

PIT OF SHAME

THE REAL BALLAD OF READING GAOL

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The Real Ballad of Reading Gaol

Published by
WATERSIDE PRESS
Domum Road
Winchester SO23 9NN
United Kingdom

Telephone 01962 855567 UK Landline low-cost calls 0845 2300 733
E-mail enquiries@watersidepress.co.uk
Online catalogue and bookstore www.watersidepress.co.uk

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Foreword © 2007 Theodore Dalrymple subject to the same terms and conditions as above. 'Arrested Development' (*Appendix 1*) © 2002 Theodore Dalrymple.

ISBN 978 1904380 214

Cataloguing-In-Publication Data A catalogue record for this book can be obtained from the British Library

Cover design Waterside Press. Front cover image of the Centre at Reading Gaol soon after 1844, from *Prison Discipline* (see also page 95). Back cover image of Oscar Wilde's cell, C.3.3 as it is today (see also the further image of this cell on page 126).

Printing and binding CPI Antony Rowe Ltd, Chippenham and Eastbourne, UK.

North American distributor International Specialised Book Services (ISBS),
920 NE 58th Ave, Suite 300, Portland, Oregon, 97213-3786, USA
Telephone 1 800 944 6190 Fax 1 503 280 8832 orders@isbs.com www.isbs.com

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THE REAL BALLAD OF READING GAOL

Anthony Stokes

With a Foreword by **Theodore Dalrymple**

WATERSIDE PRESS



Acknowledgements

First I must thank all those people who have helped and supported me with the collection of data and materials for this book: from the many members of the general public who came into the prison during the open day sessions mentioned in the *Preface* and who brought with them letters and artefacts relating to the prison to the many others in libraries and public record offices up and down the country. But as with all things in life there are a few people who make that special difference.

Bryan Gibson of Waterside Press had the belief and trust necessary for me to turn the items at my disposal into a book that he thought might be of value to a range of people interested in penal reform, English literature, or both. I also owe a debt of gratitude to Jane Green, his house editor, for her untiring efforts dealing with the manuscript and her help in bringing it to its present level. Any remaining mistakes are, of course, my own.

Nick Leader, the former Governing Governor at Reading who I mention in *Chapter 13* had the belief and insight that allowed me to expand the historical display at the prison—and did not run off too many times when I began to enthuse about Reading Gaol and its history with the various dignitaries and high profile visitors who have visited the place.

I am also especially indebted to: Pauline Bryant, my present Governing Governor and her senior colleagues; Don Mead and Michael Seeney of the Oscar Wilde Society; Matthew Williams of Reading Museum; Mark Preston of the Canadian Veterans' Association; Theodore Dalrymple for agreeing to write the Foreword, and all those members of staff at Reading whom I have not mentioned by name but who have supported me in my research from time-to-time; and the many prisoners who, following their time at Reading, have reinforced my confidence that we can make a difference and help such people to change their lives for the better.

Finally and most importantly, I am beholden to my wife and soulmate, Jacquie and my beautiful children, Christopher and Sophie, for your special support and understanding, following me to the ends of Berkshire and beyond in my research, helping me to transcribe the manuscript into a readable text and making those all important cups of tea. I could never have completed this book without it. I will always be in your debt.

Anthony Stokes

April 2007

A Note from Reading's Governing Governor

As the first woman to be in overall charge at Reading I was conscious that I was opening up yet another new chapter in the long history of the prison and building on what had already been achieved over the years. Reading has an unusually interesting past, but also needs to conform to the regulations and practices of a modern, twenty-first century Prison Service. I welcome Anthony Stokes' initiative and hard work in recognising the importance of preserving facts, information and materials for future generations in this great book.

