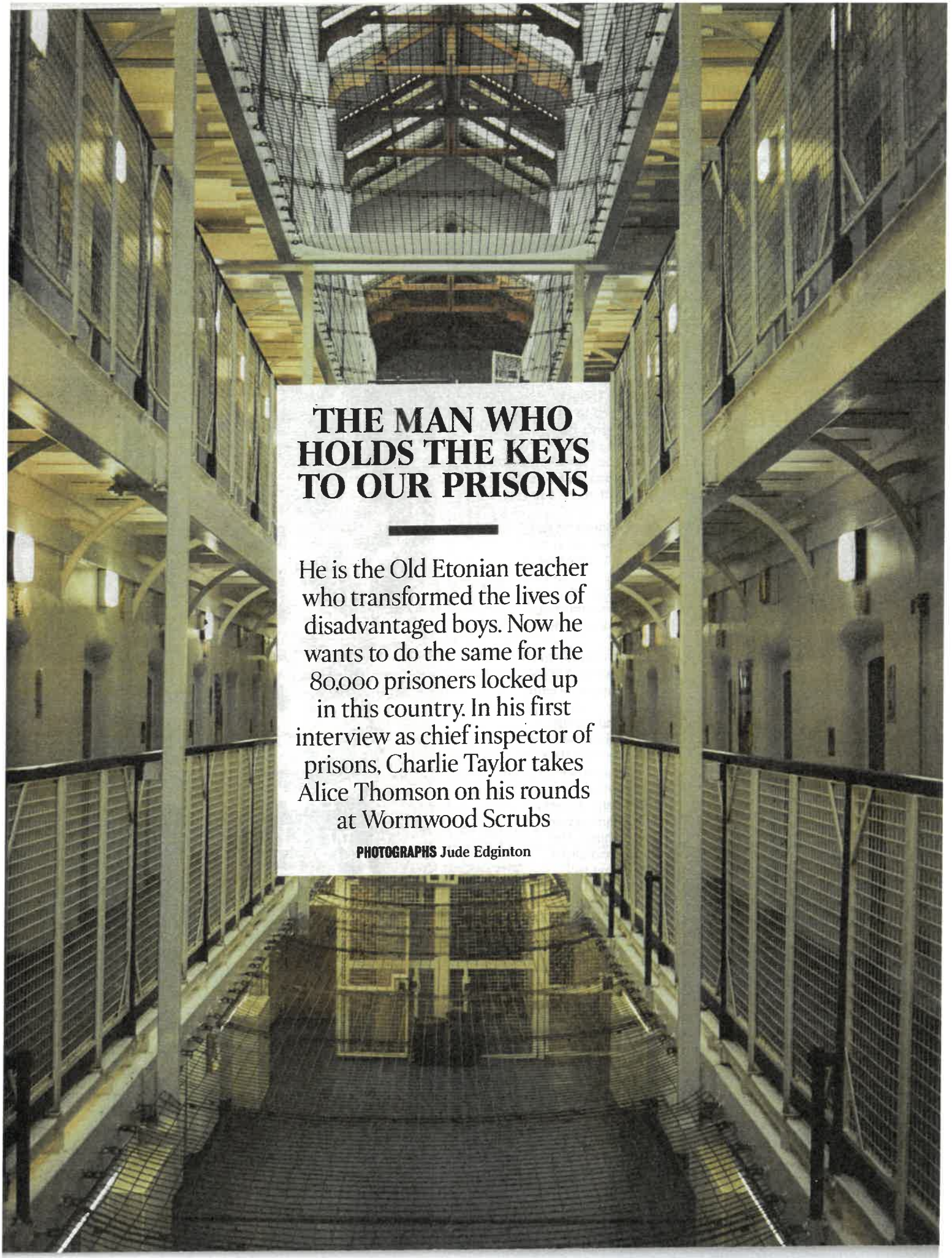
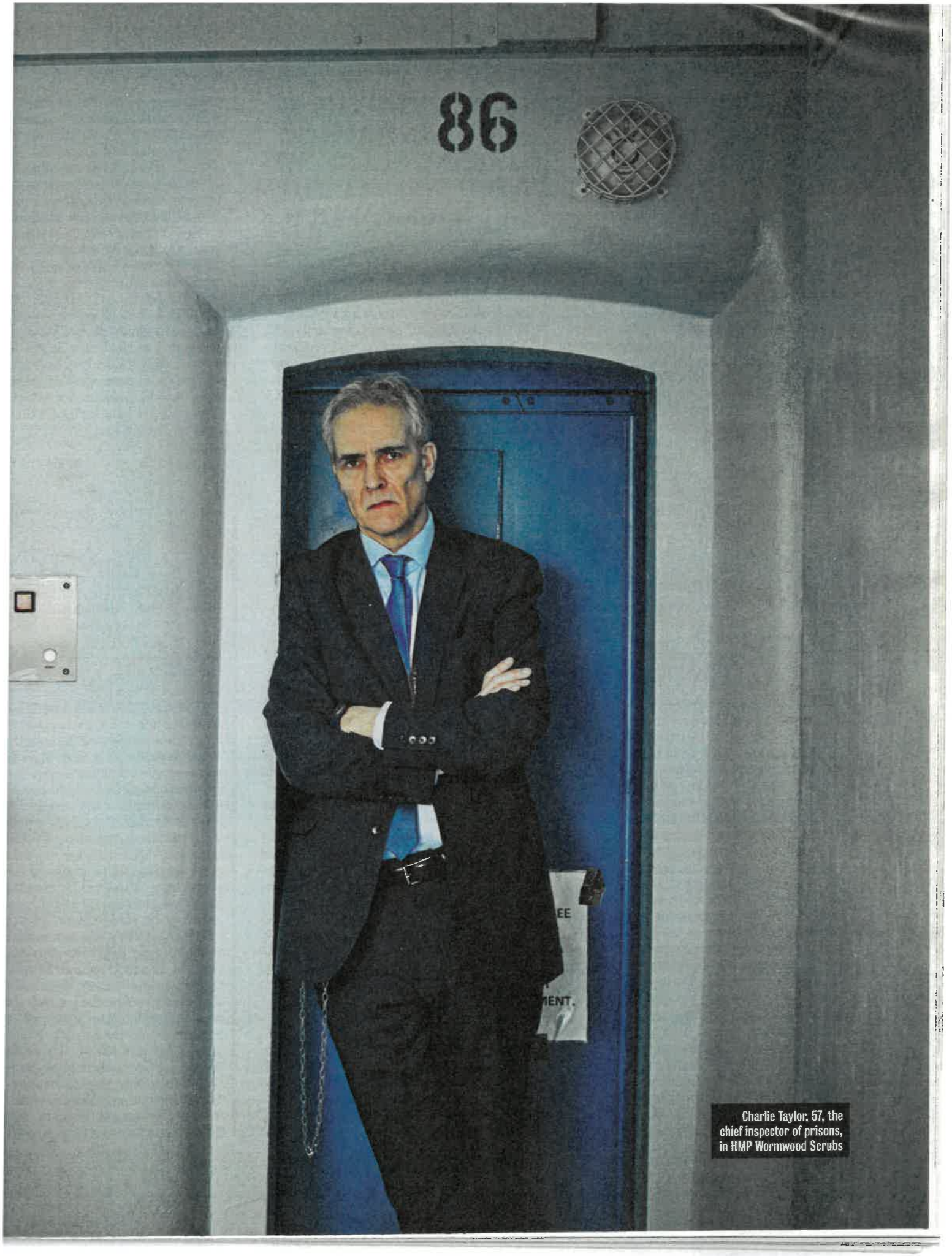


