic buildings across the prison estate, although records of changes at individual prisons are not widely available.

The recent closure of several Victorian prisons, however, has enabled detailed inspections by Historic England, providing valuable insights into the inhabitation of these buildings. For example, at HMP Reading, built between 1842 and 1844, and closed in 2014, there had been significant changes to cells and landings. Much of the original red-brick prison was demolished in the 1970s, so that only the cruciform main building remained. The original cells with their jack-arched brick vaults largely survived, but had mostly been doubled-up by removing the wall between each pair.¹¹ Several original features remained, including the metal gallery structures that supported the landings outside of the cells, with their curved supporting brackets and cross-braced balustrades, and the pointed brick vault ceiling over the galleries and central octagon, which had 'moulded stone ribs and corbels, and lozenge-shaped ceiling lights cut through the webs of the vault'.¹² However, the original 'glazed Gothic pavilion structure from which prison staff could keep watch on movements in A, B and C wings and (via the tall side windows) in the prison yard outside' had been replaced by a 'modern prefabricated cabin'.¹³ Further alterations had seen the original two-light cell windows replaced with double-glazed window units, so that only one unaltered original cell window survived, in the basement of D wing.¹⁴

Victorian-era buildings at HMP Shrewsbury, which closed in 2013, underwent similar changes, as Historic England detailed:

New staircases and balustrade panels have been fitted to the gallery landings c2007. These are heavier than the original iron panels and have required the fitting of new brackets

Much of the original red-brick prison was demolished in the 1970s, so that only the cruciform main building remained.

to supplement the originals, which still support the landing floors. [...] Scars in the brickwork show where lamp windows allowed illumination of the cells at night by warders. [...] Doors are a mixture of wooden doors with bolt-heads, some of which may be original, and steel doors from the later C20 [...] The ablutions annexe at the centre of the south-eastern side was converted to showers when lavatories and basins were fitted to each cell. Some cells have had the dividing walls removed to make them double and one triple cell is used as a servery.¹⁵

Today, Victorian prisons are still undergoing refurbishment in this ongoing process of inhabitation. HM Inspectorate of Prisons provides insights into living conditions in Victorian-era prisons today, suggesting that: 'we often find conditions in 19th-century local prisons to be worse than other, newer establishments. They often have sanitary facilities which are not fit for purpose and inadequate fixtures and fittings'.¹⁶ In some of these prisons, inspectors find that, just as had been observed when these establishments were first built or adapted for the Separate System: 'windows could not be opened properly and cells were poorly ventilated'.¹⁷ In warm weather, some prisoners reported that they took matters into their own hands, breaking windows in order to provide ventilation.

In light of similar criticisms arising from a 2017 inspection, HMP Liverpool underwent a £6 million renovation, which included the delivery of 'lighting, sanitaryware, electrical and flooring upgrades, as well as replacing 215 windows and doors across the 90 cells, wing offices, servery and staff refreshment areas'.¹⁸ Scaffolding was erected in exercise yards to allow the small Victorian window apertures to be adapted to receive new uPVC casings, manufactured at another

11. A jack-arch is a structural arch made of masonry elements cut or formed into a wedge shape, that efficiently uses the compressive strength of the masonry itself for support.
12. Historic England (2021) *Reading Gaol (main building) former Her Majesty's Prison*. Available at: <https://historicengland.org.uk/listing/the-list/list-entry/1321948>.
13. Ibid.
14. Ibid.
15. Historic England (2021) *Former Her Majesty's Prison Shrewsbury*. Available at: <https://historicengland.org.uk/listing/the-list/list-entry/1254593>.
16. HM Inspectorate of Prisons (2017) *Report on an announced inspection of HMP Wormwood Scrubs by HM Chief Inspector of Prisons 31 July–11 August 2017*. Available at: <https://www.justiceinspectors.gov.uk/hmiprison/inspections/hmp-wormwood-scrubs-3/>. p. 14.
17. Ibid.
18. ISG Ltd (2021) *Case Study - HMP Liverpool B Wing Refurbishment, Liverpool, UK*. Available at: <https://www.isg ltd.com/en/our-experience/government-public-sector-and-education/defence-and-justice/case-study/uk-hmp-liverpool-b-wing-refurbishment>.

