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Holloway Prison: Representations and Realities in the History of a Women's Prison, 1902 to 1955

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ABSTRACT



This article explores the media and cultural representations of HMP Holloway, London, England between 1902 and 1955 and contrasts this with the realities of the day-to-day female population and experience in the institution. Drawing on extensive historical analysis, the research examines how representations of the prison, and the women held within it, both titillated the public and reinforced existing or prevailing popular stereotypes about women's criminality and imprisonment in the first half of the twentieth century. These representations contributed to a distinctive and ferocious reputation, that cemented Holloway's notoriety in the popular imagination notwithstanding the contrasting realities of the institution.

KEYWORDS

Female criminality; historical; Holloway; representations; twentieth century; women's imprisonment

INTRODUCTION

This article explores the media and cultural representations of HMP Holloway, between 1902 when the prison became the first female-only local prison in England, and 1955 when the Ruth Ellis, the last woman to be executed, was put to death. Holloway prison was closed in 2016, and at that time was the largest women's prison in Western Europe. Despite Holloway's notorious reputation in popular British culture, there is surprising little academic research on the early history of this women's prison. This article will illuminate that early history and will argue that a series of representations about Holloway in the early twentieth century shaped its reputation and notoriety. Representations of the prison itself, and of the women within it, both titillated the public and reinforced existing or prevailing popular stereotypes about women's imprisonment and punishment. This research has interrogated a wide range of historical records and archives, newspaper reports and auto/biographical accounts to illuminate the cultural and media representations of Holloway. It explores the multiple and overlapping meanings attached to the prison that, by mid-century, affirmed a distinctive and ferocious reputation. Women's prisons are often presented as an anomaly and "ideas about gender have shaped prisons, literally and figuratively, from their very first appearance as social control institutions" (Britton, 2003, p.3; Cecil, 2017). Representations of the gothic architecture of the prison and the women held inside were distorted through press coverage of unusual or extreme cases of the capital punishment of women, the imprisonment of suffragettes and highly sexualized presentation of postwar young female offenders. All were presented through deeply embedded gendered notions of the anomalous world of a women's prison. This article examines these representations and how they cemented

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Holloway's notoriety in the popular imagination, yet these representations were at odds with the day-to-day realities of the prison life and of the population that inhabited Holloway in the early twentieth century.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

This article draws on extensive research across newspapers, printed accounts and original internal archival materials about the prison in the first half of the twentieth century. The archives relating to the early decades of HMP Holloway as a women's prison are sparse. Those that do exist, form a small part of the now wider collection of materials held at the London Archives. Most of this administrative material relates to the prison in the postwar period. That containing personal information is subject to access restrictions and data protection which means it is closed to the public for at least 75 years, in some cases 100 years, and has been deposited since the closure of the prison in 2016. Materials for the period relating to this article, from 1902 to 1955 are therefore small in quantity or they are unavailable, missing, lost, destroyed, perhaps due to the major redevelopment of the prison in the 1970s, or due to other changes at the prison over the decades.

There are other official sources available such as the Prison Commission's reports on the prison system which appeared annually, but the detail given about Holloway varies from year to year and is often quantitative. The paucity of archive material also shaped the decision to focus on the representations of the prison and the women within it rather than a historical reconstruction which might be the usual method to employ.

As regards the newspaper searches the *Guardian* and *Observer* newspapers databases (*Guardian* covers 1791 to 2003 and *Observer* covers 1821 to 2003) were used, as was the British Newspapers Online database (continually expanding database which currently contains full or partial access to national and local newspapers or 89 billion pages dating from 1700), here keyword searched were employed, "Holloway and prison," "Holloway and Gaol" for example, and then key themes or events were identified based on the cluster of articles on an event or topic. Searching was restricted to 1 January 1901 to 31 December 1955. Holloway is a district in north London and the name of a major thoroughfare and so searches frequently produced irrelevant material and results which produced very short newspaper entries of court cases where a person was sent to Holloway prison by the court, which were also numerous, were also dismissed. More detailed searching of the key events or cases followed the initial wider search. Before turning to these events, this article will look at the physical descriptions of Holloway, notably the architecture and "look" of the prison.

GOTHIC ARCHITECTURE AND THE "LOOK" OF HOLLOWAY

Holloway prison had been built as the city prison for London in 1852; then holding male and female convicted prisoners (Mayhew & Binny, 1862). It was described by Mayhew and Binny, in *Criminal Prisons of London*, as:

... a noble building of the castellated Gothic style. The wide extended front adjacent to the Camden Road is of Kentish rag-stone, with Caen stone dressings. The sides of the chapel and the back wings which are of brick, the windows of the cells having Parkspring stone sills, with splayed brick reveals. ... The prison is built on a rising ground, on the west of the Holloway Road, originally purchased by the City Corporation to be used as a cemetery at the time of the cholera in 1832. The ground, consisting of ten acres, is surrounded by a brick wall about eighteen feet high (1862, p. 535).

This rather ordinary description belies the future iconic status of the prison. Apart from its singular Gothic style, Holloway was a Victorian prison of radial design with long cellular wings, cell windows and brick walls, archetypal of the period. In light of this, it is surprising that

Holloway's early history as a women's prison has been largely overlooked (criminological work has notably focused on its second phase of development after 1968 (Rock, 1996)).¹ However, the architectural power and formidable gothic "look" of Holloway was a factor often significant in representations of the prison.

