

Jail Story by Ellen Atkin

Drip drop, the water drops onto the stone cold ground of the prison floor. I can hear the cold air whistling and the ear piercing sounds of chains dragging along the floor. Distant screams which sound like they are closer than they are and then silence. It is the first time I have been here, I have tried to keep out of trouble, but it was only a loaf of bread for my starving family. I'm scared and cold and wet. The stories of ex-prisoners have not been too warm hearted or pleasant, they are the main reasons I didn't steal. We were desperate, I had to feed my family, how are they going to cope now.

They throw me into a cell only about ten feet wide, it smells like rotting cabbage and dead bodies, I tried not to think of it. There were, what looked like nail scratches on the walls and floors. Three years in this place for one, one loaf of measly bread. It seems like hours until a burly looking man with a dirty looking face unlocked my cell door. He dragged me out by the arm and took me outside. I was shocked by what I saw, it was a big courtyard with several machines spread all around, there were also people dragging big pieces of wood or steel around. They looked exhausted and like they were in their own little world would not acknowledge anyone or anything around them.

I had a hard day of labour today, it must have been the most painful and difficult thing I have ever and will ever do in my entire life. I'm back in my cell now with a plate of gruel, the same we have every night.

It is 4:45 and we will have to get back to work again at 5:00, I've learnt the schedule pretty fast. I have also learnt who to avoid and not.

Prison by Catriona Bruce

My name is Annie Donlip, today was not a good day. I went to visit my mother and older brother, Tom in Reading prison. It was horrible to see what they have been put through, it was bad decisions that will effect the rest of my childhood.

Three months ago, my father lost his job; he had a job in a factory we've never had much money but we had just about enough. One day he fell whilst working and lost a leg. Consequently he can't work anymore, it has completely ruined the family. When we all thought it couldn't get worse, it did- dramatically.

Mother fell ill so couldn't work either; she was a seamstress for a rich family and was extremely good at it. She was earning the only money that was coming in as father can't work. Now we have no income and if we fall into dept both mother and father will be put into prison.

After Tom, I am the second eldest child; I have just turned 12 and have two younger sisters and a younger brother. When our parents lost their jobs, they said Tom had to provide for us and I had to take care of the younger ones. The real troubles started when Tom tried to look for a job.

Tom had been looking for over a week for a new job but no one wanted to hire him, but we had three starving little children to feed and we were becoming very desperate. Tom had almost given up on trying to find a job and ended up stealing some bread. The police caught him and he was arrested instantly.

Mum somewhere finds the courage and energy to visit him in prison and couldn't bare to see him there alone and didn't think he could survive so ends up stealing bread so she can go too. Her plan was to keep him alive whilst Father and I kept the others alive but she will struggle trying to keep herself alive there.

I went to visit them today, the prison is dangerous I worry every day about what can happen and have to pray that it doesn't. I see them, Tom with a scar on his forehead, mum looking pale and weak. They are surrounded by slums, rats and dirty men. They have been mixed with dangerous criminals who really do deserve to be there, no, no one deserves to be there. People could die there, living in dirty iron bars all alone. The visit today proved to me that there is no hope and if we fall in debt, all of us will get thrown in there too.

In the prison I saw a man- stick and bone; leaning against the wall clutching his bleeding head, crying as no one has come to see him. A beefy guard pounds past him and kicks him to the floor leaving him a helpless wretch. I wanted to help him but I couldn't. The guards behaviour was was disgraceful. He showed no sympathy to anyone.

By the time mum and Tom are free, I will be 17, that is if were not thrown in too. This is an unfair life in an unfair world. Seven lives ruined for two loaves of bread which we didn't even get to eat.

