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Suicides of Boy Prisoners; The Portland Borstal Institution; The Delinquent Child After the War

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Abstract: This article considers three extracts from the first Howard Journal, published in 1921. Concentrating on juvenile and young male delinquency and the borstal system, it contextualises the original extracts by focusing on the evolution of borstal training in the early 20th Century, the character of the interwar borstal and the influence of the Prison Commissioner, Alexander Paterson, the circumstances and notoriety of Portland Borstal and in particular the issue of suicide in the prison estate, and the impact of the First World War, on the youth and young male delinquency and penality.

Keywords: borstal; boy; juvenile crime; juvenile delinquency; juvenile offenders; suicide; youth

In post-World War One Britain, crime was headline news. This was far from unusual in the aftermath of war (Emsley 2008; Lawrence 2003), when demobilisation brought returning soldiers back into society and economy, and contemporaries worried about 'post-war criminals'. While anxieties about crime after war often focused on ex-servicemen, desensitised by the violence of conflict, in 1921, the year in which the Howard Association and Penal Reform League merged to become the Howard League for Penal Reform, youth and young adult crime and penality was one of the issues which would come under examination in the newly launched *Howard Journal*. This was not a new concern, although as we see from the set of writings here, the impact of war (absent fathers, impoverishment, 'war-strain') was thought to be a contributing factor to the continuing high rates of boy juvenile delinquency in this period. However, this was also the era of the borstal system. Initially born from discussions at the 1895 Gladstone Committee (Departmental Committee on Prisons 1895), its architect the Prison Commissioner, Sir Evelyn Ruggles-Brise, the first borstal had been established in 1902, in Borstal village, in Kent, giving the system its name. In 1908, the Prevention of Crime Act, introduced the borstal sentence, giving courts the power to pass the sentence of detention in a borstal institution (known as 'borstal training'). Youths committed to borstal should be aged

no less than 16 years and no more than 21 years and the term should be 'of not less than one year nor more than three years' (1908 Chapter 59, Part I).

The central feature of the institutions was the ethos of 'training' as opposed to penality per se, and by the First World War, there were two borstal prisons and two borstal wings: the Borstal Institution, Borstal village, Rochester; Feltham Borstal, Middlesex (formerly the Middlesex Industrial School); the borstal wing in Wormwood Scrubs, London (in 1929 it would become a Borstal Allocation Centre from where 'trainees' were assessed before being sent to the most suitable borstal); and the girls' borstal wing in Aylesbury Prison. During the war, borstal boys were released from prison to fight. As the Home Secretary, John Simons noted in 1915:

> In the Borstal Institutions of Great Britain, where youths are received under sentences of one to three years, steps have been taken since the beginning of the War to release for enlistment selected prisoners who had profited by the training of the Institution, which includes drill and gymnastics, and who appeared likely to make good soldiers. The result of the experiment has been most satisfactory; a large number have been released and have enlisted, and in the great majority of cases good reports have been received of the conduct of the lads in the fighting services both at home and abroad. (Hansard, *Commons Debates*, 5th ser., lxxii, cols 1465–6: 28 June 1915)

Feltham Borstal was closed due to low numbers in February 1916, presumably because of the declining male crime rate during the war, and the fact that youths were being diverted into the forces (*The Times*, 19 February 1916, p.5; Van Emden 2005). In the post-war period, new life was breathed into the borstal system, and the interwar period would later be remembered as somewhat of a 'golden age' (Soothill 2007, p.42). While this view has been challenged recently (Tebbutt 2020), it remains the pervasive narrative of the interwar borstal among criminologists and former borstal staff (although, of course, none survive from this period). This was the era of Sir Alexander Paterson, the reforming Prison Commissioner, and architect of the post-war borstal system. Four more borstals would be established in the period leading up to the Second World War: Portland in 1921, and four open borstals Lowdham Grange (1929), North Sea Camp (1935), Hollesley Bay (1938) and Usk and Prescoed Camp (1939). It is Portland Borstal, built a few years after the war, that concerns us here.