THE MAN WHO HOLDS THE KEYS TO OUR PRISONS

He is the Old Etonian teacher who transformed the lives of disadvantaged boys. Now he wants to do the same for the 80,000 prisoners locked up in this country. In his first interview as chief inspector of prisons, Charlie Taylor takes Alice Thomson on his rounds at Wormwood Scrubs

PHOTOGRAPHS Jude Edginton



Charlie Taylor, 57, the chief inspector of prisons, in HMP Wormwood Scrubs

The first thing I notice are his keys, a vast bunch hanging off a chain. Charlie Taylor smiles. "If I lose these, it's a sackable offence." The chief inspector of prisons is the only person in England and Wales allowed to enter a jail at any time. He knows how to unbolt and open a door in seconds. He can ask to taste the food, visit a cell, talk to an inmate or question the officers. He's on the lookout for everything from "cockroaches to contraband", the physical and mental health of prisoners and morale of staff.

I meet him in the rain outside the gates to HMP Wormwood Scrubs, a category B prison in west London that has held everyone from Pete Doherty to Ian Brady. He's wearing an immaculate damp grey suit, tie and brogues but still looks like the sheriff in a Jane Campion movie: taut, wiry and mildly menacing. "It's about respect," he tells me. "I am not going to come in here in jeans."