The gatehouse was a gothic design with stone gargoyles and castellated walls symbolic of medieval imprisonment (Jewkes & Johnston, 2007), but the main architectural prison design was that of a radial prison with four wings reaching out from the center and an administrative wing at the front (Johnston, 2000). Though the design was based on Pentonville prison, which opened in London in 1842 and was just a short distance away, the gothic gatehouse set Holloway apart, from the other recently built prisons whose gatehouses were far less grand. This "gothic revivalism" in the design signified the state ownership of punishment, "the public would be kept apart from it, they would still be able to read off particular messages about punishment through its carefully scripted designs" (Pratt, 2002: 40). Holloway was "a fantastic recapitulation of a medieval fortress, castellated, decked with towers and heraldic beasts, 'rising like a giant's castle from the means [sic] streets of North London'" (Rock, 1996, p. 16). The facade supposedly mimicked Warwick Castle and its physical grandeur "designed to frighten and deter, to inspire awe and dread ... its foundation stone was inscribed the malediction 'may God preserve the City of London and make this place a terror to evil doers'" (Rock, 1996, pp. 16–17). It was "architecture terrible" (Garland, 1990, p.136). But as Rock notes, Holloway was also "strong *symbolically*, as much expressive as practical, an extravagant, ornate, imposing, melodramatic (perhaps even absurd) place designed to fever the imagination" (1996, p.17).

It was said that the local residents objected to the prison being built and so the architect, James Bunning was instructed to give the prison "an appearance more pleasing to the eye than that of a normal penitentiary" (Camp, 1974, p. 21). Indeed, the writer known only as E. M. B. noted, that when visiting a fellow suffragette, "the fine castellated turrets and noble structure of the prison fairly put me off the scent, and I went wandering on to the Seven Sisters Road in search of my dungeon."

Yet Holloway was most often described in terms of its austerity as "grim" (Size, 1957, p. 91), "enormous and remarkable ... overpowering" (Camp, 1974, p. 21), "an architectural curiosity ... imposing and even handsome in a grim sort of way" (Kelley, 1967, p. 11); "a hideous prison, a building of heartless appearance" (*Manchester Guardian*, 13 Apr 1922, p. 8). Two enormous griffins flanked the doorway, each bearing a key and shackles, and a 146 ft high ventilation shaft with battlements rose from the center of the prison (Camp, 1974). The gatehouse separated those confined from the outside, as those who passed through, stepped into the hidden world inside. Architects of the castellated prisons (such as Reading prison or Armley Gaol in Leeds) engaged with the "idea" of the prison, not necessarily the realities of prison discipline within (Evans, 1982; Johnston, 2000). Whilst they were subject to criticism for their "prison palaces," by those who argued that the new penitentiaries had "not such a look of dread as these time feared ramparts and towers," but Bunning's Holloway, "may well have been an attempt to recapture a sense of primitive intimidation from a gothic that was becoming too tranquil" (Evans, 1982, pp. 383–4; Johnston, 2000; Pratt, 2002). This prison architecture was "evocative architecture" (Pevsner, 1976 cited in Jewkes et al., 2017) the facade designed to affect a response, as an expression of "authority, invincibility and the uncompromising nature of the state's retribution" (Jewkes et al.,

¹More broadly there is a dearth of research on women's imprisonment between the end of the nineteenth century and the 1960s/1970s. There have been important contributions on women's punishment in the nineteenth and early twentieth century focusing on capital punishment (Ballinger, 2000), semi-penal institutions and inebriate reformatories (Barton, 2005; Morrison, 2008), young women and girls (Cox, 2003). Yet there remains a significant gap in the literature between those accounts which examine women's imprisonment in the nineteenth century (e.g. Dobash et al., 1986; Rafter, 1985; Zedner, 1994) and the early sociological/criminological accounts of women's *imprisonment* that began with, for example, Peckham, 1963; Smith, 1962; followed by the beginning of influential work of Pat Carlen (1983).