Suicides of Boy Prisoners

Portland was originally established as an adult convict prison in the mid-19th Century. It became a borstal in 1921, and a young offender institution in 1988 (the borstal system was abolished by the Criminal Justice Act 1982). Today it is an adult/young offender establishment. In many ways it is a crucial institution in the history of borstal, although it remains little discussed in comparison with Rochester Borstal or Feltham Borstal. It would be the

events described in the *Howard Journal* (Anon 1921a, pp.45–6), the suicide of 17-year-old Harry Edward Buckingham in October 1921 at the new borstal institution at Portland (*Daily Mail*, 21 October 1921, p.10), which would be a turning point for the system, and for the rehabilitation of young adult offenders (Tebbutt 2020, p.713). Given the newness of the institution, 'only three months', as noted in the *Journal* (Anon 1921a, p.45), the suicide was perhaps more profoundly shocking. Although as pointed out in the *Journal* (p.46), not long before, a boy on remand at Winchester Prison had committed suicide. This case was briefly referred to in the Commons in questions to the Home Secretary, Edward Shortt, but otherwise seems to have left little trace (Hansard, *Commons Debates*, 5th ser., cxliii, col. 2341: 30 June 1921).

In contrast, the Portland suicide, and the attempted abscondment of two other boys, would result in a visit by Shortt (*Aberdeen Journal*, 14 November 1921), and was followed by the reporting of the Prison System Inquiry Committee in 1922. Better known as the *English Prisons Today* report, the Committee had been established in 1919, under the Labour government, but developed as an independent committee by 1921. Its membership included such diverse intellects as Margery Fry (Honorary Secretary of the Howard League for Penal Reform (Logan 2017)), Bertrand Russell, the Webbs and George Bernard Shaw. The report was edited by the Quaker, Stephen Hobhouse and socialist and anti-war activist, A. Fenner Brockway, who had both served time as conscientious objectors during the war and were highly critical of the prison system (Soothill 2007, p.42). Moreover, they commented on the difficulty of suicides within the prison estate, which while little talked about, was a recognised problem. As they noted: 'the greater frequency of suicides in the early period of imprisonment is specifically recognised by the Prison Commissioners' (Hobhouse and Brockway 1922, p.555). Those other Quaker commentators on the prison estate, Sidney and Beatrice Webb (aunt to Stephen Hobhouse), noted in their *English Prisons Under Local Government*, that 'the statistics of health, insanity and suicide among prisoners, which appear portentous, have so been manipulated by one side or another as to be inconclusive' (Webb and Webb 1922, p.184). Hobhouse and Brockway's report had a profound impact on prison reform, and arguably led to a sea change in the rehabilitation of convicts. It became, as Margery Fry described it, 'the Bible of penal reformers' (cited in Bailey 1997, p.300). Barry Godfrey (2014) has argued that the report's 'critical assault on the last vestiges of Victorian penal policy', played a significant role in the reformation of the penal system from the 1920s (p.161).

Moreover, 1922 was an auspicious year for the evolution of penal reform, with the appointment of Alexander 'Alec' Paterson to the Commissioner of Prisons. Paterson's work in penal reform during the 1920s and 1930s in particular, played a pivotal role in the changing climate of this period. While arguably, there has been a tendency to idealise Paterson's contribution to penal reform during the interwar years, nevertheless it is clear that he did have a demonstrable impact during his tenure as Commissioner. Even before 1922, and the founding of Portland Borstal in 1921,

Paterson had been involved with the borstal system, through his role as assistant director of the Borstal Association (an aftercare organisation following borstal youths after release) from 1908. Moreover, Paterson is notable as one of a generation of men who fought in the First World War, and became involved in youth work after the war, through their involvement in the Talbot House Christian movement (better known as Toc H). But even prior to World War One, Paterson had already been active in the settlement movement (Bailey 1987, p.9; Ginn 2017) and had published his reflections on the poverty and social conditions of the docklands area in South London in 1911 (Paterson 1911). While the Howard League for Penal Reform in the interwar period was profoundly influential on prison reform, Paterson, wielded a similar influence within the prison administration. Indeed, the Howard League for Penal Reform would work with Paterson on a small wage scheme, piloted in Wakefield Prison in 1929 (Forsythe 1991, p.184). Paterson was not without his critics. For example, Alyson Brown has explored his role in the undermining of the investigation into the Dartmoor Prison Riot, headed by the judge, Herbert Du Parq in 1932 (Brown 2013, pp.44–70). In the 1920s his reputation was largely unblemished and he was widely admired as a reformer. It was in this climate of reform, and the shift towards welfarism, that the early borstal would evolve (Garland 1985). However, Portland Borstal, opened in the late summer of 1921, reputedly had little of the spirit of the reformative ideal, which would be championed by Paterson with the establishment of the open borstals from the late 1920s.

