Women in Prison

A special report by Judith Ferguson and Anthony Barnett on the new gaol they are planning in Camden Road

Several times a week, women in Holloway prison try to kill themselves. The press has particularised the much publicised suicide attempts by Pauline Jones into something special. In fact her attempts to obtain release are only the tip of an iceberg of discontent.

The authorities admit that the regime at Holloway cannot last. Just as the present buildings are modelled on Warwick Castle, so the regime inside is based on physical brutality and repression. Sensing the mounting explosiveness, the prison authorities are acting. They are dismantling the old prison bit by bit and building a new "institution" in its place.

Modern, progressive and liberal, their plans are to solve the problems of women prisoners by abolishing them as "illegal" means of survival. "There but for the grace of God..." you might say. But the authorities have a different way of understanding women. "Most of them are inadequate in one way or another, and many of them are highly disturbed," says D.E.R. Faulkner, Chairman of the Holloway Project. For him, and for the prison service, the women's crimes are the product of maladjustment, a personal failure to live up to society's norms of good behaviour. They are mentally sick, All in the Mind.

Bright New Holloway

So a bright new and sophisticated Holloway will rise on the existing site, ready for use by 1977. Who will be inside it?

Over half the 1,000 women imprisoned today in Britain have been sentenced for petty crimes against property. Bulking up the household budget by shoplifting, obscenely stealing household goods, cheque bouncing, defrauding the social security - the majority of women in prison are there because they were in need.

Another 20 per cent are imprisoned for prostitution and allied activities, 15 per cent for drunkenness. In short, over three-quarters of the women in jail are locked up for domestic or personal reasons.

In most cases women's crimes are related to survival - economically or in terms of relationships. Stress of family life, inability to cope with bad housing, isolation, unemployment, problems of childrearing can all lead women, to seek illegal means of survival.

The first prison rule states that "the object is to 'resocialise' the women, reeducate them into accepting their role within society. The techniques used will be more subtle than the present strip-cells and overt repression.

The institution will have a full scale hospital and a prison community (with out single cells). New "admissions" will go straight into the hospital for "assessment" and progress from there to living and sleeping in the prison while attending the hospital during the day. Finally, if they behave, they may go into a further prison regime.

The architectural design is described by Faulkner: "Within the perimeter the buildings will be grouped around a green to give an open aspect and an appearance of freedom while preserving a high degree of super­vision. Workshops and educational buildings will generally be built low with living accommodation rising above them on the higher parts of the site and with views across them to the sur­rounding district: The buildings facing the road, including the chapels and a general-purpose hall, will give an inform­al and reassuring appearance; normal windows will be used where possible to give indications of re­cognizable activities."

While the prisoners will be reassured that they are only sick, and can be cured, the public too will be reassured, for despite its internal appearance of therapeutic freedom, it will be a high security compound with no voluntary patients able to discharge themselves at will.

Amazingly the new course in Women's penal treatment will be administered by the same prison officers of the existing Holloway. According to Dr Blyth, Senior Medical Officer of Holloway, they will undergo a training to receive "positive up-to-date instructions in modern psychotherapeutic regimes". This will turn them from wardresses into Hospital Staff.

Bars Inside Heads

The regime in the New Holloway will emphasise psychotherapy - putting the prison bars inside the women's heads. The object is to "resocialise" the women, reeducate them into accepting their role within society. The techniques used will be more subtle than the present strip-cells and overt repression.

The institution will have a full scale hospital and a prison community (without single cells). New "admissions" will go straight into the hospital for "assessment" and progress from there to living and sleeping in the prison while attending the hospital during the day. Finally, if they behave, they may go into a further prison regime.

