



PRISON SERVICE  
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# Obituary

## John Dring — Prison Governor

*Brendan O’Friel is a retired prison governor and founding member of the Prison Governors Association.*

The last thirty years of the twentieth century proved to be extremely turbulent for the Prison Service in England and Wales. Riots, escapes and staff industrial action beset the Service. Rising prisoner numbers since 1946 had left Governors and staff struggling with acute problems as they tried to run greatly overcrowded establishments with totally inadequate accommodation and facilities. This was the background to the career of John Dring, one of a generation of Prison Governors who steered the Service through these extraordinarily difficult times.

Dring was a quiet, thoughtful person but with the strength and determination required to meet all manner of challenges. He had deeply held values that shaped his life and his work. A particular difficulty was the unprofessional behaviour of a small minority of staff. From his early years, if he identified such bad behaviour by staff towards prisoners or young offenders, he made it very clear that this was unacceptable and that each individual should be treated with dignity. Such an approach helped set the tone in establishments in which he worked. He quickly developed into a kind but firm, fair and open minded Governor, always ready to listen to both staff and prisoners and to give credit where it was due.

Dring had a talent for encouraging initiatives that improved penal establishments especially developing positive regimes that provided prisoners with better and more demanding activities. Through improving their education and skills, such regimes helped reduce re-offending on release. This was especially the case when he was in charge of Aylesbury. He took over an establishment in a very poor condition and transformed it into a much safer prison where positive activity was encouraged to flourish.

He had a considerable passion for music and opera and was delighted when others — including prisoners — had the opportunity to develop and share that interest. This was an interest he carried into retirement.

Dring was born in Oxford to Walter and Annie Dring. Walter was the last owner of a long established family business originally running horse-drawn carts, and latterly coaches, between Oxford, Headington and London.

He was educated at Southfield Grammar School where he joined the Air Training Corps. After unsuccessfully pursuing an external degree from London University, he joined the RAF. Quickly realising that to progress, a degree was important, he left the RAF and returned to London University obtaining a Sociology degree.

In September 1969, he married Jennifer Butt also from Oxford. Jenny and he had known each other for a number of years.

After exploring several career options, in 1970 he was appointed to be an Assistant Governor Class Two in the Prison Service. After eight months training at Wakefield Staff College, he was posted to Manchester’s Strangeways Prison to work with young offenders in the Borstal Allocation Centre. This large Victorian prison gave him valuable early experience of the problems Governors faced from the pressures of overcrowding and poor conditions in which prisoners had to live and staff had to work.

A posting to the recently opened Wellingborough Borstal, Northamptonshire followed in 1975. While this was a great contrast from the Victorian buildings of Strangeways, problems still abounded. Here he was introduced to the complex relationship between Governors and the Prison Officers Association, some of whose national officers worked at Wellingborough. This experience would be invaluable when he came to work at HQ in 1983. After two years he was promoted to Assistant Governor Class One and was posted to the Prison Officer Training School at Leyhill in Gloucestershire as a tutor. He was at Leyhill at the time of the Queen’s visit in 1978 to mark the centenary of the Service.

In 1981, he was posted to Leicester Prison as Deputy Governor. He had been advised that he needed wider experience before he would be considered for further promotion. Leicester was a small but challenging local prison with a Special Security Wing which contained a small number of very difficult prisoners. Leicester was also recovering from the disastrous escape from an escort two years earlier that led to murders and a critical inquiry into security procedures. Small, but full of challenges, Leicester provided Dring with the wider experience he needed.

Further promotion to Governor Class Three followed in 1983. He was posted to P6 Division in Headquarters to grapple with the complex national staffing and industrial relations problems, solving which had become a major priority for the Service. Consequently he was involved in the preparatory work for the important Fresh Start initiative which, in 1987, transformed many penal establishments.

He was given his first command at the relatively new establishment, Featherstone Prison, near Wolverhampton in late 1985 on promotion to Governor Class Two.

After two years, he was transferred to take charge of Aylesbury Young Offenders prison. This housed young offenders serving very long sentences in a curious mix of Victorian and more modern accommodation. Some of his best work as a Governor was transforming Aylesbury. The Phoenix Trust — an organisation he was to work with over many years — also contributed to the many improvements he achieved.

He was promoted to Governor One in 1990, and posted to the newly developing Prison Service College at Newbold Revel near Rugby. He held the post at a time of particular turbulence and change following the 1991 Woolf Report which required considerable improvements and innovation to be delivered across the Service. This was followed by further unwelcome disruption: a fresh surge in prisoner numbers following the impact of the political slogan 'Prison Works'. Dring worked carefully through each new problem as best he could and produced the first Prison Service Training Plan.

Further promotion to Assistant Director at Headquarters followed in 1996 requiring him to

supervise groups of establishments, a task he undertook with success.

Unfortunately just as she was promoted to Head of Department in her school, Jenny developed significant health problems so Dring took early retirement in 2000 to provide support for her. For the next decade or so, he was heavily committed to providing care for Jenny, especially in the period leading to her final illness and death, a task he undertook with remarkable fortitude and cheerfulness. Jenny died in January 2013.

In retirement, Dring was involved with a number of charities including Kids VIP- of which he became Chair — and the Prison Phoenix Trust.

A measure of his reputation was that the Service asked him to join a mentoring panel to provide support for Governors. He also contributed for a number of years to Assessment Centre work for the Police and Fire Services. Between 2003 — 2019, he was a valued member of the Grendon Advisory Board.

In 2017 he was diagnosed with Motor Neuron Disease with increasing restrictions on his activities. In 2018 he married Midori Fachiri. He and Midori had bonded through their mutual love of opera. Midori's two adult daughters also became close to him.

He remained cheerful and positive over his remaining years, still showing a keen interest in the work of the Service. Midori cared for him devotedly until the end as MND grew worse.

In addition to Midori, he leaves two children. Simon is a Senior Executive in a technology start-up and Sarah who is taking a break from a career in IT Management to be a 'stay at home' mum.

John Dring died on 30th January 2021 aged 75. He was born on 21st January 1946.