

30th
anniversary

Parkhurst prison revolt 1969

On 24 October 1969 prisoners at Parkhurst prison on the Isle of Wight rose up in the biggest show of resistance against oppression in British gaols since the Dartmoor mutiny in 1932. The Parkhurst revolt was the spark which ignited three years of protests against prison conditions, some of which were organised by PROP (Preservation of the Rights of Prisoners), while others were entirely spontaneous.

Parkhurst prison opened in 1839 and for 160 years has predominantly housed prisoners serving long sentences, the island location serving to isolate them and render their communication with the outside world deliberately arduous.

The late 1960s saw the publication of the Mounbatten report into prison security. The effect of its publication was felt throughout the prison system even before any of the actual recommendations were implemented or discarded. Mounbatten recommended the concentration of all 'dangerous' prisoners in one maximum security facility, to be built on the Isle of Wight, together with a system of classification of all prisoners by security risk. The 'concentration' plan was rejected in favour of the option of 'dispersing' high security prisoners to a number of locations, Parkhurst being one. The dispersal system is still in operation, as is escape-risk categorisation. Mounbatten's report represented the end of a period during which at least lip-service was paid to reforming the system and the beginning of a new emphasis on physical security, control and containment. Prison officers were overjoyed by the renewed licence to abuse.

After the Parkhurst riot, an inquiry was carried out by Assistant Prison Commissioner Michael Gale, a former governor of Wandsworth, expected by no-one to take the side of prisoners against the authorities. However, Gale's report was so damning of prison officers and the administration that Labour Home Secretary James Callaghan refused to publish it.

Brian Stratton was released from Parkhurst a few months before the riot and wrote *Who Guards the Guards?* (WGTG) in an attempt to highlight the prevalent abuse. It is still one of the best books ever written about the inside of British prisons. Earlier this year, BRIAN STRATTON spoke to FRFI.

Anyone reading WGTG gets the immediate feeling that the physical conditions in Parkhurst were almost irrelevant compared to the mentality and behaviour of the screws. What can I say about Parkhurst? As far as actual conditions, it was just another prison. It's the screws that make or break it. When I first went there the governor was called Packham and he had a way of working which was maximum security on the perimeter; maximum freedom inside the prison. In other words, your cell doors got opened for a couple of hours every night and you could go and play

cards or whatever. But, of course the screws didn't like that. And then they got rid of Packham and Miller came. And, as one of the screws said to me: 'We've got a licence to kill now'.

*You organised to get the message out about the brutality. This took various forms, from sit-down protests to smuggling out a 'round robin' petition to the press. How difficult or easy was it? That's a good question. Because there are obviously a fair amount of people in there who we didn't want to know about what we were doing. So it took about four or five weeks to organise the round robin to *The People*. That was my idea, having the round robin, so that they couldn't say 'this guy's signature is at the top'.*

