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What is the impact of an ageing infrastructure and are Victorian prisons fit for purpose?

1. This submission draws on the research project [*The Persistence of the Victorian Prison: Alteration, Inhabitation, Obsolescence and Affirmative Design*](#), 2020-24, funded by the Economic and Social Research Council, in partnership with The Howard League for Penal Reform. Dominique Moran is Principal Investigator and Matt Houlbrook, Yvonne Jewkes and Jennifer Turner complete the research team.
2. The project tracks the continued operation of prisons built during the Victorian period (1837-1901), focusing specifically on how the fabric of their buildings has changed over time, how they function today, the experience of living and working in them, their cultural significance, and the impact of their continued operation. It has involved interviews with 45 former prisoners and former prison staff with experience of the Victorian-era estate; six weeks of fieldwork within two Victorian-era prisons (HMP Lincoln (2022) and HMP Liverpool (2023)) involving interviews with 61 serving prisoners and 44 current staff, supported by extensive archival research, conversations with senior civil servants, and analysis of statistical data pertaining to the Victorian-era estate. This submission therefore primarily draws on our reflections upon new empirical evidence generated during the project, which has not yet been published.

Introduction and Context

3. Although this question asks about ageing infrastructure and Victorian prisons in combination, Victorian prisons are by no means the only element of the prison estate that is ageing, or more accurately, where ageing infrastructure is having negative impacts. Prisons built decades *after* 1901 exhibit multiple and expensive issues of degradation and dilapidation and, due to less successful design and the poor quality of original build standards and materials, some have already had to be demolished. It would therefore be mistaken to assume that the only ageing infrastructure problems are to be found in the Victorian-era estate.
4. Nevertheless, the underlying sense, in the Call question, that the Victorian-era estate could be obsolete, is not new. This Call comes almost exactly a century after a Report of the Prison System Enquiry Committee in 1922 which argued of the (then relatively recently-built) Victorian estate, that ‘the only reform to which [their] buildings can be usefully subjected is dynamite’ (p. 91). Archival research enables us to trace the ebb and flow of debate across 120 years, showing that the ‘problem’ of the Victorian-era estate often seems most acute at moments of crisis – e.g. after a riot, escape, or other exposé. Despite repeated promises to close these outdated ‘relics’ (as termed in relation to the Prison Building programme announced in 2015), Victorian infrastructure remains an integral part of the prison estate.
5. Public discourse frequently describes Victorian-era estate it as ‘crumbling’ and, to an extent, this terminology has become synonymous with these buildings. However, the mere fact that they are still in use to prompt this question indicates that – like many Victorian structures – the Victorian-era estate is extremely physically robust - arguably, *more* robust than some prisons built in the mid-20th century.

6. The Victorian-era estate has some key characteristics. The 90 prisons built or added to during a concerted building program (1842–1877) were largely constructed to a consistent design. Internal finishes and exterior styles varied, but most conformed to a radial hub-spoke layout, built in brick and/or stone. All featured small cells intended for single occupancy, arranged along landings stacked three or more storeys high. Galleried spaces and internal atria provided clear sight lines, enabling officers to see and be seen by colleagues on other levels.
7. Following a series of post-WWII deviations from this 'blueprint' - many subsequently deemed unsuccessful - recent prison construction has to some extent returned to this radial hub-spoke model, albeit using modern materials and techniques, and with integral infrastructure and services. In this sense, even if the original Victorian prisons close, their design is recalled in modern facilities such as HMPs Berwyn, Thameside and Oakwood.

Considering now whether the Victorian-era estate is fit for purpose, we structure our response around some key elements:

Site and location

8. Victorian-era prisons were built on the outskirts of towns and cities. These locations have since been enclosed by urban expansion, rendering many 'city-centre' prisons close to public transport infrastructure. Since many operate as 'local' prisons, they are also close to prisoners' families and communities, and to courts. Proximity enables family contact, known to support reintegration and reduce recidivism. For many prisoners we interviewed, this proximity to home/community counterbalanced the disadvantages of the living conditions in Victorian-era prisons.
9. Given both the move towards building very large new prisons and the cost of urban land, it is unlikely that prisons holding as many people, on sites as easily-reached, could now be constructed. In effect this means that if urban prisons which are accessible by public transport are required, then at least some of the Victorian-era estate will need to remain in operation.
10. However, urban locations often come with a compact site with limited scope for expansion, which restricts opportunities to provide facilities for education and training, or outdoor exercise areas. Provision of green spaces is often limited, with proven negative effects on prisoner and staff wellbeing.[\[1\]](#)

Physical fabric

11. When referring to the 'Victorian estate', it is important to remember that the fabric of these buildings has changed markedly over time, with alterations beginning in the Victorian period itself. Wings have been extended in length, width and height. Windows have been enlarged; original doors, flooring and railings repaired and replaced. Roofs have been completely replaced to let in more natural light. In-cell sanitation has been installed, along with first gas and then electric light, as well as telephones, etc. In many cases, of the original Victorian construction, only the walls remain. However, the thickness of these walls presents challenges for retrofitting and for general maintenance, which can be expensive and time consuming, particularly when the Listed status of many of these buildings imposes specific requirements on contractors. Described as 'quirky', 'one-off', 'idiosyncratic', buildings by maintenance staff, in the context of the outsourcing of the prison maintenance contract, this can mean that Victorian-era prisons constantly have a long list of jobs that need to be done.

