

Prison

You will no doubt have seen the announcement that Birmingham Prison (I'm still used to calling it Winson Green) is soon to be privatised. With Tesco and Asda unlikely to want to enter this last bastion of the public sector, it's likely to be a security firm that moves in.

Here the government may be missing a trick. The authorities may care to look at a far more imaginative financial model from the 19th Century, and only a couple of miles down the road.

Aston gaol was on Bordesley High Street, which was once part of the parish of Aston. It was located, I think, somewhere near where the Rainbow stands today. The gaol was not designed for the long-term incarceration of prisoners, only to serve as a lock-up prior to their appearance in court.

This must have been one of the most unusual prisons in the country. At street level Aston lock-up was a pub, called the Brown Lion. Mrs Brownell ran the bar, whilst her husband looked after the prisoners, who were tucked away in two cells down in the cellar.

For that reason the place was popularly known as "Brownell's Hole".

Mr Brownell was not paid a salary as gaoler; he made his living by supplying the malefactors down the stairs with beer and food. Mr Brownell was happy; the parish of Aston was happy; the prisoners...well that's another story.

If Brownell's Hole was one of the most unusual gaols around, it was also one of the most unpleasant.

When the prison reformer, John Howard, inspected it in 1779, he found the cells an inch deep in water. "No human being," commented a later visitor, "should be confined in such conditions."

What could be said in favour of Aston prison was that it cost the rate-payers not a penny, a tempting proposition in an era of budgetary restraint.

It also made the Brown Lion was of the best-behaved pubs in the whole of Birmingham. Anyone who considered misbehaving in the public bar had only to consider what the landlord had at his disposal in the way of deterrent.

A lock-in at the Brown Lion really meant what it said.

Dr Chris Upton is under arrest at Newman University College in Birmingham.