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Returning to HMP Durham prison 30 years on:

An ex-prisoners perspective

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Introduction

Several weeks before I started writing this article, I was invited to deliver a talk to an audience of academics, prison governors (past and present), prisoner charities, educators and university students at HMP Durham Prison Officer's Club. My talk was about my journey from prisoner to criminologist and I was one of several other speakers taking part in what was a celebration marking the end of the first Inside-Out Prison Exchange at Durham University.¹ This wonderful incentive involves university students studying alongside prisoners on a 10-week criminology programme — something that was praised by the Chief Inspector of prisons, Nick Hardwick.² The day also marked a very different occasion from a personal perspective as 30 years to the day I was incarcerated in HMP Durham which was the second and final time I would be sent there. My time in HMP Durham was also when I first got the 'bug' for education. During my talk I stated, 'I never particularly want to go back inside a prison again', but fortunately, my offhand remark didn't deter the prisons Learning, Skills and Employment Manager, Lynda Elliott and the governor, Tim Allen, from asking me if I would like to do just that. They believed that prisoners could benefit from hearing about my journey. I ate my words spoken earlier and immediately agreed and when that day finally arrived it would become a life changing experience. The main thrust of this article is to compare two very different institutions — HMP Durham 1985 and HMP Durham 2015 — however, I have also drawn on some of my experiences in other prisons where I served two different sentences within two different decades. This enabled me to contextualise different inmate cultures and regimes of those periods. I will also discuss some of the main points raised in the 2013 inspection

report about HMP Durham³ which highlighted a number of very important issues both good and bad with recommendations for change. These will link to the main themes I talk about.

I was released from HMP Durham in July 1985 promising never to return, but as I said earlier, it was a promise I broke 30 years later — albeit this time as a visitor. However, it wasn't the first time I had seen inside a prison since my release day in 1985 because in 1995 I was held on remand in the then newly built HMP Holme House which now accommodated Teesside prisoners which in the past HMP Durham had done. But this was the first time I had ever been invited to any prison as a guest and when I did return to HMP Durham in 2015, it was inspirational to see the many changes that had taken place within the prison culture as a whole and to feel the positive vibes from staff and prisoners.

Although I went back to HMP Durham with my eyes wide open I was not prepared for what I was about to encounter. I entered the prison from three different perspectives — as an ex-prisoner, an educator and a research student. As an ex-prisoner I was amazed at the changes that had taken place since I was a prisoner in HMP Durham; as an educator I was impressed by the new incentives such as prisoners having the opportunity to work towards NVQs in relation to their specific job roles. I was also enthused by the staff vibrancy and the prisoner's thirst for learning and improving their prospects after release. I left the prison a changed person that day with a completely different outlook of a prison that once only conjured up bad memories.

Changing prison culture

When I was sent to HMP Holme House in 1995, I immediately noticed a significant change in the prison culture from what I had experienced a decade earlier inside HMP Durham (changes that were both positive and negative). But the 1990s was a major turning point

1. HMP Durham University Inside-Out Prison Exchange Programme, [online] 15 April 2015. Available at :< <https://www.dur.ac.uk/sass/crim/insideout/>>[accessed 15 April 2015].

2. Hardwick, N. 2015. *Prison Research Network Conference*. [April 28 2015] Leeds Beckett University, Leeds.

3. Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Prisons., *Report on an unannounced inspection of HMP Durham*. [Online] 2-13 December 2013. Available at :< <http://www.justiceinspectorates.gov.uk/hmiprisons/>>[accessed 14 August 2015].

of its deep rooted problems in prisons and an overzealous disciplinarian prison officer culture associated with Victorian designed prisons such as HMP Durham and other similar prisons including HMP Armley (Leeds), HMP Strangeways (Manchester), HMP Wandsworth (London), HMP Walton (Liverpool), to name a few. Eamonn Carrabine reminds us of that prison culture dominated by a structured form of authoritarian brotherhoods manifested in a 'strong canteen culture...and the celebration of hard drinking and their associated ethic of hard men doing a hard job'.⁴ In his book, *Punishment and Prisons: Power and the Carceral State* (2009), Joe Sim echoes this saying, 'even when there were policy changes as Carrabine labels the 'uneven transition' from authoritarianism to professionalism' — 'an aggressive confrontational approach to prisoners continued to characterise interactions'.⁵ But in the main, the once disciplinarian male dominated prison officer culture Carrabine talks about, drastically changed following the Woolf report in 1991 which came as a result of the HMP Strangeways riots.⁶ However, despite these changes, and according to David Scott, 'it had not completely been eradicated, he claims, as there still exists a number of prison officers — especially those who consider security, discipline and control to be central to their working practices — who exercise power through their personal authority'.⁷