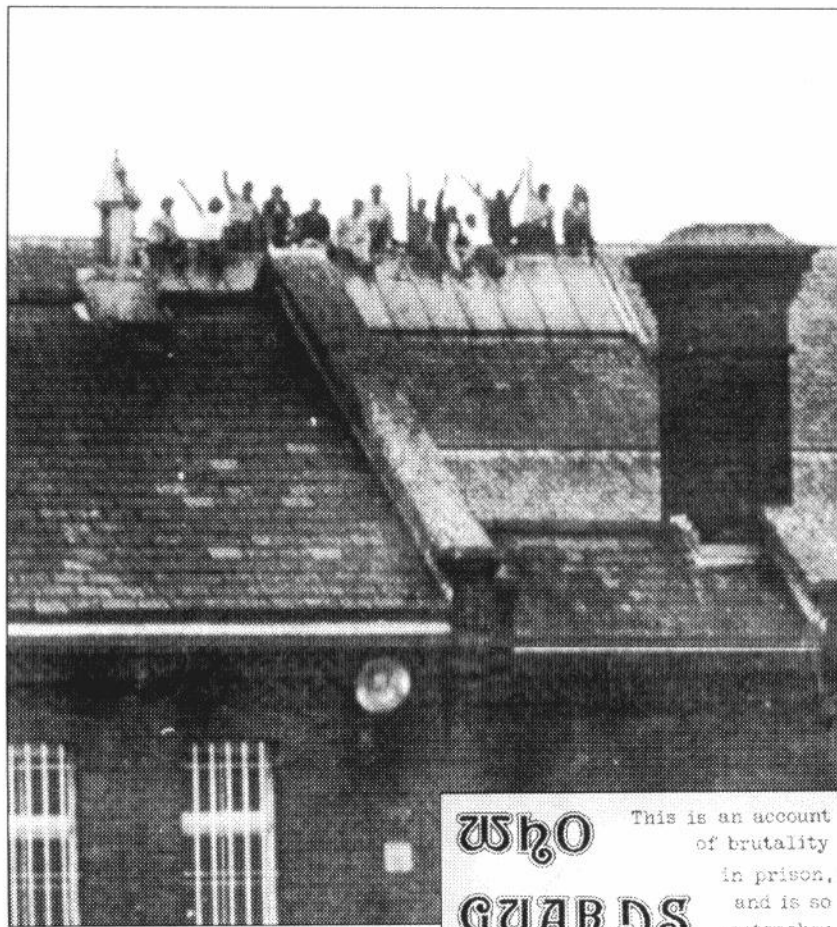
With the sit-down strike, we just used the structure in there. You had Londoners, who were top dog, then you had Scousers, Geordies, Irish, all different little gangs. So we just went to the boss man on each gang and said 'This is what we'd like to do, because they beat up so-and-so last night', and we just did it. So those who you couldn't trust in a million years couldn't walk off the exercise yard in front of everyone else.

In the sixties you didn't have the same kind of communication as now. Everything had to be done on visits. I sent a clandestine letter out once and the wrong person got hold of it and sent it back to the gaol. I'd written in it 'I'm doing it this way because the censor is an idiot' and the screw read it out when I was nicked for it. Even Miller got a grin out of that one.

*Despite all the difficulties, The People did eventually print your round robin on their front page. They printed it but they just let it go after that. And that was one of my problems with the so-called underground magazines as well. I was a journalist for *Ink* for a bit and we got this campaign going about prisons. Letters were pouring in, many smuggled out of prison, and they published them for three or four weeks but all of a sudden they didn't want to do prisons any more. I said to Richard Neville 'there's no point stopping now - this will get bigger and bigger' but they didn't want to know. And the interesting thing with Mr Neville was that he got nicked over obscenity in Oz and he went to gaol. Afterwards, he came to see me and I said 'Well, you've had a bit of Wandsworth now, let's get going,' but they had frightened the life out of him and he didn't want to know.*

By the time the riot actually happened at Parkhurst, you were out. Your book deals with the build-up to

given the standard Parkhurst tour but Stan dug his feet in and said 'I want to see the chokey, the block' and he told me he'd never been more scared in his life than when he walked down those stairs. And I said to him,



The resistance to brutality which began at Parkhurst in 1969 spread around the prison system. Strikes, riots and demonstrations became widespread. In 1972 Parkhurst prisoners took to the rooftop in a demonstration of solidarity with the prisoners at neighbouring Albany prison who were protesting against conditions

*it. How did you feel when you heard the news it had kicked off? Trevor Aspinall from *The People* rang and told me. I felt totally sick. He said 'Come down to the paper tomorrow. We'll do this and that and the other' and I remember swearing at him, saying 'If you'd done something when I came to see you when I got out, this would not have happened. This is what I've been trying to avoid'.*

It was the treatment of Timmy Noonan which started it all. Timmy Noonan was a diamond of a man. You get a preacher coming and telling you on the exercise yard that he has seen a man laying in a pool of blood and excrement and this man of god then tells you he can't phone your MP and tell him because he might lose his job. Man of god! I've no time for religion.

