

## Original Article

### Gendered Prison Work: Female Prison Officers in the Local Prison System, 1877–1939

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#### Abstract

This article examines the working lives of female prison officers between 1877 and 1939. It documents a relatively under-researched, but important, period in the history of women's imprisonment in England. In doing so it aims to uncover the working lives of female officers, the role and daily duties of officers, the development of training schools for female staff and to understand the ambiguous role of officers in the 'reform' of prisoners during these decades. The research contextualises the work of the female officer within the changing female prison estate and declining female prison population in this period and examines the ways in which gender and class combined in prison work.

This article seeks to understand the working lives and experiences of female prison officers in local prisons in England from 1877 to 1939.<sup>1</sup> At the beginning of the 20th Century, the penal system moved away from the deterrence-based philosophy which had denoted previous decades to a system based on deterrence and reform with an underlying welfare-orientated approach (Garland 1985). Significant changes occurred during this period, which laid the foundations of the female prison estate we operate today: a small number of geographically-spread institutions for women and girls.

The literature on the 'birth of the prison' from traditional accounts by the Webbs (Webb and Webb 1922) to the revisionist accounts of the 1970s and 1980s (Foucault 1977; Ignatieff 1978; Melossi and Pavarini 1981; Rothman 1971) were criticised by feminist scholars (Dobash, Dobash and Gutteridge 1986; Rafter 1985) for their lack of consideration of gender in the transformation in imprisonment from the early 19th Century. Zedner (1994) and others argued that penal responses to female criminality and deviance were shaped by constructions of femininity. Women sent to prison in the late-Victorian and Edwardian period were committed for offences which broke these accepted norms: sexual promiscuity; drunkenness; common assault; theft and crimes under the Pawnbrokers Acts (Godfrey, Farrall and Karstedt 2005; Zedner 1994). These criminal women were 'doubly deviant', breaking both the law and the conventions of appropriate feminine behaviour (Heidensohn 1985). The primary focus of the disciplinary prison was to return these women to 'acceptable' femininity through regimes based on domesticity, moral and religious education, medicalisation and appropriate feminine role models (Rafter 1985; Sim 1990; Zedner 1994).

Far less has been written about the women whose daily life revolved around the implementation of this disciplinary prison regime; the women who staffed the prisons, asylums, refuges, reformatories and other semi-penal institutions. A few higher-ranked matrons or female officials like Mary Gordon, Lillian Barker and Mary Size, who left a greater mark (publications or biographical accounts), have received some attention (Cheney 2010; Forsythe 1993; Gordon 1922; Smith 1962).<sup>2</sup> Yet, the disciplinary gaze of the prison served to engulf the staff as well as the prisoners (Foucault 1977). Hierarchical surveillance, routine and timetabling, prison rules and regulations, which extended into private, as well as working, lives, all served to subjugate the staff. The wardresses or 'prison officers' (commonly used but officially adopted in 1922 (The National Archives (TNA), Home Office Papers (HO) 45/111082/42916)) had the most daily contact with prisoners, and under the matron's

supervision, it was the officers who delivered food, opened and locked cells, collected the needlework, and supervised the laundries.

This article is based on archival research undertaken on a range of local prisons that held women between 1877 and 1939. This includes material on HMP Holloway, redesignated as a female-only local prison in 1902, as well as archives for the female wings of local prisons such as Durham, Hull and Liverpool. These represent a range of institutions, staffed by female officers, that operated throughout the period under study. This material is supported by Prison Commissioners' Reports, Home Office and Prison Commission files held at The National Archives (TNA), as well as records from the Prison Service Museum (PSM) and autobiographical accounts.

Criminological research on prison officers, their role, working relationships and personal lives has expanded in recent years (Crawley 2004; Bennett, Crewe and Wahidin 2008; Liebling, Price and Shefer 2011) in addition to research which examines 'techniques of denial' in prison officer occupational culture (Scott 2008). This article contributes a historical understanding of prison work, particularly how gender and class combined in the role and working lives of female officers.

This research reveals that whilst the gendered histories of imprisonment have been hugely important to our understanding of prison regimes, women's experiences of the prison environment were not all the same. Women who worked in prisons as wardresses are a key example of how gender and class combined to subjugate their position and as this article demonstrates, they were often regarded as lowly in status and unworthy of the task of 'reformation', something that was left to upper-middle-class women from outside the prison walls.

### The Female Prison System

From the mid-19th century, there were two types of prisons in England and Wales: offenders sentenced to a period of imprisonment of up to two years were committed to a local prison; more serious offences warranted a sentence of penal servitude in a convict prison (established after the demise of transportation to Australia). Thus the most common prison experience was a sentence served, or a period of remand (awaiting trial or sentencing) in a local prison. In 1878–9 there were 41,680 females and 101,645 men summarily convicted and received into local prisons (RCP 1879, Appendix 1, p.20). By 1900, the population had slightly increased as 44,463 women and 101,308 men were summarily convicted and served time in a local prison. Sentences were short, turnover was high and the average daily population in local prisons was 2,699 for women and 11,795 for men. Convict prisons held much smaller numbers: an average daily population of 128 women by 1900, whilst the male population was 2,588 (RCP and DCP 1900, Appendices 1 and 2, pp.60–5). Between 1877 and the 1930s female staff in the wings of local prisons dealt with decreasing numbers of women who were typically serving short sentences for minor offences.

