**by Andrew Bridges**

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**Introduction:**

This is a ‘work autobiography’. I would have to plead guilty to any accusation that the whole thing, especially Part One, seems to be merely “all about Me”. In mitigation I’d say that its very purpose is to offer my personal experiences and thoughts about my admittedly very fortunate career. My personal life outside work is mainly only mentioned in passing, when it seemed relevant, which includes quite a bit of personal background in Chapters 5 & 6 in order to explain a couple of influences on my work behaviour – I hope this doesn’t prove too offputting. While Part One is indeed all about my personal experience of my curious career and the serendipitous course it took, Part Two focuses more on the Probation work itself, albeit necessarily as I personally experienced it.

When I was 17 I read a book review of *The History of the Post Office in the 18th Century*, which skewered the tome with the opening sentence, “This book will be extremely interesting to anyone interested in the history of the Post Office in the 18th century”. I’m conscious that this memoir might be in the same category. Therefore I suggest that the reader use the first Contents page to find the bits that might arouse their interest. For example, Probation practitioners might well connect more readily with the ‘Probation work’ focus within Part Two. The second Contents page, on page 2, has been included so that the reader can more easily navigate to their preferred section(s). Some events in my career are mentioned more than once, because of the book’s non-chronological sequence, but hopefully such occasional duplication will be tolerable, and forgivable.

At this point I thank and pay my tribute to the many people, some named in this memoir and some not, who either helped me directly or who simply showed me Probation work – practice, management, support, &/or inspection - being done really well. And I also apologise to the ones I didn’t name – there are many.

Additionally, I apologise to anyone named who might feel that I have done them a disservice by saying what I’ve said. I have no agenda to direct hurt to any individual, but I’ve tried to ensure that certain experiences have been put on the record from my perspective as candidly as possible. My hope is that my record might enable the reader to form a view about how much has changed, and how much has stayed the same, over the years since c1973.

I’ve tried to be honest about what I can or cannot remember confidently, but even someone who is very proud of strong powers of recollection, as I am, has to acknowledge that memories can be fallible.

Andrew Bridges

Reading, UK, May 2019

**Career Chronology:**

Since much of the rest of this memoir is not in chronological order, it might be useful to record the steps in my career in the correct order here:

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Summer/autumn 1971 | First thought of a possible Probation career, but gave myself a further year to think about it |
| September 1972 | Applied through the then Clearing House for the University of Leicester (1st choice) & 3 other courses |
| October 1972 | Interview in Leicester – successful. |
| 3 Sept 73 – 30 June 75 | Trainee Probation Officer, Leicester |
| 1 July 75 – 6 Sept 81 | Probation Officer, Swindon |
| 7 Sept 81 – 17 July 83 | Probation Officer, HM Prison and Detention Centre, Erlestoke, nr Devizes |
| 18 July 83 – 31 Dec 86 | Senior Probation Officer, HM Youth Custody Centre & Detention Centre, Usk |
| 1 Jan 87 – 31 May 89 | Senior Probation Officer, Newport, Gwent |
| 1 June 89 – 30 Sept 98 | Assistant Chief Probation Officer, Berkshire |
| 1 Oct 98 – 31 March 01 | Chief Probation Officer, Berkshire |
| 2 April 01 – 31 July 03 | HM Inspector of Probation |
| 1 Aug 03 – 8 April 04 | HM Deputy Chief Inspector of Probation |
| 9 April 04 – 2 June 11 | HM Chief Inspector of Probation |
| Sept 11 – Feb 14 | Associate (advisory) work for G4S Care & Justice |
| Jan & Feb 2015 | Conducted a substantial review for Ingeus |
| 2011 onwards | Additional miscellaneous paid and unpaid work  – not covered in this memoir |

# PART ONE: Me – the serendipitous route of my career

## Chapter 1. “The Worst Thing …?”

“Is this the worst thing that has ever happened to you?” Jeanette asked me.

Jeanette and I were Chief Probation Officers in different parts of the country at the time, and she was referring to the phone call I’d received a few days earlier telling me that my career in the Probation Service was being forcibly ended.

Although it was a fair question, it caused me to pause. I had by then previously decided that 9 January 2001 was merely the second-worst day of my life, and my hesitant response was therefore along the lines of “Probably not”.

“The worst day in my life was when my daughter died,” Jeanette pressed on, though without going into the details. It was a salutary reminder to me to keep things in perspective, and brave of her to offer it. She had heard that I was in her part of the country that evening (for other reasons) and had offered to take me out to dinner.

Although my perspective had not completely gone I was certainly in an intense cold fury, and was to remain so for some weeks in the short term, and to a reduced extent for over two years in the longer term. For the moment I was able to manage that cold fury by appreciating Jeanette’s kindness and discussing my options for the future, while also trying to learn from this catastrophic blow to my working life.

Jeanette had been successful (where I had failed) in gaining a new Chief Officer post in the newly created National Probation Service (NPS), and now bravely gave me a copy of her written application to take away so that in due course I could consider any potential learning points for my future job applications. I respected both her and what she had achieved in difficult circumstances in her then current post, and I took that opportunity seriously when I got home. I remain grateful to her now for reaching out to me then.

Yet that evening a large part of me was still brooding over the somewhat farcical phone call that had brought to an end my entire career to date. I felt a genuine if bitter humour alongside my sense of total outrage over what had happened. Jeanette politely allowed me that evening to relive the shattering experience.

I had received the call on my mobile phone as I turned it on when emerging for a tea break from a session in the two-day course I was attending at a hotel in Kensington – the course was for Probation senior managers on the European Excellence Model, paid for by the Home Office. The calling number was withheld, but through the hubbub of course members breaking for tea I could just recognise the tones of Eithne, the incoming National Director of the future National Probation Service.

“Just a moment, Eithne, let me take this outside where I can hear you,” I said.

It was Monday afternoon and I had been awaiting Eithne’s call since the previous Friday afternoon. In the morning tea-break, when I switched my phone on, I had picked up a message from Eithne that asked me to call her back – which I did and she was unavailable – and there had been a similar miss at lunchtime. Since I knew that this call was about my future career, and I had expected to hear before the end of the weekend anyway, I was already experiencing a sense of farce. Now Eithne’s call had come through but I couldn’t hear her properly because of the teatime hubbub – hence my request to “Let me take this outside”.

\* \* \* \* \*

What was I expecting from her? The answer to that is complicated, and any reader wishing to bypass these details - which after so many years may now seem abstruse - is therefore very welcome to progress immediately to the next asterisk break.

Ideally I would have liked to be told that I would be the Chief of the new Thames Valley Area of the new NPS with effect from 1 April. On one level that would have been the obvious outcome. The new Area was to involve the merging of two former areas, Berkshire and the already-combined Oxfordshire & Buckinghamshire. HM Inspectorate of Probation had just inspected both areas, and it was already known informally that Ox/Bucks had been disappointingly graded at category ‘3’ (out of 3) for performance, while Berkshire had emerged in the top category. And yes, at that time I had been the Chief Probation Officer for Berkshire for over two years, focusing most of my efforts on improving service performance. (While we had previously been very good on ‘innovative’ work, I had wished to ensure that we also improved the consistency of our core practice.) Additionally, Berkshire had done particularly well in a recent separate Enforcement inspection -bringing a nice letter from the Minister - and had also got a ‘top score’ in a very recent Bail Information survey, as well as doing well on measures of diversity, sickness levels and budget management. There was therefore on one level an arguably strong case for spreading that successful approach to the new bigger joint area by putting the Chief of the ‘better’ area in charge of it.

On another level I rather doubted that I would get Thames Valley. Eithne had been the Chief for Ox/Bucks until about a year previously, and for various reasons I was fairly sure that neither she, nor the then Chair of the employing Committee for her former area, would want a ‘Berkshire takeover’ in Thames Valley. It might be less politically incendiary, I thought, if she put in an experienced Chief from another part of the country altogether, who might be perceived as a ‘neutral’ manager of the merger process between two areas that had some ‘recent history’ between them. (However, that was another prediction I got badly wrong.)

Formally, I was in a redundant post, due to the legislation that had by then abolished the 54 semi-autonomous ‘old’ Probation Services with effect from 1 April 2001, and since Berkshire was not going to be one of the 42 ‘new’ Probation Areas I would have no job by then. Although this was caused by Home Office legislation, it was for my local employer to give me formal notice, and I had drafted the letter myself for the Secretary of my employing Committee to notify me of my own redundancy, with the correct three months’ notice, and then I had formally received it just over a week previously.

So I needed a new job. I knew that there were about eighteen other Probation Areas in the future NPS that were looking for Chiefs, and I was reasonably hopeful of getting one of those. The selection process had seemed a little odd to me in some respects, but I had accepted it. Where the Crown Prosecution Service (CPS) had very recently done a similar exercise – of combining and reorganising existing areas so that they would align with the existing 42 principal Police Areas of England & Wales at the time – they had conducted a single recruitment exercise for all 42 Areas, put all the candidates in rank order, and then the successful candidates got to choose, in that rank order, which Areas they wanted to take up. (So the newly appointed Chief Crown Prosecutor for Thames Valley had told me not long previously.) Since the Probation Service was not at that time part of the Civil Service (as the CPS was) – and would not yet be even after 1 April 2001 – I had realised that that precedent would not necessarily be followed, but I had been surprised at the approach that was in fact adopted.

The process of reorganising 54 ‘old’ Probation Services into 42 Probation Areas of the new NPS curiously required retaining the boundaries of 35 of the areas, but the other 19 ‘old’ areas had to be combined into 7 ‘new’ ones. Somehow the Home Office arrived at the decision that the existing 35 Chiefs of the ‘unmerging’ areas would be automatically migrated to Chief of the continuing area, though under a new national contract instead of being employed locally. Meanwhile the other 19 would be compulsorily redundant – of course I was one of those. However, we were not to be offered any of the ‘reasonable alternative’ posts available, but would have to compete directly for them – not only with each other, but with any other applicant who might wish to apply to be Chief of any of the vacant areas. However, given that we were to be offered the then generous financial terms for compulsory redundancy, I had felt that this was not unreasonable. Most incumbents were aged over 50, so the early retirement option in the redundancy package was available to them and was attractive.

However I was more surprised when it emerged that any of the ‘35 Chiefs’ who wanted early retirement would also be offered the same substantial financial terms if they simply chose to step down. Although this was a pragmatic approach to clearing out more Chief posts for new appointees, in principle these people were by definition not redundant so the option seemed remarkably generous. Furthermore they had the option of applying for the ‘new’ Chief posts; John, one of these 35, had been decent enough to phone me earlier in the selection process to notify me, as a courtesy, that he was applying for the Thames Valley post (‘bigger’ than his current area), and to add the accurate observation-cum-apology that he realised he was being allowed to apply for ‘my’ post, but I was not being allowed to apply for his.

In summary: candidates from the ‘35’ could apply for new posts, and if unsuccessful fall back either on their continuing Chief post, or if over 50 take quite a generous early retirement; candidates from the ‘19’ could apply for new posts, and if unsuccessful could fall back on the early retirement option if they were over 50. Candidates from the ‘19’ who were under 50 would still receive a frankly generous lump sum if they were unsuccessful – my 50th birthday put me in this category by just nine weeks - and at least one other Chief ‘shared’ my status by an even narrower margin.

Leaving aside these odd inequities – some of which simply couldn’t be helped because some lines such as birthdays have to be drawn somewhere – the selection process had started very strongly indeed. Because some of the ‘35’ took advantage of the early retirement option, there were actually 19 ‘new’ Chief posts available when the process started, and there were about 40-odd candidates for those posts, so a demanding ‘Assessment Centre’ had been designed for us.

On balance I had been pretty impressed with it. We had come to a central London address for two days of tests (verbal reasoning, numerical reasoning), written tasks (in-tray exercise, essay), interviews and role plays. In one exercise I had become unclear whether I was being interviewed ‘as me’ or as the role I had been cast in the scenario, but otherwise I had been impressed with how well it had been designed. The written exercises had been properly demanding, though I noticed that I was clearly out of practice just in physically handwriting for over an hour, now that I was more used to keyboarding. In the final exercise, some actors had been brought in to role-play stroppy members of a new senior management team in a meeting I had to chair, under observation. This was quite realistic, and I felt I’d handled it quite strongly, and I left the whole event feeling upbeat. Although I never took anything for granted, I had not been surprised when I was one of the ones invited to the next and final stage of the selection process, the interview.

Here the process had seemed much more questionable, although I had been able to see why it was not a straightforward process for Eithne to manage. When designing a future ‘National’ Probation Service, a compromise had been made whereby each Area would have its own Probation Board, consisting of a paid part-time Chair, some paid part-time Board members (effectively non-executive directors) and the Chief, employed nationally as a ‘statutory office-holder’. The future 42 Chairs had just been appointed in the autumn of 2000, and the decision was made to involve them in the appointment of the Chief (the one executive member) of their respective Boards – a reasonable idea on the face of it.

However, this meant that theoretically there would need to be separate interviews for each Chief post, a solution that was pragmatically modified by putting the posts into ‘sets’ of two or three, with the relevant Chairs alongside the core interview panel, interviewing the candidates for any or all of the posts in that ‘set’. So one consequence of this was that candidates who applied for – or declared themselves available for – posts in more than one set, would therefore undergo more than one interview, up to a maximum of three or four. The further consequence of this was that for practical logistical reasons such candidates could not be interviewed for every single one of the posts that they had declared themselves available for.

In my case, although Thames Valley was my first choice, and I wished to be considered for it, I was half-expecting that as Berkshire Chief I would not be granted this, so instead I was prepared to accept any of 17 of the other Chief jobs, wherever they were in England or Wales. This was because I saw myself as entering a future new National service, and would be prepared to go wherever Eithne might find it helpful to send me, given my track record of achievement in Berkshire. (This was except for the new huge London Area, for which I felt I was insufficiently qualified.) Although there was clearly a defect in the interview process, as outlined above - arguably unavoidable under the circumstances - I felt reasonably confident that, given that I was in a compulsorily redundant post, and I had more than demonstrated competence in it to date, and I had passed the Assessment Centre for the new posts, Eithne and her team would therefore identify where I might most usefully be placed in the new National Probation Service.

And therefore was I being complacent? It would be fair to observe that in hindsight I realised I had misread certain signals. Furthermore I had considered at the time that my interviews were sound without being brilliant; only later did I face up to the fact that my approach to certain key areas of the interviews was less than sufficient. But I was realistic enough at the time to acknowledge that there was a genuine chance (I rated it as a 1 in 4 probability) of ending up without a Chief job at all. Indeed, on Boxing Day, less than a fortnight earlier I had discussed the matter with my wife Lesley, who in a remarkable coincidence was facing an effectively identical circumstance with her own entirely separate employer during precisely the same period. We had rated our chances of both of us being out of our respective jobs by the end of January at 1 in 10. So I was not complacent, but my level of confidence proved to be misplaced.

\* \* \* \* \*

“OK, Eithne I can hear you now…” I can picture the road outside the hotel, in Kensington, tree-lined, with cars parked under the trees.

“Andrew, I’m sorry to have to tell you that I don’t have a job for you in the new National Probation Service.” I retain in my mind an impression of that urban streetscene tilting at nearly 45 degrees before my eyes at that moment.

“You’re joking!” – an instinctive expression of horror rather than literal disbelief. I know I said this because I recall almost instantly feeling some sympathy for Eithne in her position of having to make this unpleasant phonecall. Alongside this, I remember also thinking to myself, <“This is quite a test for you, Andrew”>…

“I’m afraid I’m not…” Eithne held steady, confirmed my position, and went on to ask that I keep this information to myself until the end of the next day, when she would be circulating an announcement about all the Chief posts, and to offer me the chance of a feedback appointment. It was to her surprise that I requested late afternoon the next day, since I was already in London, and although this was clearly not welcome to her, it was probably useful to both of us that we were able to get this event done and out of the way so promptly.

That was how the rather surreal living nightmare of the next few weeks began. My approach from the start was to see this as a new test for me – could I manage my new circumstances properly? I determined to keep calm, and complete the two-day course – this could prove useful somewhere in my unknown future. That evening I would complete the task of finalising the Thames Valley Probation ‘Business plan’ on my laptop. (I did that, and Thames Valley was one of the few areas to meet the Home Office deadline of 12 January for submitting them.) After some hesitation I decided that I would have to break my undertaking to Eithne to the extent of telling Lesley when we spoke on the phone that evening – very hard for her, since I said she must not tell anyone else. I was probably being over-precious about this, since family and friends of most candidates seemed to know fairly quickly – and Rob, one of the other course participants, indicated later to me that day that he had had a knockback call from Eithne (while I remained silent on the subject).

At the end of the afternoon the next day I went to the Home Office for my feedback appointment in the same icy-cool mode, though feeling rather unsteady inside. Unsurprisingly Eithne was considerably delayed, but I decided not to let that affect my approach. The purpose of a feedback interview is to listen and learn, not to re-attempt or to argue the assessment of the original job interview – and I aimed to stick to that. Eithne explained that, out of the 33 or so candidates interviewed, I had been comfortably inside the top 19 before the start, based on my Assessment Centre result, but that after the interviews I had slipped down the list to come outside that top 19. This was the terminology she used, which was not unreasonable in itself, and I think she may have also made the general comment that in my interviews I had stressed what my achievements had been to date, but I had not explained how I had achieved them – probably a fair comment.

I knew not to ‘argue the interview’ but I did want to know what she thought her role was as the future ‘national’ chief executive in selecting the ‘local’ chiefs who she would be expecting to deliver ‘for’ her. Since I was an existing Chief with a ‘real’ track record in role, not just a potential one, and I was in a redundant post, what was her role in the appointment decision-making? I clearly recall her stating “It is not my role to go out and bat for any particular individual candidate.” In effect, she was saying that her job was simply to be the fair and impartial adjudicator in the carefully regulated competition between candidates, as if she didn’t have a view of her own about their respective merits.

This contrasts with a view often expressed in management training books and courses that one of the key jobs of a chief executive is to select her/his senior management team. This is not straightforward in a system of equal opportunities job interviews, but I had from my own experience taken the view that the Chief does have some input, and exercise some personal judgement, over and above merely deciding which candidates have scored the highest in the formal process. Track record, for one thing, was a legitimate consideration.

Furthermore, there was no recognition of an additional factor, one we had always adopted as proper employment practice in Berkshire, that if someone in a redundant post had demonstrated that they were competent they would be given priority consideration for any reasonably comparable vacancy. Since, in my case, it could be argued that I was ‘between employers’ rather than continuously within a single employer I would guess that ignoring this factor could have been a legally defensible position for the Home Office; however, I was shortly to learn of a new factor that made that position less defensible.

Swallowing my icy anger, and still not arguing the feedback, I asked if the Chief appointments were now public information. Eithne was able to show me the text of the Probation Circular she had just sent out. From this I learned two things: First, that Gerry of the Ox/Bucks area (effectively one of the assistant chiefs there) had been appointed Chief of Thames Valley – so I had been quite wrong in thinking that it would seem necessary to bring someone ‘neutral’ in from another area altogether. And this was appointing a relatively inexperienced person from a poorly-performing area to take charge over a well-performing area – and someone who would widely be seen as a protégé of Eithne, who had very recently been his boss. (However, in fairness I would add that Gerry had many decent qualities, and although in the first two to three years in the Thames Valley job he seemed clearly out of his depth he went on to make a fair fist of being an effective Chief there later on.)

I looked at this in some disbelief, and said very coldly to Eithne, “I know that it is my job to go back to the Berkshire staff and make this appointment make sense to them as a credible appointment – but that’s going to be extremely difficult.” She briskly confirmed that that’s what she expected me to do.

That kick in the teeth was exacerbated by a second aspect of the Circular: I then noticed that one of the new Chief jobs (Sussex) was unfilled, and was now going to be readvertised. This meant that although I was a redundant Chief, and one clearly willing to be moved to any post in the country, had an evidenced track record and had also passed the Assessment Centre, the Home Office would prefer to give me a large five-figure redundancy payment and readvertise, rather than simply slot me into the vacancy. There was no other qualifying candidate, so there wasn’t even the potential issue of ‘preferential treatment’. Clearly, the interviewing panel had assessed me as being that poor, based solely (presumably) on interview performance. This was therefore a kick in the teeth three times over: No job, an assistant chief taking over ‘my’ area, and me being seen as unfit to take over a vacant area.

At the end of the same month, January 2001, Lesley too was made redundant by her Oxfam employers, although the area of shops that she managed had the second best performing figures in the region – again the result of a competitive interview. It was a tough time for us both as a couple, and I admit that I feared misplaced optimism again when I said to her at one point during this period, “Hopefully, one day we’ll be able to look back at this time in our lives and laugh about it…”

\* \* \* \* \*

So why do I say that I had a fortunate career (so far)? No doubt it is obvious that if this event was one of the worst two or three things that have ever happened to me then, clearly, much of the rest of the time life has largely treated me quite kindly. Jeanette was right to advise me to keep this setback in perspective, though I think I was already able to do that. Because while I remained coldly angry about this treble setback for quite some time I think that overall I’ve been very clear that the vast majority of human beings on this planet have had much tougher experiences in their lives to manage than I have ever had.

I started with certain advantages in life – being British, white, male, middle class – and despite some challenging setbacks at times I’ve gained a mainly satisfying career, financial security, and experienced much shared love as well as (mainly) good health. I hope that most of the time I’ve given something positive back to others – both near and far – and I recognise that by most people’s criteria mine has probably been a very fortunate career, and indeed life.

\* \* \* \* \*

## Chapter 2: Twin Impostors

*“You’re joking!”* [again]

If you can meet with Triumph and Disaster  
And treat those twin impostors just the same…  
*If – Rudyard Kipling*

My feelings about Kipling are pretty mixed; he was one of the few writers that my father really liked (Tolkien was the other). While I can view Kipling’s overtly imperialist viewpoint in his historical context I can’t warm to it personally. Yet while ‘If’ has become hackneyed in some people’s eyes because it is (apparently) “Britain’s favourite poem”, much of it still works well for me. Three years before 2001 I had experienced a sense of crowning triumph when appointed Berkshire’s Chief Probation Officer – which I will describe later on - and then three years after the disaster of 2001 a new triumph came my way. My sense of perspective was strong enough to recognise at the time that it was sensible to recognise these three events as ‘twin impostors’ (or perhaps ‘triplet impostors’?).

Indeed I had understood from the moment that I applied for the Berkshire job in 1998 that it might turn out to be only very temporary in practice. Tony Blair’s ‘New Labour’ government was keen both to overhaul criminal justice and to introduce a structure to ‘regional government’ in a broad sense, so the idea to align all criminal justice services into co-terminous areas was already well established. Although the 42 principal Police Areas of the time were an idiosyncratic mix of large and small units that had arisen in the 1960s through varied local circumstances they were now strongly established. Various efforts to rationalise them both under Blair’s Government and in subsequent years have fallen foul of local vested interests. (Exception: Labour succeeded at least, with difficulty, in realigning the Metropolitan Police Area so that it now coincides with the Greater London Authority area – not a trivial achievement.)

One of the very few completely correct predictions that I have ever made was that early in 1998 I guessed that 1 April 2001 was the date when Berkshire Probation Service would come to an end. Therefore, delighted though I was when my application for Chief was successful, I was expecting to have to jump another hurdle before long, and I knew that that the 1998 ‘triumph’ could possibly be followed by a later ‘disaster’.

And now in 2001 that disaster had happened – how was I to respond? I can’t verify this, but I heard that one of my colleague potentially-redundant Chiefs, when he heard that he had not even passed the Assessment Centre stage of the selection process, went straight home and refused to come back to work for his notice period. That option didn’t occur to me on 9 January 2001; neither did the possibility occur to me that three years later - almost exactly to the day – I might be ‘gifted’ the role of HM Chief Inspector of Probation. Even while it was taking place it was certainly strange to experience how that most unlikely turn of events came about.

As I returned home to Reading from my meeting with Eithne I focused first on the immediate task of communicating the news to all the people who needed to know, and to do this in a businesslike and effective way. The text I sent to Pip, one of my senior management team (she was away on holiday) was one of the first texts I ever sent to anyone – previously I’d had little use for them. I phoned Tony, another of the team, and asked him to send out a circular to all Berkshire staff and our employing committee. My plan was to withdraw from the joint work being done with the Ox/Bucks senior managers to prepare for the area merger, so that Gerry Marshall as incoming Thames Valley Chief could have a free hand to take sole charge of that task. However I would do everything necessary to help ensure that Berkshire would be in good order and ready for the final changeover in April. As it happened, Gerry was scheduled to be in Reading the next day for one of these joint meetings, so I was able to see him promptly myself, congratulate him on his appointment, and confirm the plan with him in person. That evening I also drafted a letter to Eithne, which I finalised and sent the next day, which also confirmed how I would be proceeding.

On that next day, a Wednesday, I also started a programme for taking forward my own personal position. In those days, most public appointments appeared in the Wednesday Guardian, and for once I thought I’d better buy one. What should I find on that very first day but an advertisement for HM Inspectors of Probation; being a statutorily independent inspectorate it was constitutionally separate from the new National Probation Service, so I could see no reason not to apply. A concern was that the laboriously slow recruitment process was by the same unit of the Home Office, and I was unsure if my qualification for the role might have been tarnished by my failure to secure a post in the NPS.

On the other hand, this was a post normally filled by people at assistant-chief level, and I knew that the staff including Chief Inspector and other senior inspectors thought well of what had been achieved in Berkshire. I applied for the job of HM Inspector, and also applied in response to other advertisements such as with the then Department for Employment and some non-statutory bodies such as Crime Concern and Nacro over the next few weeks. Ironically (in hindsight) I didn’t apply for the HM Chief Inspector job – also being advertised - as I didn’t think I was qualified for it…

Overall I applied for some 20 jobs between mid-January and early March 2001 and just five responses offered me interviews. My recent role as quite a prominent national Lead Officer for Offender Employment (for Chief Officers of Probation) counted for nothing with the Employment department – perhaps rightly, who can say? – and only ‘offending-related’ organisations showed any interest. I also had some sessions with an agency specialising in coaching redundant senior executives, including videoed mock interviews; this was paid for by Berkshire, and organised with immediate effect. The offer of something similar came through from the Home Office about two months later.

Alongside this I also sought advice from my trade union: the Society of Chief Officers of Probation (SCOOP) had become a section of the GMB union and I consulted them. The difficulty was that – as I recognised - there was no obvious remedy in terms of a ‘straight’ job offer that the Home Office could make, as I had not been employed by them hitherto, and I had of course been awarded the maximum eligible redundancy lump sum payment. But I went through this, alongside the executive coaching and the job applications, with a continuing sense of grim practical focused purpose.

Overall I had a sense of going through a ‘walking dead’ experience in January and February 2001, either going to ‘resettlement consultants’ to gain advice on seeking new employment, or receiving kind tributes from various people – in both cases it seemed like hearing one’s own obituary. Inside I was certainly angry, but it was a cold fury, and one that I redirected to focusing on the task of gaining a new job. My fury was cold and calm, not so much about self-pity (I’d say) but at least as much about mismanagement of public resources, and I found that I shed no tears over these events during this period – ironically the tears came much later.

Because I had ceased the work being done jointly with Ox/Bucks on preparing for merger, and focused now only on Berkshire, I found that I didn’t need to work weekends any more. This meant that Lesley and I could widen our horizons, either in the short term by having day trips or longer term by considering moving house. We went on the very newly opened Millennium Wheel – on a stormy February day when the doors blew open (that can’t happen now) – and we had a weekend in Penzance looking at possible houses.

I also received a remarkably high number of cards from various individuals and groups, although to my shame I couldn’t bring myself to reply to them. And I was very touched when Jocelyn, the representative of the staff union, Napo, presented me with a bunch of flowers before a scheduled meeting I was having with her and her immediate colleagues.

The two lowest moment during this period - January-February 2001 – were at the end of January when Lesley too learned that she was being made redundant by her Oxfam employers, and about the same time I was given to understand that I was not going to be interviewed for the HM Inspector post. I had been in London one morning for some piece of business, and was having a coffee with Paul, a fellow redundant Chief, and the topic of the Inspectorate recruitment came up, for which we’d both applied. I said something like, “They haven’t even got round to telling us anything yet”, to which Paul looked very embarrassed and said “I’m sorry, Andrew, but I had a letter a couple of days ago [offering an interview]” I returned to Reading that afternoon feeling quite disheartened by this, as it seemed clear that I was not going to be interviewed myself, but I just decided to ‘forget’ about it and concentrate on the other current applications. As it happened I received my letter offering the Inspectorate interview a couple of days later.

In another twist I was successful at the interview, and Paul wasn’t, but he then went on very soon after to secure the frankly highly-paid job of Chief Executive of the National Treatment Agency (for drug treatment, a specialism of his) – a role I was not qualified for. Alongside the turnaround that was shortly to come my way, this illustrates how careers ‘near the top’ can turn almost at the spin of a coin.

At last the interview for the Inspectorate post came up, held in Grenadier House (now demolished), where I was given a written exercise to do before the interview. We were each given some figures and other information from a fictional inspection and were required to offer deductions and/or potential lines of further inquiry. After a wait, the formal interview followed, with a panel of two ‘independent’ members and the Chief Inspector (Sir Graham Smith) and Frances, one of the Assistant Chiefs. The experience didn’t leave me feeling especially optimistic, since as I was being escorted back to the entrance at the end by one of the ‘independents’, the answer to my question of when we were likely to hear the result was, “If you haven’t heard within a couple of weeks I should give us a ring”.

My feeling that I had better just dismiss this experience from my mind and carry on relentlessly with my current endeavours was reinforced as I started to think of all the probable mistakes I had made in the interview. When discussing the then highly regarded “What Works?” movement in Probation I’d omitted to credit Sir Graham as one of the prime movers. I also remembered Frances’s toss of her head when she firmly said that she had no more questions to ask, as I misread this as meaning lack of interest in me.

A week later I had an interview with Crime Concern, conducted quite informally, which I thought had gone particularly well, and I was also invited to an ‘initial sift’ interview with NACRO (National Association for the Care and Resettlement of Offenders). That week proved momentous for me.

From memory the Inspectorate interview was on 21 February, and the Crime Concern interview was on 28 February. On 1st March the post arrived when Lesley and I were still in bed (at that time), before I was due in London again later that day – maybe for the NACRO interview, I’m not sure. The letter was from the Home Office and was couched in lots of caveats, so after I had looked at it in a bit of a daze I passed it to Lesley, and said, “I think this might be a job offer” – she agreed. A huge weight was lifted from me, as I now no longer needed to think about fallback options such as whether I could cope with being a Probation Officer in Slough (not itself a certainty anyway!). The caveats weren’t too troubling, as they were about clearing Home Office security requirements, which by good fortune I had already done.

I went into London, and took a phone call from Crime Concern offering me a job following the previous day’s interview. This seemed a wonderful vindication, and also a dilemma. I have to admit that if the Inspectorate letter had come a day later I might have gone ahead with the Crime Concern post, as I’m not sure whether I would have changed horses midstream. As it was, I could be honest with them, and ask for a couple of days to consider my two options.

I confess that I did luxuriate in receiving two job offers, and I felt in some way ‘rehabilitated’ when attending a Thames Valley event later that week. I clarified with Home Office HR that although the letter had talked of a fixed-term post the original advertisement had specifically said a “permanent” post (a fairly typical Home Office HR muddle at the time), but I could also tell them that I had – somewhat fortuitously – already got Home Office security clearance.

This had come about roughly 12-18 months previously when I had got fed up with repeatedly attending meetings at the Home Office in my national ‘Employment lead officer’ capacity but having to wait ages at reception and then having to be escorted everywhere – including to the toilet - each time I visited. My contact person (Marcus) got me a form to fill in, and several months later I got clearance and a pass that meant I could get in and out of the Home Office, and could even go to the toilet there, on my own – a great privilege! That previously-gained security-cleared status meant now that my contract could start from the beginning of April, rather than from much later (at that time it took several weeks to gain the necessary security clearance), which would have involved some loss of salary in my case – so this was a stroke of luck.

While these details were being sorted out, and nothing was yet finalised, I still attended a Directorate interview for a couple of ‘interim’ Chief Officer posts. To my pleasant surprise I was offered temporary Chief of Lincolnshire, but just at this point the Inspectorate post was confirmed in its details. As a “permanent” (sic) post with a Civil Service pension, requiring skills with which I felt confident, and without the need to relocate, the Inspectorate was easily the best offer I had. Interestingly I felt no malice towards Eithne as I politely declined the Lincolnshire offer in a brief discussion with her. I never thought that she ‘had it in for me’ personally, but in Thames Valley I was in the way of her plans, and more generally she didn’t particularly value what I had to offer. Pip once offered her view to me that Eithne only wanted people who went about things in the way that she approved, and didn’t value people who achieved their results using other methods.

In support of Pip’s hypothesis, I have a strong memory in the Chief Officer interview(s) of explaining to the panel that, like pulling a car on a tow rope, you start very slowly and carefully to prevent snapping the rope, and then pull away gradually, moving purposefully in the direction you want to go, and that this was how one should ‘take people with you’ in managing change – and then when I looked up I saw blank faces on the panel.

Suddenly I was no longer going to be out of work on 1st April 2001, and the first and most important step back from the January calamity had been achieved. The biggest vindication of all came in mid-March 2001, when the draft Inspectorate report on Thames Valley confirmed that Berkshire was ‘category one’ and Oxon & Bucks was ‘category three’ (out of three) in overall result, though in the Inspectorate’s very indirect reporting style of the time this finding was heavily ‘disguised’.

Soon after I started the new job, Lesley completed her time at Oxfam in May 2001, and applied for numerous and wide-ranging jobs before landing a post as a Diversity Consultant with Ionann, a small company doing a lot of diversity training and consultancy for many public service bodies, especially various police and prison service authorities, with a start date of September 2001. We had arranged to meet at the restaurant of the National Portrait Gallery after her interview. I got a text as I was leaving the office saying “Forget it, its £36k” (a colossal salary by our standards then), and when I arrived she’d just heard she’d got the job. We went on holiday in August, able after all - somewhat to my surprise - to look back on the previous six months “and laugh about it”…

I describe in Chapter 14 my work as an Inspector, and life generally working in London, but here it is relevant to comment that my aim was to work in my new post conscientiously though I felt little sense of inspiration. I tried to be ‘at peace’ with what I was experiencing as a “pleasant post-retirement job”, interesting but not overly demanding, and conducted in some ways rather quaintly. My 60th birthday was now a clear target retirement date, and as a fairly undemanding prospect, which was so much better than how things had looked back in February. I was very grateful for this, and did not want to jeopardise this, so I tried not to feel ‘restless’. A new reality was brought home to me early in the new job when a couple of Assistant Chief Inspector vacancies came up, and the retiring Chief Inspector (Sir Graham Smith) said to me firmly when I enquired, that “These are not for you”. In his eyes a former good Chief Probation Officer was not an eligible candidate, which rather shocked me.

Although I usually succeeded in quelling my restlessness, nevertheless I looked at one or two other posts at my Home Office grade (Grade 7), and once I was interviewed over the phone (yes) in her car by a Director for the role of being her Staff Officer, which I found disenchanting. Of the big jobs that did come up the first was for Deputy Chief Inspector to the new Chief Inspector Professor Rod Morgan when Jane Furniss moved sideways into the Home Office proper, and for this I was interviewed, which involved a Home Office Assessment Centre for ‘Grade 5’ posts. Frances Flaxington was appointed, which was fair enough. For a job as an Assistant Chief Inspector a few months later I was more disappointed not to be successful.

Most disappointing was my one further interview chaired by Eithne, for temporary Chief of Essex Probation, some time in 2002 I think. Here I really thought I had done excellently at every step in the interview, and was particularly disappointed when I had heard nothing after several days, before getting the knockback phone call from a junior HR person. I could be wrong, but my impression on that occasion was that the Chair of the Essex Board, a former Local Authority chief, wanted someone he thought he could boss around.

A few months later the substantive post at Essex came up, which would now involve competing against the person who had got the temporary job. I applied, but when I was invited to the Assessment Centre for the post, I withdrew my application – the only time I have ever withdrawn an application once made. My reason, which was partly true but was not the whole truth, was that in 2000 we had been told that passing the ‘Assessment Centre for Chief Officer’ that year would mean that we wouldn’t have to take one again for at least three years, and I saw this new development as a breach of a promise that had been made to us. Partly, however, I was beginning to feel I didn’t want to go through this process with the National Directorate yet one more time, with little prospect of success – and as the incumbent (Mary) was doing fine in her interim capacity.

In April 2003, with my withdrawal from the substantive Essex post, I had therefore pretty well resigned myself to the idea that opportunities for further career progression were now ended, and I was prepared to proceed with being a conscientious HM Inspector for my remaining eight years of service. But an unlikely and relatively dramatic unfolding of events now took place.

It was somewhat to my surprise when Frances Flaxington announced in the spring of 2003 that she had got herself a sideways job in the Home Office – in this way she was following the path set by her predecessor and friend Jane Furniss who had done much the same thing. Suddenly I had a new opportunity to go for the Deputy Chief job, but I felt both tired and in some way ‘tarnished’ and therefore had major doubts about the prospect. Because the appointment process would be open to ‘external’ candidates the timescale was lengthy.

But then a number of positive things happened at this time. I was working with a colleague, Kate White, at the time on a manual and a training package for the then new inspection programme, and this attracted compliments and a performance bonus from management. Kate herself was quietly and also very purposefully encouraging, and one or two other colleagues such as Rose Burgess told me firmly they thought I should apply.

It was still a tricky prospect, as I was proposing to leapfrog the existing Assistant Chiefs, where in the end one of them (Peter) did also apply. As always I was fairly confident with my written application, but I was not at all confident with the interview and presentation. I did OK again on the Assessment Centre, though I noticed that my faculties were now slower (these were on verbal and numerical reasoning, tests of which I broadly approve). Kate rehearsed me on some interview questions, which was both helpful and daunting, and I was pretty tense when I attended in July 2003.

The interview itself seemed to me quite good at the time, though the aftermath was almost as much a fiasco as the events of January 2001. It was a Friday, and I pointed out that I was going on holiday but would be on my mobile phone or at my (Lesley’s) Walton address. I took the train up to Walton that evening, reckoning on a phone call some time after 6.00pm. As the train moved steadily away from London I was reviewing in my mind the interview questions, and whether there were better answers I could have given – broadly I had felt I’d given my best answers.

Then I thought of a much better answer to the last question: Of what achievement was I most proud? – I’d cited the turnaround in the quality of court reports by Berkshire officers, though I’d used this example in a different previous question, and I realised I should have simply stated Berkshire’s ‘Category One’ overall inspection result (a more accurate as well as a ‘better’ answer!). “Not to worry, too much,” I thought at first, “I think my other answers were still my best”. But to my alarm as I went back through the interview I could now think of better answers to almost all the questions. By the time the train had got to Thorpe-le-Soken, I’d talked myself out of the job altogether.

This was also compounded by the fact that I’d had no phone call on the mobile by the time I got back, and there was nothing on the Walton phone either. Nothing came through that evening, so it seemed pretty clear to me by the next morning that the successful candidate would have had her/his call by now, and it was questionable if and when I would hear anything direct myself.

It was Saturday morning, and I think I’d been for a run, thinking about how continuing as an Inspector was not a bad prospect, and at least I’d tried, and then for some reason Lesley and I argued about something around mid-morning. Then as we were having Saturday morning tea and pastry the phone rang. Lesley answered and said “It’s Rod, for you.” I took the phone, and greeted Rod, and he then went into a long thing about how difficult it had been to get hold of me – he’d got back to his home in Bath, rang my Reading home, and then gone to the theatre etc. I was feeling pretty fed up by this time, though I fortunately resisted speaking sharply as I gently reminded him of what I’d said about now being on holiday in Essex, and quietly wished he’d get on with telling me who had been the successful candidate.

Hence I could barely comprehend it, let alone believe it, when he suddenly then said that I’d got the job. After I had put the phone down at the end of the ensuing stunned conversation, Lesley said to me, “Do you know what you said when Rod told you that you’d got the job?” – I was too bewildered to remember immediately – “You said, ‘You’re joking!’” This was a weird ‘bookend’ to the phone call from Eithne in January 2001 – on both occasions my instinctive response to news of either disaster or triumph was “You’re joking!” I guess that instinctively I do treat these two impostors the same.

At the time I felt as if my return from the 2001 calamity was now complete, and I revelled in the warm responses from friends and family, and colleagues at work, which all flowed in generously. Yet six months later there was a further development: Rod got the job of chairing the Youth Justice Board. This happened at the same time as the Labour government was deciding on reorganising the Inspectorates. This led to the series of further minor fiascos that had the cumulative effect of me serving a total of seven years and a bit as HM Chief Inspector of Probation without me ever actually being ‘properly’ appointed. (I received ‘proper’ letters of appointment, but I never had to go through a proper appointment process beforehand.) How could that happen?

We were in the second week in January 2004; Rod was negotiating a start date of mid-April for his new job, and the then current thinking was that the Probation Inspectorate would be merged with the Prison Inspectorate from 1st April 2005. Martin Narey, then a ‘second’ Permanent Secretary at the Home Office, felt that the most practical solution would be for me as Deputy to act up as Chief for the final eleven and a bit months for the Probation Inspectorate. Ministers were content to accept his advice on this, and furthermore, when I asked him if I would need to designate myself as ‘Acting Chief’ he said he thought that was clumsy and wouldn’t be necessary. I was very pleased (for me), but because I hadn’t had any kind of formal appointment process I also thought this was probably wrong. Nevertheless I was also simply pleased to find myself, almost exactly three years to the day since the January 2001 calamity, in an even ‘higher’ position than I had been in before – indeed one that I had considered myself unqualified for in 2001.

Disaster had therefore in this curious way been replaced with ‘triumph’, although at the time I expected it to be only very temporary. I counted no chickens, and fully expected this new triumph to be succeeded by a new setback in due course. But as things were to turn out, the continuing fiascos were also to carry on working in my favour.

## Chapter 3: Contingency - or Luck: An Overview

*“A chapter of accidents”*

I’m sure it’s already clear from the first two chapters that what I grandly call ‘Contingency’ has played a huge part in my life – particularly my working life – and I would be surprised if this were not the case to some extent for many other people too. For me, my career has featured some humiliating setbacks, but also some very fortunate outcomes in the end, in a series of events that could easily have gone in other directions at the time. At my retirement event in 2011, I mentioned that if you just looked at my CV you would think that I’d had a smooth and majestic ride all the way through to one of the top jobs in the country – yet in reality it had constituted a “chapter of accidents” that happened to work out for me in the end. I certainly didn’t plan my career path, and I know many people more talented than I am where opportunities did not produce the outcomes they probably deserved.

In my case my good luck did not end in 2004. My appointment as HM Chief Inspector was on an ‘Acting’ basis, and furthermore only for less than a year, starting late April 2004. Yet in a series of fiascos (as I call them) I was able to continue in post until my 60th birthday in June 2011. How did this happen?

Although the Government plan at the time was that the Prisons and Probation Inspectorates should merge in April 2005, there was a policy change in October/November 2004. In accordance with the high-level thinking at the time about “reducing the burden” on businesses and other private and public services policymakers decided on a more radical overhaul of what they called ‘regulatory bodies.’ For criminal justice, this was no longer to mean just going from five to three separate inspectorates, but instead from five to one single inspectorate for criminal justice. But this would need a longer preparation period, so the start date for the changed merger would be for April 2007.

Therefore, out of the blue (to me, anyway) I was now offered continuation of my post for a further two years – a welcome bonus from my perspective. Even this development was communicated with a minor fiasco in its own right: I was told that Martin Narey (the Home Office ‘second’ Permanent Secretary) would need to phone me at 6.00 pm on a specific date about something important, and I told his office that I would be out of the office, but I would be able to stand by on my mobile phone (and confirmed the number). However, despite my vigilance I heard nothing that evening, and with no message either. Then the next day in the office I was told that Martin’s office had phoned my office, precisely contrary to the arrangement I had made with them, and on hearing I was out they simply rang off.

The next fiasco was almost exactly two years later. Although I had been loyally working towards the planned merger (and indeed I could see some strong merits in principle though I was beginning to have some doubts in practice), the Chief Inspectors of Prisons and Constabulary were arguing strongly against it, and they had gained a lot of support in the House of Lords. In the last week of the current Parliamentary session, in October 2006, the then Home Secretary John Reid decided that this fight was one not to be pursued further (it was not his own policy anyway, because he had ‘inherited’ it from his predecessor, and it was not in his interest to lose his separate inspectorate of Constabulary). He had enough clout in Cabinet to get his way, especially with some strong face-saving provisions to which the current five Chief Inspectors agreed. The effect of all this was that although we were now committed to working together much more closely, and on more joint inspections, we still continued as five separate inspectorates.

A senior Civil Servant (Jonathan) came to see me early in 2007, to ask my views on what advice should be given to Ministers concerning the filling of my post. I said that if Ministers wanted to push the issue further of getting the five CJ inspectorates to work together closely they should arrange to appoint five new ones all together on as close to a single date as possible. I was fairly sure that it would be possible to do this with effect from April 2008, and I suggested that extending my own appointment by 12 more months to reach that date would fit in with such a proposed approach. Having thus ‘bid’ for 12 additional months, I was therefore somewhat surprised when the news came back to me later that I was thanked for my advice and would I accept an 18-month extension? This would now take me to October 2008. This confirmed to me early in 2007 that there seemed to be at least two different policies inside Cabinet, pulling at times in different directions. It seemed to me that John Reid did not actually want to tie up the Inspectorates any more closely.

As I was to find out shortly afterwards, an additional factors was that there was another policy change afoot, with the creation of the Ministry of Justice (MoJ) in May 2007. This meant that the Probation and Prison Inspectorates were no longer to be associated with the Home Office, and thus in the same grouping as the Constabulary inspectorate, but would now be alongside the Court Administration inspectorate in the MoJ. It was a major job to establish a whole new Department of State like this, which also had some political and constitutional controversies. Additionally, with the first MoJ Secretary of State, Lord Falconer, being replaced by Jack Straw when Gordon Brown took over from Tony Blair, and tricky accommodation problems to solve, the place inevitably had some initial turmoil. So again it was a pragmatic line being taken when at a fairly early stage I was offered another extension of 18 months, to April 2010. This gave them time to think about possible policy options, and for me personally this was still a ‘bonus’.

At no point hitherto had I counted any chickens about anything seeing me through to my planned retirement date of June 2011 – but now that date was suddenly in sight. This gave me a personal card to play, with the approach of that date and the even closer approach of the five-year Parliament in May 2010. I didn’t press the point hard, but I did point out the advantage to the Department of giving me one final extension to either April or June 2011. My proposed timing would allow the Department flexibility to respond to whatever Government came to power in May, and the ‘fit’ I was offering was very attractive to them, so that I got my June 2011 date. As it happened this also fitted the needs of the new coalition Government when it came in as it decided on a ‘review of arms-length bodies’, with the potential option to merge or abolish the Probation Inspectorate very soon.

Nevertheless, partly through thorough preparation we survived our review quite comfortably, and so the formal and correct process for appointing my successor was able to start, though not quite on time, at the end of 2010. (Another fiasco with that appointment process meant that my selected successor was not able to proceed, so Liz Calderbank was selected in the summer to work as an interim Chief Inspector, though that’s another story.)

It should therefore be clear from the narrative so far why I could describe my last eleven years of service as a “chapter of accidents”, because of the series of accidents and fiascos that had led to a very fortunate final outcome for me. However, this period was but a rather extreme continuation of the dramatic and surprising ups and downs that I had experienced earlier in my career.

Job interviews are probably some of the most highly contingent events in modern life, particularly in careers where they are effectively the sole factors in determining progression. In my experience they have usually been carried out in a conscientiously fair and methodical manner, but my experience also aligns with the studies that have shown that despite all the best intentions such interviewing alone is an unreliable way of selecting a winning candidate. That winner might turn out to be excellent, but quite frequently not – in other words, it is a highly contingent exercise for the employer as well as for the candidates. I learned that rather slowly from 1979 to 1998 (and perhaps not even then!).

In my career path, and probably for many others, the contingencies are the choices the candidate makes – which posts to apply for – and the choices the employers make – which candidates to appoint. Like the attempts on a goal in a football match, these choices sometimes succeed deservedly, sometimes fail deservedly, sometimes succeed undeservedly, and sometimes fail undeservedly. And there are many variations within this: a moment of unexpected inspiration, a deception, a fluke, or a catastrophic error at the wrong moment can all bring about an unexpected result.