Oscar Wilde and Reading Gaol by Eleanor Dexter

Today I got sent to prison for murder. I didn't know what was going on, first I heard bullets, and second I heard people running towards me, I panicked and hid behind a wall then when they reached me I stole the gun and pointed it at him and the next thing I knew, there was the member of the gang lying dead on the floor. I was pretty sure that I didn't shoot. Then when I thought the place was cleared out I came out into the open and saw that the police were right behind me. They thought I was part of the group but I wasn't! They managed to get the other members too but I tried to free myself but it was useless.

1 month had past and today I heard the sound of guards pounding on my jail bars. I was sent to a room where they recorded my voice telling the scene of what happened when I shot the gang member dead. There were three people in the room including myself. I told them everything, everything that I thought had happened. They still didn't believe me. I guess I will just have to stay 15 years in this filthy prison.

The prison was big, as I expected. There were loads of guards which were everywhere. The building was tall and it had 3 floors filled with jail cells. Nearly every jail that I could see had either a woman or a man in it, I didn't see many children which were what I expected.

There has been one person who has been visiting me, but I don't know who he is, I have never met him before. He just started visiting me and talking to me about the shooting of the man in the gang last week.

"It was an accident; you didn't mean to shoot him" said the man

"But I still did it. Who are you?"

"I am a man that was at the scene of the shooting last month, I saw everything and you didn't shoot him." Said the man

"Then who did if I didn't?"

"It was me"

Reading Gaol by Verity Lewis

My name is Aelfric Bartholomew and I have just spent 4 years in reading prison for stealing a pocket watch. I stole it off this tall, well groomed man but I was caught almost straight away and put in prison without a second look. I was only 17 at the time.

My first day in reading Gaols was the worst by far. It all started off when I was given clothes 2 times my size and asked for an exchange but all I was given was a foul glare with a dismissing huff. Slowly, I made my way to my cell, passing many others. They were full of all sorts of people; from the youngest child in oversized clothes to intimidating, might man who could rip me apart any day. My cells walls had marks which could tell a story; like the filled in holes in the walls from past prisoners trying to escape.

For nearly a day straight I just sat on floor staring at the wall. I was awoken out of my day dream when there was a loud smash on the cell bars. A guard stood there peering at me like he was waiting for me to do something.

Nearly falling over, my legs felt weak as I stood up to walk towards the guard when he gestured me over and not even looking in my eye. I walked towards the door and saw a hall full of prisoners but no one spoke. I was expecting for the guard to let me out for what I was guess for my hour of exercise; but he didn't. Instead he opened the door slightly, only enough for his slim body to fit through, then closed it behind him. I backed up as he walked towards me with one hand behind him. Slowly, he kept walking one step at a time until by back hit the wall. He looked down into my eyes and I looked up into his. With one fast movement he pulled out his hand from behind him. Within it was a long black club. My eyes shot wide open and without a thought my mouth blurted out "please don't, I beg you sir". I didn't know what this man wanted with me; it's not like I killed a man. The guard didn't reply but instead smirked as if I was a child that didn't know any better than a dog. He lifted the club up; raring it to hit me. When all of a sudden a loud alarm went off that seem to catch his attention. Quickly he looked behind him and the back at me. As the guard stood up he said "you won't be this lucky next time". Then he just left.

I sat there for a good few hours just thinking of what could have happened to me. Even though I'm not from a great place; I have never been that close to being beaten or maybe even killed. The next day, I waited for the guard but he never came and I never saw him in the prison again. I still as scared for my life every day in prison, just thinking the guard would come again and finish what he started.

Reading Gaol by Lauren Macpherson

We had been at a disco in the town hall, 900 people had been there. A massive hall full of music, people chatting and people drinking. The hall was buzzing. 10:30 and it was coming to an end but I had drunk quite a bit. I knew I couldn't get my mum to walk me home so told her I was walking home with a friend. It wasn't until I was walking through the park that I felt ill and angry. The night before my girlfriend of a year and a half dumped me for her neighbour. I heard a noise and a candle light flashed pasted by me. I immediately looked over. I was in a park at 11 o'clock at night so I froze; stood deadly still and silent. Then his face popped up out of the blue.