In 1929, 6,500 women were received into custody compared with 49,964 men, the majority into local prisons, giving an average daily population of 613 women compared with 7,325 men. By this time there were even fewer female convicts: average daily population of only 48 compared with 1,413 convict men. In addition there were those in borstal institutions (1,232 male and 104 female) and those held under preventive detention (124 men and two women) (RCP and DCP 1931, pp.3. 11). By 1938, the total daily prison population was similar, at around 11,000. The overall decline in the prison population between 1900 and 1938 was due to a number of factors including: reduction in recorded crime; reduction in minimum sentence lengths for penal servitude; increasing use of non-custodial practices; and a significant shift in sentencing which allowed offenders more time to pay fines and diverted some offenders from prison (Bailey 1997; Rutherford 1984).

The focus of this research is the women who worked in the local prison system. These officers worked with a high turnover of short-term prisoners, albeit a declining population across the period as a whole and a population that was increasingly, concentrated in a much smaller number of establishments. Of particular concern here, are the 'ordinary' experiences of prison life, for officers and those confined. On this basis, accounts by women who were imprisoned due to political activity (for example, suffragettes) are not discussed. Those accounts which are drawn on offer a broader picture of local prisons at the time, rather than the specific experiences of suffragettes. Surprisingly, there is little written about female prison experiences at the beginning of the 20th Century and that which does exist often focuses on suffragettes (Brown 2002; Lytton 1914; Purvis 1995). This research wants to offer something different by revealing the everyday and ordinary experiences of prison.

During this period, a growing number of volunteer lady visitors were active in prisons across the country and pressure mounted for the appointment of women penal officials. Mary Gordon was appointed as the first female Inspector of Prison and Inebriate Reformatories in 1908, but the first female governor was not appointed until 1916, when Dr Selina Fox became deputy governor, and subsequently governor, of Aylesbury Prison and Borstal. This post was later held by Lillian Barker, who, in 1934, was the first woman appointed to the Prison Commission, but it was not until 1945 that Dr Charity Taylor became the first female governor of Holloway (TNA, HO 45/10052/A63072; Forsythe 1993; Gordon 1922; Smith 1962; Size 1957; Zedner 1994). Lady visitors were often higher-class women with philanthropic and charitable leanings. Whilst the focus of this research is prison officers, as noted above, women with medical qualifications did enter at senior positions and criticism at the lack of senior women appointments was often defended by the Prison Commission as pandering to feminist demands or as unnecessary due to the abundance of voluntary lady visitors (Forsythe 1993). More widely in the service, 'professional' women with qualifications in nursing or teaching, for example, were few and far between, even into the 1920s. Mary Size (1957) was taught by the 'only trained' nurse in the system when she joined in 1906, although staff were trained in nursing and hospital duties from 1900 at the training schools (see later). Prison hospital and nursing services were given impetus by the appointment of Beryl Carden in 1926 as hospital lady superintendent and subsequently the Prison Nursing Service was established in 1928 (Smith 1962).

This article will locate routine experiences of ordinary female staff within the changing organisation of women's imprisonment outlined above, at an important moment in the evolution of the female prison estate. It will address: the organisation and administration of the female prison estate; the working lives and daily duties of female officers; the training they received; and the role of officers in the 'reform' of women prisoners. This will illuminate a broader discussion of the gendered and class-orientated nature of prison work in the late-19th and early-20th Centuries.

#### Organisation and Administration in the Female Prison Estate, 1877–1930s

The Prison Act of 1877 centralised local prisons and transferred control to the government in April 1878. The prison estate was then rationalised, and by July 1878 the total number of prisons was reduced from 113 to 69; of these, 62 prisons held female prisoners (RCP 1878, p.6; Appendix 7, pp.33–5). In 1901, there were 52 local prisons with wings for female prisoners and one convict prison at Aylesbury (RCP and DCP 1902, Appendix 2, pp.62–5). By 1920, the estate had shrunk to 30 local prisons with female wings; female convicts and those under preventive detention were held at HMP Liverpool and young women in borstal at Aylesbury (RCP and DCP 1920, Appendix 3, pp.35–7).

By the 1930s, the female prison estate had been significantly reshaped. At the end of 1931 there were only nine local prisons with female wings: Birmingham, Cardiff, Durham, Exeter, Holloway, Hull, Liverpool, Manchester and Winchester, and two female convict prisons at Aylesbury and Liverpool

(RCP and DCP 1932, pp.52–3). In 1933, women's prisons at Winchester and Liverpool were closed and the prisoners transferred to Holloway and Manchester (RCP and DCP 1933, p.24). In 1937, the female prison at Hull was closed; this left Holloway (female-only local prison since 1902) and five other local prisons with wings for women (RCP and DCP 1937, p.18; Hull City Archives (HCA), DPM 17/2, p.615). The declining female prison population meant that some female wings would often have few, if any, prisoners, this, eventually resulted in closures of female wings and a geographical spread of women's prisons across the country.