The future of the Victorian prison

prison, and all cells had walls stripped for repainting, and new doors and new electrical socket points fitted. Porcelain sanitaryware was replaced with resin, new vinyl flooring was fitted, and refurbished beds installed. Older light fittings were refurbished on site and reused elsewhere in the prison.

Indeed, refurbishments often appear to follow critical inspection reports, as at HMP Wormwood Scrubs, where a 2017 inspection noted that 'efforts had been made to paint the wings and cells since the previous inspection [in 2016] but there was still too much grime in communal areas and a lot of graffiti in cells'.¹⁹ By the time of a further inspection two years later:

*most cells had been painted and there was much less graffiti; we saw few broken windows [...] The remaining cells were being repainted by prisoners as part of a prison-funded programme [...] Around 20 prisoners were employed in a successful project to refurbish wing accommodation. Cells were stripped, cleaned and decorated to a good standard by enthusiastic teams who took pride in their work and in maintaining their craft skills.*²⁰

It is clear, then, that the activity of human inhabitants constantly shapes and reshapes prison environments. Victorian-era prisons have been subject to periods of major alteration, as well as refitting and refurbishments of wings, landings or cells, and micro-scale adjustments by individuals, such as adding graffiti or breaking windows. Those who occupy these spaces, be they staff or prisoners, are constantly at work on the fabric of the buildings, within a repetitive cycle of inhabitation.

It is clear, then, that the activity of human inhabitants constantly shapes and reshapes prison environments.

The persistence of the Victorian prison means that these historic buildings continue to exert significant influence. The separation of prisoners served as the underlying principle of incarceration for many decades, enabled by robustly engineered buildings constructed for this purpose, leading Tomlinson to note that 'the system became self-perpetuating'.²¹ Likewise, the enduring existence and cultural prominence of the archetypal Victorian gaol continue to shape the development of modern penal policy and influence how politicians, policy-makers, and members of the public understand what a prison is and should be. Often associated with mostly (though by no means exclusively) Conservative governments, who champion

a version of imprisonment in which notions of order, control and punitiveness are represented as an antidote to the excesses of past permissiveness and stubbornly high crime rates, the Victorian prison has demonstrated a remarkable obduracy, despite periodic efforts to consign it to history.

Most recently, Michael Gove announced in 2015 that the 'ageing and ineffective' Victorian prison estate would be sold off to fund larger replacement prisons.²²

A year later, in the Queen's speech, Prime Minister David Cameron repeated his government's pledge to close Victorian-era prisons, describing them as 'ageing, ineffective... creaking, leaking and coming apart at the seams'.²³ The proposal was only partially carried out, with many prisons that were earmarked for closure still in operation today. Yet as far back as 1960, the bleak Victorian prison had become viewed as an obstacle to progressive penal thinking, and the form and fabric of prison buildings was regarded as an impediment to the therapeutic mission pursued within.²⁴ Policymakers feared to implement new prison designs, paralysed by

