

Obituary

Roland Adams — Prison Governor

Brendan O’Friel is a retired former prison governor

At the end of the Second World War, the Prison Service was in serious difficulties having lost accommodation to bomb damage and being simultaneously faced with an unexpected and sharp rise in the numbers of prisoners. This was compounded by staff shortages as older Governors and Officers — who should have retired but stayed on for the duration of the war — took their pensions.

To face these challenges, the Prison Service embarked on a special recruitment process for Governors for a ‘Reconstruction Period’ taking advantage of the availability of ex-service candidates, most with considerable war time experience. Those recruited — over several years — were given a common seniority date of 1st January 1946 — with the proviso that seniority was to be according to age.

Roland Adams was one of the youngest to be appointed as a junior Governor during this ‘Reconstruction Period’. In later years he would rather ruefully reflect that his youth was given as a reason for not promoting him as quickly as some of his older colleagues.

Adams quickly stood out as a talented and committed Governor. Colleagues particularly valued his integrity, his high personal standards together with his calm and considered approach to his work. A staunch member of the Anglican Communion, he regularly attended services in the many penal establishments at which he served. Throughout his service, he was frequently described as a ‘true gentleman’ — a Governor whose staff viewed him with affection and for whom many prisoners had considerable respect.

Much of his service involved working with Young Offenders. He showed a keen interest in their welfare and was particularly good at motivating staff to effectively managing their charges by example, encouragement and the occasional necessary correction.

One highlight of his career was when he was tasked with opening Onley Borstal Recall Centre in 1968. At the time, serious concerns had been raised about an existing Borstal Recall Centre based in Reading Prison. To counter public criticism, the plan was to close the two old recall centres and start afresh. Adams was required to deliver an improved regime for all those recalled to Borstal and to deliver it swiftly.

Onley was successfully opened and filled to capacity in less than three months, a considerable achievement against a background of contractors failing to complete work on time — for example the internal phone system was not operating when the first trainees arrived.

A more daunting challenge was to follow. In 1971, Adams was posted to Gartree maximum security prison, Leicestershire, his first encounter with adult prisoners. Policy and practice for dealing with very long term and difficult offenders was — at best — evolving. The increase in very long sentences such as those imposed on the Great Train Robbers together with the abolition of the death penalty created serious new problems for Governors and for policy makers. Meanwhile, the security lapses around George Blake’s escape from Wormwood Scrubs and the subsequent Mountbatten report had opened a debate about whether to concentrate or disperse high security prisoners. The decision was made to create a system of ‘Dispersal’ prisons to which difficult prisoners serving very long sentences were to be allocated. Gartree was designated as one of the new dispersal prisons.

But Gartree had been built as a medium security prison. The perimeter and fabric of the buildings — as well as the overall design — was not fit for purpose. So for many years, considerable investment had to be provided to improve Gartree — and other dispersal prisons — including converting the original perimeter wire fences to walls capped with anti-climb devices.

These vital improvements had not been made when in December 1972; there was a major disturbance at Gartree with a great deal of damage internally. No prisoners escaped — and Roland Adams did well to stabilise the situation without fatalities. But staff and prisoners were traumatised and it took months of work to restore a regime for prisoners as staff gradually regained confidence and developed improved skills and techniques. This disturbance was one of the triggers for increased militancy by the Prison Officers Association. Consequently Adams found himself on the front line of a new crisis as industrial relations issues became a much higher priority.

Adams was promoted to Governor Class One in 1977 and posted to Pentonville Prison in London. There he had to face considerable overcrowding and

an impoverished regime. He worked hard to alleviate the worst of the conditions and to deliver improvements to the regime wherever possible.

His colleagues elected him to serve on the Committee of the Governors' representative organisation from 1977 until his retirement in 1983. This and his position as Governor of a major London Prison meant that he was involved in representing the views of his colleagues to Ministers and to Parliamentary Committees inquiring into prison conditions. He was selected to read the lesson at the Prison Service Centenary Service at Westminster Cathedral in 1978 and regularly advised Church leaders such as Cardinal Basil Hume about prison issues.

Roland Adams was born in Ealing to Frank and Marjorie Adams. His father had fought in the First World War and lost a leg during the Battle of the Somme. Despite his disability, he taught his son to row and encouraged him to be a keen sportsman. Educated at Westminster City School, Roland Adams became a scout which may have been the catalyst to developing his sense of service.

He was a scout stretcher bearer during the blitz in London and as soon as eligible joined up for war service. After initial training with the Royal Artillery in Ayrshire, he was commissioned as a Captain in the Dogras Regiment of the Indian Army. It was this experience of being responsible for his men that motivated him to join the Prison Service at the end of the war.

He served initially at Portland Borstal, a secure institution on Portland Bill, Dorset which had been severely bombed during the war. He was transferred

to Hatfield Open Borstal, Yorkshire and then to North Sea Camp Open Borstal, Lincolnshire before being promoted in 1956 to Deputy Governor at Hollesley Bay Colony — a very large open Borstal in Suffolk.

While at Portland Borstal, he met and married Stella Barbara Reeves.

He was promoted to Governor Class Three in 1960 and opened the new Detention Centre at Medomsley in County Durham. From there he moved to take charge of Gaynes Hall Open Borstal Huntingdon. In 1968 he was further promoted to Governor Class Two to open the Borstal Recall Centre at Onley near Rugby.

In April 1971, he was posted to take charge of Gartree Prison in Leicestershire. A posting to Preston Prison, Lancashire followed in 1973 and in 1977 he was further promoted to take charge of Pentonville Prison, a post he held until his retirement in 1983. He was awarded the OBE in 1980.

Retiring to Wonastow in Monmouth, he became very active in local and church affairs, including being Church Warden at St Wonnows and assisting with the local scouts. He worked for the Crown Agents linking overseas groups with the Prison Service. Even in his nineties, he kept many of his Prison Service contacts and was an active supporter of the Retired Governors Association.

Stella predeceased him in 2006; he leaves a daughter Caroline and a son Roger. Roger graduated from the Royal College of Art with a Masters Degree in Architectural Design, and runs his own Architectural and Design practice — Bisset Adams.

Roland Adams — Prison Governor — born 3rd March 1923: died 4th July 2019