I had many experiences during the last 20-plus years of my service, as an interviewer, where I noticed how small events during the selection process could easily make a marked difference. We might have 80+ candidates for a post as Inspector, and to select for interview we ‘scored’ each application conscientiously against the criteria that we had published with the job advertisement – but this inevitably left a large area that was simply a matter of opinion. Once, to the displeasure of the independent external ‘chair’ of my interviewing panel we shortlisted 12 candidates to interview over two days. Two or three had been agreed as clearly the highest scorers, and some 20 or so had not really met the advertised criteria. But the remaining ten or so had to be permed from about 60 ‘reasonably good’ candidates, and even with very conscientious fairminded ‘scoring’ by us we didn’t immediately agree on the final list, and there was some arguing about various scores before we came to a final list of twelve for interview. On another day, or with another colleague sitting with me, that list might have had two or three different names…

And then of course, at interview sometimes the best-scoring candidate on paper gives a dull or hesitant interview, or a more modest scorer on the application might give an inspirational interview. Over time I did a lot of work as a manager to research and to try to improve selection methodology, with modest success only, so my experience continued to be that there was a large degree of contingency in how job appointments are made.

I describe in Chapter 7 how my curious career got started in the first place, a process which involved its own contingencies, but my main theme here is how the serendipitous succession of single events that transformed my whole subsequent career was to some extent just a “chapter of accidents”. That serendipity is illustrated by the events that followed once I started pursuing promotion within the Probation Service, with increasingly relentless determination from 1979-83.

## Chapter 4: Three cameos that illustrate a serendipitous career

*“You owe me a pound” etc*

The cameos that follow illustrate further how career-changing events often hinge at least as much on luck as they do on ‘merit’. (I cover this in more detail than many readers might want, in which case do feel free to skip this chapter.)

Taking a reductionist perspective, my total Probation career after graduating from York was ‘achieved’ with a total of seven successful interviews (to Trainee, Main-grade, Senior, Assistant Chief, Chief, Inspector, and Deputy Chief – I was never interviewed for Chief Inspector!). But it should also be seen in the context of over thirty unsuccessful interviews, and at least double that number again of applications for posts that did not even lead to an interview.

Although I can only blame myself for some of those ‘failures’, for some others my performance was probably no worse than with some of my ‘successes’, but luck went the other way. No doubt many other people have had comparable experiences. These three cameos cover the middle three interviews, of the seven above, not sketched already.

**Cameo 1:** *“You owe me a pound” – 26 May 1983*

When I set off to drive to Gwent from my Swindon home that Thursday, it was my fourth interview in that month alone for a post as a Senior Probation Officer (SPO). In Kent the Governor of Dover Borstal had made it clear he wanted his new SPO to be a more responsive (and probably cheaper) alternative to the psychiatrist he currently had to call in to see inmates who “couldn’t do their bird” and “ended up down the block”. I politely disagreed, and I did tell the next candidate that that was what the Governor wanted – I’ve no idea what he said in interview, but he did get the job. Meanwhile the Chief Probation Officer for Kent gave me nice feedback and invited me to apply for other Kent jobs (though he died unexpectedly not long after).

Also during that month of May I had an interview in Somerset and another in Lincolnshire where I was specifically told I had come second. The Gwent post was to be located at the former ‘open’ Borstal at Usk, and would cover the two separate sites of this Prison Service establishment.

Just as I was leaving for Wales my then-wife Mo said “If you get this job I’ll give you a pound”. I think she was trying to ‘lighten’ my demeanour, as she felt that I came over as tense and dour – which was indeed probably how I often felt. She also advised me to lighten the expression on my face by thinking, just as I entered the interview room, of Kenny Everett doing his act as an evangelical preacher with the enormous polystyrene hands, as this image always brought a smile to my lips. On my part I’d also found it helpful recently to have one large vodka and lime about half an hour before attending, which helped to reduce my tension (risky, I knew, but the one drink – about a third of a gill then - didn’t seem to impair my coherence).

I crossed the Severn just after rush hour (no logjam on the Bridge thank goodness) so I had time to divert to Tintern Abbey, have a good look at that, then take the very scenic ‘back road’ to Usk, note where the then Detention Centre was, then drive past the then Youth Custody Centre near Coed-y-paen, and then on to Cwmbran, close to the interview venue at County Hall, Croesiceiliog. I parked in a fairly empty basement car park – surprisingly free of charge! – looked around and had my vodka and lime in a nearby pub, then drove to County Hall, a fairly modern concrete and glass palace.

I was shown to a large open waiting area where there was already one candidate waiting, a PO from one of the Glamorgans then extant, a chap I think I’d met briefly once before, probably on a regional course. The first thing he said to me was, “You know that Carolyn Clay is getting this job?” Although I knew that things could be ‘a little different’ in Wales, this still seemed a rather shocking thing to say. I was momentarily disheartened, but had learned by then that shared assumptions were not always accurate. I also knew that the Gwent Chief had spoken to my Wiltshire Chief to try to gain more information about me than that in the reference. When Carolyn arrived I could see why the shared assumption existed: she was slim, petite, both very competent and very personable. Later we were to be SPO colleagues and good friends, a positive relationship that we maintained on and off after I left Wales until she died from cancer in 2015. But at that moment all I could do was offer a friendly demeanour while I tried to focus on simply my own performance.

As was often the case, my surname meant I was interviewed first, and we immediately learned of the interview format; it’s not a format I’ve experienced previously or subsequently, either as candidate or panel member. The format was that the candidate would move to a chair immediately outside the interview room ten minutes before the interview was due to start, and would be given a piece of paper with the key interview questions written down. Then the candidate would be called in and would speak to each of those questions to the panel.

I was then immediately invited forward, as the first candidate, sat in my ‘new’ chair in splendid isolation, and given this sheet of paper with just four questions on it. Interestingly I don’t now remember the specific questions, though I think they all focused on the specific role – a new one invented probably by the Home Office at the time – of ‘Senior Liaison Probation Officer’ (SLPO) in a former Borstal where there had been no previous Probation presence. What I do remember was that after ten minutes I was in a complete funk – it was a subject I’d already given a great deal of thought to, but now I couldn’t find a way of articulating a coherent answer – and now the ten minutes were up!

But then – nothing happened! And at the same time more thoughts came to me; I remembered that I’d concluded recently that to work effectively in a Prison Service establishment (as I was doing at the time in HMP Erlestoke) one needed “Understanding, Consistency, Patience and Persistence”… I suddenly realised that this wording gave me the platform I needed to give coherent answers to the questions in front of me, and I went through each of them again. It was another nearly ten minutes before I was actually called in, and by then I was ready – how fortuitous for me was that delay!

Not only was the delay fortuitous for me, but so was the format – my brain doesn’t easily work well giving instant answers, so having time to ‘consider and compose’ was helpful. And possibly a new advantage for me – though it didn’t seem so at the time – was when I walked into that interview room that day. It was a long, fairly narrow room, with my chair near the door I’d entered, then a long gap before a table at the other end of the room, where five people sat behind it facing me. Behind them was the full-length and full-width window occupying the ‘fourth wall’ of the room, and the afternoon May sun was blazing in and leaving them perfectly silhouetted so that I couldn’t see their faces at all.

They offered no introductions at that stage; the person who brought me in just asked me to start answering each of the questions on the sheet. Although I was conscious of the slightly surreal/farcical nature of my position, the fact that I was now prepared as already described gave me the platform to proceed and methodically work through the answers. There could be no real engagement as I couldn’t see their faces – I could see a part of the face of the one at one end and I tried to give him plenty of eye contact (I found out later on he was the Clerk to the Committee, not a panel member!).

But I also later reflected that this was possibly an advantage to me as I just focused on the interview answers, and didn’t get anxious about lack of engagement. Other candidates, who might be more reliant on personal interaction, might therefore have been disadvantaged. One encouraging signal that I did notice was them sitting up with possibly increased attentiveness after I said that the SLPO role required Understanding, Consistency, Patience and Persistence…

When I had finished those answers, they did ask some follow-ups, which by then I had some confidence with, plus the one additional question I had correctly anticipated: “Why do you want to move to Wales?” – there were very few Probation people in Wales then who were not Welsh or did not already have a strong domestic reason to be there. I started my answer with the words “Although coming to Wales is not the main reason for my application-“ – at which point one man (yes, they were all men) interrupted with “You’ve lost a lot of friends here now!” Since I couldn’t see his face I couldn’t be absolutely sure he was joking, but decided it would be best to ‘share the joke’ while lightly giving my planned answer that my wife had relatives in Wales she’d be pleased to be closer to. I was dependent on them not pressing for too much detail on this, as Mo’s cousin had married a Welshman and was living in a caravan in Tenby, and that was the only ‘Welsh connection’ I could remotely claim. However, the humorous interaction made this answer acceptable, and enabled the interview to end on a positive note.

I’ve no recollection of how I sat through the rest of the afternoon as the other three candidates (there was also a chap from Birmingham) went up in turn, and I think were usually called through on time. Then there was the further wait – this was the more usual format for these interviews, rather than being sent home to be telephoned. Eventually, the ‘secretary’ man came out and invited me to come back in. This was the moment that had previously eluded me, but I was haunted by a story told to me some time previously of a candidate who was called in first, to be given a long apology as to why he was not going to be the one offered the job. So, as the others started saying “Congratulations” I was saying “Let’s just see first, please”, in case that nightmare was about to happen to me. But all was well, I was offered the job, but it was noticeable that Gwent’s Chief Probation Officer didn’t look very happy, and seemed to treat me quite curtly. He wanted me to start on 1st July, while I offered 1st August, and he pushed it to 18th July.

I asked for a telephone to phone my wife – this had been offered to me in Wiltshire eight years previously – and he pointed me to the public phoneboxes downstairs. As I left the room I saw the other candidates being given their expense forms (oh yes, in those days!), and I went over to tell them that this had been my 16th interview, so sometimes it was worth persevering. Partly this was because one of the other two men had made the familiar assertion that if you didn’t get promotion by your third interview you should give up. I phoned home from downstairs but there was no reply.

I drove home in a quietly emotional state, and for some reason Mo was coming out to the garage at the rear of our garden as I was reversing in. I just looked at her, and said, “You owe me a pound.”

Postscript: Over the course of the first two years or so in my new job, I learned more about that appointment process. Gwynn Jones, the Chief Probation Officer, had many faults but on this occasion he had quite reasonably decided he didn’t want the then customary middle-aged timeserving local male to win this new post. He got on very well with Bruce Seymour, the Regional Staff Development Officer, a genuinely very talented and highly ethical man as well as being socially acceptable as a hard-drinking rugby-playing Welshman – and Carolyn (who was English) was his partner, working in South Glamorgan. It would seem that Gwynn was keen to get Carolyn appointed, and the first step he took was simply not to shortlist any of the internal – Gwent – candidates. However, this was a small world, so this had come to light when one member of the employing Probation Committee had casually enquired of the Crown Court Liaison Officer why he hadn’t applied for this post – he heard in response that “Several of us have applied, but none have been shortlisted.”

In this small world, one evening during my first six months in post at Usk, and before moving house, I found myself having a pint of beer with one of the Committee members who had appointed me. This was Viv, also one of the four Conservative members of Gwent County Council – the other 61 were all Labour, such was the nature of Welsh local government at that time. He confirmed that the Committee members knew that Gwynn was keen on appointing Carolyn and that he had therefore not shortlisted internal competitors. Carolyn was of course innocent of this attempted patronage (as was Bruce), and was very able in her own right, but this unsought patronage was starting to backfire.

I learned how much it backfired for her as over time I got to know the Governor of Usk better over time when in post. John was not a ‘natural fit’ in the Prison Service in Wales at that time, being rather upper class and a devoutly Christian, non-smoking, teetotal vegan. On John’s account to me, Gwynn had introduced proceedings on that day by asserting that “This needn’t take too long, as it’s clear that Carolyn Clay is the best person for this post.” In response the other members made it clear that they planned to assess each candidate on their merits – and I can’t help feeling that this backfire effect would have counted against Carolyn. And so I was the fortunate beneficiary. (Later, Carolyn got an SPO job in Gwent at the third attempt, and later still a senior management post after more than one attempt, and did well in both roles.)

**Cameo 2:** *“They know nothing about me!” – 4 April 1989*

In view of the core theme of this chapter it will be no surprise to find that there were also some highly fortuitous elements to my successful application for the post of Assistant Chief Probation Officer (ACPO) in Berkshire. The main paradoxical point is that in my mind at the time I was fairly sure that I didn’t really have a serious chance of winning – and perhaps this made me more relaxed and able to focus on the task, rather than ‘seize up’ with anxiety. However this also meant that I very nearly missed out on the post altogether.

After nearly six years as Senior Probation Officer (over three at Usk, and then two in the hectic Newport office) I had become keen on the idea of senior management but found it hard to see a way forward. We had a new Chief in Gwent, Richard Moore, who was mainly a huge step forward and was very conscientious, but this did bring the drawback that he could be anxiously cautious. When I started applying for ACPO posts he showed me his lengthy reference for me, which was a full and fair assessment of my strengths and weaknesses, but did not run to a ‘recommendation’. I failed an interview in Gloucestershire, and then applied for Cambridgeshire – and he candidly told me that the Cambs Chief had phoned him to ask him if I was worth inviting for interview, and I was not subsequently invited. So I got it into my head that I would need to go sideways to another county, and then progress from there. (I had also explored the academic option, being interviewed by both Birmingham and Brunel Universities without success.) I tried for the SPO-equivalent post of ‘Research and Information Officer’ in Somerset, where the feedback from the Chief was that I was very able and therefore unlikely to stay long enough, which seemed either frustrating or not credible – and therefore still frustrating.

I found myself in March 1989 applying for the new ACPO post in Berkshire, although I now felt quite pessimistic about this, and the Research & Information post in Kent, which seemed a more realistic option. I was writing my applications by now on a word processor (an Amstrad PCW8512), and my Berkshire application just involved some minor editing to my Cambridgeshire application, so it seemed worth submitting. When I then learned from Richard that he and Malcolm Bryant, then Chief of Berkshire, had shared an office in Bath when they both POs, I felt increasingly convinced that I would have no chance. Ironically I felt this pessimism even more strongly, despite Malcolm taking the unusual (in my experience) step of telephoning me to offer me the interview, because the words he used, as I heard them were: “We’ve got two very good internal candidates, and I’m looking for two external candidates to interview alongside them.” I (wrongly) thought he was telling me that I and the other external would be just there for token purposes.

I discussed with Bruce Seymour the options should Kent by any chance offer me their post, and being the very ethical man he was he said he believed in deciding at that point and then sticking with it – he believed in not mucking other people around. It chimed with me, and I felt that if Kent did offer, then I would withdraw from Berkshire (partly because I didn’t think I was a serious candidate there). Having since witnessed and also been on the receiving end of quite a bit of “mucking about” I would probably take a more robust approach now. Indeed on one sole, much later, occasion I actually did ask for 24 hours to decide on a job offer (temporary Chief of Lincolnshire) in Feb/March 2001 before declining, and confirming my plan to go ahead with the then current offer from the Inspectorate.

The interview with Kent went pretty well, but I was clearly short of the technical skills required on the Information Technology side, so I was neither too surprised nor disappointed with a knockback. But it would have been ironic in retrospect if I’d given up my subsequent rising career for that sideways move. Instead I focused on my new interview, and decided that, since I thought I had no realistic chance of success, I would treat it as an exercise – a training event, if you like. There were three elements to it: an observed ‘group task’ in the morning for the candidates to work together on, a buffet lunch to mix informally with the employing Committee, and the formal individual interview in the afternoon. On Tuesday 4 April 1989 I drove over the Severn Bridge and down to Shire Hall, a large modern purpose-built palace close to the M4, with a plan for each element. (NB no vodka and lime now.)

For the group task I decided to focus on being a team player who helped to get the job done. This proved to be initially a problem as our first ‘task’ was to decide as a group which one out of a list of four tasks we were going to try to achieve within the deadline (less than an hour) – my problem was that the other three wanted the task of describing how Probation might look in 20 years’ time, while I thought that this was merely about passive speculation, and wanted any of the other three tasks that to my mind were actually about achieving something. I felt quite strongly about this, as management is about trying to make things happen, not just be a passive participant in wider events, but having argued this point I also realised that unless I gave in gracefully I would be the one thereafter obstructing the ‘group task’. So although I deeply disliked the task I acceded and then wondered how I could constructively contribute.

Almost immediately they wanted ideas written on a flipchart so I immediately offered to ‘take the pen’ and be the writer. This was great, because I was in an apparently dominant role, but not having to spend my time coming up with frankly speculative ‘creative’ ideas. (I would have been much happier trying to devise practical initiatives that ‘we’ might want achieve for our local Service within the next two years or so.) And so we completed the ‘observed task’.

For the buffet lunch, my plan was based on a quotation from La Rochefoucauld that recent experience had suggested to me had some force. Its Wildean theme was (roughly) “We like people whom we amuse/entertain”. If the object of the exercise was to get Committee members to ‘like’ me, I shouldn’t try to overwhelm them with all my impressive ideas and achievements, but instead get them to tell me about themselves and what they thought – they might feel warm about a candidate who had listened to them.

In the event I felt I was getting on reasonably well with this with various Committee members over the pleasant buffet lunch, but was not buttonholed by the Chair of the Committee until just towards the end. Dr Thomlinson was a chemist (I think) and a very bright businessman who had worked for ICI and had firm constructive views about his duties as a magistrate and as an employer of Probation. He went straight into pumping me with a seemingly relentless series of questions on what I thought about this and that, and I strongly remember thinking, “This isn’t how this was supposed to work! How can I get him to talk about himself?” And then the moment came, when somehow I managed to make a link with (I think) artificial nitrates, and asked him if this had been part of his role at ICI. Suddenly his face lit up, and miraculously he swung into a lengthy description of various aspects of his ICI work, and I remember, equally strongly, thinking “Yes this is how it’s supposed to work!” For what it was worth, I felt that after lunch he would now have positive feelings about his conversation with me, because I had shown interest in what he had to say.

For the formal interview, I was as ever the first one called in. One problem for me about this post was that its special subject duties involved work in which I’d had no previous experience whatsoever: probation hostels, victim support and community crime prevention. So I decided to sell myself on the idea that I was good at developing systems for doing things, that this had helped me take on new tasks in the past, and that this approach was transferable to a future setting i.e. their job. Fortunately they didn’t seem to want from me detailed knowledge or ideas about the special subjects, and the ‘systems person’ message seemed acceptable. Then at the end the Clerk to the Committee (deputy County Solicitor at the time) asked me what were my hobbies? (<“Help! - something I should be prepared for!”>) In a pleasingly prompt moment of inspiration – perhaps because I was still treating the whole thing as an exercise – I said, “Well you could say that it’s renovating Victorian houses”, and briefly mentioned that I’d had to buy a Victorian house and do it up each time my career had progressed and I’d moved to a new town. This seemed to go down very well, as they all smiled, but there was still the last hurdle to clear: “Would you like to ask us a question?”

Here I am forever indebted to my own line manager at the time, Peter Sampson, who had taken it upon himself to discuss this dilemma with me beforehand. His opinion was, “If you decline to ask a question, you (and they) may feel it’s passive and weak on your part - but it’s worse if you DO ask a question. Either you ask something simple and obvious, which still doesn’t reflect well on you, or you ask something really difficult, which risks them feeling embarrassed as they try to answer it. On balance I think – don’t ask, but you do want to find a way of ending the interview on a positive note, as it’s the last thing they’ll remember about you.” I had found this very persuasive, so after some thought I had prepared an answer which I now wheeled out: “I did have a lot of questions, but your staff have fully answered them for me already, thank you very much.” They seemed to shift up in their seats, and looked pleased as Dr T thanked me and I left thinking to myself “Yes I think I got it right this time – I wonder when I might get the chance to try it for real?”

Though feeling surprisingly upbeat, I was also ‘spent’, and not looking forward at all to an afternoon of nervous small talk with the other candidates as they came and went, and I apologised to them as I said “I think I just need to go for a walk and I’ll be back later.” In reality I went back to the car in the car park, and possibly listened to the radio. This was a breach of the expected ethic, and I know that at least one other candidate thought I’d been incredibly rude, but both then and now I didn’t/don’t think it was a serious crime. I timed my return to when I thought that the last candidate would have safely gone in, and then I would only have a relatively short time for small talk before the final act and I could drive home.

As this interview programme ran to time (often it didn’t), I got this timing right, and I felt that discussions no longer risked anyone giving anything away, and I was not too tense under the circumstances. I had rather assumed that Kay, the last candidate, was the one probably in the box seat, and it was only after she had returned from her interview, and she started talking rather apprehensively about this and that, that the thought started coming to me, <“Perhaps this appointment isn’t a closed book after all! – is that possible?”> I wasn’t at all sure that I wanted to believe at this late stage that this was in fact a real competition, and thereby risk the customary disappointment, but I started to dare to believe.

At that moment, Malcolm came to us along the corridor and called my name to accompany him back. For a moment I still wasn’t sure that this might not be just to ask me another question, but Malcolm said to me as we walked the corridor: “They see you as a systems person, and they think that’s what’s needed for this post”. Well, that was affirming.

I know I told Malcolm at some point that afternoon that I was very appreciative of the job, and of the confidence he’d shown in me (I was thinking of the guarded reference on me by Richard) and that I would be particularly determined never to let him down in post. However, concerning that reference, I later learned that Malcolm had read it, shown it to John Hughes, one of the current Berkshire Assistant Chiefs who had also previously worked with Richard, who commented “This looks like a reference from Richard to me…” They both knew Richard, and his style, and took that into account, so its apparent note of hesitation didn’t bother them. And of course its actual analysis of my abilities was both valid and helpful.

The other candidates had gone by the time I emerged. I was able to ring Mo OK, but the evening had a minor crisis as I heard on the radio soon after I set off that the Severn Bridge was closed (weather I think), and I dropped in on friends in Swindon for a couple of hours, then heard the Bridge was reopened, and got back home around midnight. But it was earlier, on the stretch of road from Shire Hall to the M4 (Junction 11) that in my elated state, as I also tried to think about how I had reached this new career step, that a thought came powerfully to me, as I considered all the things I’d done, learned and practised since 1973 that would equip me for this role. Also that I had learned to face difficulties directly, not evade them. Contrasting this with how much my now-future employers had found out today the thought struck me forcibly: <“But they know nothing about me!”>

Postscript: At the time, I saw promotion from Senior PO to Assistant Chief PO as being a move within management, albeit that I was moving from a relatively ‘unfashionable’ county to a higher profile one, since Malcolm was Chief there. But I quickly noticed that my team in Newport, and others, saw this as a much more major step, somehow into ‘real management’. (It’s true that at that time the ACPO grade was one that was controlled and restricted by the Home Office – this ended by about 1991.) In a shire county this transition also meant moving from an operational setting to a ‘county headquarters’ setting, so the cake the team presented me, with graphs, briefcase and other management emblems, was a fair viewpoint from their perspective, even while I was thinking, < “But I’ve been a manager already for the past six years – have they not noticed?” > (Worrying thought!)

Over time in the new role, however, I did come to see this move as the biggest single turning-point in my career because, as I perceived it from about 1990 onwards: “Up to then, as an SPO in Gwent I felt I was ‘on the outside’ looking in, while now, in Berkshire as an ACPO under Malcolm, I feel as though I’m ‘on the inside’ looking out.”

**Cameo 3:** *“It’s me” – 29 April 1998*

My successful interview for Chief Probation Officer (CPO) for Berkshire came during a time which I found extraordinarily demanding. This is covered in more detail in Chapter 14, so this is only a summary here.

I had been Assistant Chief in Berkshire since June 1989. I swiftly moved through a range of ACPO responsibilities for various organisational reasons, and also became the ‘senior’ ACPO when first Alan Nicholson died of cancer in 1990 and then John Hughes became Chief of Cambridgeshire in 1992. In 1994 I was interviewed for Chief posts in Cumbria, Gwent and Wiltshire, and later for Deputy Chief of Hampshire and Chief of Somerset, all unsuccessfully of course. That same year also saw the failure of Malcolm’s initiative to bring about a merger of Berkshire with Oxfordshire and Buckingham Probation services.

Then from April 1995 I was styled “Deputising Chief” of Berkshire while Malcolm served a year as the Chair of the then Association of Chief Officers of Probation. I took on most but not all of his Berkshire responsibilities while he worked around four-fifths of his time with ACOP. Then in April 1996 I started a nine-month half-time secondment to the University of Oxford Centre for Criminological Research at the new Probation Studies Unit, returning in January 1997 so that a colleague ACPO Paul Goodman could go on his planned three-month ‘sabbatical’ accumulated leave.

Within a month of Paul’s return in April 1997 our other colleague Simon Noble had a heart attack, and early retirement was arranged, and with a prospective budget squeeze ahead we resolved that he would not be replaced. Our senior management team was reduced from four to three, just as during the year leading up to April 1998 we started to take on new demands and pressures. First, we had to reprofile our whole operational service to manage the budget squeeze, plus manage new arrangements for the financial and other services we had hitherto accessed from the about-to-be-abolished Berkshire County Council, plus cope with a change of Assistant Chief when Paul left to head the Ley Community. And I was writing up my Oxford research until February 1998.

Finally we also had to manage the major inspection of our Service by HM Inspectorate, with the main visit planned for the three weeks starting 20 April 1998. For those three weeks I was required to accompany the HM Inspector throughout his scheduled meetings and interviews during the day, and write up notes afterwards, in addition to my own duties. Since our new Assistant Chief, Susan, was only starting the same month herself, it didn’t seem reasonable to ask her to undertake this role.

With this background, the prospect of an interview (for the post I’d been holding out for since early 1996) on the middle day of the three-week inspection seemed a little demanding. Malcolm had decided to take early retirement with effect from October 1998, so after a further kerfuffle over whether the Home Office would approve replacing him the post had been advertised in good time and I had been shortlisted. One candidate, Mary Anne, was a close friend of my colleague Paul Goodman, and he decently phoned me to apologise that on a personal level he now had a ‘conflict of interest’, so to speak. The format was that there would be a dinner with the appointing sub-committee the evening before (at the Copper Kettle in Pangbourne), but the main event would be a presentation and interview in our own Head Office in central Reading. As April 1998 started, we took in-house the support services we had previously been given by Berkshire County Council, confirmed the new funding arrangements with the six new unitary authorities in Berkshire, Susan started as my new Assistant Chief colleague, and then the HM Inspectors arrived on 20 April, following the Easter ‘break’ the previous week.

The first week’s inspection consisted of me accompanying Roger McGarva, the Inspector, to various internal and external meetings that I’d arranged as specified by him, and from 5.00pm onwards I wrote up – taped - the notes of the meetings for him (he seemed to trust me not to falsify these!), and then in the early evening caught up with at least some of the other outstanding work that came my way. At this time, for some 18 months up to then, and for nearly another three years, it was ‘normal’ for me to go into the office on a Saturday, go to a Reading FC match in the afternoon if they were at home, or stay till teatime if not, and then go in Sunday morning too (mid-morning) until teatime – all so that I could stay reasonably on top of my work. On that Saturday, I went in as usual, completed the notes from the previous day, and taped or emailed any immediate/urgent written correspondence replies.

At about 11.00am, I was just about to start on some of the other, less urgent though important, Berkshire business when the thought struck me: “Hang on, this is one of the occasions when you should consider putting your own needs first – the urgent and critically important thing right now is next Wednesday’s presentation to the interviewing committee.” And so it was then I started preparing that presentation.

Even at the time the next few days seemed to me a little unreal, as I simply took one step after another. At that point on the Saturday it seemed a radical step, and a wrench, to put down the remaining ‘Berkshire’ work and to start work on something ‘personal’. I was meticulous in preparing a script to last 15 minutes, with supporting colour slides in PowerPoint that when ready I would print out on acetates and use a system of reveals and pointers to guide my audience through it. My pointer was an angel-chime that I knew that the Committee had seen before, and made people smile. I worked until mid-afternoon, and then took the file home on a floppy disk and got ready to continue in the evening. My friend Geoff rang up, offering a pint at the Clifton and I was about to refuse, but Lesley strongly suggested that a break was a good idea, and I was in any case OK for time. I had a pleasant, and not excessive, couple of hours with Geoff before continuing.

On the Sunday I got the presentation done to my satisfaction, and printed the slides at home – always slightly laborious – and said that I’d like to rehearse the ‘show’ in the relevant room in the office. (A big advantage to me was that I was in a position to do this, and indeed I was able to set up the interview room in a way that suited me: plenty of table for the candidate and the overhead projector, and neither too close nor too distant from the interviewing Committee.) Lesley had had her favourite cat, Smokey, die the previous week, but although she was still somewhat distracted she agreed to walk into the office with me, we set everything up, and then I did a run-through. The next moment was memorable, and possibly pivotal. She looked at me and baldly said, “That was crap.”

For a moment I was devastated, as I rapidly tried to think how I could rewrite the whole thing in time for Wednesday. Then she went on to say that actually the content was probably OK but I was coming across as slow, pedantic and boring. Could I just try doing the whole thing again, at double speed and look more animated? Well, indeed I could do that OK, especially as the words were now familiar, so I could concentrate more now on the style, and for better or worse her feedback to the second attempt was very positive. (<“But was she now just being polite, and wanting to go home?”>)

On Monday and Tuesday I had two more days with Roger the Inspector, which went OK, and he kindly volunteered that he wouldn’t need me at all on the Wednesday. On the Tuesday evening we had the dinner at the Copper Kettle in Pangbourne, about which I can remember very little – I just wanted to get through it politely without mishap or gaffe.

On the Wednesday I got in early and set up the interview room (our large training room in the headquarters office above WH Smith in Friar St, Reading) – a wry smile as I wondered whether I was setting up my own triumph or disaster. I was due on first, as was often the case, and which suited me – to get it over with. I’d even prepared my own ‘ad libs’ – an idea I’d learned about how Disneyland is managed when on a course at Cranfield University. With my armful of slides I had to come in for the start of the interview and set up without looking anxious, or making the Committee feel too apprehensive. So I entered and said something brightly about them being about to “see Gabriel in action again” – it was already a shared joke that my angel-chime pointer was called Gabriel.

Although my ‘planned ad lib’ set a relaxed, confident tone at the start, I was a little disconcerted that as soon as I started the presentation itself, all the faces opposite me suddenly set immobile – a phenomenon I’d experienced at previous interviews - except one, the non-magistrate member, who continued to seem engaged. But I stayed focused both on the content and on the ‘animated’ style, and then managed the continuing formal questions in a tolerably competent way, without obvious mishap, and finally I had a prepared lighthearted response to the invitation to “ask the Committee a question” – I can’t remember the exact response this time but it avoided putting the Committee on the spot, and ended the interview on a confident-sounding note.

For the rest of the day I worked in my office, avoiding going out of it much, as the candidates’ waiting area was in an open area almost directly outside my room – they were coming ‘in relay’ rather than in an all-day collective group. I saw Malcolm at lunchtime and mentioned about the faces set in stone during the interview. He commented straight away that this was how magistrates are trained to behave when listening to evidence in Court, and so probably these members were therefore switching straight into “magistrate-mode” once the interview started. (I should have thought of this myself, instead of taking it personally! This could have saved me a lot of anxiety, today and on various previous occasions.)

In the afternoon I did not feel ready to undertake serious Berkshire work, and arranged that Ann, one of our secretaries and NVQ Assessors, would spend some time with me to take me through elements of the Level 2 NVQ as “IT User” that I had started some months previously. This was useful – not too demanding but sufficiently distracting. Suddenly, a head came round the door. The Committee’s Secretary’s admin secretary just said in a pleasant voice and without preamble “Could you come with me please?” This seemed to me a little bit early – though possible – for a ‘decision’, but it could also be for some follow-up question, or to break bad news to me in person. I noticed no other candidate now waiting, but the secretary (Caroline I think) offered nothing further and led me ahead up the one flight of stairs to the training room.

The double doors were now open, and it was clear that the Committee members were now chatting to each other in a relaxed manner – and they weirdly took no notice of me as I came in. It seemed quite a while before suddenly George the Chairman seemed to notice me, and he just held out his hand. I stepped forward and took it, and still wanted somebody to say something at this stage to mark this momentous occasion, but it did seem at last likely that this meant I’d been successful. (For future Committee interviews I did ask George to be sure to make an unambiguous announcement to the successful candidate.)

I then had a pleasant few moments with the Committee, with some affirming feedback etc, and then came out to where other staff in our HQ office seemed to know what had happened. Later in the week, I heard from various sources about what various members of the Committee had said to other magistrates about the interviews. The most notable to me was that Jenny, the Deputy Chair, had exclaimed with pleasurable surprise “He waved his arms about!”… I mused how such things, which I’d only learned in practice the previous Sunday, had such impact on decisions, perhaps more so than my 25 years of varied experience – and achievements? - to date.

Technically, the day’s interviewing had been simply just a meeting of the Appointments Sub-Committee, who would then make a recommendation to the full Committee. So it was at a meeting in Newbury over a week later, on Friday 8th May 1998, a year and a day after the death of my mother, and on the last day of the Inspection, with Roger attending to provide initial oral feedback on the inspection, that I was formally offered the job of Chief Probation Officer for Berkshire by the full Committee.

Meanwhile, on that previous Wednesday afternoon after the interview, the urgent thing for me was to tell Lesley, so I got on the phone, and thought I’d tell her straight away who had got the job, as promptly and as clearly as possible, so that she wouldn’t have to wait. But I failed. She answered the phone, and I said straight away: - “It’s me!”

“Yes, I know it’s you. Now, what have you got to tell me?”

< “So much for your brilliant communication skills, Andrew…” >

## Chapter 5: Modest Expectations

*“Urrh! – that’s just showing off…”*

The sudden unexpected death in 2017 from a brain haemorrhage of my elder brother Paul (only 69, and very fit) was not only a major personal shock, but it also led to me putting into words, for his eulogy, a theme which he and I had discussed very briefly only a year or so earlier. Having recently heard someone on the radio mention in passing that his parents had imbued in him a huge sense of self-confidence (I think it was Danny Baker on Desert Island Discs) it suddenly struck me that, for all their strengths, my parents had not done that for me or my brother.

When I had spoken with Paul shortly afterwards, he had heartily agreed. Our parents loved us, each in their own way, but their expectations of each of us had been modest. Our mother was an earnest Quaker (though with a sense of humour), and our father had become a figure quite frustrated that his post-Army career had not really come to anything satisfactory for him. As I experienced their expectations of their sons, and described it in my tribute to Paul at his funeral, “I think they just wanted us to be ordinary honest hardworking members of society in whatever field of life we might happen to choose - us doing anything supposedly ‘better’ than that was, for them, just a pleasant surprise bonus.”

There were positive aspects to these modest expectations, as I also mentioned at the time, in that our parents never tried to pressurise either of us to do or be one or other particular thing, but rather find our own way, with discussion if we wanted it. Paul, who was mistakenly thought to be the less academically gifted of the two of us, blossomed in his teens at school, found geology to be his ‘calling’ when doing his ‘A’ Levels, got a First at Swansea, and a PhD at Reading, and his 43-year academic career in Derby included achievements as author, Professor, and Dean at the University. He did it all with a very unassuming personal style, which was something I felt he’d chosen to retain from our upbringing, in particular our mother’s Quaker beliefs. He had done this even though, like me, he did not personally adhere to Christian or other religious beliefs in adulthood. I think that Paul felt, however, that he’d had to grow his own self-belief in adulthood when pursuing his career, and although he and I were very different in many ways, this was probably an experience that we had in common.

And there was an additional factor that buttressed this experience during our childhood. Neither of our parents could bear the sight of someone – especially a child – behaving in a way that they perceived as “showing off”. If, on a TV programme (often a US import) a child was portrayed as saying or doing something that the TV audience was clearly supposed to see as charmingly precocious, both our parents would respond with disgust “Urrh! That’s just showing off!”

Both Paul and I had been drilled not to interrupt adults when they were talking – indeed, largely speak only to adults when directly spoken to – and certainly not “answer back”. On that latter point, Mum was much more tolerant of, even encouraging to, us asking questions and venturing opinions in conversations, provided we stayed polite, but Dad seemed to view almost any kind of response other than total compliance as “answering back”. During his worst moments, Dad could even interpret a cowed silence as “sulking” or as “dumb insolence” – provoking further admonishment – and although such moments of helplessness were fairly rare for us, I for one lived my childhood in perpetual apprehension that such a moment of helplessness might be about to happen again.

There were factors stemming from Dad’s arduous wartime experiences that led to his emotionally fragile behaviour, and there were sufficient positive moments for both Paul and I to want to please him as well as Mum, which I would guess is why we both internalised a lot of their standards and expectations. I certainly think that this included a sense of strong aversion to doing anything that looked like “showing off”. So while it was perfectly acceptable – and encouraged – to perform a piece of drama, music or recitation, neither of us would dream of prancing, posing, or making a face simply in order to seek a response from a parent or other adult. Coupled with the fact that as a family we were consciously undemonstrative anyway with our emotions, this all set the tone for modest expectations from life for both Paul and me.

Nevertheless I should emphasise that it was I that grew my own modest expectations of myself; my parents were just a contributory factor in this regard. Some of this arose for me alone: as a boy I’d been much less confident even than Paul in terms of any athletic ability, or appearance, or any of the personal challenges a boy faced growing up. I was shy with anyone new, was fearful of loud noises, seemed to have no natural manual dexterity (it took me ages to learn to catch a ball), developed both eczema and then asthma, and then for most of my childhood I was wetting the bed. So in most respects I seriously lacked self-confidence. (Indeed, but for my parents’ love and care - steadfast despite the modest expectations – confidence might have been crushed out of me altogether.)

The notable exception was with anything academic, where I found I seemed to have a natural ability to remember things, often first time, to read and write, and add up etc, and to find new subjects interesting. From the age of eight or so, when my parents moved to Claverton Down, outside Bath, and I started attending a local state primary school (Widcombe) in the city, I had a best friend, David Easton, who was exceptionally able academically, and I found I wasn’t too far behind him. We went on to the same grammar school when aged 11, and until his family left Bath for Bristol when we were c14/15 he continued to be a good friend, albeit a friend whom I not only failed to beat academically, but one whom I started to fall behind. A year after I had made a tremendous attempt to at least beat him at Latin (we came out joint top in that subject) I started to waver academically in my third year (Year 9 now) and ended it way behind him and many others. I was quite frequently absent from school with asthma, and although my bedwetting was unknown to anyone outside my family (and it dragged on until it finally stopped soon after my 17th birthday), alongside all the other aspects of this problem it certainly continued to impair my sense of self-confidence.

This is the background to my own paradoxical progress; somehow, like my brother, I had very modest expectations of myself, and yet alongside that there was also a ‘sufficient’ sense of confidence to try to learn (some) new things, and a drive ‘to do the next thing’ that grew through my adult career…

Oddly, I didn’t deliver fully on my apparent academic potential, whereas after a slow start my brother Paul delivered very fully indeed on his. He found the thing he wanted to commit to (Geology, while doing his ‘A’ Levels), while I found lots of things that piqued my academic interest, but I could never extend the necessary committed focus to any single area that could lead to, for example, a doctorate. I think I had the ability to concentrate when I felt like it, but frequently lacked the disposition to concentrate for too long, having too much of a ‘butterfly mind’ – distracted by other thoughts or ideas. I realised fairly early as an undergraduate that I was not going to cut it as an academic as a potential career; the main drive to get to University had been to be able to leave home, and while I was there I was mainly learning to how to function as an independent adult. I did OK academically, doing some good work in occasional bursts, but I was probably a little fortunate to end with an Upper Second, while I spent a lot of time on introspection and on working out how to conduct adult relationships successfully.

So, at the University of York from 1969-72, while I learned that I probably wasn’t going to be an academic, I instead gained confidence as a more rounded person: I got quite fit from starting to cycle regularly, and doing circuit (weight) training with my friend Gordon in our second year; I became a householder in March 1971 when I took out a shared ownership of a new three-bedroomed house on a nearby “co-owned” housing estate, subletting to three others; I learned quite a reasonable standard of guitar playing, both blues (steel-strings) and classical (nylon strings); and gained good quality friendships involving both sexes – ‘grown-up relationships’ as I saw them – including best of all, a rather idealised romance with Helen, whom I married in July 1972.

My confidence in myself grew and became well-established from these experiences, but my expectations for my future remained very modest. I felt that I would be satisfied if I earned enough income to ‘get by’, though I was largely oblivious to the likelihood that over time I might aspire to a lifestyle requiring a higher income, as I thought that my tastes and expectations would also remain modest. The option of seeking a career as a Probation Officer came to me in the autumn of 1971, when exploring the Careers Library at the University, but I gave myself until the following summer to make a final decision about going ahead. My expectation was that this was a decent worthwhile socially beneficial job that wouldn’t pay a great salary during my working life (though still ‘sufficient’), but had the long-term advantage of a secure if modest pension at the end of it, because it was a public service job.

In the short term I would have a clear year to go out and do something in the real world – i.e. some other job – while my application(s) to start the training course for Probation was being processed. (At the same time, neither Helen nor I saw any reason to delay starting a family before my career was officially under way, a brave or reckless decision.)

This early period of embarking on Probation Officer training, then undertaking it in Leicester from 1973-5, and then starting as a newly-qualified PO in Swindon, proved to be remarkably stressful in many ways, but also one that developed my self-confidence in certain ways too. Nevertheless, despite that I can honestly say that my expectation from the job throughout this early period was that I would be a conscientious main-grade PO for the remaining 40-odd years of my working life. I knew I wasn’t brilliant at it, but I was capable of working it soundly, and I hoped to continue to learn and improve. However, in those early years I never expected promotion to come onto the agenda as even a possibility.

Helen and I had a nightmare experience with the house we bought in Leicester, from which our relationship eventually failed despite a subsequent attempted reconciliation, and this was a severe knock to my self-confidence (amongst other adverse effects). Our son Paul was born during my first month on the Leicester course, an enriching experience at an otherwise difficult time. Also on the positive side both in Leicester and in Swindon I found a whole new range of skills as a property renovator. I took quite a pride that as an adult I’d proved unexpectedly able to emulate my brother’s much vaunted practical skills, while he in turn had been the one unexpectedly to become the high academic achiever – this turn of events quietly pleased me.

Therefore, given that I went on to end my employment career with seven years in one of the most senior relevant posts in the land, what became of those modest expectations of mine?

Probably the key point is that my expectations remained cautious, but I always remained open to whatever I perceived as the next new challenge. Sometimes I’d ‘let that challenge go’ at some point, such as the guitar when I felt that I’d got to the limit of my potential ability, or when I realised in 1988 that I would never be able to turn my then-current MPhil project into a PhD. But sometimes I just couldn’t let go of the challenge, and semi-obsessional tenacity took over instead. This most notably happened when I started applying for Senior Probation Officer posts from 1979. How did that begin to happen?

The first tiny seed of uncertainty was sowed after only about three months into that first Probation Officer job in Swindon, when a colleague (Gerald) retired on his 65th birthday. He was an ex-Army officer who had now completed 15 years in Probation, he was just over 40 years older than me, and was very emotional about retiring. But it was when another colleague (Reg), who was in his thirties, commented “I’m not sure that I want to be driving around the Park estate doing home visits when I’m 64” that suddenly, for an instant, I saw what he meant. I’d been sure up to then that I’d be content with this modest but worthwhile job for the rest of my working life, but was I right? However, for the moment I put that tiny doubt away as I was as yet not quite getting the hang of what was still the new job, and I thought no more of it at this stage.

Over the next two years I underwent my breakup with Helen, and then got together with Mo, and became established as a tolerably competent PO. I also learned to drive, which might not sound to others as very momentous. But from a young age I had felt that driving a car was something I’d never be able to do (a little too difficult and frightening), and when I’d moved to Leicester I had expected to go on to have my Probation career there, and manage my home visits etc on public transport (as I did in reality as a trainee there). Yet when domestic circumstances meant I had to apply for a PO post in Swindon instead I found that in Wiltshire not only was it advisable, but also it was actually a condition of service that one could drive.

By 1975 I had got used to bicycling in traffic (since 1971), and even used a moped for a while from 1972-3, and I gritted my teeth and decided that I would learn to drive after all – because I was appointed to the job on condition that I would ensure that I had obtained my licence before the end of my “confirmation” (i.e first, effectively ‘probationary’) year in post. To my frank surprise and pleasure, aided greatly by a truly excellent instructor (a young man my age with pony tail and wispy beard) and careful attention on my part, I passed in February 1976 after a course of 20 lessons at two a week – and just after my final breakup with Helen.

So the modesty of my expectations of myself was itself being moderated by my finding that if I applied myself I could achieve more than I expected. I took an interest in widening my skills in Probation work (e.g. groupwork, ‘Family therapy’ etc) and in airing my views on organisational matters, but it was only from about 1979 that my sense of self-confidence grew to the stage that I started to consider seriously the option of applying for promotion myself. Watching how the job was being done by my own SPO (Senior Probation Officer), Jay Wall – somewhat erratically – and by others, e.g when covering for her absence, rather better -I started to feel over time “Hang on, I think I might be able to do that”. The final trigger was the prospect from 1979 of Jay herself being about to retire, and the announcement by our Chief that in a linked reorganisation there would then be two SPOs appointed jointly to manage a combined Swindon ‘team’.

In 1980 I fell at that hurdle (long story), and over the next three years I applied for a total of 33 SPO posts around England and Wales, with a growing sense of desperation and frustration because my feeling that I could actually do the job in practice actually grew despite the repeated knockbacks – I’ve described my 16th, and at last successful, interview in Chapter 4. What I did learn, among other things, was the arbitrary nature of the process, as I was shortlisted for some posts but not for others that had looked virtually identical. But by this time I was married to Mo, with a new son Stephen, and in our ‘ideal’ house, yet I dragged the family off to South Wales, assuring myself that SPO was the job I would now be content with for the rest of my career…

Incidentally, in those days, for a combination of reasons – partly ‘union politics’ – the gain in pay from promotion for a PO with eight years’ experience was a fairly narrow one. I didn’t expect – or get – any great financial advantage in the short term, although of course I knew we would be somewhat better off in the very long term, because of how the payscales with annual increments worked at that time. I got a larger house, because property in Newport was cheaper than in Swindon, but monthly money was quite tight throughout our Newport years for a combination of reasons. I had largely expected this, and saw this as the price that I had to pay for getting the job I wanted. I did not resent the fact that at that time it took me until my fifth year in the SPO job (13 years’ qualified service) before my salary overtook that of one of my team members (Stan) who had been a main-grade officer for 20 years, and who complained bitterly about the cost of his £5,000 mortgage…!

The SPO stage of my career started as a secondment to HM Youth Custody Centre Usk, in July 1983, and the hope that in due course I’d be relocated to Newport. For various reasons this onward move didn’t take place for three-and-a-half years, by which time I had become quite impatient. I noted that one or two counterparts were successful in gaining promotion to ACPO (Assistant Chief PO), and I found myself thinking “But I’m as good as them!” and therefore starting to think about how I might get such a promotion myself. But why the new restlessness? Oddly, the Usk job, for which I received a small extra allowance (for working in a prison) was not overly demanding, despite the ‘extras’ that I grafted onto the job for myself: an Open University course on Finance and Accounting for Managers, and the Editorial Board for Probation Journal, and first Secretary and then President of a local Rotary Club. That sowed one kind of restlessness. Then the Newport job was highly demanding when I got there, and quite stressful personally, especially as it began to evolve into what seemed like quite a ‘treadmill’-type routine, which sowed the feeling that my ability could be better used in a more strategic role.

After I had completed that ‘leap’ to ACPO – also described in Chapter 4 – and moved to my new (smaller) home in Reading, I calculated at the time that I was some £200 per month net ‘worse off’ than when I was in Newport. This was alleviated by Mo’s increased earnings, but again the financial gain was long-term not short-term, although I continued to be delighted with the job, which was my important reward at the time.

When I started applying for Chief jobs in 1994, the motivation was slightly different. Having watched how my own Chief (Malcolm) did the job, and learning a lot from his excellent example – while also realising that I was different in certain key respects – I gradually came to believe that I was capable of being Chief. I applied for certain posts only, and although rejection always hurt, I did not feel at all distressed at continuing as an ACPO in Berkshire. Brilliant opportunities came my way during this period: the University of Cambridge Senior Course in Criminology, the Leading Through Change course at Cranfield University, the half-time secondment to the University of Oxford’s Criminological Studies, and a year serving as ‘Deputising’ Chief for Berkshire when Malcolm was chairing the national association for Chiefs. The whole senior management team also experienced the locally-led (by Malcolm) initiative to establish a Thames Valley Probation Service in the early 1990s that only fell at the very final hurdle because our own Berkshire employers voted by a margin of one against their own abolition. See Chapter 14 for all these.

So it was when Malcolm revealed his plan in 1997 for his own early retirement, after 15 years as Chief, that the issue was forced for me – was I content to be ACPO under a new Chief in Berkshire, or should I go for Chief myself? Of course, since the cost of not getting this Chief job would no longer be going back as ACPO to Malcolm, but to someone new, this was a bid for promotion that had to be made, and it was one that mattered more than the others had. There was still a lot of anxiety when I then succeeded – once in role, would I find that, as per the ‘Peter Principle’, I had finally reached my level of incompetence? But, taking the long view, I felt incredulous at my success.