The hate. The sleepless nights thinking about him. I was apoplectic. It was him. Jamie. He'd taken my girl. Stolen her. Right out of my hands.

However what I did next changed my life forever. With a broken bottle I still had in my hand from the party I hit him around the head. He fell straight to the floor...

'And I sentence you to 14 years in jail...'

I don't remember anything else from that day. Waking up the next day was the worst feeling in the world. Like it had all stopped. I had read stories about reading jail but this was not what I expected. The guards would stand outside your cell all day long until it was either time to eat or to go outside. The food was revolting, you always see on posters the prisoners being given the bowl of what looked like rice pudding, and they weren't wrong however mine was brown and orange. It was sloppy pasta with tomato and cheese sauce. We had one hour a day to do exercise. Some people would try and escape in that hour however no one has ever managed to get out.

During summer we were often made to do jobs around the prison. This was only given to those who were mentally capable or people thought that we wouldn't harm anyone. This often included men who had assaulted people while drunk, the young offenders, the woman or the men who had stolen items meaning they hadn't actually hurt someone.

We deserved the punishment but I knew after jail my life was going to be different. And we deserved to be treated the way we were treated. I was born a Christian therefore I knew that what I had done was wrong in the eyes of the law and God.

I killed a man and I paid for it.

Reading's Manmade Hell by Ishani Pandey

My son didn't mean to harm anyone; it was merely out of spite. Jack is an honest boy and would never intentionally kill someone. He didn't want us to pay an extra 3 shillings because of the glass that had broken in the shop. He was only thinking of us. It was simply an accident. Now he has to spend 5 years paying for a mere accident. I'm a simple beer brewer, just wanting to give a life of happiness to a child. I don't want him to have the life I did. But unfortunately, he wants to copy my life exactly like mine because he thinks it's right...But it never was.

Saturday mornings from 10 to 10; 30 are the only times I get to see my little ray of sunshine. He lights up my world every time even though he knows that the light in my eyes has already been darkened. My wife coughs out tearless sighs, trying to soothe me, the twinkle in her starry eyes just reassure me that "Only two more years, I promise."

The worst thing about coming here is just having to look up at the place. It was a manmade hell, overgrown with despair, dark with isolation and never-ending like hell. Entering in is just as worse. Cries. Cries of agitation, cries of guilt and cries of helplessness. The dead lights don't help the atmosphere for those who need help, who want help and those who forgot about the help. The division of cells is unfair. Women get a simple corner of some 100 dingy, rickety cells, men get a whole wall of larger cells and children, they get a wee shack which some will endure their life in. They try to make a five star hotel out of what is one's house full of regrets.

The brick wall that had some clean, some broken and some merely lost bricks which reminds me of my love in little Jack, his little head can only take so much. When I look at him, he looks shrivelled up, food is not given but he does nothing, like he has all his life. He is given five paces of space to think yet he does not think. He just stares outside that little chip in the wall, looking out at the light hoping that one day maybe he'll be able to see full sight. The guard comes every 10 minutes to check that nothing wrong's going on, even though they check our bodies to see if we are carrying anything. I always want to complain to tell them it is not right to make a nine year old swab the whole ground floor but, if he's not complaining then who am I to judge for if I even complain then they will not listen for they are only devils of the manmade hell...

Reading Gaol by Oyinkan Bello

As the guards led me to my cell, coarse hands reaching out beyond rusty bars scratched my skin. They were dirty unlike any dirt I had ever laid my eyes upon. A filth that seemed to be engraved on their skins that no matter how hard they scrubbed it would still be present. From then on day after day we would laboriously work until ungodly hours. I would scrub the floors till they shone to then have them spat on once more.

The days were bearable but the nights were the worst, every night I would hear cries of children too young to be imprisoned, crying for their families whether alive or dead. Searching for the light of flickering hope that seemed to be fading but still held justice. At this hour of the day thoughts for my life outside of this jail called for me, but all memory of it slowly faded away, the luxury of a hot bath; a proper meal gone and forgotten. This, for me, was my new life my new home.