Portland Borstal

In 1921 Portland was newly minted in its borstal incarnation. As noted in the *Howard Journal* commentary (Anon 1921b, p.46), the immediate context calling for an expansion of the borstal system (and new institutions), was the insufficient current provision. In particular, they were critical of the use of Wormwood Scrubs as a 'modified borstal', a term used from 1907 to describe a system implemented in existing prisons to provide accommodation and 'treatment' for those youths with short sentences. The proximity of young offenders to adults was problematic, and seemed to contradict much of the direction of policy for juvenile offenders and young adults since the Gladstone Committee. As Bailey (1987) notes: 'In practice, this could amount to little more than the collection of adolescents at the far end of the workroom in which adult prisoners were also employed, and to their sleeping in a separate wing of the prison' (p.180). As warned in the *Howard Journal* (Anon 1921b, p.46), it was unlikely that Portland would be an effective prescription for the young adult prisoner. Portland was a closed borstal, and was set up for youths who had already been through an institutional experience. In the post-war period of course, this might be the army; but also it could be an industrial or reformatory school, or prison. As Menis (2012) has pointed out, this meant that the training regime was 'particularly strict in relation to the maintenance of discipline' (p.994). In other words, Portland was reserved for the 'bad cases'. As the sociologist, Norman Hayner, noted in 1937, 'Hard boys, well-established in crime go

to the Portland Borstal' (Hayner 1937, p.702). This echoed much earlier tropes which described different categories or subgroups of young offenders. For example, the Victorians made much of the distinction between 'hardened' juvenile offenders and those who were perceived as being on the periphery of offending behaviour; what the reformer, Mary Carpenter had referred to as the 'perishing' juveniles (Shore 1999). This division had underpinned the industrial and reformatory school system of the 19th and early 20th Centuries and would also shape the selection of youths into the closed or open borstals.

Borstal had been selective from its establishment, with attempts to categories and classify boys based on their apparent amenability to reform. In many ways this was based on the older model of the reformatory and industrial schools, which took juveniles aged up to 16 years, with the former institution for the boys who had committed criminal offences and/or were considered more 'hardened' in crime (Godfrey *et al*. 2017). However, Portland did not have a happy reputation. In part this may have been related to its previous incarnation as a convict prison, holding adult prisoners on sentences of penal servitude. As pointed out in the *Howard Journal* in 1921, the decision of the Commissioners to use the services of Convict Warders (presumably in part, drawing on the existing prison staff), was not a wise one: 'These warders are experienced with adult prisoners, and it is a waste of experience to ask them to adapt themselves to work with Borstal lads' (Anon 1921b, p.46). As they noted, appointing Convict Warders rather than men specifically trained to work with borstal youths and the borstal training model, could potentially undermine the intended character of borstal.

This was not simply about separation of youths from adults, but as we have seen, about adopting the ethos of 'training'. By contrast, only one of the other pre-Second World War borstals, had a penal past, Usk, in North Wales; others were purpose-built (Lowdham Grange, North Sea Camp) for instance, or built around a former labour colony (Hollesley Bay) (Fox 1952, p.361). Moreover, all four of these institutions were open borstals. While closed borstals like Portland would remain in the post-Second World War period, open borstals would become more common. Many of the modified borstals would close (for example, the borstal blocks in Sherwood and Dartmoor were closed in the 1940s), and only a handful of closed borstals dealt with the 'boys with bad records'. These included Portland, Borstal (Chatham), Feltham (Middlesex), and later, Everthorpe (East Yorkshire, 1958), Hindley (Wigan, 1962), Swinfen Hall (Staffordshire, 1963) and Wellingborough (1964). The rise of closed borstals in the later 1950s and 1960s, was, in part, a product of the prison estate expansion from the end of the Second World War till the late 20th Century (Jewkes and Johnston 2007, p.188). But it also coincided with growing concerns about youth delinquency in that period (Hansard, *Lords Debates*, 5th ser., ccviii, cols 912–89: 23 April 1958). As Geoffrey Pearson demonstrated in the 1980s (Pearson 1983), cyclical historical anxieties about delinquency are far from uncommon. And it would often be during and immediately after wars that concerns about juvenile crime and youth delinquency were most vocal.