As Berkshire’s Chief Probation Officer 1998-2001 I had a strong drive to ensure that the Service was visibly a success, using the right approach, and for most of that time I worked a 13½-day fortnight to make it happen, and many managers and staff also went the extra mile. My ideal outcome for 2001 would have been to become Chief of the new Thames Valley Area within the new National Probation Service (NPS), though I also specifically felt that I wouldn’t be able to work at this pace past 2008/9, when I would probably need to retire. If I had been given a Chief job in another Area, that would have been OK, and a probably similar prospect.

Despite this growth in confidence, I still didn’t see myself as anything more than an ‘Area’ Chief. I didn’t seek ‘national’ roles at this time, and after my failure to secure a new Chief job in 2001, I did not feel qualified to apply for the advertised post (in January 2001) of HM Chief Inspector of Probation! But I did feel more than qualified to apply to be one of the HM Inspectors, in the same advertisement. It was only through the succession of events previously described that in 2003/4 I first secured the Deputy Chief Inspector job in open competition, and then had the Chief job presented to me – and of course I never expected to retain that job for the final seven years of my career.

There were many advantages to having these modest expectations in life – for example, many of the later steps forward were a pleasant surprise rather than a long-awaited entitlement, and usually I was merely (very) disappointed but not overly stressed by setbacks. But this did mean that I did not naturally ‘exude’ confidence, and I have always found it difficult to ‘praise’ myself directly. Later I found to my own surprise, when it was now me interviewing others, that candidates who could confidently talk up their own abilities still made a strong impact, even with someone like me who was instinctively sceptical of that kind of self-promotion.

I had realised early in 1983 that my inability to talk myself up without feeling – and looking – embarrassed was handicapping my interviews, and I had come up with the idea of focusing on talking about the skills required for the job, and leaving the link with ‘me’ as either an implied point or the final flourish. This had been a key factor in getting the Gwent SPO job, and later the others too, but of course it had by no means always worked. When I devised selection procedures I tried to minimise the impact of the ‘just good talkers’ by getting them to show me – rather than just tell me – what they had previously achieved, through direct testing when feasible and also through citing evidenced examples. It was a partial but by no means total success. It still seems largely inescapable to me that the skills needed when ‘bidding’ for a new job (or for a pay rise in some other organisations) are markedly different from the skills needed in order to carry out well the job itself.

Meanwhile, what explains the apparent contrast between these “modest expectations” of mine (and of my brother Paul), and the ‘successful career’ that followed them? Although I have not been as consistently tenacious as Paul was, I can see that some tenacity on my part was involved at times. The bigger factor was that, much to my own surprise, it seems that I never felt ‘satisfied’ – see next chapter.

\* \* \* \* \*

## Chapter 6: Never Satisfied – and becoming less Entitled

*< “Oh. Perhaps that wasn’t such a great achievement” >*

One symptom of those modest expectations of mine has been the frequent feeling that “When I’ve done/achieved/got THAT, I’ll be happy with that”. While I didn’t set myself goals of vaunting ambition, I would see a potential achievement within what I perceived as my reach, and which took my fancy in some way, and I would be keen to go for it. It was actually an incentive in my own mind to ‘go for it’ to tell myself that if and when I achieved it I would be satisfied. Yet, conversely, I was to find repeatedly that when I reached the desired new peak – whatever it was – I’d often find that the sense of satisfaction was not what I’d expected, and instead I’d see a new peak in front of me. It would often be one I had previously considered not in my reach, but now it was (or became so after a time), and the urge would arise to go for that one now. In other words, to my own surprise, I found I was never satisfied.

[I should add at this point that apparently this should not have surprised me at all. I now find that authors such as YN Harari casually state almost as a truism that “The most common reaction of the human mind to achievement is not satisfaction, but craving for more.” *Homo Deus*, p23]

There are many petty examples of this syndrome, alongside the big ones. I started learning guitar in December 1969, with no great ambition. I just wanted to be able to strum along some of the songs that my friends could strum at the time. I’d often think “Once I’ve got the hang of this song, that’ll be fine – that’s all I want to be able to do.” But each song led me to want to be able to play another one, or to be able to do barre chords, and then do transpositions, and before long learn some fingerpicking techniques, and so on. Over time, I learned some good blues riffs, developed a version of Davy Graham’s “Angie”, and then went on to learn some (fairly basic) classical pieces too. I probably had reached the limits of my ability at that point, and after I made the personally disastrous move to Leicester in June 1973 I made no further progress. But I’d got far further than I had ever imagined myself reaching when I first started.

Another example is one I think I probably share with a large number of other human beings – it arises from the question: How much wealth/income is Enough? For most of my working life I have been fortunate in that I felt that I was at least getting by with the salary I was earning – but there was that feeling that if I just had another £20-30 per month more then life would be considerably easier. Indeed, I might then be ‘satisfied’. But of course that never happens. One’s lifestyle adapts to one’s new circumstances, and there is practically never a time when ‘a little bit more’ would not seem something to be desired. In my case, when financial security arrived in the 2000s, I was able to direct this unprecedentedly into a savings plan, but the feeling never left that ‘a little bit more’ would help with that. I have found that ‘learning to be satisfied’ is surprisingly difficult.

And I think that this is at the heart of my career progression story. It looks as though at each stage of my career I have thought “When I’ve achieved this, then I will be happy to settle for that”, but in practice the feeling has grown – sometimes slowly, sometimes quite quickly – that “I think I would be able to do that thing over there now”. ‘That thing over there’ was not always a direct promotion; I looked at jobs in research, academia, even the Local Ombudsman at one point, as I looked to stretch myself a little bit more. This was how I moved on from those modest expectations.

It is possible that one of the reasons I was ‘never satisfied’ is because during my working life (and indeed after) I have never found my proper ‘calling’, whatever that might be. It depends which way you look at it. I’ve already said that my brother Paul seemed to find his calling with academic geology – and then in academic management too. As a result, he applied himself with a rigour and persistence that brought him great success and I think great contentment too. And when he retired he then gave himself new projects and commitments.

In contrast, I never knuckled down to my own academic work with the same persistence, except in odd short bursts – often idiosyncratic – and it was probably conscientiousness rather than dedication to a cause that led to such hard work as I did put in at various points in my Probation career. I never could quite ‘buy’ the whole package of evangelism for penal reform that some of my colleagues represented. I looked at whatever job I was doing at the time, formed an opinion of what ‘doing it well’ should look like, and then tried hard to put that idea into practice. As a manager, this included getting my staff also to do their jobs well. So my own dedication and conscientiousness came in bursts, while a lot of the rest of the time I was content (and still am) to be a bit of a grasshopper mind, hopping from subject to subject in random skips, musing over lateral links – e.g. between Probation and railways – rather than committing my life to one specific subject. So, either my ‘calling’ never found me, or I lacked the ‘application’ to find it.

On a tangential point, I would reference ‘The Hedgehog and the Fox’, an essay I read by Isaiah Berlin when I was a sixth-former. Based round an ancient Greek saying “The fox knows many things; the hedgehog knows one big thing”, Berlin drew a distinction between those great minds who based their world view around one single great idea (e.g. Marx, Freud), i.e. hedgehogs, and those who identified numerous brilliant insights about the world around them, but there was no single great idea that linked these insights together (e.g. Shakespeare), i.e. foxes. This essay made a big impact on me at the time, and over the next few years of study I increasingly identified myself as one being content to ‘know many things’ rather than one continually striving to integrate all my ideas together into ‘one big theory’, even though the drive to try and achieve that ‘single theory of everything’ was a very strong one. I think that this has also helped me to remain open to a diversity of viewpoints in this world as a whole, to be cautious about developing orthodoxies (including ‘progressive’ ones), and sometimes to be a bit of a contrarian, despite my other instincts to maintain many conventions.

Obviously that’s also a convenient way for me to explain to myself the somewhat random nature of the various small achievements and failures in my life, where there is little to identify any overall coherence in what I have been trying to do. And it also supports the point I was making much earlier, that the apparent majestic smooth progression of my career is entirely misleading, because it happened as the outcome of a series of ‘accidents’ during which I could have easily left this career altogether.

However, there is one more dimension to the theme of my never seeming to be satisfied despite those earlier modest expectations. I think that one of those reasons for not being satisfied was my tendency to diminish in my own mind whatever it is that I’ve achieved. Sometimes I have set myself a goal – perhaps be able to play ‘Angie’ on the guitar, or achieve a Master of Arts degree in my own time while working full-time – and I have anticipated a huge burst of euphoria that I would experience if and when it is achieved.

Yet the experience of joy and satisfaction has proved in reality to be less than expected. Some of that is down to that learned instinct not to ‘show off’, and I have noted with wry amusement that I find huge resonance not only with the stiff upper lips of 1950s British heroes but also with the ‘laid-back’ demeanours of many 1970s hippies – no wonder my euphoria remains very controlled and ‘internal’. But also I probably have a tendency inside my own mind to diminish what I’ve just done: <“Oh – perhaps that wasn’t such an achievement”>. The sequence in my semi-conscious thinking goes something like this: <“If I can achieve this MA in Historical Studies in my own time over the next three years then I will be really impressed with myself in achieving something so difficult and worthwhile”> followed after achieving it by <“This is wonderful. I’ve achieved what I planned. But was it really that difficult? (Perhaps if you can do it, Andrew, then maybe it’s not such a big achievement after all…)>”

That MA in 1984 was an example that was particularly noticeable to me, because I had been building up to it for quite a while, yet within a day or two of getting the result I noticed that I was questioning my achievement in my mind, and it was not long before I was thinking I must go for a PhD in order to satisfy my academic ambitions. That “So what?” internal response came out with many less momentous achievements too, over the years: guitar pieces, weight-loss goals, pieces of home maintenance or improvement, and so on. As I have recounted already, the gap between feeling delighted with the achievement, and then becoming dissatisfied and wanting the next one, was much longer when it concerned my career progression moves, but ultimately I think that one element in my ‘never feeling satisfied with where I’d got to’ was the parallel feeling that perhaps where I’d got to was not such an impressive thing after all.

Having been fortunate, indeed miraculous, in having been both a Chief Probation Officer and the HM Chief Inspector by the end of my career, which should be enough for anybody, I think that one of the reasons I have needed to document the various things achieved during those periods is to keep reminding and convincing myself that I was a ‘worthwhile’ incumbent of those two posts. I have to keep shoring up my sense of self-worth by recording rational independent evidence that I did a good job, which is what I have done on my website:

**andrewbridgesprobation.com**

\* \* \*

Entitlement is a concept that has only become crystallised and articulated for me relatively recently - indeed, the word itself only came to my notice in my 50s, but it encapsulated for me a range of human behaviours in myself as well as others. My Google search confirms that its use grew from a low point to a peak in 2000, and also usefully points the way to its meaning in the sense I mean it here. Alongside the formal legal and contractual meanings of the word, it adds a third definition: “the belief that one is inherently deserving of privileges or special treatment”. This definition could of course arguably include ‘standing up for one’s own rights’, and this would be OK with me if this meant standing up for the same rights for everybody. But the key word here is “special” – the behaviours that bother me are when somebody believes either that they are, or have become, someone who is deserving of privileges, benefits or special treatment, “special” in that other people are not entitled to them.

One aspect is when people who are already privileged in the world assume additional privileges and priorities in everyday life without any apparent thought or consideration for others. When a teenager, and as someone who had been brought up to believe that consideration for others, and paying one’s bills on time (for example) was the ‘proper’ way for an educated person to behave, I felt outraged when learning from tradespeople both past and present that aristocrats and large companies were often the worst at settling their accounts. It seemed to me – and I still think – that paying outstanding debts and accounts should be a high priority, and especially so when the debtor is well off.

And in terms of social behaviour, while I personally have very rarely experienced any discrimination or slights from being a former state school boy rather than a former public school boy, I have been sensitive to the supreme self-confidence exuded by many former public school attenders that all-too-often spills over into ‘entitlement’ behaviours. I was over 30 when I happened to be in Rugby, and it suddenly struck me that a group I saw of 14-year-old boys from the local public school were just strolling down the middle of the pavement blithely expecting everyone else simply to get out of their way. It probably made a particular impact on me since it contrasted with my own upbringing which had led me to show arguably excessive consideration to other users of a path or pavement, and it is rare that I am not the one to shift position to allow others their apparent preferred route.

But it is not only the already-privileged who feel and act on a sense of entitlement. Often it is the people who feel that they have worked their way up in the world from initial disadvantage who start to exert their own ‘rights’ while showing less than considerate behaviour to others. I find rudeness or offhandedness to a person trying to provide a service (in a shop or restaurant for example) even harder to understand when it’s shown by someone who has originated from a similar background to that other person.

Overall, I accept that Entitlement is not a precise term in itself, but somewhere on the spectrum starting with ‘standing up for one’s rights’ there is a crossover to where it becomes merely Entitlement. For as the years have gone on, I have got increasingly irked by people demanding their rights when it’s not accompanied by any apparent recognition that somebody else has to pay for it in some way, or any apparent sense of duty to contribute to the welfare or rights of others in return. The term captures some of what happens when someone seems to think “Because of who I am, or who I have become, I am entitled to do x…” where ‘x’ constitutes gaining some additional privilege, advantage or sense of superiority. The indignant question, “Do you know who I am??” is a classic symptom of Entitlement.

But my point here is not to embark on a series of moral judgements about a range of other people but instead to lead into an examination of some of my own behaviours. Since I am someone who has always considered himself a person who is considerate and accommodating to others, and honest and fair-minded etc, it is with discomfort that I notice some examples of when I have displayed Entitlement behaviour myself.

I started my Probation career after a period of working shifts, including regular weekends, as a cleaner in a mental hospital near York, but by the time I had qualified and started full-time work as a PO in Swindon I got it into my head that my weekends were now sacrosanct. Our hours were of course flexible, and working at least two evenings a week was to be expected, and like most POs (not all) I didn’t believe in ‘counting’, and thereby limiting, my working hours. But I was irrationally enraged when I found that a Divorce Court Welfare enquiry I was doing required me to do a home visit on a Sunday afternoon, because the father worked away from home throughout the week. After a quiet word from my Senior PO, I had to pull myself together, and readjust my expectations. Thereafter, although I was able to be successful in largely avoiding weekend working (as was possible then), I think I recognised that this was not, after all, an absolute ‘right’.

Nevertheless there is something about a hierarchical organisation that promotes the growth of Entitlement behaviours. Even as main-grade POs, our statutory qualification gave us a sense of status, which some colleagues tended to exert in fairly inconsiderate ways at the expense of “unqualified” or “clerical” fellow workers. Also, there was no such thing as overtime or premium payments in those years, which may be why we were very protective about our modest expenses entitlements for meals and mileage. There were potentially various ways in which these could be ‘milked’, though in my experience few people actually did this. However, because expenses were ‘variable costs’ incurred at the discretion of the postholder, with little direct control by management, these expenses were reined in as the years went on, causing a high level of outrage with many staff, for whom this entitlement remained a very sensitive issue. This was a case of a strong emotional sense of Entitlement becoming attached to a somewhat modest financial ‘entitlement’!

For myself, I was additionally very sensitive and protective of my ‘right’ to organise and schedule my own work in my own way, and would deeply resent any manager or colleague who sought to impose a change (though I was content to ‘be persuaded’). Having control of how I managed my work was one of the ways that made the demanding workload tolerable, and on balance rewarding. So when a new Senior PO had to require me to move my office (we all had our own room in those days) to an additional building across the road I took it very badly, though I complied in the end. Later, when a Senior PO myself in Newport, the irony of this was not lost on me when I had to require another (excellent) officer to move his office, which he took equally badly!

It is when moving into senior management that the opportunities for Entitlement behaviour start to proliferate. The two issues I noticed were First Class rail travel, and expenditure on ‘Hospitality’. I became very attached to First Class while on business travel for BPS (Berkshire Probation Service), though I did notice that since we paid by warrant – very convenient for me - we were paying maximum price. Also, for some train trips, eg on the old Southern region, it was of marginal additional value to the ticketholder. But I did become attached to it, arguably to an irrational extent (which is what I put down to a sense of Entitlement) and didn’t want it taken away. At first I had justified my attachment on the grounds that my salary as a senior manager was comparatively low, so this was a form of compensation, but as salaries started to rise this justification waned while my attachment did not.

When I moved to the Inspectorate, initially with the Home Office, First Class was again a normal ‘right’ for HM Inspector, the post I started at (though this was gradually eroded over the following years). So again I felt ‘entitled’ to this, for work journeys. As for my personal commuting to work (Reading-London), I soon felt able to buy a First Class season ticket, though this was a major purchase for me. But I also found that other Inspectors, recruited on a different contract, were used to travelling from their ‘home area’ as a work journey in First Class, also using taxis as well as rail. For my part, I practically never used taxis in London, where there was such a good Underground system, whether my employer was paying or not. This left me puzzling why I felt ‘entitled’ to First Class rail, but definitely not feeling entitled when it came to using taxis – I used them only in certain specific straitened circumstances. On any rational basis, this was not logical; this thought, and other practical experiences, led me on another kind of ‘personal journey’.

My attachment to First Class was such that from 2001-6 I paid for my journey to work in London at First Class, with a season ticket for five of those years. However, this experience paradoxically also had the perverse effect of my learning to become less attached to it. What I found as the years went on was that I became increasingly sensitive to the various occasions when the large additional amount I had paid for First Class was attracting little or no additional benefit – i.e. when I wasn’t getting the additional value for my additional payment. It was trivial-sounding stuff, such as the complimentary trolley service being unavailable, the First Class section being at the wrong end of the train, or catching the type of train where the seats were barely noticeably better than Standard. Meanwhile, at other times in my personal life, I was fairly regularly getting on a train from Liverpool St or Vauxhall with a Standard Class ticket and having to stand for over 30 minutes before a seat became available, and this didn’t cause me to bat an eyelid. I found myself jokingly telling people, “I’m finding travelling First Class more stressful than travelling Standard” – an example of satisfaction being related to expectations. In the end, for the final four years in the job I was content to commute in Standard Class (sometimes quite tiresomely, but I could accept this), and the money saved helped pay for refurbishing my Reading home.

The whole experience with First Class rail travel, and my irrational attachment to it, suggested to me that this was a case of a sense of Entitlement on my part, and recognising this helped me to feel a little better about eventually giving it up on work-related journeys.

On a related point, although I flew to Lugano (Switzerland) for a European Probation event in Economy class in 2004, I do know that much later on I felt ‘entitled’ to fly to Belfast in Business Class for a Chief Inspectors’ meeting, though with a bit of guilt afterwards. This may have been after I had been recruited to do some advisory work for the New Zealand government in 2009, which involved flying there several times for a week at a time. (My ‘earnings’ were paid into the Inspectorate budget.) Before the first trip south I looked at the logistics and told them in an email that I’d find it very hard to work effectively after a 26-hour flight in Economy, and they were most emphatic that they wouldn’t dream of expecting me to fly Economy, and I ended up with seven return trips to New Zealand in Business class, which did seem like a great privilege. Perhaps that Belfast trip was a bit of that sense of ‘entitlement’ creeping back in?

In retirement Lesley and I have continued to purchase many of the flights we’ve done in Business class – a privilege we’ve been content to pay for. Meanwhile, since 2010, very few public servants, even at the highest level, have had the entitlement to First Class rail travel, and most of the very highest level who at one time had had a Government car and driver have either voluntarily or compulsorily given up that privilege, alongside many Ministers. My own view is that perhaps this austerity has gone a little too far - it seems fine to me for (mainly elected) Ministers to have the use of such a car. On the other hand I find it hard to see how a Government car can be justified for salaried public servants.

Hospitality was also a potential minefield. In Berkshire our support services (admin) manager Tony was certainly not lax with how money was spent, so I was surprised when he told us that a meal out with other senior managers (from other areas) one evening in York could come out of the Chief’s hospitality budget on this occasion – this wasn’t a common occurrence! When I became Chief myself I found very few uses for the budget – the main event I can remember was taking the local Police commander in Reading out for a restaurant lunch, which was still not a lavish affair. I did insist, on becoming Chief, on having a ‘business’ credit card, which was extremely useful in terms of administrative convenience, and reducing my personal cashflow (spending and then claiming back), but I was careful not to misuse it by buying other ‘jollies’ for myself.

In the Inspectorate, and notably when working jointly with other Inspectorates, it was evident that some people had not only got very used to First Class rail and taxis but also quite a high standard of hotel. In HMI Constabulary the senior staff had the use of dedicated London overnight accommodation and cars with drivers, and elsewhere only used hotels which had their own gyms, which set a certain standard. And even within our own more modest Inspectorate, an expectation had grown that for week-long inspections a somewhat discerning standard of hotel accommodation was required – which seemed to me to be pleasant for us but unnecessary. In response to later pressure (reasonably) from our parent Department (Home Office, then MoJ) to reduce costs, which they tried to do by setting cost ceilings, I took the view that Premier Inn was an acceptable standard for most work purposes, and would serve as a benchmark on each occasion. This meant that either the local Premier Inn, or a different hotel that cost no more than that, would be acceptable to me, rather than work to an arbitrary single national figure as a cost ceiling for every locality.

And I drew the line when the opportunity arose to have the restaurant bill for a bilateral lunch meeting with another (related) public servant paid from expenses, because I saw this as being on a similar slippery slope to that of receiving certain types of hospitality from private companies. The demarcation lines are difficult to draw in real life, but my growing aversion to the perceived culture of Entitlement led me to take a cautious approach to allowing myself ‘fringe benefits’.

The finale to this was my own retirement do. Since becoming a senior manager in Berkshire I had grown used to the idea that the employer did not provide alcohol for ordinary leaving dos, but did provide it for retirement dos – it’s a major event in someone’s life to take retirement. As both Chief Probation Officer and Chief Inspector I had been able to continue that ‘policy’ myself for a succession of retiring staff – but in central government a new degree of austerity arrived after the 2010 general election. Visitors, including journalists, were no longer even offered tea or coffee when visiting the MoJ, and in that last year I attended more than one retirement do there where there was just some tea on offer.

For myself I was in the fortunate position that I had a do with most of the Inspectorate staff in our Manchester office in mid-May, and for my final day I had a late afternoon event in London in the Ministry of Justice atrium area, where many colleagues and ‘partners’ from outside the Inspectorate were able to attend. I decided that I would simply pay for the wine etc for this event myself – fortunately on ‘sale or return’! With good attendance, nice speeches, and some former colleagues who came a long way to be there, as well as family, it felt a very upbeat end to my career.

Overall therefore, during my career, I found that I had been extremely fortunate. But among the many other things that I learned about myself I learned that I was never satisfied, and also that I needed to curb that growing instinct to feel a sense of Entitlement.

## Chapter 7. Flashbacks: How my curious career got started & Where it might have ended:

*“You get paid the same in Torquay as you do in Bradford”*

I spent nearly 38 years from 1973 to 2011 in employment either in or around the Probation Service. How did I get into this curious career? It does seem both an odd and unlikely development, given that I had not shown any disposition towards such work in my earlier life. My childhood had seen me get initially interested in astronomy from ages 9 to 12 (I’d found that I would need double Maths and Physics ‘A’ Level to pursue a career in astronomy), and I’d been interested in other scientific and/or other mechanical matters such as model railways at various points even though I’d not been very good at them. Dad enjoyed mechanical work, my brother Paul became a geologist, and two of my cousins became doctors. (Subsequently my two sons, by different mothers, have become Masters in Engineering, with subsequent successful careers built on that discipline.) But academically I went in a different direction from age 12 onwards.

I had got into the ‘top Maths set’ for the start of my second year at my grammar school, but soon I was finding it difficult to keep up with Maths at this level and with the science subjects too. I had a number of absences from school from asthma etc, and although I could ‘catch up’ OK in other subjects I found I was less able to do this with Maths and the sciences. Partly this was because I got on better with the teachers of some of the humanities subjects than I did with those for the science subjects. In any event, although there was no requirement by the school to move into either a science or arts silo I found that the main focus for both my ‘O’ and ‘A’ Levels were on the humanities side.

Indeed one of the options I was toying with around my mid-teens was a career in one of the churches, partly because I was enjoying studying Divinity and thought it might become my chosen subject to pursue at university. Then my realisation that “There is no God”, which I would date to September 1967, rather made that option a non-runner, but I remained interested in the possibility of a ‘socially useful’ career. (Meanwhile it took me a little time to adjust to studying Divinity ‘A’ Level as an atheist, but once the penny dropped that I could study it just like any other academic subject I ended up doing rather well at it, as did the other non-believer on that course.)

I did some ‘Social Service’ in the two years of the Sixth Form, at first visiting an elderly lady in her home, and then during the two summers took some “underprivileged” children on a holiday for a week in Kent. But actually this experience rather put me off any idea of social service and I did not seek to take this any further forward when I went to York. I didn’t get into York on my first choice of a joint History and English degree, but I got in on joint History and Education. I had no ambition to be a teacher (I thought, probably rightly, that I’d not be able to control a class), but I thought it would be an interesting subject. In practice I found that all the others doing Education did want to become teachers, and the course seemed to be offering the prospect of an ever-increasing focus on teaching, and I was not overly entranced with the charismatic professor Harry Rae. I was fortunate in being permitted to opt out of this minority subject and move to a sole History degree from (I think) the winter of 1970 onwards.

For a while this left me content to continue to study without any longterm objective in view. Although I was doing reasonably well at History, following a shaky start, I could tell by about October 1971 that a future academic career was probably beyond me. I thought very vaguely that being a librarian was possible (but not attractive), and also about arts administration – though despite my positive view of the York Arts Centre in town this did not lead to me actually attending many events there at all! So my ambitions were modest and cautious, at one time idealistic but by this time less so, and with no aspiration to wealth anyway, though I did have one profound insight at this time: I was sure that one key definition of success in life was to be able to look forward to Monday mornings, a viewpoint I have retained ever since.

From memory I think it was the summer or autumn of 1971 when various reflections led me to think that perhaps I could do a job that involved talking to people one at a time – socially I’ve always preferred mixing in small intimate groups or bilaterals rather than in bigger groups. I’m not sure where the idea came from, but I vaguely thought that perhaps I could work with prisoners coming out of prison in this way. So I went to the Careers Library at the University in the summer/autumn to pursue this line of thought, and discovered somewhat to my surprise that this work was done by probation officers. (Historically there had been an After-Care association, but this had been taken over by the Probation Service in the late 1960s.) My surprise at finding that this job was part of Probation work was then followed by a further shock as I discovered that in order to qualify as a Probation Officer I would have to take a postgraduate qualification in Social Work.

This gave me a lot to think about. Applying for the available courses meant completing a form for a dedicated Clearing House, and I still just had time to apply in that autumn (1971). But I decided that applying straight away wouldn’t be a good idea; I would apply the following autumn and thus take at least a year in some other form of employment before taking up my new course, if I was successful. This also gave me time to think about other possibilities, should they arise, since it would be unwise to rule out too early any alternative options for my future career.

One thing Helen and I did in July 1972, about a week or so after we got married, was volunteer to take two “Spastics” (as people with cerebral palsy were then still formally designated) to Edinburgh for two weeks’ holiday. They were a couple about the same age as us, Gareth and Carol, who had placed an advert which we answered. We went by train to Kelvedon, Essex, to collect them and take them by train via London to stay in a guest house in Edinburgh for a fortnight. The 14 days involved Helen and me doing much personal service – lifting, washing, and pushing the wheelchairs up and down the hills of Edinburgh – two of the most exhausting weeks of my life. The couple became engaged during the holiday, with Gareth buying a ring while we were there. The relevance of this episode is that it was about the only direct experience of any kind of ‘social work’ that I could cite in my application since school…

For as it happens my mind became increasingly settled on the idea of becoming a Probation Officer, and doing a Diploma in Social Work (or similar) in order to achieve this. At some point, which I think was later in the summer of 1972, I went to the then Probation Office in York, in Priory Street, where I met the Senior Probation Officer called Mr Black. He had two important pieces of advice for me: 1) “You get paid the same in Torquay as you do in Bradford”, and 2) “Wear a suit for the interview”. He was correctly if colourfully pointing out to me that Probation Officer pay was on a national payscale, with no additional reward for working in a ‘tough’ area, and less correctly that dressing wrongly at interview was a dealbreaker. This didn’t put me off.

So about the same time that I started as a ‘Grade A Porter’ (i.e. cleaner) at Naburn Psychiatric Hospital in September 1972 I made my application, through the relevant clearing house, with the University of Leicester School of Social Work as my first choice. In a surprisingly short time I was offered an interview at Leicester; I put on a smart blue pullover and attended in October 1972. As I recall the batch for the day, about 12 candidates, were assembled for a group discussion led by Mark Monger, an eminent current academic former probation officer. We then had a lengthy individual interview each – well, perhaps it was about an hour – mine was with Martin Herbert, a child psychologist, and we seemed to get on quite well.

Not long after, I got a letter to say that Leicester was offering me a place. I think it was probably for this letter that Helen got a friend to drive her to Naburn to see me so that I could open the letter while I was still at work. I then had to write to the Home Office so that I could apply to be a Trainee Probation Officer and receive an annual salary of £1,311 when I started at Leicester the following September. This was a lot more than I was then receiving as a hospital cleaner, even with bonus and not yet paying income tax (£23.05 per week), so this seemed a very fortunate outcome.

Almost all the Social Worker candidates, and the majority of Probation Officer candidates (as I later learned) had undertaken one or two full years of unqualified social work experience – my year as a hospital cleaner was one of the least amounts of previous experience of any candidate. The scrutiny I’d received at interview was frankly pretty superficial, and in my view I had ‘got in’ that year largely because I was a ‘Probation’ candidate who had applied right at the beginning of the academic year and ‘seemed OK’ when I turned up for interview.

And that’s how I got onto a course to qualify me as a Probation Officer, and how my whole career got started…

\* \* \* \*

**Where it might have ended:**

Approaching the ‘other end’ of my career, there are a number of different locations where I might have reached, and perhaps stayed either until I retired or until one of the many Probation reorganisations of the early 21st century.

Around the end of 1992 my personal standing and confidence was quite high, and at the same time the future of Probation in Berkshire was already uncertain (see Chapter 13). This must have been what tipped me into a mentality that I had not expected to reach – becoming interested in applying for posts as Chief. My friend Geoff commented to me at the time, “I thought you said you were quite happy, playing a solid defence, while Malcolm scored the goals up front” (not a perfect analogy, but one that accurately captured the spirit of how I had previously felt), and I tried to explain how I now felt that I was capable of the top job, even though I knew I wouldn’t do it the same way that Malcolm did it.

I was interviewed for the first job that came up, in Cumbria, and Lesley and I drove up, toured the area, and stayed in Carlisle before the interview. It was common practice in those days for the selection panel to last two days, with a ‘dinner with the Committee’ during the middle evening. It was a full hotel dinner, with the Committee members rotating their seats between courses to that they could chat informally with each of the candidates. However I have little other memory of the first day of the Cumbria event except that we completed lengthy psychological questionnaires for an hour or two – cognitive reasoning as well as a personality profile. For the second day I had practised my ‘presentation’, using Overhead Projector slides (OHPs), a lot beforehand and this seemed to go quite well, and the interview didn’t seem too bad either. I’d seen Pam, a friend of a mutual friend, during the process, and indeed she later got the County Durham job, and also Ian, who duly got the Cumbria job on this occasion. Lesley and I had had to hang around in Carlisle (since as usual I was on first) and then return to the venue at about 5.00ish for that result. It was then a long drive back to Reading.

In the autumn both Gwent and Wiltshire came up in rapid succession, and to be honest I wasn’t overly keen on Gwent in comparison with Wiltshire, but I thought that it would be ‘good experience/practice’ before the Wiltshire interview, which was due more or less a couple of weeks later. My former ACPO Peter Sampson, whom I greatly respected, had been the Acting Chief for Gwent for quite a while by then, since Richard Moore had retired sick, and I didn’t expect to have much chance anyway. I also thought that my application might seem a bit disrespectful, so I rang him up to tell him that I was applying, saying, “Peter, if for any reason they are too stupid to appoint you, I want them to have had the opportunity to appoint me”.

The Gwent experience was an entertaining fiasco, with Peter and me being interviewed alongside two others, Tom and Rashid. The first night was a version of the ‘dinner with the Committee’, but the format here was each of the candidates at one of four small square tables, with a small plate of sandwiches in the middle of each one, with the four members of the Panel rotating between the tables. No one had thought to ask any of us, even Rashid, whether we might not eat meat, so there was quite a late kerfuffle while some substitute was found for Rashid.

Just as bad was the next morning, when we were invited into a room in the ‘Human Resources’ section of County Hall, where an HR person from Gwent County Council said that he had a personality test for us “But don’t worry about it, as they won’t take any notice of it anyway.” After the Cumbria experience, the idea of doing such a ‘test’ was not a surprise to me. What did surprise me, though, was that after this overlong apologetic introduction, with the many repetitions that we shouldn’t worry as it wouldn’t make any difference, the questionnaire itself consisted of only about 20 ‘personality-style’ questions anyway, and we were finished and gone in about ten minutes.

My vague recollection is that we also had an observed group discussion, and then at some point Rashid and I were told that we were not wanted any further. As the process went on, I realised that it had been a mistake for me to apply for a job that I was not that keen on taking, and although I hated the sense of rejection (again) I was relieved not to have got that job. I was very pleased when I later heard that Peter had been successful the next day, as he was very able and had worked hard for it. But it was troubling to experience how badly such things at such a high level could sometimes be handled – and not for the last time…

Wiltshire was much better handled, and the experience was still broadly positive, although I particularly remember how disconcerted I felt when I once again got no real sense of feedback/listening from the panel of magistrates as I spoke to them. The main issue for me here was that Chris Wheeler was the internal candidate, and in fairness a genuinely strong one. His joke had previously been that he had had to become ACPO himself to prevent his nightmare of me coming back as his ACPO – and now he had to prevent me from coming back as his Chief! He was good, and although I was disappointed for me, I couldn’t resent his appointment.

In the past, I had only been interviewed for about 50% of the applications I’d made at each level, so to gain interviews for my first three Chief applications seemed very encouraging. I was also prepared to apply for Deputy Chief posts (larger areas had these, sometimes better paid than Chiefs of small areas), but I wasn’t interviewed for Inner London or Greater Manchester, though at some point, later I think, I went to Winchester for the Hampshire Deputy Chief post. My confidence waned again when I wasn’t interviewed for CPO Bedfordshire, and I was genuinely disappointed when I was unsuccessful at interview for CPO Somerset in January 1996, since I had the additional sentiment of feeling that Somerset was my ‘home county’.

Then in 1997 the Berkshire job became available after all, in its existing form (albeit with a likely termination date), and it came my way in 1998 as previously described. Since this was then followed by the Inspectorate jobs, I was able to continue living – on and off – in my Reading home for the remainder of my career and after, rather than move to (and possibly later then move away from) another part of the country.

It is because my working life could have taken so many alternative twists and turns to the one that eventually unfolded that I have described my career as both fortunate and serendipitous.

# PART TWO: The work - What it was like, What I/we did, What I felt

Different readers will find different sections are the ones that interest them. So Chapters 9, 12, 13 &14 have been divided into three sections, focusing on What the job was like, What I/we actually did, and What I felt. This may help each reader to reach the material that is of most interest to him/her. For instance, ‘real life’ examples of Probation practice is covered in What I/we did, particularly in Chapters 9 and 12.

## Chapter 8: Trainee Probation Officer, Leicester, 1973-5

*“I still don’t know what I should have done”*

I had moved to Leicester from York to undertake a postgraduate Diploma in Social Work, which would bring with it the Certificate of Qualification in Social Work (CQSW), which in turn would make me a ‘qualified’ Probation Officer. It was a two-year course for graduates with a “non-relevant” degree. (There were courses for graduates with certain social science degrees which enabled them to gain a CQSW in one year.)

The course at Leicester was run by the School of Social Work in a large converted detached house in Princess Road, close to but not in the main University site itself. The School of Education was housed in a similar building almost immediately opposite, although they also had an outbuilding where a modest café was available to students of both Schools. On a visit to Leicester in 2013 I noted that the School of Education had been transformed into a huge modern development on the same site, while the School of Social Work looked on the outside almost exactly as I remembered it from 1973-5.

The structure of the course was clearly designed around the needs of the academic terms, so that placements with host employers with their ‘practice’ supervisors were for five days each week during university vacations, but for two or three days each week in term time much of the time, so that we could attend for university tuition the other days in those weeks. This intermittent pattern was not always ideal for managing continuing cases when on placement, though it could be argued that it enabled cases to be experienced over a longer period.

There were nearly 100 students on the course, one of the largest in the country, of which c30 were “Probation option” students, and c60 were “Social Services”. The latter were mainly experienced social work assistants or other ‘unqualified’ workers who were seconded on a trainee salary by their current employer in order to become qualified and return to work for a formal minimum of two years as a qualified social worker. (There may have been a few of these who were linked with other social work employers, or even independent – I’m not sure now.) ‘Probation option’ students had a salary from the Home Office – not a grant in those days - for the duration of the course, which they applied for once they had been offered a place at Leicester. About 5 or 6 of them, including me, had virtually no previous social work experience at all. My starting salary was £1,311, which seemed very good to me at the time, though I knew it was lower than those for the seconded social workers, and it was only just about enough to start paying income tax. There was an expectation – rarely enforced as far as I know – that the salary was repayable if one did not take up and retain a Probation Officer post for at least two years after qualifying. It seemed to me at the time a quite generous arrangement – and of course seems much more so now in retrospect.

I distinctly recall noting at the time that the academic part of the course offered nothing at all in terms of what I would call ‘training’, i.e. in learning how to carry out my future duties as a Probation Officer. What it offered instead was a very good and wide-ranging education in matters related to undertaking any form of social work in whatever setting that might prove to be, and this was usually delivered to Probation and social work students together. Although we had some input (lectures) on physical health disorders, mental health disorders, and social policy, most of the sessions that I recall were seminars in which perhaps a dozen of us at a time sat and discussed various theoretical issues (including ethical ones) related to the work.

In a very early lecture, given to the whole course in a theatre at the main University site by the eminent Mark Monger, he described at one point an event that happened to him as a trainee at the very start of his Probation career when he was doing a turn of Office Duty – when you might just see anyone who came in off the street and asked to see “a Probation Officer.” (This was at a time when Probation had an identity of being able to help with marriage problems – I remember someone later telling me that many people thought that we were “like Marriage Guidance, but with more authority”!)

On this occasion, a determined woman had rushed into the office, announced that she had a taxi outside, and demanded that Mark come with her to deal with the crisis she was having with her husband - otherwise she would kill her husband, or herself, or perhaps both. After a moment or two to decide, Mark had gone with her, and had spent several hours conducting a long series of individual interviews with each of them in different parts of the house in a valiant exercise of protracted shuttle diplomacy. Eventually, things had calmed down a little.

Mark then paused his narrative to us, and said that he had often wondered, with all the many years of practice experience and academic study he had undertaken since then, what would have been the correct course of action for him that day? He looked up at us all, as he added: “- and I still don’t know what I should have done.”

This was both alarming and oddly reassuring at the same time. On one level it was alarming that there were not always ‘right’ or perfect answers to problems; on another level this also seemed reassuring – you would usually be OK if you simply did your best. Less reassuringly in the longer term, the implication arose as the course progressed that almost anything might ‘count’ as doing the job well, and this led me to a discussion with my second-year tutor that I describe further below.

Meanwhile, in the discussion seminars, one course element did look at a series of ‘social work methods’, using the American textbook Theories of Social Casework by Roberts and Nee – we were all highly critical of it, because it seemed so ‘distant’ from our expected future experience, and it was all so highly abstract that there was little that one could tangibly discuss. I would however acknowledge that in time I noted that my own practice seemed to come closest to the chapter on ‘The Problem-solving approach’ by Helen Perlman. I could relate to the idea that one should try and get alongside the other individual – “client” as we used to say then – and acknowledge and try to deal with the problems that they could already see, and use that as a platform for further work to steer them towards other more constructive behaviours.

For this reason it seemed to me to be especially relevant to Probation. This was important to me, because almost all our tuition was conducted ‘generically’, and it was only during a few sessions in the second year that the Probation students were at any time tutored separately from our social service colleagues. Probation was seen by many as just one setting (out of several) in which to undertake generic social work practice.

We were supposed to submit, I think, one essay per term to our academic tutor. I’m confident that over the six terms I submitted just one essay in total, although I did several quite substantial seminar papers too. My essay was on the subject ‘Is casework an art or a science?’ and got a very strong mark. I guess I rested on my laurels after that, and no one chased me for more. I’ve now posted it on my website because I’m pleased to note that even then I was advocating some kind of ‘measuring’ of effective practice.

The viewpoint of the academic staff was fairly explicitly that the ‘training’ element of our training course would come on our practice placements. Also, the distinctive characteristics and elements of Probation practice were acknowledged but not closely examined at the University – that was also seen as business for the placements. I was sceptical at the time that this was the right approach, and since then I have welcomed the fact that later academic providers have taken more responsibility for directly delivering some elements of training in actually how to do the specific job.

Meanwhile I did at least feel at the time that we were receiving overall a good, stimulating and wide-ranging educational input – subject to one caveat: The culture of acceptance and openness – something I would definitely strongly support as it provided a good base for future considerations of diversity and avoiding improper discrimination – seemed to have a further less helpful effect of leading towards almost an ‘Anything Goes’ approach to social work practice.

For this reason I arranged to go and see my second year tutor at one point to put to him the question, “There seem to be so many different ways of doing social work well, and we seem to be saying they are all fine; can you give me an example of doing social work badly?” In fairness to him (Martin Shaw), he came back quite promptly by commenting that someone who “failed to learn”, or showed no interest in learning from mistakes, would be unsuitable to be a social worker.

I considered this to be a reasonable ‘holding reply’, and indeed it has been useful to me in highlighting the problem on those rare occasions of meeting people who say that they know all about human behaviour now, and who have simple solutions to complex problems. I certainly think that it is a serious deficiency for someone to think that they have nothing more to learn about human behaviour. Meanwhile I continued to work my way through my four practice placements.

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*“…I suspect masturbation…”*

There had been an initial ‘observational’ placement for three weeks in September 1973 (i.e. waiting for the University term to start). I went every day to the then “Leicester County” Probation Office in Regent Rd, a classic example of two bay-windowed terrace houses, close to the city centre, knocked together to provide a small office, where from memory there were about six or seven POs and a Senior. This office belonged to the old Leicestershire service which was then separate from the Leicester City service, although the two merged just six months later. My supervisor, Norman, was old-fashioned but pleasant, and I went with him almost every day either on home visits, or to Court, or to the local Leicester Prison for him to interview a prisoner for a Court report, or to North Sea Camp – a Detention Centre for young men serving short sentences, where there was no fence as it was set in remote marshland on the edge of Lincolnshire. I sat in on all his interviews both in these outside locations and in the office – on “reporting night” – with the exception of one man on Life Licence who didn’t want anyone else present.

From January to March 1974, for my first proper placement, I was under Senior Probation Officer (Training) John Kay, a ‘bright young thing’ still in his 20s, in the ‘Student Unit’ in the Leicester City office. His approach was to allocate us each a small number of reports and cases that we would discuss in some detail at least once a week. My first two reports were memorable for different reasons. One of them was on a man in his 40s with a string of minor convictions, who absconded on bail and I never saw him; the reason he was memorable was because his archive file still existed, and which I read while waiting unsuccessfully for the man to appear. The officer who had supervised him when he was still a juvenile in the 1940s had kept commenting in the records on his pale complexion, eventually commenting in the (beautifully typed) record, “This lad is very pale, and I suspect masturbation.”

With the other, a much younger man, I walked to his home address to interview him for the report, and found myself in a room with him and several of his friends, who served as a very ‘participatory’ audience for my rookie interview. I got away with it that evening, completing a reasonable report after a further interview in the office, but of course I didn’t let that kind of thing happen again.

\* \* \*

*“But is that Miss or Mrs?”*

In the summer of 1974 we all had to do a ‘community work’ placement, something that it was then unusual to require in a CQSW course. The problem for the University in putting into practice this imaginative idea was finding enough placements for such a large group of students, so tutors were pleased if a student could come up with their own idea for one. I therefore suggested the Paddington Law Centre, where I had done some brief voluntary work previously, as one of the solicitors there was then a good friend. I believe that, after North Kensington, this was just the second Law Centre to be established; in Paddington this was attached to the Citizens’ Advice Bureau in the Harrow Road, but nevertheless Law Centres were at that time a controversial development for many in the legal profession.

My suggestion was approved, and I lodged in a room in a large block called Beauchamp House near Paddington station when on placement, and undertook a housing survey in the north part of the City of Westminster, north of North Kensington. At that time there were rows of rather grand 19th century houses that had become multi-occupied or simply derelict or squats as the area declined, plus patches of demolition – since that time it has recovered. I did some additional ‘clerk’ duties too, sitting behind the barrister in a relatively minor Crown Court case among other tasks.

My ‘claim to fame’ from this period was that Jill Tweedie, at that time a well-known Guardian journalist, did a feature on the Law Centre, which included a surprisingly lengthy interview with me. She was very pleasant, but even to me at my age then she seemed remarkably naïve: in discussion she said that she was sure that if Daily Express readers really understood the conditions that prisoner experienced inside that they would become much more sympathetic to liberalising criminal justice. (My contrasting view was that many of these people would actually prefer that prison regimes should be even tougher.)

One glimpse into the state at the time of women in Britain – or in London at least – was given to me by one of the other Law Centre solicitors, who I will call Jenny Jones. One young woman was talking to her on the telephone from a callbox, to fix an appointment, but she had a friend in the callbox with her. She wanted to confirm the name of the solicitor she was going to see – “Jenny Jones” was the answer. “Is that Miss or Mrs?” was the next question. It’s just “Jenny Jones”. This exchange was repeated, and then for the third time, “But is that Miss or Mrs?” In some exasperation Jenny said that if the caller insisted on giving her a title then it would have to be “Ms”. (In 1974 the term was just starting to gain some currency, though not widely used then.) There was a long pause; then Jenny could just hear the other young woman say in a loud whisper to her friend, “That means she’s living with someone.”

Perhaps a key learning point for me from the Law Centre experience was the rather obvious one about the respective roles of solicitors and probation staff - I already knew this in theory, but it was brought to life by this experience. At one point I spent quite a lot of time seeking evidence that would support our defence of the Crown Court defendant from a charge of dishonest handling, on the grounds that as a foreigner he hadn’t realised that the items he’d bought were obviously far too cheap. In the end he was convicted, and when I reflected on the case I thought that in all probability he did indeed know what he was doing, even though he’d always pleaded to us that he’d acted in good faith. It brought to life the reality that my role as part of his defence team had been to represent and support his version of events, while my future role as a Probation Officer would always be to try to identify the truth. This point became relevant again in my next practice experience.

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*“You’re a fucking cunt, aren’t you?”*

In the autumn of 1974 I did my ‘residential’ placement, which for Probation students meant the three months were in a prison (travelling daily), and my placement was in HMP Gartree, a high security (Category ‘A’) prison at the time, out in the country near Market Harborough. No prisoner there was serving a sentence of less than four years, which at that time was a long sentence, since it was well before the great increase in average lengths of sentence that took hold early in the 21st century. I had a superb though idiosyncratic supervisor there, in Bill Robertson, whose personal demeanour seemed very ‘Columbo’ except that his accent was strong Ayrshire. In the first week he made me do the one-week induction course for Prison Officers who had arrived at Gartree from other prisons or from training, since there was a lot to learn about managing in a ‘Cat A’ setting. With this, and in other matters too, he taught me to treat all other staff of the prison, including those in security, as team colleagues – we were there each to fulfil our complementary roles in combining to provide an effective regime. With both our staff colleagues and with prisoners it was essential to be consistent in manner and behaviour, and to carry out what one had stated one would do.

Our work in Gartree consisted of a combination of what I would now describe as ‘reactive’ and ‘proactive’ work. ‘Reactive’ was mainly the taking of ‘applications’, i.e. prisoners formally applied to see the Prison Welfare Officer (the terminology then) to request something or other. Frequently this involved us needing to telephone their family to satisfy a request for them to bring something on their visit the next day, or something similar. Sometimes there was more of an emotional crisis involved. The proactive work consisted of calling in individual prisoners for interview regarding an application for home leave or parole, or simply to get them to talk about their offending behaviour to understand it better themselves, preparing the ground for leading a more law-abiding life once released.

One day I was sitting in on an interview by Bill with an inmate who was due to go on home leave, his first excursion out of custody for several years. His wife had written in and requested his current measurements (which would probably have changed while he was inside), so that she could make some new clothes for him to wear while he was out on home leave – just a ‘long weekend’ as I recall. He was turning the idea down flat – “No, I’m not doing that.” There was a pause – I wondered how my supervisor was going to deal with this. Bill looked at the man steadily, and announced very calmly and evenly, in his broad Ayrshire accent, “You’re a fucking cunt, aren’t you?”

