

Sad Saga of the Chaplain of Reading Gaol

L. A. PORTCH

THE FOLLOWING extracts from the Visiting Justices Book of Reports, Orders and Observations for the County Gaol, Reading, Berks., tell their own story. What a pity the chaplain of the day has not left his comments to make us aware of the full picture instead of us now only being half aware of this extraordinary struggle.

23.8.1862. We have considered the application of the chaplain for our opinion as to a period of the day being set apart for teaching prisoners to sing the hymns appointed for the Sunday services; we feel that such considerable objections exist as to prevent our sanction being given.

27.9.62. The chaplain allowed five pounds to purchase books of instruction.

18.10.62. On perusing the chaplain's journal for the present week we observe certain suggestions in respect to want of ventilation and the use of the chapel as a school for the instruction of the prisoners in reading their Bible and we are of the opinion that the experience

of past years renders it undesirable to make the alteration proposed. We further notice, with infinite regret, that the chaplain has made his journal of gaol duties a channel of remark upon the observation of magistrates in Quarter Sessions assembled.

8.11.62. The visiting justices do not think themselves justified in spending any more money on the organ: the sum of ten pounds has been paid out as recently as 1858.

15.11.62. The visiting justices are willing to have the barrel organ repaired subject to their approval of the estimate and direct the use of the finger organ to be discontinued for the future.

10.1.63. The governor reports that the Inspector of Prisons has been here this week and expressed himself satisfied. His attention was called to the complaint of the chaplain regarding ventilation and he had no alternative to suggest.

14.3.63. Porter, the schoolmaster, having been reported absent without leave has stated that the chaplain had undertaken to men-

tion the case to the governor which had not been done. The governor, only, can give leave to a subordinate officer and the chaplain's attention is called to Rule 131 in reference to his own responsibility which appears from his journal for 26th, 27th, 28th February not to have been adhered to by him. The justices find it necessary to require the observance of rules respecting the discipline of the gaol.

21.3.63. The visiting justices have read the entry in the chaplain's journal of the 21st inst. and again beg to refer him to their minute of the 14th inst. which they request he will adhere to in future. Schoolmasters are subordinate officers in the opinion of the visiting justices.

8.8.63. The chaplain wishes for 10 days absence on leave but the substitute he proposes is not able to undertake the duty.

15.8.63. We regret to observe from the chaplain's journal from the 10th inst. that the chaplain has been absent during the week without having submitted the name of any clergyman as his substitute for the approval of the justices in obedience to Rule 131. The consequence has been that unauthorised strangers have done chapel duty but the prisoners have not been visited. It does not appear to us that so marked an infraction of the rule involving an example of disrespect and neglect of county interests can be passed over without serious remark requiring

explanation. Should such explanation not be satisfactory the obvious course will be a report to the Quarter Sessions.

29.8.63. The justices have read the chaplain's note in his journal of this week and retain their opinion exercised in former minutes. To prevent further irregularity they have to request that the chaplain will in future act in strict compliance with Rule 131 which requires that a chaplain wishing for leave of absence shall obtain the approval of the visiting justices of any substitute proposed to take his duty before leaving the establishment.

19.9.63. The justices will be glad to receive from the chaplain previously to the end of the gaol financial year at Michaelmas a statement of the amount on hand and distributed of Mrs. Deane's charity fund. It would be of advantage also if we were informed of any cases in which the chaplain proposes to make allowances to prisoners about to be discharged, previously to their making grants for the same purpose in the weekly discharge paper.

26.9.63. The justices have no doubt about the Act 24 & 25 Vict. placing the disposal of Eliz. Deane's charity at the discretion of the chaplain—for the time being. But as administration of the fund is in the chaplain's hands only as an officer of the county for the benefiting of gaol prisoners,

it is obvious that the justices and their chaplain should mutually desire an annual account to be placed on record. If, however, the chaplain should wish to consider himself an irresponsible distributor of a gaol fund the justices would be ready to refer the matter to the Quarter Sessions as regards the annual record. As regards the weekly discharge papers it is not interfering in the chaplain's discretion to request that any sum intended to be given to a discharged prisoner may be noted on the weekly paper so that the same prisoner may not be paid from county funds unnecessarily.

