

PRISON SERVICE JOURNAL

September 2014 No 215



Special Edition
Closing and Opening Prisons

Interview: Stephen Lake

*The Very Reverend Stephen Lake, the Dean of Gloucester, was in post in January 2013, when it was announced that HMP Gloucester, the local prison, was due to close. He was interviewed by **Martin Kettle**, Home Affairs Policy Advisor for the Church of England. The interview took place in March 2014.*

MK: Could you describe your involvement with HMP Gloucester before the closure announcement?

SL: I had not had any contact with prisons in my ministry before coming to Gloucester, other than occasional fundraising and visits to the cathedral where I worked previously. But Gloucester prison is just a stone's throw away from the cathedral, and in arriving here I wanted to meet as many people as possible. It seemed right to make the connection. I simply rang up the prison governor out of the blue — it was only a name, I had never met her. It was useful — one person leading an organisation meeting another one. So I went for a visit; they were surprised to be asked, they were not quite sure where it would go or what I had come to do. For me it was interesting to see inside the prison, and she took me round and introduced me to some of those in their care. From there we built a relationship upon which was based what then happened.

MK: Did you go in on a regular basis after that?

SL: No, only twice. Part of the story is that I invited their senior management team to visit the cathedral — I went there a couple of times and they came here on a couple of occasions, over about a year. Soon, though, they were told that they were going to close.

MK: Over that year, did you get an impression of the place of the prison in the community?

SL: There were about 350 people who worked at the prison, so in a city that has had a lot of the centre taken out of it, the prison was a significant employer, and because the prison has been there for many years, there is quite a sense of history to the place. There was an understanding that the prison was a part of Gloucester, and not a negative part.

MK: Did your initial contacts lead on to anything else?

SL: Yes. It turned on an occasion when I asked if their senior management team had ever visited the cathedral at all; 'No' was the answer. We do this thing here when initially making contact with partners: I get them along and give them an informal tour of the cathedral, and take them up the tower. Most places in Gloucester you can see from the tower, and it was

good for them to be able to look down on the prison and have some fun, and then come to the Deanery for tea. So that was getting to know them — no problem. Then what happened was that a call came from them, out of the blue, because one of the prisoners had committed suicide. The senior managers were not churchgoers, but because that had happened, there was obviously an impact, and they wanted to give me the name, so that we could put the name in the prayers in the cathedral. They thought that I wouldn't read the name out, but with agreement I did, and they felt comforted that they could refer to someone outside, rather than the tragedy being literally locked in. So that was a positive thing we could offer. The next thing that happened was that we were beginning to talk about the choir going there at Christmas, in the prison chapel — but they closed before that could be done. And then they sent me a photo taken from inside Gloucester prison: someone had taken it, and felt it was really important to say 'that is what you can see when you're inside' (it was a photo showing the intricate stonework of the cathedral rising over the barbed wire of the prison perimeter). You can see a bird flying over, giving that sense of freedom. The fact that that came from them showed they were beginning to get a sense of the spiritual dimension to what we were doing. We also entered into negotiations about whether some of their inmates could come to the cathedral discreetly, on the basis that as some of them might be approaching parole or release. They needed to be able to go to places nearby, public places, where they could leave at a certain time and report in that they had been there, and be back at a certain time: and we were happy to accommodate that. That was something practical that we could offer. Also I arranged for the governor to come to the Bishop's Breakfast, which is a three-times-a-year meeting of local leaders — so now as well as the Chief Constable, and the Lord Lieutenant, and the Bishop and the Dean, and leaders in education etc there was now the prison governor as well. She now felt she was part of the bigger picture, not just on her own. I invited her to come and read a lesson at the Carol Service, so it said 'Governor of HM Prison Gloucester' on the service sheet. Again, it was just bringing the jail into wider public relationship.

MK: It was all going so well — and then ...?

SL: Then the news came that they were going to close — which was a remarkably quick turnaround, something like six weeks or two months. And again a phone call came from the prison, saying 'We need some way of ending, and we're not quite sure what to do; can we come en masse (staff, not prisoners, of course!) to an Evensong?' We said yes, and I made the arrangements. There were about 40 members of staff past and present, with some of their family members, and even some ex-prisoners, who had been in the prison and stayed living in Gloucester. They read the lessons, took part in the prayers — and for them it was a degree of closure. And a week later the prison was gone. So I think really this was at the level of the cathedral saying 'we're here, you're here, what do we need to do to help each other?'