This set me thinking straight away, “This is interesting; I don’t remember this being in any of the textbooks. And will this enrage the man?” (One of the other POs, a tall solid upright bloke, had told me that there had been a couple of occasions when a prisoner took a swing at him during a stressful interview.) Certainly it brought the man up short. Undoubtedly he was offended, yet also he heard it – rightly - as more of an observation than a simple insult. “What do you mean?” And this enabled Bill to explain carefully that his wife was trying to be helpful to him, and yet he was trying to deny her this opportunity to do something for him. The man then conceded.

As Bill expected, I was indeed “tested out” by one or two inmates, including by a household name, especially when Bill was off sick at one time, and I survived. I found later that most CQSW courses just sent their Probation students on a fortnight’s observation for their prison experience – I felt very grateful that instead of that I’d had this lengthy experience, to gain some appreciation of a prison setting. It fed my outlook of how I treated ‘throughcare’ cases during my later career, and to seek to treat Prison Service staff at all levels as potential colleagues rather than as presumed opponents or obstacles.

There was another broad learning point that I took from this experience of long-term prisoners, which was pointed out to me by Stan, the Senior PO in Gartree at the time, and which proved useful to me later with a few of my own cases, and with cases supervised by officers in my team when I was a manager. It concerned the effect on the offender of experiencing the criminal trial, particular when it was a full trial to convict the individual following a Not Guilty plea. First the prosecuting barrister makes the case sound as serious and as reprehensible as possible – leading the offender to think “No, that’s not right” – and then the defending barrister makes the case that either he didn’t do it all [or it was not that serious, or perhaps understandable, for ‘x’ number of reasons] – which leads the offender to think, “That’s right, that’s how it was, and I’ve got an important person dressed in a wig and gown who agrees that I’m innocent [or whatever]”.

The point is that the trial process – which may indeed be a fair and effective means of deciding on guilt – nevertheless militates against the offender retaining any sense of reality of what he or she has really done. At that time, prison officers were usually trained NOT to ask prisoners their offence or discuss it with them – the idea was to treat prisoners ‘equally’ on the landings etc. So the Probation Officer or Psychologist were the only people in the years after the trial who might actually seek after the real truth and help the prisoner to come to terms with the reality of what they had actually done. Later on, a case that one of my Newport officers handled brilliantly illustrates this point.

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*“…Never seen better, says Sir Alf”*

My final six-month placement effectively had two halves. I was back with John Kay in the Student Unit in Leicester, now a unified service covering both city and county. Whereas previously I had had a room of my own on the top floor, since one had been available then, this time the accommodation demands meant that the six (possibly seven) students in the unit had to share one not-very-large room, also on the top floor. Most, though not all, of us smoked, so it can’t have been great for the one or two who didn’t. John saw each of us for over an hour at a time at least once a week, to review the work we were doing with each of our cases and reports, and once again proved a sound and intelligent, if rather relaxed, supervisor.

For the first half of the placement I was given six cases, all on the Braunstone estate, the fairly notorious no-longer-that-new council estate on the edge of Leicester, off the road towards the MI going south. Very few gardens were tended, and packs of dogs would occasionally roam around, alongside the listless teenagers. I usually walked out to the estate for an afternoon and early evening session of home visits once a week. The main memorable case was ‘Nicky’, a 19-year-old on Borstal Licence, whose conviction was for 104(!) ‘walk-in’ thefts – strolling into open offices and shops and then just strolling off again with handbags, wallets etc that people had left while they were ‘just away from their desk’ for a few minutes, or maybe longer. He looked unprepossessing, and the boldness of the offences seemed unlikely (though confirmed) and his complicated family circumstances made him a good case for me on which to base my required Long Essay (case study) for examination. More of that in a moment.

In the second half of the placement we retained our cases, but we stopped taking on new reports for the criminal courts, and instead were each allocated a single Divorce Court Welfare report to complete. Until 2001, and the creation then of CAFCASS (Children and Family Court Advisory and Support Service), report-writing and other social work for the various family Courts was mainly done by Probation Services. Although the tendency in the 1980s and 1990s was to organise specialist teams within each Probation Service to do this work, and to move to towards what was called a ‘conciliation’ approach to work with divorcing parents, back in the 1970s the more usual arrangement was that each Probation Officer took on a periodic report or case from the relevant civil Court as part of our ‘normal’ duties, a key difference being that we used differently headed letterheads, and called ourselves ‘Divorce Court Welfare Officers’, and the approach was more to analyse and arbitrate.

As I was to find later, the arrangement in most areas in the 1970s was that such reports were only allocated to POs who had been ‘confirmed’ in post at the end of their first year, because such work was rightly seen as difficult and often peculiarly challenging. The drawback with this arrangement was that by then formal training had long ended; in contrast the ‘Leicester view’ was, in effect, that one should undertake one’s first Divorce Court Welfare report while still under education, training and close supervision – this made sense to me at the time, in principle.

In practice, however, what happened was that one morning John came into the Student Unit with a set of files, each of which was a request for such a report, and simply put one of them down in front of each of us. We each looked for a few minutes at the file we’d been given. Either every, or maybe most, of the requested reports was a ‘satisfaction’ report; this meant that the divorcing parents had agreed on the arrangements for what was then called custody and access (where the child/ren would live, and when the other parent would be able to see them). From memory I think mine was the only case where the request was for a report to advise the Court on where the children should live, because the parents didn’t agree. Not only that, but in this case during the course of the separation process the three elder children were living with their father and his new partner in one house in a fairly well-do-do suburb of Leicester, while the fourth child was living with the mother and her new partner in another house barely a couple of hundred yards away. Although I took up the challenge, and was meticulous and conscientious in the range of enquiries and observations I conducted, and I was well supervised by John, I did wonder – and still do – how wise it was to allocate this report to a trainee.

Court processes moved very slowly at the time, so that although I submitted my report within the few weeks required, probably in May 1975, the case didn’t come to Court for resolution until October. For messy pragmatic reasons, the full hearing of the dispute took three separate Court days, held one day each in October, November and December, for each of which I had to come back from Wiltshire to attend, and eventually to be cross-examined. My reassurance was that the judge (who in demeanour reminded me of Donald Swann) took great care and courtesy as he scrutinised carefully each aspect of the evidence presented to him, and then – so it seemed to me – he suddenly decided that the case he was hearing aligned with the case that he’d read in the Welfare report. He dispensed his judgement at the end courteously but decisively entirely in line with my recommendation, which had been the unlikely one of saying that all four children should be together, and be with their father. The judge also wrote a very nice letter for my Chief Probation Officer in Wiltshire; this was reassuring to me, not only concerning my report findings, but also because I was struggling somewhat with my first year as a qualified PO.

Meanwhile, back at the same time that I was first embarking on this inquiry, there was a disastrous development with that case of ‘Nicky’ that I introduced earlier. As I drafted my case study, I had been able to make all kinds of links with social work theories to analyse what Nicky had done and why, and how my skilful work was enabling him to grow and make him less likely to offend again. Then I learned that he had committed another string of similar offences. Did this wreck my ability to use his case as my case study? – not a bit of it. As I described in my first ever published article a few years later, I wiped this custard pie from my face and in the final section of the essay embarked on a discussion of whether it was possible to claim that the quality of the work was good, even if the ‘result’ was not good.

The serious part of my analysis concerned the issues arising at that time from the Maria Colwell case, where the social worker was bearing the main brunt of the ‘blame’ for the child’s death at the hands of the stepfather, with me noting that - in contrast - currently the Probation Officer was not blamed when a current case reoffended. I was not so far-sighted as to predict that the day would definitely come when POs would bear such blame, but I did foresee that it was possible for that day to come.

I also added a fanciful flourish to the end of my essay by making an analogy between the ‘indirect roles’ in influencing others undertaken by a Probation Officer and by a football manager. I noted that Sir Alf Ramsey had lost his job as England manager, although he had claimed that his team had played really well despite their defeat in Poland – I quoted an apocryphal Daily Mirror sports headline from 1973: ‘England Trounced by Poland: “Never Seen Better” says Sir Alf’. I observed that - as yet – a social worker/Probation Officer could still claim they’d done a good job, even though the case ‘failed’, and they’d not actually be sacked – unlike Alf Ramsey. It served as an implicit ironic acknowledgement that I hoped my case study would ‘pass’ even though the case itself had very obviously ‘failed’.

This is not the place for me to start discussing the merits or otherwise of how public expectations of what social work and Probation should be achieving have subsequently evolved over the years – I have written elsewhere on the subject of what I now consider it is reasonable to expect Probation to achieve. The point here is that I did indeed ‘pass’ the course, which as far as I am aware all the other students did too.

In addition to the Long Essay, we returned to the University in June 1975 to sit – I think – two three-hour examinations. The format was that we could go to the office 24 hours before the exam to pick up the question paper; we could then select the two or three questions to answer, make notes or draft answers and perhaps check references, and then the next day go in to write out the answers in a three-hour ‘closed’ setting. I can’t remember for sure whether we would take in the notes we’d made, but I think we could – obviously though, the submitted answers had to be written out on official exam paper.

It illustrates the ‘relaxed’ ethos of the time that the planned date for giving us the news of whether we’d passed or failed was something like 21st July – by which time almost all of us would have been working in our new full-time jobs for three weeks. Yes, by the time I started as a Probation Officer in Swindon on 1st July it was known that I’d passed my practice placements, but even at the time it seemed strange that they didn’t yet know for sure that I’d get the statutory qualification – but no one seemed worried about it. I can’t even remember how I heard the result; I think a letter arrived one morning at home, and perhaps my employer was notified as well. For me at the time it removed a niggling concern, but it was hardly a case of throwing hats in the air, or wanting a big presentation ceremony.

However, as a footnote to this issue of timing, I can add that in about 1990, when I was by then Assistant Chief in Berkshire, we had started a number of first-year POs from off a qualifying course, also on 1st July, and then heard in late July that one of them had in fact failed the course. His practice had passed, but he’d failed the academic element. We had to do a workaround, putting him on the ‘non-qualified’ payscale as high as we felt able, and amend his workload to comply with the statutory rules of the time, until after some months (I think) he completed some further work that enabled the University to give him a pass.

Meanwhile, during those first few weeks in Swindon as I endeavoured to learn my new duties I reflected on how I thought my qualifying course had equipped me for doing the job in reality. My view was that I’d had very little actual training but I’d had a very good education. So I decided I would therefore aim, as now a qualified PO, to find opportunities to learn more about the specific techniques, methods and skills I needed to become a more skilled practitioner.

## Chapter 9: Probation Officer, Swindon, 1975-81

*“Are you getting the hang of the job now, like?”*

### What this job was like:

Swindon was once described to me, soon after I started there, as a “northern industrial town in the wrong place”. In parts of the town the rows of two-bedroomed redbrick houses, with corner shops, still supported this image in 1975, a heritage of its years as a railway town, but there were already many changes afoot. This Wiltshire town had by then also become an ‘overspill’ town for Londoners, many of whom relocated to either the extensive 1960s council estates or the early 1970s private estates, and London/estuarial accents had become at least as common as West Country accents. Light engineering plants were supplanting British Rail as the dominant employers – though later to be replaced themselves by retail warehouses and other newer employers.

The Swindon office was at 15/16 Milton Rd, two bay-fronted houses in a redbrick terrace (since replaced by a modern block oddly gashed into the same location), where there were two SPOs (Senior POs), 11 POs, one “ancillary” and six “clerical” staff to provide all the Probation, After-Care and Divorce Court and other services for Swindon and the surrounding rural areas of Marlborough and Wootton Bassett, for juveniles over 14 as well as for adults. There were two daily Magistrates Courts, a weekly Juvenile Court, and a daily “tier three” Crown Court – more serious cases went to “tier one” Bristol Crown Court. The entire interior of the Milton Road office had thick brown standard-issue Wiltshire County Council linoleum on all the floors. We each had our own room, except that as the newest I had to share quite a large room with a colleague called Ken who had been there for four years, and who said he still felt like a “new boy”.

We were two ‘teams’ of Probation Officers, all in the one building when I started, with me in the team covering the east half of Swindon, six POs led by Mrs Jay Wall, the only female Senior in the county at the time. Jack Wilcox led the other team of five POs which covered west Swindon, plus the Wootton Bassett and Marlborough rural areas. There was also an ‘ancillary’ in Jack’s team, Morris (or Maurice), replaced by Lew when Morris moved to Community Service – both were mature men well past 40. In our team we each had, in theory, our own individual geographical ‘patch’ to cover, though the irregular flow of new reports and cases necessitated some flexibility on this. I covered Gorse Hill – only the eastern half of course as Gorse Hill extended westward across our artificial team boundary – but over time I took over Upper Stratton and Stratton St Margaret, and the rural area up to Blunsdon and Highworth in due course as well. These didn’t produce that much work, so I regularly also took cases from the two Park 1960s estates, which produced plenty.

For the first six months I was commuting on a Honda 50 motorcycle 17 miles each way from Macaroni Woods in Gloucestershire, but moved into my terraced house in Old Town after separating from Helen. It was a condition of service in Wiltshire to be able to drive a car, and I’d been told that I would have to pass my test before the end of the first year, when in those days one was ‘confirmed in post’ or not. To my pleasant surprise, in February 1976 I passed both my car and my motorcycle tests and obtained one of the fancy new green driving licences that was going to be valid until the day before my 70th birthday.

At the end of February I was allocated a Wiltshire County Council white Mini 850, a ‘J’ registration pool car where the only cost to me was to pay about 3.5 pence per mile for private mileage on top of the cost of the petrol. This was a brilliant provision, provided one was OK with a Mini 850 (the only option) and lived, as I did now, close to one’s place of work (otherwise the journey to work became expensive as that was “private mileage” for which an additional charge was required) since one thereby avoided all the fluctuating costs of car maintenance. It got even better in January 1977 when I was allocated a brand new ‘R’ registration red Mini.

We called the clerical staff “secretaries”, which they probably had mixed feelings about. It was possibly nice to be called a “secretary”, but also annoying as their local authority grade and pay did not recognise that status. In Wiltshire each secretary worked for two officers. On my very first day Jay introduced me to the secretary I was to share with her with the words, “This is Iris, who has been here 18 years,” after which Iris said “Good morning Mr Bridges.” My immediate thought was: <“She’s worked here since I was six!!”> and so I said “It’s Andrew – please”. At the time this was unprecedented, it seemed, and yet within a few years almost all officers were addressed by their secretaries by first name.

When I first started in Swindon everyone seemed to have been there for years. With me in Jay’s team was Geoff, a former Naval Commander, and Reg, a pipe smoker of similar age – both were very competent, treated me decently, but got irritated with Jay’s scattiness. Ann and Angela I’ll return to later. In the two teams together there was only other officer under 30 (called Lesley), and although she was always pleasant to me we had little in common. With Ken, already mentioned, saying he still felt like a “new boy” after four years, the whole office seemed to me very established, mature and staid.

However, soon after I arrived, people then started leaving! (Draw your own conclusions – I used to joke about it myself.) In Jack’s team, Gerald retired in October 1975 on his 65th birthday, after 15 years’ service. An ex-army officer, with an apparently fierce reputation, he cried copiously at his retirement do. He was replaced by Nicky, an experienced officer from London, an extraordinary tomboy woman aged about 30, who lodged in my house in Old Town for a few months on arrival.

Also in Jack’s team, Ron was suddenly taken ill not long after, and had to take early retirement in his late 50s. For a long time after retiring he used to come in to the office quite frequently for a cup of tea because he had evidently valued the social life. Bob, who commuted quite a long way from near Stroud, sensibly got himself a job in Gloucestershire Social Services, and then Ken left the service to try and make a career in acting – I once saw him in the background in a pub scene in Last of the Summer Wine. Lesley also moved on, possibly to a voluntary organisation, though my memory there is unclear. “Chalky” White, another ex-army man and heavy cigarette smoker, remained and was always a stimulating and appreciated colleague.

It shows how slow I was on the uptake that Nicky was able to move into a single office on her arrival, on the top floor, because I soon realised too late that I should have bagged it before she arrived. It is hazy to me now, but later I was able to bag her office myself after all, when she subsequently moved into the gloomy cellar office that was just by the back door (car park) entrance. This had been converted into an office a couple of years previously when Ann had broken either one or both her hips, and needed to be as close to the car park as possible during her recovery. Having completed that recovery, Ann was pleased to move to a first floor room when someone else – possibly Ron – moved on. Nicky owned two huge Alsation dogs, and was keen to have the convenience of being by the car park, so she moved into the cellar office, and I moved up to the attic office she vacated, probably in December 1975 – it was great to have an office to myself. Again, I’m hazy as to why, but I don’t think anyone had to move in with Ken, and I’m not sure why that room didn’t need to be doubled again. Possibly we were often a person down somewhere, until the time came for the office split.

One of the quirks of the Wiltshire service at this time was that a surprising number of female officers kept a dog and brought it to work, often quite regularly. Most of these dogs were small, and apart from anything else gave an extra dimension to discussions between officer and “client”, both in the office and on home visits. Nicky’s Alsations were in a different league: if I went down to her cellar office to have a quick word about something, I’d open the door, get a billow of cigarette smoke – if both she and her most recent interviewee had been smoking – and then out of the smoke would bound these excitable dogs. The alarming effect was compounded often by the sight of enormous bones on the floor, since this was how Nicky fed her pets. As far as I know, we never lost a “client” to these dogs, although it was said that someone lost a pet rabbit after a home visit by Nicky – I can’t verify that…

Crown Court was quite a large part of our working lives in Swindon, as it was a strong part of our local ethos that whenever reasonably possible we attended the Swindon Crown Court when a case on whom we’d written a report came up. This was in addition to the officer who was acting as the Crown Court Liaison Officer at the time. There was a view that this gave the defendant a better chance of having one’s report taken more seriously, combined with a view that it showed some respect to the Court, and helped the staff there to think well of us. Certainly it was not unusual for the defending barrister to arrive less than an hour before the Court session started at 10.30, grab a copy of the report and scan it, see his (yes, usually his) client for a few minutes, and then as part of the mitigation speech invite the Court to call the Probation Officer to ‘speak to’ the report and answer any supplementary questions. I had done this once as a trainee in Leicester, and did so several times in Swindon.

I was conscious at the time of some illogicalities in our Court attendances. We rarely went to “foreign” Crown Courts – the trip to Gloucester I describe later was almost unique. The total demand on our work time seemed quite disproportionate, because mainly we contributed nothing on the day, although the rare occasions we were actually used seemed to justify it – but that made it seem random. We had very little respect for the barristers we saw at Swindon (a ‘Tier 3’ Crown Court), who seemed to have little to add in their mitigations to what they’d just read – and then read out in Court – from our reports. Though in fairness, there wasn’t much further mitigation material to be found.

Occasionally we might see a barrister perform at the end of a trial, which gave them more of an opportunity to impress – and early on I was told that one very able barrister was called Mark Dyer (he became quite a punitive judge in about 1977). This led to my deciding to go to Bristol Crown Court for one of my cases, probably in 1976. Bristol was ‘our’ Tier One Crown Court, for more serious cases, so a case committed there would normally lead to a lengthy prison sentence. The law at the time made USI (Unlawful Sexual Intercourse) a Tier One case, being presumably designed to deter a mature man from taking advantage of an underage girl, even if she had “consented” (as we understood that then). However, it was also clear that in this particular case we were dealing with a relationship that had already been going on for some two years and was still continuing, between a 17-year-old boy and a 15-year-old girl.

I rather went out on a limb (as I thought) with my report in making an argument that custody wasn’t necessary, but I was sure that the boy’s barrister Mark Dyer would need to be on his best mettle to make the case in Court. When the case came up near the end of the afternoon I settled down in the ‘Probation box’ in Court to witness the great orator whirl into action. After the facts of the case had been read out by the prosecution, the ‘red’ Judge – red robes indicated a senior Judge who could sit in the House of Lords at the time – said to Mark Dyer as he rose to speak: “Mr Dyer, could you do any better than a conditional discharge?” Mr Dyer said, “No, my Lord” and sat straight down. The Judge went on to announce that Courts were for dealing with crime and not immorality, and this was simply a case of “immorality”, which was why he was imposing a conditional discharge. And so I missed the great orator perform.

Another case – but not mine – which went to Bristol Crown Court was the memorable one of “Buggery of a goat”. “How did he get caught?” the more prurient of us wanted to know. “Oh, he left his coat on a nail on the shed door.”

In 1976/7 the office was split when Jack’s team moved into a building in Victoria Road (possibly number 161) – again a bay-windowed Victorian conversion. Our Chief was keen at the time that Jay should move out from under the shadow of Jack, and that the two teams should develop their individual identities. In Milton Road we would no longer need to have an office share, or use the cellar storeroom as our tea room, and we could even use one of the large front first floor rooms for “activities”. The split took place perhaps early in 1977. One evening my colleague Ann stayed in the Milton Road office until after Jack had moved out, for it was his last day in our building, and then she moved her stuff into his former office. I watched and learned.

Although it was nice for us to have the extra space, and good for Jay to be able to establish her own identity – hitherto she had rather been seen as the ‘junior’ SPO to Jack - I was personally keen that there should not be too big a divide created between the two teams. Therefore I aimed to maintain good relations with colleagues in the Victoria Rd office – I’d sometimes go up for a lunchtime pint with some of them on a Friday in that first year apart.

So through 1977-8 we gained a new shape to both teams in Swindon. Reg went into the Community Service Unit at some point, and Geoff the Commander moved away to run a shop in Cornwall. The new Geoff was a first-year officer who started in July 1977 – quite bright and great company but somewhat feckless and on the edge of disciplinary action because his work could be unreliable or worse. Doug, who joined us soon after, was an experienced officer from London who was both a great professional colleague and good friend for some years. It was probably early in 1978 that he and I attempted to deliver a course of family therapy over a series of evenings with the family of a case of mine.

Penny, another experienced officer, joined us I think when Ann moved to the Chippenham office which was nearer to her home. Angela meanwhile, who was well into her 50s, continued in Swindon for many years, commuting in from Urchfont (c26 miles each way) every day, where she lived in a magnificent National Trust house with her husband the former diplomat Commander Courtney who had been framed by the Russians in Moscow in the 1960s. She was patient, hardworking, and not afraid to try anything new. For some years she had seen her ‘Borstal aftercare’ cases in a series of group meetings, taking them out for a meal somewhere at their last session. It was Angela, who suddenly said to me – out of the blue one day, as we were talking about something or other over at the Court building – “Of course, you’ll be a Chief Probation Officer one day…” I just stared at her in disbelief, as I found the idea preposterous. In the 2000s I was glad to be able to remind her of this episode in a social visit to her not long before she died.

It was also during 1977/8 that our Milton Rd office had a bit of a facelift. The standard Wiltshire County Council thick brown linoleum was replaced with a form of hardwearing carpet, made of an orangey-brown cord material. Frankly it seemed to me the height of luxury that we’d been given this. We had a social work student with us at the time called Gus, and because he had an “art background” Jay asked him to choose the colours for the office walls. This meant for brighter colours than some of us might have chosen, but they were OK with me.

More importantly, soon after this time, in 1979, we introduced a new way of working in the Milton Rd office during this period, using induction groups and other groupwork, which I’ll cover further below. The point here is that it led to us receiving a visit from the Home Secretary Willie Whitelaw, during the course of a ‘whole day’ visit he was making to Wiltshire Probation Service, early in 1980 I think. For he not only saw our well-known and rightly very highly regarded Community Service scheme, but also he came to our office too, because – as our Chief made very clear to Jay - she had the most innovative team in the county.

On the day, from early morning the sniffer dogs and other precautions by the police were taken throughout our building. I brought my Cona coffee maker from home and we brewed up in the office for his scheduled arrival, but (as I was later to learn) politicians’ visits always seem to run very late, so that by the time he joined us the coffee was not at all great and he barely took one sip. But he courteously asked us lots of questions which we answered enthusiastically, and in about an hour he was gone. The next day the headline photo in the Swindon Evening Advertiser was of the Home Secretary shaking hands with the policeman who was specially posted outside our front door that day. The fact that there was no real coverage of the purpose of the visit probably reflects our organisational naivety in not taking the opportunity to push a story out in a press release or briefing.

Meanwhile, as we moved further into 1980 we learned that our Senior, Jay, would be retiring on her 60th birthday in November, and that Lawrence our Chief had been able to gain Home Office approval for an additional Senior post. Lawrence had decided on a radical solution to the Swindon problem. He would appoint the two new Seniors for when Jay retired, and put the current remaining SPO Jack Wilcox into the role of fulltime liaison with the Crown and Divorce Courts, a role he was well suited to. The radical bit was that instead of managing two separate teams, the two new Seniors would have separate but complementary roles in managing one single large team. This would get round the stupid day-to-day problems that occurred with the current arrangement of having an artificial geographical division down the middle of Swindon, and should also enable much more flexible and effective deployment of staff time and resources to the work. This led to my first application for SPO (I went for the office manager role), but I was unsuccessful, and in November 1980, Alan Sealey and Marjorie Ainley arrived.

Alan Sealey the ‘Manager’ was more immediately personable, an experienced SPO from Worcestershire I think, but he turned out to be rather easygoing and passive. Marjorie Ainley seemed quite fierce, intense and offputting at first, commuting from Bath to her new promotion, but before long showed excellent strengths, as I mention again further below.

At about the same time, Probation also took over the old Social Services (and former Registrar’s office) building over the road at No: 36 Milton Rd. I was required to move there from my excellent ground floor office at No:15, much to my disgust and initial resentment. To soften the blow I was given the largest room in the new building, a bay windowed room on the upper floor. It transpired that this had until recently actually been the Marriage Room for the Registrar, and I felt very sorry indeed for the couples who in the past must have gone there to experience the standard Wiltshire County Council décor and thick brown linoleum – no carpet – on their wedding day. I ‘coped’ with the change, but realised that maybe I wouldn’t be delighted with another 35 years of this way of working.

Although Marjorie seemed quite fierce and humourless at first, she turned out to be a very good supervisor and also very personable when one got to know her. She rightly challenged our induction and groupwork system for becoming a bit stale, and overhauled it. Our revised system was a little more difficult to manage but it was methodologically of a higher standard, and she provided high quality supervision consistently. I considered that as a supervisor she was second only to our Chief, Lawrence. With Marjorie, after a session together you felt that you’d gained a lot of ideas from her about what to do next with a number of your cases; with Lawrence, after a session together (see below) you felt that you’d gained a lot of ideas – and yet they were all your own ideas! Overall Marjorie was nevertheless very good, and I learned a lot from her over the next year or so before I moved on – and kept in touch for a few years afterwards.

A few further words on Wiltshire’s Chief Probation Officer, Lawrence Frayne: He was an extraordinary man in a number of respects. In physical appearance he was very unprepossessing, of modest stature and with quite thick glasses and shock of light brown hair, looking a little like Tintin. His manner was always unassuming and consistently calm. But one very quickly realised that he was a man of very strong ideas that he was keen to carry out, and that his demeanour was one of a firm poise. Wiltshire Probation was small enough for him to have virtually a personal relationship with almost all staff – the officers at least – and indeed the idea was that every year we would each have a full day with either him or his Assistant Chief, Bill Hall. (Bill was decent, but not in the same league as Lawrence.) So Lawrence or Bill (you had them in alternate years) would read your records in the morning, and then you had a one-to-one discussion discussion for most of the afternoon. Sessions with Lawrence were entirely uplifting, as I mentioned above, in that you came out of the session full of ideas about your cases, and what you could do with them next – and they seemed to be all your own ideas! Overall I took the view that he was probably the best social work supervisor I ever met.

I don’t think he was the best manager ever, as a manager, although in broad terms I think he led us well in the right direction. But what struck me even more in hindsight, as I subsequently moved up the hierarchy myself, was how he was so completely undefensive in manner in the face of the most challenging questions or remarks. I remember criticising him strongly at a staff conference over a policy he had just introduced (I think he’d decided that reports recommending Community Service should in future be countersigned by a CS officer to reduce unsuitable recommendations). He responded to me by simply calmly explaining his thinking, and never got into the territory of ‘I’m the boss / Who do you think you are?’ As it happened, a week later he changed his mind and revoked the decision, but at the time he held his position in a credible way while remaining completely undefensive. Later on, I tried to live by similar principles when I became a Chief, not always successfully.

Lawrence was also thoughtful, caring and ‘strategic’ in handling his individual staff. I experienced this in 1978, over the matter of ‘B grading’. About three years previously, the annual pay settlement had controversially introduced a two-grade system for main-grade POs. After your first three years in the job you might be assessed by your senior managers as being sufficiently skilled to be advanced from Grade A to Grade B, and thereby go on to a slightly higher pay scale. It quickly proved both unsatisfactory and unpopular with most managers and practitioners. In May/June 1978 I had my annual review, this time involving Assistant Chief Bill Hall rather than Lawrence, and since I had by then well worked out how to organise myself I passed the assessment for ‘B grading’, for which I would be eligible from 1 July that year. We then heard that in the current pay negotiations it was highly likely that B grading would be abolished – and in those days the new pay arrangements always came in with effect from 1 July. At this point I took a call from Lawrence, who told me that I would be recorded as being on B grade from 30 June – a day earlier than I was entitled – because he was concerned about the possible assimilation arrangements that might turn out to disadvantage me if I were not ‘already B grade’ on 1 July. As it later turned out, he need not have worried on my account, but it was a mark of the man that he took this trouble over one of his POs. For my part, I could ‘boast’ that I had been a ‘B grade’ PO for one whole day!

One other substantial part of my work in Swindon was supervising probation or social work ‘students’. It was always seen as a feather in the cap, and an item to support a promotion application too, to have ‘supervised a student’ on placement to the office. Opportunities were rare in Swindon as there was no local academic institution offering such a course. On the other hand my managers were positively keen for me to gain this experience. So in the event I actually had a student in each of the years 1977, 1978, 1979 and 1980, although the first two were (disappointingly for me at the time) only ‘observational’ placements.

The first one, Clare in 1977, was memorable as I had to find a way of filling six weeks with observational content, and naturally I was keen to do this in a way that would show her what a hard-working bunch we all were. She was young, only just at the end of the undergraduate part of her course at the LSE, and until the last week or so she managed to prevent me from finding what a truly palatial home her parents had just outside Swindon. But it was probably on a Thursday evening (reporting night) that she was with me and the rest of the team in the office, perhaps after 6.30 pm, and this telephone call came through for me. A very haughty sounding upper-class female voice accusingly bellowed at me: “WHAT have you done with MY DAUGHTER?” For a moment I was thinking of either a false criminal accusation, or of a possible practical joke, but it quickly transpired it was Clare’s mother, to Clare’s very acute embarrassment.

The only time I ever made a full-blown recommendation on a Court report for Probation with a residency requirement at a Probation Hostel (as they then were) was during Clare’s placement. The system then was that you set up the placement, and then went to Court with the defendant on the sentencing day, and asked for a four-week remand on bail with a condition of residence at the hostel – with the aim that four weeks later everyone would come back to Court, and the Probation Order with the residency requirement would then be made, if the trial period had gone OK. There were no statutory Probation Hostels in Wiltshire, and when I decided that this defendant, Keith, aged about 19, needed the immersive constructive experience of a Probation Hostel I had to phone round. I found St Leonard’s in Reading – ironic in view of my later career – which was 40 miles up the M4. As this coincided with Clare’s time with me, I was particularly keen to demonstrate to her in exemplary manner how this whole system was supposed to work.

We went to the Crown Court on the day - Judge Vowden wasn’t sitting, for once - and to my pleasure the four-week remand was made. So I drove Keith and Clare in my Mini up the M4 to Reading and arrived at St Leonard’s. I was determined to do the whole thing thoroughly, so the three of us and the duty warden had a long discussion, and then a tour of the premises together, and after conducting a model ‘handover meeting’ we then left Keith there with lots of encouraging words and plans. Back down the motorway I remember it pelted with severe windy rain, which makes you feel very exposed in an underpowered Mini, and I was relieved to get Clare back to the office safely. Almost immediately I received a phone call from St Leonard’s: Keith had ‘legged it’ straight away… I’m told that this was quite an unusual event, but nevertheless this served as rather a custard pie in the face for me, though Clare didn’t seem to think any the worse of me for this –at least I could show her now how to get a warrant issued. (Keith was arrested on the warrant several months later – he’d been claiming social security from his home address, if not actually living there, almost all that time.)

A year later, John was very different, a mature man-of-the-world Scot, a keen rugby player, married to a GP, and seeking a new career in social work. He definitely didn’t fit the then-current image of a social worker, and there were times he could have been more perceptive or sensitive, but on the whole I found him alert, competent and keen to learn, especially on prison visits, as well as good for a pint in a pub after work.

In 1979 Jean M was my first, and indeed only, ‘proper’ Probation student. She was methodical and conscientious and a thoroughly worthwhile candidate. The last I heard she was married to a farmer and doing occasional sessional work. Finally, in 1980 Jean S was a local mature social work assistant who was doing the course in Bristol in order to become a qualified social worker. Both of these two ‘students’ were allowed to undertake work with a small number of cases (5-6) in their own right, which I would then scrutinise by reviewing each week in a lengthy discussion with the student, and any reports for Court that they completed had to be countersigned by me as their supervisor.

### What I/we did:

Candidly, I struggled with the work in the first year. This was partly due to the stressful and emotional personal life I was having, but also partly because I simply hadn’t found a way of organising myself or the work properly. By the second half of that year I had a limited caseload of about 30 cases, as was the prescribed norm for first-year officers, and I had been allowed to build up to that fairly slowly rather than have 30 cases suddenly transferred to me on my arrival, so I was certainly not ‘hard done by’.

The very early days showed me how different this was all going to be compared with my experience in the more cosmopolitan Leicester. Once, I and the team were suddenly presented with a piece of paper announcing the ‘Saturday morning telephone duty rota’, which alarmed me, as I had never heard of such a thing. But then colleagues explained that no one took any notice of this, and indeed I never saw such a rota again in subsequent years.

It was not a surprise to me that we had to deal with certain ‘civil work’ cases – indeed in the autumn of 1975 I had to go back to Leicester on three separate occasions for that extremely difficult Divorce Court Welfare case there – covered in the previous chapter. (The judge’s complimentary letter to my Chief was a help to me in getting me through my difficult first year in Swindon.)

But I was still surprised to find, very early on, that I was asked to deal with an Application for Consent to Marry. A father was refusing to allow his 17-year-old daughter (pregnant, I think) to marry her boyfriend, and she was applying to the Magistrates’ Court to overrule him. The boyfriend was only slightly older, and on the face of it seemed to be trying to do the ‘right thing’, but the father didn’t like him because – among other things - he had found a pornographic magazine of his, which he left with me as ‘evidence’. I didn’t especially warm to the boyfriend either, and the magazine was certainly a bit strong though not unlawful, but after a further interview the father gave way without going to Court.

Each week we each had a half day of Court duty and a half day of office duty – unlike the Saturday telephone duty these were real. Office duty meant that you had to see any caller who might come or phone during that period. They might be someone else’s case who needed to speak with another officer in their absence, or more usually it was someone who was not a current case of the Swindon office at all. Sometimes office duty was busy, but usually not too demanding, but I hated it because of the uncertainty, and the risk of a vagrant simply asking for accommodation or money which we couldn’t or wouldn’t provide.

Court duty involved being on hand to take any referral from Court, taking details and starting the report process going. When I was well organised I could sometimes use some of the ‘dead’ time at Court to write a letter to a prisoner, for example. I think my first pair of duties were Tuesday afternoon office duty, and Friday morning ‘Number Two’ Magistrates’ Court duty. There was also a year – 1977 perhaps – when it was my turn to do Tuesday morning Juvenile Court for the whole year, in addition. Those sessions were particularly slow and tedious!

When I got back to the office from each Court Duty I passed the forms to the clerical staff which were then typed up so that the requests for reports could be allocated. In Swindon, the system in the Magistrates’ Court was that the same bench of magistrates sat at the same Court every three weeks, so with very rare exceptions the standard three-week remand for a report meant that the same ‘bench’ that requested the report received it three weeks later and passed sentence. We had to get our reports over to Court by 4.00pm the day before Court, so that the ‘bench’ could read them on the day just before Court started – this normally prevented an additional pause in the proceedings. Meanwhile, every case that was committed to Crown Court also became a request for a report in those days, albeit one was preparing a report that would only be used in the eventuality that there was a finding of guilt.

When I started in Swindon the system for allocating these requests for reports was that, although most could in theory be allocated by their geographical ‘patch’, many would still come to the weekly team meeting for various reasons. The Senior would then go through each of them, saying something like “I’ve got a 23-year-old male who’s burgled a shop – with three previous…” and wait for a PO to say “I’ll take that”. If the case was currently or recently known to a PO it would normally go to that officer. Some team colleagues would say “I know it’s in my area but I’ve got five reports on the go at the moment, I couldn’t take another one right now” and there was therefore a tendency for the ‘willing’ to take on more work.

It was quickly obvious to me that this approach was inefficient; sometimes the request was already a week old, from waiting for the team meeting; then it might take nearly another week to see the person, by getting an appointment letter to them (people were rarely on the phone in those days, though we always sought a phone number at the first hearing if there was one). There was then a rush to get a second appointment in, write the report, and then get it to the Court the day before the defendant’s second appearance as required – all in that third week.

However, one had much longer to do Crown Court reports in those days – typically six to eight weeks – and here the temptation for some POs was to leave it, while one did more urgent work, until the case came up on the ‘Warned’ list, and then rush round and do it in the last week or so. The added ‘benefit’ of this (to an inefficient officer) was that one could say, in an exhausted manner, “I’ve got six reports on the go at the moment”, while a colleague who had been more efficient and got their reports done would apparently only have two or three “on the go”. The true picture of who had actually completed the most reports in the year would come to light at the end-of-year returns for reports by each officer, though surprisingly not much notice was taken of these.

I believe that this system of ‘allocating by team meeting’ was quite widespread across the country in Probation, though as I was to find later it was not the case in Newport. Meanwhile, in Swindon, I was told by older officers that “of course, in the old days” one did the reports that were requested at the Court for which one did Court duty each week. Obviously this could lead to some very uneven distributions of work due to simple bad luck, and in theory the ‘team meeting’ system should have meant better ‘matching’ of case to officer, though in reality this ‘benefit’ seemed a very marginal one. Since it was also the case that ‘in the old days’ some female officers only dealt with female cases the old approach can’t have been universal anyway. (I was told that the elderly spinster officer in our Chippenham office at that time had only started taking male “clients” in very recent years.)

In my later Swindon years, from 1979-81, our reorganisation at that time meant that I did four Court duties a week, and most of the reports that arose from those Courts, so we partly went back to that mythical ‘old system’. I found it very much more efficient though: First of all, since I was now also interviewing some defendants before Court, and was advising the Court whether a report was needed anyway, I was (hopefully) improving the suitability of the requests for reports that the Court was making. Second, if a request was made, I could dash out with the defendant, and instead of filling in a long form of details at that stage, I’d simple log his/her contact details and make an appointment, usually for a home visit, and be back in time for the next case. The appointment was usually for the same week, and even with a second appointment I could do most reports comfortably within two weeks.

My first plan when I started at Swindon was that I would organise my week so that I would see my people during the first half of each week, and then write up the reports and records in the second half of the week. Each officer decided which would be the day they stayed in the office after 5.00 pm for their own ‘reporting evening’, and in my first year I chose Tuesday. I would do home visits for court reports on Monday evening. I saw most cases as planned OK, and never messed up a court report case, but by the end of the first year I had let a couple of supervision cases rather get away from me completely, and my record-keeping was poor – I couldn’t focus on writing records in longhand systematically on Fridays as I had originally planned.

It may have been about this time that my secretary Iris introduced me to a very antiquated dictating machine. The machine had a big microphone on the end of some flex, and a red light came on when it was recording onto the strange large semi-sealed tapes. It took a bit of getting used to, but with Iris advising me on how I could best help her to help me – “always spell out key words, and the punctuation, like in a telegram” – I became quite adept.

It was a big breakthrough for me. I found I could focus on getting done both my contact records (‘Part Cs’) and my assessments and reviews (‘Part Bs’), especially when over time I put the most recent ones into a ring binder and then I simply worked through the binder once a week. At the beginning of this approach I simply came into the office on each Saturday morning and did this work without distractions. This got me onto the right path, although in June 1976 when I was assessed for confirmation in post the Assistant Chief rightly criticised the gaps in my early work, and said that coming in on Saturday mornings was not a good way of resolving this problem.

Fortunately, by that autumn I got myself better organised and into a strong weekly routine – which was useful as the numbers of cases and reports kept gradually increasing, especially since Swindon was still an expanding new town. My own case numbers reached the 60s in 1977 and stayed there for the next three years – and at the end of each year I found that I had also done 100-120 court reports.

I got very systematic at taking my ‘records binder’ home at some point on a Monday, and then with my newly issued handheld Dictaphone I would complete around six ‘Part B’ assessments (on a rota system I set up in my diary, so that I got through the caseload regularly every three months) and all the ‘Part C’ contact records from the previous week.

Employing my new routine my records were then always up to date each week. Thus sometimes I finished work for the day at teatime on Monday, though increasingly frequently I then had to go and do a home visit for a Court report in the evening. Almost without exception, I started my inquiry for each social inquiry report for Court with a home visit if the individual was on bail, and under my new system Tuesday became the usual day (with Monday as backup), visiting in the evening in most cases because offenders – or the parents in the case of juveniles – were often in employment. Wednesday was a day for doing a series of home visits on current cases, particularly with women who were at home during the day, or it was a day for visiting one or more prisons. Thursday became an office day, with cases reporting through to 7.00 pm – rarely later. Friday I did Court duty, and I usually felt justified in finishing work for the week soon after Friday lunchtime because of the hours I had done by then.

But once a month was a Friday afternoon NAPO meeting, usually in Bristol; then I wouldn’t get home until just after 6.00pm. The routine evolved over time. In late 1978 I joined a new Rotary Club, invited by my Police Inspector friend Malcolm Flanagan, which met on Tuesday evenings, so Mondays for home visits for Court reports became more common.

I should add here, in view of how National Standards and other expectations have come and gone, or ebbed and flowed, in the intervening years, what standards I set myself as a PO – and maintained - from about 1976 onwards. From witnessing how Wiltshire Community Service operated, and the credibility it established with the Courts and with the cases themselves, I was convinced that a prompt and purposeful start to supervision was a high priority. And, since “seeing me is compulsory” – as I would say - I was clear with each supervisee about when the next appointment was, visibly writing it in my diary so they could see it, and know that I thought it was important.

And so most people attended most of the time, and I only remember taking two cases back to Court for breach for persistent failure to report. My default position was to see each person weekly for just the first four weeks of the Order (maybe more with some parolees), then fortnightly for eight weeks, and, if things seemed OK, monthly after that – and monthly through to when supervision officially ended. In view of the much higher expectations later set nationally that probably seems a bit slack to more recent supervisors, but that seemed average/reasonable to me at the time, or possibly on the high side in the context of the breadth and quantity of overall workload.

(Some colleagues were more relaxed: Once a female Probationer asked if she could bring her friend Angie into our interview, and then asked “How come I have to come in and see you every week when my friend Angie doesn’t have to see her Probation Officer at all?”)

A variation to my work pattern came in 1979 when we in Jay’s team decided to make the change – mentioned earlier – whereby we would try a groupwork approach to getting Probation Orders started, to give them more impact and credibility with the Courts. Doug and I had seen a brief presentation by a charismatic Bristol Senior called David Sutton, who had described how his team ran a whole matrix of exciting groupwork programmes. We then visited their office, and disappointingly found that in practice there was just the one induction group running, and not much else in reality - but even so the concept looked a good idea. Doug and I proposed a system whereby I would do all our team’s Court duties, and do the first 20 Court reports allocated each month, and reduce my caseload to about 30, while the others would run an induction group at 6.00 pm every Tuesday on a rota we organised, and take a higher caseload (although they might still have some spillover Court reports to do in the latter part of each month).

There was a hesitant start to the new process, in September 1979 I think, because as Murphy’s Law could predict, just at the time we started I couldn’t get any cases onto Probation Orders. By the first Tuesday night I had just one or two successful recommendations; and there was also a woman who just burst into tears when I said she’d have to attend a group, so I had reluctantly decided we shouldn’t force her to attend. But before long the cases started to flow, and the groups worked pretty well in terms of attendance, with some modest increase in Probation cases. I was content with my role for a while, even though the Court duties and reports were quite a treadmill, since I was pleased that I no longer had to do office duty. By agreement with the Clerks at Court, This was also when I developed a more active role while on Court duty, interviewing selected cases before Court and offer the Court advice as to whether or not the case needed to be adjourned for a report. This helped to bring about ‘more appropriate’ report requests – fewer ‘trivial’ report requests – and bring in more cases that I thought were suitable for our new groupwork system.

That system inevitably had both advantages and disadvantages. A ‘rolling’ group meant that new cases started attending straight away, the first Tuesday after being sentenced – this was very good for getting each Order off to a positive and purposeful start, a merit that is often underappreciated in my view. But it also meant that that in a six-week groupwork programme the new person might be starting at, say, Week 3 or 5 of the ‘course’, so the experience lacked (arguably) the sense of logical progression of a coherent programme. Until this changed again, in 1980, my ‘default’ timetable each week was:

Monday: Court Duty, taping previous week’s records, two evening Home Visits for Court reports

Tuesday: Court Duty, afternoon Home Visits for Court reports

Wednesday: Home Visits, mainly current cases all day, OR to Bristol Prison or Pucklechurch for Court reports (custody cases), OR visits to other prisons for other current cases

Thursday: Court Duty, then office interviews, mainly current cases, 2.00-7.00pm

Friday: Court Duty, then either a prison visit, NAPO, or time off in lieu

After Marjorie’s arrival in 1979 as one of the two new Seniors, as mentioned earlier, we changed the system again. By introducing ‘closed’ groups, we gained the advantage of taking a cohort of new cases through a six-week ‘course’ so that everyone experienced each session in the same order. We compensated for the disadvantage of potential delay by starting a new ‘course’ every four weeks – meaning that no one should have to wait more than a month after sentence before starting ‘their’ induction group. We did this by having a rota of pairs of officers running each course; that meant for two weeks of each month we were running two groups in the building, both running from 6.00-7.00pm. With three pairs of group leaders - I was paired with Angela - we each started a new course every three months, having six weeks ‘on’ and six weeks ‘off’. The pair who took the group kept the cases – half each – for the remainder of their Order.

My Court Duties reduced, and I took on more reports, but when it was my turn for the group (with Angela) it meant that I was often working ‘late’ four evenings a week. In addition I became the liaison officer for the local aftercare hostel at Lyddington Bridge in Old Town, which meant I also did a session there from about noon to 3.00pm each week.

Looking over the whole period from 1976 onwards, the work in Swindon seemed like quite a demanding treadmill at the time. After my fairly ‘easy’ first year, from 1976 until we moved to the first (‘rolling’) groupwork model my case numbers remained steadily in the 60s, while also averaging 100-120 reports for criminal courts a year, plus the occasional Divorce Court Welfare report. I’ll say more about how I felt about this at the time in the next section.

Home visiting was a substantial part of the job in Swindon. My training in Leicester had emphasised the importance of this – to appreciate the context in which the “clients” lived – but most of my Swindon colleagues did much the same as me in this respect. (I was to find a very different pattern in Newport.) In theory we all had our own geographical ‘patch’, and indeed in practice almost all Ann’s cases were in Park North, and Angela’s in Park South, the Park estate being a council-owned estate of 1960s properties. But my large slice of north-east Swindon didn’t produce enough cases for me, so I had various cases on the Park estate as well as in Gorse Hill and Stratton St Margaret. Wednesday was when I did most daytime visits, for a whole or half-day, depending on prison, Court or other commitments, and I would have advised individuals that I would be calling, say, “some time between 2.00 and 4.00”, to give myself leeway if my schedule was going awry as I buzzed around in my Mini 850.

In a terraced street of Gorse Hill I once called and my Probationer said “Would you mind seeing Angela opposite first, as I’m just doing such-and-such?” And on the Park estate, a mother answered the door and shouted up the stairs to her unemployed son, “It’s alright, it’s only the Probation Officer.” In July 1981, during a particularly hectic period, the Royal Wedding of Charles and Diana meant an extra Bank Holiday and our office closed. I’m not a republican as such, but I had no interest in the wedding, and didn’t think it justified a bank holiday. So I decided I’d keep up with my work schedule despite the office closure by booking a prison visit (for a Court report) and add some home visits. The staff at Pucklechurch Remand Centre were less than pleased that my booking had been accepted – but for me it meant that I could get on with the Court report – and in the afternoon I found people in watching the TV. The wedding itself was over by then, and they didn’t seem to mind me calling then.

On home visits I found television quite an occupational hazard in my early years. Almost invariably the TV was on when I arrived, and it almost invariably stayed on after I arrived – at first. My aim initially was to try not to interfere or impose more than I absolutely had to, but I found it difficult to conduct the interview properly with the TV glinting and burbling in the corner of my eye. I soon decided that drastic action was needed. It was one of those occasions when you realise that you have definitely impacted on someone’s life when a colleague later reported back to me on a case where I had previously done a report: the mother told her, “Oh we remember Mr Bridges all right – he made us turn the telly off!”

