

# **JOHN HOWARD: PORTRAIT OF A HERO**

**JOHN HOWARD SOCIETY OF ALBERTA  
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## INTRODUCTION

John Howard - an 18th century figure whose work and passion for prison reform still thrive two centuries later. Throughout Great Britain, the U.S. and Canada are organizations still bearing not only his name, but the steady flame of his drive to improve conditions within the criminal justice process.

History books say much about what John Howard did and the results of his work. Far less gets said about the man himself. Just what was it about this person who grew from a sickly, undistinguished, introverted child to a shy, self-effacing yet relentless reformer, possessing the stamina to witness and record the worst prison horrors of his day?

The purpose of this paper is to look not just at what John Howard did, but at who he was and why the legacy of John Howard's work is so enduring. It will give a feel for the man who challenged and changed the entrenched and brutal prison practices of centuries, yet whose death evoked an outpouring of grief and respect that time still cannot disguise. How was it that a nation mourned this commoner's death as they would a king's or that John Howard's gardener still wept at the mere mention of his name years later?

### THE MAKING OF THE HERO (1726 TO 1773)

The cliché, "he was born of poor but humble stock," doesn't quite apply to John Howard. Born in 1726 in Enfield, England, Howard was the only son of a successful London businessman. He also stood to inherit from his grandmother, Martha Howard, a 100-acre farm at Cardington in Bedfordshire, so the prospect of slipping quietly into business or the comfortable life of a country gentleman loomed large in his future.

Early signs indicated that young John's capabilities and interests were limited. He showed no academic prowess and sports held no interest for him. Public service was not open to him, as his non-conformist religious background meant he could not take the Anglican Church Communion Oath required for public office. Subject to severe bronchial attacks, his health was uncertain. In short, big things were not expected of Squire John Howard (Godber, 1977, pp.1-2).

To be fair to the boy, it is possible these limitations were more, perhaps, reflections of his stark and restrictive childhood. His father was over 40 when John was born and "spending quality time" with children was an unknown parenting style. Between his business-focused father and the death of his mother when he was only 5, there was little real family life for young John. John Worsley oversaw the first seven years of his schooling and though a scholar, Worsley was not an accomplished teacher. John Howard commented later that he was "not fully taught any one thing" (Carlson, 1990, p.2) For a short time he attended John Eames' Dissenting Academy, where he met his lifelong friend, Richard Price. To learn business methods, he was apprenticed to a green grocer. Howard's father died suddenly, leaving 16-year-old John Howard the sole and somewhat tentative master of his own life.

Yet, even in these early years there emerged the first glimmerings of character, personality and habit that were to later play such an active part in putting John Howard in the history books. He showed himself to be serious, methodical and observant. What Howard's perfectionist eye saw as an inadequate education nonetheless left him with an unadorned, straightforward writing style well suited to the powerful investigative reformer he was to become. Many of the friends he made in his childhood, such as Price, Dr. John Aitken and his cousin Samuel Whitbread were friends he kept for life (Godber, 1977, p.5). This tendency to form lifelong personal friendships indicates a capability for unflinching loyalty and commitment which was reciprocated.

With the death of his father, his apprenticeship with the green grocer was automatically canceled. Unsure just what direction to take, the experience and health enhancing properties of travel beckoned. He traveled in Italy and France then returned to England where he lived a quiet, solitary existence. His health still weak, he was attended by his landlady, Sarah Lardeau, whom he married and who died only two years later. In 1756 he again traveled abroad--this time to Portugal. But this time he was involved in an incident that was to dramatically foreshadow John Howard's later distinction (Godber, 1977, pp.2-3).

The packet ship he sailed on was captured by a French privateer and he and his fellow passengers taken prisoner. He got no food or water during the 40-hour trip to Brest and treatment was not much better in the dungeon there, where he spent the next 6 days. Eventually, after further imprisonment at Morlaix and a stint on parole, he was exchanged for a French officer. Rather than just bask in his freedom, John Howard immediately went to the Commissioner of Sick and Wounded Seamen and succeeded in getting action on behalf of English seamen. That he acted so quickly and effectively was characteristic of him. While this incident remained an isolated one in John Howard's life for 20 years, "the memory returned and, like a lightning flash, lit up a landscape of greater need (Godber, 1977, p.3).