I also noticed how the staff/prisoner relationship was significantly different to how I remember in HMP Durham. The old school prison officer Carrabine talks about had now been replaced by a more modern, easy going prison officer. The disciplinarian prison officer culture was long gone and had been significantly changed by the equal presence of female prison officers.⁸ Toilets and washbasins had replaced slop out buckets and it wasn't frowned upon to make conversation with prison officers. But one of the most positive changes in prison culture (in my opinion) was

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the introduction of female prison officers working on the prison landings in what was once strictly hyper-masculine territory.⁹ It created a significant shift in the prison culture affecting both prisoners and male prison staff whereby male prisoners began to experience and demonstrate a more sensitive side to their behaviour. Ben Crewe's 2006 study of male prisoners' attitudes towards female prison officers showed that for some prisoners, female prison officers had a more positive influence, but as mentioned earlier — David Scott points out that despite the absence of the once prison officer disciplinarian culture, there was still an element of prison officers exerting their personal authority.⁷ The most negative and oppressive vibes I could feel when I returned to prison in the 1990s came from the all encompassing drug culture¹⁰ that infected the very fabric of the prison environment and whereas a decade

earlier I was in the majority of non drug taking prisoners, I was now in the minority (a straight head) as people like me (non drug users) were labelled by drug users.

In terms of the changing inmate culture of the 1990's, it wasn't just drugs that contributed to these radical changes nor was it just in the UK as it began to change on both sides of the Atlantic according to Wacquant¹¹ who refers to John Irwin's revised 1990 book *the Felon*¹² where Irwin claimed that 'there was no longer a single overarching convict culture — a

social organisation — as there tended to be decades earlier when *the Felon* was written in 1970'. Wacquant's analysis¹¹ and the rapidly changing inmate culture coincide with a surge of multiculturalism within UK prisons during the 1990s.¹³ In the early/mid 1990s foreign prisoners accounted for 8 per cent of the total prison population rising to and remaining consistent at around 13 per cent by 2003. Poland, Jamaica and the Irish Republic are the countries with the most nationals in prison. The Prison Service also attempted in vain to combat racist prison officer cultures by implementing a

4. Carrabine, E, (2004) cited in Sim, J (2009) *Punishment and Prisons: Power and the Carceral State*. London: Sage, p. 57.

5. (ibid).

6. Woolf Report (1991) *Prison Disturbances April 1990*, Cm 1456 HMSO.

7. Scott, D (2011) *That's not my name: Prisoner deference and disciplinarian prison officers*, *Criminal Justice Matters*, 84:1, 8-9, p.8.

8. Crewe, B (2006), *Male Prisoners' Orientations towards female prison officers in an English prison*. *Punishment & Society* 8: 395-421.

9. Ibid.

10. Crewe, B., (2005) *The Prisoner Society in the Era of Hard Drugs*, *Punishment and Society*, 7(4): 457-481.

11. Wacquant, L (2001) *Deadly symbiosis. When ghetto and prison meet and mesh*. *Punishment & Society*. Vol 3, No 1. p.95-134.

12. Irwin, J., (1970 [1990]) *The Felon*. London. Prentice Hall.

13. Berman and Dar (2013) *Prison Population Statistics*. www.parliament.uk/briefing-papers/sn04334, 108.

comprehensive race relation manual; training events and a race relations liaison officer yet despite this, problems still persisted throughout the 1990s.¹³

