ECHOES OF HOLLOWAY PRISON

Holloway Prison has been an important landmark in Islington for over 150 years. Thousands of women passed through its doors until it closed in 2016. *Echoes of Holloway Prison* seeks to capture and reflect stories of this highly significant place meaning that, even now it has gone, the voices and echoes of Holloway Prison will remain.

HIDDEN VOICES FROM BEHIND THE WALLS

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In partnership with Holloway Prison Stories and Middlesex University

ISLINGTON

1852: HOLLOWAY CASTLE

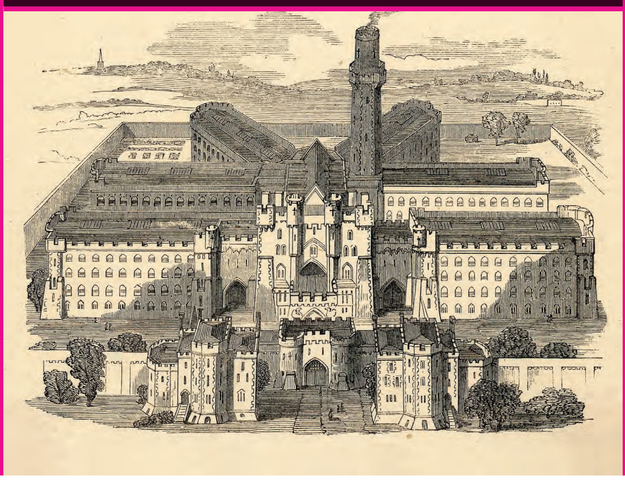
Holloway Prison opened as a House of Correction on 6 October 1852. It was built by the City of London on land bought as a potential graveyard during the 1830s cholera epidemics. As transportation of criminals abroad ended, and the use of the death penalty was massively reduced, new prisons were needed to cope with growing prisoner numbers.

'Holloway Castle' was a grand and imposing building, which dominated the landscape. At the forefront of prison design at the time, its six wings radiated from a central point, so prisoners could be observed at all times without knowing when they were being watched. An inscription on the gateway read, 'May GOD preserve the CITY of LONDON and make this place a *terror to evil doers'*.

It could hold 400 prisoners, with four wings for men, one for women and one for children over 8 years old. Prisoners were to be reformed into useful members of society, through hard work and time spent in silent reflection with God. Prisoners' work included the treadwheel, picking oakum, basket-making, gardening and laundry.

The *1877 Prisons Act* centralised prisons and decreed they should be made harsher in order to deter people from breaking the law. By the end of the century the prison had become a grim place, punitive and infested with vermin.

The House of Correction, Holloway



1902: PRISON FOR WOMEN

Suffragette postcard featuring Holloway Castle

In 1902 Holloway Prison became the London prison for women. This followed the closure of Newgate Prison and a new policy which separated male and female prisoners. A crèche was added where babies could be kept with their mothers until they were a year old.

Most of the women held at Holloway were serving short sentences for drunkenness, vagrancy or prostitution. Work at the prison was deliberately domestic – sewing, cooking, cleaning and laundry for the prison–giving time for the women to dwell on their sentence.

In 1906 the first suffragette was imprisoned at Holloway Prison, as she refused to 'recognise laws in the making of which woman had no voice'. By 1914 hundreds of suffragettes had been imprisoned at Holloway, arrested as they fought for the right for women to vote.

From 1909 many suffragettes went on hunger strike to demand their rights as political prisoners. As stories of suffragettes on hunger strike appeared in the press the government authorised force-feeding by prison doctors. The prisoner would be held down, a tube fed into the mouth or nose and food poured into the stomach. This caused pain, suffering, and humiliation. It led to a public outcry and huge embarrassment for the government.

When the First World War broke out in 1914 all suffragettes were released from prison and the majority of militant activities were suspended.

PEACE AND WAR

After the First World War, reforms began to tackle conditions and reoffending rates at Holloway Prison. Humanity and kindness were seen as the best way to rehabilitate. Education classes allowed women to develop new skills and work was paid, so women could buy make-up, cigarettes and food. The cells were better lit and ventilated, the building was repainted and flowers were planted in the grounds. Exercise, dining and recreation took place in empty cells and wing basements. New medical staff included midwives and psychotherapists. By the 1930s, however, the limitations of the building itself were restricting progress. Proposals were made to rebuild Holloway in the countryside at Heathrow but these plans ended with outbreak of the Second World War.

