heritage open days

Welcome to the Heritage Open Days tour of Lewes Prison. These notes give some of the history of this prison and the other Lewes prisons that preceded it.

Early prisons

Until the 18th century, most people convicted of a criminal offence were punished by capital or corporal punishment, transportation or a fine. Although debtors were often imprisoned, most prisons were used mainly to house people until their trial or punishment.

There was no nationally-run prison system; there were county gaols, and many towns also had 'lock-ups' – small buildings used to detain disorderly persons for short periods. Castles – like the one at Lewes – were often used as town or county prisons. In Sussex, the main county gaol seems to have been at Guildford Castle; after the Peasants Revolt of 1381, the Earl of Arundel was ordered to retain prisoners at Arundel and Lewes castles, as Guildford Prison was full.

With the decline of Lewes Castle in the late Middle Ages, the vaults under the Star Inn, now the Town Hall, may have been used as a town prison for a short while, as was the West Gate (where the 'bottleneck' is today), until it was pulled down in 1763.

The Cliffe House of Correction

An Act of 1576 ordered the establishment of Houses of Correction or 'bridewells' (the word comes from St Bride's Well in the City of London, where such a building stood in the 16th century). In 1610 a piece of land in Cliffe (today the site of 50-52 Cliffe High Street) was purchased to build such a prison. At first this was used, not for the detention of felons or debtors, but for 'petty offenders, rogues, vagabonds, vagrants and idle persons'.

At the 1741 Assizes, the Grand Jury found that the House of Correction in Cliffe was 'not convenient nor sufficient, and ought to be enlarged'. In 1749 Lewes became the Assize town for the whole of Sussex, and during the next 50 years it became increasingly obvious that a new building was required.

The prison reformer John Howard (1726-90) visited the Cliffe gaol as part of his influential nationwide surveys of prisons and reports to Parliament. His reports led to better sanitation, separate male and female accommodation, and the gradual introduction of chapels, infirmaries and exercise areas in prisons. He also helped to end the corruption in local gaols and the practice of prisoners having to pay the gaoler for their food, or for better treatment.

The North Street prison

In 1789 an acre of ground near the corner of North Street and Lancaster Street was bought for £350 to build a new House of Correction. The prison architect William Blackburn (1750-90) adopted Howard's ideas and designed many prisons in the 1780s from small local prisons to large urban ones. He designed the Lewes House of Correction and began its construction, though after his death it was completed by his brother-in-law William Hobson, and opened in 1793. It had two wings built over arcades, one for men and one for women; each of the two storeys contained 16 cells. It was enlarged to 70 cells in 1817-18, and in 1822 a treadmill was built. These were introduced into many prisons about this time, sometimes to grind corn or perform other useful tasks, but often simply as a type of hard labour. The footings of some of the cells were exposed in recent archaeological excavations prior to the construction of the new Lewes police station.