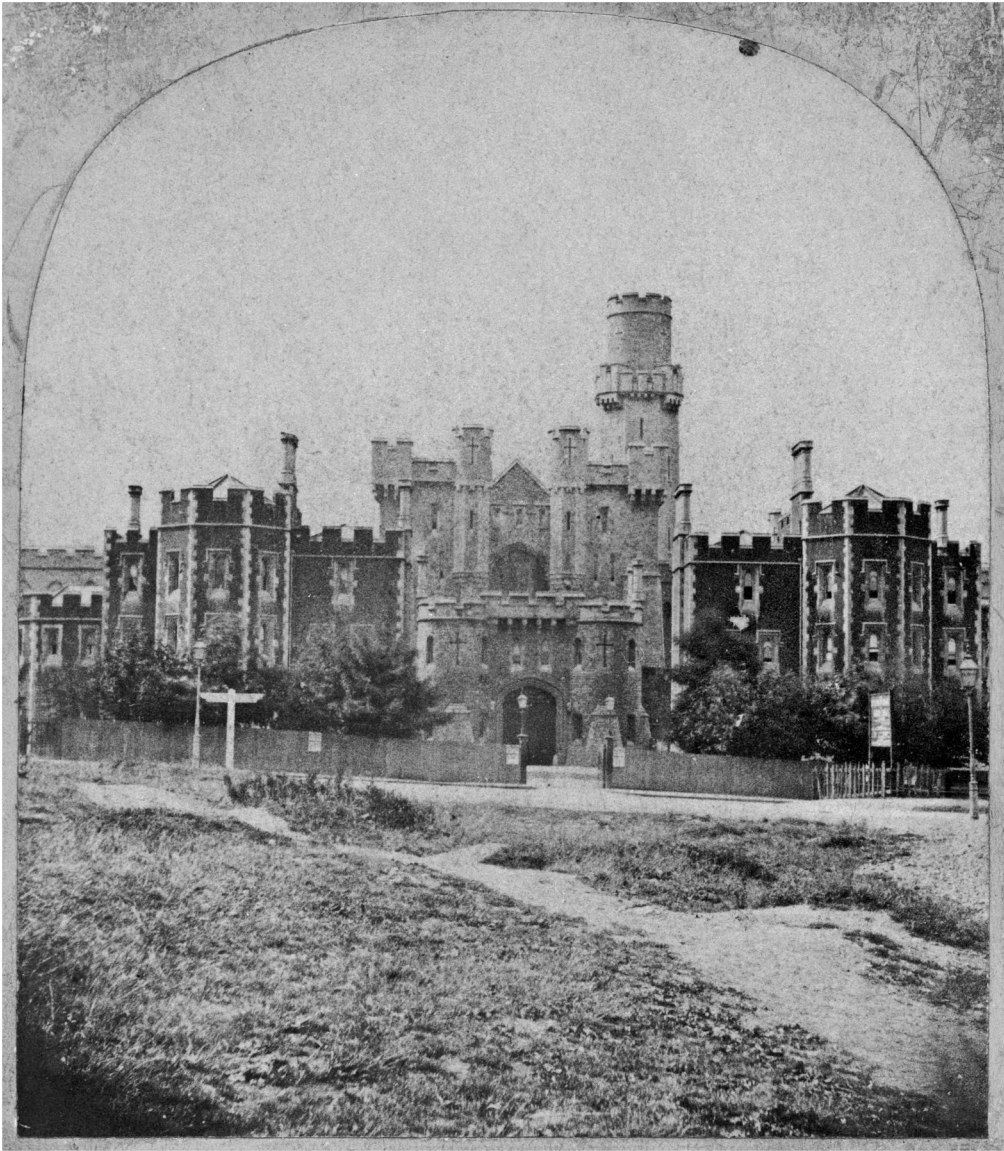


Figure 1. General view of Holloway from the west, 1850s.
Source: Historic England Archive.

2017) and Holloway epitomized this architectural power. As a radial prison, the panoptic power of internal observation ensured that, “Holloway had *functional* strength as a huge instrument of social engineering. If architectural ‘power is to be found in hierarchical structures, control, surveillance’, Holloway was powerful indeed” (Rock, 1996, p. 19) (Figure 1).

In 1902 the Prison Commissioners (body that oversaw the entire prison estate in England and Wales until 1963) reorganized the prison estate and designated Holloway as a female-only local prison, serving all the London courts (and by the 1930s up to seventeen counties, Crew, 1933). The female prison estate in England and Wales underwent a significant transformation between 1878 and 1937; reorganized from 62 local prisons holding women in 1878, usually a female wing in a prison predominantly for men, when the local prisons were centralized, down to 52 and one convict (long-term) prison at Aylesbury for females in 1901 (RCP, 1878, p. 6; Appendix 7, pp.

33–55; RCP & DCP, 1902, [Appendix 2](#), pp. 62–5). Yet further rationalization followed and by the 1920s, the female estate consisted of 30 local prisons with female wings, female convict prisoners were held at HMP Liverpool and female borstal (for young women aged 16 to 21 years) at Aylesbury (RCP & DCP, 1920, [Appendix 3](#), pp. 35–7). By 1931 there were only nine local prisons with female wings: Birmingham, Cardiff, Durham, Exeter, Holloway, Hull, Liverpool, Manchester and Winchester, and two female convict prisons at Aylesbury and Liverpool (RCP & DCP 1932–3, p. 52–3). In 1933 the women’s prisons at Winchester and Liverpool were closed as was the female wing at Hull in 1937 (RCP & DCP 1933–4, p. 24; 1937–8a, p. 18). This left Holloway as the only female prison in London and five other local prisons with wings for women across England and Wales; Holloway was therefore prominently positioned and across the following decades, held most female local prisoners in the system.

Forty years after Mayhew and Binny’s visit, Holloway prison had become the only female prison in London for short term prisoners. The prison held women on remand, those awaiting sentence and those sentenced to terms of less than two years, as well as women sentenced to death. This rather benign administrative decision associating the prison solely with female offenders had by mid-century ensured it was the most recognizable female prison in Britain: it was “unique ... and it had within its walls every type and classification of woman prisoner” (Size, 1957, p. 89) and remained so until its announced closure in November 2015. As Barton and Brown (2011) have observed of the powerful and long-held reputation of Dartmoor prison, the characterization of the dark brooding prison on the moor has often been intensified by erroneous depictions of its inmates. This is also the case with Holloway, however, as a women’s prison by gendered representations and cultural understandings of women’s criminality and punishment; often depicting the “bad,” “mad” and “sad” of the criminal justice system.

FEAR AND FASCINATION: HOLLOWAY IN THE EARLY TWENTIETH CENTURY

In the first half of the twentieth century, a series of events combined with Holloway’s gothic architecture to fix the prison’s notoriety in the wider public imagination. Broadly held ideas relating to both a fear and fascination with female prisoners and women’s imprisonment in both popular culture and the public imagination played out at the prison. Holloway appeared regularly in the newspapers when they reported the short imprisonment of a female offender but across these five decades there were moments that drew media attention to the prison. Most notably, these were high profile cases of women accused of murder, or forms of female protest, the suffragettes in the early decade and disorder amongst borstal young women in the post war that received coverage. As in the twenty-first century, “media images of women in prison are rare” (Cecil, 2007, p. 304) the way in which the prison appeared, and the meanings attached to these representations embodied gendered ideas about criminality and punishment. It is well established in contemporary and historical representations of offending, criminal women and their offenses are seen in particular ways (Heidensohn, 1985; Lloyd, 1995; Rafter, 1985; Zedner, 1994). In the early twentieth century, women were a minority of those participating in crime, they made up about twenty per cent of those prosecuted in the courts, they appeared more so in the summary (lower) courts and the numbers of women serving longer sentences of penal servitude for more serious offenses was small and diminishing.