#### Female Prison Officers: Conditions of Service, Working Lives and Daily Duties

As a result of centralisation, all staff were appointed to the prison service and became civil servants. The reorganisation of female prisons meant fewer female staff and fewer possibilities for movement around the system for women seeking promotion or relocation. In 1878, it was proposed that the total body of female staff be reduced from 488 posts to 387; later reports revised the 1878 figures, stating that 493 female staff were employed and this was reduced to 377 by the end of March 1879. The main reductions were in the posts of matron which declined from 109 to 69 and female warders from 278 to 226 posts.<sup>3</sup>

New scales of pay were introduced and all female staff received a uniform allowance, quarters in the prison with fuel, light, water and washing, medical attendance and medicines (RCP 1878, Appendix 6, p.31). Matrons were organised into three classes according to the size of the prison; for example, matrons of the first class (prisons with more than 200 prisoners) received a minimum of £150 per annum, with £5 annual increments to a maximum of £180. Female warders received a minimum of £55 per annum, with an annual increment of £1–10s. to a maximum of £70 per annum. Female assistant warders received a minimum of £45 per annum, with an annual increment of £1 to a maximum of £50 (RCP 1878, Appendix 6, p.31). There was also a minimum age requirement for female officers, of 24 years. The male service operated a slightly different ranking system which included principal warder, but male officers of a similar grade received salaries which were on average £15–20 per annum greater than those of their female counterparts (RCP 1878, Appendix 6, p.31).

During the following decades there were two major staff inquiries: the Rosebery Committee in 1883 and the De Ramsey Committee in 1891, concerned with staff working conditions. The Rosebery Committee only concerned the convict service, but the De Ramsey Committee included all prison staff and female officers from two local prisons signed petitions in the months preceding the Committee (Thomas 1972). Officers from both prison systems petitioned for increased pay, annual leave, and superannuation, for changes in promotion, and reduced working hours. There were differences: local prison officers wanted the same scales and conditions as the convict service and requests for hours and pay varied. In the end, staff in local prisons received a pay rise, free quarters and an issue of boots; the rank structure was not changed but two increments were added for assistant warders who had served eleven years, leave was slightly increased and whilst hours of duty were not changed, overtime was introduced (RCP 1878, Appendix 6, p.31).

The struggle over working conditions continued into the 20th Century (see Gladstone Committee (1895) below). In 1911, pay scales for female officers were still at the same levels as those listed above in 1878 (West Yorkshire Archives Service (WYAS), C118/283). Weekly pay was introduced in 1912, but it was not until 1918–19 that local staff were paid the same scales as the convict service and important changes to the pension schemes and staff representation occurred through the Whitley Council (Prison Service Museum (PSM), PSMC (Prison Service Monthly Circular), 21 Nov.–20 Dec. 1911; Fox 1952; Thomas 1972). That said, female staff were still paid less than male warders,

about 5–9s. less per week, depending on the rank. By then the structure was wardress (II and I), principal wardress, two classes of matron, chief wardress and the highest posts were lady superintendents at the three large local prisons (RCP and DCP 1919, pp.38–9). Lady superintendents were in charge of the female staff and wing of their local prison but were subordinate to the male governor of the local prison overall.

On entry to the service all officers signed a declaration to conform to the rules and from 1911, they signed the Official Secrets Act (WYAS, C118/283; PSM, *Instructions for Officers*, 1912). Throughout the 19th Century, prison officers had been subject to an extensive fining system for a range of infractions, but in 1921 this was discontinued (Johnston 2008a). Instead, the governor punished staff on a scale of admonition, reprimand, severe reprimand for minor or graver neglect of duty, or very grave or repeated acts. Grave offences were punished by the Commissioners by fine, special probation, forfeiture of increment or dismissal (WYAS, C118/283).

The officers' daily duties and role revolved around the implementation of a highly-organised timetable and hundreds of Standing Orders and rules and regulations. Frequently, wardresses lived inside the institution. At Manchester and Liverpool, for example, in 1865 all but three of the 20 female officers lived in (Liverpool Record Office (LRO), 347 JUS/4/1/2). By 1911, it was a requirement that all bachelor and female officers lived in the prison or in quarters assigned to the prison (WYAS, C118/283). Despite requirements on accommodation, provision for women officers was often an afterthought; Mary Size's first room at Manchester adjoined a prisoner's cell and after outside accommodation in Leeds ended, she was found some space in a store cell at HMP Leeds (she later recounted this to Sir Evelyn Ruggles-Brise (Chairman of the Prison Commission, 1895–1921), much to his horror). Most staff quarters, especially in female wings, were converted cells at the ends of corridors or landings, or rooms in the hospital (Size 1957). Matrons' accommodation was a little more spacious: at Leeds, quarters were on two floors, splitting the bedroom and sitting area from the kitchen and bathroom; at Aylesbury, two-roomed flats were provided; and at Liverpool, a house was provided (Size 1957).

Evidence suggests that there was a marriage bar in the prison service; some civil service departments did operate one, but not all. Certainly women left the service upon marriage but whether or not it was formally prohibited is ambiguous. Civil service regulations in 1921 stated that female candidates should be unmarried or widowed and that women holding any post should be required to resign upon marriage, but there were exceptions 'in the interests of public service'. This practice had become formalised after the Sex Disqualification (Removal) Act 1919, which said that a 'woman could not be disqualified by sex or marriage from the exercise of any public function' but this was not the same as being entitled. However, as Hilda Martindale (1938) noted, there was a definite suggestion that married women could be appointed or retained, but the decision was down to the department. Unfortunately, her study of women civil servants examines only women working in juvenile reformatories, rather than prisons.

