

2015

# Preface Our Criminal Past: Caring for the Future?

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Godfrey, H. (2015) 'Preface', Law, Crime and History, 5(1), pp. 1-4. Available at:

<https://pearl.plymouth.ac.uk/handle/10026.1/8913>

<http://hdl.handle.net/10026.1/8913>

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SOLON Law, Crime and History

University of Plymouth

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## PREFACE

### OUR CRIMINAL PAST: CARING FOR THE FUTURE?

*Barry Godfrey*<sup>1</sup>

This edited collection of selected papers arising from three well-attended symposia organised by Heather Shore and Helen Johnston raises a number of extremely pertinent questions. Together the papers question who *owns* the past, and who has the right to *represent* our criminal history, as much as who cares for it?

Social history research is much contested because it is still seen to be relevant to current political debates, and to modern social policy (can we imagine a debate on immigration, or the privatisation of the health service, for example, that does not include historical references?). The social history of crime history can be placed in the same bracket, and indeed it can claim to be more salient because of its inherent public interest. The general public, non-professional historians, genealogists, museum-visitors, all have an interest in the institutions we created to judge and punish offenders and transgressors - some because they have sympathy for those that they believe were unfairly persecuted and subject to punishing regimes (unmarried mothers in Magdalene homes, for example), and some because they liked the harshness of past regimes (harking back to a period when we cherished an even more punitive approach), or some just because it is somewhere different to take the children on a rainy day. The more interested visit many gaol and court museums, access blogs such as <http://criminalhistorian.com> or <https://waywardwomen.wordpress.com>, and watch TV programmes dedicated to crime history, or which incidentally feature it in genealogical shows. Museums such as [The Galleries of Justice](#) or [Kilmainham Gaol](#) trade quite legitimately on the basis that we can now visit important sites where power was exercised; where resistance took place; where people suffered. Thousands of people each week 'experience' (often virtually) how the criminal justice system used to be. So, the questions posed are important ones for anyone interested in preserving the past and using historical evidence to influence the future, but there are some complex issues to negotiate.

The question of who owns the past is about access to historical sources. Many of us have grown up in the archives, spending days reading primary sources in local and national repositories. Now we might spend an equal amount of time online consulting sites around

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the world such as the [Leiden Crime and Gender Project](#); the Australian-based [Prosecution Project](#); [Belgium's Quetelet Database](#); or one of the big data projects which now provide details of thousands of court procedures and defendants ([www.digitalpanopticon.com](http://www.digitalpanopticon.com); [www.oldbaileyonline.com](http://www.oldbaileyonline.com)). In both cases there are issues about access. Whilst Ancestry and Find My Past charge a fee, other academic-led sites do not, but the data they present has often been accessed from private businesses. There is nothing intrinsically wrong with commercial companies charging to use digital data, and they have made a vast amount of data available and usable (reducing long expensive trips to archives). However, many academic historians will be uneasy about our joint heritage being packaged and sold for profit. I think that we must be careful here. The uncomfortable truth is that archives are swimming in difficult waters. Comprehensive spending reviews have dramatically reduced their budgets, and many now close their doors on certain days – even The National Archives. Deprived of the licensing fees for their holdings, some archives might close for good. Who own our past? All of us, but we might need our archives to make money from their holdings in order for academics to be able to access the records of our past.

The second battlefield is the question of who represents our past? We have been used to a closed club ruling this roost. Until recently, academics in universities have had a dominant position in interpreting the past on behalf of (sometimes despite?) the public. This series of symposia has shown us that Our Criminal Past is actually being interpreted, reinterpreted and represented to a wide public audience by museum managers, hotel developers, school and FE teachers, bloggers and tweeters. It is appropriate and timely that the essays in this collection discuss *who* can legitimately present the past back to us, as much as *how* we can ensure that the representations reflect current historical research. My impression is that academic historians have mainly ignored these processes if they happen outside of the universities (with a few exceptions, such as Raphael Samuel). Now, especially with the government urging us to demonstrate the impact of our work, I suspect that we will hold more open (and hopefully less condescending) conversations across the whole spectrum of users and consumers of history.