We had done the usual thing and seen the two-faced governor, who denied anything was going on. Then we got another message from Timmy that they were still doing him.

It kicked off the day that the MPs Stan Newens and Joan Lester had been down to Parkhurst. I'd got them to go down and even then it took three months. I got out in June and they went in October. They were

WHO GUARDS THE GUARDS? This is an account of brutality in prison, and is so outspoken that commercial publishers refused to handle it. North London PROP is now publishing it, so that what happens inside our prisons may be widely known. 2nd EDITION £1.00

'if you're going down those stairs into one of the cells, you don't walk down, you get thrown down'. He asked one of the block screws how long he'd been on that job and he said four years. They're only supposed to be there for three months. You've still got your chokey blocks today and you still get chokey screws who gravitate towards them - sadists, they become a little clique and even the other screws don't like them.

It was only supposed to be a demonstration. It wasn't planned as a riot. The screws turned it into violence. The prisoners took over what were called the stage rooms and took two screws each side hostage. The side where Frank was, the screws were put in a room and a man called Jimmy Robson was told 'Whatever you do, don't let anyone hurt those screws' - this is 'mad' Frank Fraser saying this. And those screws did not get hurt. And after they gained control - the whole thing was over in two hours - you come out of the stage

rooms and go into this tunnel known as the bath-house tunnel, and they lined it, screws with riot sticks. You couldn't see the whitewash on the walls - it was just blood and shit. I tried, with James Morton, the solicitor I got to represent some of them, to get a forensic expert to get a sample off the wall, but they whitewashed it the next day. Jimmy Robson was the last of the men - about 150 altogether - to come through the tunnel and Jack Smith, one of the screws who'd been held hostage, put his arm round Jimmy and said 'This man hasn't done a thing. You do him and you'll have to do me as well'.

After the revolt, you stayed involved, talking to the press, and helping with the defence of those on trial for riot. The first thing I did was to ring the Express because their headline said that the riot had been because Kroger, the spy, had been returned to East Germany! They put the phone down on me. Then I was on the television, which didn't do me any favours.

*I got James Morton to take three of the cases. God knows how much the riot trial cost. Special assizes set up in Ryde. QCs and Juniors and god knows what. They were charged with riot and I think Martyn Frape was charged with attempted murder as well but got a not guilty. The judge to begin with was Lawton, who was the son of a prison governor. Ex-governor of Wandsworth, the first governor ever to have been a screw. I got *The Times* to dig into him and they published a bit about how Lawton stood as a fascist candidate in the 1930s and the solicitors in the case got him replaced.*

Mainstream publishers liked WGTG but were too afraid of libel actions to publish it. It was finally published by PROP. What is your assessment of that organisation? When I first met PROP they were getting by on sales of my book and donations. A year later I met Geoff Coggan, who was then running it and he said the Cadbury's foundation were funding them. So I said, 'That's why you've stopped doing anything. That's why people stop me in pubs and say "We can't get nothing done by PROP" over somebody being beaten up in Chelmsford or wherever'. Once you take money from these people you're fucked. Because if you do get a case you could really get some publicity for, which is adverse publicity for the forces of law and order, you know that the grant is going to get stopped. So you don't do it, and so the union, the organisation, stops.

When Parkhurst went off, the Labour Party was in power, as it is today. I remember Victor Collins, alias Lord Stonham. He stood up in the House of Commons in the 1950s, when they were in opposition. Fifteen shillings a week was supposed to feed each prisoner. Stonham says 'My wife spends 15 shillings feeding our cat'. Years later Stonham is a Home Office minister and wouldn't do a thing. I had people writing him letters from outside when I was in but he had his nose in the trough and he was going to keep it there. And that's how I see Blair and this gang today. ■