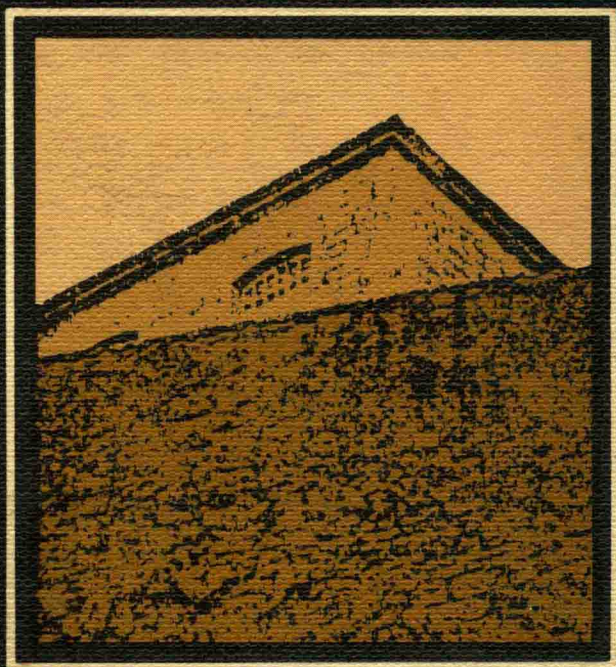


COMMUNITY OF SCAPEGOATS

The segregation of sex offenders
and informers in prisons



Philip Priestley

Pergamon Press

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and informers in prisons

By

PHILIP PRIESTLEY



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Preface

THE work on which this book is based was carried out at Her Majesty's Prison, Shepton Mallet, between 1966 and 1968 and written up as a research report in 1974. Two points need to be made about the present text.

Firstly, it does not refer to something which no longer exists, or which is not recognisably the same. Prisoners continue to ask for protection under Rule Forty Three of the Prison Rules, and there is still a special wing set aside for them; now at Gloucester Prison rather than Shepton Mallet.

Secondly, the book has not been rewritten to take account of contributions to the prison literature since 1974. It remains what it was when it was first written; a description of a group of prisoners in a particular place at a particular time.

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CHAPTER 1

Her Majesty's Prison, Shepton Mallet

"Alas that there is need of such a place on Christian soil."

JOHN FARBROTHER

THE building of the House of Correction at Cornhill in the central Somerset market town of Shepton Mallet was begun in 1610, which makes it one of the oldest purpose built places still in use as a prison in England and Wales. John Howard paid a visit there and described it in his book *The State of the Prisons*. "One day-room for men and women. Men's night-room too close; only one small window. The women's night-room is too little: the keeper has taken what seems to have been part of it to make his malt-loft. He told me his prison was some years ago so unhealthy that he buried three or four a week."¹* Death from the gaol fever, was counted an unavoidable hazard of life inside until John Howard and Mrs Fry began their moral crusades. But historically Shepton has also been the setting for more deliberate kinds of deaths. According to Farbrother, writing in 1872: "... in 1658, Jane Brooks and Alice Coward, her sister, both of this town, after having been examined several times by Robert Hunt and John Cory, justices of the peace, were imprisoned for bewitching Richard Jones a boy of twelve years of age. The former of these two was condemned and executed March 26, 1658. This was one of the last executions for witchcraft in England. . . ."²

This author also recorded his more contemporary impressions of the prison: "Of this large and important building, if little be said, or if its internal arrangements, economy and proceedings

*Superscript numbers refer to Notes at the end of each chapter.

be not minutely detailed, let a pardon be granted, for its very walls look forbidding and within its courts and corridors reigns a dismal silence, broken only by the clink of keys, the creaking of a lock, the grumbling of a heavy bolt, the measured footsteps of a warder, or more rarely by the penitential moan of some poor conscience-stricken sinner." Penitential moans have since then passed out of fashion in prison circles, but the physical description still rings true.

