

**OUR CRIMINAL PAST: REPRESENTING PENAL HISTORIES:  
DISPLAYING AND NARRATING THE CRIMINAL PAST**

**Third AHRC Network Event**

**31st January 2014, Galleries of Justice, Nottingham**

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This inspiring, well organised, and well attended day was the third and, sadly, the last of three excellent research networking events, each organised by Dr Heather Shore (Leeds Metropolitan University) and Dr Helen Johnston (University of Hull ), and supported by the Arts and Humanities Research Council.<sup>2</sup> As such, it was the third opportunity for scholars, archivists and those engaged in an educational and heritage capacity in museums and prisons who are interested professionally and academically in *Our Criminal Past* and its future, to gather and hear excellent papers. As usual, and held in a particularly appropriate setting - the Galleries of Justice Museum, Nottingham - the event was attended by over 50 established and newer members of the network all interested and involved, in particular for this event, in displaying and narrating our criminal past. The day was split into four sessions:

**Session One: Displaying our Penal Heritage**

After preliminary welcome statements by Dr Helen Johnston, the first session, chaired by Dr Vivien Miller (University of Nottingham), began. This session was concerned with the work of, and the challenges to, heritage institutions and professionals. Bev Baker, from the Galleries of Justice, opened the session with her two-part paper entitled *Presenting Prison History at the Galleries of Justice Museum*. The first part explored a brief history of Nottingham's County Gaol up to its closure in 1878, and the subsequent conversion into the Galleries of Justice Museum in 1995. The second part examined how the museum presents not only the history of the county gaol but also that of the Prison Service to the public and presented the plans for the future of the museum. In describing its history, Bev explained that in 1993 the Museum of Law Trust was formed to save Nottingham's Shire Hall, a complex of buildings consisting of the County Courts, County Gaol and County Police Headquarters. The site closed in 1986 and was left derelict until

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<sup>2</sup> Although there are plans to sustain and develop the network, so perhaps not too sad!

1993. After several years of fundraising, conservation and development, the Galleries of Justice Museum was opened to the public on the 1<sup>st</sup> April 1995. Bev then outlined the development of the museum since it first opened nearly 20 years ago, detailing the current crime and history tours through the museum and their use of costume interpreters.

Now that the Galleries have been successful in securing funding to re-develop the museum, proposed changes to their traditional methods of displaying crime and prison history will take place over the next two years. Most important for Bev and the Galleries is the robustness and sustainability of the practices to be used, and, in the context of changes nationally, these changes at the Galleries relate to the accessibility and flexibility of the museum's displays to the public, and to modernising the mode of displaying. For example, timed tours are to be replaced with open access tours in response to the public's dislike of being part of a group, and more flexibility is to be introduced so that the public can choose their own tour route. More use will be made of volunteers to engage with the visiting public, as in National Trust sites. This ease of access will in future extend to the electronic accessibility of the collections held at the Galleries - the collections will be digitized and made available on-line.

A quite different interpretation and use of a historical site was presented by Lisa Price from Oxford Castle entitled *The Interpretation of Oxford Castle Prison: can the public and private sectors be partners in crime?* Lisa similarly began with a brief history of the site describing how the history of Oxford Castle as a place of incarceration dates back to the thirteenth century when it was used as a place of detention for unruly scholars from the university, though it was not until the sixteenth century that it was formally constituted as the County Goal. Lisa explained how the partnership between Oxford Preservation Trust (OPT), the County Council's Museums Learning and Access team, and the Continuum Visitor Attractions group worked together to interpret that history and, as is necessary to ensure the survival of any heritage attraction, used it to generate income.

When HMP Oxford closed its doors in 1996 the County Council took on the site and OPT began work towards a long-held ambition to open up the site to the public. Opening to the public in 2006 as Oxford Castle Unlocked, the aim was to 'present an engaging and

academically rigorous interpretation of prison life'. The site has recently been undergoing a period of change under a new manager. The vision now is for a different style of 'experiential' interpretation and a move towards events to attract more young adults, whilst still retaining the more traditional audiences of school and family visitors. Similar methods are employed to those at the Galleries, such as costume interpreters and workshops for school children using archival photographs and records to provide educational material. However, being a university town and a place that attracts many international visitors, there is a simultaneous move towards entertainment as well as historical education, for example, 'murder mystery' events. Lisa mused that academic rigour is lost in this attempt to entice young adults to the site for reasons other than its educational value or as part of their academic course.