However a memory that would never be lost was my husband. His wavy dark hair filled my thoughts, a life line, the only thing keeping me sane. The recollection of his smile would light up my day, gives me the drive to go face the devil with every fighting power I had.

Things then began to unravel me. The abuse. The pain.

The prison master found inhumane pleasure in the cries for mercy. He always howled a laugh when anyone was kicked or beaten. He was a broad man with a plump face which seemed to religiously obtain a crooked smile. He was tall and well built with a frosty cold heart.

Every day they severed gruel for breakfast, luncheon and supper. Although vile, scurrying children like an invasion of rats would race for a bowl full of the grey poison. They seemed to crave the sickening slop and would always shove it down their throats doggedly.

We were treated like animals; brushed to the side with no compassion, for the children no compassion for the abundant. Guards were all made to stand stiffly lined two by two. Vulture-like eyes watching our every move, barking out chant like orders. One move, or a step out of place all hell would break loose.

We prisoners never talked, just kept our heads down and worked. The only time we would dare utter a word would be on visiting days.

Crook after crook would depart everyday to be led off to be hung. Then crook after crook would be brought in to replace them. We all lived in fear to be the next to face this unfortunate death.

Reading Gaol by Megan Durham

The guards ran past again shouting and waving their batons because a prisoner had said something that up set them they stopped and saluted which was never a good sign if meant the most senior patrol officer was present.

That man made all us children shiver because he had enforced all the rules like they were sacred and special this meant if you even tried to whistle while we were in the exercise yard he would beat you until you where numb. Unfortunately he was also the one who watched over us as we toiled away rubbing doors and scrubbing the floor

We have to do the same jobs as the adults like sewed sacks, breaking stones, and banging tins. This is what we did day in day out will we severed are sentence and as we walked back from to exercise yard to are numbered tombs we saw the grave for the hangman's next victim. This was the life we live in terror of the hangman's rope the coffin at the front of the chapel that was when we knew someone was going to die.

On the rare occasions that a prisoner had a visitor we would all try to hear what a mother, a wife or a sibling was saying. Bring news from the world outside are four white walled hell. During the night you hear the shouts and sobs of the younger children calling for their parents because they have been chucked in this hell hole for stealing a biscuit

Today someone is going down to the hallows to be hanged I know this because it's all the guards have been talking about for weeks the hanging of Billy Smith prisoner 110. As we walk pass his cell you can see writing on the wall but we can never see what it says.

Billy Smith is a known trouble maker and we all know his final stand will be impressive and in front of the population of reading. The thing the guards are normal quite nice to me because I am the son of the wine merchant and if my father visits me and hears they have miss treated me he will tell how they often get drunk in his inn when it is there shift.

We were March to the hallows all of us to watch Billy Smith be hung. Just before this happen the way a war cry from the prisoner who inhabited cell number 147 and before the guards realised what was happening they got mobbed and as Billy was hung he shouted let D.4.9 be haunted for ever more. With that he jumped and broke his neck. Later that day the guards read out what he had written on his wall and it simply said 'be not afraid of the hangman, for he is one of you' and with that we walked in to are numbered tomb the screams tonight where louder as the young terrified by what they had seen called for parents.

Reading Gaol by Maddie Whitehead

The air inside hung over my head, stale and stagnant. Mould clung to the corner of the cold stone walls where it was just out of reach of even the tallest of the convicts. The floor glistened but not from the shine of the dim light coming through the filthy window above, but from the sweat and tears of the many men dragged through the passage before. The high ceiling echoed the tap-tap of the feet of a broad man with his shoulders back and truncheon grasped in his left hand. Behind him trailed a boy, no more than fourteen, skinny and weak. His bones showed through his skin. His face was long and slim. His slender fingers were twitching slightly and he walked more on his bare toes as if, in an instant, he was ready to run. His sunken eyes were scanning the room, looking for an escape route or maybe just something pleasant in this dull and dreary place.