In 1909 a prisoner was admitted to Shepton Mallet who later wrote his memoirs under the pseudonym of Stuart Wood. "It is", he said "a grim, ugly building of grey stone. The discipline was harsh, repressive and destructive, and every day brought its hour of desperation. The Governor seemed a decent sort of fellow . . . and I was really sorry to hear later that he had put himself on the wrong side of a cell door for embezzlement."³

Twice in recent years Shepton's long history as a place of confinement has appeared to be in danger of ending. During the 1920's and 1930's the English prison population declined to a point where establishments were actually being closed down and prison staffs feared for their jobs. In 1935 the Prison Commissioners abandoned the prison and the Army took over the building. For the next thirty years it was an important part of the military justice system. During the 1939-45 war it served as a combined services prison for the allied forces.

It retained its physical aura: "... the forbidding aspect, the thick grey walls and barred gates of this ancient local prison immediately conjured up for the visitor the vision of Dante 'Per me si va tra la perduta gente lasciate ogni speranza voi ch'entrate . . .'" said an army psychiatrist who worked there.⁴

Fifty-two men are reputed to have been executed in the prison during the war. Along the back wall inside, when the coke heaps run low, marks can be seen said to have been made by the bullets of the firing squads. The shooting had to stop, so the story continues, after protests from local people. They were allegedly disturbed, not so much by the deaths of the deserters, murderers or rapists, as they thought, as by the noise of the fatal fusillades which occurred at dawn and woke them at too early an hour.

After that, the work is supposed to have been despatched on the silently efficient gallows which were housed in the angle between the small wing and the main block.⁵

The Ministry of Defence eventually ceased operations at Shepton Mallet in 1965 and the future of the prison was once again uncertain. Alternative uses for the buildings were canvassed, but at what seemed like the last moment the Prison Department of the Home Office re-acquired the site from the Army with the intention of housing within it a population as exotic as any from its past.

It had been decided that a special prison should be opened to cope with a growing problem; the segregation of men who had applied to the authorities for personal protection under the provisions of Rule Forty Three: "Where it appears desirable for the maintenance of good order or discipline or in his own interests that a prisoner should not associate with other prisoners either generally or for particular purposes, the Governor may arrange for the prisoner's removal from association accordingly."⁶

Thus number Forty Three of the Prison Rules. But behind the bland administrative prose there lies a complex and intriguing social process; a process which involves sexual deviation, violence between prisoners, group scapegoating, solitary confinement and the establishment of what amounts to a voluntary prison within a prison. In a tiny minority of cases, prison governors place men on the Rule, not for their own protection, but in order to stop their attacks on fellow prisoners. These men are known as 'governor's Forty Threes'. For the rest, the rule refers to the protection of individual prisoners from the violent attentions of their peers. It refers to men convicted of sexual or violent offences against children; to 'grasses', 'stool-pigeons' or informers; and to prisoners who have failed to honour tobacco debts or similar obligations within the inmate group. The only thing that these three groups have in common is that other inmates shun, and harry and physically attack them, sometimes with extraordinary violence.

For many years the rule was invoked for only a few prisoners, and those who applied for protection under it spent the re-

mainder of their sentences in solitary confinement; twenty-three hours a day working and eating in single cells, and an hour's exercise taken alone.⁷ For some men this degree of isolation might last for only a matter of months; for some it could stretch into years.

Whilst it remained a small-scale problem, no special provision had seemed necessary, but during the 1960's the numbers of men seeking protection began to rise. In 1965 the Prison Department concentrated a number of Rule Forty Three men in one wing at Strangeways Prison, Manchester.⁸ The plan was to allow men on protection to mix with others in the same situation, freed by their common plight from the fear of attack. As between the men on protection, the Manchester experiment was reportedly a success. Normal routines were followed; meals, work, association and exercise all took place as they would in an ordinary prison. The presence of an outcast group within a large local prison like Manchester, however, continued to create problems for the staff who still had to protect them as a group from other inmates. Protection cases had to use facilities in the main prison, such as the bathhouse. They might have to go to the hospital. Visits had to be taken. On all these occasions, whether the Rule Forty Three men were moved about *en masse* or as individuals, there were risks of physical attack or if that were not possible, then a chorus of jeers and catcalls accompanied their progress around the prison. Shepton Mallet, a small and secluded prison, offered a better solution; a separate establishment set aside for Rule Forty Three prisoners.