As in the nineteenth century, women were overrepresented in certain categories of offending; theft and offenses under the Pawnbroker’s Acts; drunkenness; lower-level assaults and public disorder; offenses relating to prostitution for example. Women’s participation in more serious interpersonal violence was small but provoked deep societal concern as these cases often related to poisoning, baby farming and infanticide; infractions that were overladden with notions of motherhood, femininity and domesticity (D’Cruze & Jackson, 2009; Davidoff & Hall, 1987; Godfrey et al., 2005; Knelman, 1998; Zedner, 1994). Holloway as a local prison thus contained

two groups of women, the overwhelmingly majority of the population were serving short sentences for minor offenses, all processed through the London courts (and beyond). Merely as criminal women they drew a fascination as women who has stepped outside the law and accepted gender norms, who were often depicted as emotional, irrational, impulsive, challenging prevailing views of appropriate femininity and womanhood, based on notions of dependency and domesticity (Heidensohn, 1985; Zedner, 1994). As will be discussed later they were often also depicted in a sexualized way. But Holloway was also “hanging” prison, serious female offenders were remanded to Holloway, and should they be sentenced to death this would be carried out at the prison, this association also gave Holloway a particular notoriety.

Women who committed serious crimes of interpersonal violence were rarely in the courtroom, given that few women committed such serious offenses, and this alone has meant their cases received considerable attention in the media. Women accused of such crimes drew considerable public interest and cases were especially emotive (Knelman, 1998). In the first half of the twentieth century, as in the contemporary period, there were a small number of cases in which the activities of female offenders were seen as particularly “evil” or “monstrous” (D’Cruze & Jackson, 2009; Jewkes, 2011). The following section will examine the death penalty at Holloway, five women were executed between 1903 and 1955 in four executions, the first two women put to death epitomized such feelings of horror about female criminality.

THE DEATH SENTENCE AT HOLLOWAY

The pinnacle of public fascination with women offenders at Holloway is demonstrated in the attention drawn to women who were charged with murder, but especially in the few women executed for these crimes. By the early twentieth century, offenders in England and Wales were only executed for crimes of murder and female offenders sentenced to death were rare. There were 130 women sentenced to death between 1900 and 1955, most were reprieved but fifteen were not (Ballinger, 2000). Of these fifteen, five women were executed behind the walls of Holloway in four separate executions between 1903 and 1955. Ballinger (2000) has explored all these cases thoroughly in *Dead Woman Walking*; this discussion will focus on the associations these cases made with Holloway as a prison.

Public executions had ended in England in 1868, and they were subsequently held behind prison walls (Johnston, 2015; Pratt, 2002). The spectacle of execution had greatly diminished since the carnival of Tyburn and thus the focus of media interest in the days leading up to a hanging was often the executioner and the behavior of the condemned. As Garland has observed, executions were no longer “public displays of awe-inspiring force and sovereign power ... Instead, executions have become behind-the-scenes, bureaucratic procedures in which the offender’s life is terminated with a minimum of pain and suffering” (Garland, 2002, p. 466). This was evident in the first half of the twentieth century as the government sought to restrict access, increasingly manage and bureaucratize executions (Pratt, 2002).

By the early twentieth century, markers of an execution were severely restricted, black flags flew until 1902 when they were abolished; bells tolled for fifteen minutes either side of the execution, then only after the execution, until they were also abolished. From 1925 the press were excluded and a simple death notice was posted on the prison gate to announce the execution (Pratt, 2002). It was often the arrival of the executioner, the supposed demeanor or repose of the condemned in the preceding days or their contact with family or visitors that formed the basis of newspapers reports. Seal (2014) has observed that the capital trial became the focus of public attention and “entertainment,” but the presence or not of a crowd outside the prison was also a part of the “execution story.” It is Holloway’s association with capital punishment and with a small number of unusual or controversial cases of condemned *women* that ensured its notoriety. As Seal has observed “the execution of a woman has the potential to heighten the emotional force

of the death penalty and to make it especially culturally and socially significant” (Seal, 2011, p. 493).

Crimes related to the family, against children or in the domestic sphere, went against the prevailing constructions of motherhood and family on which middle class ideals of femininity were based. Women as mothers, wives and homemakers were pivotal in the preservation of moral and religious values and thus “bad mothers,” mothers who were seen as immoral, idle or criminal were blamed for their children’s delinquency or criminality (Zedner, 1994). Women who had contact with criminal justice system or were serving sentences in prisons like Holloway, were often working class or were living a marginal existence (insecure work, seasonal or temporary employment), few were homemakers, and most having to maintain an income and their home and children (Clark, 1995; D’Cruze, 1995). Undoubtedly, women serving sentences in Holloway were mothers and sometimes women had children with them or were pregnant when they entered the prison. The short sentences they often served in local prison like Holloway, means that information about this is relatively sparse, yet given the prevailing ideas about womanhood and mothering, further stigmatized women in prison. Lengthy terms of incarceration of convict women disrupted their lives as mothers, and sometimes completely fractured their possibilities of motherhood (Johnston, 2019; for recent contemporary discussion see Morgan & Leeson, 2024; Walker & Worrall, 2000).

It is within these prevailing views of femininity and mothering, that in 1903, a year after Holloway became a female-only prison, Amelia Sach and Annie Walters were convicted of the murder of a male baby under their care for adoption, as “baby-farmers.” They were, however, suspected of murdering more infants than the one they had been convicted for. The nature of this offense and the speculation surrounding it drew a great deal of public interest, at the time known as the “Finchley” or “Islington Baby Farmers” case. They were the first women to be hung at Holloway women’s prison.

The *London Daily News* reported that “Remarkable fortitude was displayed by each of the women down to the last, Mrs Sach repeatedly expressing a desire to meet her fate as soon as possible, and so to put an end to her misery” (4 February 1903, p. 7). The case and similar reports detailing their last interviews with relatives, last night in the cells and confirmation of their deaths appeared in numerous provincial newspapers across the country. Local newspaper, the *Hendon & Finchley Times* noted that it was,

lamentable to find the same morbid taste prevalent amongst the people as led to the unseemly orgies outside Newgate back into the last century. On Tuesday morning a crowd of humanity gathered outside Holloway Gaol to listen to the tolling of the bell – the funeral knell of two living creatures. Many thousands composed this crowd, and we suppose in imagination picture the scene which was passing within. It is a taste singular in its way, but an execution has always acted as a spell to draw together crowds of a certain sort (4 February 1903, p. 6).