Slopping out

As I mentioned earlier, when I returned to prison in the 1990s I noticed that one of the most important and much needed changes that had taken place was the ending of 'slop out'. Slopping out which was described by the 1991 Woolf report⁶ as being 'a symbol of the inhumanity which existed in prisons', was once a major characteristic of prison life. It was supposedly abolished in 1996 though it took much longer for every British prison to completely dispense with it. Apart from being unhygienic, it was degrading having to perform bodily functions in full view of other prisoners and staff when they were doing roll check. I recall the degrading ritual of 'slop out' commencing each morning around 06.30am where rows of weary looking prisoners carrying plastic chamber pots full of human waste would make their way along the landing to dispose of its contents along with plastic bowls to fill with water for washing and white plastic jugs to collect drinking water. In those days we didn't have toilets and washbasins in the cells because HMP Durham dated from the Victorian era and wasn't originally designed to have toilets. Three times a day we were unlocked to dispose of our stinking faeces and urine into large sinks situated in a recess area at the foot of each landing.¹⁶

Temperers were frayed as it was far too early in the morning to be suddenly woken by a bright light and a bang on the door by a prison officer bellowing 'slop out!' only then to be then hit by the overpowering aroma of human waste. There was one toilet in the recess area and if you could get there before someone else beat you to it, you made the most of it. I never thought using a toilet could ever be such a luxury, but it was at times like that, I realised just how much I had taken everything in life for granted. The disadvantage of the toilet though, was that the cubicle door was only waist height so when everyone was crammed in

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the packed recess area slopping out, you were on full view. We were all used to not having any kind of privacy though. We had to perform our bodily functions in the presence of two cellmates but there was sort of a mutual respect where we always gave one another as much privacy as possible.¹⁶ In 2013, according to the inspectors, there were still some issues in HMP Durham regarding privacy, where they claimed that cells had inadequately screened toilets.¹⁴

As the morning 'slop out' ritual unfolded, a prison officer would visit each cell with a wooden box containing our individually named razor blades. The paper which our razor blades were wrapped in had our names written on to make sure we got the right one because we used the same blade every morning for that week. It was a rule to be clean shaven unless you made a formal application to grow facial hair as this was classed as 'changing your appearance'. Once we'd had time to shave, our razors were then collected back, but while we were waiting for the prison officer to come and collect them, we would quickly use this period to slice our matches into four quarters so they would last longer. It was quite a skill to do this while making sure the sulphur remained intact.¹⁶

Meal times

Meal times were always the highlight of our day — something that has remained a consistent factor of prison life. Lunch would consist of something like chicken or vegetable pie, mash and gravy with duff (pudding) such as sponge and custard. At tea time around 4:30 pm it was a lighter meal with perhaps chips and ham and a different piece of fruit each day. Each night around 9:00pm when we were all safely locked behind our doors for the night, a prison officer and a kitchen orderly would go around the landings with a tea urn perched on top of a trolley and a tray of cookies left over from earlier. It was these small but significant treats that made a grim situation more bearable. The 2013 report shows that many prisoners were dissatisfied with the food in HMP Durham, but a survey showed that 18 per cent of prisoners thought the food was good with few issues raised.¹⁵

14. Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Prisons see n. 3, p.42.

15. Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Prisons, see n. 3, 14.

16. Honeywell, D.M., (2014) *Never Ending Circles* (2nd ed). Beehive books, 71-94; Honeywell, D., *Doing Hard Time in the United Kingdom* In Richards, S (ed) (2015) *The Marion Experiment: Long-Term Solitary Confinement and the Supermax Movement* Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 203-221.

Purposeful activity

The 2013 inspection also showed that although fully employed prisoners had reasonable time out of their cells too many other prisoners were locked up during the working day. There was a lack of activity places but the prison paid good attention to education and vocational training where peer workers were used effectively to support learning. I could see the positive emphasis on education and work since the ending of the factory styled workshops designed to mass produce mail bags, football goal nets and army camouflage nets. The mailbag shop used to be run by the one and only female prison officer (a total comparison from today). She sat perched high on a chair at the head of the large room overlooking four rows of prisoners machining away earning their two-pence per bag. One day after realising I hadn't sewed a single stitch; she had me escorted back to my cell. She actually did me a great favour that day because several days later I was placed on education classes which would be the beginning of a life changing career in education.¹⁶