A view inside the Naval Prison shortly before it was demolished in 1963

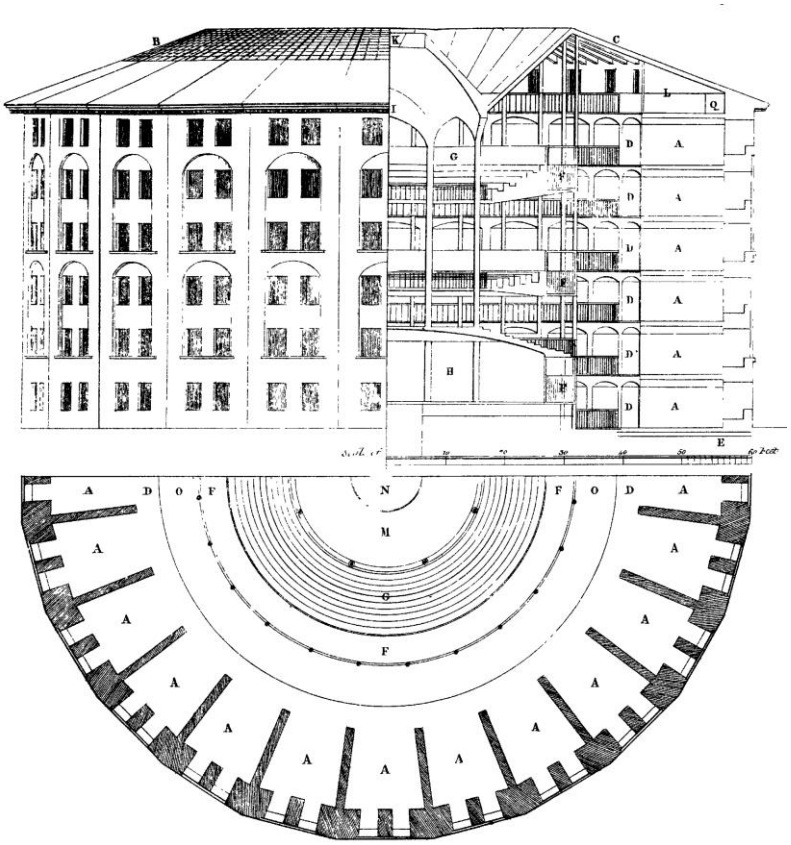
Despite a further extension in 1834 with a further wing for women prisoners, this prison in turn soon became overcrowded. Prison overcrowding was a nationwide problem in the later 18th and early 19th centuries, partly due to the growing

population and the large number of prisoners of war following the end of the Napoleonic Wars. A further factor was the ending of transportation to America in 1776 and, although ship hulks were used as prisons for a time and transportation to Australia began in 1788, the problem remained acute. The first national penitentiary, Millbank in London (1812-21) was built partly to address the PoW problem.