Pauline Bryant

Governor

Her Majesty's Prison and Young Offender Institution Reading

April 2007

About the author

Anthony Stokes was born and educated in Cardiff, South Wales where he joined HM Prison Service at Cardiff Prison in 1988. After training at the Prison Service Training College at Newbold Revel in Warwickshire he was posted to Reading Prison in Berkshire where he is now a Senior Prison Officer. He holds a Certificate in Education (Further Education) from Reading University, is a Member of the Institute of Carpenters and a fully qualified prison locksmith. He has been twice commended: by HM Prison Service, after he saved the life of a prisoner (1992); and by the Director General of HM Prison Service, for his part in helping to quell the riot that took place at Reading Prison on Boxing Day 1992 and which is described in *Chapter 11* (1993). In 2003, his ground-breaking work in setting up a Vocational Training Department at Reading led to his being nominated for a Butler Trust Award, one of the highest in this field. He lives in Berkshire with his wife, Jacquie and two children and spends what spare time he can taking part in water-sports and driving his speedboat off England's South Coast.

The author of the Foreword

Theodore Dalrymple was for many years a hospital and prison doctor. He wrote a regular column for *The Spectator* for 14 years, and is contributing editor to the *City Journal* of New York. His latest of a line of thought-provoking books is *Romancing Opiates: Pharmacological Lies and the Addiction Bureaucracy* (2005) (Natl Book Network).

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CONTENTS

Acknowledgements	iv
A Note from Reading's Governing Governor	v
About the author	vi
List of illustrations	viii
Foreword	ix
Preface	xi
Timeline	xiii

CHAPTER

1 The Old Reading Gaols	17
2 The New Prison	30
3 Punishments of Former Times	44
4 Executions	52
5 Prisoner C.3.3 Oscar Wilde	77
<i>Illustrations</i>	95
6 The Ballad of Reading Gaol	103
<i>Illustrations</i>	119
7 The Easter Rising and Internment	127
8 Invisible Prisoners	139
9 A Pioneering Borstal Correctional Centre	144
10 Starting Again with a Clean Sheet	148
11 Life as a Local Prison	153
12 HM Remand Centre and Young Offender Institution	159
13 'Reading Gaol' Today and in the Future	165

APPENDIX

1 ' <i>Arrested Development</i> ' by Theodore Dalrymple	174
2 <i>Rules for Prisoners</i> (c.1850)	181
3 <i>Prison Dietary Scales</i> (c.1850)	183
4 <i>List of Executions</i>	185

Primary Sources, Internet Sites and Select Bibliography	187
Index	189

List of illustrations

Page xvi

Victorian 'Centre Box' and floor tiles before their removal in the 1960s.

Pages 95-102

Old print of the Centre at the time of the separate system.

Prisoner 973 Arabella Earles (c.1891).

The elaborate 1844 Gatehouse.

The Canadians arriving in 1945.

Prisoner Q.311 William Clarke.

Facing east down A-wing on Level 2 today.

Visiting Committee Book entry for 10 July 1896.

'There is no Chapel on the day they hang a man'.

The front of the prison around 1960.

Execution Log open at the entry for Charles Thomas Wooldridge.

Pages 119-126

Architectural gem. An old print of Reading Gaol (c.1850).

Skylights in the Centre roof.

View along A.3 landing.

E-wing showing proximity to Huntley & Palmers.

Typical view looking upwards.

The separate system. Old print (c.1860).

The top landing today – with safety net.

Top bags for top people at knock down prices.

Plans of the Execution Centre (c.1900) and Reading Gaol (c.1850).

The front gate from inside and outside.

View from Level 3 during conversion work in the late 1960s.

Plan of Reading Gaol in 1865.

Oscar Wilde's cell, C.3.3.

Foreword Theodore Dalrymple

Historians face a seemingly insoluble dilemma: they can either burrow away in the archives and produce monographs of limited overall significance, of interest mainly to specialists, or they can produce wide-ranging histories that, by excluding detail, risk sweeping and inaccurate generalisation.

