

The Life of a Prison Officer

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MANY YEARS AGO—30 to be precise—a shy, country girl reported for duty at Aylesbury Borstal Institution for Girls. It had been a wearisome wait for appointment after application; 18 months, in fact, but at last instructions were received for joining. Seven of us arrived that day, but one left the following morning.

The six who remained were taken in hand by a senior officer, and issued with the very odd uniform of the time. This consisted of a mauve striped cotton dress, with stiff collars and cuffs, a leather belt with leather pouch attached, and a hideous white muslin bonnet with two streamers or strings which had to be tied in a bow! The training lasted for two months, at the end of which the trainees were posted to various prisons. Usually one was retained at Aylesbury.

Miss Barker was the Governor at that time, and was well loved by the inmates.

Her methods of dealing with delinquents were somewhat un-

orthodox. If a girl stole food from the kitchen—be it jam or dripping—the girl would be shut in her room until she had eaten a pot of jam or a pound of dripping.

“Smashing” was very rife in those days, and the punishment was bone smashing. So many pounds of bones had to be pounded fine enough to pass through a wire sieve and then weighed. On one occasion a girl was given 56 pounds of bones to smash: but the smashing of room equipment continued. Night after night the emergency bell rang, and the officers left whatever they were doing—some were in bed, others were cooking, or in the bath—and ran to give assistance. All staff lived in quarters, inside the grounds, and all were single, or widows without home ties.

After a while, Miss Mellanby became Governor and changes were introduced. The bone-smashing was terminated, and the offender was ignored as far as was possible. She was made to stay

in the room she had smashed, minus all the furniture she had damaged. It was noticed after this, that the mirror was never broken, although everything else had been totally destroyed. One girl had even twisted her iron bedstead into grotesque shapes, but the deprivation of furniture and the weeks spent without pay finally stamped out the smashing. The food at that time was wholesome, but very plain and monotonous. Tea was the last meal of the day, consisting of bread and margarine one night, the following night bread and jam, the third night cheese, and a hard rock cake called "clinker" by the girls, was issued once weekly. Cocoa and one oat biscuit were issued at 7.30 p.m.

During 1935 the staff were told they need no longer wear those hideous muslin caps, streamers and bows, and great was the rejoicing.

Even the girls rejoiced with us. And at about this time, or the following year, the old mauve striped cotton dresses became obsolete and we wore bright blue moygashel dresses, with tussore collars and cuffs. The belt was supposed to be worn underneath the dress, with a slit at the side of the dress to enable the wearer to reach her keys! It was felt, I believe, that it was not good policy to allow inmates to see keys!

At the outbreak of war in 1939 the majority of the girls were discharged, partly to make room for women prisoners from Holloway, Birmingham and Manchester,

Borstal officers were transferred to prisons and prison staff, with their respective charges, to Aylesbury. My posting was to Birmingham, where four very happy years were spent in spite of the air-raids.

What a dark and dismal women's wing there was at Winson Green, and how very orderly and quiet the prisoners, after borstal girls! The man Governor was very strict, and reports on the women's side were unheard of. What a lot there was to learn for an officer fresh from borstal! As I was in my seventh year it was assumed I was a fairly senior officer, and was conversant with all duties, consequently I was put in "Receptions".

The prison "cleaner" was excellent and she showed me and told me exactly what to do—even to writing on the commitment. She told me whether rings were valuable or commonplace, and helped in every possible way. I shall always remember this woman with gratitude.

At Aylesbury we were not allowed to see a record or a commitment, and we never did escort duty. My first escort was to an Assize Court, and again it was assumed I would know the procedure, but I was so overawed and overcome that I can only recall a kindly policewoman placing a chair for me and holding smelling salts to my nose, when I was supposed to be attending to the prisoner in the witness box,

Duties were soon learnt, however, and all were enjoyed, whether in the laundry or workroom, Receptions or Library. In the smaller prisons the post of librarian is only part time, and at Birmingham it was combined with Chaplain's Officer and letter censor.

The women from the Midlands appeared to be rather dull and apathetic, but this was possibly due to the anxiety of the war years, and the almost nightly air-raid warnings. The staff were always around and on duty when the raids were on, unlocking the really nervous women and "jollyng" them along, and on duty the following morning, in spite of having been up half the night. They were a grand lot of colleagues, and a happy staff.

Then came Holloway—with its noise and its bustle, and "Bedlam" as one daily newspaper described it at that time. It was understandable—"doodle-bugs," with their horrible "cut-outs" were a menace—followed by those ghastly "rockets". Nerves were strained to breaking point, and we were all becoming a little weary of vegetable soup, three times weekly, served in the Mess, for lunch! But V. E. Day came, and a party of us made our way to Buckingham Palace and dutifully chanted "We want the King". And walked the whole way back again, as there was no transport!

Gradually the "New Look" seeped into Holloway. Many more classes were started, cocoa was served to each woman during the

evening, and very gradually, colour crept in. The old brown paint was scraped from walls, and cosmetics were issued.