We leave our phones at the entrance and are asked to hand over any chewing gum, pens or matches. He starts unlocking a series of metal doors. "I love getting lost in prisons. It's the best way to discover how they work," he explains as we weave through a labyrinth of corridors, chatting to staff along the way.

There are around 80,000 prisoners in England and Wales, but most people will never go into one of the 117 jails. At Wormwood Scrubs there's a beautiful church in the centre surrounded by barbed wire. "It's grade II listed and made of Portland stone by the prisoners in the late 1880s," Taylor says. Having become chief inspector 17 months ago, he visits dozens of prisons a year and is now an expert on their architecture as well as their inhabitants.

I've interviewed several of his predecessors and they have all been horrified by what they have discovered. "You can't do this job for long, because you get used to things you shouldn't and become desensitised," Nick Hardwick, a previous chief inspector, once told me. "Blood on sheets, rats, unscreened shared toilets, revolting filth and squalor. The claustrophobia, the unhappiness." He only did one term.

But Taylor, 57, believes that he can make a difference. The late Victorian prison is divided into blocks; we're heading for C Block. He unlocks several more doors until we are standing in a vast corridor where nearly 300 men are incarcerated in four floors of cells.

On the top floor are the detoxers. Taylor knocks on a door, unlocks it and explains he is the chief inspector. Two men are lying on their bunks in a stifling cell 6ft by 12ft, watching daytime TV. There is a birthday card, a loaf of bread and a packet of half-eaten biscuits on their shelf. You couldn't swing a hamster in here. "At least you have a curtain over your toilet," Taylor says.

'MANY OF THESE ADULTS HAVE NO COPING SKILLS. WE NEED TO HELP THEM GET BACK ON TRACK'

He has an easy manner, neither too intimidating nor too ingratiating, and the inmates are expansive. They explain that they are locked up 23 hours a day. "It's my 15th time in this jail," one of them tells us. "My eighth," says the other. "We were both addicted to heroin and crack." They're doing time for burglaries that funded their habit.

The older one misses his two kids. "They think I'm in rehab." Taylor agrees that's a sensible decision. The younger one got kicked out by his dad. He wants help to move areas when he gets out so he can start again, "Otherwise I'll be back on the same streets and tempted by my former friends."

BRITAIN'S PRISON RECORD

- England and Wales have more people serving life sentences than France, Germany, Italy, the Netherlands, Poland, Spain and Sweden combined.
- **Scotland, England and Wales have the highest imprisonment rates in western Europe: England and Wales is 130 in every 100,000 people, compared with France's 93.**
- The prison population has risen by 74 per cent in the past 30 years and is projected to rise by a further 20,000 by 2026 (from just below 80,000 to 98,700).
- **40,000 people were sent to prison in 2020: 63 per cent had committed a non-violent offence and 44 per cent were sentenced to serve six months or less.**
- For more serious offences, the average prison sentence is now 54.3 months – almost 24 months longer than it was in 2008.
- **The resource budget for prisons is 13 per cent lower in real terms than in 2010-11.**
- There are 12 per cent fewer front-line operational prison staff than in 2010.
- **There are almost triple the number of people aged 60+ in prison than there were 16 years ago.**
- 16 per cent of prisoners are serving an indeterminate sentence (no release date), up from 9 per cent in 1993.
- **34 per cent of people assessed in prison in 2017-2018 reported they had a learning disability or difficulty, compared with 2 per cent of the general population.**

Source: Prison Reform Trust Report 2021

Taylor inspected this jail last year. In the Eighties it was dubbed "the penal dustbin" after riots. Four years ago it was in special measures; now Taylor says it's "calm and well ordered". But he can't stop himself testing the showers before we leave the building. "They've mended them. That's good." We go outside to the exercise yard, covered in netting so drones can't deliver drugs. The warden explains it's not advisable to stand too near the windows because frustrated inmates lob out unsavoury liquids.

On another wing, a prisoner is working as a cleaner in his grey regulation tracksuit. "Why are we only getting 70p a session for our work?" he challenges Taylor, but they are soon chatting and he tells his life story. "I'm 41. Done a life sentence. Did the first seven years in a jail overseas." Taylor is intrigued. "You wouldn't want to inspect that. This is a five-star hotel in comparison. We had 40 in a dungeon, no running water or toilet. I've done all the London jails. I was an arsehole when I was young, but this is the best," he tells Taylor.

