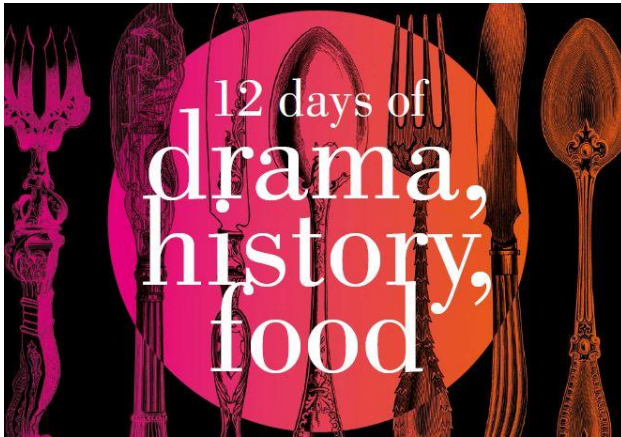


Reflecting on Past Time, March 2018



Public Engagement Officer Flo Swann looks back on the first run of our project, *Past Time*, at HMP Hewell with Rideout (Creative Arts for Rehabilitation).

I don't know that any of us knew quite what to expect, other than to expect the unexpected, as we walked into HMP Hewell back in

March for the first run of our *Past Time* project at HMP Hewell.

We had been prepared by Saul, from Rideout, and were, to be honest, quite nervous. Dr Margaret Charleroy had run education and creative writing programmes in US prisons previously, but my only experience had been visiting YOI Onley (as the Young Offenders Institute was then) with a band when I was 21.

Who would we meet?

We didn't know how many men would turn up, and we didn't know who they would be. We had suggested we work with men who were already sentenced, rather than on remand, just for stability over the course, and we knew that most would be considered at risk of poor mental health. Would they engage with us and the historical materials we were bringing in?

On Day 1, 11 men warily started the course with one dropping out almost immediately, overwhelmed at the sight of women who reminded him of his estranged family on the outside. Over the next three weeks several others joined, and a couple more dropped out, but in the end nine men completed the course.

History is boring?

We were worried that we might be having to crowbar in the historical materials but, I think, because we were embedded in the delivery team from the start, the men really took to the idea. Margaret, who produced a rich collection of historical resources for the men to work with, talked about how the perceptions of food had changed over time, for example how food of the poor (oysters, grains) could culturally evolve into foods of the rich, or how ideas of food as a

source of energy were tested in Victorian prisons so men would have 'enough' food to do their daily toil, but not 'too much' or in to have in any way a better diet than the poor outside of prison.

In fact, so interested were the men that Margaret had to do some research in response to their questions around what happened to prisoners during air raids in WWII, which was then incorporated into the performances.

High drama

The drama games run by Rideout were really clever, getting us all comfortable with each other and helping the men build confidence in speaking out in front of a group. Some struggled in the early stages, especially those with lower literacy levels who found it stressful to be asked to read under pressure in charade type games. One chap impressed us as he walked out three times during early sessions, but found the courage to return and continue – not easy. This particular chap was also a huge support to his mate, who struggled at various points but was buoyed up by his pal.

The cooking

Cooking didn't go quite as planned as the new facility we were hoping to use wasn't quite finished. So we took our men to the main kitchens where other men on kitchen duties kindly accommodated us. (Wings at HMP Hewell have serveries to heat food but not cooking facilities; all food is cooked in the central kitchen).



Gruel was made, as was bread and soup, but our plan to serve food cooked by the men at the theatrical performances had to be abandoned and we commissioned the food instead.

Rewarding awards

Before the men could go to the kitchen though, they had to pass their *Basic Food Hygiene* award, and we were very relieved when they all did– one with a mark of 100%! Additional to that, they all achieved a *NUCO Level 2 Good Nutrition* award as well as a *British Heart Foundation Heart Start Emergency Aid* award.

The performances

The Chaplaincy allowed us to host the third week in their chapel. So we were able to rehearse there and then run two performances. The first show was open to invited guests – some men invited their families, and we and Rideout invited various funders, colleagues, and students, to join us.



Prison trifle, made live on stage

The piece the men created covered prisons past and present and touched on many issues including: nutrition in relation to Victorian ‘hard labour’ in prison; Parliamentary debates on food reform; the sorts of food available to prisoners through the ages; a live prison trifle cookery demo; and a hilarious section, *Pad Chef*, which saw cellmates competing in full Masterchef style.

I have never been so proud of a group of people as I was watching that show. This group of men, who had been wary, nervous, and at some points on the edge of leaving the programme completely, entirely came together as a team. The camaraderie was evident, as they supported each other to perform the show and serve the food they’d learned about over the past weeks: gruel, soup, bread, and plum pudding were all offered to the audiences to taste (some items were more popular than others).

What was the feedback?

Comments from participants:

I have a real interest in history and this was a rare chance to learn about the history of the prison culture. I have learnt so much and I feel I have also developed skills I didn't realise I had.

It was eye opening to see the way prisoners through the generations lived and the tasks they had to complete. I have developed lots of usable skills for the outside via this course.

Comments from audiences:

Very interesting project that helps give a lot of important context to contemporary conditions and problems in prisons. Prison food is a significant indicator of wellbeing in prison and also says a lot about how the prisoner is seen in different historical periods. The comparison between past and present

practices was very effective and the experiential learning from tasting the food made the topic really approachable and current.

What a wonderful way to experience the history of food in prisons. I've learnt lots of new information about the historical and contemporary prison system. And experiencing this in a working prison makes this so much more compelling and engaging. Seeing the inmates working together, supporting each other through the performance, encouraging and prompting when necessary was really heartwarming. What a great collaboration between the University, Rideout, and the prison.

What next?

In June, we will be taking a display about *Past Time* to [Tate Modern](#) as part of the University of Warwick's [Tate Exchange](#) week. In July, we are running the programme for the second time at HMP Hewell, and following that we will create a publication documenting the project and disseminating it publically.

Photography credits: Natalie Willatt

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