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# THE TABLET

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## Light inside

How the pandemic made HMP Pentonville safer,  
cleaner and more humane

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A former inmate, now a volunteer prison chaplain serving in the notoriously difficult HMP Pentonville, describes how prison officers and convicts have not only survived a cruel pandemic largely intact but have seen the introduction of groundbreaking and long-overdue reforms / By JONATHAN AITKEN

# 'All in this mess together'

PHOTO: PA, ANTHONY DEVLIN



**H**MP PENTONVILLE entered the pandemic with a frightening start when two well-respected prison officers, Peter Bovid and Patrick Beckford, died with Covid-19 in the first week of April 2020.

"I came in that Monday morning feeling really scared that we might be entering a war zone," recalled governor Ian Blakeman. "I was desperately worried about the potential death toll. We thought we could lose 80 men quickly if the infection became virulent."

Experienced prison staff are used to coping on a daily basis with crises which range from punch-ups to flu epidemics. But no one had seen drama anything like this. Its surprise and scale soon sent fear stalking along the wings of our 178-year-old north London prison. Our unpreparedness for the unknown caused some overreaction and chaos. A temporary morgue was installed complete with body bags. Sleeping facilities were arranged for officers to stay overnight in the prison. Initially we had no face masks, no PPE equipment and no testing facilities.

Internal information circulated erratically. When the first consignment of face masks arrived, it was followed by an edict from Public

Health England which instructed the prison not to use them except in critical situations. So all prisoners and officers were ordered to stop wearing their masks. As the military would say: "Order, counter-order, disorder!"

Amid excitable media reports that an overcrowded prison could start a Covid outbreak equivalent to a medieval plague, staff shortages became a big problem.

At an early stage, more than 157 Pentonville uniformed officers out of 450 were "off sick", a label which ranged from the seriously ill to the imaginatively precautionary. Deploying those who did report for duty proved challenging. On the worst of the early days, there were only 39 officers available to guard our 1,100 prisoners spread across seven wings and 35 landings.

Staff from all the outside agencies – education, probation, maintenance contractors, many healthcare workers and all visits administrators – soon left. Only the governor's senior management team, the depleted daily complement of officers and the chaplains remained on duty continuously. Occasionally, in private murmurings, we admitted to each other how worried we were. But an understated spirit of "keep calm and

carry on" somehow prevailed, not least among the prisoners.

"The biggest surprise was how most of the men were prepared to take the problems on the chin," said custodial manager Jamie Regan. "They had to put up with multiple restrictions and deprivations. They were banged up in their cells for over 23 hours a day. But, on the whole, their morale and their attitudes remained amazingly good."

Old lags, like old soldiers, can be steady on parade. Pentonville put in place a core group of "Red Bands" (trusted wing cleaners), "Listeners" (Samaritan-trained suicide preventers) and "Insiders" (information providers to new prisoners). They did their jobs well, had special permission to move along their wings and set a tone of stoical acceptance.

Inevitably the steadiness was not universal. In my hearing, one semi-hysterical F-Wing inmate, who was on constant watch for self-harming, kept shouting: "We're going to be left here to die!" He was silenced by serial offender, Charlie C, who retorted: "Well, you ain't dead yet! And if you go on cutting yourself they'll take you to hospital where you'll meet so many Covids you'll be brown bread much sooner."

Humour down on the wings was transcended at the highest levels of the prison by the serious intensity of innovative decision-making. Governor Blakeman and his ex-Royal Marine commando deputy, Steve Dixey, knew that they had to move fast to get a grip on the situation.

Their first initiative was to enter into “command mode”, which is prison service jargon for the governor taking autonomous decisions outside the rule book. The primary move was to write an ERMP (Emergency Regime Management Plan) which in turn created an RCU (Reverse Cohort Unit). These Ministry of Justice acronyms read incomprehensibly. Implementing them on the ground was the equivalent of solving a Rubik’s cube.