Why is he back in? "Went to a Liverpool v Inter Milan match on a couple of vodkas. Wrong place, wrong time, got into a fight in the pub. I'd just got myself a fried chicken and hot-dog shop. Thought I was out for good."

The inmate has four children and three grandchildren. "I was always a hypervigilant, anxious, scared child. Home life wasn't great. In some ways I cope better in prison – this one's got structure and routine." Last time he was in Pentonville. "They threw me out a day late. My missus had been waiting all day for me by the gate; she'd gone by the time I got out."

The noise on the corridors is continuous. Alarms sound every few seconds as another inmate wants toilet roll. Disgruntled prisoners shout abuse; the strip lights blare down. During the hour when they are let out, they mop their cell floors or queue for their provisions for lunch and breakfast the next day: Rice Krispies, a carton of milk, a sandwich, a packet of crisps.

In the library, the men are allowed to order romances, thrillers, recipe and travel books, but what they like most are the business guides or positive-thinking manuals. "They like Orwell too, but they all want to learn how to be an entrepreneur," says the librarian. "They say, 'Miss, you're better than Amazon Prime.'" Taylor asks how many can read. "Not enough," the librarian says. "It's so frustrating."

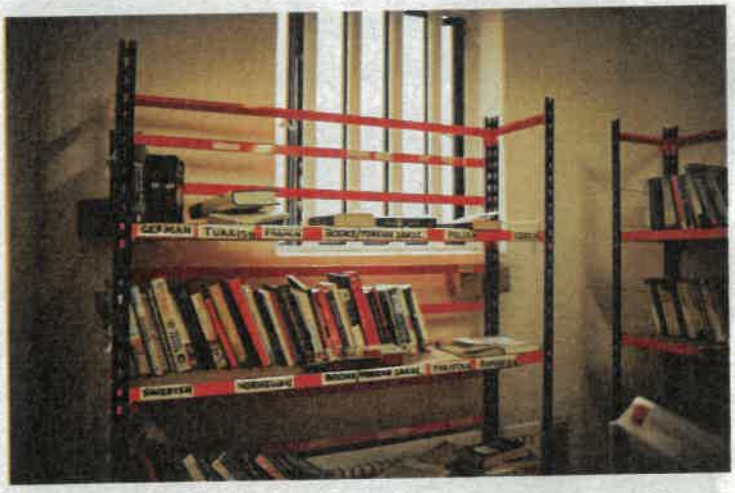
Taylor takes it all in. While some of his predecessors found the job demoralising, he seems to find it fascinating. The former teacher always worked with disadvantaged, challenging children who have often been "neglected beyond belief" or abused. Little shocks him. The joint of his finger is still bent from a fracture he sustained when he became head of the Willows school in northwest London and had to grab a ten-year-old boy

who tried to throw himself out of a window. The children would spit and scratch so much that he wore a nylon drip-dry suit. But he also introduced hugs and toast for breakfast and provided much needed sympathy and patience, managing to turn round many of their lives and set them on a different path.

Prison, though, is where some of his most complicated children ended up, so it seemed apposite that, after a period as the government's youth behaviour tsar, he became chief inspector.

He started in the middle of the pandemic. "I arrived in a very artificial world with prisoners in their cells 23 hours a day and sometimes locked up all weekends," he says in his first interview since taking the job. "I soon realised we had to keep the inspections going because we needed to let in light and oxygen."

Taylor in the prison library



When the rest of the country went into lockdown, prisoners went into double lockdown. "At the beginning many prisoners were more scared than the rest of us – terrified that Covid would rip through prisons and they might die without seeing their families again, so they didn't mind being incarcerated in their tiny cells day and night if it meant they were safe," Taylor explains. "Suicide levels went down, but they became more desperate when things began to open up on the outside and they were still very restricted."

Some prisons, he says, quickly spiralled downwards during the pandemic. "We saw rubbish pile up, excrement lying around, officers completely disengaged, sheets not changed for weeks, no clean underwear. When you are in prison you are completely reliant on other people doing things for you, so if you want deodorant, bedding or soap, you have to ask an officer. Prisoners were getting frustrated because they didn't know what was going on. They couldn't get any fresh air, go to the gym or have visitors. But if prisoners were let out, levels of brutality could go through the roof. No one felt safe, so it became a vicious circle."

But Taylor also noticed something else that made him sympathetic to their fury. "Their backstories were very familiar from where I once taught. There were the same stories of violence at home, lack of parenting, poverty, family involvement in crime and drugs. There have been very few surprises about people's backgrounds except with sex offenders, when you get a broader spectrum."