Lost in the system

Although I only spent a total of 14 months incarcerated in HMP Durham, it was a place that became embedded in every part of my being. Some of the inmates became lost within its system and it was quite common for prisoners to serve their entire sentences — sometimes up to three or four years in HMP Durham. Such was the effect of its pervasive culture, HMP Durham prison became part of my very existence. My life had become so entrenched in the masculinity of the environment that the chances of integrating into a more civilised, humane prison environment, would be very difficult — as I discovered when I was transferred to HMP Castington Young Offenders Institute (YOI) in July 1984. This transfer was a complete waste of time because my 21st birthday was just three weeks away which meant I would no longer be a Young Prisoner and would then need to be transferred back to HMP Durham. HMP Castington YOI had all the facilities that HMP Durham didn't. We had washbasins and toilets in our cells, there were no cockroaches and we spent a lot of time out of our cells. We had a dining hall to eat our meals in and the

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activities were excellent. Everyone was employed, there was a modern and well equipped gymnasium and prisoners who liked to keep fit were allowed to run within the perimeter of the fence. The staff/prisoner relationship was much more personable and I was quite shocked to see friendly banter between prison officers and prisoners. As I mentioned earlier, this was something frowned upon in the adult estate. This sort of behaviour was seen as fraternising with the enemy and could result in swift retribution from your fellow prisoners. But despite the disciplinarian culture⁴ of HMP Durham I couldn't wait to get back there which, as I said earlier, was inevitable once I turned 21. The modern, prisoner-friendly institution of HMP Castington (YOI) disrupted my sense of self — mainly because of the immaturity typical of YOI inmates. I had become

accustomed and dependent on the militarised and masculine structure of HMP Durham. It was a system focussed on punishment rather than rehabilitation — an arena fraught with tension, mounting anger and mutual contempt — a pressure cooker waiting to explode. The 'us and them' mind-set dominated the prisoner/staff relationship in HMP Durham with constant mind games¹⁷ each trying to always get one over on the other — yet I still felt I belonged there.

Staff/Prisoner relationships

Staff and prisoner relationships have always been an issue in every prison and something that should be continually addressed. There will always be a constant flow of staff and prisoners entering and leaving prisons, therefore, in order to maintain equilibrium, the relationship between both is something that needs to always be monitored. According to the 2013 report, many prisoners didn't feel they were treated with respect which the inspectors said their observations confirmed with many prisoners feeling they were victimised by staff. As I observed during my two sentences, this was something that made prison time much harder than necessary and begs the question of whether offenders are sent to prison to be punished or as punishment. The report says that staff engaged well with prisoners and demonstrated a supportive and caring approach but that a significant number of staff did not show adequate care or support for prisoners which had a disproportionately negative effect on

17. McDermott, K and King, R.D. 1988. *Mind Games: Where the action is in prisons*. British Journal of Criminology Vol.28 No. 3, p. 357-375.

relationships. Also many staff displayed a disinterested attitude towards prisoners — as at their last inspection — and most interactions were superficial.¹⁸

If prisoner/staff relationships are to be improved, then it is worth addressing robustly as strains between the two can have huge implications on how a prison performs. In the 1980s, the growing resentment between staff and inmates continually festered which often resulted in skirmishes behind closed doors. As I've already said though, this culture along with its grim conditions of the day was not unique to HMP Durham. It was typical of the prison culture of the time. But it should never be forgotten that many prison officers were also faced with the same oppressive, disciplinarian culture from the same domineering element as were the inmates which of course led the riots at HMP SrangeWAYS (Manchester) six years later.

Equally it should never be overlooked that there were as many well-meaning prison officers as there were bad prison officers with the essential 'firm but fair' approach who did a good job and in return received the men's respect. And in 1984, I was fortunate to become acquainted with one such prison officer called Mr Coates. He somehow managed to arrange it for me to attend education classes after I was dismissed from the mailbag workshop (I mentioned earlier). Mr Coates, who I remember as a mild mannered, very approachable prison officer — will have merely regarded his gesture as being nothing more than 'all in a day's work'. For me it was a life changing experience for which I shall be eternally grateful because it was that brief gesture that started to change my life. But more than that, it was a prison officer going out of his way to help a prisoner for whom he felt sympathy. And more importantly, an act of kindness from someone who felt I was worth making the effort for. I wish I was able to tell him that the foolish young 20-year-old who he made that gesture for 'came good' in the end and went on to make a success of his life. He may never know but at least I am able to continue similar gestures through my teaching.