MK: Did you get much reaction in the wider community to the closure?

SL: There was a lot of disappointment in the community, locally, because of the employment, but also — I think Gloucester has had a shaky history, with Fred West, and the shoe bomber, and it was the first place to have riots after the metropolitan centers two summers ago (although we didn't really do the riot very well), and there were mixed feelings, because when you've got names of people who have been in that prison, it's quite good to get rid of that stigma. But what we have now is a much bigger issue, which is that great empty carcass of a building, which is currently up for sale, and is right in the middle of a major regeneration piece of land, which is either going to enable — depending on who buys it — the regeneration of the centre of the city, or be a blight upon it, just simply because it's there. Nothing has been sold yet — there are lots of ideas floating round. Now what we have is something that was a place of employment, a place of understanding that it had always been there and was ok, to being a potential eyesore, or white elephant. So the prison is still very much talked about, as much when it is empty as before.

MK: So you didn't have any notice — the SMT hadn't let you know what was coming?

SL: They really didn't know, not at all. They got a telephone call, and they were just told by the Ministry of Justice, at very short notice. So it really shook them,

employment-wise, and because the prison has been here so long, there were generations of families in the city who had worked there.

MK: Do you think most people who had worked there were local people?

SL: Oh yes — and getting new jobs has led to a lot of them moving away. People think of prisons as places where prisoners go, rather than places of employment that contribute to the local community.

MK: So there has been an impact on businesses and other organisations in the city?

SL: Certainly — for example the local paper shop has seen its business go downhill sharply, just by having been the nearest one to the prison. These things happen, don't they, but you've still got this great big building there that looks like a prison.

MK: Does that link in with any of the other ways in which public sector reforms and cuts have affected Gloucester?

SL: I think there is a cumulative effect in the area of regeneration. Gloucester is a town that was blighted by the planners in the Sixties. It used to have more listed buildings than Oxford; a lot of them were taken down. So we have great parts of the city that need to be redeveloped — and that is the biggest piece of land, that the prison is standing on and adjacent to. Therefore it is a big

factor in the multi-million pound package that is going to have to be put together. I in fact bear some responsibility in this. The Regional Development Agency ceased to fund urban regeneration companies with the change of government, and so the urban regeneration company that was responsible for all of this disappeared. The local council became responsible, and they set up what is called a Regional Advisory Board, which is a voluntary, honorary group of key people who both advise and challenge the Council on regeneration issues. And here, they asked the Dean to be the Chair. So, not only was I involved when it was open, but now I am still involved because with me as chair of that board, which is involved in higher negotiations with the Ministry of Justice and others about its sale, the church is directly involved in the regeneration issue, in its disposal as well as formerly in its life as a working prison.

MK: Looking back on this story, what sort of lessons would you take from the closure, what

Now what we have is something that was a place of employment, a place of understanding that it had always been there and was ok, to being a potential eyesore, or white elephant.

advice would you offer to the prison service and to government when they consider prison closures in the future?

SL: I think that economic decisions must have within them the understanding that there are human consequences. For example, I wonder what the costs were in closing a prison — and I think most of us thought that it probably should close, because it was so out of date — but the costs in relocation of staff, and the impact on places that are struggling for regeneration, and then the closure compounds the problem. And I think that the main priority is joined-up thinking — so for example selling the prison to the highest bidder is not necessarily the joined-up thinking that is going to be working in partnership with the county council, city council and other

landowners to develop this great big site. So by moving out, they cause a problem. They need the capital receipt, to build other prisons with, but it then becomes a problem for Gloucester, rather than for the government. The advice is, in summary, to recognise that these places which have been prisons for many, many years involve a wider impact than simply the economic imperative that a Victorian prison needs to be closed. Prisons are parts of the local community — and what was an active prison is now an empty shell that could be an obstacle to the economic development of Gloucester. So the big issue in closing a prison is — what could its future use be? And I think government has a responsibility to answer that question rather than the sale just being an item at the bottom of an accountant's spreadsheet.



**Prison Service Library
& Information Services**

PSC Newbold Revel

Delivers a quality Library and Information Service to staff working in HM Prisons. Provides access to Prison Service related information to other organisations in the criminal justice system.

For further information:

Tel: 01788 804119
Fax: 01788 804114
Email: catherine.fell@hmps.gsi.gov.uk