Beginning in August 1966 the protection population was transferred piecemeal from Strangeways in Manchester to 'A' Wing at Shepton Mallet. At the same time some non-Forty Three men from the South West prison region were brought in to do restoration work on the dilapidated buildings. These men became the 'C' Wing population, forty to fifty strong, which undertook service tasks within the prison and outside work on the gardens and in the staff quarters.

As a prison population with few if any exact parallels anywhere else in the world, the Forty Threes at Shepton Mallet

presented a singular opportunity to look at some aspects of the social organisation of prisons and the functions of scapegoating in human groups.⁹

Prisons by their very nature excite the sociological imagination. Not only do they contain populations of criminals who are of interest both as individuals and as the product of processes of law and order in the community, but they also constitute small-scale societies in their own right, isolated from the outside world by walls and bars and other security measures. And one of their attractions to the student of society is the ease with which they can be observed and recorded. Much of the work in this field is American and has concerned itself with four main issues: the formal organisation and power structure of the prison administration; the impact of imprisonment on the individual prisoner; the existence and nature of the inmate subculture or 'society of captives', and the ways in which these potentially explosive elements are held together in relatively stable relationships with each other. They are potentially explosive because prisons compress into small spaces large numbers of difficult and dangerous people. And they are confined in conditions which not only restrict their liberty but also impose on them a version of the monastic vows of poverty, chastity and obedience. The job of holding down this unruly population belongs to the uniformed staff of the prison: prison officers in this country; guards in the United States.

In his classic study of New Jersey Maximum Security Prison, Gresham Sykes described the guards there as pursuing a number of specific and not necessarily compatible goals.¹⁰ Their first priority was that of security: keeping their charges under lock and key for the lawful period of their sentences. The maintenance of order within the institution came next, together with enforcement of the artificially low standard of living dictated by the administrative rules of the place. Following that, men were required to perform minimum amounts of work-like activity every day. And finally lip service was paid to the idea of undertaking some kind of rehabilitative work with the inmates.

According to Sykes the experience of regimes like these can

be summarised in terms of what he calls 'the pains of imprisonment'. These include loss of liberty and autonomy in all but the most trivial areas of existence; fear of physical assault; and the central problem of surviving long periods of imprisonment as mentally intact as possible. The official advice to prisoners in these circumstances is to 'do your own time'; to serve out sentences in a sort of self-imposed solitary confinement. This advice is backed up by a system of rewards for good behaviour, and punishments of varying severity for those who break any of the many minute rules that govern the daily life of the prison. And in theory, prison administrators possess a monopoly of power which enables them to impose their vision of things upon their captives.

In practice things are not so simple. Practically every published account of prison life suggests that prisoners organise themselves to oppose this version of reality.¹¹ They organise themselves into what have come to be called 'inmate' or 'prisoner subcultures'. These are *sub rosa* societies which exist in the interstices of the official regime and which serve to meet some of the otherwise unmet human and economic needs of their prisoner members.

In American prisons, at least, these inmate societies are highly articulated affairs. They incorporate a set of values which are derived in part from the criminal culture outside the walls, and which stress the importance of loyalty to inmate interests above those of the guards, and the need for integrity in dealings between prisoners. In practical terms these values define the staff as 'the enemy' with whom collaboration of any kind is forbidden, except where it might serve some illicit inmate interest. And of all the forms that collaboration can take, the most strongly prohibited is that of 'ratting' or informing on other prisoners.

Another part of the inmate code concerns the characteristics of the 'good con'. He is a man who is 'tough' and 'sharp' and 'cool', someone who displays in his attitudes and conduct a model of poise and self-control which can help men do their time and come to terms with the emasculating absence of women from their lives. Other roles, some of them less admirable,

are also described in American prison slang or argot. There are 'politicians' and 'merchants' who manipulate the administrative and economic environment to their own and other inmates' advantage. There are sexual role labels: 'wolves' and 'queens', for example; and some which indicate the violent tendencies of those to whom they are applied, e.g. 'ball-busters' and 'gorillas'. 'Fish' are new entrants to the prison community, and 'square johns' are men, typically first offenders, who retain whilst inside an attachment to the 'straight' values of the outside world. And finally there are 'rats' or informers; 'rapos' or sexual offenders; and the 'dings', a residual category of petty and inconsequential offenders who are held in contempt by everyone else in the prison. These last three groups are the American equivalents of the men who formed the basis of the Rule Forty Three population at Shepton Mallet.