Medical Care

One aspect of staff/prisoner relationships that was fraught with tension as I remember was between medical

staff and prisoners. Medical care was always a major issue throughout my time spent in prison during the 1980s and 1990s and though I never needed medical attention in HMP Durham I did in HM Castington (YOI) in 1984. For troubling the duty doctor one Sunday afternoon when I was suffering agonising migraine, I was punished with three days cell confinement. This punishment was made worse by the intense heat and direct sunlight streaming into my cell. We were punished for covering our windows with sheets or blankets so I had to suffer instead.

Medical care in prison was an aspect to prison life that was in dire need of reform across all category prisons. The 2013 report stated that in HMP Durham, 'patients were not seen quickly enough in reception and waited too long in the waiting room but on a positive note, the new health clinic was a huge improvement. 'Health

provisions had differing views about some prescribing practices which was unsatisfactory', however mental health services were excellent'. Registered mental health nurses — a specialist occupational therapist and forensic psychiatrists provide an excellent range of interventions for common, complex and serious mental health problems.¹⁹ With around 90 per cent of the prison population having at least one diagnosed mental health disorder and one in ten with a serious mental health issue, HMP Durham's positive focus on mental health is very encouraging.²⁰

April 2015

April 2015 marked the 25th anniversary of the HMP Strangeways (Manchester) riots that helped put an end to the brutality of the past prison culture I have continually referred to in this article. However, although now in the past, approaching the main gates of HMP Durham was one of the most nerve racking, daunting experiences since being incarcerated there three decades earlier. Fortunately, Dr Kate O'Brien criminology lecturer from Durham University and module convenor of the Inside/Out programme had asked if she could come along. Having her there made a difficult start to the day much easier than had I been alone. While I was waiting for Kate, my mind immediately reverted to inmate mode as my imagination ran wild — expecting things to be just the same as when I left. I rang Kate to make sure she

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18. Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Prisons, see n. 3, 32-33.

19. Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Prisons, see n. 3, 41.

20. Singleton et al, cited in Sainsbury Centre for Mental Health (2009) Briefing 39 *Mental health care and the criminal justice system* p.2.

was still coming. She told me to meet her in the café just inside where I bought a coffee. It was a friendly place. I relaxed a little. I suddenly noticed an office directly opposite the cafe where several prison officers were sat overseeing security yet I didn't feel intimidated by them as I would have expected to. For some reason they were not paying any attention to me. I wondered why I wasn't receiving icy glares of suspicion and disdain. As my imagination had gone into over drive I had fully expected to be met by several old school prison officers who would impatiently search me and place my belongings in a box to collect on my way out. Yet the only indicator that the old school prison officer culture ever existed came from a tunic displayed in a glass cabinet along with other various historical artefacts thus giving out a clear message that it all belonged in the distant past! It was enough to reassure me that beyond the next gate I could expect a different world.

A Sense of Purpose

It soon became apparent that the disciplinarian culture²¹ of three decades earlier was now extinct. I didn't hear a single raised voice or witness one icy glare. There was the same familiar fencing surrounding the exercise yard I had in the past spent many hours circling but now flower beds surrounded the pathways. As we walked through the myriad of corridors, we eventually entered an office where we were invited to take part in the early morning meeting about the day's education and training agenda and any issues that needed to be raised. I was drawn in by the whole energy within the small office and everyone's enthusiasm. I was even more amazed when I was asked for my opinion at the end of the meeting along with everyone else. To everyone else this would have seemed normal — to me it was another clear message of how much things had come full circle. I knew I was a different person to the one who was once a prisoner, but when this is reflected by the way others behave towards you, your sense of self is greatly empowered. The friendly banter and energy amongst staff was infectious and as the day continued, there were a catalogue of positive surprises. Therefore it comes as no surprise that the 2013 inspection identified the prison's 'strong focus on employment in developing prisoners' skills for successful resettlement. The report

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also identified, 'good management, with collaboration between the prison and the Offender Learning and Skills Service and National Career Service partners to drive improvements. 'Learners in vocational training and work developed high standards of commercial skills which enhanced their employability and improved their self-esteem and confidence'.²¹

Provision of activities

Visiting the various workshops, I was amazed by the level of skill some of these men demonstrated through their work. The traditional monotonous mailbag shops as I remember were replaced by IT skills and the once laborious chore of sewing goal nets had now been replaced with furniture craft where prisoners were creating works of art any major furniture store would be proud to sell. Ironically the fabric once used to sew goal nets was now being used as seat covering for small wooden stools. There was a printing workshop with impressive high tech equipment for all types of printing then as we made our way from one workshop to the next another historical artefact caught my eye. It was a large black and white photograph of the one of the mailbag workshops where I once worked (albeit briefly) displayed on the wall.

