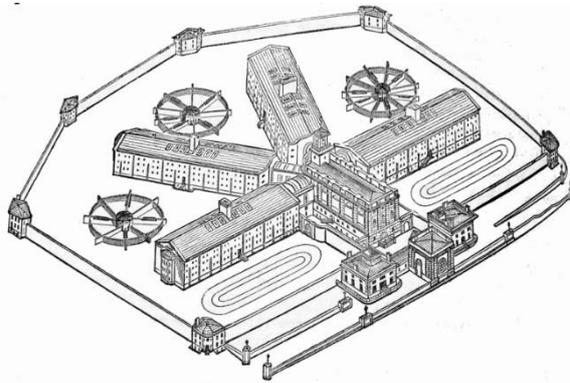


## ***Over a century ago, Dickens said it was cruel, wrong and “tampered with the brain”. So why is solitary confinement still allowed?***

by Kirstie Brewer

Prospect Magazine, September 29 2017



*Pentonville prison, from an 1844*

Over a century ago, Dickens said it was cruel, wrong and “*tampered with the brain*”. So why is solitary confinement still allowed?

From Charles Dickens to the West End stage, the "separate system" has been condemned since 1842. It's high time we got rid of it—and found better ways to help prisoners. Today, over a third of prison inmates who have been held in solitary confinement report mental health problems.

Abnormal, inhuman, diseasing, demoralising. That's how prison inmate Susan Willis Fletcher described her experiences of being in solitary confinement. “*Each prisoner is locked in her solitary cell for twenty-three hours out of every twenty-four; which is in itself a very dreadful punishment bad for the health of the body, worse for the health of the mind,*” she wrote in a journal about her twelve-month stint in Westminster Prison.

That was in 1884—but prisoners today can still strongly relate. The ravages of solitary confinement on the minds of prisoners have been documented ever since it was first introduced in England in 1842, but the practice persists.

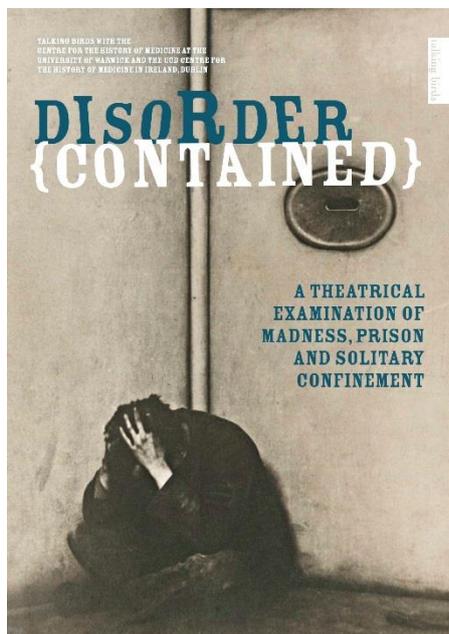
During the 90s and mid-2000s, Dean Stalham spent a total of six years in prison for handling stolen artwork and landed in solitary confinement a number of times. The longest period was a fortnight, when he says he was locked up for at least 23 hours a day. He says he'd smuggled a miniature television into prison so he could watch the football world cup.

*“It is horrendous—you cover every inch of the cell you're in—studying the light and how the air is different in one part than the other,”* he remembers. *“I ended up curled up on the floor, in an embryonic state.”*

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Stalham—who writes stage and screenplays about prison life—recalls the messed up sleep patterns; staring at the dirty pale yellow walls and slipping into a hallucinogenic state where reality merged with dreams because there was no way of telling what the time was, or how much of it had passed.

Professor Hilary Marland of the University of Warwick explains that *“The language used [today compared with in the 19th century] is quite similar, they describe this process of becoming gradually unable to think clearly—a dulling of the mind and an inability to think clearly, a loss of memory.”*



Marland is co-leading a five-year research project into the history of prison health in England and Ireland and recently gave historical evidence to Parliament’s Joint Committee on Human Rights inquiry into Mental Health and Deaths in Prison. The project forms the basis of a new play: *Disorder Contained*, a theatrical examination of madness, prison and solitary confinement.

### **The rise of the separate system**

The practice of solitary confinement in prison took root back in 1842 when the ‘Separate System’ was imported to England from America.

Pentonville Prison in London was purpose-built with this new regime in mind.

