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Menis, Susanna (2025) Would Elizabeth Fry approve Shrewsbury Prison's 2025 Mother's Day Weekend? British Society of Criminology.

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Would Elizabeth Fry approve Shrewsbury Prison's 2025 Mother's Day Weekend?

The role of mothers in prison has historically carried deep social significance and deserves serious attention. A touristic event like Mother's Day in prison would have likely drawn criticism from Elizabeth Fry, as it risks trivialising and overlooking the harsh realities of imprisonment.

Most of incarcerated women will not be able to see their children on Mother's Day. A recent [Inspectorate report](#) indicates that almost two-thirds of women in prison are the primary carers of a child, and circa 18,000 children are separated from their imprisoned mothers each year.

Strikingly, the attraction sites non-operating prisons of [Shrewsbury](#) and [Shepton Mallet](#) have offered free tickets to send your mother to prison (also advertised on their social media):

Mums Go Free! This Mother's Day weekend, send your mum to prison... for fun, of course! We're giving away 50 FREE Self-Guided Tours for mums when accompanied by a paying adult or child. Hurry, claim yours now!

Prison tourism exemplifies how sites of past suffering are transformed into entertainment and heritage attractions, often overlooking the devastating effects these institutions have on those confined within them. A [travel advice website](#) recommends fourteen historical prisons in the UK, such as the [Clink](#), [Lincoln Castle](#), and [Gloucester Prison](#). Shrewsbury and Shepton Mallet, after being decommissioned in 2013 and subsequently managed by Cove Attractions, have also become popular destinations. These attractions offer traditional heritage guided tours, 'cell escape-room', 'prison break' experiences, an Easter 'fun' event, and ghost tours. As historian [Rosalind Crone](#) (2018) indicates, Shepton Mallet started operating in 1610. This was a period when the Bridewells (houses of correction) proved to be popular and were used frequently by the judges of the peace. Shrewsbury prison was built in 1793; it was possibly one of the several pseudo penitentiaries (like

Gloucester) which opened following the not-so-successful plans of the Penitentiary Act 1779. The prison was reconstructed in 1877 under the chairmanship of Edmond Du Cane, who led the Prison Commission, establishing the notoriously controversial approach of prevention through uniformity and reformation through discipline. As a result, both the architecture and the penal policies enforced within these institutions left lasting and often harmful impact on the lives of those imprisoned there.

Researchers [Barton and Brown](#) (2015) acknowledge the tension between the commercialisation of prisons and the commodification of past suffering. However, they also suggest that prison tourism might have educational value if it were to represent the complex story of the prison experiences more authentically. But at what cost, and is this even possible?

The practice of prison sightseeing predates the modern prison penalty, revealing how public fascination with punishment and confinement has deep historical roots. The spectacle of the public executions and the visibility of justice being carried out were typical of many early sites of confinement, such as Newgate, the Fleet and Marshalsea. Allowing access to visitors, surveyors, inspectors, and the press played a significant role in drawing public attention to the hardships of imprisonment. A frequent visitor to Newgate's women's wing once observed: 'all were crowded together, in one promiscuous assemblage, noisy, idle, and profligate; clamorous at the greetings, soliciting money, and begging at the bars of the prison, with spoons attached to the ends of sticks' (B.H. Grey, *A letter to the common council*, 1818:282). Another visitor witnessed 'two women [...] in the act of stripping a dead child, for the purpose of clothing a living one' (T.F Buxton, *An inquiry*, 1818:126).

However, little is said about the sometimes disruptive effect of these tours. Research by [Menis](#) (2020) on the prison engagement of Elizabeth Fry reveals that she was not keen on publicity. Once the improvements she brought to the women's wing at Newgate were exposed, the project became a spectacle. Elizabeth Fry's daughter commented on how visitors 'flocked to witness the extraordinary change that had passed over the scene' ([Fry and Cresswell](#), 1848:263).

Twenty-first-century prison tourism still relies heavily on sensationalism and entertainment – the spectacle continues, albeit without human actors (although there

may be performers). The suggestion that prison tourism allows the public to have an educational experience has no grounds. Instead, at one level, driven by crime fascination, the experience further distances the visitor from the human condition - because this is missing. At another level, a lack of knowledge of the problematic historical context of this social institution contributes little to a socio-political critical consideration of contemporary practices and penal policies.

Also, an event such as spending a day in prison for Mother's Day 'for fun', further desensitised the public to the unseen pains of imprisonment. Presently, this event ignores the fact that thousands of mothers will spend Mother's Day in prison, not for choice, not for one day, and away from their children.

Historically, the role of mothers in prison has been socially significant and should not be taken lightly. Before the advent of the modern prison penalty, the incarcerated woman may have been joined by her children (husbands and perhaps other members of the family) for caring and financial reasons. Even judges and jury were aware of the role of mother and wife in safeguarding the family; this, to the extent of sometimes choosing to commute a sentence and, in many cases, allow for an application of pardon (Menis, 2020). John Howard also observed in his London prisons tour that wives and children of debtors would be commonly accommodated with them too; he noted that 'there are often by this means, ten or twelve people in a middle-size room' (*The State Of The Prisons*, 1777:33).

From about the last quarter of the nineteenth century, the imprisonment of mothers has led, often, to the breaking down of the nuclear family. The [Corston report](#) has repeatedly drawn attention to this; in 2007 Baroness Corston recounts that the women she saw in prison 'were most mothers. Some had their children with them immediately prior to custody, others had handed them to relatives, or their children had been taken into care or adopted' (p.7). Significantly, the [House of Commons Joint Committee](#) on Human Rights addressed the government in 2019, asking whether sending mothers to prison is in the best interest of the mother and child, suggesting that it goes against the right to family life.

Elizabeth Fry would likely disapprove of the Mother's Day event, as it trivialises and ignores the harsh conditions and emotional toll of imprisonment, particularly for mothers separated from their children. The educational value of prison tourism is

debatable, and its entertainment focus risks desensitising the public to the realities of imprisonment, thus further perpetuating policies and practices that should have been left behind as relics of the past.