31.10.63. The justices regret that the chaplain finds difficulty in providing them the information they asked for solely for the purpose of saving the county unnecessary expenditure in reference to discharged prisoners but probably the course they have decided to effect may be obtained if the chaplain will take the earliest opportunity in his power in acquainting the governor with the amount the chaplain proposes to give outgoing prisoners.

23.1.64. The adoption of the visiting justices' report to the Epiphany Sessions sanctions further the proposition of the chaplain in reference to the services of the schoolmaster and the course of instruction suggested by the chaplain.

20.2.64. Reply sent to a letter of Canon Ringrose of the 16th inst.

Leave of absence granted to the chaplain for the 25th and the two following days under Rule 131. With reference to the case of Pat McDonald (lately a prisoner) mentioned in the chaplain's note in reply to the justices minute of the 13th inst. the justices tho' of the opinion that questions of discipline more correctly come within their authority than that of the chaplain do not desire to express any dissent from the course hitherto taken in general cases. They do, however (to avoid misunderstanding), request that the chaplain will in any matter of discipline affecting prisoners of a church or religious persuasion differing from that of the established Church, communicate with the justices before taking a course similar to that taken in McDonald's case.

23.7.64. The chaplain applies for leave of absence from the 30th July to 9th August and proposes as his substitute the Revd. John Gregg, the present chaplain of the Royal Berks. Hospital. Leave granted on his engaging *first* to obtain the consent of Mr. Gregg to do the duties of chaplain and also the permission of the governors of the hospital. Thereto such assent and permission to be made known to one of the justices before the chaplain gives up his duty.

25.8.64. Leave of absence granted to the chaplain. The duty to be performed by Mr. Gregg.

15.4.65. The chaplain having

produced medical certificates stating the absolute necessity for a total relaxation of all duties and proposing to nominate a substitute at his own expense, subject to the approval of the justices—Rule 25 refers. We concur in opinion that the proposition should be accepted and the arrangement submitted to the Quarter Sessions. The chaplain is requested to name the substitute he proposes and to instruct that gentleman as to the duties of chapel services and visiting the prisoners.

22.4.65. Chaplain attended and produced names of substitutes for his duty during his absence on sick leave.

14.10.65. The chaplain has returned to duty after absence since April.

5.4.66. In answer to the three questions asked by the chaplain in his book on this date the following answers are returned:

1. We are not aware that it has ever been considered the duty of the chaplain to undertake ministerial charge of warders or their families residing in the borough and not in the gaol.

2. The families of officers living in the grounds of the prison are within the sphere of the chaplain's duty.

3. The chaplain is not to wait to be asked to visit officers ministerially but is to consider them equally with prisoners under his charge.

2.5.66. The chaplain resigns his appointment. Informed that it is accepted. He is asked whether he wishes his salary to continue to the end of the quarter, he providing a substitute to be approved by us, or whether his salary is to cease from the time of substitute undertaking the duties—also whether he wishes to remain in the house until the end of the quarter.

11.5.66. The chaplain states that he should expect his salary to cease as soon as a substitute can be engaged but would wish to retain the use of the house until such time as he has completed his arrangements.

25.5.66. The chaplain left on Sunday 19th.

15.6.66. Testimonial for the chaplain considered only.

There are no further entries of any sort in the ensuing pages relating to the new chaplain or his acceptance of the discipline and control of the day. Such an absence of comment after such a spate over the previous two years can only lead us to surmise that his successor was much more amenable and quiescent than the un-named reverend gentleman whose one-sided battle with authority is recorded above.

It must be some relief to the chaplain of today that his journal is not inspected weekly by the visiting justices and that he is not subject to the same sort of control as that in vogue 100 years ago.