The staff position also improved, owing to a trickle of ex-Service girls joining. Women officers were admitted to the Training School at Wakefield.

Promotion came along, and it was discovered that the life of a Principal Officer could be very full and satisfying. Each Wing brought its problems and interest, and as we moved around almost weekly to these various Wings, our knowledge broadened.

Eight very full and happy years slipped quickly away in Holloway, and promotion came once more—this time to the women's wing at Durham Prison. It was with regrets and sadness that I handed in my Principal Officer's uniform, knowing that it had been worn for the last time. From now on it was to be mufti.

The women's wing at Durham was small and housed up to 50 women. The staff were temporary officers who had been exceptionally well-trained and were second to none. It was a very happy little prison, with the healthier atmosphere one associates with a "mixed" prison. There were, at that time, up to 800 men housed there. This was the place where one would really get to know and understand each woman personally.

They were a very docile, well-behaved section of the prison population, and the peace of the

women's wing was only shattered occasionally by a borstal recalcitrant sent us from time to time by Miss Mellanby.

We were also the Corrective Training Recall Centre during this period, and I had the privilege of starting the Preventive Detention Rehabilitation Scheme for Women.

This was not an unqualified success, however, partly owing to unemployment in the North East.

There was no woman Assistant Governor at Durham so that her duties were performed by the Chief Officer, but as the house provided was inside the walls, night visits held no terrors!

And Durham City—a place always visualised as grimy and squat—in my mind, was enthralled. That wonderful old cathedral, perched snugly on a hill, and the beautiful river Wear, coiling around the city.

A very pleasant interlude, this, but changes were pending and after three years or so, once again I found myself in Birmingham Women's Prison. What a contrast, though, from the old war years. Gone was the green and yellow paint, and the gayest pastel shades were in evidence everywhere. A very useful and instructive Domestic Training Course was running, and the laundry had the most modern and up-to-date equipment. There were two principal officers, a larger staff and an Assistant Governor, who, to my horror, had ousted the Chief from her traditional office! However, as always there were

compensations, and I very quickly resettled.

This was in 1956 and for the first time in my service, my official quarters were outside the walls, and I soon realised what a difference to one's well-being this made. The early morning walk, even in Winson Green, could be quite enjoyable, especially when the blackbirds started to sing. And sing they did, enchantingly, even in that insalubrious district.

The quarters provided for the women staff were excellent. The Hostel was styled on a Nurses' Home, and was light and airy, with wonderful parquet flooring.

The Chief Officer's flat was compact and comfortable—entirely self contained, and parquet flooring throughout, with ample cupboard space. The whole place was centrally heated, and was set back from the main road, therefore not unduly noisy.

They, too, were a wonderful staff, hardworking, efficient and loyal. They worked a long day, from 7 a.m. until 5.30 p.m., and rarely were they on the sick list. It was a great loss to the Service when so many of them resigned on the closing of the women's wing.

The years here, as in all previous stations, slipped quickly away, and a final promotion was offered. This was to Holloway, as Chief Officer Class 1. For the second time I found myself reporting for duty at Holloway Prison, but no doodlebugs or rockets this time!

Instead, a Holloway with a "New Look." A new Governor, new systems and ideas, the Norwich Scheme fully operating, complete with Group Counselling, and a more enlightened staff, kindly, thoughtful young women for the most part. The wings had been, or were being redecorated, with attractive colourings and each wing was a small prison within itself, with its own complement of staff. An ideal arrangement, really – if only there were sufficient officers to go round. Never had young officers "had it so good," and never was "In short supply" more evident. Why cannot young women be recruited for the Prison Service? Given the staff, it is a calling of the highest order, both worthwhile and wonderfully satisfying.

Thirty years ago, women and girls were locked in for the night at 4 p.m. They had received their bread – a small cob loaf, a pat of margarine and cocoa – yes, cocoa, as the last meal of the day at 4 p.m.! And ship's cocoa at that, made from blocks of chocolate. Tea was not issued until after the outbreak of war, and it was very satisfactory to see their pleasure when tea was given.

The foregoing is a sketchy account of one woman's career in the Prison Service. Through the borstal institution – the only one for girls then – through mixed prisons and through Holloway twice: detailed to assist in the opening of Hill Hall Open Prison, and serving under 13 Governors, eight of whom were men.

The life has been absorbing, enjoyable, at times frustrating, but mostly satisfactory and, given the choice if it were possible, I would choose it again as a career.

After the war, conditions quickly changed. Evening classes developed, recreation and association increased, canteens became well-equipped as earnings increased. At the outbreak of war, newspapers were not allowed, and the Chaplain or a member of the staff was detailed to read the news in the workshops. After a while a few newspapers were allowed for each wing. Then radios were installed, and inmates were allowed to buy personal newspapers and magazines.

Officers' uniform was redesigned once more – this time similar to that worn by women police officers. There is a complete change pending at the present time.