A-Wing’s 200 prisoners, most of whom had been in situ for months, had to decamp in order to create the new RCU. Every day, A-Wing takes in around 40 new arrivals from courts such as Wood Green, Highbury, Snaresbrook, Chelmsford and the Old Bailey. They all get tested in reception. The few who test positive are escorted in heavy PPE gear to J-Wing for isolation. The rest are kept in some 20 self-contained bubbles, segregated from other bubbles with separate feeding, showering, medication and exercise arrangements until it is safe for them to move to one of the remaining six wings of the prison.

**THIS IS A** logistical nightmare, yet it has now operated successfully for almost a year. Pentonville’s novel RCU methods contained Covid effectively. We went for long spells (notably the eight-month period April-December 2020) when we had zero home-grown infections.

Although there were temporary surges in other parts of the prison, such as one triggered in the officer’s mess, seen in the round we believe that Pentonville has had the lowest average count of in-prison cases of any big city jail. We have never had a serious epidemic. We have never been classified as an “outbreak site” and we have lost only one prisoner to the disease. So far this year we have had not one single new in-prison Covid case since mid-January: a remarkable result. In contrast, there are jails like HMP Brixton in south London and HMP Ranby in Nottingham which have been struggling to contain outbreaks in the 200-400 range of in-prison infections with exacerbated tensions on the wings.

But a price has had to be paid for this successful Covid containment. Prisoners are “banged up” for 23 hours a day with no visits, and activities are savagely restricted. Such a harsh regime of in-cell confinement normally causes trouble. This has been avoided at Pentonville over the past year for a combination of reasons.

First, fear was a calming influence. There were big falls in assaults and “kickings off” (outbursts of bad temper). The number of prisoners getting “nicked” for bad behaviour fell from about 30 per day to two or three a day. Self-harming cases and numbers of ACCTs (the acronym for men on watch for mental health problems) came down dramatically. It

was soon noticed that prisoner-to-prisoner good neighbourliness and prisoner-officer mutual politeness became the new normal.

Some of the changes in tone were caused by the introduction of new technology. Prisons are notoriously behind the curve when it comes to using even old technology. Until this year, the most reliable method of communicating with our prisoners was to push a piece of paper under their cell doors. Their phone calls had to be made from open booths on the landings, a system that gave little privacy and frequent friction in the queues. Thanks to the pandemic, every Pentonville prisoner now has an in-cell telephone enabling him to call out to friends or relatives at any time of the day or to call internal helplines such as Listeners and Chaplaincy. The wiring for these in-cell phones was installed in 2019 but it took the Covid crisis to prompt a massive delivery of the missing handsets.

**THEN, IN AN** inspired move, Blakeman decreed that every prisoner should automatically be given £5 a week phone credit to facilitate calls to his nearest and dearest. The intangible benefits of these suddenly improved phone links between prisoners and their families made a major contribution to keeping Pentonville calm. So did the creation of a Zoom system called “Purple Visits” which enabled families to link up virtually.

Another big technological change was the use of in-cell TV sets which previously broadcast only the main terrestrial channels, as new methods of closed-circuit communication around the establishment. An ingenious custodial manager, Darren Robson, discovered that the prisoners’ TV sets had two unused channels. So he set himself up as Pentonville’s producer-in-chief.

At first the output consisted of basic word-only announcements. But Robson gradually became more ambitious and started to put on live broadcasts. The most effective of these were “Question Times”, when prisoners could quiz Blakeman live and uncensored. Sometimes these exchanges with the governor

were frank, but as it became evident that tough questions were getting straight answers, the men gained a better understanding of the problems and the pressures of the pandemic. “Governor One is a straight shooter ... He tells it like it is,” was a characteristic accolade I heard from a vulnerable prisoner on F-Wing.