Taylor is an Old Etonian from a happy family. His father was a management consultant who helped devise Youth Training Scheme courses for difficult children, his mother's relations were also teachers, and they lived in Notting Hill in the Seventies when the paint was still peeling off the white stuccoed houses. He now lives close by with his wife, a primary-school teacher, and their three teenage children, and says he restrains himself from lecturing them on how lucky they all are.

He's not sure why he has always wanted to help damaged people. "I think the opportunities to see people make progress are more than you would get in other jobs. The complexities of their lives are incredibly interesting – where it's gone wrong, how they can be helped, what will motivate them."

His first job when he was at teacher-training college was at a small school near Cambridge. "There was this kid from a traveller background and he was deeply unsettled. I connected with him. He would be in trouble a lot and I was interested in what made him tick and how I could stop him going off the rails."

As head teacher of his school for problem children, he understood the importance of social and emotional learning. "Many of the children found it hard to socialise. They may never have sat down together, learnt to resolve conflict or look after each other. Some were still in nappies. We taught them to connect a bit more. We practised going to supermarkets, delayed gratification and other life skills as well as how to read, and had some amazing results."

He's gone from being the head teacher of 60 kids to looking after 80,000 prisoners. There are some similarities to prisoners, he now believes. "You can see that many of these adults haven't been given any coping skills. They are still like the children I taught: unable to understand how to interact with the outside world. You can say that prisoners are beyond redemption, but even in prison you need to have an expectation that they can change."

This is what drives him now. "We need to help them find a way to get back on track, even if we have come too late to prevent them going off the rails in the first place."

In an ideal world, he says, potential criminals would be helped at nurseries before their bad habits become hard-wired. "With children under five we could always make the most progress, but the acid test of whether we'd done our job properly when they left was whether they could walk away if someone threatened them on the bus. It's the same in prison – they need to know how to behave on the outside as well as inside."

Many of the young children he has taught had communication disorders so they couldn't speak and went round whacking people, or they couldn't hear or read properly. "We could short-circuit a lot of this becoming serious later on. Many prisoners have learning difficulties, a big proportion have dyslexia or ADHD or a traumatic brain injury."

He says he's never been frightened of problematic children, angry teenagers or irate prisoners. "I am trained in restraint techniques. Younger children are more dangerous in a way because they are less controlled and you end up getting kicked, punched and have things thrown at you. I once got punched by a boy who was 15 and that hurt quite a lot. But I've never felt fearful with the prisoners. Most just want to tell you their story."

Taylor understands society's desire to lock away "bad people". Some prisoners have devastated and even destroyed their victims' lives; some are beyond help and will always present an unacceptable risk unless they are incarcerated. But he says the emphasis on retribution rather than rehabilitation can be detrimental. "We put more people in prison than many other countries do, and it costs £45,000 a year, so it's an incredibly expensive way to deal with society's problems." Forty-seven per cent of adults are reconvicted within a year of release. "The more you can divert people from prison, the better. For many it becomes a treadmill. They see it as normal, like going to a job. It's amazing how many have been in 20 times before. It's a way of life."

What shocked him most, he says, is the age of many prisoners. Sometimes they pass him on Zimmer frames. "It's the appalling waste of life. With children you always have a sense of optimism, but with older adults their time has nearly run out to change."

There was a prisoner aged more than 100 who died recently. "I spoke to a 30-year-old guy yesterday and he has a 35-year sentence. A lot are now getting long sentences off the back of things like knife crime and gang activities and their lives are just disappearing."

Drugs is one of the few ways to alleviate the boredom, he says. "You are up against a very sophisticated multimillion-pound industry trying to get drugs into prisons. Prisons have got better at detecting them with body scanners and there are a load of dogs. If drugs are getting into prison with people chucking them over the fence, that is normally a good sign because that is a hard way to get drugs in. It's expensive and wasteful. If they are brewing their own hooch, that's seen as a good sign because it means prisoners are having to revert to making their own."

Food is a regular gripe. "The catering facilities in some prisons are antiquated and miles from the wings, so the food arrives cold." Taylor tries to eat at most prisons. "The food varies between hot dogs and a proper hot meal. There's one particularly revolting chip I will never get over. At least, I think it was a chip. In lockdown a lot got overweight. They had nothing to do and they spent any money they had on snacks."