Prisoners worked, ate and slept in their cells—alone and in silence for 23 hours out of 24. When there were allowed out—to attend chapel and do exercise—they were forced to wear masks or hoods to conceal their identity and any communication between prisoners was forbidden.

It became the blueprint for the modern penitentiary. Prisoners would live like this for 18 months, before being transported to the Australian colonies. When transportation fell away, they’d go to labour prisons—but many ended up in Bethlem asylum, according to Marland.

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*“Prisons before were ramshackle, chaotic places and this was seen as a reformatory initiative—the silence and heavy emphasis on religion would give them time to reflect on their sins and come to state of repentance,” she says.*

*“It wasn’t thought of as a punishment, but as a system of discipline—the idea was to improve the prisoner’s mind, not drive them mad.” It was prison chaplains who drove the new regime through. “They were incredibly influential—probably more so than doctors in the earlier decades”.*

Pentonville’s first prisoners were carefully selected first-time offenders, aged between 18 and 35 and deemed fit and healthy enough to withstand the force of what was widely recognised to be an “experiment.”

*“What surprised the prison officers and people promoting this separate confinement system was that within months of Pentonville opening there were reports of hallucinations, delusions, depression, anxiety—morbid feelings,” says Marland, who has been poring through accounts from prisoners, chaplains and prison staff.*



*Disorder Contained. Photography by Andrew Moore*

In her research she has found very specific references to prisoners seeing snakes coiled around bars, and things crawling through the ventilation systems. Many prisoners also reported seeing images of dead relatives in their cells and hallucinations of the devil.

*“Instances of religious mania were reported—these prisoners had religion as their main mental stimulus and some of the chaplains were quite ferocious in their preaching,” explains Marland. The first chaplain at Pentonville was dismissed because of his over-zealous preaching. The work brought to their cells was arduous and mindless: picking oakum from old tarry ropes; grinding up stones.*

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*Dickens in New York, circa 1867–1868*

The regime was contentious. Charles Dickens was in America at the time and visited the Philadelphia prison which had inspired the new practices across the Atlantic. In *American Notes* he declared the separate system “*cruel and wrong*”, and decried the “*slow and daily tampering with the mysteries of the brain.*”

Back in England, the *London Times* mounted a huge campaign against the setting up of Pentonville, predicting that “*insanity*” would be a “*probable,*” even “*inevitable,*” outcome. Some prison superintendents also voiced their concerns. But supporters of the new system would claim the prisoners who didn’t cope with it were already “*weak-minded*” and prone to mental breakdown.

By 1853, the 18-month period was reduced to eight, but the system of separate confinement endured right up to the early 20th century. “*A real loss of faith in the system—as well as overcrowding in prisons—meant that separate confinement was phased out,*” explains Marland.

### **Solitary confinement today**

Yet today prisoners, including children, can still be segregated if it “*appears desirable, for the maintenance of good order or discipline or in his own interests.*” There is no time limit for this, although a change to the law in late 2015 means that after 42 days the Governor of the prison must now get authorisation from the Secretary of State for it to continue.

Earlier this year, a 16 year-old boy won a high court challenge against Feltham Young Offender Institution for the post-traumatic stress of being locked in a cell for more than 23 hours a day over a period of almost two months.

Anita Dockley, research director at the Howard League for Penal Reform, says the fact the prison system still uses solitary confinement is a troubling indictment of a broken system. “*Why do we still resort to isolating people who are in crisis, who are challenging? It is an unproductive place of so little hope and can do nothing but harm to a person’s mental health.*”

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A report by The Prison Reform Trust found that one-third of prisoners held in segregation units had deliberately engineered a move into segregation to escape violence on prison wings or raise concerns about prison conditions. And over half of the prisoners interviewed for the study reported three or more mental health problems including anxiety, depression, anger, difficulty in concentrating, insomnia, and an increased risk of self-harm.

*“If people are so desperate that they feel safer there, what does that say about prison violence and the lack of positive engagement going on in prisons?” asks Dockley. “The best suicide and self-harm prevention mechanisms are based around relationships and building up a rapport—it doesn’t help someone to function and cope by shutting them off into isolation, with no stimuli.”*

Dockley’s words reflect those of Pentonville prisoner John Lee, some 130 years ago. *“I can think of nothing more calculated to drive a prisoner mad than months of solitude with nothing to think about but his own miseries, with no companion save despair.”* As the British prison system continues to plunge deeper into crisis, this grim legacy of accounts from people behind bars shows no sign of abating.

**ENDS**

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