For a moment, his gaze grazed mine. His dark glare was empty but his features formed a grimace as he shuddered. The blue, naked feet crept along the stony floor and his pale arms covered his small figure for some form of warmth. How dare someone deprive him of love to send him to this state? There was no father to fetch him a blanket, sister to make him a fire and no mother to make him a warm drink; just the warming touch of truncheon and the luxury of his new, desolate home. Maybe if I smiled, or opened my mouth with any words of comfort, I could show him that he still had worth. However, I had missed my chance and his stare was long gone as he still staggered behind his leader like a lost dog.

I looked across the corridor at one of the cells. A man was sat inside, staring at the floor. A barred window let in some of the outside, polluted air that in that musty cell, must have felt fresh. The room was simple; a bed, toilet, sink and one shelf. The shelf was empty and gathering dust which matched the rotting wall. The man had not sensed my presence or looked up. He was as motionless as his room. There was no life left, not even a spider occupied a corner of the peeling wall. The man's skin was grey and cracked, gathering dust like the shelf in front of him. It seemed like he must have been there for years, staring at the wall, deciding that moving or hoping did not make his situation any better. I was moved aside to make room for the same broad man, who I had seen earlier, to come through. His chiming keys fumbled in the lock and the sitting man looked up. He had the same drained look as the boy had. The policeman barked an order as the man quivered in fear. Then, yet another broken soul was removed from his kennel.

Prison Writing by Emily Riches

As soon as I walked down the residential wing, the institutional smell of caged human males hit me.

The prison cell was barely six feet by four. The walls were a thick stone grey with mean, metal barred windows, which contained no glass. It was no brighter than the gathering gloom of dusk, even at midday. The bed was a plank of wood on legs, there was no mattress, no cushioning; only one thin blanket. It was a damp, dark, dusky room, with a sound of pain, suffering and cries of the unwanted. It was either suffocatingly quiet or pierced with the screams of tortured inmates.

The dull walls each carried a burden memory where psychotic men drawing closer and closer to their death had been scratching at them. Looking up from the corner of the cell, the light flickers as many moths flutter around finding the only hope and light that was left in this horrific, torture house.

A metal door clangs shut, followed by the sound of keys jingling in the lock. Footsteps of the only free people in the high-ceilinged chamber echoed, growing fainter as they move towards the exit of this cold eerie room. You could not escape this endless, darkened wait to freedom.

Another door slams and the only sounds are the voices of private conversations, the rustle of paper from those who choose to read and the quiet murmurs of crazy men rocking back and forth. Staring out of the window, all you can see are florescent lights humming and buzzing overhead; one by one free people walking around, entering or exiting there house. Free. Free from this... this insane, unimaginable habitation.

You can hear the cacophony of sounds. It is the loudest, most chaotic noise I have ever heard. Guards yelling, prisoners screaming, dominoes slamming against steel tables; but worst of all, is the hollow echo as each of these sounds mixes with the others and reverberates down the corridors creating a deafening roar.

Looking at the stone floor, it is covered in small, dead insects which were rotting and had been eaten by smaller maggots and bugs. Around these bugs small speckles of dried blood could be seen, where men had attempted to escape the prison in their own personal ways. Some would succeed. Some would live the rest of their life in pain. Some would return to a nightmare in the small and claustrophobic prison cell.

As I walked down the corridor there was a peculiar smell of captive humanity; a stench of male sweat, festering dustbins and stale cigarette smoke from cheap tobacco hit me like a bombshell. There were cubicles on each side of the central corridor which often had urine leaking from the bottom, across the floor.

Many manic men would reach out to me, begging for forgiveness or asking me to help them escape. Some inmates were suffering from serious health conditions. Some were heavily medicated.

