LETTER FROM THE U.K.

WHO OWNS THE LEGACY OF A WOMEN'S PRISON?

Activists want the site of a former correctional facility to honor history and provide social services. A real-estate developer wants to build apartments.

By Anna Russell

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The sale of the London prison H.M.P. Holloway, which had come to be respected as a progressive institution, was controversial from the beginning. Photograph by Peter Marshall / Alamy

Pamela Stewart had been working as a psychotherapist at H.M.P. Holloway, a prison in London, for twenty years, in the fall of 2015, when she was suddenly called to the chapel for a mass announcement. As the officers and staff members filed into the large concrete space, she wondered if there had been a bombing, or if the Queen had died. Instead, she and her colleagues learned that Holloway, the largest women's prison in Western Europe, was shutting down. The institution would close, the land would be put up for sale, and the more than five hundred inmates would be moved to other prisons, outside of London.

Immediately, the officers around Stewart began to cry. "A massive personal, social, historical moment had come," Stewart told me. "Everything that we'd learned, and built up, and were working toward, was about to be bulldozed."

Soon afterward, George Osborne, the Chancellor of the Exchequer at the time, announced the closure in Parliament. "Old Victorian prisons in our cities that are not suitable for rehabilitating prisoners will be sold," he said. The proceeds would go toward building nine modern prisons. The announcement launched a flurry of articles in the British press. The BBC reported that the Prison Governors Association had "major concerns" about moving women out of Holloway. There was tittering speculation about the future of the site. "THE LAG OF LUXURY," one *Daily Mail* headline read. "INFAMOUS HOLLOWAY PRISON WHICH HOUSED—AND EXECUTED—SOME OF BRITAIN'S MOST NOTORIOUS FEMALE KILLERS IS TO BE SOLD OFF."

Holloway opened its doors in 1852, on a ten-acre plot in an underdeveloped part of North London. The building resembled a medieval castle, with an imposing entrance arch flanked by stone griffins, and a foundation stone that read "May God preserve the City of London and make this place a terror to evil doers." Originally intended for both sexes—Oscar Wilde stayed for a wretched month in 1895—the prison became women-only in the early nineteen-hundreds. In the years that followed, "royalty and socialites, spies and prostitutes, sporting stars and nightclub queens, Nazis and enemy aliens, terrorists and freedom fighters" all passed through Holloway's halls, as Caitlin Davies writes in "Bad Girls: The Rebels and Renegades of Holloway Prison." "Women were sentenced for treason and murder, for begging, performing abortions and stealing clothing coupons, for masquerading as men, running brothels and attempting suicide."

In Holloway's registry, it is possible to trace a history of social movements. In the nineteen-tens, the hottest story was the imprisonment and hunger-striking of militant suffragettes, including Emmeline Pankhurst. For these women, Davies points out, a visit to Holloway was a badge of honor: they made Holloway-themed brooches and Christmas cards. During the First World War, the prison held conscientious objectors. During the Second World War, Diana Mitford, who had married the head of the British Union of Fascists, was imprisoned on the grounds. Throughout the nineteen-eighties, nuclear-disarmament activists from Greenham Common were taken to Holloway repeatedly for disturbing the peace. (Their supporters climbed onto the prison's roof in protest.) Five women were executed on the grounds, and many more died of other causes. Davies told me, "Every spot there tells a story in terms of the history of women, and crime and punishment."

Despite the language of the announcement, by the time Holloway closed, it was no longer a Victorian prison. The castle had been torn down and rebuilt, in the seventies and eighties, along softer lines, to resemble a hospital. Its policies were increasingly progressive, for a prison. Some of the women lived in small groups around shared kitchenettes, worked in the garden, and took classes at the pottery studio. The facility had a gym and a swimming pool, a mother-and-baby unit, a team of therapists, a hairdresser, and a dentist. There were still problems: the building's layout made it difficult to see around corners, and drug use and self-harm among prisoners were not uncommon. But Holloway had received good marks on its latest inspection, especially in mental-health services. The prison's location, however, in central Islington, one of the city's most popular boroughs, made the real estate valuable. The closure was all the more bewildering because H.M.P. Pentonville, a truly Victorian men's prison nearby, which had recently been cited for overcrowded and unsanitary conditions, would remain open. But, as some critics noted, Pentonville was bigger, and its inmates more often violent; it seemed easier to move the women.