One very positive aspect of Probation work in Swindon was the Community Service scheme. The officer who I replaced when I arrived in 1975 was Norman Richards when he became the first SPO for Community Service for Wiltshire, and was charged with establishing the scheme for running Community Service Orders (CSOs) from December 1975. He was given a workshop and office in Gorse Hill, in the part just outside my ‘patch’, and over time he and his staff introduced first to Swindon and then to the whole of the county a scheme that was both radically innovative and yet also strict. I can absolutely vouch for the fact that when a CSO was made in Court, we on Court Duty would see the individual and give him/her a letter that was an instruction to report immediately to the office in Gorse Hill. The individual was then seen, inducted into what was required of them, and then in most cases would be further instructed to report to the same location for work at 9.00am the very next Saturday.

The sentencing day in the Crown Court was a Friday, and it was quite normal for a case to be sentenced on the Friday, attend their induction immediately as above, and then be doing their first work placement the very next day. We had two punitive judges who regularly sat at Swindon Crown Court; they each agreed to spend a Saturday to see for themselves what happened to those on a CSO, and they both saw people at work that they had sentenced the previous day. One of them, Judge Mark Dyer, was completely won over to the idea that a CSO was a credible sentence; the other – Judge Desmond Vowden – remained a total sceptic about anything that Probation might have to offer.

Norman was red hot on enforcement. Anyone who failed to report on time on the Saturday (either absent, or too late for the departing work transport) was subject to breach. He stopped using warrants when he realised that the police did not prioritise serving them, and adopted a system where he or his staff went and served a summons in person to the individual at home to appear in Court the following Friday. This often meant that members of a work party, where one who had been missing the previous Saturday, would find that on the very next Saturday that absentee was now in Bristol Prison.

However, Norman didn’t just go looking for ‘unpaid work’ projects. Although he always had some core ‘light building/painting/digging’ jobs on the go, he in addition introduced a number of ‘social work’ placements, in residential homes etc, and most notably of all, founded a Saturday Club, entirely the creation of Wiltshire Community Service. This was essentially a ‘respite care’ club where the CS workers looked after children with disabilities for the morning while their families could take a break from caring. If someone made a donation to the work that CS were doing, Norman would call a meeting of the CS workers to consult and involve them in how they thought the money should be spent. Each worker also completed a brief questionnaire at the end of their Order – this was at a time when feedback forms were by no means as ubiquitous as they are today. A copy of this completed form was sent to the officer who had made the original recommendation – something I personally appreciated.

This was all part of how Norman made this new-fangled Order an integral part of Probation practice in Wiltshire, after some passive resistance from the more traditionalist officers. At a time when ‘PO autonomy’ was highly prized and jealously guarded it would have been problematic to attempt any compulsion, so Norman introduced measures whereby ‘we’ could ‘help him’ to run things effectively – notably to ensure that we briefed defendants properly on what they should expect if a CSO were to be made. He gave us an information sheet at one stage which spelt out the requirements on a CS worker, and my practice from then on was that I would go through it with a defendant and ask him/her to sign it (not that it had any statutory value) if I were recommending a CSO.

And indeed, before long I was recommending quite a lot of CSOs. I actually made the first ever recommendation for one in Wiltshire, a man appearing at Oxford Crown Court on 1 December 1975, but for whatever reason the judge passed a suspended prison sentence instead. (I hadn’t attended Oxford because I was at a different Court with a report on a current case that day.) But soon Norman was sending round to the Swindon office a monthly sheet showing which officers had recommended – and had passed – a CSO that month, and for the year so far. For some colleagues this was dubiously close to an attack on their autonomy, but I was impressed, and I was usually in the top two on the ‘league table’. My positive view was reinforced after spending a Saturday morning with the scheme.

Of course, for a while I assumed that this was a ‘normal’ way of running Community Service, and I took it as second nature that CS was a ‘constructive’ experience as well as a retributive one for the offender. So I was somewhat baffled by the debates in wider NAPO circles at the time that portrayed it as a punishment that should never be used as an ‘alternative to probation’ (as I quite often did) and should only ever be used as an “alternative to prison”. This was especially baffling to me, as when I did have dealings with an out-of-county CSO case, the supervision and enforcement of the case seemed to me to be very casual: “Oh, just tell him to await a letter.” And then when I moved on to Gwent in 1983, where the CS scheme had a very high reputation, I was at first misled into thinking it was similar in quality – but this proved to be an illusion. The Gwent scheme was built on sand, while the Wiltshire scheme was built on rock.

Meanwhile, back to my own personal work in Swindon, of course a number of individual cases stand out in my memory.

One of my earliest cases was a young man transferred to me on Norman Richards’ departure. This Probationer had said to Norman at the initial meeting to read and sign the Probation Order, after reading the paperwork carefully, “It says here that I have to come in and see you whenever you say, but it says nothing here about having to talk to you.” Norman had thought that this was a brilliant comment to have made, and it certainly caused me to think further about the nature of Probation work. It contributed to the development of my overall view that led to me saying – in one way or another - to the individuals I supervised, “Seeing me is compulsory; what we talk about is voluntary – let’s make what we talk about something useful”. This usually then led into a plan of work, which would be reviewed and revised (or revived) every three months.

I was constantly looking for things to say or do that would enable me to have a stronger influence on people’s behaviour, because I had no illusions that as a practitioner I was pretty modest in ability. I read and learned about Family Therapy, which I formally attempted at least once (with Doug), and later on took a course in ‘Social Skills’ – which turned out to be principally a series of pencil-and-paper exercises – which I deployed quite a bit in my later years as a PO. My instinctive approach was similar to what had been called during my training ‘The Problem-Solving Approach’ of Helen Perlman – I mentioned in Chapter 8 - whereby if you got alongside the ‘client’ and helped them with what they thought their problems were they would increasingly gain trust in you and talk and learn about their other behaviours too.

I believed (and broadly still believe) in this approach in principle, but when I have reflected on my own work the memorable cases – the ones where I felt I really made a difference – were not only rare but they also tended to follow a different pattern. I found that it tended to be when I caught someone by surprise with some action or comment that the memorable turnarounds in attitude or behaviour took place. Consequently, I developed the view that my job with each case was to start by embarking on some modest but consistent shared plan – on the ‘what we talk about is voluntary’ principle - but then be alert and ready to grab and use an opportunity to have real impact should it come along.

Such opportunities were more likely to come along if the person under supervision showed some oppositional spirit (rather than be someone who just agreed with everything you said all the time). I had a parolee whom I’ll call Alan come out of Shepton Mallet prison from a two-year sentence on just four weeks’ licence as I recall. I’d seen him once while inside (he’d been quite cool and distant) and visited his wife for his parole report (she’d seemed sincerely pleasant), but I didn’t know them particularly well.

On reporting from prison he was very dismissive in attitude, pointing to the shortness of his licence – though this was no one’s personal fault, as it was a product of the rules at that time that earlier time spent locked up on remand counted for remission but not for parole eligibility. My recollection is that he had a job to go to in the building trade but needed his own tools in order to get it. I wrote a letter for Social Security as it then was, and somewhat to my surprise he got the grant, the tools and consequently a job (I can’t be sure it was the job originally claimed, though…). His attitude to me was then transformed, and as far as I can tell he stuck with his determination to establish himself as a proper provider for his family. The case was memorable to me because of the starkness of the change of attitude achieved in relation to the shortness of the supervision.

Much less confrontational were a married couple that had been transferred to me on my arrival as they now lived in my Gorse Hill ‘patch’ – I’ll call them John and Jane. They were in their early twenties and had been convicted of some burglaries and thefts – John had been sent to prison for a few months and was now on ‘voluntary after-care’, while Jane had been given Probation.

Jane’s case gave me a salutary lesson in making sure I read the file properly. The typed front sheet that I ‘inherited’ from my predecessor officer said she had two years’ Probation and gave the end date; so in due course I said farewell and closed the case. About six months later she came up in Court again – for receiving stolen goods I think – on the fringe of a much bigger case, and was committed to Crown Court. The problem was that she was described as being in breach of Probation! I retrieved the file, and, yes, although the typed front sheet said a two-year Order OK, when I checked the actual Probation Order it did indeed say it was a three-year Order. Neither I nor my predecessor had noticed the typing error on the front record sheet. I was fortunate that in those less assiduous times the breach of Probation produced neither a greater punishment for Jane, nor any questioning for me about why I had not seen her for the past six months.

Meanwhile John is memorable to me just for one event. As many people in this line of work have observed before, some of the most useful conversations one can have together is when driving in a car. You are not facing each other, so sometimes some valuable confidences can emerge. Or not. On this occasion, I think I’d offered to drive John to another address in Swindon where he was to pick up some second-hand item he’d bought. It can’t have been an enormous item as I only had the Mini, but clearly I must have thought that this would be a good opportunity for me to be helpful, and maybe have a useful conversation. We were probably almost exactly the same age, 24/5 at the time, and he’d known me for the eight months or so since my arrival in Swindon. In my opinion there was no malice or mischief intended, but rather a simple gauche friendliness, as I heard him ask, as I drove him up the Cricklade Road, “Er, do you think you’re getting the hang of the job now, like?”

Not far away from them lived a fifteen-year-old boy under supervision, Denis, in a small terraced house with his divorced mother, who was extremely bright but uptight. She would complain about him a lot, comment on what other people should do with him, but distance herself from doing anything with him (it seemed). He tended to be pretty quiet in my presence. His school attendance started falling away, but by staying in all the time it was more like the ‘school refusal’ more common in younger age groups than the ‘truanting’ more typical of his age group (wandering about with other truanters). I remember that one morning I simply turned up on their doorstep, got Denis out of bed, bought him a sandwich or something (I think), and dropped him outside the school and watched him go in. He attended for a few weeks after that.

One week at a home visit Denis’s mother brought the whole matter to a head by demanding that I arrange for him to be taken into care as she wanted nothing more to do with him. She was emphatic about this, although I can’t remember the specific threat behind the ultimatum – I’m not sure now whether it was a week or just two days I was given but it was a specific timescale. At first I couldn’t see any way out of this, and preliminary discussion with Social Services (who knew of the case) suggested that they would be prepared to accede. But I did some wider reading, and I tended to be impressed with the work of Bill Jordan at the time. Although Jordan was thought to be quite a radical left-wing thinker it was also clear that his approach was not the simplistic one of just giving a person what they asked for. His book explained that sometimes this could be quite damaging, having the effect of reinforcing the person’s own low self-esteem, and it discussed how to recognise this and handle it.

After some anxious but careful consideration, I resolved that I was not going to confirm for the mother an official view that she was ‘an unfit mother’. So I went to see her at the appointed time and told her that I was not going to take Denis into care - if she wanted him in care she would have to take him down the road and abandon him herself there at the Social Services office (it was less than half a mile away). Immediately her demeanour underwent a complete radical transformation – she became relatively warm and engaging and started sharing a proper discussion about her and Denis’s future, and how to make it work. Denis did not reoffend (his offending had not been that serious in the first place), and although not everything was always sweetness and light from then on the case closed satisfactorily. At some later point during the supervision period, she told me that before my visit she had written on a piece of paper “He will not take Denis into care” – so it was a strange emotional game that she had caught herself and Denis, and me, up in.

Roger was another fifteen-year-old, but in a very different pattern. His parents lived on the Park estate, but were council tenants on the way up in material terms, with ostensibly good family values. Suddenly he had started committing a series of thefts of various kinds, ignoring all types of warnings from school and parents, then (I think) a police formal caution, then a conditional discharge in Court, and then even after being charged and bailed by the police for the latest offences he carried on stealing. Hence my first contact was with him at the Brooklands Community Home, at Langport in Somerset where he was remanded for assessment.

Roger was perfectly pleasant, if a little disoriented, and there was nothing specific wrong with him either psychiatrically or psychologically (the residential assessment said). It would be fair to say that he was a near certainty for a Detention Centre sentence anyway, but in any case I felt sure that that was the right sentence this time, and said so. In my view he was an intelligent if fairly self-contained boy in a conventional home who had suddenly found that the boundaries he was expecting weren’t in fact there. I think it was almost a reassurance to him to face finally a tangible consequence for his out-of-control behaviour instead of just being let off again (as he would have experienced it).

He served six weeks in Eastwood Park, where I visited him, and then a year on licence which I supervised when he returned home. My hazy memory is that he committed one very minor offence and nothing further. A couple of years later I bought some petrol at Kingshill petrol station and he was serving at the till, and gave me a cheerful greeting. I’m not someone who believes in any general rule that an early short sharp shock deters a young person before they slide further into crime – too few of them are really thinking about what they’re doing, and the general evidence is that this usually doesn’t work. But there can be exceptions, and I think Roger was one. For him, a fairly conventional boy, I think it was baffling that he received no ‘instant punishment’ each time he was caught, and that in a peculiar way it was a reassurance to him when the boundary was finally firmly imposed.

One of the first cases I ever had in Swindon was to do a pre-trial report for Crown Court on Angela, who was pleading not guilty to theft from her (now former) employers at Membury M4 Service Station. Since she was pleading not guilty I had nothing to say about the alleged offence, but it seemed to me that she was poor but honest. After several months the case went to Court and she was found Not Guilty, and I was pleased for her, and gave it no more thought. That was until she suddenly appeared in the Magistrates’ Court, first for non-payment of TV Licence – a standard hefty fine was given - and then for a minor theft for which she got a short Probation Order. I thought I would support her efforts to cope financially, but in fact she made no progress at all in paying the fine, pleading that she didn’t even have 50 pence per week to spare – which worried me. Finally she went to Court for non-payment of fine and was given a suspended committal order, meaning instant prison if the fine was not paid in (I think) seven days. I was astonished to find that the fine was then instantly paid – the lesson I took from this was that I knew her and her circumstances much less well than I had thought. But she didn’t come back to Court again during my time in Swindon.

The most remarkable group of cases I had were identical twins and their father. All were of a low IQ, they had not lived together for many years, the sons being in their late twenties, and the father in his fifties. Ian, the father, committed some minor offence, as he had done a few times in the past, got two years Probation, and came to see me as required without difficulty, and basically just droned to me in a monotone about his week. My biggest problem with him was just staying awake! I wasn’t yet 30, and drowsiness was not yet normally a problem for me, but I noticed that with him and with no other case I really had to work hard to stay awake as he droned on at me. And yes, I did find it difficult to identify what purposeful work I should be trying to do with him – but he didn’t reoffend either during his time with me.

What was remarkable was that the identical twin sons had very similar patterns of offending behaviour, but had been dealt with completely differently by the criminal justice system. In about 1977 (from memory) I had to do a report on Robert for Magistrates Court for a series of feckless thefts while on a suspended sentence, and there was also a psychiatric report I think from the defence as the solicitor rightly noticed he was none too bright. In the language of the time, the doctor said that he had an IQ of 68, that it was on the edge of “subnormal” but he wasn’t suffering from any specific psychiatric disorder other than mild psychopathy and he couldn’t offer treatment. The solicitor made a passionate speech about the fact that there was no facility for someone with this kind of mental impairment, and that it was shocking that he’d have to go to prison, it was society’s failure and so on, and Robert then duly got a fifteen month prison sentence.

I opened a ‘throughcare’ file on Robert, and it was then that I learned that he had an identical twin called Peter who had been detained in Rampton Hospital for several years now already – I got the file out, and opened a throughcare case on him too. This was how I learned that the two brothers had committed broadly similar offences, though not usually together, until Peter was about 19, when on one occasion his haul had included an air rifle which he had on him when he had an altercation with some boy scouts. As far as I could tell no one was actually hurt, and I’m not sure that the air rifle was even fired, but it was in any case an assault involving a firearm.

Peter had had a psychiatric report, and the doctor (a different one) had identified an IQ of 68 – interestingly identical to that for Robert – but (also, and in contrast) a degree of psychopathic disorder which could be “treated”. Under the extant provisions of the 1959 Mental Health Act, if a mentally ill person was not diagnosed as ‘treatable’ he/she could not be confined to a mental hospital, but if his disorder WAS considered ‘treatable’ he could be. Hence because Peter’s doctor decided he was treatable Peter was given a Restriction Order under the Act and was confined indefinitely to Rampton secure hospital in Nottinghamshire.

These identical twins had this very marginal difference in their diagnoses, but with massive consequences. Robert served a series of short but finite prison sentences, but was at liberty when released, and indeed after this particular 1977 sentence he started a relationship with a woman and settled down, and to my knowledge did not reoffend. Although his solicitor was understandably outraged at his prison sentence on that occasion it is in my view highly doubtful whether the alternative option, that Peter had experienced, was any more effective or humane at all.

As it happened, a few months after I had seen Peter in Rampton on one occasion, I was advised that the authorities had decided that he could be released on “conditional discharge”, which in this context meant on indefinite aftercare supervision to me, like a Life Licence. As I recall Peter had been in Rampton for eight years when he returned to Swindon in about 1980, and although I can’t recall details he seemed to settle down in much the same way as his brother did – to be candid I think that they both just ‘grew out’ of their former offending behaviour. My main residual memory is that I had to write to the Home Office every three months to report on how Peter was getting on – to which I would receive a solemnly written acknowledging letter from some junior civil servant to say how pleased they were with his progress.

Towards the end of my time in Swindon I had a second case where I was also in this kind of quarterly correspondence. About a year after I started in Swindon I inherited, from Ken (I think), a current throughcare case I’ll call Tim. He had lived in a village on the edge of Swindon with his quite elderly mother, and at the age of fifteen he had had one fairly minor offence behind him when one evening he had knocked on the door of another house in the village where lived another fairly elderly woman. It appears that without warning he had attacked her, with a knife as I recall, and she was lucky to escape with her life.

The charge was reduced from attempted murder to Grievous Bodily Harm with Intent, but as a juvenile the seriousness of the offence was outside the conventional custodial sentences available. Instead he had been made the subject of the one provision available for ‘grave’ offences by juveniles at the time, which was detention under Section 2 of the 1933 Children and Young Persons Act. Section 1 was indefinite detention – often referred to as ‘Her Majesty’s Pleasure’ – while Section 2 was indefinite up to a prescribed maximum, which in Tim’s case was 15 years. In theory he could be released at any time up to the 15 years maximum.

I visited him several times in HMP Aylesbury, a prison for ‘Young Prisoners’ since by my time Tim was over 20, and although they kept him there until he was nearly 22 I can’t remember what, if any, adult prison he then went to. But the Parole Board decided to release him at what I think must have been about the half-way point, over seven years. He had an older sister who had her own family but who took him in, and I saw him both at the home and at the office several times in the last few months before I moved on from Swindon. I went over the original offence, and the events surrounding it, over a series of sessions before and after his release, but only starting this after the decision to release because I did not want him constrained by thinking that the release decision might be influenced by what he said to me.

He couldn’t give a coherent explanation as to what had been going through his mind when he attacked the neighbour, and my tentative theory was that at the time he was frustrated and angry with his mother – but not admitting it even to himself – and then took this anger out on his innocent neighbour. Reoffending seemed very unlikely – but you can never be sure with cases where behaviour seems so opaque. The other main factor in his case was that as someone who was not particularly ‘delinquent’ in the conventional sense he had spent his late teens and early twenties locked away with other males for whom he seemed to be potentially one of the fellow prisoners you might ‘look up to’. Therefore a large part of the work I attempted with him was about his non-normal transition to adulthood, and adjusting to life in the real world in his twenties.

The most difficult man was a prisoner I’ll call Jim. He was serving six years in HMP Gloucester, because he had asked – intransigently insisted, probably – to be on ‘Rule 43’, kept away from other prisoners (as sex offenders usually also request) simply because that’s what he wanted even though he wasn’t a sex offender himself. His offence was blackmail – basically he could just bully people into giving him money or whatever he wanted, just by the strength of his bullying personality because he was not a great physical specimen. I came to the view that he liked being on this special wing at Gloucester, along with all the other prisoners who were almost all sex offenders, because he could manipulate and bully them with ease.

I picked him up as a throughcare case, with potential parole eligibility, went to see him in Gloucester, said I’d be back in about six months (my normal interval for long-termers), wrote him a short letter to which he did not reply, and returned six months later with an observation student (John) in tow. On my arrival he asked to see me on my own (without the student) and for about two hours or so he sought to tear a strip off me for writing him a ‘cursory’ letter, and generally not taking him seriously. Certainly he seemed to be alone in the world (not surprisingly), and I saw a case for ‘reaching out’ to him to draw him into feeling better about the rest of humanity. Since Gloucester was only about 35 miles from Swindon I felt OK about agreeing to see him about once a month from now on, usually for a two-hour visit, and I also liaised with his prison probation officer Geoff.

My Senior, Jay Wall, was not at all interested in the case, and I got no advice there. But memorably, the Chief, Lawrence Frayne, read the case at our 1978 session, and he commented that Jim reminded him of a former case of his own, “Shitty Hayes” (not a name one forgets), a prisoner in Dartmoor who smeared his faeces all over his cell walls, long before this became the standard ‘dirty protest’ of IRA prisoners in Northern Ireland. So Lawrence broadly supported my attempts to ‘reach out’ to Jim. However, over time I felt increasingly that Jim was manipulating me, drawing me into accepting handcrafted gifts (technically allowable) to prove I wasn’t rejecting him. I could see that this was creating a jeopardy for me, despite my good intentions, because I had ‘accepted’ them (though I kept them in the office).

So one day, with parole reports approaching, I prepared a speech which I recounted to him when I next visited him, in which I explained why the current arrangements would have to stop, and we would have to proceed on a more ‘correct’ standing in future. He became extremely furious at this, holding his face and then his fists close to my face to express his anger, but my strong impression was that at no point was he out of control. I held my ground, and from then on he continued to find other ways of putting pressure on me, but had to do so just on what he said rather than trying to suborn me.

He got a couple of months parole just before the end of his sentence – interestingly I can’t remember the accommodation arrangement, it may have just been lodgings – and once I got a volunteer to drive him to a job interview near Chippenham. As far as I can remember the case closed ‘satisfactorily’, and I never saw him again (and I wasn’t sorry).

Dan was a fairly inarticulate working man who got himself lodgings with a pleasant woman, now a single parent with five children, but then he started coercive sexual relations with her daughters as they reached puberty. He went to prison for offences against (I think) the second daughter, who was sixteen when I met her. The mother took the blithe view that she would have him back – as I recall, on the grounds that her daughters would be leaving home anyway shortly – not an option I could approve! He served a sentence – four years I think – and then got parole to live at Lyddington Bridge, the aftercare hostel in Swindon at the time, because I certainly could not endorse his return to the former home. Later on, he went on from the hostel to another lodging house he had arranged himself and assaulted the daughter there too. I had made many attempts to ‘get through’ to this inarticulate man, without progress, and the new conviction and prison sentence confirmed how unsuccessful a case this had been.

Ray was a man of mixed race descent, who normally lived in Fairford, Glos, but because he was in Stratton Lodge (hostel for the homeless in my ‘patch’) at the time of his case I got to do the report. He had few convictions, but was on a suspended sentence for a different type of offence from the new charge of (I think) working while claiming. The offence had been committed at his time in Fairford, so I remember driving him to Gloucester Crown Court where I was questioned by the judge. This was 1976 (I still had a white Mini), and it was a classic case of why suspended sentences are not a good idea. Clearly the judge considered that custody was unnecessary for Ray, and was looking for a good reason why he should exceptionally not impose prison despite that suspended sentence. When passing a Probation Order on Ray, he made great play of me having spoken “passionately” (I had been calm, rational and relentlessly logical, I thought) and I left the Court feeling that I had just become part of the ‘theatre’ of the Court proceedings designed to convince Ray – rightly – how fortunate he was to get Probation. Happily he completed satisfactorily two years later.

On only one occasion I had to write a report on a case where I had (arguably) witnessed the offence. In late January 1980 Swindon Town played Tottenham Hotspur in the 4th round of the FA Cup, and I went to the match, arriving early as was my wont. The ‘Town End’ behind the goal to my left was traditionally the area for the most vociferous home fans, but it transpired that a large group of Spurs fans had decided that they would ‘take it over’ on this occasion. It seemed that they drifted into the standing area a few at a time, and then on what may have been an arranged signal they formed together, drove out the home fans and started singing triumphantly.

Police and stewards were sent in to move them to the correct area of the ground – no easy task – and indeed some put up some resistance. In particular I could see one huge bloke swinging round and round on one stand support pillar, sending people flying, and for a while he seemed to be scattering people in all directions with no one being able to get near him. It was a while before several police marched him off. The following week, on the Monday probably, he appeared from the cells and was put back in custody for a report to be prepared.

I can’t remember how or why I came to do the report, as technically he had a home address in London and so a London officer should have done the report – but he was in custody in ‘our’ local prison, Bristol. I went to see him and found he was most mild mannered and with a job. As ever my memory is hazy but I think he got a three month prison sentence.

Another case that comes to mind was Juney. She was about 19, and was I think the youngest daughter of a fairly notorious Swindon family, though not one known to me personally. She was by then married, with one or two young children, to an Irishman who looked to me about 40 but turned out to be about 24 - he was a fairly hard drinking roadmender or something similar, one of a number of Juney’s co-defendants remanded in custody in a series of theft and handling offences going to the Crown Court. Juney was on the periphery, had few or no previous convictions despite the family she came from, and was therefore on bail.

The first reason she was memorable was because she didn’t keep appointments even at her home for me to do a social inquiry report for Court. At the time, in Swindon, this was most unusual. On the rare occasions that I’d seen someone come back to Court after a bail remand for a report having failed the appointment(s) the practice of the magistrates had been to remand in custody – but this had never happened to me. With very rare exceptions I always made the first appointment a home visit, in the evening if the person was in employment, and I doubt if there had been more than three occasions when a failed appointment had led me to arrange more than one ‘second’ appointment. I was pleased about this, as I experienced the threat of a remand in custody as a threat to me and my feelings, as much as it was a threat to the oblivious defendant. (Later on I was to find in Wales, Berkshire and the wider country, ‘failed’ social inquiry report appointments were quite commonplace, and rarely with adverse consequences for the defendant. There was something to be said for the draconian regime with which Swindon Magistrates Court was run by Ron Stevens, the longserving Clerk to the Justices there.)

I wasn’t sure what attitude the Crown Court would take to a ‘non-report’, but I knew that Judge Desmond Vowden sat very frequently, and he almost always sent every convicted defendant to prison. So I just went on making new appointments, at Juney’s home (the case was about 6-8 weeks getting to Court), and it was in fact the seventh appointment that I finally found her at home, and was able to prepare the report. Colleagues thought that I was mad to make seven visits, and even madder to recommend Probation, and although I may have been a little naïve, I just found her to be rather vague and distant, and a bit passively mistrustful, rather than hostile, and I felt – rightly as it turned out – that having met me she would keep appointments from now on.

Her case was fairly uneventful from then on, with her getting Probation as recommended, but her husband got a prison sentence and at some point they split up. The second reason the case became memorable was that some time later, when her husband was in prison (again, on a later sentence I think) one of the children had a rare cancer and I think died. The father made a formal complaint that I should have arranged for him to be notified before the child’s death – though in fact neither he nor she was a current case of mine by this time. It was memorable because the only two formal complaints made against me in Swindon were made in the same week, and were dealt with very properly by Marjorie Ainley, though it was a disconcerting experience for me at the time. (I was cleared in the other complaint too.)

Finally, when I was on the point of leaving Swindon to take up my secondment to Erlestoke, I had the luxury of running down my own workload, which seemed a very privileged role to be in after the frankly exhausting treadmill of the previous five years. One particular memory tends to stand out from this brief period. It concerns a particular sex offender. In the past one would have described him as an ‘inadequate’ male in his forties, socially isolated and personally unattractive, but not actually nasty in demeanour or anti-social in outlook. He’d been cautioned before for indecent exposure, and was now on probation to me for a relatively minor indecent assault. There was always the possibility of his behaviour getting worse, though at his age this was not a high risk – so a Probation Order had been a wise precaution.

After weekly contacts early on he was now on fortnightly reporting, with periodic home visits, and from memory I’d already had the meeting of introducing him to his new officer Sally when we had our last meeting in mid-August 1981. He’d not been a particularly ‘difficult’ case, but certainly not a rewarding one either from my perspective, though at least I felt I’d prepared him thoroughly and professionally for the coming change of PO. We’d had our last meeting and I went down the office stairs with him to the front door to say goodbye. Suddenly he stopped and said with apparent surprise and shock, “Does this mean I’m not going to see you any more?” and as I carefully started to remind him of our recent discussions he dissolved into copious tears.

It was a standing joke that some officers always had a box of tissues on their desk because they were often needed for tearful “clients”, but I’d always said I had never needed them. But now I had found that the one person in all my hundreds of cases who had actually cried when we parted was this unattractive relatively minor sex offender.

Meanwhile, alongside the c60 cases and c100 Court reports per year I and my colleagues were also completing Divorce Court Welfare reports, although as part of the 1979 arrangements I wasn’t allocated them anymore. It always seemed odd that we used different letterheads and a more widely spaced report format for this work, but accepted the anomaly as a fact of life. Most of the requested reports were ‘satisfaction’ reports, meaning that we saw the parents, and the children, and made other enquiries, and then wrote to confirm that the arrangements for the children were ‘satisfactory’. Obviously, a dispute over custody (“residency” as the law now expresses it), such as I had done in Leicester, was much more demanding. In those days before conciliation became the preferred approach to this work I and my colleagues saw this as a duty to observe, assess and recommend to the relevant Court where the child(ren) should live – a ‘quasi-judicial’ function, one might say.

Sometimes worse, though, were the disputes over access - “contact” – to the children by the ‘non-resident’ parent. This was not always the father – I inherited a continuing case of ‘Divorce Court Welfare supervision’ where the ten-year-old boy lived with the father on my ‘patch’ but had to be driven by a Probation volunteer once a month to Taunton for a weekend visit to his mother.

Of course it is a couple of the other ‘dispute’ cases that I still remember. One was a ten-year-old girl living with her mother on my patch, not the only child but over the next four or five years she could upset her mother by running off to her father in west Berkshire. These storms in a teacup usually blew over quite quickly, but I found the mother’s distress quite hard to handle. I remember coming home one evening after one of these episodes and suddenly dissolving into tears myself – I think the only occasion I did as a practitioner.

In a report case, the father had the three children in Swindon in uncertain accommodation, while his wife had the council house in Barnsley. I drove in my red Mini to Barnsley to interview the wife, and see her with the children during a period of ‘access’, and also to see the local social worker etc. It was soon evident to me that in this case the mother should be awarded custody, although for the present, until the case came back to Court, the father still had the interim order. The arrangement was that I was to pick up the father in Barnsley, and then collect the children and drive them back to Swindon – but the mother was now talking of not letting him have them back. I consulted the local Senior PO, who was excellent, and we agreed that I should explain to the mother that it wouldn’t help her case if she violated the current interim Court order – but in reality we agreed that if she dug her heels in it wasn’t for me to try to drag the children away. As it happened, she let me pick them up, and it was four hours of mainly motorway driving of two adults and three agitated children in my Mini 850 to get back to Swindon. I also went up to Barnsley for the eventual Court hearing, but the father didn’t seriously fight my report, and mother got custody.

In another case I thought I was going to get a trip to Sweden, as the father gave his address as being there, but it transpired that while he worked there most of the time, he also visited Swindon regularly. So it became a rare example of me conducting a DCW interview in the office rather than at someone’s home address. Meanwhile the two teenage children, a boy and a girl, were in boarding schools on the Isle of Wight. I think that the only times I ever claimed taxi fares as a main-grade officer was on the day I drove to Southampton, took the noisy hovercraft to the Island, and then used three taxis to get to the two schools, see the two children and the headteachers, and get back.

I guess it betrays a certain shallowness on my part that another case which I remember because of the out-of-county travel, but not so much the details of the case itself, was one where the non-resident father lived in Kennington, south London. He suggested that I could get the train to London and he’d meet me at Paddington and give me a lift to his home. He and his brother duly met me and I then found that the three of us were now to fit into a Reliant Robin, a three-wheel plastic-bodied ‘car’ similar to that later made famous in ‘Only Fools and Horses’. I was generously allowed the passenger seat, but I did not feel exactly safe in the London traffic negotiating the Hyde Park Corner roundabout. But that was not the reason he wasn’t awarded custody…

No doubt a modern Family Courts social work practitioner would shudder at some of the practice of me and my colleagues at that time. I certainly think it was right for the focus to change from a quasi-judicial to a conciliation-based role, and for the work also to become a specialism in its own right as it did increasingly during the 1980s nationally, before becoming a completely separate Service in 2001. I’ve also little doubt that for the parents and children involved in those 1970s Court proceedings the experience must often have been dreadful – drawn-out, often further delayed, baffling and frustrating. On the other hand my personal experience was NOT that Courts were judgemental about the ‘moral’ behaviour of individuals, nor did they ‘presume in favour’ of the mother – two accusations often airly voiced now about those times. For all our collective faults, both the Courts and their ‘Welfare Officers’ (as we were) were very conscientious about focusing on the needs of the children, as best as we understood them, at the time.

### What I felt:

I’ve used the term “treadmill” a couple of times already, and to a large extent my own feeling about my work in Swindon, after the first year, was that it indeed became quite a treadmill. However, there were positives as well as the obvious negative aspects to this feeling.

On the negative side, I most definitely remember thinking, one evening in the office on my own, “If I ever move on from this, I’m never ever going to forget what this was like.” (I wasn’t sure how I might or would move on, if at all, but I thought it might happen in some way that I couldn’t anticipate at the time). I probably did feel a little bit more sorry for myself than perhaps I should have, given that I certainly did work much longer hours later in my career. But the key point about this period was that the work just came at me, seemingly relentlessly, with not a great deal of control of it on my part, which is what created the treadmill effect. It also didn’t take much – in terms of some crisis or other with a particular case or two – for the job to get on top of me instead at times, emotionally, and I’d feel particularly sorry for myself. However, the only time I actually cried was over that Divorce Court Welfare case outlined above.

There were periods when all I wanted to do at the weekend was to collapse in an indulgent lazy stupor of food and drink. Once, a short article in Probation Journal from a PO who described his weekend of creative artistic endeavour enraged me so much that I penned a satirical counterblast – fortunately not published – as I couldn’t see how anyone who was doing the job as I was experiencing it could have the energy to do anything constructive over their weekends. Yes, I should have been more open-minded, although there was some real evidence that our workloads in Swindon then were on the high side compared with most other locations.

Yet strangely there was a positive aspect to this too. I gained a strange satisfaction from working out a ‘system’ of organising my working week in a way that ‘worked for me’, and then implementing that week after week. I was conscious that in some way it was a privilege that I could choose how I did that organising myself, to a large extent – this is what “Probation Officer autonomy” meant for me. In my head I started to use the analogy of the plate-spinning cabaret act, where you’d see someone keeping plates spinning on top of a couple of dozen spinning-poles at the same time. The performer was constantly having to be alert to see which plate was about to fall off, then move over to it to speed it up again. I felt that I was trying to keep all my ‘plates’ spinning at the same time too, and in constant fear of one of them dropping onto the ground. On one level, that was quite a satisfying feeling – when it was working well!

With colleagues there were occasional discussions about what were the rewarding and what were the frustrating aspects of our job. In the long term, the obvious aspect of Probation work generally is that Success is when Nothing Happens – i.e. the former Probationer or parolee doesn’t come back. But on a day to day basis, this provides no immediate sense of personal reward. On the contrary, one was constantly reminded instead of the disappointments – “So-and-so is back in Court, AGAIN!” This had a hardening effect on even the most upbeat of officers, which meant that one treated these events as a sad joke. My colleague Angela had dealt with a succession of teenage delinquent sons of a notorious local woman on her ‘patch’, and Angela was some seven years short of her own retirement when she bounced into the office one day to announce: “Mrs \_\_\_ is pregnant AGAIN, but I won’t have to deal with this one!”

Most of my colleagues, as well as I, tended to respond in our feelings about the job on almost a day-by-day basis: either we felt “Today has been a good day” or it had been a disappointing or frustrating day, following some obvious setback. The “good day” could be due to a difficult Court report being well received, with its recommendation accepted, or there had been one or more good interviews with someone under supervision that day. Direct positive feedback was quite rare, so it was through our own feelings at the time that we judged whether an interaction had ‘gone well’. Obviously, in some instances a later event might show us that we’d judged that occasion wrongly – perhaps if we found we’d been deceived, for example.

Sometimes that worked positively though: I once listened to a sixteen-year-old talk at some length about his week, and by the end I felt really quite depressed about it, so much so as to discuss the feeling with my then-wife Mo. She reminded me about ‘transference’ – how sometimes you imported someone else’s emotional state, and indeed by doing so you sometimes relieved them of that state. Sure enough, although I hadn’t been looking forward to seeing that young man again the following week, at that next interview I found him quite cheerful and upbeat.

For myself, apart from these fleeting events, and the satisfaction from getting my planned work done each week, the other personal reward I sought was to try to identify where I had made a positive difference to someone’s life (yes, including stopping reoffending). Although there was a good proportion of cases which didn’t reoffend, as far as I knew, it was inevitably difficult to be able to identify the cases where it might have been something I did that made the difference. I think I definitely did something significant in those cases of Denis and Alan that I described earlier, for example, but I recall that on leaving Swindon I took the view that maybe I’d had a comparable impact on just about six cases altogether over my six years there.

I might have been playing it down a bit, but overall I never considered that I was a particularly brilliant or inspiring Probation Officer – I was simply sufficiently competent. My general view for most of my career has been that most offenders simply ‘grow out of’ committing offences – what I did was to try to ease their progress along that path. It’s possible that I had more personal impact than I realised at the time, but I’m mainly content for those individuals to be given the credit for their achievement of turning round their own lives.

A strange ‘perk’ of the job was the opportunity to make excursions to various prisons in different parts of the country (mainly in the south-west). The regular run to Bristol, our ‘local’ prison, was not a great treat, leaving home at 8.00 to arrive for the start of ‘professional visits’ at 9.00ish, and getting back to the office by 12-12.30. But other prisons could often mean a stop for a lunch somewhere: a well-planned drive to Dorset to visit Guy’s Marsh, The Verne and Portland in one day could often include a lunch in Pullinger’s restaurant on Weymouth Pier (Ann’s preference), or a stunning view over Chesil Beach from the bar of the Portland Heights hotel. For those who drove their own car, and claimed an expense allowance, such trips also earned a very modest tax-free (in those days) financial benefit, but although this was joked about, I knew very few officers at any time in my career for whom I thought that was the main motivation for their prison visits.

One possible exception to that concerned HMP Dartmoor. Once a colleague mentioned in the tea-room that he had a fortnight’s holiday in Cornwall coming up in a couple of weeks, so he was going to book a visit to Dartmoor on his last Friday afternoon on duty, to ‘pay for’ the car mileage for much of his journey to his holiday accommodation. Another colleague said, “Have you booked the visit yet?” He hadn’t, and of course duly found that the visits room was completely booked up for that Friday, and had been for some time now. Since many other POs across the country had also thought of this ploy, securing this ‘perk’ in reality required considerably earlier advance planning.

Team culture, across the Swindon office, was very much about mutual support almost all the time. This was mainly a good thing, but on the negative side it did mean that one tended not to confront the shortcomings of certain colleagues. An officer rightly facing ‘corrective management’ from SPO Marjorie could easily mistake the friendly emotional support we gave him as a distressed colleague as being ‘support for his behaviour’, which it certainly wasn’t. This left the SPO Marjorie looking and feeling quite isolated, a point I was later to remember, having noted this at the time.

Earlier, during Jay’s time, one team-enhancing activity that we established was when we agreed Thursday as the evening reporting session for all the officers, with one of the clerical staff also agreeing to work late. This mean that it felt like a proper functioning office with us all together during these sessions each week. It was a welcome contrast with the somewhat ‘ghost office’ and frankly unsafe feel that one had when working late as an individual in a half empty building in the dark, as when I had first started. In Wiltshire we were paid on the last Thursday of the month, so the habit developed that three or four of us would adjourn to the Duke of Wellington, on Eastcott Hill, after the reporting evening on that last Thursday of the month. If it was also the first payday after the annual pay rise – which was always a few months after the scheduled July date so there was almost always some backpay too – Doug would immediately extract a cheque for £10 from each of us for the Edridge Benevolent Fund, the national fund for distressed Probation colleagues.

This might make us sound like a strange mix of the frivolous and the earnest – and perhaps that’s correct. There was certainly an earnest desire to do the job well, linked with a belief that Probation supervision was beneficial to the society as well as to the offender. We felt this even though we also knew that the available research findings on reducing reoffending were mixed at best – we thought that what we needed to do was to learn increasingly effective methods. But while in this respect we took the job very seriously indeed, we didn’t take it solemnly, and it was normal to be wryly amused at anecdotes about certain cases, or our own mistakes or miscalculations.

Although Probation staff, like social workers or teachers, tend to be a very inward-looking bunch, we did have some idea of how we perhaps looked to outsiders: rather depressed-looking down-dressing earnest idealists. And we saw the funny side of that too. Late in my Swindon days a new first-year officer arrived – Roy, who dressed smartly, had a bubble perm, and who kept laughing and smiling cheerfully all the time. We took him aside, and in severe mock-earnestness advised him: “Roy, you’re not getting the hang of looking the part of being a Probation Officer at all, and will never get confirmed at this rate. You’re going to have to learn to go around looking much more depressed…” That’s one aspect of how I think we took the job seriously, but not solemnly.

Meanwhile, in those days it was unusual, surprisingly perhaps, to have much direct contact with the police, except in the Magistrates’ Court where a duty Inspector did the prosecutions in those days before the Crown Prosecution Service was founded. However, through a mutual friend I developed a friendship with a duty Inspector, Malcolm Flanagan, and in turn it was through him that I was also invited to join a new Rotary Club, that met in the evenings (on a Tuesday at 7.30, so I could usually just make it). The criterion for Rotary membership was that you should be in an “executive capacity”, which was informally interpreted as ‘you don’t need to ask anyone’s permission to go and get a haircut while at work’. I benefited from the wider horizon on life in the town that Rotary gave me, and I also found it interesting to try to explain my job in plain language terms to my various Rotarian friends. It was still an all-male club in those days, which had initially caused me to hesitate about joining. However, to be frank I think I benefited from this opportunity to participate in regular male company – a complete change from any of my usual social life - in addition to the benefit from engaging with viewpoints that were well outside the familiar public service ethos.

A final reflection at this stage on the ‘treadmill effect’ of the job: I didn’t feel the same degree of ‘relentless treadmill’ effect in either of my next two prison secondment posts, or – most of the time – later on as a senior manager. However, I certainly did feel that treadmill effect as a Senior PO in Newport, which I’ll return to. The later senior manager posts were for me demanding in a different way, and certainly involved working longer hours still – but they didn’t feel like the grinding treadmill that I’d felt in the frontline posts. However, I was to find that perhaps my perspective was not typical. When I became an Assistant Chief PO and attended a course for other new ACPOs, I found in one of the sessions that most of my counterparts had found their earlier posts relatively lacking in stress, and felt that only now as ACPOs were they experiencing serious job stress for the first time. I felt very surprised. There were certainly stresses in being an ACPO, but my viewpoint was that being a main-grade PO in Swindon, and indeed an SPO in Newport, had each had their own way too of providing me with a very exacting and stressful experience.

And the opportunity to find out all those new experiences started to arise from 1979 onwards, as the option of promotion started to occur to me. Originally I had only ever wanted to be a Probation Officer in Swindon, and when I started I thought I would be content to work there for ever. But over the years I found myself wanting to take on an increasing number of ‘managerial’ initiatives:   
1) I plotted on a map all the cases in Swindon at one time, 2) I drafted a paper on the proposed reorganisation of the office in the leadup to the office ‘split’, in 1977-8. 3) With Doug Thorn, I drafted the plan for the induction groups in 1979. 4) I researched how comparable ‘two-team’ Probation offices were organised and resourced in comparable neighbouring cities/towns – I’ll return to that one in Chapter 12. But it was when we learned that Jay was planning to retire in November 1980 that it started to dawn on me that I might now have to make a ‘hard choice’.

I’ve covered my career progression elsewhere, but at this point it is worth recalling the process I went through in my own mind right at the start, because despite that seed of doubt sowed at Gerald’s retirement do I had hitherto had no thoughts of actually becoming a Senior Probation Officer myself. I remember when Jay was on holiday once, and my colleague Reg had had the task of ‘acting up’ for the three weeks, how conscientiously he had gone about it, and how smoothly it went. Later he had moved on to Community Service, where quite a bit later on he did become a Senior. ‘Acting up’ was not a role available to me – tradition said that the PO with the most years’ experience acted up in the SPO’s absence, and I was not close to this. But on the other hand it was widely thought that to apply for a real SPO post one needed about 3-6 years’ experience, and after six years one was leaving it a bit late. So the prospect of Jay’s retirement suggested that I really had to make the hard choice now whether I would ever want promotion at all.

There were many aspects of the responsibility that made me feel apprehensive, but the more I thought about it the more attractive the prospect seemed, as I felt that I could make many things run better – I thought principally in terms of organising things and also providing human support to colleagues doing an often-stressful job. On the other hand, as soon as I made known my intention to apply for the vacancy I also became aware of just that smidgeon of ‘separation’ from colleagues, because with this intention I had set myself apart from them just a fraction. One of the undercurrents that I became perhaps oversensitive to over the three years it took me to achieve promotion was that I had sought to place myself ‘above’ my colleagues but had hitherto failed to do so. I didn’t like that feeling, and it spurred my determination to prove to myself and others that my aspiration was justified!

Of the two advertised roles of Manager and Staff Development, I applied for the job that was about organising things, was interviewed, and didn’t get it. One memory of that was that the interview was held in our staff tea room in Milton Rd, an absurdity that I found distracting – though I think my interview was probably weak anyway. I also applied for a job in Bristol, to manage the office covering St Paul’s, had a much better interview, but didn’t get it. I now had to decide what to do next.

I was reluctant to move house – in September 1979 Mo and I had moved to a bigger house, an excellent Victorian property in Old Town, and this was everything we both wanted (if I’d got the Bristol job it would have been just about commutable). I think that, perhaps in indecision, I probably put my thoughts about promotion mainly on ice for the next few months, while I saw how things developed with the new SPOs in Swindon.

During this period of indecision as to whether to pursue promotion more assiduously I continued to work hard and conscientiously, but with greater awareness of wider horizons I became increasingly restless. In January 1981 I started a part-time MA in Historical Studies at Bristol Polytechnic, and in the summer I had the opportunity to take up a secondment to HM Prison and Detention Centre Erlestoke, near Devizes. This was the one opportunity in Wiltshire for a secondment to a post for a main-grade PO on manageable financial terms - and the reassurance of returning almost certainly to Swindon at the end of two years. I had explored prison secondments before, but outside of area, once to Wandsworth (the ACPO turned me down at an early stage) and once to Bristol (I didn’t pursue). I had reservations about working in a prison, but I also knew from my Gartree experience that it was doable.

The current incumbent, Sally Williams, was encouraging, and before long it seemed that I was the only candidate. I had an appointment to see the Governor, which I thought was for me to ask him about the post, but he seemed to think it was for him to interview me for approval. Fortunately, however, his informal conversational approach meant that it came to much the same thing. Once I’d set him off he did all the talking about the prison as he saw it, and at the end of his talk to me he told me he’d be happy for me to join them.

Meanwhile Sally was to do a straight swap with me – we’d each be driving 26 miles each way in opposite directions from September – and we had some two months to brief each other for our new jobs. Two years later I left Wiltshire altogether, and the officer who filled the vacancy that I left in the Wiltshire PO establishment, Mike McLelland, went on to marry Sally and also to become National Chair of Napo, the union for Probation and Court Welfare staff.

So I didn’t leave Swindon on promotion after all – instead I left to take up the secondment to HM Prison & Detention Centre Erlestoke, near Devizes, Wilts.

## Chapter 10: Probation Officer at HM Prison & DC Erlestoke, 1981-3

*“It’s just the opposite of a holiday.”*

The Prison Service establishment at Erlestoke, on the northern edge of Salisbury Plain, accommodated young adult “trainees” (as they were then called) i.e. those aged between 17 and 20. There were two sites within the grounds, serving what were then two completely different custodial regimes: a Detention Centre (DC) providing typically a first experience of a custodial sentence for the offender that was normally for a nominal three months; and a prison for ‘Young Prisoners’ (YPs), typically for young men in the same age range who had however already usually served at least two custodial sentences. It was the sentencing Court that decided whether the offender went to DC, Borstal or a prison for YPs, within certain formal legal restrictions.