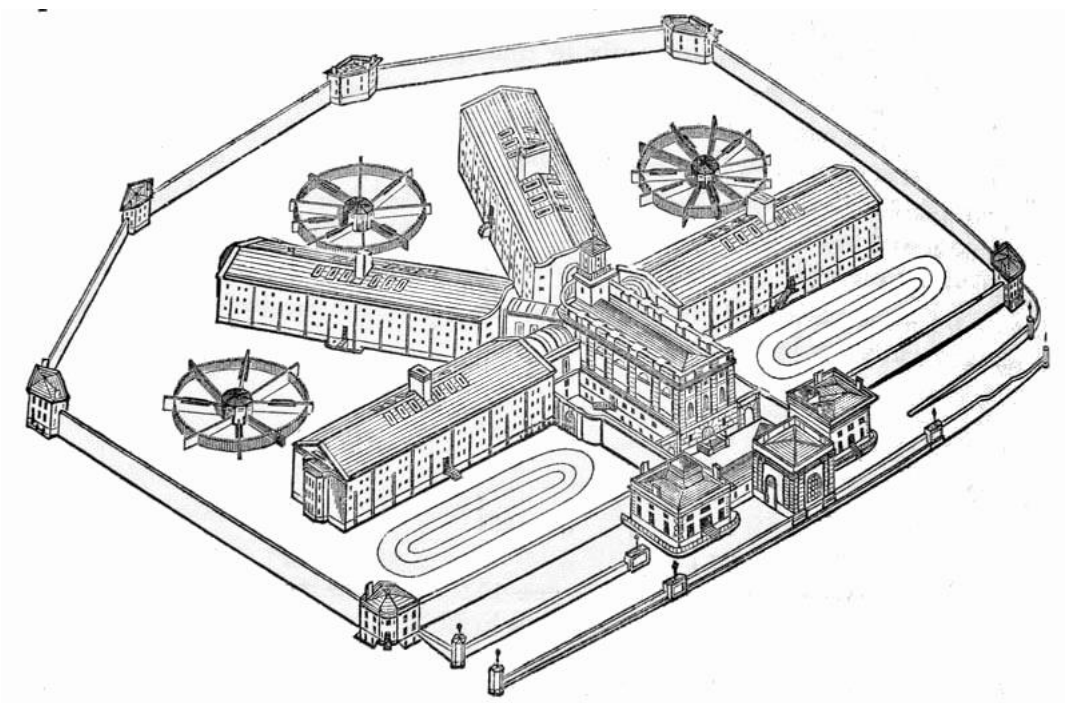
Prison systems

The philosopher Jeremy Bentham's idea of a 'panopticon' is often mentioned in the history of prison architecture. This was a building designed so that a single person at a central point could watch all the inmates without them knowing whether or not they were being watched (the idea being that they would in theory control their behaviour at all times – a similar principle to today's public CCTV cameras).

In 1791 Bentham put forward a panopticon design (shown below) for the new Millbank National Penitentiary, but it wasn't taken up, and – although it raised important issues about surveillance and control – the panopticon wasn't widely adopted as a prison design. A few such prisons were built in the USA and Holland, but the nearest to a panopticon design in this country seems to have been a female wing at Lancaster prison (1818-21).



Bentham's real legacy is in Pentonville (1840-42, illustrated on the next page) and the other Victorian radial prisons that followed Pentonville's model. They made it easier for a limited number of staff to supervise prisoners, but they are not panopticons.



From the late 18th century there were two competing prison systems: the 'silent' and the 'separate'. In the silent or 'associated' system, inmates occupied small cells by night but laboured together in common workrooms during the day, when silence was rigidly enforced. Some productive work was done, or simply hard labour as a punishment. The silent system was the norm in English prisons in the late 1700s and early 1800s.

In the separate system, inmates occupied cells by day and night, working and sleeping in them, and leaving only for exercise and religious worship. This was tried in the late 18th century but reintroduced in the mid-19th century, following studies of the system in some USA prisons. It was widely adopted in local prisons after 1840 and made compulsory in 1865. The present Lewes prison is thus part of the second phase of new prisons built to accommodate the 'separate' system favoured by the mid-Victorians. The inmates worked and ate alone in their cells.

Wings of late 18th and early 19th century prisons were usually rectangular, with arcaded workrooms on the ground floor and sleeping cells above, opening inwards onto a central corridor or outwards onto an external walkway.

With the new 'model prisons' of the 1840s, wings were open internally from floor to ceiling, with the cells on the upper levels reached from landings. This allowed a smaller number of officers to supervise the prisoners. Until about 1880, cells had toilets and washbasins, but later these were replaced by central washing facilities.

There was usually a gatehouse with reception facilities, often flanked by houses for the governor and chaplain. The chapel would often be on the upper floor of the central building.

Two prisons in Lewes

In the early 1800s the county gaol was at Horsham. Sussex was at the forefront of reforms in the late 18th century: Horsham was the first purpose-built fully cellular prison in Britain, while Petworth was an early example of the separate system.

After Horsham closed, Lewes became the county gaol for the Eastern division of Sussex. In 1848 the Justices at the Quarter Sessions decided to replace the North Street House of Correction with a new county gaol. A committee was formed, which wrote to Joshua Jebb, the national surveyor-general of prisons, asking him to prepare a plan for a building to hold 250 prisoners. The new prison was built between 1850 and 1853 on a site west of the town bought from William Verrall. The architect was Daniel Rowlinson Hill (1810-57) of Birmingham, and Lewes prison followed the model of Pentonville prison (which had been designed by Jebb) in having a central hall with radiating wings of cells. Hill also designed prisons at Winson Green (Birmingham) and Wandsworth in London, as well as Warwick County prison.

The new prison was to have four wings for males, females, vagrants and juveniles and debtors. Building began in 1849 but after the main contractor, William Trego, went bankrupt, the work was completed by George Locke and Thomas Nesham.