At the centre of Holloway Castle

On 2 September 1939 Holloway Prison was partly evacuated. Those with less than three months to serve were released and most staff and prisoners transferred. The prison was hit during the Blitz in 1941, and further damaged by V1 and V2 attacks. Those held at the prison during the war included both 'enemy alien' refugees prior to internment, many of them Jewish, and fascists held under the *Defence of the Realm Act*.

By 1945 Holloway was filthy and understaffed. The 1948 *Criminal Justice Act* allowed women to give birth at a local hospital rather than in their cells. Yet, for many women the regime gave no hope of rehabilitation.

1970-1985 REBUILD

In the 1960s the world was changing. Women in prison began to be seen as ‘mad, not bad’ and the focus shifted to prisoners’ mental health. But the oppressive Victorian building was a major problem and proposals to rebuild became more insistent.

The new and old prison stand side by side (Image: London Metropolitan Archives)

The new Holloway was to be a place of healing, more hospital than prison. It would be a model community of small groups of women rebuilding their lives together. In contrast to the Victorian Holloway Castle, the building was to be slight and unobtrusive with an ordinary, rather than an intimidating entrance. The space within would be turned ‘inside out’ – instead of a central point connecting the wings, it would have a green space at its heart. The long corridor linking the wings to the swimming pool, gym, education block, chapel and new mother and baby unit would be a ‘village high street’. Suggestions to move the prison outside London were quashed: What would happen to the children of the women held there?

The prison was pulled down wing by wing, starting in October 1970. Various groups opposed the rebuild – Islington Council felt the land should be for local people, while campaigners felt the prison should be pulled down, not rebuilt. Prisoners walked across the courtyard from the old to the new prison in January 1977 but the building was not finished until 1985.

HOLLOWAY PRISON REBORN

By the time the new Holloway Prison opened the world had changed again. More women were being imprisoned for a wider range of criminal activity. The new Holloway quickly became overcrowded. Officers, used to being able to see along whole wings, found the new confined spaces hard to control. Both prisoners and staff felt unsafe. Self-harming, vandalism and arson were rife –the rebuild might look good, but things had changed for the worse. By the mid-1980s, industrial relations had broken down. The new education block and swimming pool stood unused and, in 1986, prison officers began a six-week long strike. Maybe the new building wasn't the problem – was prison culture itself to blame? By making small changes Holloway saw huge improvements. Prisoners with severe mental health issues were transferred to hospitals, the relationship between staff and prisoner became more caring, outside organisations grew a network of support and the new facilities were finally in use.

The prison library in use at last in the 1980s

Prison life became bleaker again in the 1990s. The Chief Inspector of Prisons walked out halfway through a 1995 inspection, shocked by the appalling living conditions and cruelty of the regime. Holloway became a key case-study for the 2007 Corston Report on women in prison. A radical rethink was needed – women who posed no threat to society should not be in prison – and big prisons, such as Holloway, were not fit places for women.

2016: CLOSURE

In the early 2000s squalor and high levels of self-harm dominated the prison but, by the 2013 inspection, conditions were improving. The prison was safer, with staff, charities and community organisations working together to care for the prisoners and support them on their release.

The 2015 government spending review announced plans to close 'Victorian' city centre jails. The land would be sold off for housing, to pay for the building of modern prisons. On 25 November, George Osbourne announced the closure of Holloway Prison. The first prison to close in London since Newgate in 1902 was the 30-year-old Holloway. Prisoners, officers and civilian staff were shocked by the news and fearful for the future. Prisoners were transferred away from London to Bronzefield and Downview. The last prisoner ever to be held at Holloway Prison left on Friday 17 June 2016.

An empty cell at Holloway Prison after the closure

Why was Holloway chosen to close? The Ministry of Justice described Holloway as 'antiquated and inadequate'. Campaigners cautiously welcomed the news – if the closure resulted in fewer women held in smaller, local, community-led prisons.

The site today remains contested. It is for sale for redevelopment. In May 2017 the visitors' centre was occupied by Sisters Uncut, protesting cuts to domestic violence services. The Reclaim Holloway Campaign is fighting for social housing and community provision, including a women's building on the site, and for a future without prisons.