The modern workshops and employment incentives are highly praised in the 2013 report: 'The vocational workshops that provided about 35 places for brickwork, plastering and painting and decorating units at (level 2). Vocational training was offered in a good range of employment related subjects in well resourced environments. Staff made good use of their expertise to deliver effective demonstrations and individuals lacking in new skills'. This was something I also witnessed in their mentoring business skills class. 'Prisoners working in the kitchen completed NVQs in food hygiene and received first aid and health and safety training; survey workers received food hygiene and British Institute of Cleaning Services training'.²²

Every contact matters

The staff work towards an 'every contact matters' concept which was highlighted in an earlier edition of the Prison Service Journal by Ian Mulholland in 2014:

21. Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Prisons, (2009), 15.

22. Ibid, p.42.

*We used the term 'Every Contact Matters' because it neatly encapsulated the idea that however small or fleeting, experience and the desistance research shows that even the most common day-to-day interactions between everyone who works in a prison and prisoners can and do make a difference. Importantly, altogether if each of these contacts is positive, their cumulative impact can be profound. They make a difference to the tone and culture of institutional life which becomes self-perpetuating: when positive this helps not only promote safe, decent and secure conditions but potentiates the benefits which 'what works' literature shows that the delivery of services which meet prisoners' criminogenic needs can realise.*²³

The governor's keenness for this concept was clear to me from the outset and this resonated with mine and Mr Coates encounter all those years earlier. The prisoners I met on the education block were no longer just using the classes to escape the confines of their cells as in my day but rather using them to improve their skills and education. These classes would have matched any vibrant University seminar. The first class Kate and I participated in was for gateway prisoners which includes a five day induction/assessment of newly arriving prisoners. You could see the anger and fear on some of their faces which reminded me of the feelings I experienced when first entering the prison. The second class was a mentor group with men interested in setting up their own businesses. They asked me a lot of questions about the barriers I encountered when job hunting with the stigma of the ex-convict label. They were all fascinated of how I overcame them. They told me I was an inspiration but it was they who inspired me.

Conclusion

No matter how well a prison performs and works towards improvement, there will always be criticism

and room for further improvement. HMP Durham is continually working towards this. I soon began to realise that this was not the prison I left behind in 1985. The talent that the prison holds only highlights the wasted skills of the men and the need for employers to look beyond the crimes and more towards what these individuals can offer. I left the prison a free man again with the option of never returning except this time I couldn't wait to return. My lasting memories of HMP Durham being a place of brutality and degradation have now been replaced by a place of progression and forward thinking. The brutality has faded into insignificance where it firmly belongs. Today's culture in HMP Durham prison is one of moving forward, acceptance and support. I no longer felt emotional because of its bad memories and the resurfaced emotions but instead because of the changes I saw for myself- emphasising towards prisoner's needs. I am not for one moment suggesting that HMP Durham won't have its fair share of problems as with all prisons. That's just the nature of imprisonment. Clearly I will view HMP Durham differently through the eyes of someone whose life is now incomparable to the life I lived 30 years ago. And as the Chief Inspector of prisons, Nick Hardwick, explained to me two weeks after my visit, I would probably still feel the pains of imprisonment if I was an inmate in HMP Durham. This is true because the nature of prison is to deprive one of their liberty, but there is no mistake that HMP Durham has changed drastically from the institution I once knew — but essentially and more importantly — so have attitudes. HMP Durham is now a place where staff want to make positive changes. Walking out of the gates and leaving the prison behind didn't leave me with the sense of freedom I had felt 30 years ago, it was walking into the prison that made me feel a sense of freedom — free from a past that no longer exists and free to help others who are about to embark on the very same journey as my own.

23. Mulholland, I. (2014) *Perrie Lecture 2013: Contraction in an age of expansion: An operational perspective in Prison Service Journal* No. 211 p.14-18, p. 17.