The most important innovation on the communications front during the Covid crisis has been a new briefing meeting at 1.30 p.m. every day led by Blakeman for his 24 custody managers and 21 senior officers. Having attended these meetings, I would describe them as a model of decisive leadership and effective communication. The entire top and middle management of the prison attend. A daily briefing note written by the security governor Kat Lawrence is read out, questions are asked and problems get solved. Everyone goes back to their wings knowing what is happening, what has got to be done and what needs to be relayed to the landings.

These briefing meetings were transformational. They broke the mould of the old-fashioned hierarchical divisions in prison management. Senior officers (SOs) became the new front line of the Covid team effort. By their dedication to duty and by the flexible originality of the way they operated what is being called “the new jailcraft”, they rose to the challenges of the pandemic.

Take, for example, the “Three Musketeers” who have transformed A-Wing from being the notoriously chaotic hellhole of the prison into a calm, safe and low-infection regime. SOs Joseph Spall, Tristan Joseph and David Ralfe are young men (average age 29) of differing backgrounds and talents. They are comparatively new recruits to the prison service which has promoted them fast.

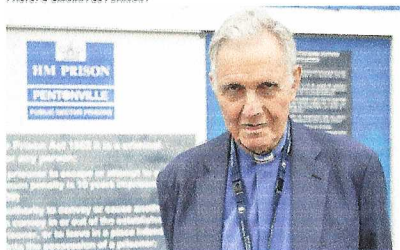
**THE MOST COLOURFUL** of the trio, in terms of background, is Ralfe. After winning a first class English literature degree at Cambridge, he trained to be a comic actor at the Jacques Lecoq theatre school in Paris. After performing with various companies, he read a newspaper article about the prison service’s graduate entry scheme, applied for it and four years later is running what may well be the most demanding wing in any British prison. Ralfe gives a tongue-in-cheek explanation for his career change: “I guess I was attracted to acting because it is full of interesting people and stories. Pentonville is even richer in people and stories!”

The panorama of daily human dramas in a prison has intensified with the challenges of Covid. The most sensible Red Band prisoners and the most capable officers of all ages have gone the extra mile to change Pentonville into a safer, cleaner and more humane jail.

For example, SO Emmett Lerner, a veteran who has spent his entire 35-year career at Pentonville, would probably win the first prize, if there was one, for being the prison’s most effective morale raiser, problem solver and energetic people person. His day jobs include being in charge of PPE distribution (once head office lifted its misguided “no masks”

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PHOTO: © GRAHAM GUY BARRATT



**Jonathan Aitken** is an Anglican priest and voluntary prison chaplain serving in HMP Pentonville; an assistant priest at St Matthew’s, Westminster; and honorary chaplain to Christians in Government. He was a Cabinet minister under John Major and served seven months in jail after being convicted of perjury in 1999. Copies of this week’s *Tablet* have been donated to the staff and inmates of HMP Pentonville in lieu of Jonathan Aitken’s fee.

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edict) and training young rookie officers during their first days of service.

Larner has mantras like: "Prisoners are people ... politeness and firmness go hand in hand ... let's take pride in Pentonville." His can-do spirit sets the tone in many parts of the jail, not least on G-Wing, the longest and largest prison unit in Europe. G-Wing houses over 450 prisoners when full, a total lowered to 330 right now, thanks to strategic reductions agreed by the Ministry of Justice.

"At least we're no longer like a rugby scrum," said the youthful SO who runs G-Wing, 28-year-old Ash Culley. She joined the prison service at 19 and has built a high reputation for keeping knife-crime gang members separated and peaceful. Her elongated five-landing empire has only 29 shower heads (not all reliably working) for hundreds of sweaty and often stropy men coming off the exercise yards and out of their cells for 20 minutes at a time. Old Pentonville hands call it "the Ash miracle" that G-Wingers have had their showers and exercise breaks every day throughout the pandemic.

Although the heaviest burdens of the pandemic have fallen on the wing officers, many others have made exceptional efforts to cope with the emergency. For example, the PEIs (physical education instructors, headed by SO Andy Turner) moved their equipment out of the indoor gyms into the exercise yards

and have done wonders in keeping the prisoners fit through outdoor workouts.