As I glanced into a cell, an inmate was being sick in his sweatbox and the vomit was running down the gangway and under the cubicle door. It was the antechamber of hell. I walked forward a couple of paces before turning round to look at this man again. My eye's slowly adjusted to the dim light

and I could just make out the man's face. It was then that I saw, sitting in the corner of a chilled room... my father.

Oscar Wilde Reading Gaol by Ana Schaenzler

I was only 9 years old and had only stolen a loaf of bread. I normally was good, never done anything like it before and probably will never do it again. Two guards dragged me through long everlasting corridors. I just sopped having thoughts of getting away and terrifyingly looked at all the men and not so many women locked behind the rusty bars all stick thin and smelt like rotting food. Dust lay over every surface like a layer of dirty snow. I was locked up couldn't see anyone and wasn't allowed to talk to anyone. My prison cell was barely six feet by four. I was restless. I had nothing to do; the prison looked like it hadn't been cleaned in 10 years. All the walls were decaying and had writing all over them. I didn't like it I felt alone, I was only a child.

A guard came to drop of a small plate with bread and butter and without saying a word and then straight away left, it felt like no one in this prison had a heart, everyone just got on with their job/sentence and didn't think that being kind would make it better. All the guards made it hell so everyone wanted to get out. I froze when I heard shouting from a distant corridor, it got closer, the eco got louder, and I felt a shiver down my back spine of the freezing cold and of being scared. A guard was dragging a child not much older than me and he was bleeding so much from his head and the guard carried on hitting him with his metal baton which has also covered in blood.

They passed and all I could see was a trail of blood which probably would stay there to mould as no one ever cleaned. I sat I in the corner of my cell, I had never felt more alone, I looked around in more detail to where I had landed. There was coffee on a small table which was thickly encrusted with dried up mould. There were small shafts of light bursting through gaps in the boarded up windows. It was no brighter inside than the gathering gloom of dust, even at midday. The bed was the wooden floor; there was no mattress or pillow only one thin blanket. It was either suffocatingly quite or pierced with screams of tortured inmates.

I needed to, wanted to, had to get out of this awful place before I killed myself.

Reading Prison by Isabella Taylor

“Pa! I’ve missed you so much!” It was the first time that I’d seen him since he was taken away a month ago. His face had gone a ghastly grey; he looked dead, like he hadn’t done anything for the past hours. But I could make out the small smile he made when he saw my little brother. I ran up and hugged him tightly. I felt safe when I was locked in my pa’s cell with him. It was so much more than we had at home. I couldn’t imagine what he was thinking, the people looked so scary here and it was so dark dusty and daunting. I felt the need to be with him but how? How much longer would I have to look after my brother on my own? I couldn’t think about this now, I had to make the most of the time I have with him today.

In my pa’s cell was a bed, I had never had one of those before. There was a chamber pot underneath his bed, it made his room stink like the sewers. I’m sure I even saw vermin scurrying as I walked through the prison door. I had been welcomed by litter being thrown out of the window, one piece nearly hit me.

We have been in debt for a long time now, that’s why pa was in this awful place. Ever since ma died 4 years ago to be precise, that was when I was 4. My brother had just been born then, I don’t really remember her face but pa tells us nice stories about her.

Pa couldn’t stop talking about his life in prison, as he normally isn’t allowed to talk to anyone. He said it’s hard to sleep at night because of all the doors slamming and all the shouts. He said it was hard to live by himself, he felt so alone without us. He told us about the other people, some of them scare him. Pa was the last person I thought would say this. My father was turning into skin and bones, he hadn’t eaten for a while I could tell, he stated that you had to pay for your food, we had no money. I wanted to get him home.

I wondered about how I could get him out of here, from what I heard he hated being alone, it was either get him out or get me in! He doesn’t deserve to be here. I spotted marks on the back of his neck and his wrists; I looked around spotting that everyone had them. I asked Pa what they were but his eyes filled up with water. My hour was up, this couldn’t be it, it went so quick. It felt amazing to hear Pa’s voice again but now I’ll have to wait.

