

'Old' England to 'New'

J. F. W. BRIGHT

DURING AUGUST of last year my wife and I were fortunate to be spending a holiday with relatives in New Jersey, U.S.A. Although limited to a three-week stay, we covered many miles and visited several places of interest.

With the help of the Governor of Exeter Prison and the Prison Department, I was able to obtain permission from the Director of Prisons, Washington, D.C., to visit the Federal correctional institution at Danbury, Connecticut, an experience that proved interesting and instructive, particularly to one who is serving in our own discipline ranks.

We commenced our journey on a fine August morning, with approximately 200 miles ahead of us, charging our way along the New Jersey turnpike, towards New York, where, upon arrival, we were confronted with the well-known maze of motorways and fly-over networks, and after much confusion and frustration, we managed to navigate ourselves on to the route for Connecticut, a sigh of relief from

me, at least, as we left the hazard of the organised, but very heavy New York traffic.

As we approached the town of Danbury, the countryside became much more "English", the hedges on the roadside, and the surroundings generally, reminded me of home. With a feeling of some expectancy we were travelling on the last four miles from Danbury itself to the correctional institution, and it was now that we saw on the right-hand side the tall watchtowers, this being the only indication that it was a prison.

We entered the main drive and when about halfway towards the establishment, motorists and pedestrians were requested to stop by a prominent road sign, where we were challenged by means of an inter-communication unit erected at the roadside, this being operated by the officers in the tower keeping observation.

After proving our identity, we were given permission to proceed to the parking area. The establishment was located on reasonably

high ground and open country, giving panoramic views surrounding it.

Built in 1946, at first sight, this prison gave one the impression that it was a modern factory, with its well-kept lawns and flower beds, making an excellent setting.

A feeling of optimism became apparent now as I made my way to the main entrance, with the old "trusty" working on the lawn nearby casting an inquisitive eye. I had now forgotten the first thoughts of the "Yankee jails" as they are often quoted, to find something quite different and unexpected.

After meeting the associate warden at the main entrance, who very kindly invited my wife and my relatives to accompany us, we were given an interesting tour of the prison.

The building was constructed in such a manner that the administration block, workshops and inmate accommodation, formed an oblong perimeter, the centre area being used for exercise and outdoor games, thereby giving no need for a prison boundary wall.

All windows faced inwards towards the compound and the construction of the buildings were such as to make escape difficult.

Two entrances gave access to the building, one main entrance and a

contractors' entrance, the security of the building being integral, except for an outer perimeter wire fence and the observation towers manned by armed officers.

The main entrance being double swinging glass doors leading to a small foyer which contained seating accommodation for visitors and kept under full observation by two gate officers enclosed in an armoured glass protected office.

Persons permitted to enter were required to state the reason for visiting on an occurrence sheet which was duly signed and passed to the gate officer through a small aperture, and at this point access was made through an inner and outer gate, both controlled by electronics. The contractors' entrance was under the control of a separate gate officer at the far end of the building.

Communications and security, the issuing of keys, was supervised in a locked control room which was equipped with a telephone switchboard and indicators, also a V.H.F. radio for internal use, patrolling officers having walkie-talkie radios during evening and night duty. The alarm indicator board was installed in this room, and any communications with the police department was made by telephone.

Two resident medical officers supervised a comprehensive hospital unit, part of which included an

operating theatre and a dental surgery.

Other facilities included a gymnasium, cinema, library and classrooms for evening educational activities, civilian teachers being employed for this purpose.

Religious services were taken in the prison chapel by a resident chaplain, attendance at any religious service was voluntary.

The population of inmates was approximately 600 and consisted of men serving sentences from three months to five years, and were classified as trainable persons.

Inmate accommodation consisted of a reasonably large, but secure, dormitory and two cell blocks, one of which included more elaborate cell rooms, these being occupied by men employed on the "work release programme".

Inmate labour was under the supervision of a superintendent of industries, and the workshops were run by similar methods as our own, background music being played while work was in progress, the average earnings for a 40-hour week inside the prison was approximately 40 dollars, but subject to variation according to industry. Inmates were encouraged to earn and so assist dependents at home. Canteen facilities were available for those who wished to make use of it, and of course not forgetting the popular "snout box" for those who were short of a smoke.

Each inmate had his own personal locker, this being operated by a

combination lock, a master key being held by the authorities for the purpose of searching.

Open visits were allowed under supervision, inmates being subject to a search at the termination of the visit.

A large dining hall provided accommodation for all inmates to eat at tables for four, a self-service counter being situated at one end of the room, the rear of which included the kitchen area which was completely sealed off from the dining hall, and a notice displayed the choice of two menus for the day.

During leisure time inmates could exercise freely in the compound or relax in their cells or dormitory, these being unlocked during the day, except those rooms of men working out, there was no regulated exercise period. Television was available for those permitted to use it, this was installed in a room set aside for this purpose.

A number of suitable inmates were employed in civilian industry, working day and night shifts; transport was provided to convey them to their place of work and they were located in the better-equipped rooms as I previously mentioned, but were kept segregated. This working programme was under the control of an "employment placement specialist".

The reception and discharge office did not retain any property of inmates, all sundries and valuables being held by relatives or persons held responsible by the inmate. A

selection of new clothing was available on release subject to the inmates' needs.

Men being released by the parole board were assisted by the employment specialist in obtaining a suitable job of work, this being in conjunction with a release board consisting of management and union representatives.

As a matter of interest, during the tour I noticed the uniform worn by the correctional officers was very much the same colour grey as that

of the inmates, you may think perhaps this is demure and in keeping with the training system advocated at this type of institution, but it was the endeavour of the warden and his staff to run a secure but relaxed establishment, evidence of this was illustrated in a film produced and compered by the warden, Mr. Frank Kenton, which was shown to us at the end of the tour, this depicted his conscientious effort to rehabilitate those in his charge.

CONTRIBUTORS

NORMAN LOW joined the Prison Service in 1948 and until 1957 worked in the clerical office at Feltham, being then promoted to assistant governor and serving at Rochester, Wormwood Scrubs and Blundeston. Since 1967 he has been principal of the Officers' Training School at Wakefield.

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