He's also inspected five women's prisons in the past year. "Women are less violent than men. A lot are caught in a cycle of drugs but also mental illness, abusive relationships and homelessness. At one prison recently there were women who didn't want to leave because they knew they had nowhere to go. A prisoner in the North West said when she left she would get a taxi straight to where she worked as a prostitute because she needed the money for her kids. Other women would leave their property in the jail and ask them to keep it for

'SOME FEMALE INMATES FEEL SAFER IN PRISON THAN ON THE OUTSIDE AND THAT'S JUST WRONG'

next time. Some feel safer in prison than on the outside and that's just wrong."

After two female prisoners lost their babies in childbirth in horrific circumstances due to failures in care in the past five years, Taylor has made a point of visiting mother and baby units. "I can't make policy, but I can ensure that any policy is carried out as decently as possible."

It's surprising he hasn't yet succumbed to gloom. "It can feel very Dickensian even in the newest prisons. There is always something ominous about a jail and too often you can smell the feeling of despair even in the new buildings with great facilities."

But he thinks prisoners can change. "You have to believe you can help make a difference and I want to focus on two issues: leadership and education. Recruitment of officers is a massive issue. A few people will always want to be a prison officer. In places like the Isle of Sheppey there will be three generations of prison officers. But often it's just not seen as a career. Governors aren't even paid as much as head teachers for an incredibly demanding job, yet those who are engaged, efficient and curious make all the difference. Governors who don't have the same grip can destabilise a prison very quickly. Officers also matter. If you have a wing that runs like clockwork, where the prisoners feel safe and listened to and bad behaviour isn't tolerated, everyone is happier."

Education is also vital. "The idea that you can do a four-year sentence and be unable to read when you come in and when you come out feels like an enormously wasted opportunity," he says. According to the Ministry of Justice, 57 per cent of prisoners have literacy levels below that expected of an 11-year-old. "There are an awful lot when you talk to them about their life stories who will say, 'I didn't go to school,' or, 'I moved school the whole time,' or, 'I was kicked out of school.' But if you're functionally illiterate you can't apply for bank accounts, jobs, trainee schemes."

The problem, he says, is that offenders' education is low on any prison's priorities. "Governors spend more time worrying about security and not enough about purposeful activity. You lose your job if a prisoner absconds rather than being promoted if they learn to read and find a job when they leave."

He realises that it's unrealistic to assume there will be much government money to supply more teachers, but he says prisoners would benefit vastly and quite cheaply even if they were just given a tablet or iPad so they could access learning programmes.

The public, though, aren't keen on spending money on prisons. "For understandable reasons people don't feel a lot of good will towards prisoners. But the question I always ask is, 'What do you want to happen to them when they come out, as almost every prisoner will at some stage? If you want them to be paying taxes, working, taking care of their families, then you have to give them the support they need when they are in prison. If they aren't helped to change, it's likely they will go back to making people's lives a misery."

There is this fear that prisons will become too luxurious, he suggests. "Most people have no idea how awful prison is; I'm not sure I would survive a sentence. But desiring retribution is an instinctive human emotion." This isn't about prisoners having wonderful Christmas parties, duvets and an array of comforts, Taylor says. "It's about education and it's worth the money teaching them to read."

Those with severe mental health issues shouldn't be in prisons, he stresses. "At a women's prison recently there were four women who were causing huge distress to themselves and staff – hurting themselves, screaming. The prison couldn't force them onto medication to stabilise them as they can in hospital. These people are put in prison because there is no hospital space available. We came across a woman who had attempted to take her life four times by jumping in front of traffic. She was arrested for a public order offence and put into prison on remand. That's insane."

Does he understand women's fear that they could be locked up with a trans woman and abused? "Some women are fearful that a predatory trans woman could be sharing their prison cell with them. That's understandable and it does raise concern among the public. But prisons are doing far more now to make sure that they have specific areas for trans prisoners, for example HMP Downview in Surrey has a specific wing for trans women."

Taylor says he's not a natural do-gooder. "I fell into teaching. I wasn't one of those people who from the age of ten thought, I am going to go off and save people. I just always felt that you shouldn't give up on anyone just because they were difficult or had made some mistakes or went down the wrong route."

He's not envious of friends who went into the City and made millions and now live near him in Notting Hill. "I think, good luck to you and thank you for paying the taxes that allow me to do a useful, stimulating, fascinating job. I have a much more interesting job than them, I am sure. The people in jail have the most extraordinary stories and so do the staff. I couldn't say that about most bankers." ■