

The third in our “Talking Heads” Series took place on the 19th of November 2020



Senior Warden, Dr. Kathy Seddon, introduced the conversationalists. These were Immediate Past Master **Geoff Hughes** MBA Med BA Cert Ed., former Governor of HM Prisons Belmarsh, Cardiff and Drake Hall, and Court Assistant **Andrew Board** former Chair of RSA Wales, VLV Trustee, BT Project Director and member of OFCOM Advisory Committee Wales. Another excellent evening began.

Andrew asked Geoff about his birthplace and schooling and Geoff told us that he was born and raised in Usk, attending a small junior school there before moving to Monmouth School. His father’s first language was Welsh, Geoff regretted that Welsh was not spoken at home and so he is not a Welsh speaker.

Geoff then spoke about training to be a PE teacher. He said his choice of career came from a wish to “play rugby forever”. He qualified as a teacher at Cardiff College of Education where his PE student contemporaries included six Welsh Internationals, who went on to be British Lions! These included John Bevan (who was only 19 when he was selected for the Lions) JJ Williams, Alan Martin, Roy Bergiers Brynmor Williams and Stuart Lane. Another contemporary was Colin Smart the English International. Geoff played club rugby for Bath, Newport, Pontypool and Cross Keys.

Andrew recounted how Geoff also scaled another height through rugby! He was a member of the sixty strong “Captain’s Climb” team that set out to climb Mt Kilimanjaro. The group included 15 former Welsh rugby captains. They were responding to Huw Evans call to raise a million pounds to fight lung cancer. Huw was the WRU photographer and his wife Sue was being treated at Velindre Hospital.



*“So how did you become a prison Governor?”* Andrew asked. Geoff explained that his last three years in teaching had been spent at a “naughty boy’s school”, so he was already moving away from mainstream education. Geoff spoke about the direct entry scheme which saw him become an Assistant Governor. He went on to detail how prisons in the UK are classified, following the Mountbatten report. This sought to simplify the system and prevent the worrying levels of “escapes”. Category A top security prisons, such as Belmarsh, house the most dangerous prisoners. There are eight in the UK. Prisoners in Category B institutions are serving long sentences and are still a danger. Category C prisons have walls or fence, but the prisoners are unlikely to try to escape, or to pose a danger if they do. ‘Open prisons’ are classed as category D, where prisoners won’t try to escape and pose no threat.

Geoff spent four years on secondment to HM Inspectorate of Prisons reporting on the treatment of, and conditions for, prisoners. This was on behalf of two Chief Inspectors, Lord Ramsbotham and Dame Anne Owers. This involved leading teams on announced and unannounced visits to prisons throughout the country. When then offered the post of Governor of Belmarsh High Security Prison, Geoff wondered if those who had been criticised in his inspections thought that he deserved the challenge! Andrew asked about the prisoners and Geoff explained that Belmarsh housed 1000 prisoners, not only terrorists but also anyone sentenced at the Old Bailey, such as Jeffrey Archer.

He later moved to Drake Hall the open women’s prison in Staffordshire where 150 prisoners had absconded in the year before he took up post. Discussing the proportion of offenders nationally that are women in prison, Andrew was surprised to hear that it is less than 5% of the total prison population.

Geoff then returned to Wales as Governor of Cardiff Prison and his last post was Area Manager for the Prison Service in Wales

A Churchill Fellowship saw him travel to Sweden and Finland where he was struck by how cultural differences affect the penal systems. Geoff was surprised that every prison in Finland has access to a sauna which they considered normal. The Finns were however astonished, and thought it outrageous, that some UK Prisons had swimming pools.

Andrew asked what major reforms Geoff would make to the system and Geoff spoke about “life sentences” and “remand”. If found guilty of murder the only sentence is life imprisonment, so an Al-Qaeda terrorist has the same sentence as an elderly, domestic murderer. The Judge then sets a tariff about the minimum length of the sentence to be served. Geoff felt it would be sensible to have the sentence on the warrant reflecting the severity of the crime (rather than the tariff). In terms of the remand system someone who is remanded, in custody for six months, might be found innocent and have lost everything, with no compensation. If found guilty the time in remand would count as part of the sentence. Geoff felt that this was unjust and that it is not the case in other countries.

Turning to privatisation Geoff outlined that the private sector in the Prison Service is bound by contract to provide a specific service, they are inspected and fined if they failed to do this. He noted that Parc Prison, Bridgend provided good outcomes for prisoners.

Turning to the Livery Andrew asked what the highlights of his “Master’s Year’ had been. Geoff described how much of an honour it had been to represent the WLCow at many events and venues in London including Buckingham Palace and St. Paul’s Cathedral. He was proud of the financial turn-around he and his team effected from £8000 in the red to £9500 in the black. He had also very much enjoyed events like the Treorchy Male Voice Choir at St German’s Church. However, the highlight occurred during his Master’s ‘away weekend’ at Ypres. He laid a wreath at the Menin Gate at the “Last Post” Ceremony, which has occurred there since 1928. He was also asked to read the very moving exhortation taken from Laurence Binyon's poem “For the Fallen”.

In retirement Geoff became an Independent Member of the Lord Chancellor’s Advisory Committee for South Wales. He also works as a freelance Prison’s Consultant. Andrew asked about the prisons in the many countries that Geoff had visited. Geoff felt that the UK penal system compares favourably – otherwise he would not be asked to visit as a consultant! Detailing some of the more troubling experiences Geoff spoke about Mongolia where the very militaristic guards inspired terror in the prisoners.

Andrew outlined Geoff’s involvement as Chairman of the South Wales Fire and Rescue Service Standards Committee. Geoff added that he also lectures part time on Prison Studies at Universities of South Wales, Bangor, Aberystwyth and, next year, at Chester. Geoff is also a Liveryman of the Haberdashers’ Company. More recently, Geoff has had yet another career as a guest speaker for Cunard and P&O on their cruise ships all around the world. He said that retirement is tough!!

Andrew thanked Geoff and handed back to the Master, Peter Coleman who thanked Geoff for an interesting and illuminating evening, He thanked Andrew for “aiding and abetting” him. The Master concluded by asking everyone to raise a glass to the Worshipful Livery Company of Wales and Liverymen everywhere.