The first prison rule states that "the purpose of the training and treatment of convicted prisoners is to encourage and assist them to lead a good and useful life." The prisoners will be grouped in families of 16 in their sleeping and eating accommodation to create an atmosphere of the community. Long­term prisoners will undergo psychiatric therapy, but the majority of women will take part in group councils. There will be guided by an Assistant Governor who will supervise but not participate. The inmates will not disperse the social relations within the prison, nor their position in society as women. Instead domestic problems, work problems, sexual problems and personality problems will be the topics of conversation. Any major personality problems will be referred to the psychiatrist.

If this is resisted, then the iron hand beneath the therapeutic glove will whistle them back into hospital. The report states: "Despite the intention to achieve a straight flow from hospital to prison to outside world, there is a tendency to cyclic behaviour, i.e. from hospital to prison (where misbehaviour occurs) back to hospital!"

But if all goes according to plan, and the unfortunate petty criminal has enough self discipline to stick it out in the therapeutic prison then there will be psycho-drama and gymnastics to "eviscerate their aggression". "Music and Movement routines are considered good for deportment which, in turn is considered "valuable for self-esteem". In all pursuits the women will be encouraged to "adjust themselves to life as members of a community". A community in which "patients will move from special observation through psychiatric nursing dependency to discipline officer dependency". For those who persist in remaining "mentally sick", there is always ECT, "a form of treatment at present used in Holloway" and which "will be carried out in the psychiatric unit."

Resocialisation

Work is another form of re­socialisation. The therapeutic occupa­tions devised by the Home Office are dressmaking, toy-making, handiwork, and simple assembly operation, laundry, gardening, cleaning, repair of fabrics. All traditional occupations of women as housewives and homemakers.

Underpinning the whole outfit there will be a variety of punishments, such as loss of privileges, loss of remission, or cellular confinement. The Home Office says: "The normal conception of a punishment block is regarded as in­compatible with the ethos of the new establishment". But for cases of "non­medical isolation or segregation" there will be a "plain and functional unit, with special attention to sound proofing". You've guessed it - a prison cell.

How has this state of affairs come about? The wretched and paltry crimes that bring women into prison, the tiny numbers who are involved in large scale robbery or effective violence, the mun­ dane and pathetic nature of the charges, the large number of women on remand, are all signs, within the criminal world...
Women's prisons in Britain

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Establishment</th>
<th>Women under sentence in prisons 1966</th>
<th>Women under sentence in prisons 1967</th>
<th>Women under sentence in prisons 1968</th>
<th>Women under sentence in prisons 1969</th>
<th>Women under sentence in prisons 1970</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Bullwood Hall</td>
<td>1608</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>69</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>48</td>
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<tr>
<td>Bristol</td>
<td>1966</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>59</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>52</td>
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<tr>
<td>Headingley</td>
<td>2618</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>37</td>
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<tr>
<td>Holloway</td>
<td>414</td>
<td>564</td>
<td>2342</td>
<td>1701</td>
<td>1904</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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Women in British prisons in 1967:

1. Closed prisons
   - Holloway
   - Bristol
   - Headingley
   - Bristol
   - Bullwood Hall

2. Open prisons
   - Ambedkar George
   - Manor Court
   - Long Marston
   - Risley
   - Risley
   - Box Hill
   - Box Hill
   - Kent Burton
   - Kent Burton

3. Prisoners in total
   - 1966: 34
   - 1967: 59
   - 1968: 38
   - 1969: 52
   - 1970: 48

Women's in prisons in 1967:

4. Borstals
   - Risley
   - Borstal
   - Holloway

5. Open Borstal
   - Risley
   - Kent Burton

Sandy Grew: "You're trod on so much that you even begin to believe the things that you are fighting..."

Pauline Conroy: "To piss, to eat and to breathe in Holloway is a privilege."

Pauline Conroy, who two weeks ago was discharged from the charge of Complicity in a conspiracy to stay, spent one week in remand in Holloway. Here are the speaking-the-truths of the regime, where to think is considered a provocation. In these circumstances she found her attempt to prepare a defense for her case was political discrimination.

Bristol, January 1972

"And to breathe there is a privilege..."