

Winchester Prison Past and Present



On 9th October Mark Watts presented an exceptionally interesting talk about the history of Winchester Prison. He is presently head of security, having served in the prison service for 30 years, the last 26 at Winchester. The previous prison built in 1805 was in Jewry Street and is now a pub. However, the enormous increase in the number of crimes, as well as the decreased use of transportation, meant that the new prison was opened in Romsey Road in 1849. It was built in the traditional radial style with five wings - originally called wards and hence the name prison warders - with 4 landings, and occupying 6 acres. Incidentally we have now reverted to building radial style prisons. The prominent tower was to draw the initial warm air heating through the prison, but is now used as a water tower.

Conditions were originally extremely harsh, with prisoners kept in isolation, unable to talk to fellow prisoners and even wearing masks when outside of their cells. In 1865 the silent regime was ended, however, otherwise conditions were made even tougher with a treadmill which was used to raise water from the well, and hand cranks which could be adjusted with a screw to make them more difficult - and hence the slang term "screws". Towards the end of the 19th century the hard labour regime ended, and the treadmill was banned in 1902. At that time the warders worked 15 hour days with one Sunday off in three. Today a prison officer, the title was adopted in 1921; work a 39 hour week with every other weekend off.

In WW1 Winchester did house some conscientious objectors. However, contrary to popular opinion very few were jailed. Only those who refused to do anything to help the war effort, even by working on farms, were imprisoned. There is one surviving copy of a newspaper "The Winchester Whisperer" illegally produced and circulated by one of these inmates. For the first 60 years there were few changes. But since then have been added the prison hospital in 1908, the prison chapel in 1924, and further buildings in 1964, 1981 and 1995. In 1997 one of the wings was demolished and rebuilt. It was originally intended that all five wings would be consecutively demolished and rebuilt but this has not happened.

Winchester is principally a category B prison. It used to house category A prisoners but it would have been too expensive to bring it up to the high level of security which would now be required. There are a small number of category C and D prisoners who are being prepared for release.

There was a riot by young offenders in 1993 when they got onto the roof of one of the buildings. Riots are always dealt with by prison officers on call from other prisons, and all officers have one weeks training a year in dealing with these. There have only been 7 escapes from the prison in its entire existence. The last one in 2001 escaped with help from outside and inside the prison over part of the wall which was in a blind spot. He was recaptured after 4 days.

It was originally designed for 450 prisoners but now houses a maximum of 690; at present all men, with either one or sometimes two to a cell measuring 8ft by 12ft. There are regular searches to detect drugs, mobile phones and any home-made weapons. This includes searching visitors and the use of sniffer dogs. The visitor centre has two way mirrors and CCTV, and any visitor detected is arrested by the police. There are considerable efforts to train prisoners with courses in computing, woodworking and bricklaying and many other amenities. However, the re-offending rate remains high. There is a tradition that prison governors must eat, or at least taste, the same food as the prisoners, and it is described as being OK, certainly better than hospital food.