Erlestoke had once been a fine 18th century manor, set in substantial grounds overlooking the vale towards Devizes, but then there had been a catastrophic fire. When the Prison Service took it over an unsightly cell block was then built over the ruined part, and crudely ‘gashed on’ to the surviving part of the manor, presenting an oddly surreal image to the eye in my opinion. This was now the unit for the DC ‘trainees’, and was called ‘Wren’ after Christopher Wren, who either had designed the original manor, or had some other close association with it. The unit for the YPs was called ‘Alfred’ – after Alfred the Great I believe, because Erlestoke was very close to Edington, the site of one of Alfred’s key victories against the invading Vikings. ‘Alfred’ was a couple of linked single-storey huts, of the type one associates with RAF camps, providing dormitory accommodation. Neither unit took more than 100 ‘trainees’, so this was a small establishment in total. The perimeter fence around the large grounds was not classified as ‘secure’, so the YPs allocated to Erlestoke had to be Category ‘D’ – suitable for ‘open’ conditions.

The original plan, when the secondment to Erlestoke had been agreed, was that I would work with the DCs in ‘Wren’ and my Senior PO Chris Noble would continue to work with the YPs in ‘Alfred’. However, during the three weeks I was on holiday before starting, a change of plan became necessary when the neighbouring army camp at Rollestone was suddenly taken over by the Prison Service as an emergency measure during a prison population surge, and so Chris was needed to ‘be’ the Probation presence there for part of each week. Accordingly, another PO was seconded from the Swindon office – Angela, who was near retirement, and who also happened to live quite close by. She took on the DCs, because both she and Chris generously felt that it would be better for my development to work with the YPs. So I took over ‘Alfred’ instead.

In those days the Prison Service paid for a small additional taxable allowance on top of the otherwise fixed Probation salary, but what was much more valuable was the non-taxable allowance for mileage for the return journey from one’s ‘home’ office to the prison each working day. In my case this was 27 miles each way, and I calculated that these allowances would cover a Wiltshire County Council loan which I could take out to buy a new (base) Ford Escort. I could therefore buy the first car I had ever owned, and hand back my Wiltshire County Council Mini.

Every morning I set off from home in Old Town, Swindon, between 7.15 and 7.45 and drove through Wroughton on the A361, through Avebury, across the A4 at Beckhampton, and then through Devizes, where I was buying petrol almost every other day, onto the Salisbury Road, and then turned right just before Salisbury plain – it took about 50 minutes each way, listening to Radio Four, so I arrived soon after 8.30. Most days I stayed inside the prison all day until just before 5.00, usually doing without lunch as I recall, and then catching the PM programme on Radio Four on the way home.

There was a very peculiar sentencing regime for young adults that had developed up until reform in 1983. If a Court wanted to impose a custodial sentence on someone under the age of 21 there were three options available: Detention Centre (DC), Borstal or prison as a “YP” (Young Prisoner), though the statutes strongly constrained which option could be taken. “Borstal Training” had started as quite an idealistic paternalist but originally indeterminate period of custody when it was introduced between the wars, but by the 1970s had become a somewhat anachronistic and fairly fixed ten-month custodial sentence, available only to a Crown Court. DC was intended to be a young offender’s first experience of custody, the “short sharp taste of custody” of just eight weeks in most cases (a “three-month” sentence, minus remission), which optimists hoped would divert that person from further offending. My colleague Angela was handling these cases at Erlestoke, in ‘Wren’ unit, and I had very little contact with those cases, as SPO Chris did most of the covering work there when needed.

However, we did discuss our respective separate roles when we met, once or twice a week, and one observation by Angela about her work remained memorable for me. At that time – and even more so later as the 1980s moved on – DC was strongly promoted by penal hawks as a “short sharp shock” that they thought would be more effective if it were a tougher regime still; meanwhile the penal doves told stories about how it made naïve offenders into hardened worse offenders. I’ve never found either kind of generalisation terribly helpful, and I found more resonance in Angela’s observations about the young men she’d seen both now and in her past experience - they had certainly not enjoyed their experience in a DC, but despite that it had made no difference either way to their future behaviour.

She told me how she explained it to others she knew, such as members of the local Conservative Association that her husband chaired. “These young men don’t connect the experience with anything they’ve recently done. It’s just the opposite of a holiday.” She meant that it was a ‘negative’ holiday rather than the more usual ‘positive’ holiday in terms of the experience, but that it was the same as a holiday in that it was a separate compartmentalised experience in one’s life, but one that doesn’t actually cause a person to change their behaviour back in the normal world. By then I’d previously dealt with many older men who had served a series of sentences throughout their adult lives, and one frequent observation from these serial offenders was that they felt they simply lived two parallel lives – the life outside prison and the one inside it – as two entirely separate parallel experiences, with neither ‘life’ having any connection with or impact on the other. Angela’s view was consistent with that.

On a related point, I was by that time coming to the conclusion that for a large proportion of the offenders who came our way, especially the young ones, the problem was that they simply didn’t think about what they were doing a great deal of the time. When I went through with them their previous behaviours and subsequent Court sentences, it seemed in many cases that their offences were things that simply just ‘happened to them’, and the idea that one might have a choice seemed almost novel to many of them. With such individuals, deterrent punishment can’t prevent what they do, until or unless they gain the idea of choice of how they might behave, and the ability to exercise that choice. For this reason, the introduction of cognitive behaviour groups for offenders, later in the 1990s, seemed to me a very valuable new development, though as always with innovations it should not have been deployed as if it were a cure-all to be applied to every case.

Let’s return now to ‘my half’ of Erlestoke. The national ‘Young Prisoner’ population broadly consisted of two distinct elements. There were a few individuals who had committed an offence too serious even for Borstal (so sometimes such cases might have hardly any previous convictions) and there was a much larger number of individuals who had already served a Borstal sentence and who continued offending. Often that further offending merited further custody. Naturally, not many of either of these groups in the whole country were assessed as ‘Cat D’ (suitable for open conditions), and therefore Erlestoke had to trawl almost the whole country in order to find suitable ‘trainees’ to fill its Alfred Unit.

Actually there was nothing scientific about how this was done in practice: long before there was any genuine centralised prisoner allocation system the process consisted of a Senior Officer (‘SO’ grade prison officer, arguably the equivalent of a corporal or sergeant) phoning another ‘SO’ he might personally know in a few ‘Local’ prisons – these were the prisons that took people from Court and then looked to allocate them onwards – and ask them if they’ve got anyone suitable they could send. Although we were formally in the South West Prison Region at the time, we got very few cases from within our region, and most of Erlestoke’s intake came from London or Birmingham, and a quite a few from further afield such as Chelmsford, Durham, and Manchester.

As in all prisons at the time, every prisoner had to be ‘processed’ – ‘induction’ was the official term – consisting of each prisoner being seen and entered on the records of each separate ‘department’ within the prison. We only took prisoners in on one day a week (Tuesday I think it was), and a minibus might arrive with about six or eight young men, bewildered after quite a long drive. (Some young men arriving from Manchester told me that the SO had told them they were going to a nice place in the country for their sentence, but he had not mentioned that it would be about a five-hour drive…) I took my turn in interviewing the new arrivals one by one, and alongside noting all the formal details of them and their sentence and their ‘home’ Probation Officer etc I would also go through some of their previous offences and Court appearances.

This task confirmed a view I’d gained by then that the problem for a lot of these young men was they simply didn’t think about what they were doing. Typically, they either took and drove away cars, which was not difficult in those days, or broke into houses to steal portable TVs and video recorders which could then be sold down the pub. Most did this with others, and were vague about why it seemed a good idea at the time – so that increasingly I took the view that a lot of offending of this kind is simply ‘good fun’. Textbooks then often described the offending that arises from poverty or “boredom” from unemployment etc as desperate cries for help, but although I agree that social conditions are a relevant experience that some people seek distraction from, I think we often fail to appreciate that committing offences is often enjoyable in itself.

This view was often reinforced if and when I got onto the subject of what the money they wanted was for. A debt or similar practical need was often the first response to this question, after which I’d go on to ask how much they’d gained, and then how that money had actually been spent. I was somewhat taken aback to find over the course of my two years in Erlestoke how often the answer was that they and their friends would go by train to a neighbouring town and go “shopping” – basically, an enjoyable day out.

The other salutary lesson I learned from this quantity of ‘routine’ interviews was their perception of going to Court. I would be trying to see if any of their previous sentences – especially either Probation or Community Service – had had any impact on them in any way, or even started the process of thinking and reflection. Given that they were repeat offenders I was not overly surprised that few could remember any specific detail about any of their previous sentences or what had happened after them. What was glaring from these vague recollections of so many repeat offenders over two years, was that to most of them there were basically only two sentences – there was either “going down” or “getting off”. This was not good news for a Probation Officer who believed that a community sentence should be a ‘real sentence’ and definitely not be a case of simply “getting off”. But that perception was a reality that I realised from then on that we have to face up to; when advocating community sentences (or early release) we should be straightforward about what a community sentence can and can not achieve, rather than spout nonsense about it being as ‘tough’ a sentence as custody.

Meanwhile, as I went through all the routine factual questions I needed to know from each of the new arrivals each week I was struck how wasteful and duplicatory this all was – each ‘trainee’ was being asked the same questions by over six different prison staff in the course of a day. I got together with the unit Principal Officer (‘PO’), Colin Marker, to see how we could improve. We jointly devised some documentation so that we would only ask each prisoner each question once, and then share (copy) that documentation. But it required a lot of co-ordination between departments and I doubt if it survived for long after we each moved on. Overall I had a lot of respect for Colin Marker, and although I met some other very able Prison Officers over the years, I always felt that Colin was the finest I ever worked with. Thirty years later there was still discussion in the Prison Service about how to eliminate wasteful duplication – more feasible in principle with computerisation, but still difficult to achieve in practice.

On the other hand, what did work better was when I embarked on ‘courses’ of individual interviews with certain trainees in much more depth – mainly the ones who were serving sentences that made them eligible to apply for parole – and I realised that it was wasteful to use their ‘work time’ for this. They only had about two hours each morning and each afternoon at their place of work (some of which led to City and Guilds certificates), while they might have an hour or more doing nothing after lunch while the staff took their own break. Therefore, rather than call the individual out from their work time (which I was entitled to do) I started to use that hour after lunch, typically 12.30 to 1.30, to do these interviews – which seemed a sensible innovation.

These ‘lunchtime’ interviews, plus the weekly batch of reception interviews, were the majority of my direct face-to-face work with Erlestoke ‘trainees’. It’s difficult for me to identify examples of where I felt I made a difference to the life of any of them except in minor ways, though my aim was to enable them to gain early release if possible and then make a success of it. The only one of those cases that I can recall now was memorable simply because of the young man’s straightforwardness about doing domestic burglaries for a livelihood (not his words obviously). He had no problem talking through with me his train of thought when he went around neighbourhoods at night in his home town (Derby), and was merely rueful when recounting his arrest, and also when encountering a house he couldn’t break into – it was double-glazed (unusual then) and “the brick just bounced off!” His attitude was uncommon in my experience of talking with burglary and theft offenders over the years – the majority seem simply not to given much thought to what they were doing. The minority of much more ‘calculated’ offenders do exist though – which many colleagues and commentators seemed to ignore – and the wittiest one I met was in 1999 in another institution (Huntercombe), who quipped, “My problem is that I’ve a champagne lifestyle and a lemonade income!”

I didn’t do these lunchtime interviews on Wednesdays though – this was the regular day each week that the three of us (Chris, Angela and myself) went out of the prison and visited one of the many Wiltshire country pubs within a seven-mile radius that served a nice pint and a nice meal. Occasionally I took a visiting Probation Officer out to one as well, as I saw it a major part of my job to develop a ‘complementary’ working relationship between prison staff and ‘home’ Probation Officers, and I wanted to encourage POs to visit.

London officers were usually quite good at visiting, whether they were in the then specialist ‘Throughcare unit’ in Borough High St or not, while it was usually quite difficult to get a visit from a West Midlands officer. Bettina Crossick was a memorable officer visiting from London, but memorable only for me – years later she was in NOMS and I was Chief Inspector and when I sought to remind her of the event she had no recollection of her visit. The most memorable visit was by John Murphy of Hertfordshire (Cheshunt office I think). He had great difficulty getting his management to agree to him coming, but Colin Marker and I thought it important for the particular case he had, so with our help he gained permission from his management to visit.

To our surprise he came down by hitchhiking, turning out to be an (apparently) mild-mannered blond long-haired character in jeans with a strong ethic of the ‘noble hippy’ kind (as distinct from the stereotyped ‘debauched lazy hippy’ kind). One of the Erlestoke secretaries had been driving back to the prison at lunchtime, and had driven past this hitchhiker at the crossroads with her nose in the air, and was therefore very surprised to see him in my office later in the afternoon. Colin took a deep breath when he was introduced to John later on, but they had a good conversation, and Colin was actually favourably impressed that John knew his stuff, and was encouraged by the meeting. I drove John north at the end of the afternoon and dropped him by the M4 on my way home. Later I heard over the years that he was regarded as quite a pain in the neck by Herts managers, and I wouldn’t be surprised if he was obstinate at times, but equally I doubt if they knew how to bring out the best in him. There are different ways of doing this job well, and for me, meeting officers whether eccentric or not was a definite benefit of this otherwise relatively routine prison job.

Having said that, I should also acknowledge that for the first ten months of my time at Erlestoke I also disappeared off to Bristol for a number of Wednesday afternoons and evenings to attend the St Matthias site of the then Bristol Polytechnic (now University of the West of England) as part of my MA in Historical Studies. I was in a class of two studying British and American Business and Entrepreurial History with two very good lecturers; the class session was in the evening but I often arrived mid-afternoon to spend some time in the Library and on private or preparatory study. There were also ten (I think) Thursday evenings in total – evenings only – when we had classes in Quantitative Methods, which were excellent.

From the summer of 1982 onwards formal classes in Bristol ceased but I booked a succession of Mondays as annual leave to go to the Public Records Office at Kew to trawl through Great Western Railway records to research for my dissertation. Almost as significant was that from March 1982 to May 1983 I had over a dozen different (failed) interviews for various Senior Probation Officer posts in many different parts of the country. So all of these, too, gave me days away from the prison.

At the time the most important interview seemed to be for Chris Noble’s own post in May 1982, when Roy Runswick in Trowbridge retired, and Chris was allowed to move sideways into Roy’s job, creating the vacancy in Erlestoke. Interviews were with three or so members of the employing Probation Committee, in this case in County Hall in Trowbridge. The Chief would be in attendance, as would an assistant from the Committee Secretary’s office. My interview was first, I think, and then I went to work in the prison. At the end of the afternoon I got a call from the assistant, who said “I’m afraid you’ve been unsuccessful”, and that was it.

The successful candidate, Chris Wheeler, was currently working in Leyhill Prison, and he started several weeks later. He had real ability, and also the charm that I didn’t have, and he was good in giving a new impetus to the SPO role in Erlestoke. He was also both skilful and sensitive in the way he handled a very bruised and angry me. He was helpful in many ways, in developing my skills by directly observing me interviewing – this had NEVER been done before! – and offering advice on this and on job applications. He often joked that his nightmare was that I would come back one day as his Assistant Chief, and so (he said) this was why after I left the following year he had to keep applying for promotion to prevent this happening. Indeed he became Assistant Chief and then Chief in Wiltshire – in the latter instance both he and I were interviewed for that post, so his nightmare was not that far off coming true.

One almost-final incident at Erlestoke I should mention is the day that I officially went on strike. In October 1982 NAPO had at its annual Conference and AGM passed a resolution that if the Home Office did not back down on its reform of the arrangements for trainee POs we would take action including strike action (for one day). I warmly agreed with the cause, but I’d voted against the proposed strike action. But I knew that the Executive was now bound by the AGM resolution. The cause was that the Home Office was no longer going to pay a salary for trainees, usually over two years, and would instead pay a grant – less money and less status now, and fewer pension contributions and less length of continuous service for postholders in the longer term. The cause was therefore not at all about current members, but about what we felt was the future recruitment to the service. We felt it discouraged people seeking a second career and would make us more dependent on young graduates, so the ‘mix’ of staff would be weakened. (On this point, we were of course proved absolutely correct over time.)

So I was strongly ‘for’ the cause, particularly as it was a genuinely altruistic one, but I didn’t agree with going on strike in principle, and furthermore, when the day was named it was a day I particularly wanted to be at work – it was one of the early evening ‘Board’ meetings between a succession of individual trainees and key staff, an innovation that I had worked especially hard (with Colin Marker) to establish. My wife at the time was Mo, who argued that there was no point being a member of a union and then expecting to opt out of decisions made by proper process. Eventually I devised a slightly bizarre solution: I wrote to the Chief, saying that I was formally on strike from 7.15 am to 3.15 pm (one working day) on the relevant day - Weds 27 April from memory. I then drove to work and we had the early evening Board meetings as scheduled.

Needless to say, members of the POA (prison officers’ union) at the prison thought I was barmy, but I felt that honour was satisfied by being loyal to my union, being ‘on the record’ as being part of the strike and losing a day’s pay – and yet I got my planned work done. Also needless to say, the Home Office policy proceeded as planned. A month later I was invited by Payroll to pay the missing pension contribution for the missing day (about £5), which I wrongly decided not to do – I was at least fortunate not to lose my continuous service.

My decision on that occasion was perhaps somewhat barmy, though to my mind it meant it served two otherwise-contradictory purposes. There was also an absurdist element to my behaviour, with which I was comfortable because I find I’m often struck by the absurdist aspects of Probation work, especially in work in prisons. I’ve mentioned already the weekly intake of new arrivals transferred to Erlestoke from a remand prison. I would be interviewing each of these for about ten minutes each, as would a number of other prison staff, and as I described earlier I and the Principal Officer tried to streamline that largely bureaucratic procedure. Nevertheless I was still seeing each of them for that initial interview, and over time two separate absurdist themes struck me.

The first concerned the regular intake that arrived from HMP Birmingham. This was happening, for me, at the same time as on a regular satirical TV show, ‘A Kick up the Eighties’, Rik Mayall was doing a regular monologue slot using the ‘character role’ of “Kevin Turvey”, a young man from Redditch who described his life each week in a strongly West-Midlands-accented haphazard stream of consciousness. At first I hadn’t found “Kevin Turvey” particularly funny, but over the weeks the absurdist thought struck me that half of each week’s arrivals from HMP Birmingham were sounding to me like “Kevin”. I’m sure that I continued to carry out my role seriously each week, but there was a part of me inside smiling about how well Rik Mayall had captured the accent, mannerisms and thought-flow of a certain proportion of young men from the West Midlands.

The other absurdist theme that struck me from this time came from Monty Python’s Life of Brian. It’s where Michael Palin is a prison guard, with clipboard and pen, asking the question, with the kindliest demeanour, of each prisoner, “Crucifixion?... Yes?... Line over there – one cross each.” For I recognised that I had consciously chosen not to do, as most Prison Officers did, and stand at my office door and bellow down the corridor the surname of the trainee I wanted to see. I’d find them, call them by their full name, and accompany them back to my office on the wing. While I wasn’t quite the cartoon-softie persona lampooned by Palin’s portrayal, I did still see quite a strong absurdist parallel between what I was doing each week and that ‘Life of Brian’ prison guard.

It’s therefore worth adding here that in addition to the excellent Colin Marker, I gained a lot of respect for quite a number of the other Prison Officers at Erlestoke. A ‘Personal Officer’ scheme was officially in operation, whereby each trainee had a nominated Prison Officer who would be his contact person for any immediate problems or other aspects of pastoral care. However there was little training or provision for time within the regime, so depending much on the individual Officer, its operation in reality was patchy. One Officer, who was also a Football League referee, was enthusiastic and imaginative – he arranged for the temporary release of one talented trainee to have a trial for Bristol Rovers.

The demeanour of another Officer was a complete contrast – he appeared the very archetypal stereotype of a stern controlling Ulsterman. One day I was interviewing a trainee, perhaps to clarify his release plans, and this led him to say that there had been a problem with them, but he’d seen his Personal Officer, and he’d made a number of phone calls, and sorted it all out. The details escape me now, but it had not been a straightforward problem – and of course the Officer was this gruff Ulsterman. On the principle of ‘Try to catch someone doing something well’ I found him in the corridor later that day, and although he’d barely had a civil word for me up to now I told him that I’d heard how helpful he’d been to ‘trainee X’. Came the reply along the lines of “We’re not all woodentops you know” before he strode off. It takes all sorts…

And then there was the 1981-2 winter snow. On the first day of the major snowfall I drove south from my house but was stopped by a wall of snow in or just beyond Wroughton, and I didn’t get to work. The next day, research told me I could get to Erlestoke by going via Chippenham and Westbury – three sides of a rectangle, and that’s how I got in all that week. I went in on principle, even though the ‘fringe’ roles like mine couldn’t get much done in practice – but the Prison Officer tasks were ‘essential’. Some of them had strode across fields in wellingtons to get to work the first day, partly out of dedication and partly out of macho pride, but they’d kept the place going. Their ‘world’ was a very different one from the one I experienced, but despite those differences of opinion and perspective I maintained a respect for them.

Overall I did my job conscientiously at Erlestoke, and I also introduced some innovations, but it is fair to say that a lot of my attention was also given to doing my MA work, to being Branch Membership Secretary for NAPO, to being Secretary of my Rotary Club in Swindon, and also on gaining promotion to SPO. Most of my fifteen ‘failed’ SPO interviews were during the second half of this period. More happily, my younger son Stephen was born during this demanding time.

However, from my Erlestoke work I gained a clear idea about how to define and develop the ‘Liaison Probation’ role in a prison, which I was able to describe in my successful interview in Gwent (described in Chapter 4), and which I was then able to deliver in practice as an SPO in HM Youth Custody Centre & Detention Centre Usk.

## Chapter 11: Senior Probation Officer at HMYCC & DC Usk, Gwent, 1983-6

*“Actually, 150 recommendations is quite a good result.”*

Those first few months in Usk from July 1983 were a useful settling-in period, both for the job in the institution(s) and for life in Wales Probation and Wales generally, which seemed so different even though I’d only moved 60 miles westwards. I was returning to Swindon each weekend, while we tried to sell the house, and I claimed an allowance so that during the week I could for the time being lodge in the Prison Officer ‘quarters’. These were bare but serviceable, in a Victorian semi-detached house in Usk opposite the institution, although ironically only I and the Admin Officer were using them. Indeed the Prison Service was in the process of selling off such property nationally, and I was asked to leave before the end of the calendar year – fortunately this fitted perfectly my plans as they worked out. (The Governor, John Capel, was fortunate in being able to buy his magnificent detached house at a relatively well discounted price, and retained it even when his job moved him away.)

I didn’t cook much during those six months, as Usk with its population of c2,000 had thirteen pubs at the time, all of which sold real ale and did cheap meals – though almost all of these were of an identikit something-and-chips format. I went for a (very short) run some mornings, and despite the beer I could feel myself getting a little fitter, though I doubt if I ever ran further than a mile or so. My office was in the YCC (Youth Custody Centre) at Prescoed, three miles up in the wooded hills between Usk and Pontypool. This was a site with no fence but with wooden huts, built just before the war, where I had – great privilege – a small room of my own in a hut not far from the gatehouse hut, but I walked out and about as much as I could to get to know the staff, primarily, and also some of the longer-term trainees who might be eligible for parole.

My principal aim in the YCC in these early days was to convince the many experienced (and often dedicated) former Borstal staff that I was not there to take away or detract from their job, but to ‘add value’ and to improve relations with ‘home Probation Officers’. I also managed the singleton Probation Officer who did the more orthodox ‘social worker’ role in the DC (Detention Centre) in Usk, a traditional (though small) Victorian gaol. Susan was a very sound and straightforwardly competent officer, as was her later successor, Cellan, which was helpful.

In my first week the Governor showed me – as a reminder of the past - the Victorian register of inmates, which included a young girl serving a short sentence for a very minor theft (of milk or coal, I think). There was still a Court house next to the DC, and at one time there had been a tunnel between the two buildings for the direct ‘taking down’ and/or ‘producing’ of prisoners – very practical. Up at Prescoed, during my first week or so that July, I was watching one morning as the officers lined up all the ‘trainees’ for a muster before despatching them to their work parties. Suddenly I realised that a couple of young hikers were striding purposefully down the road towards them. I imagined they were Scandinavian or something, and lost, and went over to them to suggest that they were lost and needed to move away quickly – but the Principal Officer in charge stopped me and said, “No, it’s perfectly alright – this is a public footpath.” The possibility that a prison might have a public footpath through the middle of it had oddly not occurred to me.

Back in the town, as well as having the semi-detached house that constituted ‘Prison Officer’ quarters (but with no Prison Officers in it), Usk also still had a Prison Staff Social Club, in a detached building in a field to the south of the DC, which was also under-used – hardly surprising with so many pubs available in such a small town.

Accordingly, in a bid to increase business, the Committee there decided to organise a team Quiz competition, three members per team, on a knockout basis as I recall. This was during my first few months in the job, and I was keen to participate, to show support for my new workplace. But I had to overcome the slight problem that my ‘department’ only had two members, being just me and Susan. The Senior Psychologist, Zoe, had committed herself to another team, and so at first I tried to get someone in from the local Pontypool Probation office – without success. I had a good team name, I thought, because by calling ourselves the ‘Do-Gooders’ I thought the self-deprecation would appeal to other staff – but I was becoming stumped for a third member.

Then the Yorkshire-born Assistant Governor, who already had a full complement for his own team, said to me one day, “Have you thought of asking t’Old Man?” – a term which threw me for a moment, until I realised he meant the Governor. The term didn’t immediately resonate with John Capel’s slim, healthy but rather ascetic and almost youthful appearance. Indeed, no one else had asked him either, and he too was delighted to have this chance of showing support for this staff event. His knowledge of opera and fine art complemented rather well my knowledge of history and football, and Susan’s contribution, so over two or three evenings over a couple of weeks we won rather handsomely, beating a local pub team in the final – and I still have the trophy…

It was a big wrench to sell the house in Swindon, which took six months, and we took on an even bigger house in Newport (at less cost), though it needed considerable work. This gave me a fairly straightforward commute from my home of about 11 miles each way to Prescoed and nearly 15 miles to the DC.

The overall job at Usk developed quite satisfactorily from my point of view, with my establishing a good level of credibility with the staff there after a fair amount of initial suspicion from some of the staff. Good links were made with colleague SPOs in other establishments in the same Prison Region, and with a wide range of ‘home’ Probation Officers across southern Wales, south-west England and parts of the Midlands. My ‘Liaison Probation’ role was to promote a ‘joined-up’ service of ‘throughcare’ – as we called it then – of Probation Officers from the trainee’s home area working in good co-operation with that same trainee’s ‘personal officer’ (a Prison Officer). When it worked, there was a coherent plan for the trainee that started in the institution and continued through the period of post-custody supervision. Culturally, there had been traditionally a lot of mutual suspicion between Probation and Prison Officers, which sometimes I felt I was successful in breaking down and sometimes I wasn’t.

I was keen to introduce the idea of Prison staff being colleagues not ‘enemies’ at an early stage in Probation Officer training, and to this effect I became a regular provider of input at each placement in the Cardiff and Newport Student Units. After a struggle I even managed to do an input once at the Bristol Student Unit, and at occasional staff events elsewhere such as Bodmin in Cornwall. I felt very fortunate that my role involved me visiting ‘county management’ meetings at a number of the Probation Services in South Wales, and to various team meetings as far afield from Usk as West Bromwich. There was the occasional minor irritation that the prison officers who staffed the (non-existent) ‘gate’ at the entrance to Prescoed tended to assume that if I wasn’t on site I wasn’t working, but overall relations were positive.

I also finished writing up my MA thesis, which an Usk secretary typed up for £50, and I gained my MA in July 1984. In the same month we had two Home Office Probation Inspectors (as they then were) visit Usk for three days (!) to assess how the new post was working out. The visit went quite well, especially when the Gwent Assistant Chief, Vince Magill, came up for the final afternoon. When at one point he thought that the two Inspectors were pressing me too hard he suddenly barked at them fiercely and sent them into full retreat. It wasn’t necessary for him to do that, but he did make me feel supported!

An aside at this point: Although we’d had the visit by the Home Secretary when I was in Swindon, I’d never seen an Inspector the whole six years I was there, but by the time I’d completed my five years in Erlestoke and Usk, I’d met four Probation Inspectors and the Head of the Probation Service Division of the Home Office (“C6”), in addition to various Prisons Inspectors.

For there were several visits by HM Inspectorate of Prisons, notably including a full Prison Inspection during this period, possibly late 1983, the course of which I noted at the time with some bemusement. The Inspectorate team took over an entire ‘hut’ at Prescoed for the fortnight, went hither and thither for the period, both observing the regime and interviewing various staff including me. But the Chief Inspector of Prisons himself, Sir James Hennessey, was to visit in person for the last day or two, and I was invited to take tea with him on the Friday afternoon. He was a former diplomat (ex-Governor of Bermuda I think), and from memory he had the Governor’s office that day. We sat down for tea and had a very pleasant conversation, not so much about Usk but about various criminal justice matters such as capital punishment.

From memory, it was eleven months later (yes, really) when the draft report arrived at the prison from the Prison Inspectorate. It had something like 150 recommendations, including one to clean the moss off the top of the (Victorian) perimeter prison wall at the DC. I was aghast that the Inspectors’ judgements bore no relation to the ‘contract’ that the Governor was required to ‘deliver’ to his Regional Director, and I asked John if this did not upset him too. “Not really,” he said “Actually, 150 recommendations is quite a good result.” Most inspections in those days produced two or three hundred, he believed.

So I learned at the time that success must always be measured against expectations. In fairness, I also later learned that Prison Inspection was about assessing against independent expectations of ‘decency’ rather than performance measures of effectiveness. But having said that, I couldn’t see the point of large numbers of recommendations, many of which were just micro details.

From the start I was keen to show that although I mainly worked the five-day week I wanted both to understand and take a share of the responsibility of the whole of the regime. In my first week I did an observation of the whole of a ‘long day’ at both parts of the establishment, and the work and training opportunities – this took me from 7.00am to past 10.00. I also took care to attend the Management meetings, even on the days when my ‘Probation’ contract entitled me to a statutory day’s leave (but then those contracts did give us a lot of leave).

However, I was to learn once again that ‘cultural’ expectations can vary. At the time, Probation culture was to be fairly relaxed about punctuality, and meetings in the Probation world rarely started on time in my experience. I imagined that in contrast the mainly uniformed Prison Service would be much more disciplined, and I was keen to show that I was not of the casual ilk. So I made sure that I got to my first Management meeting early.

I arrived to an empty room – <“Not to worry, I’m early”> - but then at the scheduled start time of 10.30 the room was still empty, and although I’d already double-checked the details my fear was aroused that the location had changed. Eventually, it was 10.40 when I was first joined by another manager, after which the room quickly filled, and off we went. This pattern continued. The Prison Service culture – at least here – was every bit as tardy as the ones I’d previously experienced, if not more so.

But one of these meetings had, in retrospect, a lifelong effect on me. Earlier that week it had been announced that in future the prison discharging an inmate would no longer issue the higher grant to those who were going out ‘homeless’ – everyone would receive just the standard grant, whether homeless or not. In a nationally negotiated change of policy the Department for social security had undertaken that any newly discharged prisoner who presented themselves as homeless at a social security office on release would be assessed and if necessary given the necessary additional financial assistance. I was absolutely outraged at this development, because all my experience to date told me that this was unlikely to work in reality in local offices across the country, no matter what was being promised in Whitehall.

I attended that week’s Management meeting – it was in the DC that week – in a fury. When we got to that item on the agenda I let fly and ranted about the subject. As I looked round the room I just saw blank faces: on one level, it was not their problem, but even if they did think it was their problem there was nothing anyone round that table could do at that moment. Our job was to implement a new policy decided by the government, and we’d have no authority to dispense money differently. All my rant had done was to make me feel a bit better emotionally. They waited politely for me to finish and then got on with the rest of the meeting.

On further reflection, the thought also came to me that it must have been a deeply unattractive experience for them to have this person in their meeting seize the moral high ground and go on a self-indulgent rant, clearly implying that he was somehow morally superior to them with his sanctimonious viewpoint. From that day on I have been much more careful about how and why I ‘let fly’ when at work. First, there has had to be a specific purpose, decision or action that can be taken as a result of my rant, and second, I have tried to take care not to imply any claims of moral superiority in my viewpoint – I try to keep it rationally practical.

For a different reason one episode at the DC caused me some brief consternation one morning. It was announced on the morning news that the Government had decided to extend the flagship ‘extra tough short sharp shock’ regimes from the two original DCs to all other DCs with immediate effect. Introducing the two original pilot ‘tough regimes’ had been politically popular with the Conservative Party’s core support, so this announcement was not a complete surprise – even though there was no evidence that it had made a difference to reoffending – but to me it was certainly unwelcome. I rushed down to the DC to see the Principal Officer in charge to ask him what difference this was going to make to our regime in Usk. “No difference,” he told me blankly, and he then rather toyed with me as I tried to recap what I had heard on the news, and what he was saying, and to reconcile these two pieces of information.

When he had enjoyed himself sufficiently watching my bemusement, he then explained that the definition of what constituted the ‘tough DC’ regime had been changed – and it had changed so that it aligned with the regime being operated at Usk already (and presumably at most of the other DCs as well). Hence nothing needed to change at Usk to comply with the new announcement. At that time I was astonished at the bare-faced cheek of the political announcement, but at least it prepared me for some of the political posturing that I encountered in the later years of my career.

After the first year or so I was there, a ‘new build’ programme started at Prescoed. The huts in the woods had been there for many years, and some may even have at one time dated from when the pre-war Borstal Governor had marched a troop of his ‘boys’ up into the woods to pitch the original Prescoed “Camp”. But now some beautifully designed new-build structures were rising up, and again I was fortunate in that I was moved to one of the new ones fairly early on. At first I was given a generously large room in one of the new buildings, and then sensibly moved to a smaller room when the Senior Psychologist moved on.

Throughout this time, alongside all the ‘liaison’ duties that I’ve described, between Prison Service staff inside the institution and the Probation Service staff from the surrounding areas, I was also doing some direct work with the young offenders themselves. But to me it was important that any work I did with offenders was seen as additional to, and not as ‘taking over from’ work that had previously been done by Officers under the earlier Borstal regime.

This suited me anyway, as I had no ambition to return to the routine weekly induction interview schedule that I’d had at Erlestoke. The Officers were welcome to continue with that at Prescoed, while in the DC my main-grade colleague continued to do that there. So instead she and I devised and ran some pre-discharge courses, including on benefits entitlements (the Citizens Advice people in Cardiff helped us design this), and again I regularly saw those whose sentences were long enough to make them eligible to apply for parole.

During my last two years at Usk/Prescoed I looked for further ways to develop both my role and my personal skills. I devised an ‘ongoing’ research project to ‘profile’ the inmate population on arrival and departure at the four main YCCs (all male) in the South West Prison Region: Portland, Guy’s Marsh, Erlestoke and Usk. For a set period of some 17 months each ‘reception’ (arriving inmate) had a number of his details entered on to a ‘database’ that I devised, and then further details were added at the end about the throughcare contact that they either had or had not received from their home Probation area.

The ‘database’ in those largely pre-PC days was recorded on sets of ‘Cope-Chat’ cards, and Colin Roberts (the Oxford academic) had helped me design that database. My delegated ‘team’ of colleagues in each of the four institutions – my new PO Cellan Rees did it for me in Usk/Prescoed – clipped out the holes that went round the perimeter of each card, one card per inmate (“trainee”), in effect a series of questions in binary form. Then at the end of the period when we had a large enough cohort I collated the information by putting a sturdy needle through each of the holes in the set of cards. Cards that were left on the needle were effectively the ‘No’ answers to that question (hole) and cards that came off because the hole had been clipped were the ‘Yes’ answers. Because we were looking at all the ‘receptions’ in all of the four YCCs in the prison region as a single cohort it was a reasonably strong representation of the YCC population as a whole for the region.

The main findings about the YCC ‘receptions’ were that there were lots of YCC cases with numerous convictions though still serving short sentences, and about a third of the whole sample had had experience of going through the system for local authority care. For the YCC ‘discharges’, they had had a variable throughcare service from Probation, and although the Cardiff specialist unit had provided a particularly consistent service, other specialist units had not necessarily done so, and overall the quality was more down to individual officers than it was to managerial policy. A summary article is on my website.

The experience of this project then inspired me to organise a further project to look at the profile of all cases under Probation supervision throughout the county of Gwent, and here I was successful in securing the help of the computer people at Gwent County Council where all the information of a one-off survey went on to a database on the County Council mainframe. This piece of work concluded just at the time I was moving from Usk to Newport. There was a fair amount of ‘quite interesting’ information from this, although the main practical benefit was to quantify what percentage of cases currently needed intervention in which aspects of their lives, albeit in the opinion of their supervising officer. As I was to find out later, the need for help with employment was always underestimated by Probation Officers, for a combination of reasons.

This illustrates the point that at the same time that I was establishing my new role within the Prison Service at Usk/Prescoed I was also establishing a role for myself within the Gwent Probation Service generally, which employed me, and in addition in a broader sense within the world of ‘Wales Probation’ overall. The Gwent service was a very similar size to Wiltshire, having one Chief, one Assistant Chief, and nine Senior POs including me. The only other SPO who had been promoted from outside Gwent, the Scot John Baillie, had been appointed 17 years earlier than me. All were friendly in demeanour, but the informal culture was markedly different from what I had become used to.

I gained some early learning informally from John Austin, the Newport SPO who suddenly had to retire early with heart trouble. He lived close to Usk, and so after his retirement about once a week I would go and see him at lunchtime to have a pint and a soup at a pub about a mile up the road from his home. He told me colourful stories about how, soon after the war, the onetime Monmouthshire magistrates interviewed PO candidates in the dock at Monmouth Assizes, and didn’t want to appoint people who were “too Welsh” (i.e. spoke Welsh). However, they were also suspicious of him as a Londoner when he was interviewed until they learned that he was married to “Doctor Roberts’ daughter” (Dr Roberts, the GP in Ebbw Vale). That meant it was ‘alright’ to appoint him PO, and later SPO.

This also occasioned the first of a couple of SPO retirement events, the nature of which brought home to me further that I had moved to a completely foreign country. Gwynn, our CPO, would book this small restaurant up towards Brecon, where he, Vince and the nine SPOs and wives had a roast dinner of either beef or lamb, and then the various people who liked talking took it in turns to stand up and tell stories about what it had been like in the (good?) old days. These were mainly stories of fiasco or mishap or ‘bending the rules’ – not unreasonable in itself – but the quantity of them drew attention to a rather complacent outlook on the job.

Once a month Gwynn had a ‘County Management’ meeting in HQ (then at 9 Gold Tops, next to the Registrar’s office) that started at 10.00 am and finished promptly at noon – a point I return to below. The most memorable item for me, which said it all about these meetings, and about how Gwynn ran the organisation, was at the end of my first year in post when the last item on the agenda was ‘Staff Evaluations’. We reached it at five to twelve, and he said, “As you’ll all remember, we stopped doing staff evaluations a few years ago. Well, we’re going to start doing them again from now on, and here’s the form…” – which he then passed round, a single A4 sheet with about half a dozen headings. That was then the end of the meeting.

Incidentally, I had been completely unaware that Gwent had “stopped doing staff evaluations”, though I did know that the attitude to supervising staff was utterly different from what I had been used to. Susan had been very surprised, and at first took it negatively, when I told her that we would be having a one-to-one session once a month. I soon learned that the unspoken culture in Gwent was that what we called “supervision” was something you had in your first year, and then you ‘grew out of’, and that even asking for help or advice at any time was regarded as a sign of weakness. This was just one of the various rather unattractive and unhealthy ‘macho’ aspects of Probation ‘culture’ across large parts of South Wales, especially Gwent at the time, which I had to learn to take into account – very different from my previous experience in Wiltshire under Lawrence Frayne.

Meanwhile, the reason the meetings ended at 12 noon was that basically Gwynn only worked in the mornings. Usually with Vince, he then went down the pub half way into town, until 3.00pm closing time (then), after which he might go to Littlewoods and buy a bottle of red wine to drink in the office. If you were ‘in favour’ at the time, you might be asked to join them, which happened to me a couple of times late in my first year, until I inadvertently upset him again.

The big event for Gwent Probation as a whole while I was at Usk/Prescoed was the Community Service scandal. Clive Morgan was a very charismatic Community Service Organiser, who ran a highly idiosyncratic scheme. He had many prestigious visitors to see what he did, including by David Mellor, Minister of State at the Home Office, and he also gave talks, sometimes abroad. The work done by offenders was wide-ranging and sometimes very entrepreneurial, including spending a weekend every year selling burgers etc at a folk festival on the south coast of England.

But finally a ‘whistleblowing’ letter reached the Treasurer of Gwent County Council, saying that public money was being misspent on a large scale, and triggering a major inquiry. Apparently, previous letters had gone to the Chief, Gwynn Jones, but these had led to no action. As time went on it became clear that Gwynn had made no attempt to manage Clive in any way, had no idea how the money was spent, and had even had community service workers doing his own garden at home. It was a symptom of the time that the Home Office view was that there should not be criminal prosecutions, although Clive was to be disciplined with nine charge of gross mismanagement.

As far as I could see, Clive was an extravert smooth talking ‘Valleys wide boy’ who was not so much actively corrupt, but loved being a local celebrated figure who was at the centre of a spider’s web of various voluntary organisations and found it easy to get each of them to ‘help’ other ones – ‘do them favours’ in an unaccounted way. They couldn’t find evidence of his personal finances benefiting from his free and easy (re)deployment of money and resources, but it was a local joke that his Community Service scheme was known to many as ‘Gwent Construction’.

And then there were the buses. Early on in my time in Gwent I had asked for a visit to see his work, and Clive said he would pick me up from Raglan Castle. He arrived in a full-size bus, and he showed me that this had been obtained and then ‘done up’ as a community resource, for the use of local charities. Later on, we visited Tredegar Bus Station, and he talked to a scheme member in another similar bus – “You’ve got two buses then Clive!” I said naïvely. Later that month, there was an item on the local TV news about Tredegar Bus Station closing down for lack of business, and I remember commenting to my wife Mo, “That’s strange, as there were lots of buses there when I was there.” And then some months after that the scandal blew up, Clive was suspended and one of the other SPOs (John Baillie) was drafted in as an interim Organiser – it was a full year before the disciplinary case came to a hearing. During this period John would receive a phone call every now and again from the police – “We’ve got this bus, and it’s registered to Gwent Community Service.” By the end of twelve months a total of 33 buses had come to light, all registered to Gwent Community Service. I think this best illustrates what I would call Clive’s out-of-control ‘entrepreneurialism’.

Meanwhile Gwynn was in many ways just as culpable, as he had actively ‘more than’ allowed the Scheme to be run in this way, and therefore he had to go. But the Home Office chose the easiest solution of getting him to take early retirement, and so one day we got a brief curt note advising of his retirement, with the date. We loyally attended his leaving do at the Cwrt Bleddin between Caerleon and Usk, and were relieved it went off without too much embarrassment. Vince Magill then acted up as Chief until Richard Moore arrived as the new Chief, plus a new Assistant Chief, Peter Sampson, whom I had trained with at Leicester but barely knew. They had to see through the proceedings with Clive, in the eventual hearing which initially took two weeks before he was found culpable, and then after several months more while his appeal then took place.

This was part of a wider revolution that took place over the whole of South Wales over several years in the late 1980s. Until then, the six Chiefs were informally known as the “Taffia”, a cosy backslapping informal group, good company when they were out for a drink together (even the teetotal one). The most venerable one, Albyn Crook, took early retirement from Mid Glamorgan at about this time, and the Home Office intervened to ensure that an ‘outsider’ would replace him – they only ‘approved’ one candidate to be interviewed by the local employing Committee, David Sutton (that former Bristol SPO) who was now ACPO in Cambridgeshire. Then Gwynn’s departure allowed another replacement, again from ‘outside’, as did the vacancy at South Glamorgan.

Strange things still sometimes went on in South Wales: in West Glamorgan two SPOs were disciplined when a friend of one of them was appearing at Crown Court – the SPO who knew him wrote a report for Court, and to disguise the known personal link he got the other SPO to sign it as if he had been the author. The first of these two SPOs was dismissed, as one might expect, but the other was first ‘busted’ down to main-grade for six months (yes, really), and then on appeal the grade reduction was itself reduced to three months. This was not a great advertisement for the convoluted disciplinary system with all its provisions for ‘representation’ and lengthy appeals.

The strong suspicion was that freemasonry played a significant part in some of the problems experienced in Wales, and this was almost certainly a factor in an even bigger scandal that blew up in Dyfed in the 1990s. Here the new Chief from outside Wales most certainly did not prove a success. He maintained his home in Surrey, and as the years went on he found more and more reasons to claim travel and other allowances to maintain two homes, and overall seemed to run a very corrupt regime. His case did become a criminal prosecution and went to Swansea Crown Court, and yet remarkably he was acquitted.

The other excitement, earlier in the 1990s but after I had left Wales, was when Martin Jones left West Glamorgan and was replaced by someone who had been a submarine commander. This was very shocking to many people inside Probation, but without ripping up any trees the ex-commander went on to do a decently reasonable job. The later upheaval with the creation of the National Probation Service in 2001 brought more change, mainly for the better on balance. Finally, the creation of a single Trust for the whole of Wales Probation in 2010 was a very creditable achievement, because it was locally led and driven successfully against some awkward political opposition nationally.

Meanwhile, back during my time in Usk/Prescoed in the 1980s, I was looking for ways for further self-development. The main early event since arriving had been the course for new SPOs laid on by the Regional Staff Development Office, led in Bristol at the time by Bruce Seymour. Course members attended from south-west England and also south Wales, and we attended two separate week-long residential events. A core theme from the course was taken straight from John Adair’s Effective Leadership, and was the idea that there were three roles for a manager - Achieving the Task, Building the Team, and Developing the Individual – drawn as a three-way Venn diagram, and the three things needed to be attended to in balance with each other. I found this helpful at the time, and of continuing help in practice in future roles too – unlike most other memorable theories for how to manage well. But I also knew that I wouldn’t be able to test myself on this until I had a ‘proper team’ to manage – though at least I could develop myself in other ways meantime.

So I maintained my commitment to the Probation Journal Editorial Board, which met five times a year at Napo HQ in Battersea, London (with plenty of advance paperwork to get through), and in being active in the South Wales Branch of NAPO too. I had also joined a new Rotary Club in Newport when I moved house, and was suddenly obliged to become its second-ever President for a year, so I treated that too as a ‘management development experience’. More relevant to my future work, I embarked on a unit of the Open University Business School degree in Management, called ‘Finance and Accounting for Managers’, which I found to be excellent. In those days you got a video (meaning that you no longer needed to get up to watch BBC2 at 6.00 am!) and some excellent supporting written material. I was taken through constructing budgets and monitoring them, and at the end I sat an exam in Cardiff which I passed. This did prove a helpful preparation for my later work in Newport – managing a reduced expenses budget in 1988/9 – and more so for my later work as Chief Probation Officer and Chief Inspector.

More closely relevant to my current work was a memorable presentation I attended that was given by Peter Raynor of Swansea University on the subject of the Afan Alternative. On a separate occasion I’d already been to Port Talbot and seen a “Demonstration” of this community programme for young male offenders. It was a combination of groupwork and activities delivered in a rather macho style, so there was a range of views about whether or not this was a ‘good’ way of working. But this presentation was not about the content of the programme – instead it was a meticulous analysis of whether or not it was ‘making a difference’ in terms of reducing reoffending. The reason I thought the talk was excellent was that it thoroughly illustrated just how difficult it was – and still is, of course – to answer such a question with any confidence.

Peter patiently and meticulously took us through the steps in the process of identifying a cohort of comparable cases – Yes, most of these got custodial sentences, so Afan DID appear to be diverting cases from custody in reality – and then comparing the later reoffending rates of the two cohorts. His talk illustrated to me both the need to attempt the equivalent of ‘double-blind’ clinical trials, and the fact that in our line of work this is almost impossible to achieve in practice. But this analysis was about the nearest equivalent to doing such a thing, and although one couldn’t have absolute 100% confidence in one’s conclusions, if you took this level of care you could have reasonable confidence in what you’d found.

On the balance of the available evidence the Afan Alternative was having a beneficial effect on the reoffending of this group. The effect was a marginal one – but that is always the case with these matters, as there is no panacea for ‘curing’ offending. Meanwhile, this talk was in my perception a model for what would later be called ‘taking an evidence-led approach’. It was a big influence on my developing thinking about how to assess the effectiveness of Probation work generally.

I was also keen to develop my part-time learning into doing a PhD, building on my interest in studying organisations which had been aroused by my MA course. I couldn’t get formal support from my management to do this, to my disappointment, but the academic at the University of Bath School of Management, Stephen Fineman, helped me devise what was to be at first an MPhil project. This was on analysing the work of Senior Probation Officers, which I could do by carefully booking annual leave when I was doing fieldwork in office hours. This I finally got started on late in 1986, which gave me an excuse to leave Rotary at the time, and I got most of the fieldwork itself done during my time in Newport. I return to this briefly in the next chapter.