Anthony Stokes' history of Reading Gaol solves this dilemma very neatly. A prison officer of many years' experience, his researches into the history of the prison in which he serves were obviously a labour of love, which has been amply requited in this book. In giving us so detailed and fascinating a picture of Reading Gaol through the ages, he causes us to reflect on penal policy, the nature of crime and man's perpetual temptation to cruelty. I don't think anyone could read his book, for example, and conclude that the harsh treatment of prisoners is either a good idea or morally justified. Here is a detailed history of a single institution that is of wide philosophical significance and that could be read with great profit and enjoyment by the intelligent and enquiring general reader.

Of course, Reading Gaol is mostly famous among the general public for having been the subject of the greatest, and most moving, poem about prison in our language, or possibly any language, Oscar Wilde's *The Ballad of Reading Gaol*. Anthony Stokes sheds fascinating new light on Wilde's imprisonment, but he recounts many other cases that are in their way (precisely because they were less famous or notorious) just as fascinating. No one will be able to resist his stories of escapees, incompetent criminals who leave their addresses at the scene of their crimes, prisoners, executioners, eccentrics and corrupt warders. His selection of detail is very telling: the bureaucratic thought that went into the regulations concerning the administration and physical properties of the lash, for example, tell us a great deal about the mentality of the age. Moreover, much of what goes on in any prison is very funny, and the author captures this aspect of prison life, often unsuspected by people who have no experience of prison, very well.

If I had to recommend a single book about the history of imprisonment in this country, this would be it. The horror, the humour, the misery, the difficulties, the successes and failures—all are here. A history such as this, written by a man who is idealistic without sentimentality, could have been written about any large prison in Britain, but it has taken Anthony Stokes to do so.

I am honoured to have been given the opportunity to write this foreword.

Preface

This book represents the end product of a passion that began soon after I arrived in Reading, Berkshire almost 20 years ago now. It is based on many years of investigation, research and detective work. Sometimes this has involved me in exploring old manuscripts kept in places where few people have trodden; at other times in scrutinising the large collection of artefacts and historical data from official and public sources that I have amassed during my years as a prison officer. It is also informed by my close, daily proximity to the fabric of Reading Gaol, its sometimes brooding and austere atmosphere, and its ghosts.

A long and proud history

The history of Reading Gaol is as vast as it is complex, stretching from the days of Henry VIII and beyond, through the penal Dark Age of the separate system of imprisonment of the Victorian era under which Oscar Wilde served his sentence, to the more enlightened times of the present day. Perhaps no other prison in England and Wales can boast such a diverse and varied pattern of uses and roles. None, I think has come to be associated with both penal reform and English literature in quite the way that Reading Gaol has.

Reading has had a gaol of one kind or another for over five hundred years. It attracted worldwide renown as the setting for Wilde's classic poem of 1896 after he was imprisoned there. *The Ballad of Reading Gaol* is featured at length in *Chapter 6*: it has become a touchstone for penal reformers at home and abroad and Wilde's imprisonment, though lawful by the standards of his day, is now a *cause célèbre* in the history of criminal justice. The ballad is a good place to start for anyone who needs to understand that prisons are not all sweetness and light; and that imprisonment must always be about far more than punishment, retribution or incarceration if, as Wilde put matters, the 'vilest deeds' are not to 'bloom well in prison air'.

But though Oscar Wilde and Reading Gaol have become inseparable in many people's minds, there is so much more to the place, as I hope readers will discover from the pages that follow. It has a black history of what would nowadays be seen as barbaric punishments (*Chapter 3*) and executions (*Chapter 4*); and the uses to which the buildings have been put range from Irish internment (*Chapter 7*) to a Canadian military prison (in which prisoners were made invisible: *Chapter 8*), a borstal correctional centre (*Chapter 9*), and a young offender institution and remand centre today (*Chapter 12*). In between times it has been a place of safety for vulnerable prisoners (including 'supergrasses'), a food store, an army surplus depot and a driving test centre!

During 2004 I arranged an open day for the general public: a chance, as I put it, to walk in the footsteps of Oscar Wilde. Over two hundred people came into

the prison over a fortnight. I was astounded by their response. Despite their initial disbelief, I think they found that good work does go on inside prisons. This made me yet more resolute to bring out this aspect in the book.