Ceri Williams from Beaumaris Gaol and Court followed with her paper entitled *The Interpretation of Llofruddiaeth: 19<sup>th</sup> Century Crime and Punishment in a North Wales Prison*.<sup>3</sup> This looked at how the history of crime and the gaol system itself is narrated at Beaumaris Gaol. Ceri explained that Beaumaris Gaol is part of a group of museums that makes up Anglesey Museums Service run by Anglesey County Council. Beaumaris is an important town in the history of the island and, being a popular destination with both holiday makers and local people, the Gaol has a variety of visitors to cater for. Ceri showed how the museums service offers its visitor experience, through discussing their interpretation methods, and learning and event programmes. Many of which are traditional displays of panels and objects, but also include 'children's passports' in which children have to answer questions (with the help of their family) to pass through time, and the gaol. The site boasts the only (not working) *in situ* treadmill in the UK. Much of the marketing for this site, mainly directed towards visitors, is through the County Council website and leaflets - both of which contain little detail about the site.

Ceri spoke at length of how the use of the Welsh language has an effect on their work now and how it impacted on the Gaol and its inhabitants when it was in use. In their work today, the site's marketing and displays all have to be in English and in Welsh, which affects the number of words that can be used, but when in use as a gaol, the use of English and Welsh caused many problems. The gaol's residents were Welsh speakers, but the court system and prison education were in English. Ceri explained that the Welsh

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<sup>3</sup> 'Llofruddiaeth' translates into English as 'murder'.

speaking community of the time would not have understood the English language and there is no evidence of a translation service, although an advertisement for a gaoler did state that the candidate would need to be Welsh speaking. Ceri was asked about the lack of a Welsh feel at the site, and answered that they were led by their sources - which are all in English, due to the centralised control of the English prison system and the plethora of nineteenth century Victorian bureaucratic prison system sources.

The papers sparked many questions, but the overarching theme that ran through them and the ensuing discussion was the balance between providing entertainment, and attracting the public to the heritage sites, and avoiding sensationalism and maintaining academic rigour. Generally, the heritage professionals were conscious of the need to address and fulfil visitor expectations, and appeal to all age groups, but not at the expense of historical accuracy and integrity. This compromise is encapsulated in the term 'edutainment', conjured up by a PhD student visiting the Beaumaris Gaol and Court heritage site. Without an appeal, and some entertainment value, many visitors would not be drawn to these historical sites, which would then affect the dissemination of historical work - children and students have to be engaged, and adults absorbed, otherwise visitor numbers would drop, leading to a further cuts in funding, and the whole historical project of displaying and narrating the criminal past would be undermined.

### **Session Two: New Directions in Researching Crime History**

The second session, chaired by Dr Shore, saw two new and exciting research projects being outlined. Professor Barry Godfrey (University of Liverpool) presented his paper entitled *Conceiving the Digital Panopticon* and Dr Richard Ward (University of Leicester) presented his paper entitled *Investigating and Displaying the Penal History of the Criminal Corpse*. Professor Godfrey explained how recently, at the end of 2013, AHRC funding under their Digital Transformations banner was awarded (to the tune of £2million over four years) to their large scale project involving five universities - so although the *Digital Panopticon* is under way, it is just in its infancy.<sup>4</sup> The paper outlined the ambition of the project and the various themes of enquiry that will be run over the next few years as the team try and answer, with digital technology, the answer to Jeremy Bentham's original enquiry: which is best for the long-term prospects of inmates, penal servitude in the UK, or convict transportation to Australia?

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<sup>4</sup> For further information see: <http://www.digitalpanopticon.org>

After outlining the different aspects, such as the intergenerational inequalities of free settlers versus transportees for example, that each of the five universities will be examining (explained in detail on the project's website), Godfrey talked about the extensive impact and reach the project would generate - furthering academic research and employment in the form of funding for seven PhDs and three research assistants; the development of public-private partnerships; the use of social media, electronic dissemination through blogs etc., and on-line publishing; resources for schools and universities; and prison education programmes. From the ensuing discussion, it was apparent that this project has engendered much public engagement and enthusiasm in Australia, where having a criminal past is a 'badge of honour', particularly compared to the more restrained public engagement in Britain. Whether that sort of enthusiasm will be generated here remains to be seen, but it definitely generated much interest amongst the delegates in attendance.