John Howard was now 32 years old and about to enter what was possibly the happiest period of his life. By this time he had adopted a simple vegetarian diet and strict regimen and his health improved. In 1758 he married Henrietta Leeds, a woman of frail constitution but possessing a philanthropic bent that matched her husband's. He enjoyed the peaceful pleasures of being a husband and country gentleman and he proved to be an innovative and enlightened landowner (Godber, 1977, p.4).

As landholder at Cardington, he was responsible for providing housing for the people who worked on his estate. Usually these cottages were small, cramped and dark. John Howard was one of the few landholders of that time who saw the importance of providing good estate housing and he spent considerable money on buying larger cottages and renovating them. It was also a time when conditions at most parish workhouses in Bedfordshire were appalling, yet inventories show those run by Howard at Cardington were well managed. Regular schooling did not exist in Industrial Revolution England, but Howard and his cousin paid for the children on his estate to learn to read (Godber, 1977, p.5). Dr. Aitken described Howard's relationship with his tenants as not "imperious" and that "he possessed their love" (Godber, 1977, p.5).

A Fellow of the Royal Society, he published studies on the meteorological effects of temperature in various locations on his estate. In religion he remained a nonconformist, but tended to honor the spirit of religion in whatever form it took. One of his closest friends was a Unitarian minister and both his wives were Anglican. When he traveled and Sunday found him in a place where there was no Independent Church, he would simply attend the local church, regardless of denomination.

Howard did not mix much socially with his fellow landowners. He shunned large gatherings, preferring the company of a small circle of friends. This later changed as his reputation spread. No two portraits of him were alike and he would never sit for an artist. However, it is known that he was short, "had lively eyes, prominent features, and a quick gait" (Godber, 1977, p.5). He gave little thought to dress, none to fashion, and favoured simplicity and neatness. Long after it started to fade from fashion, he continued to dress in the style of a London merchant, with wig, wide-brimmed hat and breeches with stockings. He was a familiar figure in his red vest beneath a salt and pepper frock coat (Godber, 1977, p.6).

By 1765, John Howard's life was a blend of modest but useful activity and domestic harmony. The birth of a son the same year seemed the crowning jewel. Then personal tragedy struck. A week after John Jr. was born and just after returning from church, Henrietta collapsed and died in Howard's arms (Carlson, 1990, p.4). Gone were her gentleness, simple faith and collaboration in his schemes. Though from time to time he considered re-marrying, John Howard remained true to Henrietta's memory and remained single the rest of his life (Godber, 1977, pp.6-7).

Dealing with small children did not come easily to Howard and he had few happy memories of his own childhood. As Howard saw things, it was his duty to provide his son with a good education, so instead of having a loving, attentive nanny, John Jr. was sent away to school at age four (Godber, 1977, p.6). While there could be much speculation as to why the younger John lived such an ill-starred life, the record shows he was unruly and profligate, spending the last 13 years in an insane asylum, where he died at age 34. Of John Howard and his troubled son, Samuel Whitbread writes, "Young John...was never an hour out of his thoughts" (Godber, 1977, p.14).

By 1773, John Howard was 47 years old. While his dearest friends were making their mark in life, Howard had yet to come into his own. Richard Price was gaining public notice for his pamphlet on the National Debt and Samuel Whitbread was achieving considerable status as one of the first brewers to operate on a really large scale. John Howard seemed a study in latent power unused. It was at this point that a seemingly unspectacular turn of events proved to be the catalyst that would transform John Howard's life from the obscure to the heroic.