A month later, reports emerged from concerned residents in the district of the prison (and of nearby Pentonville prison) who feared the demoralizing effects of executions, notably on school-children, but also on property values. It was reported that “strangers of the worst type flocked to the district to discuss the details with the executioner and warders, and in the recent case at Holloway, from the upper windows of houses backing on to the prison, the burial of the two women, with all its gruesome details, was actually witnessed by girl servants” (*Framlingham Weekly News*, 7 March 1903, p. 4).

Walters and Sachs were convicted of child murder and both the rarity of such offenses committed by female offenders, and their subsequent death sentence,² as well as widespread concern about murderous female “baby farmers” ensured public focus on Holloway prison. Their case had

²Although a number of women were convicted of murdering their own infants, they were overwhelmingly reprieved of capital punishment, the last woman executed for murdering her own child in England was put to death in 1852.

relatively quickly followed two earlier well publicized cases of baby farming, involving Amelia Dyer, who was executed in 1896 and Ada Chard Williams in 1900 (Ballinger, 2000; Knelman, 1998). As Ballinger (2000) argues, these baby farming cases only existed within a culture that stigmatized illegitimacy and single motherhood, exposing the contradictions between the reality of women's lives and the dominant images of ideal motherhood in Victorian and Edwardian England.

Nearly twenty years later, the second execution at Holloway was that of Edith Thompson. This case would also prove to be one of the most controversial of the early century: as the trial proceeded attention was yet again on Holloway. Thompson was convicted alongside her boyfriend, Freddy Bywaters, of murdering her husband, Percy. Now regarded by some as a miscarriage of justice, she was executed on the same day as Bywaters, 9 January 1923; Thompson at Holloway and Bywaters at nearby Pentonville, both having been sentenced to death for the murder. Edith had been convicted through evidence presented in court of a conspiracy to murder between the lovers, despite her lack of involvement in the actual attack which resulted in her husband's death (Ballinger, 2000; D'Cruze et al., 2006). The case was a veritable cause celebre, and this played out in the media reporting of the trial. As Bland has pointed out, the "new journalism" of the late Victorian period permeated the daily newspapers and increasing readership ensured that court trials became "mass cultural spectacles" (2008, p. 626). The case, adultery and murder epitomized the sex and scandal sensational reporting in which the papers reveled, and Edith represented the "danger of the postwar sexual modern woman" (Bland, 2008, p. 647).

After being sentenced to death, Edith was sent to Holloway prison to await execution. The press often focussed on the demeanor of the condemned and detailed the day-to-day activities or conditions in which condemned prisoners were held; presenting the extremes of prison life as media portrayals continue to do in the twenty-first century (Jewkes, 2006; Marsh, 2009). They often reported what was usual practice or routine for the prison system but placing this in public domain gave the reader the opportunity to peep behind the prison walls of Holloway.

On the day of the execution, press coverage was widespread. The *Northern Daily Mail* reported large crowds outside both Holloway prison and nearby Pentonville. Official notice of Edith's death was not posted until 9.33am and "the crowd then surged round the prison gates, and mounted policemen had considerable difficulty in keeping them back" (9 January 1923). Of the prison, the newspaper noted that "the grim building itself showed no unusual signs of activity, and, beyond the waiting assembly outside, there was nothing to indicate the dread happening about to take place within its walls" (9 January 1923).

Even after the execution, stories or adverts appeared in newspapers about Thompson's case. A year after the execution, John Ellis, the hangman, who had executed over 200 people, had attempted to shoot himself. It was claimed he had been particularly upset by Thompson's execution.³ The *Portsmouth Evening News* stated that "Mrs Thompson had to be carried, only partially conscious, to the scaffold, and the scene is said to have so affected Ellis that he declared he would never hang another woman" (26 August 1924; Calvert, 1928). This was just the kind of story to grip the public imagination and to aid the already well-established abolition movement in Britain. Whether there is any truth in such claims is debatable, Harley Cronin's (1967) (later leader of Prison Officer Association) autobiography states that his aunt was the wardress in attendance at Thompson's execution and that the claims were false. But the gap between the realities of what happened behind Holloway's walls and representations of this nature allowed stories like this one to fill a cultural vacuum between the imagined and the reality of punishing women.

As Philip Smith has argued, legitimacy is given to the death penalty by the condemned participating in the orderly routine; "Thompson, it seems, had unwittingly unleashed a counter-

³Ellis was prosecuted for the suicide attempt and appeared in Rochdale magistrates' court. He promised to refrain and was discharged, but did commit suicide two years later (Calvert, 1928).

discourse of the execution not only as cruel and undignified but also as the domain of sacred terrors” (Smith, 2008, p. 55). Similarly, Greer has observed that, whilst all “executions embody the key determinants of newsworthiness,” botched executions “constitute sites on which the conceptual foundations and perceived legitimacy of capital punishment may, in theory, be fiercely contested and forcefully undermined” (Greer, 2006, pp.86–89).

Over thirty years after Thompson’s execution, the contrasting cases of the final two executions at Holloway came close together: Styllou Christof in 1954 and then Ruth Ellis in 1955. Ellis was to be the last woman hanged in England. Christofi’s case is less known, a Greek immigrant she was convicted of murdering her daughter-in-law by setting her on fire. The media attention tended to focus on her “foreignness,” her lack of spoken English and her son’s inability to forgive her actions (Ballinger, 2000).