Dr Ward outlined another exciting but near completion, five year, £1million research project entitled '*Harnessing the Power of the Criminal Corpse*', which is another major, multi-disciplinary project, this one currently being run at the University of Leicester and funded by the Wellcome Trust.<sup>5</sup> Ward explained how the meanings, treatment and uses of the criminal corpse constitute an important aspect of our criminal past. He explained how the executed criminal body was a powerful object which was utilised, variously, for the ends of political authority, criminal justice, medicine and folkloric healing, amongst other things. Thus each of these related disciplines - history, medicine, folklaw and culture - are partners of the project, as well as archaeologists. Ward explained how the multi-disciplinary aspect brings a richness to the project, as well as difficulties, such as parity in the evaluation of evidence. For example, historians and archaeologists in particular require a different level of 'proof' when constructing narratives and arguments.

Dr Ward continued to explain how the project aims to communicate its findings to the public more widely, so in this way his paper was a call to educationalists, archivists and heritage professionals for feedback on how this might best be achieved, and the opportunities that are available for collaboration. To illustrate the possibilities, Ward made a few suggestions as to how the penal history of the criminal corpse (particularly

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<sup>5</sup>For further information see: <http://www2.le.ac.uk/departments/archaeology/research/criminal-bodies-1>

practices such as dissection and hanging executed offenders in chains on a 'gibbet') could be a fascinating aspect of the future history of crime, in both an academic and public frame. In discussion, and on a practical level, the idea of a touring exhibition was raised, but in a more conceptual vein, the competing notions of 'a' highly narrative, linear 'story', and a more fluid, individually conceived historical narrative were considered, which raises the question of what, as historians and heritage professionals, do we want when attempting to represent our criminal past.

### **Session Three: Representing and Presenting Penal and Policing Histories**

Following an excellent buffet lunch, Dr Dave Cox (University of Wolverhampton) chaired this session. Drs Alyson Brown and Alana Barton (both of Edge Hill University) started with *Prison tourism: history and representation* about the phenomenon of prison tourism not only with regard to those who physically travelled to such sites, but also the way in which current prison museums portray their collections to those who 'visit' them on the internet. Barton and Brown explained how prison tourism could be considered an aspect of 'dark tourism' in which the public travel to locations associated with suffering, disaster and/or death. Also that, as contemporary penal institutions, prisons are often considered 'closed' but people have always 'visited', or at least had access to, such places. For example, Brown argued that the links between the prison and tourism are not always made - holidaymakers and tourists visit Princetown in Dartmoor to see the town, but that the visitor interest in the prison was not acknowledged. She explained that the concept of 'dark tourism' is relatively recent and an historical consideration of tourism is as yet under-developed, even though people have visited and shown interest in prisons for centuries, especially the modern prison with its new modes of discipline and punishment. This interest had a much earlier precedence though - Brown told of the importance of *Success* for current understandings of 'dark tourism'. *Success* was an Australian prison ship built in 1840 which was converted into a floating museum and undertook world tours displaying relics purporting to represent the horrors of penal transportation. Unique at the time, *Success* was an entrepreneurial endeavour in which prisoners and their accounts were sensationalised for entertainment and attraction.

Dr Barton discussed in particular the problematic nature of what was portrayed to the visiting public, contending that the portrayal was usually only one side of a very complicated story. She knowledgeably argued that images of our penal past are not

historically or conceptually static, and that the complex interpersonal and institutional dynamics of prison life are often simplified into imagery and depictions that prioritise the exceptional over the mundane. For example, exceptions such as escapes, executions and violence are often portrayed, but prison suicides, which are much more common, rarely feature. In this way, punishment can become detached from its historical and political reality. The politics of representations mean that prison tourist sites are where 'expert knowledge' fights a losing battle against popular culture. Barton summed up with a question - should the prison be represented as entertainment or should such museums embrace the spirit of questioning, uncertainty and exploration? Where this leaves a prison museum commercially though is equally problematic.

