

British Prisons Also Criticized

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Special to The New York Times

MAIDSTONE, England —

At 6:40 each morning the lights in Maidstone Prison flicker on. The cell doors open, the prisoners walk to communal bathrooms and, by 7:15, they are sitting at long wooden tables sipping tea and eating porridge and bacon or eggs.

"On the one hand you've got to contain them, and on the other hand you've got to treat them as individuals," an official said as he walked through the main yard of the 153-year-old prison 40 miles southeast of London. "You've got to keep this careful balance between security and caring for them. It's difficult."

Maidstone, a walled 15-acre institution in the center of this red-brick town, is one of the 115 prisons and reform schools in England and Wales, which are housing 40,000 inmates, a record representing an increase of more than 100 per cent in 20 years.

The British penal system has come under wide criticism. A spokesman for and two senior officials of Scotland Yard have asserted that lawbreaking has been increasing because of what they termed "soft" treatment of perpetrators of violent crime; they have urged "a basic diet, a bare cell, a hard bed and something to keep them warm."

Prisoners' Rights Upheld

On the other side, the National Council for Civil Lib-



The New York Times/Neil Libbert

The walled prison in Maidstone is in the center of town

erties, similar to the American Civil Liberties Union, has taken up the cause of prisoners' rights and says that the Government has ignored allegations of mistreatment in prisons and that grievance machinery is inadequate. Assaults and fist-fights have broken out in Albany and Parkhurst Prisons, on the Isle of Wight, as well as in Liverpool and Bristol.

The deaths of 32 prisoners and 11 guards as a result of an uprising at the state prison at Attica, N. Y., in September have underlined the growing nervousness about — and awareness of — the British penal system, where half the inmates are living in buildings more than 100 years old.

Visits to British prisons by newsmen are infrequent. The Home Office approves visits only on the condition that all articles, like this one, are cleared before publication "to check accuracy and to prevent identification or embarrassment of prisoners or their relatives."

Interviews with inmates are restricted and quotations may not be attributed by name. Some British officials are known to feel that newsmen have been given too much leeway in prison visits in other countries.

Officials make it clear that the key problem is overcrowding — a third of the male convicts are sleeping two or three to a cell originally designed for one — and that in such conditions physical needs are emphasized.

Average Term Is 3 Years

In Maidstone Prison there are 550 inmates, serving an average sentence of three years. The inmates, generally in their twenties and thirties, represent a wide cross-section—middle-class youths, West Indians and Pakistanis, hippies, tough dropouts and even a handful of Americans involved in narcotics violations. A sizable share are charged with crimes of violence.

The regimen is strict. Following breakfast, the prisoners, in blue-striped shirts and dark trousers, walk through the cramped yard to jobs in printing and welding shops or to brick-laying, painting, cooking and carpentry. They earn \$1.40 to \$4 a week.

"If you occupy people's time with work that's meaningful, you'll avert boredom and trouble," said a prison official in a machine shop where youths were welding carts to be used by the British Army.

Lunch is served at noon. On a recent typical day the menu was a choice of beef curry or beef stew, potatoes, cabbage and pudding. After working again from 1 to 5 P.M., the men reassemble in the dining room for tea—bread, margarine, spaghetti, biscuits—and many then attend optional classes in academic and commercial subjects. A fruit bun and a cup of tea are served at 9 P.M. Prisoners who prefer a vegetarian diet are served separately.

"Very often prisoners choose food as their source of complaint—although the food is of a high standard," a prison official explained. "People miss the variety and they miss the home cooking."

TV and Billiards

Between 7 and 9 P.M. the prisoners watch television or play billiards in each of the four blocs of Maidstone. By 9:30 they have washed and returned to their cells, which are locked for the night.

The cells are grim—a bed, a bureau, a pan, a transistor

radio, pictures of a woman or a family, Playboy pinups or magazine photos of racing cars.

There are several sharp distinctions between American and British prisons: the staff here is unarmed, prisoners are generally kept busier and they resort less to violence (two prison officers have been killed in British institutions in 50 years, the second one in 1965).

Loneliness is, of course, the most searing personal problem. Prisoners at Maidstone are allowed two visits a month.

"A prisoner gets very, very upset if he's not visited," an official said. "Next to serving his punishment and getting out, it's the most important thing in the world to him."

With one out of four Maidstone prisoners paroled and many of them first-time offenders, the good behavior needed for early release is common.

In the last year three have escaped, by methods undisclosed. They were quickly recaptured.