Shift patterns determined whether officers were required to 'sleep in' at the prison. During the Gladstone Committee in 1895, the matron at Holloway stated that officers took turns doing the evening duty which entailed sleeping in. Regular days meant working from 6 am to 6 pm, but officers on evening duty would finish at 4 pm and return at 5.45 pm until 10 pm, then sleep in the prison, answering cell bells, if necessary, and would return to duty at 6 am the following morning (Gladstone Committee 1895, Minutes of Evidence, p.177). A similar system operated at HMP Liverpool. Reception staff were relieved of night duty, but regularly received prisoners late at night and could not leave until the last prison van had arrived (Gladstone Committee 1895, Minutes of Evidence, p.190). It appears that the system of two hours off duty in late afternoon for those on evening shift

was widely used and continued into the 20th Century (Size 1957). Female prisoners were strictly observed at night, in case of illness; in certain prisons, one female officer was required to sit up on duty all night, and a second officer to sleep in, to be called if necessary. Other prisons simply required an officer to sleep in or off the wing and a second to be available (WYAS, C118/283). In 1921, the *Howard Journal* noted that the 'needs of female staff [were] too little understood' (Anon 1921). Male warders received extra payment for 'sleeping in', but wardresses whose quarters were in the prison and who 'inevitably have some of the share of responsibility' received no extra payment.

Writing in 1898, Eliza Orme<sup>4</sup> observed that it was 'astonishing how efficient the matrons and warders [were], considering the conditions under which they work'; the warders were 'good, trustworthy, punctual workers, with the curse of overwork and monotony stamped on their features and in their very gait' (Orme 1898, pp.794–5). She also observed the gendered nature of prison work, comparing the male warders with a prison matron:

A warder living with his wife and family, and hearing of the children's progress at school, and entertaining a friend or two, spends a very different sort of evening from the matron in her lonely little home, when the prison-help has gone back to her cell and the door and the shutters are closed; or than the warders in the female quarters, talking prison gossip and prison grievances over the fire in their common-room. (p.795)

Similarly, in 1922, Hobhouse and Brockway observed that they could get no change from the prison atmosphere; there were no separate quarters for female officers, generally they had mess rooms, perhaps a kitchen and a 'none too cheerful apartment'. They also acknowledged that: 'the warder gets home to his house and family and becomes an ordinary citizen when his work is over; the wardress has her meals in the prison and has no family life to refresh her' (Hobhouse and Brockway 1922, p.379).

The strict regulations and rules also pervaded their lives outside. In 1903, rules for officers occupying outside quarters at Holloway noted that officers were to be in their quarters by 10 pm when the outer door would be locked by a senior officer (officers 'in' reported to the governor). All gas was to be out by 11 pm and fires extinguished at night. Staff quarters were subject to daily random checks from the matron or chief warder, as well as weekly inspection. With the governor's written permission, officers could admit visitors, 'sleep out' and stay out until midnight, to go 'to the theatre or entertainment', as long as someone could admit them on their return, but as far as possible this should be arranged for Saturday nights (TNA, Prison Commission (PCOM) 7/646).

In local prisons, where female wings were closed in the early 20th Century, the staff transferred to other prisons or chose to leave the service and women continued to leave upon marriage. A snapshot of female staff at Newcastle prison from the registers of officers provides details of 16 women officers. Of this group, one probationary wardress resigned after about a year (reason unknown); another after ten years' service; two were superannuated; and two resigned due to marriage (one after six years, another after nearly 14 years). The other women spent considerable periods in the service; many progressed through from assistant warder to warder II, warder I, some to principal warder or to the matron class. Most served in a number of different prisons during their career. For example, Jane Meredith began as assistant warder at Leicester prison when aged 24 years. During the following 28 years she worked at Manchester, Norwich, Derby, Liverpool and Maidstone prisons, progressing through the ranks, and after returning to Liverpool as chief warder, she was appointed matron at Newcastle in 1910. She remained there for more than eight years (except for a brief period at Holloway in 1918), but in 1919 was transferred on promotion to chief

warder at Holloway. When Newcastle prison was closed in 1925, all seven female staff were transferred, three to Durham and four to Holloway (Durham County Record Office (DCRO), P/13/1).

The organisation of the estate by the early-20th Century would have limited women's chances of movements, transfers or promotion, as the number of female prisons was small. But, as illustrated by Jane Meredith above, women did move around and some were keen to progress within the service. Records of the lady Inspector, Mary Gordon, are peppered with comments concerning staff transfers or promotion (DCRO, P/14/3). The limited opportunities were recognised by the Commission and in 1912, the female principal warder grade was removed and officers became class IV matrons at a pay scale of £70–2s.–80d. Eleven senior warders from Holloway, Liverpool and Manchester were granted £5 per annum for the extra duties of former principals and eleven more promotions were created which 'considerably improved' prospects for female staff (PSM, PSMC, 21 Sept. – 20 Oct. 1912). In the 1930s, there were 153 female officers in the service; only 31 female principal officers, twelve matrons and five superior officers (one governor, three deputy governors and one housemistress). As Cicely McCall's (1938) own experience taught her: 'Promotion is therefore very slow' (p.51). By the 1950s, the average length of service of all officers promoted to principal officer was 17 years and eight months, and eight years from principal to chief (Fox 1952). Agnes Resbury joined the prison service in 1894 and stayed for 24 years, spending nearly 19 of these at Holloway. During her career, she achieved principal warder after 17 years' service. She refused a post as matron; later she moved to Stafford and then to Birmingham as matron, serving a couple of years at each before she retired, just short of promotion to lady superintendent and a long-service medal (Dodge and Forward 2006).