The Delinquent Child After the War

In 1921, three years after the end of the war, it was remarked in the *Howard Journal* that the rise of juvenile delinquency associated with the First World War, was now abating, although it warned that the legacy of wartime neglect had some time to run: 'During the war, we were accustomed chiefly to attribute juvenile delinquency to the father's absence from home: but it should be remembered that, if the father's temporary absence during the war was so disastrous to children, those numerous instances in which, alas! the father is now permanently absent are not likely to be less disastrous to children during peace' (Anon 1921c, p.47). This rise in juvenile crime during the war, was well documented by contemporaries. According to figures provided by the social worker and economist, Edith Abbott, in an article published in 1943 (Abbott (1943) originally written in 1919), the number of persons proceeded against in the juvenile courts, had steadily increased from 36,929 in 1914 to a peak of 51,323 in 1917, decreasing back to 40,473 in 1919. As noted in the *Howard Journal*, by 1921, the figures remained higher than the pre-war levels (Anon 1921c, p.46). Abbott (1943, p.192) described how a National Union of Women Workers was organised to place patrols on the streets of London and other cities, immediately after mobilisation, as a response to the apparent bad effects of the wartime preparations on the conduct of children. The Howard League for Penal Reform was in a strong position to comment on the apparent rise of juvenile crime that had been exacerbated by wartime conditions. Cecil Leeson, a probation officer who, as secretary of the Howard Association in 1916, had been commissioned by the Howard Association to explore the juvenile crime 'problem': 'found that the rising crime rate was connected to such role models as fathers, other male relatives, teachers, boys' club leaders and the like being away at the Front' (Bradley 2008b). According to Anne Logan, the pamphlet which came out of this research, *The Child and the War*, on which Leeson had worked with members of the Penal Reform League, 'soon became the most oft quoted publication on the subject' (Leeson 1917; Logan 2016, p.9). This theme of a generation of working-class youths who lacked male role models, fed into other prevailing ideas which would emerge after the war, and which would directly influence the care and rehabilitation of young offenders in the interwar period. As noted in the *Howard Journal* in 1921, the juvenile delinquent of 1915, was, by the interwar period, likely to become a juvenile-adult offender, hence consolidating the link between the juvenile and young adult penal population. Indeed, as noted, the rise in young adult offenders was already apparent, at least for male offenders, thus 'some of the delinquents appear to be carrying through adolescence the marks of their war-time neglect as children' (Anon 1921c, p.47).

The author of the *Howard Journal* article was far from writing about the impact of adolescence in a void at this time. From the early 20th Century, the growth of psychological investigations into adolescence had made an increasing incursion to the development of treatment models for young offenders. For example, in 1925, the later discredited educational

psychologist Cyril Burt (1925) would publish his important study, *The Young Delinquent*; in 1927, the Report of the Departmental Committee on the Treatment of Young Offenders was published (Cecil and Maloney 1927). In the *Howard Journal*, Cicely M. Craven, was generally favourable to the findings of the Committee, noting that it contained proposals, 'which, if acted upon, will give much that the Howard League has long advocated for the child delinquent' (Craven 1927, p.106). Moreover, new approaches to dealing with juvenile delinquents and young adult offenders were also influential in this period, and perhaps can be most clearly evidenced in the descriptions of the interwar borstal system. Bailey (1987) refers to this as a new social conception of delinquency, although its roots were in the changing attitudes to youth and so-called 'discovery' of adolescence in the later 19th and early 20th Centuries (pp.8–10). As we have seen, the university settlement movement would be influential in the early 20th Century (Ginn 2017). The settlement movement evolved with other charitable organisations such as Toynbee Hall, in the poor districts of east and south London (Martin 2008, p.110). A generation of Oxford University students would be influenced by the movement, including Alec Paterson who had worked in the Oxford Medical Mission to Bermondsey during university vacations before the war (Brown 2007, p.293). Indeed, a number of educated young men, who undertook social work for 'settlements' such as Toynbee Hall and Oxford House (including William Beveridge and Clement Attlee), would go on to serve in public life (Bradley 2008a, p.138).