The campaign and controversy that surrounded Ruth Ellis’s case is by contrast well known and well documented, highly controversial at the time, and influential in the end of capital punishment in England (Block & Hostettler, 1997; Seal, 2011). Ellis’s defence was one of provocation, based on the victim Blakely’s violence and promiscuity. Her conviction for murder and subsequent failure to gain a reprieve, alongside her “femme fatale” appearance in court ensured widespread attention to the case and wider public sympathy (Ballinger, 2000; Seal, 2011). Ellis’s case encapsulated the fascination with condemned women, as Seal observes the “strangeness of the condemned cell was enhanced when it contained a woman, but especially when it contained a woman with the kind of spectacular femininity embodied by Ruth Ellis” (Seal, 2012, p. 18). Thus, Holloway’s attachment to these cases, through a small number of high-profile cases of women accused of serious crimes, led to a deep association between the prison and the public’s knowledge about women’s punishment.

REALITIES OF PRISON LIFE AT HOLLOWAY

Whilst the executions of these women drew considerable attention to the prison, the overwhelming majority of the women who served sentences at Holloway did so for ordinary petty offenses such as drunkenness, indecency, public order offenses and other crimes relating to prostitution. In contrast to the infamy of a handful of Holloway’s inmates the reality of life inside the institution were rather more mundane and certainly belies its reputation. Until the 1930s, the maximum term any women would serve in Holloway would be two years; women sentenced to more serious offenses would, until 1948, serve a sentence of penal servitude (minimum term of three years) in a convict prison (Aylesbury until 1922 then this was moved to Liverpool and then at Holloway from 1930s). But the overwhelmingly majority of those women in Holloway served less than six months, most less than one month.

In August 1902, all male prisoners at Holloway were transferred to Brixton. Structural alterations were made to the site and in October 1902 all the female prisoners then in Wormwood Scrubs, numbering about 300 and the female staff, were moved in, over a five-day period. However, it was immediately apparent that Holloway would not hold all the female prisoners in London. On the 24 October 1902 there were 820 women locked up and in the following months, women had to be sent to country prisons when the accommodation was “unduly strained,” causing “much inconvenience and dislocation of the ordinary routine of the prison” (RCP, 1902–3, p. 338). Additional employment and industries deemed suitable for “fallen women” were introduced to the prison: these included bead-blind making, sewing female officers’ uniforms and the uniform for Greenwich Hospital, laundry for various Government offices in addition to the washing for their own prisoners and officers, as well as for Brixton prison (RCP, 1902–3, p. 339).

The problems with overcrowding and the transfer of women to other prisons did not subside until 1906 when a new wing of the prison was opened that contained 101 cells (Smith, 1962). In the period before the First World War, broadly speaking Holloway held around 700 prisoners

everyday – yet received about 13,000 women into custody every year. Many women prisoners were sentenced to short periods of imprisonment, which often meant meager conditions and were required to undertake labor in their cells. At the beginning of the twentieth century, changes in the law and the criminal justice system had offered different avenues that prisoners had not been permitted in the past – for example, payment of part fine, which if carried out enabled release, and women at Holloway did make use of this. Short sentences blighted the local prison system, the Chaplain at Holloway agreed; “sentences are too short to make any lasting impression ... A series of short sentences has a very hardening effect, and turns the victim from a mischievous, undisciplined child into a vicious and embittered woman” (RCP, 1913–4, p. 38). Such observations fitting into the wider views about female offending prevalent at the time; the young female criminal, infantilised victim of circumstance on the one hand, and the hardened and unreformable “bad” older woman offender.

SUFFRAGETTES AND HOLLOWAY

In the second decade of the twentieth century, Holloway became associated with the imprisonment of suffragettes, the merry-go-round of the Cat and Mouse Act and the horrors of force-feeding. These events again drew public attention to Holloway. In 1909 during the height of the suffragettes campaigning activities the *Illustrated London News* ran a series of images in a three-page spread: “The Scene of the Suffragettes” Martyrdom – In Holloway Prison (7 August 1909). In all the piece used twenty-five images of the prison; three external views of a cell block, and exercise yards, but most were internal pictures of the prison; cells, noting their sparse contents, corridors of cells, washhouse, work rooms, chapel and the prison cat. Yet more followed, of the reception and property rooms, cell spyholes, bathhouse, the kitchen and several of food stores, gruel boilers and the daily ration of food lay out on a table. The paper notes that “meat of the best quality is served on certain days; bread is always twenty-four hours old before it forms part of the rations, vegetables are grown in the prison grounds” (ibid.). The article noted that “Holloway Prison has been very much in the public eye when it became the scene of the militant Suffragettes” “martyrdom.” These images offered the reading public a view into Holloway a look inside the hidden and closed off world of women’s imprisonment.

Research on the experiences of suffragettes and their imprisonment between 1908 and 1914 has demonstrated rational politics of the suffragette movement as well as the conflict between women as suffragette prisoners and as female prison staff (Brown, 2002; Holton, 1992; Purvis, 1995) but the suffragettes activities also drew considerable attention to Holloway itself and to the prison system more generally. Purvis (1995) estimates that around 1000 suffragettes were imprisoned across the country between 1905 and the cessation of suffragette activities in August 1914. All those arrested in London were therefore remanded to, or subsequently sentenced to periods confined in Holloway, placing the prison center stage in this conflict between the state and the suffragettes.

This period was undoubtedly one of unease for the Prison Commission, the suffragettes tactics inside prison; smashing cells, destroying prison property, refusing to co-operate, might have been more regular occurrences amongst “ordinary” prisoners in Holloway, but hunger-striking amongst these suffragette women terrified the authorities. As Forsythe observes the system “became a stage for high drama with suffragettes as martyrs in the hands of a cold, intransigent, self-perpetuating male dominated state” (1990, p. 106). The “Cat and Mouse” Act 1913 as it was known (Prisoners (Temporary Discharge for Ill Health) Act 1913) allowed the authorities to release prisoners temporarily on health grounds and then require their return after recovery; the authorities employed this Act as a strategy to deal with hunger striking suffragettes.

