

# (In)Justice in the Archives: Reinterpreting the Policing Collections at Ripon Museums Trust



UNIVERSITY OF LEEDS



WRoCAH-funded Collaborative Doctoral Award between the School of English, University of Leeds and Ripon Museums Trust

## Lead Academic and Partner Organisation Supervisors

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## Project summary

This project examines the history of Ripon's Prison & Police Museum and challenges popular narratives of police (in)justice, offering the opportunity to reinterpret the collections in ways that speak to contemporary concerns and encourage visitors to seek a fairer society. By exploring the evolution of Ripon Liberty Prison to police station, then museum, alongside the lives of people connected with the site (as uncovered through the extensive collection) and public representations of policing (e.g. the sensationalised *Illustrated Police News*), the project seeks to reframe historical and modern policing through a critical, democratised lens.

## PhD Project description



Ripon Museums Trust (RMT) is one of few independent museums holding significant policing collections (i.e. not part of a police department or led by retired officers). This positionality offers a rare opportunity to gain critical distance regarding historical and present (in)justice in the policing system.

Much research on police museums has focused on those housed in modern police premises, exploring how these are carefully situated, both physically and ideologically, to reinforce the modern police force's legitimacy (e.g. Michelle Brown, *The*

*Culture of Punishment: Prison, Society, and Spectacle*, NYU Press [2009]). The novelty of this project, in contrast, is that it is not a progressionist view of policing's technological improvements; it moves from top-down, institutional history to a democratised narrative of the buildings/people that constitute the historical life of the RMT site, and the role played by the institutions they represent in the lives of 19th- and 20th-century people in the area. RMT's unique museum cluster – Workhouse, Prison & Police Museum, Courthouse – offers an interconnected social commentary on crime, punishment and welfare that pushes back against Dickensian ideas of workhouses and prisons to challenge assumptions, with a focus on inspiring people to seek a fairer society. Leeds, the academic base of this project, has also been grappling with how its city publicly represents policing history and the liveness of emotions around reframing historical injustice: in 2022, the blue plaque of David Oluwale, hounded to his death by policemen in 1969, was stolen on the day it was unveiled.

The project's research questions facilitate and sharpen connections between historical and contemporary policing. There are three intertwined strands: how did Ripon Liberty Prison become Ripon Police Station, which in turn became the Prison & Police Museum, and how might the history of the building play a part in encouraging reflection on the collection, the history of the local area, and the police? How has the history of the collection itself, begun in the 1980s, shaped the narrative about the police and their history, and what role does that narrative play today? What are the overlooked stories of the people associated with those different lifetimes as gaol, police station, and museum-especially the working class, 'everyday' stories?

Policing items and documents make up 95% of the collection, but from its foundation in the 1980s to 2018 the collection was unmanaged, and museum interpretation has not been refreshed for at least a decade. Initial work has begun on rationalising, cleaning and digitising items; the student would have the opportunity engage in this process, shaping the collection's representation online and offline, and developing their own project by finding the most compelling stories in a collection of mugshots, notebooks, and record books from the 19th/20th centuries, and exploring possibly the most complete run of the *Illustrated Police News* in the UK.

First published in 1864 and continuing weekly until 1938, the *IPN* had a reputation for sensationalising crime and was, as a result, very popular among readers of all classes. The student will enrich their reinterpretation of the RMT collections under the supervision of Dr Bell at the University of Leeds by digging into popular representations of policing such as that offered by *IPN* during the 19th and 20th centuries to consider how the life stories of people connected with the Ripon prison and police station, drawn from original prison notebooks and wider research, compare and contrast with the public perception of policing in this period. This will offer the opportunity to integrate analysis of literature and journalism of the 19th and 20th centuries, as well as consider the contemporary relevance of the policing museum in the modern world.

## About Ripon Museums Trust

[Ripon Museums Trust](#) was formed in 1982 by a small group of volunteers. The Trust's mission is to use the unique trio of the Workhouse, Prison & Police and Courthouse Museums, alongside their collections and stories, to help people explore issues such as fairness, equality, justice and welfare. This is achieved through excellent engagement, programming and outreach. RMT aims to encourage people to be 'more knowledgeable, creative, compassionate, motivated and confident in their ability to make a difference', and 'to inspire people to seek a fairer society'.

A key element of RMT's work is the importance of the fabric of its buildings, not just its collections. By exploring the museum's history as a gaol and police station, the PhD will enrich the understanding and representation of its material heritage.

The Workhouse Museum is about to begin a major project, 'Inspiration for a Fairer Future', funded by the National Lottery Heritage Fund. After this, RMT will focus on reinterpreting the Prison & Police Museum. The PhD will act as scoping research for this next phase, allowing the student to collaborate on re-envisioning the museum's approach to prisons and policing.