Professor Ian O'Donnell's (University College Dublin) paper *Punishment and Prisons: Notes from the Irish Front*, talked about two current research projects which are examining the history of crime, punishment, and penal policy in twentieth-century Ireland. These research projects have begun to uncover some of Ireland's hidden histories, which despite their obvious significance, are aspects of Irish social and legal history that have attracted little sustained attention, due to a dearth of reliable information. Professor O'Donnell highlighted three peculiarities. The first was the fall and rise of lethal violence between adults which was accompanied by the gradual disappearance of infanticide. The second was the retention of capital punishment for political purposes (as a deterrent in a period of civil war) despite popular abolitionism and the state's inability to recruit its own hangman.

The third was the notion that a low rate of imprisonment betokened a non-punitive society. For example, in 1958, there were just 369 prisoners in the entire country held in only three prisons, a situation that meant there were more Irishmen in British prisons than there were in Irish ones. *But* there was a high level of 'coercive confinement' in a range of institutions outside the criminal justice system - 3,000 other places in which people were held against their will in fact, numbers which O'Donnell argues disturbs the narrative of a low imprisonment rate if equated with imprisonment in prisons. These included the Magdalene asylums, youth offending institutions, youth reformatory and industrial schools, and psychiatric hospitals. By the 1950s, numbers of people held in psychiatric hospitals peaked, with 750 people per 100,000 of the population as inpatients - a ratio higher than the US prison population now. Additionally, O'Donnell continued to

argue that people held in such institutions spent longer in them than people confined in prisons, for example, psychiatric hospitals were places from which many people did not emerge. Such a situation suggests a disturbing of the narrative of being a country not obsessed with imprisonment *per se*. This newer narrative tells of a country with a potent and wide-reaching controlling power.

The final paper of the day was delivered by Beth Wilburn (PhD candidate, The Open University) entitled *Narrating 'Our Criminal Past' at Greater Manchester Police Museum in the context of the UK Government funded Tackling Knives Action Programme 2009-2011*. in which she described her work as an Education Officer between April 2009 and May 2011 working for the Greater Manchester Police (GMP) Museum funded by the Tackling Knives Action Programme (TKAP). Financed by the Home Office, the TKAP ran in England and Wales, aimed to reduce serious violence involving 13 to 24-year-olds using a range of enforcement, education and prevention initiatives. The broad aim of the project was to use heritage to reach out to young people in different communities in Greater Manchester and continue to break down barriers between them and police officers at GMP. In her work, Beth used narratives of the history of crime and policing as a tool.

Additionally, the handling of items and uniform from the museum collection were used in outreach to schools and colleges. This was done not to glamorise but to contextualise, although Beth acknowledged that holding objects such as handcuffs is a very different feeling to knowing how it feels to have them on as a defendant. The physical fabric of the museum itself, which houses an original Victorian police station, cells and Magistrate's Court, hosted a variety of activities aimed at young people from different backgrounds. A range of resource packs aimed at teachers was produced, one of which claimed to 'tackle violent youth crime by drawing parallels with youth gangs in late nineteenth century Manchester'. Beth explained that the effectiveness of these initiatives was difficult to assess, as the evaluation produced more qualitative than quantitative data. Moreover there was evidence of some discrepancies between work that was funded and the actual work carried out, which indicates, Beth argued, the challenge the museum faced in maintaining a sensitive portrayal of heritage balanced against the need to retain avenues of funding - a theme that has run through many of the papers presented.



#### **Session Four: Roundtable Discussion**

The last session was a lively, thought-provoking roundtable discussion chaired by Dr Chris Williams (The Open University) and featuring Dr Judith Rowbotham (SOLON), Jamie Bennett (Governor, Grendon Prison), and Christopher Stacey (Unlock)<sup>6</sup>. The roundtable started with each speaker giving their thoughts generated throughout the previous papers. Rowbotham started by highlighting what she saw as the two 'elephants in the room'. The first was assumed strong popular demand for the stereotypes of 'good' versus 'bad' behaviour - an assumption that suggested we cannot demand too much of the public, that we cannot present nuanced narratives in case they cannot understand. The second was that there is currently a strong political need for a representation of a harsh Victorian past for us to return to. Rowbotham asked whether we wanted, or should, continue to sustain that stereotype.

