



Devon Family History Society
Joint Project Publication with
Devon Record Office



PRISON LADIES PHOTOGRAPHS

1870s

DRO Reference – Prison Collection 5853

DFHS Book Reference - D034

In 1869 'The Habitual Criminals Act' was passed, which tried to make a distinction between first-time offenders and those who committed further offences. It was felt that a prison sentence was a heavier punishment for the first-time offender who would lose his or her job, housing and social status, but the same prison sentence given to the habitual offender was not as severe a punishment since he or she had less to lose. The problem lay in trying to identify the habitual criminal, since by giving a false name, he or she could avoid recognition. The 1869 Act attempted to solve this problem; all convicted persons now had to be photographed. Many prisons began to employ a photographer who had his studio either in, or close by, the prison. However, in practice this scheme proved unsuccessful since it was impossible to go through hundreds of mug-shots in the hope of finding a picture of an accused person, and it was eventually discontinued.

The album indexed here contains photographs of women prisoners in Exeter Prison and Devon County Prison in the 1870s. No details are given about each prisoner apart from their names and the prison numbers pinned to their clothes. However, both prisons kept Receiving Books which are registers of all those admitted to gaol. There are separate Books for men and women. In the case of the women prisoners, the Receiving Books are set out one prisoner to every page, including such information as a brief description of the prisoner's physical appearance, her address, age and place of birth, occupation, religion, whether married or single, the number of her children if any, and of course details of the offence for which she was convicted. The youngest prisoners were aged 11 or 12. Most of the women were in prison for minor crimes such as petty theft or being drunk and disorderly. Only information on the women pictured in the album has been abstracted from the Receiving Books. There are many more prisoners listed in these Books who do not appear in the album, and there are also a number of photographs of both men and women prisoners glued into the Receiving Books which have not been indexed here.

These pictures are of particular interest to the family historian because they are professional photographs of women who would not, at that time, have been able to afford a visit to a professional photographic studio. Some of them

have become faded with time, due to the mix of chemicals used in producing them, but many are as clear and sharp as if they had been taken yesterday. If a photo of great-grannie has not been passed down in the family, you may be lucky enough to find one here!