One of the most interesting aspects of the symposia was its scope in encompassing digital representations and the physical remnants of criminal justice institutions, not least in debates about dark tourism. The emergence of digital data may have altered the landscape of our research, but the archaeology of former prisons and convict sites is producing whole rafts of new and interesting research.<sup>2</sup> Moreover, the Coalition government seems determined to

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<sup>2</sup> see <http://www.ucc.ie/en/archaeology/research/projects/thespikesislandproject/>

add to our supply of former-prisons, with another 13 prisons decommissioned in 2013. The uses to which these ex-sites of punishment are now being put tells us a lot about our care of the past. Reading Prison (opened in 1844, closed in 2013), designed by George Gilbert Scott and based on the New Model Prison at Pentonville with its cruciform shape, is a good example of early Victorian prison architecture. It was closed because it was costing the Ministry of Justice approximately £20,000 a month to maintain.<sup>3</sup> The plan now is to convert the buildings into a theatre and community arts centre. Another characteristically Victorian prison, Dorchester (along with Gloucester Prison, Kingston Prison, Portsmouth, and Shepton Mallet Prison) have all been sold to development company City and Country. They intend to carry out a community consultation on the development of all the sites, with plans including mixed-used schemes of assisted living units alongside retail and social amenity areas.<sup>4</sup>

The decommissioning of historic Northallerton prison is allowing the local authority to create a new civic 'masterplan' for the area which includes a retail area, workspace, new homes, a leisure centre and a town square. It incorporates the prison's five listed buildings which include two female wings built in the 1800s and the governor's block. The Council Leader stated that 'Buying the prison is an exciting project for the council ... we have a blank canvas to work from to create something that is exciting for both the town and the district.'<sup>5</sup> It is possible, given the size and prominence of the site, that Shrewsbury Prison could form part of a new civic design for the town too. The eighteenth century prison with a characterful entrance (including the bust of John Howard) and a set of wings with traditional prison landings which will be utilised by the Osborne Group. This is the same development company that undertook a large number of high-quality development projects, many of which involve both historic buildings and council partnerships. Their latest projects include the regeneration of Oxford Castle and Armagh Gaol in Northern Ireland. HMP Canterbury has recently been sold to Christchurch University and there are plans to turn the earlier Georgian and Victorian part of the estate into student accommodation, potentially with a heritage centre attached. It is expected that the twentieth century buildings will be demolished. The physical integrity of these prisons will, at least in part, be preserved. The 'repurposing' process could, with care, also be used as an opportunity to educate visitors about the people who were once confined in those buildings.

However, the remaining decommissioned prisons are destined to be demolished. Blundeston in Suffolk was built in 1961 and does not possess the same historic character as

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<sup>3</sup> <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-berkshire-28214330>

<sup>4</sup> <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-30596574>

<sup>5</sup> <http://www.hambleton.gov.uk/council-news/3611-northallerton-prison-sale-takes-step-forward>

Canterbury or Shrewsbury. The housing development planned for the site has been widely criticised by local people.<sup>6</sup> Bullwood Hall (built a year after Blundeston) in Essex has also been earmarked for a housing development. Camp Hill has been merged with two other prisons to form HMP Isle of Wight. The least attractive of the prisons are being knocked down, and the characterful historic gaols will be redeveloped. The care we have for the criminal past is therefore highly selective, and will by-pass critical institutions, eras, and places that do not quite fit the academic or the commercial agenda. As Alyson Brown and Alana Barton pointed out (in a paper delivered at the third seminar, 'Representing Penal Histories: Displaying and Narrating the Criminal Past', held at the Galleries of Justice), the twentieth century prison (and the stories of the people kept within their walls) are in danger of being omitted from the heritage agenda. Those prisons which originated in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, but which continued to serve in the twentieth, will, of course, capture something of the experiences of more recent inmates. However, those prisons that were purpose-built in the twentieth century are less likely to be turned into museums which can interpret the more recent criminal past for us.

The symposia, and the papers presented in this volume, have raised some critical questions, and reminded us that there are a complex set of underlying political, commercial, and academic criteria which determine who cares for our criminal past, and to what end.

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<sup>6</sup>[http://www.lowestoftjournal.co.uk/news/calls\\_for\\_rethink\\_over\\_housing\\_development\\_plans\\_for\\_for\\_mer\\_blundeston\\_prison\\_site\\_1\\_3837006](http://www.lowestoftjournal.co.uk/news/calls_for_rethink_over_housing_development_plans_for_for_mer_blundeston_prison_site_1_3837006)