A few practical remarks

So, if I can ‘talk business’ for a moment, I should mention that, to be sure, there are some staff who may have lost their initial spark and rationale for working with offenders. There may even be those who have become ‘bitter and twisted’. They may have been fresh and raring to go at one time, but became worn down by the daily grind and constant exposure to a side of life that most people might prefer to ignore and hide behind prison walls. These may, in fact, be the same kind of people who in my early days at Reading Gaol just could not fathom out why I was at all interested in the prison itself, ‘the poet’, the Execution Log, where the unmarked graves were, why fine Victorian architecture and fittings had been replaced, or where important records and artefacts had gone. At times this amounted to outright opposition from those who saw the history of the place as a hindrance or millstone.

But in truth such people are in the minority—increasingly so over the years both at Reading and also elsewhere within the modern-day Prison Service. Prison officers are nowadays more likely to be dedicated to their tasks, working as part of a well-trained and highly professional team, focused on making a lasting difference to the lives of prisoners, treating them with humanity, dignity and instilling into them a sense of achievement, self-belief and self-esteem. There is considerable satisfaction to be gained from this: making that one difference to somebody’s life that steers them away from a cycle of drugs, violence, dishonesty and returning to prison towards a better life. I count myself lucky that I became a prison officer and would recommend it to other people seeking such a challenge. Examples of both the ‘old guard’ and the new appear within the book.

‘In Reading Gaol by Reading Town there is a Pit of Shame’

The title of this book, *Pit of Shame*, I have unashamedly taken from a metaphor of Oscar Wilde that appears in the opening lines of Part VI of his ballad. The book distils all the historical data I could find and verify about this onetime ‘pit of shame’ and explains how it has been rehabilitated (*Chapter 13*). Within the book I have drawn a number of personal conclusions for which I take full responsibility, including about Wilde’s time at the prison (mainly in *Chapters 5* and *6*). These are based on close study, privileged access to documents and materials, and long reflection. So I hope that the book provides at least some fresh insights—and that my passion for Reading Gaol, its history and legacy comes through in its pages.

Anthony Stokes April 2007

Timeline

- 1071 Berkshire County Gaol at Wallingford receives its first state prisoner, the Abbot of Abingdon, suspected of complicity in Hereward's Rising.
- 1290 Berkshire County gaol is moved by Edward I from Wallingford to Windsor.
- 1537 A blacksmith from Wallingford is alleged to have spread a false rumour that the King was dead. He is whipped at Wallingford market-place, placed in a cart and then whipped again through the town. Next day he is taken to Reading and whipped there, then finally cast into Reading Gaol.
- 1571 A felon named Newman is hanged in the market-place in the centre of the town.
- 1574 John Nabb is the first person to be born inside Reading Gaol.
- 1625 Anyone caught begging is to be committed to Reading House of Correction. Prior to this, two constables are employed to administer whippings to beggars.
- 1634 William and Edith Wallis are accused of witchcraft. William is cleared because a suspected witch's mark, a spot on his back, bleeds when pricked—a 'test' of a witch. Edith is sent to Reading Gaol, lucky not to have been burned at the stake.
- 1683 Richard Marshall and Mary Elton, both prisoners in Reading Gaol, become the first people to marry there.
- 1755 July 17: Margaret Wright is hanged for the murder of her infant child.
- 1761 March 21: Ann Giles is hanged for arson.
- 1779 The penal reformer John Howard first visits Reading Gaol.
- 1785 A new gaol - often referred to as the 'first gaol' to distinguish it from that of 1844 onwards - is built on the site of the old abbey and opens fully in 1786.
- 1793 'Forbury House of Correction' opens.
- 1799 Reading is at the centre of a nationwide constitutional *cause célèbre* concerning *habeus corpus*, ending in the trial and acquittal of its governor after he refuses access to certain prisoners: *Chapter 1*.
- 1822 The treadmill is introduced for hard labour.
- 1828 In-cell sanitation is removed from the 'first' Reading Gaol of 1786-1842.
- 1842 The first gaol closes for demolition to make way for the 'new gaol'.
- 1844 The new gaol – a cross between Pentonville Prison and Warwick Castle - is built on the site of the old one at a cost of over £40,000. This imposing building is supposedly constructed with all 'mod cons' including in-cell sanitation. One of the first prisoners is Abraham Boswell, sentenced to six months with hard labour for the attempted rape and indecent assault of a two year old child.
- 1845 First public execution at the new gaol, of Thomas Jennings and a possible miscarriage of justice: *Chapter 4*.¹
- 1847 Reading Gaol accepts 'Government convicts': *Chapter 2*.
- 1857 March 3: Thomas Gorman, a 23-year-old-blacksmith, is sentenced to transportation for 14 years for attempted murder; after attacking Principal Warder William Brewer, who is saved by the prisoner in the next cell dragging the unconscious officer into his cell.
- 1862 Last public execution at Reading, of John Gould, above the gatehouse: *Chapter 4*.