The new prison opened in 1853 at a cost of £56,000, of which some £3000 had been obtained by selling the old House of Correction to the Admiralty. For the next 100 years Lewes therefore had two prisons, a civil one and a naval one. During the Crimean War (1853-56) Finnish prisoners of war (often known as Russian prisoners, because they were in the service of the Tsar) were held in the naval prison. (There is a memorial to those who died there in the churchyard of St John sub Castro.) The old prison was closed in 1910, but during World War I it was taken over by the army and used for training, and later in the war both this and Lewes Prison were used to house prisoners of war. It was demolished in 1963.

Lewes Prison, viewed from a cornfield on the other side of the Brighton Road

The present prison

The main block is radial in plan with four wings around a half-octagonal central block (see aerial photo). The windows and main entrance have round arches in the Romanesque style. The original buildings are of brick and flint. The long symmetrical front has low towers with 'machicolations' – the architectural term for gaps between the corbels (the supporting structures below the roof line). In a defensive building these gaps were used to repel attackers, but here they are used decoratively. The front has stone quoins (cornerstones) and detailing.

The main buildings are faced in halved flints with redbrick quoins and dressings. Some of the walls have 'gallets' or sharp shards of flint set into the mortar – a technique sometimes used in defensive buildings to make them seem even more difficult to climb.

The original chapel (now a visiting centre) was on the upper storey of E wing, opposite the main entrance. Note the bellcote to the SW corner of the chapel. Originally, the prison's Governor and Chaplain lived in rooms either side of the main gate.

Although many original details have been lost in later modernisation programmes, some interesting features remain, for example the brickwork at the top of the modern stairwell into C wing.

At first the prison housed both male and female prisoners, the latter in F wing. This wing had no windows on the side facing A wing, so that female inmates could not see the male prisoners.

Lewes Prison in 1861
(reproduced courtesy of the Lewes History Group Bulletin)

The 1861 census lists as resident in the prison in St Anne's parish the governor (John Sanders aged 62, a Cornishman), the chaplain (Rev Richard Burnet, 54, born in Dublin), a matron, a porter and nine warders – 6 male and 3 female. The governor, chaplain, porter and one warder were accompanied by their families. There were a total of 210 prisoners, 160 men and boys, 47 women and girls and 3 infants. The three toddlers were described as prisoners, but each accompanied a woman with the same surname. The youngest prisoner was John Durrant, a bootblack aged 12, but 5 boys and one girl were under the age of 15. There were another 38 older teenagers – indeed for females the most common age group was 15-19. For both genders more than half the prisoners were under the age of 30. The oldest prisoners were an Irish shoemaker and a carpenter from Ripe, both aged 75, but only 5 men and one woman were over 60. Just 10 prisoners, nine males (including the 12 year old bootblack) and one female were natives of Lewes.

Some of the men are ascribed occupations one might not expect to meet in prison. There were two surgeons (one specified as FRCS), a surgeon dentist, an attorney, an architect, a brewer, an auctioneer, a master mariner, a furniture broker and a retired dancing master. There were a scatter of tradesmen – a farmer, a 'farmer and bather', a builder, a butcher, a baker, a grocer, a linen draper, a lime burner, a cabinet maker, a wheelwright, a blacksmith, a licensed victualler and a contractor of mail carts.

Perhaps less surprising were a horse dealer, a selection of hawkers and hucksters (of both genders) and no less than 8 soldiers, plus a soldier's wife aged 16.

Victorian developments

In 1868-70 the prison gained an extra 120 cells: the east and west wings were extended and the female wing to the south also lengthened. An incentive scheme was introduced by which the inmates could earn extra food or remission for good behaviour.

In 1878 the prison system, which had until then been controlled at county level, came under national control and Lewes became the centre for those doing 'the separate' – those sentenced to penal servitude served up to 9 months in solitary confinement at Lewes before being sent on to a convict prison.

Public executions at one time took place on a platform built out from the south-east wall, but after public execution was ended nationally in 1868 they were moved inside the prison. There have been four public executions and eight others at Lewes, the last in August 1914.