19. HM Inspectorate of Prisons (2017) *Life in prison: Living conditions*. Available at: <https://www.justiceinspectorates.gov.uk/hmiprison/inspections/life-in-prison-living-conditions/>. p.29.
20. HM Inspectorate of Prisons (2020) *Report on an announced inspection of HMP Wormwood Scrubs by HM Chief Inspector of Prisons 16 September – 4 October 2019*. Available at: <https://www.justiceinspectorates.gov.uk/hmiprison/inspections/hmp-wormwood-scrubs-4/>. p.14, p.32, p.47.
21. Tomlinson, H. (1980) 'Design and reform: the 'separate system' in the nineteenth-century English prison', in King, A.D. (ed) *Buildings and Society: Essays on the Social Development of the Built Environment*. Routledge: London, 51-65, p.61.
22. Gove, M. (2015) *Speech given at the Prisoner Learning Alliance 17 July 2015*. Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/the-treasure-in-the-heart-of-man-making-prisons-work>.
23. Politics.co.uk (2016) *Cameron prison reform speech in full*. Available at: <https://www.politics.co.uk/comment-analysis/2016/02/08/cameron-prison-reform-speech-in-full>.
24. Pratt, J. (2002) *Punishment and civilization: Penal tolerance and intolerance in modern society*. London: Sage.; Jewkes, Y. and Moran, D. (2017) 'Prison architecture and design: perspectives from criminology and carceral geography', in Liebling, A., Maruna, S. and McCara, L. (eds) *The Oxford Handbook of Criminology* [6th edition], 541-564.

the prospect that any novel approach could prove 'as great a handicap to our successors as early Victorian prisons are to us now'.²⁵ As a result, newer prisons often replicated Victorian-era designs, leading a 1961 special issue of the *British Journal of Criminology* to lament that contemporary prison design simply perpetuated 'an embarrassing legacy of extremely permanent buildings expressing an outdated and outworn penal philosophy'.²⁶ More recently, architect Roland Karthaus has noted that even in our very newest facilities, we have built Victorian hub-spoke, galleried prisons, just like those built for the Separate System, but now in concrete, and with integrated plumbing and wiring.²⁷ This repetition is perhaps an example of 'affirmative design', which reinforces how things are now, conforming to cultural, social, technical and economic expectations, and thereby maintaining existing norms.²⁸

As long as Victorian facilities still operate, then, they pose challenges for the implementation of living standards such as those advised in the UN Standard Minimum Rules for the Treatment of Prisoners.²⁹ Victorian prisons have been described as obsolete, yet the precise characteristics of obsolescence are surprisingly hard to pin down. Adjectives such as 'ageing', 'ineffective and dilapidated', 'unsafe', 'infested', 'overcrowded' and 'grim' are commonly deployed, but these are just as apt for many more modern prisons. What is it specifically about Victorian prisons that defines them? Why do they serve as an archetype of punishment, to be celebrated and even fetishized in the popular imagination? How and why

does this matter for those who live and work in these buildings today? We believe that understanding these issues is essential to inform future prison design.

Conclusion

The Victorian prison casts a long shadow, literally and metaphorically. In seeking to better understand its permanence, our research is taking a wide-ranging, multi-faceted, interdisciplinary approach. We are using methods including archival research, analysis of literary and media sources, interviews, oral histories, creative methods, and a programme of events, to uncover the many ways in which the Victorian prison has influenced, and continues to influence, our political landscape, society and culture. Over the three years of the project, there will be opportunities for current and former prison staff, currently and formerly incarcerated people, prison managers and contractors, and the general public to share their views and experiences of these historical buildings. By working together to explore the persistence of the Victorian prison, we hope to better understand the challenges facing the contemporary prison system.

Find out more

To find out more about this project, please visit our website: www.victorian-prisons.com or follow us on Twitter: twitter.com/VictorianPrison

25. Howard (1960), cited in Fairweather, L. (1961) 'Prison Architecture in England', *The British Journal of Criminology*, 1(4), 339-361, pp.358-359.

26. Fairweather, L. (1961) 'Prison Architecture in England', *The British Journal of Criminology*, 1(4), 339-361, p.339.

27. See discussion at: <https://www.wired.co.uk/article/birmingham-prison-riot-design>.

28. Dunne, A. and Raby, F. (2001) *Design noir: The secret life of electronic objects*. Springer Science & Business Media, p.58.

29. United Nations (2015) *The United Nations Standard Minimum Rules for the Treatment of Prisoners*. Available at: https://www.un.org/en/events/mandeladay/mandela_rules.shtml.