However, as the year 1986 progressed, Gwent had a new and much more promising Chief, in Richard Moore, and I was getting increasingly restless with my need to feel that I was moving forward. Although I was a little disappointed with the long timescale, I could understand the reason for not hurrying things, and finally during the autumn of that year I heard I would be going to Newport as a ‘second’ SPO in that office. I was very pleased about this, even though I knew that it was going to be a very challenging role.

## Chapter 12: Senior Probation Officer, Newport, Gwent, 1987-9

*“Waving or Drowning?”*

### What this job was like:

My time at the Newport office, from 1st January 1987 to 31st May 1989, was in some ways the most demanding job I ever had. Later on, in more senior jobs, I certainly worked harder, and for longer hours, yet to a large extent the Newport job created the most day-to-day emotional stress for me, even though many aspects of it I found very rewarding.

This did not come as a surprise to me, fortunately, because in one of those ironic twists I had previously made a number of enquiries of various comparable offices when I was at Swindon to find out how such ‘two-team’ offices were organised. In 1981 I had talked with, and even visited, various offices such as Oxford, Gloucester and Newport, and in the course of these enquiries I not only learned that no one had a ‘magic’ answer how best to organise them, but by asking them about staff numbers and workloads of current cases and court reports per month I had also learned about average workloads per officer. In this respect we in Swindon were feeling quite hard done by at that time, compared with the rest of Wiltshire, and I had been able to come back to colleagues and confirm to them that we were indeed unusually poorly resourced compared with these external examples too. “We have much higher individual workloads than all these other comparable teams,” I had told my Swindon colleagues “- with the exception of Newport, where they seem to have a considerably higher workload even than we do”…

For the Newport Probation Office, and indeed Newport itself, had some comparable similarities to what I had experienced in Swindon. The two towns were similarly large unfashionable industrial towns located in or close to desirable rural areas (though the industrial South Wales Valleys begin with the western half of Gwent). The Probation Office was then at 19/20 Gold Tops, a pair of very large Victorian semi-detached houses converted into a single office building, and happened to be about 80 yards from my home. This office accommodated 12 POs and, until the recent past, had had two SPOs, but this ‘two-team’ office had become a ‘one huge team’ office when one of the SPOs was moved away onto other duties by CPO Gwynn Jones in about 1982. Our new Chief Richard rightly realised that this had been unwise, so my move from Usk was to move in alongside the existing Senior, rather than to replace him, making Gold Tops a ‘two-SPO’ office again.

I knew by the time I started in 1987 that not much had changed in terms of workload in the six years since I had first visited from Swindon. When John Austin suddenly retired, the Student Unit SPO Colin Mason took over from him in due course (and Steve Bowkett arrived from South Glamorgan to take over the students), and although Colin worked harder than John had done there was a limit to what he could do with such a large team on his own. At one stage, when the sheer quantity of work was particularly troubling him, I had come in from Usk, by agreement with Colin, and I’d done some Social Inquiry Reports for Courts in the Newport area. I’d done this because I knew that my job in Usk was far less demanding than his was. But now I was coming in to work alongside him as a colleague SPO – how should we organise that work?

My previous knowledge and experience had given me some understanding of what was ahead of me, and also some views about the difficulties of making a ‘two-SPO’ office work, so I did some planning in advance with Colin during the weeks just before I started. My aim was to build a sense of shared purpose and trust in advance, in which I was not always successful but we did agree a constructive *modus vivendi* in the end. We would jointly run what in principle was a ‘joint Team’ to cover the area, but he would directly manage the officers who were supervising the cases aged under 21, the “Under-21 Group”, and I would have the “Over-21 Group”. With all the various Team responsibilities, Colin would be the ‘internal’ manager (managing the building, the clerical staff etc) and I would be the ‘external’ manager (liaison with Courts and all other relevant outside bodies) – we sometimes lightheartedly called this the ‘Home Secretary’ and the ‘Foreign Secretary’ roles.

We had a bilateral meeting once a week for mutual briefing and adjustment. Nothing ever goes perfectly, of course, but even many years after the event I can think of no better way of two frontline managers jointly managing that kind of unit. ‘Boundary’ disputes between the two halves of the team were at a minimum because the only matter needing negotiation was when to transfer a case from the Under-21s to the Over-21s – sometimes a problem, but far less fraught than other types of boundary disputes. For example, when two teams cover separate geographical boundaries, there can be regular dilemmas and disputes as cases move backwards and forwards across that line on the map.

My ‘Foreign Secretary’ role was quite demanding in itself, especially as it needed some developing after years of neglect, but in fairness to Colin his side of the job – principally responsibility for the building - shortly became hyper-demanding. This was when a major programme of works started on the building in January, requiring the central heating to be removed - we were all then given Calor gas heaters. The project then proceeded in reality with no relation whatsoever to the timetable we had solemnly been given at the start of the programme – it eventually took seven months instead of three. But Colin handled things on our joint behalf brilliantly, so despite our occasional ups and downs we did quite well in our joint role.

I was fortunate in mainly having a very good team of officers for the ‘Over-21’ Group, though the one rather elderly spinster PO could be eccentric at times, and there were certain cases I felt I shouldn’t give her. Stan was also a long-serving officer, and with a very sharp tongue, but in the main did his job conscientiously so I tried to find the right balance between showing him some respect and not showing him too much respect during his tendencies towards becoming too loose a cannon. (I was advised, long after I’d gone, that when the time came for him to retire there was virtually nothing on his staff file for the whole of his career – with the one exception that I had done a ‘staff evaluation’ on him in 1988.)

Also in ‘my’ Group, Dave became quite a friend, partly from our shared interest in NAPO, and partly from our shared interest in football. Another officer - a different Colin - was very thorough, but even as a second-year officer was developing rather inflexible attitudes to how he worked. It became a tricky storm-in-a-teacup personnel crisis for me to manage moving him physically from an office on one side of the building to a very similar room on the other side, simply because he didn’t want to change. Finally he went with good grace, which was a relief as he was a fine officer. This enabled Colin Mason and me to achieve having our respective Groups in ‘our’ respective halves of the building. This came at the end of those first nightmare seven months in Gold Tops of complete upheaval within the building, and we were needing to start establishing the new shape of how we all worked together.

One of the reasons workloads were particularly high in Newport was that Gwent as a whole had been under-resourced for many years, and on top of that Newport got less than its fair share of the undersized county ‘cake’ anyway. CIPFA, the Chartered Institute of Public Finance Accountants, produced a table from time to time that showed that relative to its population and crime rate, Gwent was the poorest resourced Probation Service in England and Wales – South Glamorgan (i.e. greater Cardiff) was the next poorest, while Somerset was easily the highest. Certain Chiefs, such as Alan Croston in Somerset, were very good at persuading their local County Council to increase the Probation budget, for one reason or another each year, no doubt using the additional argument that they only paid 20% of it anyway, as at that time the Home Office simply stumped up the other 80% of whatever was stipulated by the local authority. (This system couldn’t last, and it didn’t.) Other Chiefs were content to let things atrophy, so that for example while most Probation Services started to appoint more and more “ancillaries” in the late 1970s, Gwynn appointed none in Gwent.

I’ll describe in the next section how Colin and I handled the workload issues in Newport, but one effect of our efforts was that we gained the transfer of a PO from the East Gwent office. This led to a concern on my part where I was proven absolutely wrong. When I heard that it was the East Gwent officer coming back to work after her second maternity leave who had indicated that she wanted to come to Newport, this gave me initial great concern. Previous experience suggested to me that new mothers were sometimes no longer so committed to the job, and for practical reasons would demand a lot of support from colleagues. However, Lindsey proved me completely wrong by becoming an absolute star in the team, and alongside Dave, Monika and Colin, this was a group of relatively young but energetic creative very able hardworking officers. Meanwhile the older officers Philip, Stan and in the main Anne all pulled their weight too, while Peter did his own thing as Crown Court Liaison Officer.

I then realised that across Gwent there were in fact numerous examples of married women coming back to work after more than one childbirth, and continuing at full tilt just as they had before. I found this to be a marked contrast with my previous experience and observations in various parts of England over the years, and put this down to the very different demographic I was finding in South Wales. Whereas in Swindon – just sixty miles away - none of the POs or social workers I knew had had any extended family in the area, in Gwent it seemed that all these new mothers had their own mothers living just round the corner, and they always seemed entirely ready and willing to help. For this reason arranging childcare seemed to be of comparatively minimum stress. That was a learning experience for me.

An episode where instead I was vindicated – after a fashion - was when ‘our’ computers first arrived. I had first seen a word processor in 1983 when I saw the Chief’s secretary typing words that then bafflingly appeared on a screen in front of her. But it was 1986/7 before I saw another word processor, as I heard about and then scrutinised the Amstrad 8256 and 8512 - and people who had such a thing could explain what it did. I then bought an 8512, and through some self-discipline I taught myself to touch-type when I typed up the interviews I was recording for my MPhil project. Nevertheless, outside the Chief’s office, we still had no computers in our offices until, I think, 1988.

Then we heard that each ‘team’ in Gwent was to get an Olivetti word processor, using ‘Olisoft’ software, and in Newport we would have two. Colin Mason and I had gone to an event in Cardiff (a NACRO event from memory) one Friday afternoon, and we returned between 4.00 and 5.00 as the office was closing to find that the two computers, both boxed up, had just been delivered and left in the ‘front’ office (clerical staff office), prior to planned installation the following week. My ‘crime prevention antennae’ are quite strong, and I persuaded Colin that this was a crime risk since theoretically at least they could be seen from the car park.

In the entire building at that time there was only one room which had its own lock on the door, a store room on the first floor, and in fairness to Colin he agreed after initial reluctance that we ought at least to move these two large boxes up to that room. This was not a welcome task late on a Friday afternoon when everyone else had left the building, and since even the ground floor was quite elevated the risk of someone ‘casually’ seeing the boxes from outside was quite small. But we had had burglaries in the past – juveniles pinching the tea fund or jaffa cakes etc – so I thought we should guard against a casual burglar striking lucky. We duly moved them to the locked room, and went home feeling virtuous if a little over-cautious.

I was first in on the Monday morning, and found the outside Yale lock had been forced. In view of past occurrences this was not a total shock, but what was so surprising was to find in due course that the first floor storeroom had been broken into – not easy as it was a solid door with a deadlock, and the computers (and nothing else) had been removed. Despite the obvious shock and disappointment, rarely have I ever felt more vindicated, since we had ‘taken all possible available precautions’ to prevent this happening, and Colin and I were absolved from potential criticism for not taking proper care of these (relatively really expensive) items.

We had to be fingerprinted for elimination purposes of course, and I pointed out to the police that this had to be a case of ‘deliberate planning based on information’ rather than simple ‘opportunity’. The items had arrived late on a Friday, when none of us had known in advance that they were coming, and when hardly any, if any at all, of the people under our supervision would have seen them arrive at that time; yet someone had arrived over that specific weekend, with transport, and gone through the building and taken the trouble to break down the one locked door in the entire office – they would not have done this unless they had had specific information. The most likely source of such insider information, in my opinion, was the firm who delivered the items. But nothing to my knowledge came of this, and in due course the County Council agreed to purchase two more, which were duly installed for our two senior clerical staff to use.

In addition to their use as word processors, I think they could also print out case lists (I’m a bit hazy about this now), and I’m struggling to remember how we tried to use the information – basically ‘lists’ - they were able to provide. We were keen to try to make use of them, but not sure how in practice. The message at the time from senior management was that they didn’t want either POs or SPOs fiddling with computers – we should ask our senior clerical officers for information. But we didn’t know what we could or should ask for.

Although I understood the management view that they didn’t want us focusing on computer screens rather than people I thought it was misguided. You need the ‘hands-on’ experience to learn what is possible, and therefore its potential value. This was just the first phase in a continuing story about the right way to develop an effective relationship between using IT and managing people, which I touch on again in Chapter 17.

### What I/we did:

I arrived in January 1987, keen to prove myself as proper frontline manager. The core concept from my management course over two years previously had only been partly applicable to my former ‘indirect’ role in Usk, but here would be my opportunity to put into practice the three overlapping ideas from John Adair of Achieve the Task, Build the Team and Develop the Individual.

As I’ve said already, the workloads for the Newport staff were very high. Most officers were doing between eight and twelve reports most months, and case numbers were 50-60. However, an already established big plus was that, unlike many other teams across the country as a whole, in Newport no one expected to have ‘allocation’ meetings once or twice a week, where cases were allocated. Our system was that the Senior just put the requests for reports in POs’ in-trays as fairly and equitably (and promptly) as possible. This meant we didn’t waste time on meetings with POs competing to describe how much they were overworked, and instead the SPO who actually knew whose turn it was could get on and allocate each case promptly. This had the further benefit that the relevant PO had the maximum available time to get the report done.

Newport POs had also mainly got into the habit of doing their Court reports on the basis of one daytime office interview. Partly this was another symptom of being overstretched, and partly – it was put to me by the more experienced officers – that in the 1980s almost every case was of someone unemployed or otherwise available in the daytime. One said to me that even if the person was in work they’d have to take time off to see a dentist, for example, so why not for us? While this was a plausible argument, it was very different from the ethic that I’d previously grown used to. In any event, the newer officers were open to the idea that sometimes “clients” now had jobs, and therefore some evening work was necessary. Balanced against home visiting however, was the growing concern about officer health and safety, which I return to again in Chapter 17.

Meanwhile, officers did still find the sheer quantity of the work quite stressful, and indeed some of their individual cases were too. My SPO colleague Colin and I both saw structured individual supervision as having a key role in managing our ‘joint team’. My perception was that POs valued the support and interest we demonstrated, and my officers even readily accepted having me read half a dozen files each month before each session. This was a positive ‘shift’ in organisational culture in Gwent, compared with the earlier informal and rather complacent assumption that ‘supervision’ was something you no longer needed after your first year in the job.

My view then (and still now), arising from my Swindon experience, is that ‘work stress’ is by no means always completely bad, but it does become completely bad for the individual when they have no sense of having any control over their job. Many people who move into management roles complain about the extra strain of “executive stress”, but I’ve found that this can often be tolerated and even deployed advantageously when the individual has some reasonable control over how they do their job.

My aim in Newport, and with the other individuals and groups I managed later, was therefore to give team members some control over how they did their job, provided that their efforts were focused on what the team as a whole was trying to achieve. As was somewhat ‘fashionable’ at the time, in 1988 I organised an ‘Awayday’ meeting for the whole of the Over-21 Group. We went to the Glen-yr-Afon Hotel in Usk for a day to reflect on and make future plans for our Group as a whole. As requested by them, we sat upright round a ‘business meeting’ table rather than wallowing in low sofas, and various plans were made, including (hazy memory) starting an alcohol education groupwork programme.

On the subject of team meetings, as SPOs both Colin and I had an ‘inclusive’ spirit, and we were both very conscious soon after we started our joint regime that our ‘full team meetings’ did not at that time include the “clerical” staff, who after all undertook key duties of reception and administration as well as ‘simply’ typing. When one of them pointed this out, we were ready to accede, and to announce that in future the full team meeting would include our “clerical” colleagues. My memory is not wholly specific on the detail, but I think it was after about three or four of these when most of the clerical staff realised that what Probation Officers bang on about at length on these occasions was not for them. The request came: “Can we stop coming to your meetings now?”

Therefore, not all our attempts at “Building the Team” were completely successful, however well intentioned. However, we did have a modicum of success with gaining staff resources for Newport, though of course this could only happen because of the change in Gwent senior management. Gwent’s first “ancillary” (Probation Service Officer as this role became) was established in Newport just before I arrived, a promotion for one of the clerical staff.

Very soon after, though, our new ancillary went on maternity leave, so we had to appoint a temporary replacement. This was my first experience of recruiting and appointing a member of staff, and I credit Peter Sampson, our new ACPO from 1986/7 onward, as being painstakingly helpful in steering me through this process, as a ‘learning by doing’ exercise. I’ll add here that Peter was very good to me in a number of ways, though he was not well liked by most SPO colleagues, being very dry and seeming quite cold. Although he was aware, as he pointed out to me himself, that for people to experience feedback as ‘balanced’ they need to hear three times as many compliments as criticisms, he didn’t understand – for example - why colleagues didn’t experience being rated as ‘adequate’ as being positive feedback. Nevertheless for me he was helpful in rethinking certain current issues from a wider perspective (Bruce Seymour was helpful with this too). What was good on this occasion was how Peter modelled for me how to go about the recruitment process from start to finish, and at the end he invited me to phone the successful candidate while he phoned the unsuccessful ones. It was a good induction for me into that role.

In addition to the “ancillary”, we were also successful in securing the additional PO for Newport. I’ve already described how I managed a one-off survey of the Gwent Probation cases in 1986/7, and linked to this I took some care to examine workloads across the county. One day, still in 1987 I think, I had all the information I needed to demonstrate very comprehensively that the transfer of one PO from the East Gwent team to my Over-21 Group in Newport would produce about as even a distribution of staff to resources across the whole county as one could reasonably expect. It was about 5.30pm when I went across to the HQ which was then in 9 Gold Tops. Richard and Peter were poring over some figures and said to me as I came in, “We’re looking at these figures, and they show that things are pretty steady at the moment,” to which I of course said, “Well my figures show that they are a real problem, and show that you should move an officer from East Gwent to Newport.” Richard’s instinct was to resist defensively, but Peter rightly could see that our sets of figures related to different issues, and simply asked for the opportunity to examine ‘my’ figures at leisure. I’m glad to say that several days later Peter saw me to confirm that they would act as I’d recommended.

I had another success through researching numbers. On the other side of town, the voluntary organisation NACRO (National Association for the Care and Resettlement of Offenders) was running an employment scheme. There were many at the time across the country, as the Government sought to alleviate the national unemployment rate, and the stated purpose of this one was to provide employment for “ex-offenders”, especially for current Probation cases, as this would help with crime reduction. The only problem was that, as our team POs reported to me, hardly any of their current cases were actually on this scheme. I went to see the NACRO manager, a pleasant enough man, but he was defensive when I explained my concerns, and he said that his local Employment Office was happy that his scheme was compliant with its aims.

But I managed to get off him a list of the scheme’s current cases, which I then crosschecked individually with our own card index of current cases, and found that there was a total of about six of his cases in all, out of about 300, that were current Probation cases. It became clear on further investigation that whenever a new Employment Office case was interviewed, and admitted (or claimed) that he or she had ever been convicted or cautioned for any offence ever, they were deemed suitable for referral to the NACRO scheme.

I therefore pointed out to the local NACRO manager, and then to his regional office in Cardiff, that almost all of his cases were historic minor former offenders but hardly any were ‘current’ offenders, so in reality they weren’t benefiting the work of Probation as claimed at all. At first this seemed to get no response. Then I suddenly heard that the local manager had been removed because Nigel Whiskin, the manager of the schemes at NACRO’s national office, had acted on my information. My opinion of Nigel, whom I had known from my Wiltshire days in an earlier NACRO role, rose very markedly. A new local manager came in, who took care to liaise with me closely, and the number of our current cases on the scheme increased very satisfactorily.

Not long after I started, and after I had established regular working relations with various accommodation schemes in Newport, one of the local bodies told me that they were planning to open shortly a hostel for drugtakers near the centre of town, and it would be called Ty Palmyra. It was an excellent facility, as far as I could tell, and soon attracted many referrals, mostly though from outside the area. As a general rule in this line of work there tends to be a large dropout from drug treatment, and hence there was quite a large turnover of Ty Palmyra residents. However, the additional factor for us was that most of these individuals then stayed in Newport, in other accommodation. After the project had been open a year, I again went through our team caseload, and found that we had ‘gained’ over 30 new cases on our books now, only a few of whom were still at Ty Palmyra, but none of whom had even been living in Newport a year previously. We had imported nearly a whole additional caseload of often quite difficult ‘lively’ cases from outside Gwent in about 12 months!

I had one of these cases myself, and he was quite a nightmare. I rarely did reports or took cases, rightly I believe, but I helped out with reports during the summer leave period, and then took on about six cases some time in 1988 – I can’t remember for sure the specific reason, but it may have related to the team caseload rising due to the ‘Ty Palmyra’ factor. I’ll call him Alan, and he arrived at Ty Palmyra from prison at a mature age, and may have been a parole case (I can’t remember), but life with him was always a series of crises. Then he left Ty Palmyra, found lodgings, which I went and checked, and after more crises he disappeared and I had to issue a warrant. A few weeks later I was visiting him in Bristol Prison, which covered the area where he had been picked up. He was a real reminder of the messy reality and the chaotic lives that many of our cases led, and I was not sorry to leave him behind when I left the Newport job.

I was acutely aware (as was Colin) of some of our particularly notorious cases – notorious not so much from dreadful crimes but because of their capacity to disrupt. One of Colin’s officers had a case of a 19-year-old woman who came in almost daily in some kind of crisis or other, demanding help or at least attention and at length. One Saturday I went into our office to sort out some minor concern that was bothering me, and when I looked out the window she was outside sat on the wall of our car park. I really didn’t want to be seen by her and drawn into whatever the latest crisis would be, so I went back upstairs to do some more work – fortunately for me, an hour later she was gone.

The even more disruptive case was Daniel, a case I had allocated after discussion to Dave, who I felt might be able to achieve some connection with him. Daniel was very unusual for a Probation case; his offences were relatively minor in themselves, but he was very bright and assertive, certainly very ‘pushy’, and he could calculate pretty carefully what he might be able to get away with at any one time. He was a case the other officers knew about from the past, and were keen to avoid having, so he had been fined rather than put on Probation more than once in the past. He explained once to Dave that he didn’t like paying his fine, and didn’t mind prison, but didn’t want to lose his benefit, which arrived in a fortnightly giro. So when a warrant for fine default had been finally issued by the Court, he’d wait until ‘giro day’ (the local police were not overly energetic in executing warrants), put the money into his bank/building society account, and then surrender to the police at the police station. He’d be carted off to Cardiff Prison for two weeks, then come out and pick up his new giro to add to the one he’d already banked.

Our Gold Tops office was an old fashioned building, an old large detached house, and therefore not designed to ‘manage’ outside visitors separately, carefully and safely (Swindon and many other offices across the country had similar issues). For 99% of the time this was not a problem in practice, but for someone like Daniel he liked to ‘burst’ into the front office where the clerical staff worked, and become the centre of attention. We put a push button entry lock on the door of that office, but it was fiddly and for many reasons did not prove effective, so in one of a number of ways at different times Daniel remained a regularly recurring disruptive episode for the office, though Dave did get him to temper his provocative behaviour a little over time.

On a very different note, I’ll mention here a case of Monika’s, whom I’ll call Carl. This was a man in his 20s, without significant previous convictions I think, who was remanded in custody awaiting trial for murder. Normally, Probation would not be seeing someone remanded pre-trial other than for the purpose of preparing a Court report – and only then if we knew he planned to plead guilty. On the other hand, a viewpoint was developing, which was later enshrined in Circulars from the Home Office in the 1990s, that as part of the process of long term management of Life Sentence cases, it was good practice to initiate contact with someone remanded pre-trial who was a ‘potential Lifer’ – as this man Carl clearly was, even though he was denying the charge.

Carl was a former soldier who’d served in Northern Ireland, when the ‘Troubles’ were at their height – which may or may not be relevant to his emotionally controlled disposition. The indictment was that he’d deliberately allowed himself to be approached by a middle-aged man – in a bar, I think – who invited him back to his flat for sex. Once back at the flat, at some point Carl turned on the victim and embarked on a sustained and sadistic attack that culminated in murder. Carl flatly denied this.

Monika lived in Cardiff at the time, and she found that it was not difficult for her to visit Carl in Cardiff Prison first thing once a week and discuss with him the feelings he was going through in prison and his discussions with his legal team. She discussed the case with me a couple of times as she tried to clarify what her role was during this pre-trial period, although with good reason she thought it was important to establish a working relationship with Carl at this stage. She also mentioned that she thought it was notable that the legal team never (as far as she knew) asked Carl whether or not he had actually committed the murder. Carl would recount to her the possible weaknesses in the prosecution case that his lawyers had identified, and this was how they planned to base his defence. Monika was careful not to challenge or subvert Carl’s lawyers’ work at this stage, by giving a view about what she thought about his guilt, but she noted that to her he was emphatic that he was “Not Guilty”.

Finally the trial came up in Crown Court, and Carl was duly found Guilty, with all of the gruesome details publicised for everyone to see. Monika saw Carl shortly after his post-trial visit from his own barrister. He said to Monika, “My brief says we should put in an appeal…” and he listed the grounds that his barrister had given him on which an appeal could apparently now be made – adding that he was going ahead as advised. And this was where, because there was now a conviction, Monika made her move. What she said, in effect, was, “Now is the time that you must really decide whether or not you committed this crime. Of course if you really didn’t do it, you should go ahead with the appeal. But if you know, deep in your heart, that you really did to it, now is the time to start to face up to that…” She left him to ponder.

Monika returned for her next visit, at which point he said very quietly that he had told his brief to drop his appeal. He confirmed that he had committed the murder, and over the next few weeks, while he remained in Cardiff Prison pending a transfer to a long-term prison, he recounted to Monika in painful detail each stage of what he had done and what he thought he was doing at the time, including his blindly hateful homophobia. All being well, all those details should be available on the case file that should follow Carl through the rest of his sentence. More importantly, Carl had started to learn to acknowledge to himself the truth of what he had done.

For me, not only was there some selfish vicarious pride in the quality of the work being done by one of ‘my’ officers, but here was also a perfect illustration of the syndrome described to me by SPO Stan in Gartree that I outlined in Chapter 8. For all its good qualities, our trial system that focuses solely on whether or not the indictment can be proved (etc) strongly discourages defendants from facing up to the truth of whether or not they ‘actually did it’. One of the key jobs of the Prison and Probation Services is to help individuals who have offended to face up to what they have done in order to learn and change – sometimes one of the unintended consequences of our commitment to a fair trial is that some offenders have been led in the opposite direction.

Also memorable from this time were the two trainee POs, supervised in successive placements by ‘my’ Colin and by Monika, because both these failed their placements. This caused us all some anguish for a number of reasons, and particularly because Gold Tops also housed a Student Unit that processed 12 trainees every year, and none had recently failed. It is probably true that less assiduous officers might have given one or both of these trainees a pass, as to be frank that was always the line of least resistance for any supervisor. (Failing a student created a lot of extra work for the already-busy supervisor, involving at least one visit to the university/college to see the tutor, and probably being cross-examined etc) Also, I was conscious myself that in my time at Leicester these two might have got through ok, in more ‘permissive’ times. But now we were much more thorough in our assessments, which included the videoing of at least one interview with a current case.

On each occasion, ‘my’ officer told me that they were concerned, invited me to view the videotaped interview, and asked me what I thought. I don’t now remember any details, but I do remember being very disappointed that in both cases the whole interview approach was very passive (and frankly boring too). I sadly concurred in both instances, because I shared my officers’ desire to safeguard a minimum standard of quality of practice for Probation work - passive isn’t good enough. I was also proud of their whole approach, since they clearly wanted their students to do well, but their consciences wouldn’t let them go against the evidence they had gathered. Subsequently, in the Inspectorate I have seen numerous examples in case files where the passivity of an officer has infuriated me – the case seems to ‘happen to them’, rather than be managed by them. There’s some similarity with those offenders who talk about their offending as if ‘it just happened’, and they had no say in whether they did it or not. Only for officers, there’s less excuse.

Up to this point I’ve covered how we aimed to ‘Build our Team’ and ‘Develop our Individuals’ – and also gain additional resources - so I now need to move onto our crucial role of ‘Achieving the Task’. This was at a time when the stated ‘Purpose’ of Probation nationally was less about reducing reoffending and more about diverting cases from custody (see Chapter 18).

On my original arrival in Gwent in 1983 I had been puzzled by various contrasting observations. Before arriving I had heard of Gwent’s highly regarded Community Service scheme, and I’d also heard more than once that on a national ‘Ball and Chain league table’ published I think by the Howard League, that Gwent magistrates sent a lower proportion of cases to custody than any other area in the country. On the other hand, when I arrived I found that most officers, in almost all parts of the county, viewed the Magistrates’ Courts in quite negative terms, being difficult to work with. What explained this contrast?

My time at Usk gave me plenty of time to examine sentencing practices, both across England and Wales, and also internationally. I soon worked out that the unusual pattern in Gwent was that, yes, custodial sentences were relatively low, but so too were ‘community sentences’. Even before the Gwent Community Service scheme went through its scandal (as I’ve covered previously), the Gwent magistrates were imposing fines in a relatively huge proportion of their cases. In Swindon the Courts had deviated from the national average by very rarely imposing conditional discharges, being fairly average on fines, and being marginally higher on custody and community sentences generally; here in Newport conditional discharges were ‘average’, but it was the very high use of fines, not community sentences, that got Gwent to the top of that ‘Ball and Chain league table’.

Focusing specifically now on Newport, in a slight contrast with the occasionally hostile experience I’d seen in Swindon, the Magistrates’ Court was experienced by officers here as being rather ‘distant’ and therefore not particularly ‘probation-friendly’. What also struck me, for a town with a strong similarity to Swindon in size and broad demography – and therefore types of cases – was that in Swindon we’d had two Courts sitting per day, averaging 2-2½ hours each in duration, whereas Newport had five Courts sitting each day, each of which could easily last well into the afternoon. Swindon’s Court sittings had seemed to us a little like machine-gun fire at times – Newport’s seemed to be a long way in the opposite direction, drifting somewhat languidly.

In the ‘Foreign Secretary’ aspect of my SPO role I sought to improve working relationships with the Courts by meeting periodically with the Clerks, and by improving the format of the official ‘Liaison’ meetings. This was because hitherto we still had the format whereby the magistrates started the Probation Liaison Committee meeting on their own, and with the Probation Officers standing outside in the corridor until at some point we were graciously invited to come in and join the meeting. In Swindon this format had stopped several years previously. My memory is that we changed this in Newport, and improved discussions a little by preparing material in advance, but the meetings remained fairly stilted and cautious.

But we also introduced less formalised discussions with wider groups of the Magistrates periodically. My main memory of this is a discussion with one of the bench “Chairmen” about what helped him to decide on Probation rather than custody in a difficult case. He said he wanted to assure himself that it would be “safe” – and after further discussion I took this to mean that he would feel ‘safe from criticism’ at a later point. In recent years it has been much more common for people to criticise Court decisions openly and abrasively, so if anything he was ahead of his time. Overall, I felt that we improved the tone of our dialogue, and our mutual understanding a little, but I’m not sure that I could point to a particular tangible benefit that we gained from these efforts.

Given that at the time our aim was to divert cases from custody, a more direct tactic was when Gwent introduced in 1988 what was called a ‘Risk of Custody score’, devised by David Bale, a Cambridgeshire PO. The idea was that each time a case was remanded for Probation to prepare a report for Court, the PO would use certain information about the case to complete and calculate a ‘Risk of Custody’ (RoC) score for that case. The score, given as a figure out of a hundred, indicated how likely it was that that a case of this type would receive a custodial sentence at the end of the remand. Therefore, if and when a PO persuaded a Court that someone with a high RoC score could be safely given a community sentence then Probation was doing a good job. We were advised that for this purpose if the RoC score was 55 or higher then it counted as a ‘high’ score.

I discuss in Chapter 18 the issue of whether or not this was strategically a good definition of what Probation should have been aiming to achieve, so here I will just focus on its effect on our team practice in 1988. What struck me when I did a Court report myself, as I still did occasionally, was that I would complete the form in a few minutes, and I would immediately see whether or not the case came into the ‘55+’ bracket. If it did, and if I was successful with a recommendation for a non-custodial sentence, then I would know immediately that my case counted as a ‘success’.

This sense of immediate feedback on performance contrasted starkly with the more usual problem that there is both delay and uncertainty in ‘waiting’ (and for how long?) to find out whether or not a case has reoffended, in order to judge the ‘success’ of that piece of work. When Colin and I set a target that our Newport team would achieve non-custodial sentences for more than a certain percentage of Court Reports over the coming year where the RoC score was 55+ I felt that one of the merits of this target was that POs could tell for themselves, and straight away, whether each report they completed was contributing to the team objective.

I can’t remember what percentage we set as a target that year (1988/9), and it was probably quite a modest one as I think we achieved it. I continued to have nagging doubts as to whether this strategic purpose of ‘diverting from custody’ was really the best purpose for Probation. But on the other hand a key lesson for me was that we should try to identify objectives for practitioners where they could see for themselves straight away how they were getting on, alongside doing the work itself. This was better than them having to wait months or years to be told by someone else whether the work they’d been doing all that time ago was any good.

However, although this experience remained useful to me in later years when trying to help practitioners become more ‘performance conscious’, I soon realised that it was merely one step in the right direction. When I invited my talented and able POs to assist me in devising ways of measuring what our new alcohol education group was achieving I swiftly received the answer, “That’s a job for management – we’ll leave that to you.”

I also applied a new skill when senior management announced that there would have to be a reduction in the county’s travel budget. This happened from time to time in most counties, and was almost always implemented by ‘banning’ ‘out-of-county’ journeys, or making them subject to a manager’s approval, or other such arbitrary ‘rules’ – with various pernicious consequences to either the management or the quality of the officers’ work.

I was concerned because as a group my officers had a much higher proportion than other Gwent teams of cases in a wide range of prisons right across the country as a whole. So I was very pleased when after discussion the senior management agreed that I could have a ‘team budget’ of mileage that I would be responsible for managing – if I met this by the end of the financial year my group would have made their contribution to the planned reduction by the county as a whole. We were taking responsibility for managing the reduced budget ourselves, rather than being subject to either a ‘rules-based’ regime, or a series of arbitrary decisions by senior managers who were distant from each practical issue at hand. You can see why I like ‘devolved responsibility’.

This approach meant that I could organise, in the form of a flipchart on my office wall, a journey planner of visits to various prisons around the country, and at each of our fortnightly meetings the officers could plan when they would visit their various prisoners, sharing cars as needed. It worked as a kind of shared ‘commitment budget’ that the team members could see for themselves and take some ownership of it. As I recall, we were projected to be slightly over budget until the end of January 1989, but by March we were comfortably inside. In terms of getting people to share responsibility for managing finite resources it was a useful exercise, despite its imperfections (I left in May 1989, and it’s possible that officers may have just postponed some visits from Feb/March to May/June, though I don’t think so.)

This was one of the ways in which I sought to treat the members of the Newport team as adults rather than as dependent children. Most staff, and especially those who have gone through a formal qualification that included the taking of responsible decisions, are ready and willing to exercise that responsibility if managers treat them the right way. Alternatively, if managers start spelling out detailed instructions about what must be done in each and every eventuality, as happened with increasing frequency nationally in the early 2000s, some staff will develop a passive kind of learned helplessness – “I just did what you told me to do” – even when it makes no sense. I return to this point in Chapter 14.

Alongside all this I did most of the fieldwork for my MPhil. I interviewed eleven Senior POs, three times each, for up to two hours each time, recorded on audio tape, which I then typed up. While some could be interviewed over evenings or weekends, I did most meetings by booking a day’s annual leave, usually a Friday, for me to drive over and see them in their office – often in south-west or central England. The Gwent leave allowance was particularly generous, so the only hardship there was in catching up with the work I’d missed each time. My questioning was broadly about what they thought they were doing, and how it felt – my format was not a structured questionnaire, but a prompting of a flexible dialogue, sometimes more of a stream of consciousness. Some might call this an ‘ethnography’, while I called it a ‘Phenomenology’ – a qualitative form of study. The dissertation itself is on my website.

Referencing a poem by Stevie Smith, I called it ‘Waving or Drowning?’ This question was only one topic discussed with my respondents, and rarely directly, but most of them could relate to the idea that sometimes the work seemed to get on top of one, though not usually for very long. A final additional session, where most but not all of the SPOs came together with me for a final recorded discussion, produced the most laughter about the ups and downs that we each variously experienced.

### What I felt:

I’ve ended that last section by introducing the theme that leads into the initial theme of this section. Both I as the Senior, and some of the POs, sometimes felt that we were on the edge of “Drowning” under the work. Indeed, the fact that Newport officers at this time found their work life particularly stressful made for a delicate task for me as a frontline manager. I needed to show some sympathy and understanding for them – it would have been wrong just to brush off their feelings – but it wouldn’t help to show too much sympathy either. Too much sympathy on my part could give them an excuse to feel that they didn’t need to try any more – indeed some years later, on a visit to another area, I witnessed that sequence taking place.

But my experience in Swindon had taught me that ‘stress’ has some beneficial effects as well as some negative ones. I had found that when I was feeling on top of that demanding job there was actually a sense of euphoria from that feeling, even though there were other times when I had felt that I was ‘going under’. Of course, this was not something to lecture about to my officers – no one would thank you for that. So instead I would keep talking with them, both in the formal bilateral meetings and informally – and in the various team meetings – to hear where they were, and show some understanding of the range of feelings they were going through. Most were particularly conscientious in their work, and could find pleasure in what had gone well, as well as frustration with other things. I could therefore latch on to their good feelings as well as their bad ones.

With some of them I would offer quizzical analogies. I talked less about ‘plate-spinning’ now, and instead offered a comparison with surfing (about which I know nothing): “Sometimes you can feel exhilarated about being on top of the wave, with that feeling of somehow mastering this mass of material beneath you; and other times you find you’ve been knocked off the wave and are underneath it with a gobful of salt water…!”

You would have to ask them whether they found this personally helpful or not, but my perception was that it helped the team as a whole to get the work done in a positive spirit, and to help them to help each other rather than compete with each other. Giving them a genuine sense of control over key aspects of how they each went about their duties, rather than be subject to various batteries of detailed instructions, was what I hope enabled them to experience being on top of the wave more frequently than being underneath the wave. They also knew that both Colin and I had fought for what resources that came our way for our team within Gwent, and they were therefore prepared to go along with some of our additional demands such as to achieve certain team objectives.

Meanwhile this delicate alternating between ‘feeling on top’ and ‘going under’ was something that I noticed I was experiencing myself as a Senior PO, and to some extent even more than I had experienced it in Swindon. Some of my colleague SPOs, those respondents in my MPhil study, also shared these feelings – and also had other experiences in common.

One of these was finding that one’s own team of POs behaved differently in team meetings than in bilateral supervision meetings. An officer that you’d had a perfectly rational discussion with about work the day before could suddenly be objectionably negative in the next day’s team meeting. It became evident to me that, as perhaps in many other Probation offices too, team meetings became an opportunity for staff to behave delinquently. By that, I’m not referring to people asking difficult questions, or even making overt criticisms, but it was the tone of voice and gratuitous rudeness that seemed so striking from staff who after all had been trained in managing interpersonal relationships. The experience led me to develop a theory to explain this.

The theory I coined during this period I called “shit-shovelling”. I felt that POs ‘take a lot of shit’ from people under supervision during their encounters in the course of each week, so an opportunity to shovel some shit onto someone else (their line manager) in a safe place when the opportunity arises is perhaps to be expected. And indeed I noticed that SPOs in turn have a tendency to get delinquent too, also not in individual meetings but in group meetings, with their own line managers – it happened in our County Managers’ meetings in Berkshire. As I saw it, each group of staff takes their turn to ‘shovel shit’ up the line of management. It might well be the case that you have to feel that it’s a ‘safe setting’ to do this, of course – I’ve seen passive silence in other meetings, which probably reveals a different problem. I’m sure some theorists might say that it was a management weakness to allow this type of ‘negative discussion’ to be aired in meetings, and they might think that the passive silence is preferable. For my part, although I didn’t enjoy it, I thought that the hot air was a price worth paying if it was of any help at all to officers in managing better through the rest of their working week.

As for me personally, I gained a lot of satisfaction from the Newport job. I felt that I’d proved to myself that I could manage a busy team of officers and other staff, and focus them on achieving together a good quality service that included some team objectives. Many of the cases I read each month gave me great pleasure to see the efforts being put in to change people’s lives for the better, and there was a particular joy in listening if an officer came to tell me that the day or week they’d just had, or the interview they’d just had, had been rewarding for them. This indicated for me some success in Developing the Individual.

Because they helped each other and took some collective pride in their work I felt that Colin and I were doing reasonably well at Building the Team. I was also pleased with the small steps I’d made for the team with gaining and deploying resources, setting and achieving measurable objectives – enabling staff to Achieve the Task.

On the negative side there was a high emotional cost, and the inevitable frustration. Much of the emotional cost came from my awareness of the officers feeling stressed, so it was a case of not only anxiety about potentially failing to keep all the different strands of the job on track, but also an anxiety that one of the officers might succumb to the pressure they were under.

As for the work itself, intellectually I’m comfortable with not being in control of events, and indeed I fully accept that a key part of being a manager involves responding to setbacks and crises. Emotionally, though, I have rarely enjoyed those daily ‘reactive’ aspects of the job, and I’ve enjoyed work much more when I can be the one taking the initiative to do the assessing, planning, deciding, and carrying out what I/we think needs to be done. I hoped I would be doing more of that initiative-taking work if I were successful in gaining the next promotion.

## Chapter 13: Assistant Chief PO, then Chief PO, Berkshire, 1989-2001

*“Managers are like motorways – they create more traffic.”*

### What these jobs were like:

On paper, being an Assistant Chief for the first nine-and-a-bit years in Berkshire was the longest single post I ever held. In practice it proved to be several different jobs in rapid succession, not something I’d expected when I started. It was also my third successive job where it was either a new post altogether, or at least one where I had no direct predecessor (as in the Newport job). It was a great and valued privilege for me to be able to carve out my own new post at least three times in my career. When it ended I gained the further privilege of being the Chief Probation Officer for Berkshire for two and a half years, until the post was abolished in 2001.

So that first morning, Thursday 1st June 1989, I came down on a fairly early train from Newport, got off at Reading about 8.00am, and decided that 8.30 would be the time to ring the bell on arrival, though I was not sure whether an HQ office like this would have anyone in much before 9.00. The office was right in the centre of Reading, near the station, occupying three floors above the main branch of WH Smith, so the street door was controlled by an entryphone. I had much to reflect on before I stepped into place to ring that bell at 8.30 that morning.

This was the ‘first day of the rest of my career’ – it had seemed like ages in getting to this exalted position, and it was not even one I had ever originally expected to aim for. Yet in fact I would only have completed 14 years as a qualified officer at the end of the current month, so when taking the long view it had not been that long after all. And, I suddenly also thought, as I was about to ring that bell, it was still 27 years until my 65th birthday! So although I wasn’t necessarily expecting to have to go all the way to 65 I still had an awful lot of my career still to go. I couldn’t imagine how those years might go – I certainly wasn’t expecting that I might want to be a Chief Probation Officer – but I was vaguely aware that maybe I wouldn’t just plod along as a Berkshire ACPO all that time. But I was content to let events take whatever course they would take, and not worry about it for now, as I started in the first instance to make sure I could do this new job properly.

Alan Nicholson (ACPO) was in at 8.30, so I was able to make a good start to my first day, and after all the usual initial settling in, and meeting with Malcolm, and arranging to visit the members of my new team, the other key memory of that first day is of buying fish and chips in Caversham Road and eating them by Caversham Bridge before staying overnight with friends. The next day was my 38th birthday and I can remember virtually nothing about it – except possibly having to buy cakes for everyone at HQ (about 19 people then?), and I don’t think I waited very late before getting the train back to Newport, where I’m sure that Mo and I must have done something to mark the occasion. I commuted by train the following week, and I can remember that I had a stiff gin and orange (juice) on getting home each night, before deciding that this was not a good habit to develop, and I changed to just orange juice.

One of my biggest anxieties about moving to Reading from Wales, apart from the size of the prospective mortgage, was (oddly) the density of the traffic. I’d once been caught in sustained stationary traffic there when visiting our friends’ house one New Year, and my natural impatience means that I hate such incidents. My concerns from that incident were reinforced on my second Monday in the new job, when I brought the car down from Newport in the morning, as I would be staying with Alan and Jim that week. An SPO warned me the previous Friday about allowing plenty of time for the rush hour traffic on the A4, as she came in the same way, and sure enough, I got from Newport to Junction12 in about an hour, turned off the motorway at 8.00am, and pulled into the car park at exactly 8.30, after which it was nearly a ten minute walk to the office. But the people who had been telling me that you just ‘get used to it’ were proven right in the end, as I too have found, even though the volume of traffic in Reading has probably doubled twice in the 25+ years since then.

Overall, my new job was pretty comfortable for the first three months. I had the field team in Newbury, which covered West Berkshire and therefore the single largest geographical part of the county, also Bracknell and Maidenhead, plus the Information Unit (suited me well), and responsibility for the four Probation Hostels, two of which were run by separate independent management committees. I ‘got to know’ all of them, but I also arranged introductory visits to all the other teams in the county. Meanwhile I had by August also successfully made the challenging jump of moving house from Newport to Reading, which still left me £200 per month net worse off despite the salary increase, the moving to a smaller house and some fortuitous elements to my sale and purchase. Despite that anticipated financial setback it was all a pleasant start!

The pace of the job took off markedly after that, with an investigation at the Elizabeth Fry Probation Hostel, and then just seemed to continue ratcheting up for the next eight years for a combination of separate different reasons. Some of this in 1991-2 was due to my changing domestic circumstances as my second marriage ended, and I lived in a mobile home for nearly three years. I’ve been fortunate – yet again – that my third marriage has worked better for me, since the increasing demands from 1992 onwards were entirely job-related.

The mobile home in Mortimer served its purpose, with me becoming used to commuting six miles each way into congested Reading each day – always aware that others had much worse daily commutes. I’d get into work about 7.15am, and use that time to get my paperwork in order before the meetings of the day started – sometimes the urgent correspondence, but sometimes the planned ‘strategic’ papers. On the other hand I rarely worked then after 6.00pm other than for the occasional evening meeting. But when I re-established my domestic circumstances in 1994 I was pleased to buy a house with a central location that meant that I could walk into work most days, in 15 minutes, and I only took the car in if I were going to need it later. Another advantage – a big advantage as it later became – was that the railway station was a similarly easy walk. To date I’ve lived there ever since.

Soon after my return into more central Reading I joined a gym, and for most of the rest of the 1990s I no longer started work so early, as I’d go to the gym before breakfast and then walk to work. But I started working evenings with increasing regularity as the work ratcheted up, and for reasons that will become apparent I started working weekends from late 1996, between ten and fifteen hours per weekend, most weeks until early 2001. This weekend work was mainly done in the office, where I would go in often unshaven and casually dressed – and on occasions would find Tony also getting some work done. In addition, when we were running an NVQ Assessment Centre, some staff from Tony’s division sometimes came in of their own volition on a Saturday to complete some NVQ-related task (National Vocational Qualifications). On the whole, the only work I actually did at home was the preparation of speeches or of PowerPoint slides that I designed to support some of my presentations from about 1997 onwards. It was possible for us to make a secure dialled connection from home onto the Probation IT system, for doing other work, but on the whole I preferred to avoid using that option.

Meanwhile, back in late 1989 my work with the Probation Hostels increased first, and then in a re-jig of responsibilities I also took over the two specialist Throughcare teams (who supervised prisoners through their sentences and then on statutory licence or supervision on release). I attended a course for newly appointed Assistant Chiefs, which involved pursuing a personal ‘work objective’ between the two residential weeks, during which Roger Statham – the Chief of Teesside – provided excellent tuition and leadership which I greatly appreciated.

Alan Nicholson was diagnosed with cancer in (I think) May/June 1990, and most of his responsibilities then came to me, as additional duties of course. He died in November 1990, and after a decent interval there was an advertisement and Paul Goodman was appointed (from Oxfordshire), and he started in around April 1991. There was then a fresh changearound of responsibilities, with me taking mainly non-line management roles, which included - quite arbitrarily - developing offender employment, something that proved momentous in my career development.

When John Hughes, the other ACPO, left in 1992 to become the Chief of Cambridgeshire, he was replaced by Simon Noble on an internal promotion. This meant that I was now the ‘senior’ ACPO, and it also meant that for a combination of reasons I had in my three or so years in Berkshire already held at various times most of the areas of ACPO responsibility in the County. On the other hand, it was quite a privilege in some ways that I was now able to focus on what we called ‘Service Development’ roles without being constantly distracted by the day-to-day issues that arose with direct ‘Service Delivery’, which was managed by my two ACPO colleagues. Amongst other things, this enabled me to take up both a ‘regional’ and also a ‘national’ role on the subject of offender employment, which I’ll outline later. Tony Rolley was ‘senior’ to me in the management team, having been appointed a few months before me, but it was not until 1997/8 (I think) that his role was redesignated from Principal Administrative Officer to Assistant Chief Officer (Support Services), so in our then Probation-centred perspective he ‘didn’t count’ for the potential purpose of being able to deputise for the CPO.

Paul Goodman became quickly well regarded by staff. Simon Noble was an internal promotion to replace John Hughes a year later, but his was not a popular appointment within the service, for some reasons that were not his fault. For lots of good reasons, people were strongly hoping that a woman would be appointed this time, and at least one female candidate on the shortlist had looked extremely promising, but apparently she fell badly short in the interview. Although Simon proved perfectly able as an ACPO in practice, though different in style from me and Paul, he had quite an uphill struggle against broad (passive) hostility from many people in the Service. Indeed, for understandable reasons, we four then-bearded members of Malcolm’s senior team were subject to pointed remarks as an ‘apparently-closed’ all-male group.