A man who I’d never seen before came to take us away from Pa, I didn’t to leave. He grabbed my arm; my little brother broke into tears as we left the cell. I picked him up and carried him out. His used my shoulder as a tissue and cuddled me. I knew how he felt, as I felt the same. It was a long walk through all the corridors. Finally I saw light.

Lost by Charlotte Walker

I slowly entered in, peeking round the corner wondering where my father was. My mother grabbed my hand and told me that I had to be a good girl as guards were looking for bad people. Slowly I entered into the room where people would meet their loved ones that have been away for months sometimes even years. I found it scary as people my age at 11 could be in jail. My father came out of the rusty door that had bars across it. I ran and hugged my father as I hadn't seen him for months. This was the first time meeting my father in jail; I finally know what actually happened that night. When I found out I didn't hug my father goodbye as I was scared he was going to get some money out of my pocket. He had already stolen from me before; even though it's not real stealing it still wasn't nice. That's why he is in jail now, right now when I'm writing this he is hopefully thinking about taking people's belongings and that he should keep his hands to himself. The jail itself was cold and lonely it had tiles for the floor and hardly any windows if there were windows there were bars in front of it so no one would escape. I felt so uncomfortable seeing my dad as everyone was just staring at me as I was the only child there.

I knew the way my father acted he was scared I knew he was treated badly. He looked unhealthy as you didn't really get any exercise only when you were told to go outside for exercise. Looking around everywhere it just broke my heart even though some people deserve to be in these places to think their life out. There is even 7 years old here. I saw a little boy wrapping his hands round the long metal bars begging to get out of there. My mother wanted my father to come home but she knew he belonged there to learn his lesson.

Guards were roaming around the prison looking for any odd behaviour. The prisoners were kept in their cells for 23 hours every single day. Men were kept in the three wings it also had a large chapel. There were 200 men in the three wings. The females were in a separate block as men. They housed 25 females. Children were put into cells with adults.

Saying goodbye to my father was hard as I knew I wouldn't see him again until he would get out which was 3 months away. I was so looking forward for seeing him out of prison and in our home and not getting looked upon by guards. I felt like I was lost between feeling sorry for my father or not.

Oscar Wilde and Reading Gaol by Ellie Winterburn

I was 14 years old and was imprisoned in Reading Gaol for stealing three pairs of boots. I was arrested and taken into a prison cell for the first time in my life. I was really scared. I glanced at several other cells on my way past. Each cell was small and dirty and everyone inside was looking bored and sad. Reading Gaol was horrible. I was made to do hard, boring work like walking a treadmill and picking oakum. The gaol was damp, unhealthy, insanitary and over-crowded. I was surrounded by all kinds of people: men, women, children; the insane; serious criminals and petty criminals like me; people awaiting trial; and debtors. It was unfair. If you paid the gaoler, you could buy extra privileges like better food, more visitors, keeping pets, writing and receiving letters and books to read. My family did not pay and I was kept in grim conditions. They only paid the gaoler at the end of my sentence to be let out.

I was kept on my own in a cell for four months. This was called the separate system as people believed criminals should face up to themselves so when I was let out of my cell, I had to sit in a special seat or wear a special mask so I couldn't see or speak to another prisoner. Many of the other inmates imprisoned for much longer than me went mad.

My family visited me every fortnight and on one occasion, they brought my younger sister with them. She was very upset about seeing the prison and started to cry. I picked her up to comfort her and a prison guard immediately came and dragged me out of the room, back to my cell and pulled my little sister away. There was no contact allowed with family members and I was given a further 2 months. I had to pick twice as much oakum as before and wasn't allowed any more family visits.

In my time in prison, I was living in fear as each day I saw an unfortunate man led away to be hanged, terrified. When my sentence was over, my family came with the money for me to be released. I have never been happier than when I left my cell and walked through the prison gate, a free man. I made sure I would never go back there again.