## Engagement, outreach, dissemination and impact initiatives

The student will learn crucial collections management and public engagement skills to inform the project and their work, and will play a key role in bridging the Workhouse redevelopment and the Prison & Police Museum redevelopment: this is a unique opportunity to integrate research, outreach and curatorial work across these two phases. The student will use their research to connect historical narratives to contemporary issues under the guidance of the Community Curator. Their involvement in practical collections management work will be supervised by the Collections Access Officer. This will involve 1) audience engagement activities such as assisting in the creation of a conservation-in-action station to deepen visitor engagement, and reinterpreting the Prison & Police Museum, providing research to refresh the displays; 2) collections management tasks including cataloguing, rationalising, preserving and digitising the collection, prioritising items with contemporary relevance and engaging in best practice in digital preservation; 3) acting as a link between the two phases and enhancing RMT's knowledge base, reinterpretation, displays and public programming, with findings used in exhibitions, websites and publications. This could form the basis of the Knowledge Exchange Project. They will also work alongside Trustees, volunteers and community groups in involvement in the above.

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## Financial support

Studentships for doctoral research are 40 months in duration for full-time study. Awards are subject to satisfactory academic progress. Awards must be taken up in October 2025; no deferrals are possible as this is the final round of recruitment to WRoCAH CDAs. Awards will comprise fees at Research Council rates and a tax- and national insurance-free maintenance grant (£20,780 in 2025/26). The grant pays the fees at the Home/UK rate; international students are, however, eligible to apply for this Studentship, and the University of Leeds will cover the difference between the Home/UK and International fees. Awards may be taken up on a part-time basis if a student is eligible to undertake part-time study; international applicants may be required to study full-time under the terms of their visa.

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## Qualifications

Strong applicants will have a good first degree in an appropriate subject, as well as a Master's degree (or be working towards one), usually at Distinction level; however please note that, in line with RMT's commitment to inclusivity, an exceptional candidate may instead demonstrate a strong record of professional experience relevant to the scope of the project. We are looking for a well-qualified student with a background in any of the following disciplines: English, History, Cultural Studies, Museum Studies. Applicants must be able to demonstrate an interest in the heritage sector, and potential and enthusiasm for developing skills more widely in the areas of heritage/community engagement.

## Requirements of the Studentship

This opportunity is being offered as a full-time studentship, but part time study may be an option subject to agreement with the supervision team. As a collaborative award, students will be expected to spend time at both the University of Leeds and Ripon Museums Trust properties and offices. The PhD will involve a placement at the museum to fully immerse themselves in audience engagement, collections management and bridging the gap between the two projects, likely 2-3 days per week for 18 months (the exact timing of which will be negotiable). The student will undergo RMT in-house training, and have support from museum staff to learn on the job.

WRoCAH students are required to undertake a bespoke training package and to complete a Researcher Employability Project of at least a month and a Knowledge Exchange Project.

**All WRoCAH students must submit their thesis for examination with the funded period.** This is a requirement of the Arts & Humanities Research Council, which provides the funding for WRoCAH, and is a condition of accepting a Studentship.

Before applying for any WRoCAH Studentship, please first ensure that you have read the WRoCAH webpages about the WRoCAH training programme and requirements, as well as other funding opportunities

<http://wrocah.ac.uk/>

### How to apply

By 12 noon Wednesday 5 March 2025, applicants are required to submit to WRoCAH an Expression of Interest, which should include:

1. A CV with details of academic qualifications
2. A covering letter comprising a two-page statement to convey your motivation and enthusiasm for the project, and to demonstrate your suitability for your intended PhD studies with the University and Project Partner.

*The covering letter should specifically highlight the following:*

- Your interest in the project and details about why you have chosen that University and Project Partner.
  - How you will apply your current skills, knowledge and experience to undertake a PhD and the approach you would take to develop the project.
  - How the project fits into your career plans and ambitions.
- 17 March 2025: decision about short-listing  
The short-list of candidates to be invited for an interview will be announced on Monday 17 March 2025.
  - ***Short-listed candidates must complete a PhD programme application before interview.*** If you are short-listed for an interview you will be sent details of how to apply for a place at the University of Leeds. At that point you will need to submit the names and contact details of two referees, copies of transcripts of your academic qualifications and (if applicable) an IELTS certificate.
  - Interviews will take place on 8 or 9 April 2025.  
Interviews will involve the academic supervisor, Project Partner supervisor and a member of the WRoCAH Studentships Committee. They will be conducted online.

**For more information about this project contact**

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