

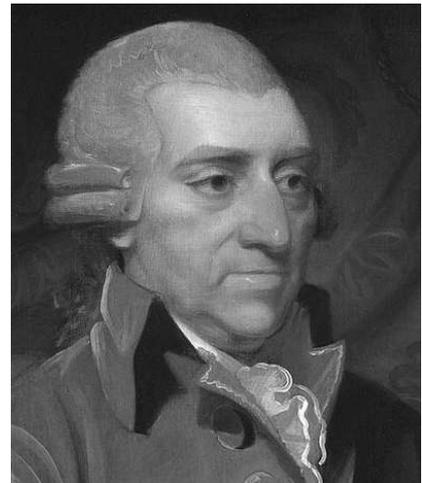
At the beginning of the last article on Crime and Punishment was a brief mention of the prison reformer John Howard who lived at Cardington. (Not to be confused with John Howard who set up an iron foundry in Bedford which eventually became the Britannia Iron Works.) This article tells the story of his obsession with inspecting and reporting the conditions in prisons in the 18th century.

John Howard – prison reformer.

You may have noticed the bronze statue in St Paul's Square, Bedford, and heard of the Howard League for Penal Reform. You may even have shopped in the Howard Centre, Bedford. So who was John Howard?

He was born in Hackney in 1726 but his mother died when he was just five years old. His father was a highly successful businessman and, when he died in 1742, left his son John and his daughter a considerable fortune.

At the age of twenty John Howard took himself on a “Grand Tour” of France and Italy. Although travelling great distances in those days must have been difficult John Howard enjoyed the challenge of getting to new places. He returned home three years later when he had an illness described as a “nervous fever” and was advised to change his diet. From this time he restricted himself to vegetables, fruit, bread, milk and tea.



Eventually he moved into the home of Sarah Lardeau who nursed him back to health. Although she was twice his age Howard proposed marriage to Sarah in 1752 but she died three years later.

Nine days before his wife's death there was a huge earthquake in Lisbon, Portugal. Howard wanted to see the aftermath and eventually set sail from Falmouth in 1757. He chose to sail directly to Lisbon to avoid the current hostilities between Great Britain, France and Spain. Unfortunately, his ship, the Hanover, was attacked and captured by a French privateer and taken to Brittany where Howard was imprisoned in the castle at Brest. After a few months he was released and allowed to return to England.

Howard now settled in Cardington, where he had inherited family properties, and started to improve his home and those of his tenants. He married Henrietta Leeds in 1758 and she helped with his work to improve the accommodation of villagers. In 1765 Henrietta gave birth to their only son, John (known as Jack), and died a few days later.

After a spell of ill-health Howard started travelling abroad again and made several trips over the next few years. Eventually he settled back in Cardington and was appointed High Sheriff of Bedfordshire in 1773. One of his duties was to attend the Assizes. Here he saw prisoners being brought to court in shackles. He was particularly concerned to find that debtors, having paid their debt, were sent back to prison because they could not pay the fees that they owed the gaoler.

Driven by curiosity he visited Bedford Gaol to see how it functioned. He found it “foul and fetid” but, as he would discover later, it was not as bad as some. He discovered that the gaoler was not paid but could charge fees. On the wall was a notice that said “*All persons that come to this place ... must pay before discharg'd, fifteen shillings and fourpence, to the Gaoler.*” Howard asked the justices if the gaoler could be paid a salary instead of relying on the prisoners for their income but they were reluctant to do this. He decided to find out what went on in other gaols starting with Cambridge where he arrived unannounced. He meticulously recorded all the details of the gaol. He must have felt that this was his life's vocation for he immediately set off for Huntingdon to inspect its gaol. This was the beginning of his relentless self-imposed schedule of gaol visits that would

continue for the rest of his life.

In 1774, after visiting over one hundred gaols on horse-back, averaging 40 miles a day, he appeared before a House of Commons committee to answer questions about the state of the prisons in the UK. Wishing to do what he could to improve prisons, he stood for parliament but was not elected despite a rerun of the election.

He continued to tour the country visiting prisons and then decided to find out how prisons in other countries compared. He journeyed to Ireland, France, French Flanders, Holland, Germany and The Netherlands.

In 1777, he collected together all his observations and published *The State of the prisons in England with Preliminary Observations and an Account of some Foreign Prisons*, a 520 page report. Howard had produced copious notes about all his visits but needed to enlist the help of a team of acquaintances to produce the report as he was very poor at writing good English.

In 1779 he was appointed to a key role as one of three penitentiary superintendents to choose sites and design and build new gaols. Whilst Howard was the leading collector of information on prisons he was out of his depth when it came to implementing reform and he resigned his post and returned to travelling.

During his travels he experienced people's fear of the plague and the reluctance of ports to allow ships from known plague ports to enter without a period of quarantine in a lazaretto for the crew and passengers. A lazaretto was similar to a prison and Howard wanted to inspect them but was not allowed in. The only way he could gain entry was to board a ship with a bill of ill-health and go into quarantine when he arrived at his destination. So he decided to sail from the ancient Turkish city of Smyrna to Venice where he would be imprisoned for forty days. This was an extraordinary risky thing to do but it typifies Howard's obsession with accessing all aspects of prison life. On arrival at Venice he had to board a gondola which was towed at the end of a rope by another gondola to the island where the lazaretto stood. He had hoped that the Venetian ambassador would rescue him but he had to spend the full period in a stinking cell. He eventually was released without contracting the plague but whilst he was there a letter told him that his son, Jack, was behaving in a wild and dangerous manner. Howard had very difficult relationship with his son who was eventually admitted to a lunatic asylum.

When he returned to England Howard published "*An account of the principal lazarettos in Europe*"

In 1789 Howard set off for what was to be his final tour. It included Holland, Germany, Prussia, and Russia. The following year, whilst in Russia, he visited and stayed at Kherson which is now in Ukraine. Whilst there Howard was asked to visit a woman who was suffering from fever (typhus). At first he refused saying that he only helped the poor but later agreed. The woman died and Howard became ill. Later he died and was buried near Kherson. Despite Howard's insistence that he wanted a simple funeral, it was attended by the Prince of Moldavia.

John Howard had always insisted that he didn't want a permanent memorial after his death but this was ignored and a monument was placed in St Paul's Cathedral, London in 1795. The great prison reformer, who holds a key and book, is rather incongruously depicted bare-legged in classical robes

The bronze statue in St Paul's Square, Bedford was unveiled on 28 March 1894 to commemorate this extraordinary man's contribution to prison reform.