## JOHN HOWARD - CHAMPION OF PRISON REFORM (1773 TO 1790)

It was in 1773 that John Howard was appointed Sheriff of Bedfordshire, a one-year position of little consequence. The original purpose of this post was to ensure the safety of the judge, but there hadn't been a judge kidnaped for 500 years, so there was little else for Howard to do but be present in court when the assizes were in session (Godber, 1977, p.8). It wasn't long before his keen eye noticed that even when no good case could be made against a prisoner, he was still taken back to jail. Ever curious, Howard asked why this was so. Because even though they are innocent, the prisoner must still pay a gaoler fee, replied the Under-Sheriff. Why must the gaoler get a fee? asked the new Sheriff. Because the gaoler gets no salary, so he depends on the fees for payment. And why is there no salary? persisted Howard. This time all the Under-Sheriff could do was scratch his head and mutter something about a salary not being customary.

Howard's investigative instincts told him this was a subject to be checked more thoroughly. He wanted to find out if Bedford gaol was out of step or was this the situation elsewhere. His travels to other gaols told him it was similar practice for gaolers to depend on fees and that conditions in the gaols were deplorable. An unsuccessful attempt had been made to introduce a bill changing how gaolers were paid. However, it wasn't until John Howard presented his precisely detailed description of what existed in England's gaols, that Members of Parliament were finally galvanized into action. Two bills were passed within the year. One immediately set free all prisoners being detained for nonpayment of fees and authorized the payment of gaoler salaries by the county. The other dealt with health in prisons (Carlson, 1990, pp.5-7).

Though heartened by his success at Bedford, Howard didn't stop there. "I was prompted by the sorrows of the sufferers," he wrote (Godber, 1977, p.10). He couldn't forget the misery he had seen. Throughout 1775-76 he toured the prisons of Europe, including France, Flanders, Holland, Germany and Switzerland. He was painstaking and meticulous with his observations.

The culmination of these efforts was the publication in 1777 of his classic work, The State of Prisons. If his work at Bedford made him known in his own country, it was this publication that made him an authority in Europe on prison matters (Godber, 1977, pp.9-10).

The State of Prisons was not only groundbreaking in terms of prison reform, but was a monument to John Howard's ability to be thorough, detailed and constructive. It includes a general study of the distress in prisons, proposed improvements, a detailed analysis of prison conditions and statistical tables. Parliament passed two more prison Acts, in 1778 and 1781. Aware that making it law doesn't automatically ensure the changes will be made quickly, Howard continued touring the prisons of England and Europe. He not only collected information about conditions, but revisited many to monitor the progress of reforms (Godber, 1977, pp.10-11). For the next several years, John Howard worked ceaselessly, making five more tours of European prisons, as well as visiting those in England. He kept up with his responsibilities at his Cardington estate as well. Health matters concerned him increasingly, inspiring him to publish a second book in 1789 on Lazarettos - the plague ships.

His stamina became legendary. It was hard to imagine that he was once a sickly, delicate youth. He could ride 40 miles a day, needed little sleep and could withstand considerable heat and cold. On one of his trips to Ireland he gave up his berth to a maid servant and slept on deck. He maintained his simple vegetarian diet of fruit, vegetables, bread and milk or tea. One of the reasons he chose traveling by horseback was to disperse the bad odours from the jail he had been visiting, although he took pains to change his clothes as soon afterwards as possible. In 1786 he even traveled to Venice on a plague-infested ship in order to observe firsthand the conditions on a Lazaretto (Godber, 1977, pp.11-12). However, his spartan regimen cannot account for all of his extraordinary ability to withstand the physical demands, pestilence and filth of his prison tours. His friends observed that by this time John Howard possessed an air of purpose, serenity and vigor that seemed to surround him like a magic cloak. Howard himself wrote, "Being in the way of my duty, I fear no evil" (Godber, 1977, p.12).

John Howard was in demand by royalty and aristocrats. In Austria he dined with Empress Maria Teresa and on a later trip, had a long visit with Emperor Joseph. To many he was a hero, but he had lived most of his life an unknown and was, by nature, modest and self-effacing. He had made such an impact on the public that when some decided to pay him tribute in the form of a monument, large sums of money were collected almost overnight. Though these funds were later returned or diverted, Howard's reaction to this incident is revealing: "I see with accumulated pain what is going forward in England. My greatest enemy could not have wounded me more" (Godber, 1977, pp.12-13).