12. The fact remains that the Victorian-era estate still represents some of our most robust prison accommodation. The original build quality was very high, as was the quality of the materials used and, as a result, where well-maintained, these buildings are some of the most physically-secure within the prison estate. During research interviews, several senior respondents reflected that since these prisons form the secure 'backbone' of the prison estate, they are often a backstop location for the most challenging and disruptive prisoners. Therefore, dispensing with them without suitable replacement would be operationally extremely challenging.

Design and Layout

13. A consistent message throughout our interviews was that Victorian-era prisons 'got the layout right'. The visibility afforded by long galleried wings with good sightlines in all directions and few hidden corners, was directly related, in these conversations, to feelings of safety on the part of both prisoners and staff. Perhaps related to this feature, Victorian prisons see fewer cases of self-harm and violence than the estate as a whole.[\[2\]](#)

14. However, modern refurbishments have impeded these sightlines. Staff office 'bubbles' on wings, and (as at HMP Liverpool) robust steel structures supporting new netting and new wider staircases, impede visibility and acoustics, meaning that staff can no longer see or hear one another as clearly as before. These wings now feel more dangerous to all concerned.

Accessibility

15. Narrow landings, steep staircases, galleried wings, and the difficulties of undertaking building work, mean that Victorian-era prisons present challenges for accessibility. Installation of lifts is difficult. Prisoners with mobility issues, including the growing number of older prisoners, often find themselves confined to one landing, with few opportunities to leave their wing.

Operation and Management

16. Even where staff office 'bubbles' have been created on Victorian-era wings, staff are highly visible. Operational staff and prison governors told us that in more modern prisons with better staff office provision, staff could 'hide' in offices during shifts, whereas in Victorian-era prisons they were more likely to be out on the landings interacting with prisoners, with the result that they knew them better and were better able to support rehabilitation.

17. Staff felt that the Victorian-era prison facilitated staff training. Since many are 'locals', they hold: people awaiting trial and sentencing; people relocated closer to home in the latter stages of their sentences whilst navigating re-entry; and people serving the whole of their sentences and engaging in employment and training. This enables junior staff to very quickly become familiar with 'everything that can happen to someone in prison'. Since some Victorian-era prisons also lack advanced in-cell technology, staff also supported prisoners to submit paper applications for everyday requests. Whilst a cumbersome process for prisoners, this required staff to understand and explain the operational systems behind these 'apps'. Together with the intense nature of interaction on landings this was described by many as 'fast track' training for prison staff.

18. The connected layout of Victorian-era prisons (i.e. long wings connected at a 'centre', rather than detached campus-style buildings) meant that Governors and other senior staff felt visible and approachable. One commented that since he walked around the

whole prison every morning on the '2's' (at first floor level), if any prisoner wanted to speak to him directly, they would know where and when to find him, and would have the opportunity to do so. For senior staff, this meant that it was quick and easy for them to 'take the temperature' of the wings, and to effectively identify and resolve issues.

19. For Governors, the fabric of the buildings and their restricted urban sites posed problems of appropriate provision of activity. In many establishments, it is simply more difficult and expensive to add new structures or repurpose existing spaces. However, whilst describing these as drawbacks, they simultaneously recognised potential benefits. Governors and senior management teams needed to develop more creativity in their problem-solving than would be the case in a more flexible site and had to use their available resources in the most effective manner.
20. Alongside 'crumbling', Victorian-era prisons have also become synonymous with the term 'overcrowded'. Almost without fail, HMIP reports note that cells designed for single occupancy are now doubled-up. This crowding is a very significant problem both of decency and of hygiene, given the close proximity of toilets, (where sanitation has been provided within every cell rather than via three-into-two where two cells each access one half of a middle cell converted into two toilets). The fact that first covid-19 and now staff shortages can see prisoners locked up together for upwards of 20hrs/day heightens the impact of this crowded accommodation on wellbeing.
21. Although the Victorian-era estate has barely ever been operated in the intended single occupancy (only a few years after it opened, HMP Liverpool already had two or three people in cells intended for one), the specific challenges that crowding poses in these buildings are clearly the result of the increasing population of the prison system itself, and resulting management decisions, rather than of the age of the prisons themselves.

