



Convicts at Dartmoor Prison in 1907. "I am struck by how the problems prisons present don't change over time," says Dr John Moore

Concern about prisoner welfare has always had to compete with claims that prison regimes are too lax

DR JOHN MOORE

As a historian of prisons, I am struck by how the problems prisons present and the solutions offered don't change over time. Prisons mostly operate away from public view, apart from in the aftermath of extreme events. With the current attention on Birmingham prison, it is worth recalling one of those rare occasions when an inquiry – the 1853 Royal Commission that investigated the prison – focused on establishing the truth. The commission was established in response to concerns over the self-inflicted death of a 15-year-old prisoner, Edward Andrews. It found that prisoners had been repeatedly subjected to corporal punishment and children had been whipped illegally. Other punishments included the straitjacket, adapted to allow prisoners to be attached to a hook on the wall. Female prisoners were strapped to railings in the central hall. In the

case of Edward Andrews, the commission concluded that, "By the order... of the governor, he was punished illegally and cruelly, and was driven thereby to the commission of suicide." The governor was subsequently imprisoned for three months. Yet concern about prisoner welfare has always had to compete with claims that prison regimes are too lax. When Winson Green was opened in Birmingham in the 1840s, local judge Matthew Davenport Hill said it should be a "moral hospital". The famous reformer Alexander Macdonochie was appointed as governor. However, within two years Macdonochie was dismissed after complaints about a lack of "sufficient discipline". It was under his successor's regime that Edward Andrews was to die. Ultimate responsibility for prisons has changed much over time. Until 1878, prisons were the responsibility of local government, and conditions varied. Then all prisons came under the control of the Prison Commission, which operated a deterrent system of discipline. From the late 19th century, there was an emphasis on character reformation. The interwar years saw several reformative initiatives, including borstal and open prisons. However, prisoners' accounts show that much brutality remained. Following the Second World War, prison populations increased and investment in prison buildings was not a priority. Under Home Office control from 1963, reformation



The 1990 riot at HMP Manchester, known as Strangeways, resulted in a prisoner's death and caused enormous damage



Inside Cardiff prison. Conditions in jails have often been hotly debated

remained the dominant official discourse, although prisoners themselves stressed the experience was mainly one of "doing time". Since the 1990s prison policy has largely articulated wishful thinking – from Michael Howard's "prison works", through Tony Blair's "tough on crime", to David Cameron's "rehabilitation revolution". Prison populations have increased, as has drug use. Austerity has seen reductions of staffing, education and work opportunities. As the situation worsened, ministers have sought to distance themselves organisationally. If we really want to find out what is happening today, the 1853 Royal Commission provides a blueprint: a public inquiry, with opportunity for those at the frontline, both guards and prisoners, to share the lived reality of prison life, and a commitment to finding the truth rather than excuses. **11**



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