Jamie Bennett followed, describing Grendon prison as a living museum - derived from, and maintaining, a set of values from a welfare age, which drives a potential for re-discovery of penal alternatives. He continued to outline the particular struggle at Grendon to establish their own history as funding for such enterprises was not seen as a priority, so they are having to seek alternative private funding. Jamie Bennett then went on to address the concept of 'dark tourism' in respect of Grendon. While many people visited Grendon, as people attending for therapy and families of those resident there, such visits, he claimed, are the antithesis of 'dark tourism' - they are not about visiting places of hopelessness but places inspirational about hope.

Chris Stacey spoke of his concern of the missing element from any historical representation of imprisonment - that of what happens to people when they leave prison (which all but a small proportion do). He argued that what happens beyond the prison has a role in penal history. For example, Chris commented on the archives held at the Galleries of Justice from the London Police Court Mission that are not drawn on in the museum displays. Galleries staff explained these archives do not contribute to the history of the site, the primary focus of the present interpretation, but a future re-interpretation could make use of the resources and include the role of former prisoners. Jamie Bennett concurred by saying that the prison experience needed to be placed in

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<sup>6</sup> A charity that supports people with criminal convictions. See <http://www.unlock.org.uk/main.aspx>

context and used the example of the struggle with prisoner biography at Grendon. Prisoners at Grendon wanted to record their own history but they had to overcome the middle-class prisoner and 'gangster' tradition of biographies before being able to produce their own.

Questions and comments from the floor followed, which culminated in an enthusiastic discussion; Dr Helen Rogers (Liverpool John Moore's University) led the way commenting that the occupation of prisoners often reflects the dominant occupation and economy of the local area. Prisons do not just have to think of themselves as needing to show the story of the prison, but telling the story of the local area as well. Dr Rowbotham confirmed this notion by adding that Victorian prisons often undercut local workhouses on oakum picking and laundry prices. Jamie Bennett brought the discussion to the present day by drawing the parallels with work undertaken by prisoners in the US. There, prisoners are used as a cheap labour force to perform dangerous recycling work that traditionally has been done in under-developed countries. Jamie suggested that the use of US prisoners for such work demonstrated their lack of worth as human beings to the political structures in the US. He argued that the dichotomy of being inside or outside the prison was reinforced by seeing prisons as special places of tourism or heritage blurring the transient boundaries and fluid movement of people in and out of prisons, particularly of those who work in prisons. The example of Ruthin Gaol was used - here the archives of those prisoners held there are now kept in the cells so, symbolically, these prisoners retain a presence, they have not been allowed to leave. Dr Richard Ireland (Aberystwyth University) added that one cannot understand the prison diet without understanding what diets were like outside prison – again suggesting that prisons and prisoners cannot be seen as separate but must be seen as part of the life as lived then. Jamie added that people in prison tend to be from certain sections of the community, which demonstrates the inequalities present in specific times and places, but neglects the wider reach of the impact of imprisonment - specifically the families of those imprisoned. Dr Rogers concurred and highlighted the problem of those children attending museums for example, where they may have been affected by a family member being imprisoned but the museum and teaching staff may be totally unaware. Nell Darby (University of Northampton) added the final comment by highlighting the problem of depicting prisoners as other, as outside mainstream society, that there is a liminal space existing on the boundary of before and after prison which is neglected in

interpretations of prisons as discrete places. Such hearty discussions clarified and answered many questions or concerns held, but also generated many more questions and ideas that can be taken forward for future discussions.

In conclusion, this networking day was as successful as the first in providing a stimulating mix of papers by motivational speakers in genial surroundings, and represented a fitting ending to the series of networking events. This has been a most excellent, thought provoking and novel series. Each event has been different, but followed an overarching theme, each were well planned and well executed. All have been very well attended. All papers have been appropriate and stimulating. Many academic and social discussions have taken place. Each event has seen old friends and colleagues meet, and new associations and friends made. Well done and many thanks go wholeheartedly to Helen Johnston and Heather Shore for their expertise, friendliness and inclusiveness. Endeavouring to continue the network would be the best way to repay their hard work. Future collaboration will be the legacy.