Infrastructure – heating and ventilation

22. In both case study prisons, maintenance staff struggled with heating infrastructure. Temporary boilers were in place and prisoners complained of intermittent heating on the wings. If they could only rely upon prison-issue blankets, they were frequently cold. The thick brick or stone walls take time to warm up, and in many cases, the same parts of the buildings that are persistently damp and cold today (e.g. cells in corners of buildings facing the prevailing wind), had been reported as such in 19th Century Governors' reports.
23. Conversely, in summer, poor ventilation meant that cells overheated, creating extremely uncomfortable conditions. Thick walls initially protect inhabitants from extreme heat but, once they become warm, they retain and radiate heat. In the original Victorian construction, a simple and effective 'plenum' ventilation system had ensured a flow of fresh air into cells but, over decades of refurbishments, many plenum cell vents have been blocked, and most ventilation stacks (resembling chimneys) on roofs have been dismantled and removed, rendering this system ineffective. During fieldwork in the August 2022 heatwave, it was obvious that modern retrofitted windows with 'trickle vent' ventilation offered wholly inadequate ventilation, and both prisoners and staff were suffering in extremely hot and stuffy conditions on wings. Many staff commented that they would not lock a pet dog behind a cell door in those conditions.
24. Throughout the estate, the overheating of buildings is already recognised by HMPPS as an operational problem that will become worse given the more intense extremes of weather that we can expect under climate change. The Victorian estate is not immune to this challenge.

Cultural significance

25. The Victorian estate occupies a particular place in the collective consciousness of both the people who live and work within it, and the general public. Around a quarter of the custodial population of England and Wales currently reside in prisons with Victorian-era accommodation, and since many of these are 'local' prisons (holding those awaiting trial or sentencing), very few of the remaining (male) prison population will *not* have spent time in one, meaning that the Victorian estate constitutes something of a shared experience for male prisoners. The sheer longevity of the Victorian estate, and by extension the plethora of representations in literature and on screen (e.g. *Porridge*), means that there is today a sense of the Victorian prison as the 'archetypal' British prison, firmly established in the collective cultural consciousness.
26. For both prisoners and prison staff, we detected something of a sense of pride in having lived or worked in one of these prisons. Among prison staff, we had expected to find a sense of attachment to the Victorian prison in which they worked, that was connected to its long history as an institution in their city and sometimes intertwined with their own family history. More unexpected was a similar sense of attachment on the part of many prisoners, who valued the sense of history that they felt was carried by the buildings, felt a connection to the generations of prisoners who had occupied the cells before them, and readily contrasted their own experiences with how they imagined past lives had been lived in these prisons. Although they could astutely contrast the conditions in their cells with more modern prisons they had served in or heard about, they could also imagine how life must have been in their current prison in the era of slopping-out, and before in-cell technology like televisions.
27. We might have expected that prisoners (and staff) in these 'crumbling', overcrowded prisons would condemn their living conditions as not fit for purpose but, in reality, their views were far more complex and nuanced. Prisoners in particular contrasted the 'historical', 'like a castle' external appearance of these prisons with their more modern and updated interiors. They felt that the staff in these prisons were more confident and competent than some of their counterparts in more modern prisons (perhaps connected to 13, 16, 17 above). We heard the term "a proper jail" countless times in reference to the Victorian-era estate, from both prisoners and staff.

Conclusion

28. Our research project has not sought directly to address the question of whether the Victorian estate is fit for purpose today, but our data do enable us to reflect on the challenges of its continued operation.
29. There is clearly a balance between advantageous geographical location, facilitating positive links to family and community, and disadvantages of idiosyncratic physical fabric, tight urban site, and cells which are very poorly suited to double occupancy.
30. A very clear view from both prisoners and staff is that many of the operational challenges of the Victorian-era estate are as much, if not more, a factor of its consistent overcrowding, than of the characteristics of the buildings themselves.
31. Compared to more modern prisons, living conditions in many Victorian-era prisons are objectively worse (smaller living spaces, poorer in-cell sanitation and in-cell technology, less reliable infrastructure, fewer facilities and so on). However these are counterbalanced by perceived differences in the competence and experience of staff and, connectedly, the attribution of enhanced safety and security to the layout and design of these prisons, with their clear lines of sight.

32. If an outcome being contemplated is the closure of the Victorian-era estate, then the prison system would lose significant capacity in accessible urban areas proximate to courts and to communities, as well as a layout regarded as effective and safe, which prepares staff well for the demands of prison work. Assuming that these lost prison places would be replaced rather than the whole system downsized, it is unclear whether the gains in living conditions would outweigh the inevitably peripheral location of new prison spaces in areas further from population centres, with worse public transport.
33. If the Victorian-era estate continues to operate, then consideration should be given to its most effective and appropriate use. It should not be crowded: its cells should be returned to the single occupancy for which they were designed. Consideration should be given to the most appropriate populations to be accommodated: those prisoners who would benefit most from its advantages of location and confident staffing, and suffer least from its disadvantages.
34. In summary, our research indicates that the problems of the Victorian-era estate are really the problems of the prison system and of prisons policy in general. Throughout its history, in policy and media discourse, the Victorian-era prison has been used as the proxy for a much broader set of challenges, and the solution to these broader challenges does not lie solely within this element of the prison estate.

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[1] Moran et al (2021) Does nature contact in prison improve wellbeing? Mapping land cover to identify the effect of greenspace on self-harm and violence in prisons in England and Wales. *Annals of the American Association of Geographers* 111 (6): 1779-1795

[2] Ibid.