Studies of English and European prison communities have failed to disclose such clearly defined social structures as those which appear to exist in the United States.¹² But the existence of Rule Forty Three cases in numbers sufficient to justify the experiments at Manchester and Shepton Mallet is a violent affirmation of the presence in English prisons of deeply held common values capable of being outraged by certain classes of offenders, and of modes of collective action through which these sentiments can be expressed.

An examination of the individual protection cases at Shepton Mallet promised to throw some light on these processes. Why, for example, had these men been singled out for violent attention from other prisoners, and by what routes had they arrived in solitary confinement at their own request? Who, amongst the general prison population had taken most interest in attacking or threatening the sex cases and the informers? In what circumstances were threats uttered and violence inflicted, and what functions do these activities seem to serve for the prison community as a whole? Why is the phenomenon apparently increasing? What is the effect of personal rejection by their fellow prisoners on men who have already been comprehensively condemned by the legal machinery of the wider society?

These questions and many others relate to the position of the scapegoats within the inmate subculture of ordinary prisons. But there is another and equally stimulating set of questions which can be asked about the possibilities of co-operation between the protection cases themselves. Do they, when freed from the immediate threat of violence and brought together in what passes for the near normal in prison conditions, begin to form a subculture of their own? If so, what distinctive features does this social system possess? What kinds of roles are available to its members? To what sorts of values do they subscribe? Are there groupings within the population? On what basis are they formed? How are relations with staff handled? And perhaps most intriguing of all, does a status hierarchy develop amongst men who have already been relegated to the bottom rungs of two successive social systems: that of society as a whole, and then that of the ordinary prison subculture?

This study raises and attempts to answer some of these questions within a descriptive account of a prison and the people in it. The data on which it is based were collected in the course of working at Shepton Mallet as a prison welfare officer between 1966 and 1968. Since much of this work involved discursive conversation with prisoners, it was not difficult to ask about the process of recruitment to Rule Forty Three, or to discuss adjustment to the situation at Shepton Mallet. Over a period of eighteen months, sixty-five accounts were gathered in this way. No notes were taken during these interviews and they were normally written up later the same day. To them were added details from other conversations and events observed during the daily life of the prison.

Research conducted in this way is subject, of course, to a number of possible sources of bias. The first of them has to do with the recording of the material. With practice it is possible to recall and write down both the sequence and the substance of even quite long interviews. Where the bias creeps in is in the shaping and censoring of the content; a subtle and forgetful kind of personal editing. Even the language of the interviewees can be subject to retrospective correction and condensation of

style. Similar difficulties occur, of course, in any treatment of non-standardised data. More 'objective' information was gathered from the official prison records of one hundred Rule Forty Three men who were at Shepton Mallet during this period. In theory totally accurate, prison files are in practice imperfect documents in which even the most basic details may on occasion be missing or wrongly recorded.

A second difficulty arose from the location of the researcher in the welfare office, which made it easier to talk to and record the views of prisoners who had personal problems which they wished to discuss; or of men who were about to be released. A third, and related problem, more diffuse and less tangible than the others, but potentially more damaging to the pursuit of objectivity in the research, stemmed from the relationship between the welfare officer and the other staff of the prison; the officers, administrators and specialists. Like all social relationships, these were at once personal, based on the characteristics of the individuals concerned, *and* structurally determined by historical features and institutional forces quite outside their control. Disentangling the two is never easy, and for those involved as interested parties in concrete situations practically impossible. No attempt will be made in this study to examine directly the role of the researcher as welfare officer, although some of the structural problems of the latter role have been discussed elsewhere.¹³ On a personal plane, however, these problems are not experienced as impersonal forces with neat sociological labels, but in subjective ways best described as 'opposition', 'obstruction', 'bloody mindedness', and even 'hatred' which is the word that most readily springs to mind in connection with identifiable prison researchers like Pauline and Terence Morris.¹⁴

Good reasons for this apparently endemic hostility between prison staff and outsiders, especially inquisitive ones, are not immediately obvious, but they may have something to do with the unresolved ambiguities and uncertainties of the prison officer's situation. Until recently the officer's cosmology was a thing of two dimensions and coloured black