¹ A full 'timeline' for executions after 1844 appears in *Appendix 4: List of Executions*.

- 1864 The Prison Ministers Act 1863 allows Roman Catholic priests into the gaol.
- 1865 Some time after the Prison Act 1865, in-cell sanitation is removed, during the austere ‘Du Cane era’ of ‘Hard Fare, Hard Labour and Hard Bed’—a time of harsh attitudes in society generally (except for a minority of reformers) about how people who were ‘different’ should be treated; and prevent communication.
- 1868 Last public executions in Britain, on the roof of Horsemonger Lane Gaol, London, of Michael Barrett and other Fenians re the Clerkenwell Explosion. Subsequently all executions are held inside prisons pursuant to the Capital Punishment Within Prisons Act of the same year.
- 1870 John Owen is released from Reading Gaol on May 20 vowing revenge on Emanuel Marshall for past wrongdoings. He goes straight to Marshall’s house and murders him, his wife, mother, sister and three children in what becomes known as the ‘Denham Murders’. For this Owen is executed at Aylesbury Gaol on 8 August 1870.
- 1876 Prison clothes are supplied by local department store Heelas, now John Lewis.
- 1877 The Prison Act of that year nationalises the prisons.
First private executions (i.e. behind prison walls) of Henry Tidbury and Francis Tidbury, brothers, for the murder of two police officers.
- 1879 May 2: Ada Chamberlain becomes the first person to escape from the prison.
December 12: A major fire breaks out forcing the evacuation of the women’s wing (E-wing). It is extinguished by the local Volunteer Fire Brigade.
- 1882 Roderick Maclean is arrested at Windsor Railway Station for the attempted assassination of Queen Victoria—having fired a pistol at her, but missed. He is charged with High Treason and remanded to Reading Gaol; found not guilty by reason of insanity, branded a dangerous lunatic and sent to Broadmoor Lunatic Asylum (as it was). He dies after nearly 40 years there in 1921.
- 1889 April 14: Henry Strong commits suicide by jumping off the top gallery (A3) and landing on the floor of the centre hall three storeys below.
- 1892 October 10: five members of the Salvation Army are sent to Reading Gaol, sentenced to five days’ imprisonment each for non-payment of a fine imposed for obstructing the highway at Windsor in pursuit of their beliefs.
- 1895 Oscar Wilde arrives on November 20 (though he claims it was November 13).
- 1896 April 4: Amelia Dyer is arrested and charged with the murder of three infants entrusted to her care as a foster mother for a fee of £10 each. In total, seven small bodies are found in the River Thames. She remains in Reading Gaol until May 2 when she is committed for trial at The Old Bailey and thence transferred to Newgate Prison where she is executed on 10 June 1896.
July 7: Execution of Trooper Charles Thomas Wooldridge (the C.T.W. of the *Ballad of Reading Gaol*). Major J B Nelson arrives as Governor at Reading.
- 1897 Oscar Wilde is released after being handed his notes for *De Profundis*.
- 1898 *Ballad of Reading Gaol* is first published by Leonard Smithers of London.
- 1910 June 4: on the accession to the throne of King George V there is a general amnesty: the entire prisoner population at the gaol is granted special remission and released—a total of 70 men and four women.
- 1913 Last execution at Reading, that of Eric James Sedgewick: *Chapter 4*.
- 1916 The prison becomes a Place of Internment (or POI): *Chapter 7*.