As Zedner (1994) observes of Tothill Fields House of Correction in the 19th Century, warders were often of relatively lowly social class and without family or marriage; prison work engulfed their lives (p.150). But as Mary Size (1967), who spent 42 years in the prison service, said of her early years at HMP Leeds:

the long hours of duty spent on monotonous work within the confines of a gloomy prison did not destroy their cheerfulness. There was a bond of friendship and loyalty which bound them closely together and it was this rather than anything else that made life bearable. (p.33)

#### Training Female Prison Officers

Training schools for prison officers were introduced after the Gladstone Committee in 1895 and by 1898, there were four schools at Chelmsford, Hull, Wormwood Scrubs and Manchester prisons. From 1898 to 1907, 338 female officers were trained and became permanent staff, and in 1901, the training of female officers was moved to Liverpool and Manchester prisons (RCP and DCP 1902, p.27; Johnston 2008b). In September 1902, the probationary period for trainees was extended to one year, but instruction at the school remained at four months (RCP and DCP 1904, p.32).

No evidence remains of these schools. The records of HMP Manchester were destroyed and existing records of HMP Liverpool make no mention of the school (LRO, 347/MAG/1/3/4–5). One autobiographical account provides some insight. In 1906, at the age of 23 years, Mary Size joined the service and presented herself at Manchester prison for her probationary training. Size (1957) describes following the senior officer in her duties, working through the daily timetable, appearing on parade at 6 am, collecting keys from the chief officer, unlocking the cells as the prisoners went to the toilets and emptied their chamber pots, supervising prisoners cleaning their cells, locking them back in their cells, supervising the serving of breakfast, handing out bread and ensuring the cell doors were locked again. The day continued with strict observation of the timetable and rules:

unlocking the women, sending them to workrooms or the laundry, inspecting cells, learning how to fold bedding and instructing prisoners to do so, unlocking and locking the cells for matron's inspection, supervising women returning to their cells, serving the dinner, and sending women to associated labour or distributing and collecting materials to women on cellular labour, supervising visits, serving the evening meal and going off duty at 6 pm. The officers in workrooms and laundries spent hours watching over the prisoners; at HMP Durham in 1910, Mary Gordon ordered extra high chairs to be built for supervision as officers stood all day (DCRO, P/14/3). Size (1957) spent only two months on probation at Manchester and was transferred to Aylesbury convict prison to receive hospital work training from the only fully-trained nurse in the service. Her experience of hospital work at Manchester had consisted of sitting by the bedside of a woman who had attempted suicide: 'I was not allowed to talk to the women nor to read. I just sat with my hands in my lap from 2 to 6pm. – the longest and dreariest four hours I had ever known' (p.19).

In 1911, the training school for female officers was moved to Holloway and the matron was relocated to superintend the school. The average number of officers under instruction at Manchester had been eight and at Liverpool, six, anticipating 14 at Holloway. Instruction lasted for four months and covered not only disciplinary duties, but also physical training, Swedish drill and some nursing. Probationers received lectures from matron: on the theoretical side of officers' work; on humane treatment; on employment as a factor in reformation; and on the exercise of moral influence, but it is difficult to know exactly what these lectures consisted of (TNA, HO 45/19647). After the first year, the Commissioners informed the governor of Holloway that they were 'very satisfied and desired him to express to all the officers concerned – especially the Drill Instructor – their appreciation of the manner in which the work was carried out' (PSM, PSMC, 21 Jan. – 20 Feb. 1912). By 1911, there was an entrance exam for the service and female officers were required to be proficient in reading, writing and arithmetic (simple addition and subtraction, and from 1913, of money) (WYAS, C118/283).

During 1919 and 1920, the training school for female officers was relocated to Manchester prison as a result of an investigation into conditions at Holloway chaired by Adeline, Duchess of Bedford (RCP and DCP 1920, p.31). The then Prison Commissioner, Ruggles-Brise, was 'anxious to have independent inquiry made' into 'explicit allegations' of neglect at Holloway. Specifically, the inquiry addressed allegations of neglect of prisoners' personal hygiene and claims that women suffering from venereal disease had been released to 'Homes'<sup>5</sup> (similar problems persisted to the Second World War (see Lonsdale 1943)). He was at pains to make the Committee aware of the difficulties of administration at Holloway during the First World War – shortages of medical staff, large numbers of women requiring medical care and strain on staff – but wanted 'an opinion as to the general character of the administration' and asked for comments on issues such as pregnancy and nursing, the treatment of young girls as well as staffing and administration (TNA, PCOM 7/40).