The Chaplaincy has done its bit too. Although the mosque, the chapel and the multifaith room have been closed for services, the spiritual life of the prison has been well cared for by chaplains going into overdrive with pastoral visits and support.

Our chaplaincy team is led by the Revd Jo Davies, the Anglican managing chaplain. She is an efficient and sensitive bridge-builder between faiths and with the secular prison administration. Her eight or nine main faith chaplains work together in a collegiate spirit of cooperation and unity.

I feel a special bond of friendship with Imam Tayib Ali, the Sudanese Muslim chaplain. He has invited me to preach in his mosque (how many Christian priests are given such an opportunity?) and I invited him to intone the *Adhan* (the Muslim call to prayer) at the Old Bailey carol service. We are planning to write a book together on Muslim and Christian prayers. He is a scholar and a courageous preacher whose Ramadan sermons (broadcast this year on the prison TV channel) were a stabilising influence on the large Muslim population.

The cooperation between chaplains across faith boundaries is much more practical than theological. We offer pastoral support, welfare and counselling, plus a prayer-giving and hope-giving dimension to the life of the prison

at a time of high tension. We have our own different styles. I find it easiest to build a pastoral rapport on the wings by playing my trump card: "I used to be a prisoner".

Our acting Catholic chaplain, William Lo, a deacon of Westminster archdiocese, originally from Hong Kong, cuts an elegant figure in his cassock and stole. On Ash Wednesday, I assisted him in handing out record numbers of rosaries and imposing ashes of repentance on an encouragingly large number of penitent prisoners. Meanwhile, in the background Davies leads a quiet but powerful ministry to the staff.

We have all been overworked at some personal cost. One of our chaplains died with Covid, two have been seriously ill in hospital and six of us have had the disease. Sometimes the chaplain's role is full of sadness. Too often we have to be the bearer of bad and sometimes tragic news. We have done a great deal of bereavement counselling and often arrange Zoom participation in family funerals. In August, I conducted the heartbreaking funeral of a 27-year-old prisoner who had committed suicide.

Yet there are joys too. I was on duty from 24 December to 1 January and expected to encounter plenty of doom and gloom and tears during this usually tense Christmas period. Inevitably there were some sad encounters. But on the whole I was amazed at the height of Covid to find how good the atmosphere was on the wings. Why?

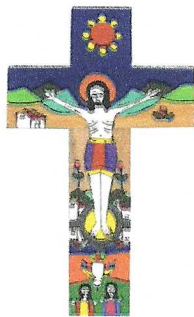
"Well, we're all in this mess together now, aren't we?" said John, a bulky Red Band, as he vigorously wiped down tables with disinfectant on Christmas morning. "If the screws can keep smilin' when they'd rather not be away from their families either, the least we can do is to keep our peckers up too."

PENTONVILLE HAS had the reputation of being a notoriously bad prison. Its infrastructure remains Dickensian, still inhabited by too many cockroaches and rodents. Of our inmates, 60 per cent are young prisoners on remand facing serious charges. They used to wait three or four months for their cases to come to court. Now they wait for 18 months or more. The logjam in the courts is having a more damaging effect on the mood in the prison than Covid.

In the overcrowded and dangerous environment of a prison, there is a case for including selected officers and prisoners in a priority group for vaccination. But the system is deaf to this argument. Only 23 of our 1,100 prisoners and none of our 450 officers have been offered the vaccine. This means that for several more months we will remain a high-risk environment.

Yet "the times they are a-changin'" at Pentonville. We have shown what greater autonomy, clear leadership, good team spirit, innovative jailcraft and more devolution of power to SO wing officers can do. These reforms are likely to endure. What a paradox that a cruel pandemic, in a notoriously difficult prison, can produce so many good and groundbreaking changes.

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