The war itself would play a fundamental role in the later evolution of the borstal system, and the rehabilitation of those youths, impacted by war, identified in the *Howard Journal* in 1921 (Anon 1921c, p.47). Paterson's wartime experience, and particularly his role in the establishment of the Talbot House (Toc H) movement, undoubtedly shaped the post-war philosophy which underpinned the borstal movement. His first borstal housemasters, were also products of the battlefields, the boys' clubs and the university system (Bailey 1987, p.200). Most well known of these was Captain William Wigan Llewellin, who after a governorship at Feltham, would go on to lead boys from the prison, on a march to Lowdham Grange in Nottinghamshire, where they would build England's first open prison. Llewellin later wrote about the endeavour for the *Howard Journal*. The emphasis on character building which had underpinned the work of the boys' clubs and settlement movement, and had been sharpened by the camaraderie of the trenches, was apparent here: 'From the start, the aim is to build upon the sense of honour and loyalty inherent in every British boy' (Llewellin 1933, p.36).

Afterwards

In 1921, the Howard League for Penal Reform was at the forefront of organisations, individuals and institutions collectively invested in addressing juvenile and young adult delinquency. Making the connection between the overlapping groups, it saw the importance of dealing with delinquent youths in a way that recognised the often difficult circumstances and home

lives that framed their offending activity. Thus, the Howard League for Penal Reform, and the *Howard Journal*, were a central influence in the liberal social policy that, for a time, predominated in this interwar period. How liberal was this period in reality? Clive Emsley has pointed out that there was often conflict between the 'new idea' subscribed to by governors and deputy governors, and the reality on the ground for prison officers. He argues that, in fact, there was a great deal of wariness among the latter, of reformers, particularly in the closed prison estate, and the *Prison Officers' Magazine*, in 1922, had objected to the appointment of Paterson (Emsley 2011, pp.211–12). The prison, like other parts of the justice system, operated with a significant dollop of discretion and so the idealistic goals of reform in borstals may have run into opposition or misinterpretation from prison officers. Melanie Tebbutt's recent work on the diaries of the Reverend Digby Bliss Kittermaster, chaplain at Rochester Borstal in the 1930s, shows that he certainly thought so, and his diaries reveal a much harsher disciplinary regime, challenging the dominance of Paterson's idealised view of the interwar borstal (Tebbutt 2020). Tebbutt (2020) writes: 'Institutional and peer bullying exacerbated depression and mental health problems among vulnerable inmates. At high risk of self-mutilation and suicide, they were more likely to be regarded as manipulative and needing discipline than vulnerable. In May 1938, Kittermaster recounted the fourth case of "attempted suicide" he had reported since arriving at Rochester' (p.726).

Borstal then, nor the changes to juvenile penality which came with the Children and Young Persons Act (also known as the Approved Schools Act) of 1933, or later innovations such as detention centres (1952) or secure units (1964), solved the issues with juveniles and young adult offenders identified in the *Howard Journal* in 1921. The Approved Schools Act merged the former industrial and reformatory schools, although the boundaries between these institutions for juvenile offenders (which had been established in the mid-19th Century) had frequently been blurred. The approved school did bring child welfare more into the orbit of the court, but many of the abuses which had characterised the industrial and reformatory schools, continued in the new system, with a number of scandals about mistreatment of inmates during the 1950s and 1960s (Coldrey 2006). Detention centres were established in 1952 for youths aged from 14 to 20 years serving short, three-month sentences (Muncie 1990). Secure units were set up in 1964, for children who had absconded from approved schools. The post-war years continued the largely circular nature of youth justice institutions with each innovation apparently addressing a weakness with the current system, but then, in turn, falling out of favour. Problems of absconding, harm and violence characterised such institutions through the later 20th Century and continue to be sources of concern today (Daw 2020; Hazell 2001). Suicide in young offender institutions (from 1982, youth imprisonment and borstals were merged into youth custody), remained and remains a problem. Liebling's (1992) ground-breaking work on suicide in prisons, confirmed that the period of remand, remained the most dangerous for young offenders (aged up to 21 years) at risk of suicide. Moreover,

her research has shown that the rate of young offender suicides has increased since the 1970s, and at a higher rate than for the prison population as a whole (p.69). In the early 21st Century, this has not changed much, and the rates of suicide and self-harm in a failing prison estate are continuously reported in the national media. The young offender – now essentially young adult – population, remains the most vulnerable, and Feltham, one of the first borstals, one of the worst of the young offender institutions. As the Prison Commissioner, Peter Clarke reported after a 2019 inspection of the prison: 'Our fears were justified, as performance had almost totally collapsed. There was virtually ungoverned use of force, children were locked up for excessive periods, were not receiving proper education or reliable access to health care, and were subject to behaviour management that was almost exclusively focused on punishment' (HM Inspectorate of Prisons 2020, p.17).

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