However, during their actions, the suffragettes drew a great deal of public attention to the ordinary living conditions in prisons; the bleak, oppressive regime, the poor unhygienic and

unsanitary conditions and clothing (Lytton, 1914; TNA, HO45/11050/149309). Although the suffragettes who were imprisoned came from a variety of backgrounds, classes and ages, married women, as well as the more dominant image of young, middle-class women they “pitied the disadvantaged lives” of other female prisoners, but “these perceptions were forged across a recognition of distance and difference” (D’Cruze & Jackson, 2009, p.97). Most of the women in prison were not able to challenge the state or even the daily internal workings of the prison. Lady Constance Lytton was perhaps most effective in drawing public attention to the “ordinary” female prisoners plight when she disguised herself as “Jane Warton” to prove that working class women were treated worse in prison than higher status women (Lytton, 1914).

There is no doubt that the suffragettes were shocked by what they found in prison and drew attention to everyday conditions. With regard to Holloway, in an article titled, “Cleanliness of Prisoners,” suffragette Maude Fitzherbert challenged the Under Secretary claims that unsanitary conditions in Holloway were unfounded (*The Observer*, 31 May 1908, p. 10). The suffragettes held frequent meetings and protested outside Holloway, trying to give comfort to those of their number confined within. *The Observer* estimated a crowd of 20,000 had been drawn to Holloway in the expectation that the suffragettes were going to make a raid on the prison (15 Nov 1908, p. 9). This was not the case, but the procession, “their own cheers, with those of the enormous crowd, must have been easily heard by the inmates. They drove round the gaol twice, the bands applying the ‘Marsellaise’ and other marches; and the police allowing the procession to make a brief pause in front of the gates. No speeches were attempted by the leaders who contented themselves with calls for cheers for the prisoners and groans for the Liberal Government” (*Observer*, 15 Nov 1908, p. 9). In 1913, it was reported, “Explosion at Holloway: Supposed suffragette outrage,” that the suffragettes had attempted to blow up part of the prison wall with gunpowder causing two violent explosions. This was thought it be due to the force feeding of Rachel Peace, then the only suffragette inside the prison (*Manchester Guardian*, 19 Dec 1913, p. 9).

Although suffragette imprisonment was a relatively short period in the longer history of Holloway prison, it undoubtedly drew more public attention to the prison, not only to the suffragette activities, regular protests covered by the press, and the government responses to them, but also to the everyday conditions inside. Like many women confined in prison, the suffragettes behavior was often depicted as irrational, emotional and impulsive but this also sat alongside representations of these women as “captured”; employing sexualized or distorted images of confined women and this imagery continued in subsequent decades. As Ciasullo observes this as “an enduring cultural erotic fantasy: women imprisoned, trapped with one another in a criminal and sexual underworld” (2008, p. 195) which permeates a range of genres of popular culture from the early twentieth century. These representations were underpinned by sociological and criminological theory at the time which also connected women’s criminality to their sexuality (Ciasullo, 2008: also see Rowe, 2012). These representations are enduring in media narratives of Holloway but are epitomized in newspaper coverage of disturbances and disorder by borstal young women held in the institution in the late 1940s.

DISTURBANCES AND DISORDER

The final theme this article will address is the imprisonment of young females under sentences of borstal training in the immediate post Second World War years. Borstal training was a sentence created by the Prevention of Crimes Act 1908. It was specifically aimed at young people aged 16 to 21 years (later extended to 23 years old) and created a system distinct from adult prisons. In this nationally adopted system, young people would serve sentences of between one- and three-years’ detention and be subject to a system of licensing (early release subject to conditions) on discharge. This system aimed for a more reformatory ethos underpinned by training and education and lasted until 1982.

A few years after the end of the Second World War, a flurry of press reports about Holloway appeared across the Summer of 1949. By this time, Holloway's governor was a woman, Dr Charity Taylor, not only the first female governor of the only all-women prison, but also the youngest to be so appointed, a point often noted by the media (*Daily Telegraph*, 22 Aug 1949; TNA, PCOM 9/457). Taylor had been appointed in 1945, she was 30 years old (*Manchester Guardian*, 18 & 20 July 1945; TNA, HO45/19752). Her appointment had followed the long-held governorship of John Morton Hall, also a doctor, whose appointment in 1921 had reflected prevailing ideas about female criminality and medicalization (Dobash et al., 1986; Sim, 1990).

The press reports explored here focussed on a series of disturbances that had occurred at the prison and they epitomized the ways in which prisons, and particularly female prisoners are depicted in the media (Jewkes, 2006; 2007). These representations also revealed the tensions in penal policy between more reformative methods and more deterrent prison regimes that were apparent during these decades (Forsythe, 1990).

At the end of July 1949, four borstal young women had barricaded themselves in a cell for 48 hours at the prison. At this time, Holloway was operating as a borstal allocation and reception center; female borstal inmates were received from the courts and placed in Holloway to either awaited removal to a borstal institution, or they were returned to Holloway after breaching their license conditions. In the aftermath of this disruption by young borstal females, complaints from staff of indiscipline, "pampering of prisoners" and the lack of punishment as well as staff shortages appeared in the media (TNA, PCOM 9/457: "Indiscipline at Holloway," *Manchester Guardian*, 02 Aug 1949; "Women warders meet at Holloway: Don't resign"; "'Holiday' jail staff call for new rules 'or we go' threat," *The Daily Graphic*, 2 Aug 1949; "'Pampering' discussed by women jailers," *The Daily Worker*, 2 Aug, 1949; "Ede asked to probe 'prison pampering'," *The Reynolds News*, 31 Jul, 1949; *The Star*, 1 Aug, 1949). The *Sunday Pictorial* summarized the recent events by claiming that three months prior to this disturbance a riot had occurred in which officers had been injured; an official from the Prison Officers' Association said subsequently "trouble hasn't stopped. The officers are 'browed off'. They have to do extra duty continually, and they are threatening to resign." Furthermore, residents in neighboring houses were frequently woken by "shrieking and bawling" and that eighteen months prior to this the governor had "abolished bread and water punishment as an experiment and allowed young prisoners lipstick" (31 July 1949 in PCOM 9/457). Many newspapers also noted that 33 members of staff had resigned that year, and that staff wanted the Home Secretary, Chuter Ede to intervene (PCOM 9/457; *Daily Express*, 5 Aug 1949; *Daily Herald*, 5 Aug 1949; *Daily Mail*, 5 Aug 1949; *Daily Telegraph*, 5 Aug 1949; *News Chronicle*, 5 Aug 1949).