In the spring of 2016, the blocks at Holloway began emptying one by one. Two hundred women were moved to H.M.P. Downview, in Surrey, an hour outside of London. Some women were moved farther afield, to prisons in Staffordshire and Yorkshire, making visits from friends and family in London difficult. Many women were crammed into already full cells, in prisons without the services they were used to having at Holloway. The closure "pulled what I would call a village apart," Jenny Seymour, a former prison officer at Holloway, told me. Around this time, an inmate created a painting that depicted the prison with a "For Sale" sign and a pirate flag. The stone griffins that once guarded the entrance to the old Victorian prison are lounging on clouds, playing cards. In the background, impossibly tall new apartment towers stretch into the sky.

Holloway opened its doors in 1852, on a ten-acre plot in an underdeveloped part of North London. Photograph from Shutterstock

The sale of Holloway was controversial from the beginning. It had come to be respected as a progressive institution, and many worried that it would be replaced by less-well-run prisons outside of London. Some also feared that its important political history would disappear with it. In May, 2017, an activist group called Sisters Uncut staged an occupation of the prison's old visitors center, and demanded that the government use the land "to support survivors of domestic violence and the local community," as a member, Nandini Archer, wrote in an op-ed in the *Guardian*. The activists climbed onto the roof, wearing T-shirts that read "This Is a Political Occupation," and unrolled a banner printed in purple and green, the colors of the suffragettes: "Sisters Uncut have reclaimed this space for the community of Holloway."

In the spring of 2019, the housing association Peabody bought the site for eighty-two million pounds, with plans to build a thousand new flats. The deal went through with the help of a forty-two-million-pound loan from a fund controlled by the mayor of London's office. The terms of the loan required Peabody to offer sixty per cent of the new apartments as affordable housing. Islington Council issued a press release calling the deal a "once-in-a-generation opportunity" to build "genuinely affordable housing for local people." It would be one of the largest developments in Islington in decades.

Peabody also agreed to an unusual condition: it had to construct a women's building on the grounds. Islington Council had stipulated, after input from activist groups, that any new development should attempt to replace the bevy of women's services—therapy, job training, and more—that were lost from the borough when the prison closed. The council wrote that the development should provide "a women's building/centre that incorporates safe space to support women in the criminal justice system," as well as "services for women as part of a wider building." The wording was a little vague, but activists hoped that the new building would offer services for the whole community, and memorialize the prison's history, serving as its "living legacy."

When Peabody released its draft proposal, there was an outcry. The plans called for apartments in several new tower blocks. Instead of a stand-alone structure, the "women's building" had been relegated to the ground and basement floors of two apartment blocks. Peabody's plans included fourteen hundred square metres of space, but Reclaim Holloway calculated that only three hundred and fifty square metres would be dedicated to women-focussed services; the rest was designated for general or flexible use. There also seemed to be little reference to Holloway's status as a significant site in women's history. "Why do women have to bend to the *NEEDS* of the Building," Niki Gibbs, a member of Reclaim Holloway, wrote online, "rather than the building serving the *NEEDS* of women?"

Reclaim Holloway had released its own plans that envisioned a much larger stand-alone building, with suggestions for a ceramics studio for art therapy, like the one the prison had, and a floor each for employment and probation services. On the upper floors, they proposed counselling for domestic abuse and emergency women's housing. "This building must have something special about it that is exciting and creative that makes it iconic and instantly recognisable," Gibbs wrote. On Peabody's plans, Reclaim Holloway marked the building by superimposing, on a small apartment block at the back of the complex, a glittering, rainbow-colored exterior.

One hot day in July, I rode my bike to Holloway. The prison is a blocky red-brick complex, with a distinctive wavy wall—meant to symbolize a breaking down of barriers between the prisoners and the community—along the perimeter. In the courtyard, a few dozen people had gathered for a vigil. It was the five-year anniversary of the last prisoner's departure. A band was setting up; a woman was handing out pieces of watermelon. Stewart, the psychotherapist, told the crowd about the impact of the prison's mental-health services: "You should see the way they could grow. You know why? There was someone there to listen to them. To listen, not correct their grammar, not to give them a diagnosis, not to give them a pill, not to tell them what to do. Tell me your story. I care. We can care. Society can care." She noted that many of the women could access help at Holloway that was unavailable in the wider world. "What a weird setup, that the only way you can solve your housing problem, your domestic-abuse problem, your drug problem, your being-sexually-abused-as-a-child problem is to come *here*," she said.