In late 1789, Howard once more set off for Eastern Europe. Almost as though he knew it would be his final journey, he had taken special pains to leave his affairs at Cardington in order and to bid fond farewells to his dearest friends. It was after tending to a prisoner with typhus at Kherson in the Ukraine that Howard became ill. He died January 20, 1790 at the age of 64. He was buried in Russia and the inscription on his tomb conveys so much of the simple, unconditional, caring essence that was John Howard: "Whosoever thou art, thou standest at the grave of thy friend" (Godber, 1977, p.15).

Then came all the tributes he forbade during his lifetime, including a statue of him in St. Paul's Cathedral in London. It was the first time a commoner had been so honored. His friend, Sam Whitbread, who knew him well wrote: "From the throne to the dungeon, his name was mentioned with respect, gratitude and admiration" (Leigh, 1991, p.11). One who grieved as much as any was Howard's gardener at the Cardington estate. Joshua Crockford, even 23 years later, could not speak of his former master without tears (Godber, 1977, p.15).

## THE LEGACY OF JOHN HOWARD

While John Howard the person died just over 200 hundred years ago, the work of John Howard is still very much alive. Today there are 53 John Howard Society branches throughout Canada alone, whose basic aim is still to make improvements in the criminal justice process. As popular and powerful a force as he was though, quite some time was to pass after his death before the John

Howard Societies we know today emerged. This is partly because John Howard and the work he did was a tough act to follow. It was comparatively easy to commend him for his work, it was quite another to emulate him. Nonetheless, his work meant that no longer could the incarcerated or the criminal justice system be ignored by society.

In 1866 England's Howard Association was formed to continue the work of John Howard, followed by the League for Penal Reform. These two organizations merged to form the Howard League for Penal Reform in 1921. A variety of prisoner aid groups emerged in Canada towards the end of the 19th century and beginning of the present century, but the first to use his name was the Vancouver John Howard Society in 1929. In 1935, it became the John Howard Society of British Columbia (Leigh, 1991, p.12).

The John Howard Society of Alberta came onto the scene in 1949 and its primary aim was assisting the individual to re-integrate into the community. The society's goals were revised in 1983 and focused primarily on the prevention of crime through improving policies and techniques within the criminal justice system, providing services to those in conflict with the law, promoting awareness of the causes of crime and urging society to take responsibility for changing the circumstances that contribute to crime (John Howard Society of Alberta pamphlet, 1985, p.3). When you consider these objectives and the fact that the John Howard Society of Alberta is a community-based agency concerned with crime prevention in communities, it is not hard to see how the legacy of John Howard continues.

Essentially, the main reason John Howard wrote The State of Prisons was to raise public awareness about prison conditions and to push for reforms. Today it's called public education and, while the particulars might vary, the intent of today's John Howard Society public education programs and resources is very much the same - promoting crime prevention through constructive changes in the criminal justice process.

While John Howard successfully put an end to Gaolers' Fees, today's John Howard Society offers the Fine Options Program, designed to find alternatives to incarceration for individuals unable to pay their fines (John Howard Society of Alberta, 1990, p.1). John Howard's quest for over all prison reform is still echoed today in such Society-sponsored priorities as the Alternative Measures Program for young offenders. This innovative program is based on the premise that incarceration is not necessarily the only or the best way to deal with those in conflict with the law (Berzins, 1987, p.1). For many today, the new perspective suggested by alternative measures is as revelational as was John Howard's push for prison reform in his day.

John Howard once wrote to a friend, "When I am gone, someone else will take up the matter and see it through" (Leigh, 1991, p.4). One wonders if "clairvoyant" should be added to John Howard's list of attributes. The six local chapters making up the John Howard Society of Alberta and their ongoing commitment to improving the criminal justice system are proof of just how right John Howard was. That John Howard's work began in the Industrial Revolution, continued through the



Technological Revolution and remains alive and valid as we stand at the threshold of what some call the Human Revolution, is strong testament to not only the work of John Howard, but to the unique qualities of the person himself.

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