In headlines fitting with postwar views on female criminality and youth delinquency, "hooliganism" amongst borstal inmates, notably those who had had licenses revoked, were the primary source of staff complaints. But there was also concern about insufficient staff numbers and claims that punishments were ineffective to deal with recalcitrant prisoners (*Daily Worker*, 8 Aug 1949; TNA, PCOM 9/457). The number of young people in the criminal justice system had increased in the postwar period but the number of young females was small and smaller still when looking at those sentenced to borstal training; 140 females borstal receptions (aged 16–23) in 1948 (Fox, 1952, p. 366). But during this period, female prisoners and borstal girls were depicted as "far more vicious, aggressive and 'tough' than before the War"; that Borstal held "no terror" for many girls who had experienced institutionalization in approved schools (TNA, PCOM 9/457 "What is going on in Holloway," *Sunday Graphic*, 7 Aug 1949). More broadly, the delinquency or criminality of these young women was seen as highly sexualized, they were precocious and unstable, and their sexuality needed control through institutionalization (Cox, 2003; D'Cruze & Jackson, 2009). Holloway therefore was depicted within these representations as the place which would contain these unruly and precocious young women. An article in the *News Review*, titled "The Naked Women of Holloway" claimed "recent outbreaks of mass hysteria";

though “only one girl stripped off her clothes: like a tigress she fought off the four wardresses who tried to force her into a strait-jacket.” Further that “a few women had ripped off their dull grey uniforms, black stockings and thick underwear. They stood naked in their cells, hammering on the doors and screaming in an ecstasy of hysteria.” One “older warder” said “Some of these girls are young and sexy. Starve then for a while. They’ll soon cool off” (n.d., TNA, PCOM 9/457). Lillian Barker, governor of Aylesbury Borstal institution for females, said to magistrates in 1929, “I can tell you my girls are absolutely untireable. All their violence and all things that cause so much trouble are owing to them being oversexed. It has to be got out of them somehow” (cited in Forsythe, 1990, p. 201). These views epitomized postwar representations of female delinquency and criminality, posed young “modern” women as a threat to wider social order through their sexuality, independence and youth. Working class young delinquents were stereotyped as “sexually predatory or dangerous,” both within criminal justice and more so through welfare mechanisms, young women’s sexuality was subject to forms of institutionalization (D’Cruze & Jackson, 2009: p.149).

There were also tensions relating to the appointment of a female Governor which was depicted as insufficient to deal with the problems inside a prison like Holloway. Many papers also reported that during a meeting of staff at the prison it was voiced that a male governor would be better as women respect “male authority,” though some also noted that this “was not necessarily correct” (TNA, PCOM 9/457 “Girls behind bars,” *Sunday Empire News*, 7 Aug 1949). But headline likes “Holloway Jail disorders: Too many ‘experiments’: Not enough discipline, Prison is ‘home’ for naughty girls” typify the media coverage of the events (TNA, PCOM 9/457, *Sunday Express*, 7 Aug 1949). Newspaper reports continued in the following days as the Home Secretary responded to the calls and sent two representatives to the prison and it was claimed further attempts to barricade themselves in cells were made by prisoners and an officer had her finger bitten (TNA, PCOM 9/457, *Daily Express*, 9 Aug. 1949; *Daily Telegraph*, 9 Aug, 1949; *News Chronicle*, 9 Aug, 1949; *The Times*, 9 Aug 1949). In October 1949 Holloway temporarily ceased operation as a borstal allocation center “to reduce the burden on staff” (PCOM 9/457, *Western Mail*, 14 Oct 1949).

CONCLUSION

This article has argued that Holloway’s reputation and notoriety was crucially shaped by a series of representations of the prison and the women who were held inside. These representations provided a window into anonymous and anomalous world of female imprisonment but were deeply embedded in prevailing notions of gender, criminality and punishment. In combination with a benign administrative change that made Holloway the only female local prison in London, and a fierce architectural gothic facade, these representations came together to support a distinct view of Holloway, notoriously as *the* prison for women in Britain. Though representations of prisons and prisoners by the media are often “negligible and when visible, contradictory ... [they] remain shrouded in a certain amount of mystique and mythology” (Jewkes, 2006, p. 150); especially so in the early twentieth century when prisons were shrouded in secrecy (Pratt, 2002). Newspaper reports about Holloway offered a window into the hidden world of “Britain’s oldest and grimmest women’s prison”; but a distorted window through the highly unusual and controversial cases of female capital punishment, the “irrational” protests of the suffragette movement or the highly sexualized postwar “girl” delinquent. By mid-century, it had a ferocious reputation, one reporter noted that a common thread of opinion was that “Holloway is bad. It should be emptied of prisoners and demolished. Nothing good can be done inside it any more. Its spirit is evil, its name is bad” (TNA, PCOM 9/457, “Women’s Prison Scandal,” *Sunday Dispatch*, 5 Aug 1949). As this article has shown, Holloway’s reputation had firmly been established by this time and it was “Britain’s Number One Prison Problem” (TNA, PCOM 9/457, “Girls behind bars,”

Sunday Empire News, 7 Aug 1949) and it had “never had a good name” (TNA, PCOM 9/457, *News Review*, n.d.).

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