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Special Edition
Closing and Opening Prisons

Interview: Prisoner A

Prisoner A was detained at HMP Kingston, and was one of the last prisoners to leave the establishment, staying on to help with the physical decommissioning work. He is interviewed by **Vikki Levick**, Head of Security at HMP Leyhill. The interview took place in January 2014.

VL: Could you describe your time at HMP Kingston before the closure announcement?

PA: Up until the announcement it was a relaxed jail because it was all lifers there. I had been there since 2010 and through the whole time I was there I only saw two incidents, and both of those I would describe as handbags at dawn. Even though there were a lot of quite notorious people there, it was a steady jail and was very quiet. Originally I didn't want to go down to the South, and Kingston is about as far South as you can get without getting put on a boat to the Isle of Wight; but actually it was a very good place to settle in to. You got a three month settling in period, which helped. It was a relaxed sort of place, and everyone got on.

VL: Was there any anticipation amongst the prisoners that Kingston would be closed?

PA: A lot of the old lifers knew it was coming. There were rumours that any Cat C that had less than 500 prisoners would close, so a lot of lifers knew it was coming. We didn't want it to close, because it was a good jail; but it only boils down to money at the end of the day. Some of the staff knew it was coming too, I'd been told by my personal officer that it would come, and it would only be a matter of when.

VL: How were you informed that Kingston would be closing?

PA: Certain prisoners were told by their personal officers, or other staff they got on well with. There was a note that was sent around to everyone's cell, but by that time everyone already knew.

VL: What were you told were the reasons for the closure?

PA: We weren't really told anything, but everyone assumed it was down to the money. It was a very small prison.

VL: How did you feel when you heard the news?

PA: I felt a little bit wary as I was waiting for my move to open conditions when the announcement came. There were some bits missing from my parole document, so it was taking time for the Secretary of State to sign off on the parole board's decision to award me my Cat-D. I thought that I would be going to North Sea Camp, which is nearer home for me, but as I stayed behind to help close the print shop I ended up coming to Leyhill. I came to Leyhill at the end of February 2013 and I was one of the last twelve to fourteen prisoners left.

We had to empty all the shops, take out the beds etc... we had to gut everything, the only things that could stay in the cells were the toilets and wash basins, everything else had to come out. It was a lot of work. When there were only a few of us left it was really eerie. It was very quiet. We were just unlocked and left to get on with the work we needed to do. I miss a few of the staff there. My personal officer, an officer from the OMU, my psychologist and my boss in the print shop too; they were all good staff that I miss.

VL: How did other prisoners respond to the news?

PA: There was a lot of fear as people didn't know where they were going. People were able to put in requests but that didn't mean you'd get where you wanted to go. They changed the VP unit in Bullingdon into something they called the Kingston Unit, but it didn't really work. It was meant to be a Cat C unit but as soon as you left the unit you were back in a Cat B. They also two-ed people up, a lot of people didn't want to share cells. They were lifers and weren't used to having to share cells. At other jails you got your own cell if you were a lifer. Let's just say that a lot of people that went there ended up in the Segregation unit because they had to share cells. Some people got good moves though. There was a lot of fear about where you would end up.

VL: How did the staff respond?

PA: They were as apprehensive as we were I think. They didn't know what was going to happen to them either. I'm not really sure how it worked for them but I think they got a choice of two or three jails and if they didn't want to take them they would just get put somewhere and have to go there. I know a lot of people took redundancy or retirement. My personal officer took retirement. There was a lot of fear of the unknown for them, just like us.

VL: How was the transfer of the prisoners managed and what issues did this create for you?

PA: There's two ways to answer this really. Some were happy as they were transferred to good jails, or ones they chose to go to. For those that had to go to Bullingdon though, they weren't happy. It felt like they were going backwards as they had to go back to a Cat B jail and Bullingdon did not have a good reputation. The Kingston Unit wasn't any good, it was just a Cat C unit in a Cat B jail and being two-ed up was a major problem. I was happy because I thought I was going to

North Sea Camp. By going there I would be able to build back up my family ties, which weren't as good after I had to come south. I stayed behind though and ended up coming to Leyhill instead, the space I had saved at North Sea Camp was taken by someone else.

VL: Did the closure impact on your ability to complete your sentence plan/interventions in a timely manner?

PA: No not really because I had already been awarded my Cat D, I was just waiting for it to be signed off when the announcement came. The delay in my Cat D though meant that I didn't get to go to North Sea Camp and I stayed back to help with the clearing of the prison.

Our allocations officer pushed to get me a Cat D spot though and managed to get me into Leyhill. It was very quick and I only had 24 hours notice before I transferred to Leyhill.

VL: Did this have any impact on your family/friends in the community?

PA: Yes. I don't get visits at Leyhill because all my family live in the North and it's too far to travel down here. If I had gone to North Sea Camp I would have been able to have visits. Also I knew North Sea Camp, because I had served my first sentence in there when it was a detention camp in 1976. I haven't tried to get a transfer up there though, even though I'd like to. It's because getting a transfer up there would put me back another 6-12 months and I feel better the devil you know now I am settled in Leyhill. I have a good job in the kitchen here, a good room, and I have people I get on with here. I would like to be in North Sea Camp though, I would like to see my family and I would like to get the chance to hold my youngest grandson, but it's just one of those things.

VL: Looking back, has the closure had any significant impact on you or your fellow prisoners?

PA: I can't speak for the other lads. There are people that have gone to other prisons that I miss. You can't really write to them though, as they don't like you writing to other cons here and you have to think too much about what you write in case your Offender Supervisor or psychologist look at your letters. I have some magazines that used to be published in Kingston and looking back at them, it's funny how much Kingston changed over the years, but the staff were always good staff. The staff you didn't get on with just left you alone and the ones you got on with you really

got on with. There were only about 200 in there, so it was like a little community. We were going to have some new opportunities in the print shop, because some new contracts were due to start, but when the announcement came they stopped, and those opportunities will never happen now.

VL: How does it feel to be one of the last prisoners left in such a historic prison?

PA: I don't know really. It's a hard question to answer. You saw a different side to staff there than at other jails. It was a relaxed jail. There was no bullying or anything like that; it just wasn't put up with, the staff sorted anything if it started. They did loads for charity there too, especially up at the gym, they

would do all sorts. A friend of mine, who's been there too, had to go and pick some kitchen equipment up from there a while ago, to bring back to Leyhill and he was able to have a look around. He said it was really strange seeing it again but with no one in it. It's somewhere I'd like to go back and have a look around one day now that it's quiet.

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