In relation to staff issues the Committee noted the 'first necessity ... in the post of wardress in a Prison is to find the woman who appreciates the opportunity of exercising good influence among the Prisoners' (TNA, PCOM 7/40, p.61). They wished to communicate with the Church Army Authorities in order to approach women who 'might be inclined to consider Prison work as an opening for their philanthropic activities', they stressed their desire to improve the type of young probationer, of whom they thought were 'not of so high a type of character and intelligence as the Senior Officers' (TNA, PCOM 7/40, p.61). This, they thought, was the result of the range of professions that had recently opened up for women that offered 'variety, independence and attractive and remunerative work, whereas the prison service is monotonous, and may be described as barren of interest and resource' (TNA, PCOM 7/40, p.62). It is not clear what occupations they mean here but research



indicates that nursing opened up to some young women, upper-middle class and lower-middle class, in the late-19th Century; they may have been attracted to this and away from prison work, although it had a similar ethos of philanthropic mission and living in, dress and board was similarly customary (Jordan 1999). But for working-class women, shop work also expanded. This may have had more social status and women appeared more frequently as publicans, café proprietors and in catering roles. Clerical and office work also expanded by the 1930s and offered women much better pay, up to £2 per week, although like prison work, few chances for advancement and often a marriage bar. Despite this, domestic service still remained the largest occupational group for women throughout the period (Roberts 1988).

The Committee resolved that the training school should not operate at Holloway; the 'presence of untrained women requiring instruction adds to the difficulty and anxiety of the administration' and experience could be gained in another large local prison 'without hindrance to regular work' (TNA, PCOM 7/40, p.63). Indeed, the Committee reflected the general sentiments about prison work at this time, reiterated in the unofficial enquiry by Hobhouse and Brockway published in 1922.

Evidence from female staff noted:

The wardress is more constantly in prison than all save the most habitual of criminals, and the nature of her work is such that change, recreation and friendship are essential to her. The conditions are undoubtedly worse in the small prisons, but the problem of recruiting the right women and of their proper treatment exists for all prisons alike. (Hobhouse and Brockway 1922, p.379)

In 1925, the Officers' Training School for male officers opened at Wakefield prison and over 1,300 men passed through classes to July 1939. In 1937, this became 'The Imperial Training School for Prison Officers', a nine-week course before posting as a probationer officer for two months' training in practical routine, all part of the twelve-month probationary period on entry to the service (Owen 1939; Fox 1952; also WYAS, C118/79). Owen, a contributor to the *Howard Journal*, observed the importance of training, reflecting the reformatory ethos of the system by the 1930s:

The right type of officer can make a success of a reformatory penal system: the wrong type can render it futile from the start ... the reform of prison method must devolve to a great extent on the ordinary officer, it is of utmost importance to any sound progress in the next thirty years that the Service should get the right type of man. (Owen 1939, p.173)

Unfortunately, Owen's analysis did not extend to the 'right type' of woman. At this time, women officers were trained at Aylesbury, which then held borstal girls and first offender convicts. McCall (1938) noted, the 'conditions under which ... [they] live are of course quite different from those of an ordinary prison, and it seems unfair to the probationers, most of whom will be drafted to prisons, that they should receive their initial training under special rather than general conditions', as a result, when she gets to wherever she is drafted, 'she has to forget most of her training and start again' (pp.43-4).

Gendered Prison Work, 'Reform' and Appeals to the Heart

Reformatory work with female prisoners, during the 19th Century, was largely based on the notion that, through individual attention, the hearts of female offenders could be turned away from a life of criminality and their appropriate womanhood restored. The burdens of 'acceptable' femininity and behaviour have been documented as permeating the lives of women who worked in, as well as the women serving sentences in, prison and it is similarly the case here (Britton 2003; Freedman 1981; Rafter 1985; Zedner 1994). However, this research demonstrates that there was a marked class difference of experience for female officers as opposed to the higher graded matrons or lady visitors

and this is evident particularly when examining their perceived role in the reform of prisoners. Dominant ideas of appropriate femininity placed the female officers under the gendered disciplinary gaze. For staff on prison wings, where numbers were small, this gaze was more intensely felt. For female officers, gender and class combined and they found their lives engulfed by the prison. There was little time or inclination to engage in any activity that might be described as 'reform' with the prisoners and much information suggests that they were never expected to do so. For these women, gender and their class backgrounds and their low position in the service served to subordinate them within the bureaucratic prison machine. As Forsythe (1990) observed, warders 'were viewed as strictly regulated subordinate operatives of a system run by their superiors, the commissioners, governors and chaplains' (p.140). The 'reform' of women prisoners, however it was conceived, was to come from the socially-superior matrons who, either by birth, or by climbing the ranks in the service, stood as a model of womanhood, and most importantly, from lady visitors, who delivered inspiring speeches to the waiting prisoners; the officers just stood and held the keys.

The origins of personal attention and appeal to female prisoners are firmly located within the reformatory work of Elizabeth Fry at Newgate gaol and Sarah Martin at Great Yarmouth gaol, in the early 19th Century and such work was carried out by Ladies Associations across the country. Fry (1827) thought that the ladies should 'express their sympathy with them under their afflicting circumstances, soothe them with words of gentleness and kindness, and endeavour to hold up, ... the danger and misery of vice, the beauty of holiness, and the innumerable advantages ... to a life of sobriety, industry, honesty and virtue' (pp.16–17).