By the later 19th century the prison regime had become harder in response to a more punitive mood amongst the public. The Gladstone Committee investigated the prison system in 1893 and a new wave of reform was introduced. In 1909, John Galsworthy, author of the Forsyte Saga, came to Lewes prison to interview those on 'the separate', using his findings in a play called 'Justice' which raised a public outcry about solitary confinement. Winston Churchill, then Home Secretary, took the reformers' side, conditions were improved and the use of solitary confinement reduced.

The 20th century

During the First World War the prison was emptied: the female wing was closed and the remaining women moved to Holloway. The final prisoners to leave, at the end of 1917, were the Irish rebels from the 1916 Easter Rising for Irish independence, led by Eamon de Valera, the future Taoiseach and president. One of the rebels was elected to Parliament while imprisoned here; De Valera insisted that his men were treated as prisoners of war. When this was refused, the rebels rioted and had to be split up and transferred to other prisons.

Throughout the 1920s, the prison had only a limited remand function, holding those whose cases came before Lewes Assizes. The prison reopened in September 1931, with the newly appointed Governor, the Chief Officer, 15 Officers and 68 convicts moving from Chelmsford Prison. A month later the first receptions from local courts arrived. Since that time Lewes has been the local remand centre for adult prisoners, taking prisoners from the courts at Chichester, Hastings and Haywards Heath.

Between the wars the Naval Prison was for a time home to the Territorial Army but when World War II broke out it again held PoWs.

In the late 1940s and 1950s, Lewes was used as a centre for young offenders and a Borstal experiment was tried in 1963. This was a success, but pressure on London

prisons meant that Lewes was once more requisitioned as an overspill. Some of the first new arrivals in 1964 were the Mods and Rockers, rival gangs of youths on scooters and motor cycles who fought on the beaches at Brighton and Hastings.

In August 1968 a fire in the main wing caused considerable damage and many prisoners had to be moved to London prisons. After this the cells in A and C wings were brought up to more modern standards.

In the early 1970s Lewes became a training prison, with one wing devoted to training long-term prisoners, many of them lifers in mid-sentence. After a period of unrest during the late 1970s, young offenders from the London area were introduced.

Lewes has accommodated many famous or infamous inmates: John Haigh the 'acid bath murderer', Great Train Robber Ronnie Biggs, Reggie Kray, the writer Brendan Behan, Mick Jagger (for the night!) and the man who stole the World Cup in 1966.

The prison today

From the late 1980s there have been many changes within the prison system: privatisation of prisons and escorts, agency status and a more business-oriented approach. A higher public profile has led to modernisation of the prison estate. 'Slopping out' has ended, in-cell TV has been introduced and prisons are a more humane experience for everyone, including prisoners, staff and visitors.

In 1990 the training wing at Lewes was emptied of long-term prisoners and the prison once more became a local prison housing short-termers and remands. A £1 million healthcare unit was opened in June 2004, which included a 19-bed unit for assessing mental health.

Lewes today is a resettlement prison, holding convicted and remand adult males mainly from East and West Sussex courts. Accommodation is mainly in shared cells, with some single accommodation. A new block, the Sussex Wing, was opened in 2008, and the prison now has an operational capacity of around 700 places. It also has a First Night Centre for newly arrived prisoners and a Listener Scheme for those at risk of suicide and self-harm. It offers a range of full and part time education including information technology, literacy, numeracy, and life/social skills. Additional employment is offered in the prison workshops.

Further reading

Allan Brodie, Jane Croom and James O Davies: Behind Bars: The Hidden Architecture of England's Prisons (English Heritage, 1999); English Prisons: an Architectural History (English Heritage, 2002) – this is a more detailed version of the first title

Helen Poole: Lewes Past (Phillimore, 2000)

Details about the early history of Lewes's prisons are sometimes sketchy. If you have information which would make these notes more accurate, please let us know: email leweshod@gmail.com.