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Learning Together

Obituary

Geoffrey Lister — Governor and Director of Prisons

Brendan O’Friel is a retired former prison governor.

Working in the Prison Service from the end of the Second World War meant facing relentless and growing problems of overcrowding, poor accommodation and deteriorating regimes. Over the following decades, further shocks rocked the Service: security lapses, prisoner disorder and staff industrial action. It became a Service in crisis.

The task of grappling effectively with the many problems of the Service began in October 1979, with the publication of Mr Justice May’s Report of his Committee of Inquiry into the UK Prison Services. This Inquiry had been set up because of the very serious breakdown of industrial relations within the three UK Prison Services. The Report’s recommendations were the catalyst for many improvements — a process considerably aided by the appointment of Willie Whitelaw as Home Secretary following the Conservative victory in the 1979 General Election.

Whitelaw agreed to major changes to the Prisons Board, the body responsible for managing the prisons in England and Wales. Geoffrey Lister, Midland Regional Director was one of those appointed to the new Prisons Board, a position he was to hold until his retirement. Lister’s extensive experience of running prisons and young offender establishments helped to shape both policy and operational decisions at Board level. From 1980 to 1985 substantial improvements started to be delivered and new approaches to regimes and staffing developed. It was during these years that the foundations were laid for the radical improvements of 1987 when ‘Fresh Start’ began to transform the Prison Service through changes to the way staff worked which brought much needed improvements to prisoner regimes.

This final appointment was a fitting climax to Lister’s considerable career as a Governor. His formal education had been disrupted by war service but he returned to university in 1947 and graduated before joining the Service in 1950. In those days — in common with many other careers and professions — there were relatively few graduate Governors.

A committed member of the Church of England, Lister briefly contemplated a Church vocation taking up a place at the Hostel of the Resurrection in Leeds to train for the priesthood. His religious principles may well have influenced his ultimate choice of career and may

also have accounted for the importance he attached to taking the right decision. While some found him cautious about developing new approaches, almost everyone regarded him as a Governor with the highest principles: deeply committed to caring for both his staff and his prisoners. Although generally serious and very hardworking, he also occasionally displayed a very perceptive sense of humour.

He was involved in many improvements throughout his career for example developing one of the earliest pre-release courses for prisoners at Wakefield Prison. When working at Headquarters, he was heavily involved in the development of Control and Restraint Training — a vital and successful initiative to enable staff to control prisoner violence while remaining accountable for their actions.

Geoffrey Lister was born at Lightcliffe, a village near Halifax to Norman and Elizabeth Lister. His father worked as a Supervisor in a local carpet factory. He was educated at the local Church of England Elementary School and Hipperholme Grammar School. In 1943 — in the depth of the war — he volunteered for the Indian army as a schoolboy Officer Cadet from the University Training Corps. Commissioned from the Officers Training School, Bangalore, he became a Captain of an Air Dispatch Platoon. In 1944/45 at Imphal and Akyab in Burma he was involved in the supply by air drop to units of the XIV Army in their advance from Imphal to Rangoon and was mentioned in dispatches. At the end of the war he returned to India where he commanded a detached platoon at St Thomas Mount Airfield, Madras, and was the last British Officer to serve there prior to independence.

On demobilisation he returned to Leeds University and in 1950 was one of their first graduates in Social Studies. He quickly applied to join the Prison Service through the direct entrant Assistant Governor scheme and was accepted and posted to the secure borstal on Portland Bill in Dorset. While at Leeds University he had met Grace Cartwright from Tunstall who was training to be a Probation Officer. In November 1950 soon after commencing his duties with the Prison Service, he married Grace and they moved into Prison Quarters.

In 1956, he was transferred to Hollesley Bay Colony, the large open borstal near Woodbridge in Suffolk. He was seconded to take a course in Applied

Social Studies at the London School of Economics and then posted as Deputy Governor to Hull Borstal.

Promotion to Assistant Governor Class One followed in 1958 with a posting to Wakefield Prison, his first experience of working with adult prisoners. Alan Bainton, a very talented and influential Governor was in charge and encouraged Lister to develop some of the first pre-release courses in the service.

In November 1962, he was given his first command as Governor of Pollington Borstal near Goole, Yorkshire. Pollington was part of a national experiment to test the impact of different treatments upon young offenders. Three small open borstals ran different regimes with qualified young offenders allocated to each on a random basis. Lister's task was to run Pollington as a therapeutic community using group counselling techniques.

In 1967, he was appointed Deputy Principal of the Prison Service College at Wakefield.

In 1969, he was promoted to Governor Class Two and posted to Maidstone Prison in Kent. In July 1972, he returned to Hollesley Bay as Governor and in October 1973 was promoted to Governor Class One and posted to Stafford Prison, a very difficult overcrowded Victorian Training Prison. In 1976, he was transferred to take charge of Albany Prison on the Isle of Wight, one of the 'dispersal' prisons holding top security prisoners.

In 1978, he was further promoted to Assistant Director and appointed Head of P7 Division at

Headquarters, with personnel responsibilities, including promotions, postings and the training of staff.

In 1980, as part of the radical changes to Prison Headquarters following the May Inquiry, Lister was appointed Director of the Midland Region and to the Prisons Board. He held this post until his retirement in 1985.

He continued to be very interested in prison issues following his retirement to Lichfield and was involved in prison work for a number of years. He spent two years in Mauritius from 1986 — 1987 advising the Government on prison matters especially personnel policy; later he spent months in the Seychelles assisting the modernisation of their prisons. Nearer home, in 1990 he was asked to assist the Woolf Inquiry into the Strangeways — and other — riots. In subsequent years he also provided independent advice to Government on aspects of introducing private prisons within the UK, an innovation about which he had considerable reservations although he supported attempts to bring new methods into prison work.

Locally, he was active within the Lichfield Festival Association and was a member of the Guild of Stewards of Lichfield Cathedral.

Grace predeceased him in 2015. He leaves two daughters both now retired. Susan worked for the NHS as a Senior Nurse in Sheffield and Kathryn in Education first as a School Meals Organiser and then as a School Teacher in Harrow.

Geoffrey Lister died on 18th November 2019 aged 94. He was born on 20th February 1925.



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