One of the last women to speak was Mandy Ogunmokun, who had served time at Holloway and now runs a charity called Treasures Foundation, which provides housing and support for women struggling with addiction issues or involved in the criminal-justice system. Ogunmokun was born into a family with a history of prostitution, and she later became a drug addict. (She's now sober.) "It's really sad, because I experienced my freedom in there," she said, gesturing toward Holloway. "I used to end up coming to prison for a break. Because it was in prison that I felt safe, it was in prison that people listened, and it was in prison that I felt the care." She went on, "That sounds really institutionalized, but then I'd come out of the prison and there was *nothing*. It was like putting a two-year-old baby outside the gates and saying, '*Live!*' " She doesn't like prisons, but she didn't agree with the way that Holloway had been closed. "If you close something and then there's *nothing*," she said, "it's not really thinking about the women."

A few weeks after the vigil, I returned to Holloway for a tour of the site, organized by Peabody. Our group included Patricia Ribeiro, one of the development's architects, who had been assigned to work on the women's building. Ciron Edwards, a consultant for Peabody, led us through the main entrance, a tall red-brick passageway. He pointed out the reception area and a dark room that had once been the prison archive. The shelves were empty, and shredded cables covered the floor. People had broken into the prison while it sat empty and stripped the cables of copper wire, Edwards explained. Elsewhere, there were signs of other kinds of intruders: fox droppings, and vines creeping in through the windows.

We visited the mother-and-baby unit, the chapel, and the swimming pool. Art work by former prisoners dotted the walls: a paper snowman, a mural of mountains and a sea, a painted family tree. In the cells, paint peeled from the walls in papery rolls, and the metal bed frames, bolted to the floor, had turned rusty. I asked if Peabody planned to reuse any of the materials. "We are looking at

what we can salvage out of this," Edwards said. Perhaps the timber could be reused as balustrades or benches. But, as Edwards explained, they didn't want the new residents to feel like they were living "in the shadow of the prison." "It's a delicate balance," he said.

What should we, as a society, do with places with difficult histories? Should we paint over them, build around them, bulldoze them? Do we owe anything to the people who once cared about them, who lived and died in them? Sarah Wigglesworth, an Islington-based architect, told me that she thinks the question isn't about personal preference. "It's about the fact that, historically, this is what we have done to people," she said. "We need to remember that when we think about how this site gathers the memory of the past around it." There is precedent for incorporating historical memory into new developments. In 2017, Wigglesworth's team proposed a radical redesign of Pentonville, the Victorian men's prison still in operation not far from Holloway. In the plans, the site retained the prison's iconic star-shaped layout, but many of the buildings were altered. The chapel became a public market hall. A garden had raised flower beds in the dimensions of a prison cell. "It really turned the whole thing on its head," she said.

"I keep coming back to this idea of 'What do you value?' " Andrew Wilson, a local resident and former magistrate, and a member of Reclaim Holloway, told me. He posed a hypothetical: What would happen if Normandy Beach were bought, "and the developers said, 'Right, we're going to call this Ocean View Estate, and there's going to be no historical references?' " He continued, "The way I was brought up, wars are big deals and you honor them." Whereas, at Holloway, "women's history, a hundred and sixty years of incarceration and struggle for women's rights, is being erased," Wilson said. "We don't want this history to be erased." But that raises the question of whose history should be told? When I spoke with Roz Currie, a former curator at the Islington Museum, who had organized an exhibition on Holloway in 2018, she was wrestling with that question. Should we be telling the story of only the activists once held there, "because everyone's cool with the suffragettes?" Currie asked. Shouldn't we also include the stories of those imprisoned for less glamorous crimes, who later rehabilitated their lives? What about the women who didn't? "Who should we really be representing on the site?" Currie asked.

In March, Currie watched Peabody give a presentation on Zoom about plans for the development. "I feel like they hadn't got to the detail of everything," she told me. She asked how they would mark where parts of the prison had been. When Peabody suggested plaques, she asked, "Are you going to put, 'This is where Ruth Ellis was executed'?" (Ellis, sent to Holloway for killing her abusive lover, in 1955, was the last woman to be executed in Britain.) Currie asked how much of the prison's dark history would be incorporated into the women's building, where some have called for a museum. "This is the problem with Holloway. It's so complicated; it's got all of these layers. Representing it in a non-carceral space—how do you do that? That's a really hard question."

Soon afterward, Peabody hired Currie as a consultant. When I spoke to her last month, she was preparing to hold focus groups—with the prison's former inmates and workers, with activists, and with local residents—to research "how the story should be told." "Hopefully we'll get some answers," she told me. Recently, Gibbs, from Reclaim Holloway, attended a focus group with other members of the community. "It was full on," she said. She was feeling more hopeful. Someone had suggested setting plaques into stones to commemorate the women who'd died at Holloway, by execution or otherwise. Perhaps the garden could be planted in the footprint of the old buildings. Perhaps the prison's wavy wall could be turned into a skate park. "We've got loads of ideas," Gibbs said.