Fry (1827) argued that female officers should be selected with 'peculiar judgment and care. Let the female criminal in prison perceive, in every officer who exercises authority over her, a consistent example of feminine propriety and virtue, and great will be its influence towards a happy change of habit and character *in herself*' (pp.30–1, italics in original). Similarly, the Society for the Improvement of Prison Discipline thought the wardress 'is at once the representative and guardian of her sex, and she ought to be a bright example of its purity, disinterestedness and love' (cited in Zedner 1994, p.121).

The language of prison work for prison officers, at the end of the 19th Century, was one of 'reclaiming' the criminal. Instructions to prison officers in 1878 stated that officers 'must be of good moral principles and unblemished character' (PSM, AAPSM 2003.0912, p.2). With regard to the role and duties of the officer it stated that:

The great object of reclaiming the criminal should always be kept in view by all officers of the prison, and they should strive to acquire a moral influence over the prisoners by performing their duties conscientiously, but without harshness. They should especially try to raise the prisoner's mind to a proper feeling of moral obligation by the example of their own uniform regard to truth and integrity, even in the smallest matters; such conduct will, in most cases, secure the respect and confidence of prisoners, and will make the duties of the officers more satisfactory to themselves and more useful to the public. (PSM, AAPSM 2003.0912, p.4)

This reflected the earlier reformatory philosophies of the 1820s and 1830s and pre-empted the more embedded reformatory endeavours of the 1920s onwards. However, the 'reclamation' of offenders had little practical reality for the officers, whether male or female, within the constraints of their daily duties and routine in local prisons (Johnston 2008b).

Thus the 'reform' of female prisoners was frequently conceived as something that would come through women *outside* the prison service; it would be women 'visitors' who would drive it. The

Ladies Association had renewed impetus at the end of the 19th Century, visiting prisoners, giving lectures and helping women to find employment on release (particularly through Discharged Prisoners Aid Societies). Their activities are in stark contrast to the women who spent long hours with prisoners (many of whom were 'ordinary' working-class women). Through the strict rules and regulations on their daily work they were often unable to even communicate with prisoners let alone 'appeal to their hearts', even if they knew how this was supposed to be achieved. Davenport-Hill (1885) noted that prison staff 'may do their duty and achieve much, but it is not possible for them to give the individual sympathy and patient attention to every member ... needed to win the confidence of persons made suspicious and distrustful by years of guilt, and may be of ill-usage too' (p.542). Female officers could not achieve these class-orientated ideals within the regulated prison environment.

In 1900, the Duchess of Bedford, Adeline Russell became the first president of the national Lady Visitors' Association (Forsythe 2004). Bedford was a well-connected active woman in charity work and had, since 1897, been visiting Aylesbury convict prison and helping place women in 'homes' after release. The aim was for lady visitors to be appointed at all prisons holding women to 'befriend, assess, and educate them, and to provide aftercare' (Forsythe 2004). Bedford was critical of the calibre of women appointed to the prison service and advocated the employment of educated women as lady superintendents in large institutions to lift prisoners 'to a higher plane' (Bedford 1910, p.630). But she was also critical of women of her own class, who dabbled in voluntary prison work, but who 'had no experience in such matters' (Grey 2008, p.1).

This research on lower-ranking female officers reveals the expectations and sheer mundane nature of gendered prison work. Female officers' lives were restricted and controlled by the long hours and monotony of the daily prison timetable and the hundreds of Standing Orders which governed their working and personal lives, yet due to their class backgrounds they were not perceived as of sufficient status to undertake the task of 'reforming' women prisoners. Their working lives encompassed domestic service, nursing and caring, discipline, administration, overseeing labour, and the role involved many aspects of women's 'work' more generally; but it was distinct within the civil service due to the living arrangements and social constraints. Records are patchy but it appears that most of the women who entered the service were working class and were aspiring to a career which could offer them a lower-middle-class life. Although, expected to be moral upstanding examples of femininity, they were often criticised for their relatively lowly status. Their role in reform was also made difficult by the rule of silence. Although unevenly enforced, they were not permitted to speak to prisoners (except strict directions) let alone impart uplifting or life-changing moral guidance.

The government's retort to such criticism was that the service was popular and applications for vacancies were high. For some women, the prison service did offer them a permanency and additional benefits including pensions and accommodation, not available in other female occupations. But as Eliza Orme (1898) argued, it was:

not enough to show candidates abound and that warders cling to the service. The more important question is whether the women appointed are really suited to the work required of them, namely, the improvements of the criminals in their charge ... Short hours, comfortable feeding and housing, and plenty of wholesome exercise, are the conditions most likely to attract and keep warders of the right sort with sunny tempers, bright hopeful spirits, and bubbling over with originality. (p.795)

These kinds of sentiments were also accorded to matrons who 'often admirable women as they are, are not generally of the class under whom any of us women who are interested in prisons would like to be put for discipline' (Amos 1898, p.805).<sup>6</sup>

This conflict between the intentions and the realities of gendered prison work is epitomised by the oft-quoted experience of suffragette Constance Lytton in Holloway in 1909. When asking for some larger shoes to wear, the officer had no other means of reply:

She seemed not to have heard what I said, did not look my way, but shouted past me into the air, speaking in a loud voice, very rapidly, and without any variety of intonation in a way that sounded strange and unnatural, as if she were proclaiming an edict written by another person: 'It's – no – good – complaining – about – those; they're – the – largest – size – in – stock; you – can't – have – any – others – so – you'd – better – make – the – best – of – them.' ... 'So that is what it means' I thought, 'being in prison'. (Lytton 1914, pp.81–2)

However, by the 1920s, the change of name from warder to officer, for Lionel Fox (1952) (Chairman of the Prison Commission), at least 'symbolised a change of spirit – warder suggests the turnkey and the guard, officer the leader' (p.91). Mary Size's (1957) account of her working life certainly gives the impression that things had begun to change by the 1920s, reflecting the new wider ethos of punishment and rehabilitation in the criminal justice system. Size was appointed lady superintendent at Liverpool prison in 1925 and took with her an ethos developed in the reformatory borstal system, saying of the staff on her arrival: 'their idea of discipline was repression and punishment, close confinement and bread and water diet. I had another plan for keeping order, which was the antithesis of this. I cultivated friendship amongst the women without familiarity, and, in that way, I gained their confidence and respect' (Size 1957, p.69). Similarly, McCall (1938) notes that older non-promoted officers were 'devitalised' by institutional life and, whilst she was a strong supporter of better officer training, acknowledged that 'the younger officers of to-day are a much finer type than the older women, in spite of the many disadvantages of the service' (p.50).

## Conclusion

Contemporary criminological research on the prison officer has focused on the role and nature of prison work. This article presents a historical understanding of the role and reveals the tensions between the bureaucratic nature of prison work for female officers in the late-19th and early-20th Centuries and the facilitation of 'reform' or 'rehabilitation' on the other. The female prison system changed significantly between 1895 and the 1930s. Female prison officers in local prisons spent long hours in the dull, monotonous, machine-like operation of the restricted prison environment on and off duty. They were also affected by the overall contradiction in the prison system at the time: on the one hand changes had occurred in the wider penal system (Garland 1985), since the Gladstone Committee, which had resulted in the removal of certain groups from prisons; the development of alternative penal sanctions and strategies, but the daily regime inside local prisons lagged behind and did not significantly alter until the 1920s and 1930s. Changes in local prison regimes were slower, and more protracted, but it was significantly aided by the decline in the prison population (Bailey 1997; Forsythe 1990). The role of female officers in the 'reform' of female prisoners demonstrates the ways in which gender and class combined in prison work. Often regarded as lowly in status and engulfed in routine and regulations of the prison, the female officer led a monotonous existence, whilst the feminine ideals seen as essential to 'reform' came from higher-class women outside the prison service. Female prison officers would only observe significant changes in their working lives in the 1920s and 1930s as a broader shift in penal philosophy towards more reformative ethos began to permeate the wider prison system. By this time, the female prison

system had been significantly reshaped, their working lives were undoubtedly better, restrictions were made on working hours, better pay, and pensions all came about in the early part of the 20th Century. By the 1930s, the officers' role and significance in practice began to be seen in more professional terms, for both men and women their status improved as the wider prison system slowly moved away from the restrictive and closed environment of the late-19th Century.

#### Notes

1. This research was supported by the British Academy (Small Research Grant, SG-46679).
2. Terminology can differ, in the US some female staff were referred to as matrons, used as a generic term and could include lower ranks but in England and Wales, matron was a superior grade (since the Gaols Act 1823) and she was the governor of the female wing, although still subservient to the male governor. In some larger or female-only prisons there were a number of matrons assigned to a wing and the warders and assistant warders were under their instruction.
3. In April 1878, there were 488 female staff in the service; one clerk, 28 schoolmistresses, one lady superintendent, 103 matrons, 328 warders and 27 other sub-officers. The government proposed cutting the staff to 387, consisting of 29 schoolmistresses, two lady superintendents, 25 matrons and 331 warders (RCP 1878, Appendix 5, p.30) The Second Report of the Commissioners revised these figures stating that there were 493 female staff: 30 schoolmistresses, two lady superintendents, 109 matrons, 278 warders and 74 other sub-officers and these were cut to 21 schoolmistresses, one lady superintendent, 69 matrons, 226 warders and 69 other sub-officers (RCP 1879, Appendix 7, pp.31-3).
4. Eliza Orme (1848-1937) was a lawyer and campaigner. She was a member of the London National Society of Women's Suffrage, the Society for Promoting the Employment of Women and a founding member of the Women's Liberal Federation (WLF). When the WLF split in 1892 she joined the Women's National Liberal Federation. She was a senior lady assistant on the Royal Commission on Labour in 1892 and was a member of the Gladstone Committee on Prisons in 1894 (Howsam 2004).
5. Women prisoners were often released to 'Homes' which were supported by charitable and religious organisations or Discharged Prisoners Aid Societies; practice varied across the country but they often offered accommodation and basic support to homeless women or assisted with finding employment, funding travel or other aspects of aftercare.
6. Sarah Maclardie Amos (1840/1-1908) was a political activist. Formerly lady superintendent of Working Women's College in London, she was involved in various campaigns including the repeal of the Contagious Diseases Acts, the National Vigilance Association, Social Purity Association, British Women's Temperance and the British committee of the Abolitionist Federation. She also sat on the executive committee of the WLF, National Union of Women Workers and the Salvation Army (Levine 2004).

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