- 1917 Following determined efforts, four prisoners escape: *Chapter 7*.
- 1919 Reading Gaol closes as a prison.
- 1920 January 8: 100 tonnes of tinned salmon are secured inside the gaol.
- 1925 The prison workshop is used by the army as a surplus clothing store.
- 1936 The Chaplain's quarter becomes the Berkshire driving test centre.
- 1937 The Governor's quarter is used as a headquarters for the ARP (air raid wardens).
- 1938 September 7: Councillor T. Smart visits the empty gaol and requests that it be handed over to the council for use as a local government administrative centre.
- 1939 Offices within the gaol become the County Censor's Office responsible for the checking of all news prior to publication at the outbreak of World War II.
- 1940 A padded cell in E-wing is used to store the county's ration books.
- 1945 April 9: the prison is handed over to the Canadian Military to be used as a detention centre but this is kept secret from the general public.
May: 370 Canadian rioters from Headley Detention Barracks moved to Reading.
- 1946 August: the gaol re-opens as a local prison and an 'overflow' prison.
- 1951 Reading becomes one of the first Borstal Correctional Centres: *Chapter 9*.
- 1961 Re-roled as a Borstal Recall and Correctional Centre.
- 1964 Last executions in Britain, simultaneously at Walton Gaol, Liverpool and Strangeways Prison, Manchester at 8 a.m. on 13 August 1964, of Peter Anthony Allen and Gwynne Owen Evans, respectively.
- 1965 Murder (Abolition of Death Penalty) Act suspends capital punishment for murder.
- 1967 The Criminal Justice Act 1967 finally abolishes corporal punishment in prisons.
- 1968 Allegations of brutality in the national press force an inquiry into events at Reading, culminating in its closure by 14 January 1969.
- 1969 Reading reopens as a local prison when a major rebuilding programme starts. Capital punishment for murder abolished permanently by way of a Commencement Order signed by James Callaghan, Home Secretary.
- 1970 April 8: Re-opens as a 'Rule 43 Prison', i.e. for vulnerable prisoners.
- 1980 Reclassified as a Category B local prison holding adult and young offenders; also a new Supergrass Unit opens within the old segregation unit (E-wing).
- 1984 American film actor Stacey Keach serves time at Reading for drug offences.
- 1990 In-cell sanitation is re-installed throughout, 125 years after it was last removed.
- 1992 The prison is re-roled as a Remand Centre for young offenders (aged 18 to 21).
December 26: a major disturbance—the 'Boxing Day riot'—takes place, in which staff are attacked and 49 prisoners run riot doing damage worth £153,000.
- 1993 December 21: seven of the rioters are sentenced for prison mutiny pursuant to the still novel Prison Security Act 1992.
- 1996 Again re-roled: as HM Remand Centre and Young Offender Institution. The Kennet Unit (*Chapter 12*) is opened by ex-England footballer, Trevor Brooking.
- 2000 Wilde Walk, Reading commemorates the centenary of Oscar Wilde's death.
- 2001 UK ratifies Protocol Six to the European Convention On Human Rights (ECHR) signed by Jack Straw, Home Secretary in 1999, so as to completely outlaw capital punishment in peacetime.
- 2003 A new Vocational Training Centre (VTC) opens at Reading.
- 2004 UK implements Protocol 13 to the ECHR ending capital punishment in war time. Pauline Bryant becomes the first woman governing-governor at Reading Gaol.