We worked very hard that summer and autumn to implement the Criminal Justice Act 1991 with effect from the planned date of October 1992, as it had major implications for many aspects of Probation practice (though most of the provisions were eroded away over the next few years). I also attended, in July 1992, a fortnight course called the Senior Course in Criminology at the University of Cambridge, which had senior people from across the Criminal Justice system attending – 24 I think. The experience was excellent – Martin Narey was a course member, and it was clear he was on his way up – though the quality of teaching by the academic staff, as teaching, was quite poor even though the content was often good.

During 1993 and after, although I was disappointed with failing my promotion interviews, it was not the case that I ‘needed to get away’ from my current post, as I had often felt in the past, because there was a lot in Berkshire to retain my enthusiasm. In his response to my interview failures, Malcolm always said “I’m sorry for you, but I’m pleased for us” and in the way he said it this was very supportive. So I went ahead with buying the house in Reading in May 1994, and to my pleasant surprise a new opportunity opened up for me. It came very soon after the failure of BPS to join the planned Thames Valley Probation Service merger in December 1994.

Malcolm became national Chair of the then ACOP (Association of Chief Officers of Probation), a rotating role that he would be taking for one year, with effect from April 1995. He decided that although he would remain actively Chief of Berkshire (as was expected, and was normal) he would want to give at least half his time to the ACOP role, and he would like me to act up in his stead for many of his CPO duties. I wasn’t fully an ‘Acting Chief’ as Malcolm was still around some of the time, in particular attending to the Committee and other key external duties. Also, it was not permitted (at that time) for me to be called ‘Deputy’, as such posts were under the formal control of the Home Office, so I was called ‘Deputising Chief’ for that year. This meant that I assumed the specified added responsibilities and did that work over and above my normal ACPO duties, and was paid quite a good honorarium. It seemed very good for my CV, and I was well supported by my senior team colleagues who accepted ‘supervision’ from me in a positive spirit, and I also enjoyed it.

As 1996 opened, with the Deputising role coming to an end shortly, two new alternative opportunities emerged. First, I went for CPO Somerset, a very attractive option for me, as I still consider that to be my ‘home county’, but I was again eliminated after the first of two days. The following week I was successfully interviewed for the role of ‘Probation Fellow’ at the Centre for Criminological Research at the University of Oxford, a brand new part time role for up to a year from April 1996. I was grilled quite forensically by David Sanders, the Deputy for the Centre, and it struck me afterwards that this interview was far more exacting in content than any interview I’d had for Chief or any other Probation role. The resulting work I describe in Chapter 15.

One effect of that additional work was that this was when I started working weekends regularly. Throughout my time as an ACPO up to now I had often worked long days, but I had rarely had to work much at weekends – maybe to complete some preparation, or to travel somewhere on a Sunday night, but not often. But in September 1996, as the research data from my Oxford work built up, I found I had to discuss with Lesley at home my need now to work weekends to prevent my overall work plans from falling over.

I genuinely expected this to be only a temporary phase, but for a combination and succession of reasons I never really got my weekends back while I was in Berkshire until the last couple of months as Chief in 2001. The sequence started when I came back in January 1997 to Paul’s three month absence, and I had to do my share of covering for his work – as he was a hard worker there was a lot to cover. Then I decided to do a Common Purpose programme in Reading, starting in April, though this proved complicated. This was because Lesley and I booked our first ever ‘proper’ holiday, a fortnight cruise in the Far East, which overlapped with the first session of the programme. On our return in April, although the senior team was now back at full strength for the first time for two years we then had a major new problem.

The new problem was the decision to abolish Berkshire County Council with effect from the end of March 1998. There had been almighty political shenanigans up to this point about the shape of the unitary authorities that were to replace it, resulting (thanks principally to John Redwood MP in Wokingham) in the somewhat unsatisfactory arrangement of the six existing borough/district councils keeping their exact current boundaries, but all becoming unitary authorities. Although there were already unitaries in Wales that were smaller at the time, the ‘Berkshire six’ would all also still be much smaller than the recommended minimum size for such bodies. And Berkshire would now have six Directors of Social Services and six Directors of Education, each with their own senior management teams and infrastructures, where previously there had only been one. The local politicking up to this point hadn’t impacted much on our day to day work, but from April 1997 onward the practical arrangements for Berkshire Probation Service had to be worked on radically to cope with the new local authority structure from April 1998.

Alongside this we were now given indicative sharply reduced budget figures by the Home Office (under the new cash-limited arrangements) for the next three years. This led us to plan a major reorganisation of the service to cope with the future limited funding, rather than just go for ‘salami slice’ reductions as the next three years unfolded. On top of this we learned that HM Inspectorate was going to arrive to undertake a full inspection at the start of 1998, which involved the preparation of quite a lot of ‘advance information’ – and then to cap all that, in May/June 1997 Simon Noble had a heart attack that he survived but was off work. All this came just after my own Mum died on 7th May.

One additional complication was that this was when desktop computers were starting to arrive for all staff to start to use. This all made 1997/8 a pretty strenuous year overall, when for the first two weeks after my return from holiday in April it had all looked promisingly easy going! It also made my plan to do the Reading Common Purpose programme a bit reckless, but having made the commitment I made sure that I attended each of the full-day events and once per month for the rest of the year.

Our reorganisation of the Berkshire service started with replanning what and how our services would be provided with the prospective budget available. We were deciding strategy first, and structure afterwards. This is the sequence that I have noticed is rarely followed in reorganisations, but I’m convinced that in principle it is the right approach. However it makes staff anxious in the short term, as for them it takes longer before they know what the future structure will be, and where the future jobs will be.

In our case, Simon’s illness allowed us to decide at an early stage that we would be able to show that we were going to avoid the customary sin of ‘cutting the body but not the head’ by planning to reduce the Assistant Chiefs from four to three (Tony now formally counting as an Assistant Chief) – Simon was ‘retired sick’ and not replaced. Work at HQ therefore continued to be pretty strenuous, although I noticed that there was an apparently paradoxical benefit that we became a tighter more coherent team with some efficiency gains because we had fewer colleagues that we needed to liaise or coordinate with. This view influenced the development of my opinion that “Managers are like motorways; they create more traffic”.

The added complication in the autumn of 1997 was when Malcolm was able to negotiate his own early retirement (from 30 Sept 1998), and in the meantime devoted a lot of his own attentions to The Prince’s Trust, for which he was now the Chair in Berkshire. I had quite a frantic spell, doing my job as both ACPO Service Development and for delivery in East Berkshire, helping with the transition to unitary authorities, doing the Common Purpose programme, developing my offender employment programme both regionally and now nationally (I had shot into the ‘national Lead’ role largely through a lack of alternative ‘candidates’), and was writing up my Oxford research during quite a lot of my leave period. I had to start thinking about applying for Malcolm’s job too, and also to ensure that I was ‘looking the part’ meantime.

On top of all this we learned that Paul Goodman successfully got the job of chief executive of the Ley Community, a residential project for drugtakers near Oxford, and we had the prospect of a change of colleague. Malcolm persuaded the Inspectorate to modify their schedule, but the timing remained fairly diabolical. The file-reading days were (I think) in January 1998, but the retimed main Inspection was now to be in April, three weeks of two Inspectors (with me to accompany the lead Inspector every day to take notes), starting three weeks after the start of our new strategy and structure, and change of local authority arrangements. It was also in the first month of Paul Goodman’s successor, Susan Brooks from Bedfordshire, in her new job as a colleague Assistant Chief. I found all this fairly stressful, and had at first not been delighted when Malcolm had suggested that we organise an all-staff conference, plus guests, in March 1998, to launch the publication of my Oxford research. But of course he had been right, that this would be good for my own personal profile as well as for Berkshire Probation Service.

I’ve described in Chapter 4 the process of how I became CPO Berkshire, being appointed in April/May 1998 to start on 1st October. It gave me time to recruit my own replacement, Pip Coker, who started in the last week of September. For myself, I had been ACPO (now ACO) for over nine years in all, the longest I held any individual post, albeit it had felt like about six different posts altogether over the years. I never liked the title much, but enjoyed very much indeed the variety that the role had given me, despite (or perhaps because of) some periods of sustained very hard work.

It seemed such an unlikely eventuality that I had now become a Chief, even though I had strived very hard indeed to get there, and I was very conscious that it would probably only be for a very finite period because of Government plans for reorganisation. And I did not want to be Eden to Malcolm’s Churchill – a well-regarded ‘Number Two’ to a reputedly excellent Premier who after a long wait to get to the top was then perceived as a failure during his brief period as ‘Number One’ in his own right. I would work hard to prevent this happening to me!

And I’m certainly confident that I ‘put the hours in’ as Chief, though many could reasonably say that it was unnecessary for me to devote the large number of hours that I did to the ‘ACOP Offender Employment’ work and to the ‘European’ projects (see Chapter 15). My thinking was based on the these considerations: My main desire was that BPS should become recognised more clearly as an effective Service as well as an innovative one, so I wasn’t going to stint on that task. But additionally, I believed I still had much to offer in terms of developing offender employment practice by Probation across the country as a whole. And on top of that, yes, the European work was a bit of a self-indulgent addition, a benefit to me in terms of potential foreign travel, although I had a good case for seeing it as a useful complement to my national offender employment work.

Alongside those considerations was my strong expectation that my job wouldn’t last very long. National restructuring of the Service was clearly to be expected, in one form or another, and in a rare example of me actually getting a prediction right, my guess was that my job would come to an end in March 2001. This added a spur to my determination that I would make every effort I could to make a success of my time-limited job – I didn’t want a future when I could look back on being the Berkshire Chief, and to regret not having made a little bit more effort, and made better use of my time there. Accordingly, I continued to work a six-and-a-half day week, except in August and in Christmas week, for my whole time as Chief, until that January 2001 disaster, after which I rarely needed to work weekends. (Though I did take holidays – giving me four or five weeks in the year which were work-free.)

I should also confirm that, yes, some of those weekends were taken up with seminars in various European cities (eight, I think), and at least twenty working days per year were used on events or meetings for ACOP Offender Employment, so I needed to do a lot besides in order to achieve my main desire with BPS. And all this had also to be done alongside the increasing work required for preparing for the transition to a Thames Valley Probation Area from 2001. From the end of 1999 there were regular meetings with the senior managers of Ox & Bucks, and meetings of the shadow Board for the potential new Area, in addition to the continuing six meetings per year of our own employing Berkshire Probation Committee. We Chiefs were also summoned to London on various occasions to be briefed by Home Office personnel on various aspects of the developing plans for the new National Probation Service.

On one occasion the senior Home Office official told us that Probation Service performance was still important to Ministers, so although we needed to devote some time to managing the transition we shouldn’t let this be an excuse for being distracted from maintaining a focus on our performance. This was not unreasonable in itself, as I’d seen other organisations, for example Social Services in Berkshire, quite markedly lose focus on their service delivery while dealing with their own structural reorganisation. However, at the next meeting the same official asked us to bear with her since she and her people would not be able to respond to us effectively at present because they were so busy dealing with the transition management. Unsurprisingly this drew a fairly indignant response from one of my colleague Chiefs along the lines of ‘Surely, what’s sauce for the goose…?!’ The official had the grace to blush.

I was fortunate that through my two-and-a-half years as the last Chief Probation Officer for Berkshire I had a stable and highly competent team of Susan Brooks, Pip Coker and Tony Rolley as ‘my’ three Assistant Chiefs. Then, from April 2001, and the establishment of the new Thames Valley Area of the National Probation Service, I was gone of course. More remarkably, from April 2002 the other three had by then also gone! (Another story there…)

### What I/we did:

As already mentioned, in 1989, during my first few months, the job didn’t seem overly demanding. I mainly inducted myself into my new role with a series of ‘hands-on’ visits around the county, and discussions with various staff of BPS (Berkshire Probation Service).

Then there was an allegation of misappropriation of money by the Warden at Elizabeth Fry, and although the police decided after a while that they were not going to pursue it further, the management committee requested that I come in and do a deeper inquiry. I was not now exploring allegations of dishonesty, but looking at management practice – indeed the practice by the warden of having jars of cash from which she paid for different items at different times in an unaccountable way reminded me on a small scale of Clive Morgan’s management of Community Service in Gwent. She’d been in post for some 18 years, and with little oversight had developed her own ‘Spanish practices’, not all of which were about cavalier financial management. So although I didn’t want to go from extreme undermanagement to extreme overmanagement I did think some corrective changes were needed, and the Committee was pleased with the idea of me as ACPO becoming the Warden’s direct line manager on their behalf (which meant I had to join that Committee).

This inquiry gave me a lot of extra work in the short term, and then also in the long term as I became much more involved in the management of both Elizabeth Fry and Manor Lodge, the other then independent Probation hostel. So the pace of my work was now somewhat increased. Some time after this, after Paul Goodman had taken over from me the responsibility for the hostels, he took the decision to arrange for Manor Lodge to be brought in to direct management by BPS by abolishing its independent management committee.

Meanwhile a related element of my job when I started was to develop opportunities for offenders under our supervision to gain accommodation, for which task I had the privilege of a budget to appoint a full-time member of staff. We agreed that we needed someone who really understood local authority and/or voluntary housing sector policy and practice, and with the appointment of the excellent Gillian Wilson we gained the first of what I later called our ‘service development managers’. She and I established links with each of the six District-level local authorities in Berkshire, and then had them all meet together regularly in what we called the Berkshire Offender Accommodation Forum. We were told by them that this was the first time that these local housing authorities had actually met together!

Gillian continued right through to 2001, quietly and consistently developing and maintaining these links at strategic level, while also doing so much practical individual work with practitioners that she gained high credibility with them too. She carefully conducted an annual survey every year which identified the quantity, nature and local distribution of current offender accommodation needs, and tailored her work accordingly. She also designed and managed a ‘purchasing’ contract with a local third-sector provider to provide ‘resettlement’ support to some of our cases who were moving into independent accommodation for the first time – the aim was to prevent the frequent problem of such individuals failing to manage independent living in their first few months. The radical element of our contract was that we simply specified the service we wanted them to provide, and for them to evidence that they had provided it with 30 cases each year. Unlike their other funding bodies we didn’t seek to tell them in detail how they should spend their money.

In the 1990s one element of national policy was helpful to the work that Gillian did on our behalf: the Home Office distributed, in effect, a hypothecated budget for “supporting” local accommodation for offenders. This ended at the turn of the century when it became part of the larger budget, owned by the relevant Department that managed local authorities, for supporting a whole range of “vulnerable” or disadvantaged groups. This meant that in effect local decision makers would be deciding which local ‘vulnerable’ groups of people would get which amounts of this total money. Personally, I could understand the thinking behind this policy in terms of the ‘big picture’, but I shared the concern that under these arrangements supported accommodation for offenders was likely to lose out. As it happened, I got the chance to make some assessment of this for myself in my early years as Chief Inspector – things were not marvellous (they never are), but equally they were not as bad as I had feared they would be.

Back in 1991, offender accommodation remained part of my brief even after Paul Goodman’s arrival, when he took over responsibility for managing the four Probation hostels. Most local Probation Services grouped these two roles together, as superficially both seem to be about ‘offender accommodation’, and initially we expected to do the same. But I quickly came to the view that this would be a mistake. Probation hostels – “Approved Premises” as they are now inelegantly called – are a specialist area of direct service delivery, existing for the purpose of dealing with offending behaviour. They therefore belonged in the category of specialist service delivery, which was Paul’s new division. But Gillian’s work was an ‘indirect’ service development role, and should therefore become part of my new division – this was eventually agreed. This arrangement went on to work well in practice – but then I would say that, wouldn’t I?

In 1989 one aspect of my new job that was almost a complete mystery to me before I started was what we then called ‘community crime prevention’. But I knew that it was important that I should make some kind of success of this new mysterious duty, because Malcolm was the national lead for this area of work within ACOP (Association of Chief Officers of Probation). He felt strongly that there was a role for Probation in working with ‘communities’ as well as with individuals to help prevent crime from being committed in the first place.

On a related point, Malcolm had also been a key member of the group that had founded the very first Victim Support scheme in the country, in Bristol in about 1974, so helping the development of Victim Support locally was also a key part of my BPS duties. Accordingly I attended the quarterly evening meetings of when the three active Berkshire schemes met as the Berkshire “Association”, and also the Thames Valley Association, the assembly of all of them in the three counties of Berkshire, Buckinghamshire and Oxfordshire that was formally sanctioned by Thames Valley Police (to the chagrin of the Berkshire schemes). BPS expected local SPOs to attend their local schemes too. The most notable practical local contribution had been before my arrival, when Kay Vanstone, then as Newbury SPO, had been very active in assisting her local Victim Support scheme during the aftermath of the Hungerford massacre.

I’m not sure what I personally achieved for Victim Support other than be an ‘ambassador’ for Probation generally, which has helped a little to keep to a minimum any potential for Victim Support to become a lobby-group for harsher punishments for offenders. On the other hand, although I don’t think I was previously blind to the victim perspective, my recurring contact with Victim Support during the 1990s, the victims’ testimony in our Inspection reports in the 2000s, and the advisory work I have done with the Victims Commissioner since then, have all helped me develop my consideration of the viewpoints of the victims of crime.

Meanwhile, from 1989 to 1991 I was trying to plan what I should be doing for the rest of the ‘community crime prevention’ agenda. The offender accommodation work had opened channels with the District authorities, and I learned that crime prevention was coming onto their agenda too, in terms of planning for use of street lighting and ‘designing out’ crime – but I was still not sure how I could help here. Then Malcolm stepped in with an initiative that was very much a product of its time. He bid to the County Council for Berkshire that the BPS budget should have an increase for this local crime prevention purpose – and the carrot was that, as per the arrangements at that time, the Home Office would simply be stumping up 80% of the cost of that increase.

The County Council agreed, and then we contacted each of the District councils to offer a sum towards them appointing their own ‘crime reduction manager’. Two of them agreed, so that meant we could afford to fund almost all of the cost of one manager each, for three years (I think), the idea being that if the post were seen to be a success they would take over the funding. The posts were seen as successful, and later on, we moved to part-funding posts in more Districts – the arrangements for which varied – until the late 1990s when they were solely with those councils. The whole experience of working with local authorities at various levels, and their local police commanders, and the nature of how local politics worked in different localities, was a complete eye-opener to me. It stood me in good stead when, first Youth Offending Teams arrived locally in the late 1990s, and also in the Inspectorate, when many inspections, especially of Youth Offending, involved dealing with local authority viewpoints with which most Probation Inspection staff were completely unfamiliar.

Two of my main memories of this work in Berkshire concern the appointing of the first of these pioneering Crime Reduction posts, in Bracknell Forest, in 1991/2, I think. The first was gaining final approval for the post from the District Council. Naively, I thought that this would be about presenting a formal business case to the full Council, or at least a formal committee. No, the Chief Executive explained, what would be helpful would be if I and the local Police commander came to an informal evening meeting in the CE’s office with a couple of “key members” of the Council.

I went along, as I was the key funder, but I am for ever grateful that the lead role was with the Chief Superintendent, as it was clear that he knew exactly what was required. He turned up in full uniform, which I had never seen him in before. He concisely stated the purpose of the new post, outlining its strategic role locally, and why he supported it. When he’d finished, one of the councillors then responded by describing an incident where a friend of his had been pushed off his bike in an underpass in the town recently, and what were the Police going to do about it? I was most impressed with Pat (the commander) who didn’t lose his temper, as I might well have done. He proceeded to talk quietly and confidently about his knowledge and understanding of local concerns in various exchanges with the two councillors for about another half an hour – the post itself wasn’t mentioned again. At the end, the councillors looked quite happy, and after they’d gone my two colleagues said they were sure that our plan would now be fine (it was).

For the appointment itself, I worked with the same two colleagues in preparing the job description etc, the shortlisting and the final interviews. What struck me at the time was the number of retired police officers applying. I was vaguely aware that many police officers could retire at 50, and often went on to get jobs in various security and other related roles, so I should not have been surprised to see so many of such candidates. On the other hand, it seemed to me that hardly any had given any thought about the nature of the role we were advertising. One in particular spent much of the interview describing the boat that he was building on the river, and our job would give him something quite interesting to do in quiet moments (OK, I slightly exaggerate). But Pat had thankfully no agenda to appoint a former colleague, and we had little difficulty in agreeing that a youngish woman who was a research chemist would be the best appointment. The fact that she had recently been a Special Constable was partly helpful – some hands-on experience – and partly problematic, as that role was obviously a junior one. But her rational strategic thinking, and desire to base her work on planning for evidence of results, made her easily the best candidate.

Having now talked about some of the ‘external’ elements of my job, I should turn my attention back to the ‘internal’ life of BPS, and what I tried to do there. One of the things that I had noticed as an SPO myself, and which was strongly reinforced by the SPOs who participated in my MPhil research, was the nature of the ‘divide’ between SPO and ACPO (Assistant Chief). This divide was principally about the geographical gap between someone in charge of a local service delivery unit and her/his line manager who was part of a team in a separate headquarters building. (Therefore, in a metropolitan Probation service the split might sometimes be between ‘local’ ACPO and HQ Deputy Chief.)

A key aspect of this was that day-to-day informal contact rarely took place, so the business that needed to be conducted in the scheduled formal bilateral meetings required a different approach. The traditional hour-and-a-half session that an SPO had with a PO seemed insufficient for an ACPO/SPO meeting, I felt. So from the start in 1989 I aimed to spend most of an afternoon on site when I visited a local manager, and I sought to divide the session up into sections so that we could cover different aspects of what we needed to talk about. In particular, although it was important to deal with what I called the “shopping list” of immediate/urgent problems that needed resolving, I didn’t want that to prevent us from moving on to discuss the more long-term aspects of the SPO’s job. As before, I made notes of our meeting and sent the SPO a copy of my notes – because I still believed that essentially it was like any other business meeting, in which it helps if there’s a record of what’s been discussed and decided, and which can be followed through next time. In practice, with annual leave, monthly meetings meant nine or ten meetings in reality per year.

My aim was first to learn and then to influence how they went about getting the best from their own staff – there is more than one way of going about being an effective manager. But I was now working with the Adair model from a different perspective: could this frontline manager demonstrate to me how they were Achieving the Task, Building the Team and Developing the Individual? If not, we could discuss how to do it better.

I think my approach was useful in practice, albeit somewhat hit and miss in terms of effective management, but with hostels for example there was a benefit to me in terms of developing my knowledge and understanding of that setting, and hopefully also a benefit to the hostel, as the local manager’s practice was open to regular scrutiny at some depth - the monthly meeting usually included an element of inspection by me.

Looking at those early years, what was I trying to achieve overall as a BPS senior manager? Malcolm Bryant the Chief set out both to staff and to the outside world a strong and often visionary description of what Berkshire Probation Service was all about. In addition to his role in helping to found the first Victim Support scheme in 1974, and his promotion of the idea of ‘community crime prevention’, Malcolm had been the originating prime mover of the idea that we should stop calling the people we supervised “clients”. So he was finalising a Five Year Strategy when I arrived in 1989, called “Strategy for Achievement”, where much of the thrust was to emphasise that our work was for the whole community and not just “for” the person under supervision. Therefore I quickly formed the view that the job of his ACPOs was that we should try to make sure that what our organisation delivered in real life would in reality bear some resemblance to his vision. My focus on the Adair model with those service delivery SPOs was how I tried to ‘make that happen’. For his part Malcolm was encouraging and gave me direction without micromanaging.

However, from 1991 I needed to find a different rationale as I didn’t have those local service delivery managers any more. And since ‘my’ service development managers were all located with me in our headquarters office in Reading I could also rethink my monthly diary. Because our co-location meant that we had quite a lot of informal contact most weeks, I found that our regular monthly formal meeting could work quite satisfactorily at about the hour-and-a-half level, though still with notes of the meeting that I copied and shared. Because the work they did was indirect it was not straightforward to set annual objectives for them and then monitor how well they were doing, but we found an approach that worked reasonably well. They had ‘task objectives’ each year (i.e. specific tasks they had to complete in the year ahead), and we also identified measurable changes in ‘offender outcomes’ in the county as a whole that our division would help our Service to achieve over a longer period. For example, we would have a three-year offender employment strategy with a target that x% of Berkshire cases would be in employment at the end of their Order or Licence (this objective had a detailed specification).

By 1992 my ‘Service Development’ division consisted of the SPO (Training), Information Systems Manager, Accommodation Development Manager, Volunteer Development Manager and Employment Development Manager (of which more later), all of whose jobs were ‘indirect’. In Mintzberg’s terms, we were the ‘technical support’ division. We agreed that, collectively, our role was to promote and enable facilities for, and enhancements to, the services being provided directly by frontline staff. No doubt some people might have seen me as simply ‘empire-building’, though in each case in my mind I was developing that work rather than my personal entourage. In support of my ‘defence’, I would point out that when responsibility for Equal Opportunities came to me, many staff hoped that I would appoint a service development manager for that work too – but I decided that that wasn’t needed (see also Chapter 16).

In contrast I had identified a role for a Volunteer Development Manager early in 1991, when I analysed the contract that we then had with SOVA (the Society for Voluntary Associates) who were contracted to organising Probation volunteers for BPS in the eastern half of the county. It struck me that for the total money we were paying them each year for doing the job in just half the county we could directly employ a manager ourselves who would manage volunteers for the whole of the county. It was a delicate matter to notify SOVA of this planned change, since the relevant SOVA manager was Lesley, the woman I was later to marry. Nevertheless we carried out this transition, and appointed Viv to our new post.

Then the Home Office decided that all Probation Services should be spending at least 5% of their revenue budgets on “partnerships” – by which they essentially meant subcontracted service delivery work. While in the pre-2001 world, the Home Office had no direct means of enforcing this, much pressure was exerted by indirect means – constant demands for explanation etc. This was the beginning of the long and repeated exercise of me advocating that managers should be able to decide for themselves which local services they choose to contract out and those that they don’t, based on a ‘business case’ analysis each time. The issue receded during the 2000s, but arose again in a new form for CRCs (Community Rehabilitation Companies) in the 2010s. Back in the 1990s, in Berkshire I’d made a costed ‘business case’ decision on how our budget would be spent most effectively, and I was then being told ‘from above’ for reasons of blind ideological policy that I was ‘doing it wrong’.

Meanwhile, Viv did the job well until she moved on elsewhere, at which point, with our budget now somewhat tighter, we made that job a half-time role that would be carried out in future by the SPO for the small team at Maidenhead. However, this meant that Volunteer Development ceased to be in the Service Development division.

BPS’s Information Systems were clearly an important aspect of my job, but unlike the other roles, I never succeeded in getting a sufficient grasp of the technical side of that job to understand well enough what needed to be managed by me. When I arrived in 1989, only the small Information team (of two) had computers, although most secretaries had just started using word processors (pre-Windows). I used an Amstrad word processor at home, and also some of its computing capacity for personal purposes, but it wasn’t until 1996 that I had my first access to a computer at work. After the revolution of IT rollout over the next two years, and with a change of Information manager to Adrian, I was then able to take a more intelligent approach to what needed to be managed – I describe this more in Chapter 17.

As for the subject of offender employment, I took on this responsibility almost ‘by accident’ on Paul Goodman’s arrival, when we eventually decided it came under the heading of Service Development. But then immediately I found myself further propelled almost by default into increased responsibility for this area of work. For there had been, and still was then, a strong tendency within Probation nationally not to pay much attention to getting the people under our supervision into work. There was an assumption that this was for the local job centre (Employment Department) to do, and that there was little for us to add. Among many POs across the country, with general unemployment becoming so high from c1977 onwards, and especially in the 1980s, a rather pernicious view had also developed that that it was unreasonable to expect our “clients” to find employment themselves – a phrase often heard was “We shouldn’t set them up to fail.” To some extent I had been beguiled myself by this perspective in the 1980s, but it was also now clear to me that having low expectations of people was damaging to them, even if ‘well-intentioned’. When I had first started my MPhil at the University of Bath a fellow SPO from another area, Diana Fulbrook, had been doing a study of POs’ attitudes to offender unemployment, and this had also helped me realise that our approach needed to change.

So when this became one of my responsibilities in Berkshire in 1992 I thought that if I attended a meeting of the group of my counterpart ACPOs in the region I would start to learn more about how to make some changes and improvements. But at the second meeting, the ACPO who chaired this meeting moved on from his area, and with no other willing alternative I found myself becoming the new regional chair of this group. I quickly realised that I would have to do a ‘teach myself’ job after all, and even more so when in my new capacity I attended the ‘national’ group of such ACPOs, where in next to no time (it seemed) I was chairing that too. This was called the “Employment Working Group” of the Association of Chief Officers of Probation (ACOP), and ours was one of a number of ‘working groups’ that came under ACOP’s Social Policy Committee. I had huge respect for the Chief of Teesside who chaired this, Roger Statham, because of his excellent tuition on the course for new ACPOs I’d done, but my perspective on this task soon increasingly diverged from his. He saw offender employment as primarily a social policy matter for us to campaign on, while I saw it increasingly as an area where we should improve our own service delivery practice.

Nationally, I repeatedly battered away at the ACOP leadership to give Offender Employment the status of a ‘subject lead’ in its own right, recognising it as a specific area of service delivery – this finally came in March 1998. The problem had not been hostility, as in many ways the leaders were backing the work of the national group already, but they were cautious, reasonably, about having too many separate ACOP subjects. Meanwhile I chaired our national ACOP group every quarter, where some regions had a better-attending ACPO than others had, and I also attended the Home Office’s National Offender Employment Forum twice a year, which included policymakers and representatives from other Government Departments and organisations, and some leading national charities as well (e.g. NACRO, Apex Trust). From about 1999 I was chairing this Forum too.

Within the ‘South of Thames’ ACOP region, later the South East region when it aligned with the then Government Office for the region, my group was mainly attended by the specialist managers from each area, with occasional ACPO attendance as well. We generally learned of ideas and initiatives from neighbouring areas, discussed how to make them work better, or searched for new ideas. Kent seconded a manager, Amanda, to work exclusively to the national group, and thereby also to the regional group, and she produced prodigious amounts of training material and other guidance and ideas.

Nearer to ‘home’, the local TEC (Training & Enterprise Council), called Thames Valley Enterprise, was keen to do its bit for ‘disadvantaged groups’ – as was its parent the Government’s Employment Department. Although its Thames Valley area didn’t align fully with ours, we did have a Thames Valley offender employment strategy from 1998-2001 which did achieve the strategic objective that we’d set at the start. This was because it was in the interest of all the different organisations round that table to achieve that same objective. We made different contributions – I mean ‘work contributions’ not money – to achieving the shared objective. To my mind this was an example of a good ‘joint-working partnership’, as distinct from a ‘purchasing partnership’. Yet both types of partnership had their uses, if they were worked well.

For my part I was able to do all this because of our appointment in BPS of our own Employment Development Manager, Jim Openshaw, in about 1992. I had been fortunate that Malcolm had backed the idea, and we could afford it in our budget at the time, and Jim proved highly effective in his own idiosyncratic way right through to 2001. He had been a PO early in his career, but for the last 20 or so years had been working mainly in catering or sales and marketing, and I learned a lot from him on that latter subject. His networking and his marketing of our people as an ‘opportunity’ for local employers was one major part of his successful practice.

Some POs did not warm to his ebullient and extravert ‘commercial’ style, but many came to appreciate that he was creating work opportunities for the people under our supervision. His was the original ‘Forklift truck driving’ initiative that was very successful (it was evaluated independently) in training people to gain the certificate and then into employment. This project has subsequently been imitated by other organisations such as HMP Reading. I often told him that I was able to walk the national stage – and even a European stage – as an offender employment ‘expert’ in large part because of the practical work he was putting in. More about my offender employment work later on.

But at the same time as all this extra benefit was being brought to our work I was conscious of an ironic consequence. It had become evident a few months after I had started in Berkshire as the new, and additional, ACPO. John Hughes had said to me at one point, “I thought that when you came I wouldn’t have to work quite so hard as before, but I seem to be working harder than ever now!” When I reflected on this, and continually over the years after that, it struck me that most of what I was doing were jobs that simply weren’t being done before. And of course when I appointed new ‘Development Managers’ these also involved work that hadn’t been done before. The issue was of course that in principle extra managers should bring ‘added value’ to the work of the organisation, and also in principle it should be possible to measure or at least assess that ‘added value’. But against that there is a ‘cost’ to the organisation of not only the money for the new manager and support staff if any but also the extra work it creates for the other existing managers which in turn can adversely affect their effectiveness overall.

As someone who took seriously Mintzberg’s analysis of organisational structure, which broadly divides management into service delivery, support services and technical support, I was keen to ensure that my Service Development ‘division’ (i.e. technical support) was something that added value rather than subtracted value from the overall work of BPS. For it was true that we made demands on service delivery managers at both frontline and senior level with our requests for data collection and surveys on accommodation and employment status, for monitoring the work of Probation volunteers locally, for help with various anti-racism and gender issues initiatives, and support for our community crime prevention and victim support work. Naturally I felt that we were successful in adding value, on balance, but I didn’t take this for granted.

The big test came in 1997-8, when that change in Home Office funding arrangements meant not only a ‘hard ceiling’ to what BPS could spend in a year, but also a lowering of that ceiling because we in Berkshire were (correctly in my view) seen as being historically overfunded compared with other local Probation Services. Under Malcolm’s leadership the senior management team resolved to achieve a major reduction in annual expenditure by making strategic changes to how we managed the Service. We caused some anxiety for staff initially by insisting that we’d reprofile what we did and how we did it (i.e. strategy) before reorganising (i.e. structure), but of course that’s the right way round even if it’s rarely done that way in practice. Most saw the sense of this in due course, and seemed appreciative that it showed that staff changes had a logic to them, and in particular that we made a cut at senior management level as well as at frontline and practitioner level, as I’ve already outlined.

Given that we were all working extremely hard – I wasn’t the only one regularly working most of most Saturdays and Sundays - we were a bit apprehensive about this, but it seemed to us inexcusable not to include ourselves in the cuts. We were talking about a 20% reduction over three years, based on Home Office projections re our now-capped budget. Simon’s heart attack, from which he recovered but was content to accept retirement on ill health grounds, gave us a fortuitous way of making the senior management cut. Although all three of the rest of us continued to work extremely hard, we could focus on what most needed to be done within the new strategy, and sure enough we found that the joint task we were doing continued to be do-able. I’ll return to my reflections on this experience in the next section.

Meanwhile the unsettling element of the job throughout this whole period was the prospect of the Berkshire Service disappearing into a larger Thames Valley Service. I can remember quite early on, maybe Christmas 1989, when I think I had delivered something to Malcolm’s house in Wokingham, he said something on the doorstep as I was leaving that one potential straw in the wind was an amalgamation into Thames Valley. I was quite spooked as I drove home that evening, since I had naïvely previously thought that I had just that year secured my ideal ‘job for life’, and now there was a threat that just might take it away. I wasn’t overly anxious about it, but I was ‘spooked’, and in my simplistic mind I was then the ‘junior’, and new additional, ACPO, with no prospect at the time of the other two leaving any time soon, so if anyone was going to lose their job over this development it could easily be me, I thought.

As time went on it became clear that the drive for the change was coming from Malcolm himself, in conjunction with the Chiefs of Oxfordshire and Buckinghamshire whom we suspected of being attracted by a prospective retirement package. At the time this idea was extremely radical; all current Probation areas had been determined by the 1974 reorganisation of local government, and had stayed the same even after Thatcher’s government abolished Metropolitan County Councils in 1980s. (The one change during this period had been the disappearance of the tiny City of London service, with its three officers, into Inner London, also in the 1980s I think.) It was a case of Malcolm being “ten years ahead of his time” (again, as he often was) in seeing that further area mergers would be the way of the future at some point, and in taking the initiative so that we could make an early start to this.

This first phase of a proposed Thames Valley service was therefore driven entirely locally, and lasted from 1992 to 1995 in all. There was a series of preparatory meetings, first the three senior management teams together, and then the three employing Committees together, a phase when the management consultants Coopers and Lybrand as they then were came in (they were utterly pathetic, and in my eyes caused me to doubt whether it was a good idea at all), culminating in the three Committees meeting in the same week near the end of 1994 in order to pass separate resolutions to amalgamate. The Oxfordshire and Buckinghamshire Committees had already met and passed their resolutions when the Berkshire Committee met on 1st December 1994, a memorable date.

Despite our reservations the ACPOs spoke in support of Malcolm and in favour of the proposal (when asked), as did the then Chair, Anne Barroll. But though her heart was certainly in the right place she was not a skilful Chair. Two factors combined and clearly weighed heavily with some Members: first, there was a strong impression gained that the other two Probation Services were weak and were to be ‘helped out’ by the ‘strong’ Berkshire service, and second, it so happened that the Chair of the entire national Magistrates Association for that year, Rosemary Thomson, was on the Berkshire Committee. She was quietly very forceful on the point that the merger might be good for Thames Valley as a whole, but it would be ‘bad for Berkshire’ (as our ‘strength would be diluted’ in her view). Anne seemed to get tired, and took the matter suddenly to a vote without making any attempt to sum up, and the motion fell by one vote.

It was of course quite a shock, but Malcolm being the true professional had drafted two different memos for his secretary Joyce to send out, and he telephoned her to tell her to send out Memo B rather than Memo A. He had said to us beforehand that he thought that it was ‘about three-to-one-on’ that the resolution would be passed, but that meant that it could still fall – and so it did. I remember that straight after the meeting he and we his team went to a pub at Shinfield, quite close to Shire Hall, to take stock and review what had happened and outline what we would do next.

In fairness to us, we had continued running the Service in a purposeful manner through all the other negotiations, and it did not take us long to confirm that we would simply proceed, in effect, with ‘Plan B’, and plan for the year ahead as normal. The postscript to this first phase was that the other two Services proceeded with a merger between themselves, deciding that they would imaginatively call themselves the Oxfordshire & Buckinghamshire Probation Service (there had once been a regiment of the same name…), and at some point in 1995, Berkshire was invited to make a late change of decision and join in. This got short shrift in the Berkshire Committee; the December 1994 resolution was the only matter on which they had ever actually gone to a formal vote, and having taken it they were not going to change their mind on it now. Indeed there was a stronger majority this time. Meanwhile, the new Oxon & Bucks Service gave the current Chiefs the retirement packages they had been hoping for, and appointed Eithne Wallis, then Deputy Chief in Inner London, as their first Chief. I expected this to be a good development.

Malcolm sought to develop co-operative practices with the Oxon & Bucks Service, but we had to be clear that because of the Committee resolution there could be no question of reopening the question of merger. This led to a rising tension, I came to notice. Once we had a joint senior management meeting in Aylesbury, and after the initial separate bilateral between the Chiefs, they each came out and made a brief address to the assembled two teams – Malcolm diplomatic, and Eithne overtly critical of Malcolm and us for not trying to persuade our Committee to change its position. Given that Malcolm had been the moving spirit all along, until the point when his employers had made their decision, this seemed to me crass as well as discourteous. (Malcolm was never critical or indiscreet about other Chiefs, even with us in private.) This event may have taken place just after the point when Malcolm had let it be known that he was planning to retire, and Eithne and her Chair had tried to persuade Malcolm and Anne, unsuccessfully, that they should use this opportunity to allow Oxon & Bucks to ‘take over’ Berkshire.

In due course, almost a year after this, I was appointed Chief of Berkshire, and I knew when I came in that merger was once more on the cards, this time driven from ‘above’ rather than from ‘below’ – part of a potential national plan rather than a local initiative.

So I’ll cover that ‘second phase’ of the merger issue later on, and will now go on to describe three episodes of us at BPS dealing with Home Office policy over IT in the late 1990s. I describe elsewhere, in Chapter 17, the overall course of the IT revolution, particularly during the 1996-9 rollout of equipment at BPS, so I’m only focusing here on these three episodes, which took place during that initial IT revolution. It will be apparent than in all three instances I was highly critical of the stance taken by the Home Office, although I could moderate that a little by commenting that I doubt if in those uncertain times many people knew any better how to handle the matters.

First was RMIS (Resource Management Information System). This software programme was introduced for rolling out to the 54 separate Services in the mid-1990s. The idea was that the work that was being done could be coded and recorded onto the database and enable us to manage our work and our money more effectively. It was a good example, and not the last one, of a good idea in theory being so badly implemented in practice that it did not achieve the purpose which it was intended to achieve. In brief, you could enter a lot of data, and in theory produce a lot of ‘quite interesting’ reports, but not in any form that would enable a manager to make a revised ‘informed’ reallocation of resources. Principally, the nature of Probation work is that practitioners are paid a fixed salary to provide a range of tasks or processes, most of which at that time were statutory duties or requirements. As far as any current manager was concerned, an individual PO could be redeployed – which we didn’t need RMIS to help us do – and we could influence that practitioner to modify the way she/he allocated her own hours. Detailed retrospective time-recording would be a waste of practitioners’ time with little practical management benefit.

The event that nearly sent me over the edge was when I was required to attend a three-day course to a superb location in Worcestershire, with our Training SPO, where three trainers contracted by the Home Office sought to ‘train’ a grand total of five of us course members to ‘train our trainers’ (back in our home areas) about how to use RMIS and why it was a good idea. It was clear to me that the Home Office had markedly overpaid from their own training budget, and the contractors found they could lay on this laborious course numerous times across the country. Two of the course members, of which I was one, had our birthday during the three days, and the trainers – always professionally courteous and considerate – laid on a cake etc each time.

But the waste of money over the training was only a small part of my annoyance – it became increasingly clear to me that the software was going to be of little value to me as a manager in practice. It produced some 150 reports, none of which did anything more than provide mildly interesting information, while when I gave my example of the report that I would genuinely find useful I found that it couldn’t produce that. We kept being told that our job was to go back and explain why it was all a good idea – though, by the way, it was going to be compulsory anyway – while I got more and more angry about it consuming a lot of staff time with additional data entry requirements for no useful purpose.

In the end I worked out how we could supply the Home Office with the minimum data upload that they now required from us each month, using the minimum of our staff time, and we implemented it on that basis. But as I returned from this course I was anxious as well as angry, and I confessed to Malcolm how I had been conspicuously irate while attending this course, and hoped that there wouldn’t be ramifications for him or for BPS. It was on this occasion that Malcolm made on of his memorably reassuring comments to me: “Don’t worry, Andrew –it’s the grit in the oyster that makes the pearl.”

The fuss over CRAMS (Case Record And (Assessment &) Management System) was even more far-reaching. Clearly the idea was good – with computerisation should come a national internal electronic system for managing all our reports and cases. Indeed there was a serious hope that the whole of the CJS could become linked up – I was asked to host an event in Berkshire in 1993 for all the criminal justice agencies in the region to be introduced to the national project then called the CCCJS (Co-ordination of Computerisation in the Criminal Justice System). We heard from the project leaders that we would all be able to access the relevant information that we needed from each other once the project would be completed in fifteen years’ time – in 2008. CRAMS would be the Probation component, the counterpart to the various other case management systems being introduced for the Police, Courts and Crown Prosecution Service.

To greater or lesser extents, none of these systems, nor others devised for other Government Departments, proved problem-free, but the failings of CRAMS were particularly egregious. A number of Probation Services, mainly in the east of England, had by the mid-1990s devised their own “ICMS” which ran on MS Windows, but I believe this system was considered by the Home Office either insufficient for further potential development, or simply too expensive. In any event, a new system was slowly designed, with a graphical user interface, but its functions were different from Windows and considerably less user-friendly.

The Home Office was determined to implement CRAMS, principally so that information about cases could be available centrally (a fair aim), but it moved into ‘steamroller mode’ to make this happen. For a long time, it was like a dark cloud that we were waiting to come over the horizon, as we heard a series of informal stories about how bad it was, and then the official stories about how the problems had been exaggerated and anyway were now fixed. In Berkshire we were forbidden to take further any plans for adopting ICMS, and forced to move off from our existing case database and onto PROBIS, which was the existing clunky Home Office supported database, as this was a preliminary measure for moving to CRAMS when it eventually arrived.

At about this time many of us senior managers were summoned to an event where the presentation was by John Scott of Surrey PS, a man whom I greatly respected and liked. But John was also a ‘loyal company’ man, and he had been given the job of implementing CRAMS in Surrey to prove it could be done – and John had risen to that challenge. He gave an excellent meticulous account of the time, timescale and money that had been deployed in implementing CRAMS, and listed the problems and how he had overcome them – and achieved the objective had been set. I likened it to some surviving commander listing all the numerous casualties after the Charge of Light Brigade, which I believe did after all capture the Russian guns they’d been (mistakenly) sent to capture. There was no sense that CRAMS was actually achieving anything positive for the management or operations of Surrey PS, and although I was impressed with the presentation I was as worried as ever about the prospect of CRAMS.

A senior Home Office chap was sent to Reading to persuade me – I was the Chief by this time. He told me that it was my job to “make the business case” to my employing Probation Committee as to why CRAMS should be implemented. I told him flatly that I couldn’t do that as there wasn’t a business case. I would be telling the Committee that we were having to do it because we were required to do it, but it was not our preferred system. By then I had also conducted a two-part “trial” to check that I was not making a big mistake over all this. I and my senior management team spent a day actually examining ICMS, doing some ‘ghost’ data entry and management on a PC, and then also examining CRAMS, doing the same kind of data entry and management. CRAMS was not quite as bad as it had been described at one time, but its functioning was as poor and as perverse as we’d heard and feared. So I knew what I was talking about as I rebuffed the Home Office yet again. However I knew that I would have no choice at the final crunch implementation point, as I would be allowed no other means of submitting data returns.

In fairness – as usual – I should add that the email system that was rolled out for the 54 Probation Services had excellent functionality. It used Lotus Notes, and indeed the same software enabled me and Adrian, the Information Manager, to devise and implement a useful database that was sufficiently live to help us manage the public protection cases (Chapter 17). It left me wondering why Lotus Notes couldn’t be used to develop a suitable case management system – though of course my technical knowledge was and is quite limited.

The rhetoric from the Home Office continued, part draconian threats and part bullish argument. We were told that despite its historic problems CRAMS could now be “made to work”, as exemplified by the pilot in Surrey. My counter argument now rested on a new analogy: I said that CRAMS was like an East German Trabant, the then-still-notorious standard model of car produced in the old communist German state. Yes, it could be “made to work”, but was it fit for purpose for a manager to purchase a fleet of them for the company sales team, to drive up and down motorways and do their job effectively? The Home Office seemed unmoved.

Then, suddenly, the problem – or at least the immediate problem – went away. It was announced that the rollout of CRAMS was being suspended, following a report from the Probation Inspectorate. Much later, I heard that Sir Graham Smith, the Chief Inspector, had sought an interview with the Minister when he received the draft findings prepared by a team of his Inspectors – I believe that Roger McGarva may have been the lead Inspector – and the Minister pulled the plug as a result of that interview. I can’t verify that myself of course. What I can verify is that just a couple of days after this announcement, there happened to be a gathering of Chief Probation Officers which had been called by the Home Office to discuss the transition towards a new national Service.

Paul Boateng was the Minister of State who had made the recent CRAMS decision, and who was also now about to address us on the coming changes. There was a minor hiccup with his microphone, and a hiatus as this was dealt with, and then he suddenly said into the now-working microphone, “CRAMS was crap, right?” There were loud cheers all around the room, though none were mine. I hadn’t heard other Chiefs previously openly criticising CRAMS, and I didn’t warm to the mood of everyone now laughing together that “of course we all knew all the time that the Emperor had no clothes…”

This was by no means the last time that the Probation world, and indeed other areas of public service, were over-promised and badly under-delivered when it came to electronic databases or case management systems. Even in 2015, while conducting a commissioned report, I found that for most staff of the company I was visiting were finding that the new version of “e-NOMIS” that they were now required to use had very poor functionality, and indeed was worse than the previous local system they had recently been using.

The third element while I was still CPO was the “Millennium bug” – or “Y2K” – which occupied an enormous amount of time and resource during the year 1999. Across the world there had been a growing concern in many circles over some years previously that a whole range of computer functions would fail on New Year’s Day 2000, because the habit of only having two-digit dates on most IT programmes would mean that those programmes would ‘think’ that the new year was now 1900. Some commentators spoke about aircraft falling out of the sky, which even then seemed fanciful, yet still a member of our own Probation Committee, who worked for Motorola I believe, was warning us a long time in advance that this was a potentially very serious matter. With my limited technical understanding, I was never sure why it was that difficult to convert two-digit dates to four-digit dates over a reasonable period in advance, but we heard that it was not that straight-forward, and that IT specialists were gaining expensive contracts to solve this for big companies. Then, for us, the Home Office took charge.

It was Tony Rolley, our Support Services Assistant Chief, who actually bore the brunt of what became a huge burden of extra work throughout 1999. While the Home Office rightly and helpfully dealt with matters ‘at the centre’, such as the national IT software programmes, where applicable, they then less helpfully got into demanding repeated audits and risk management plans from each of the 54 areas, always to be submitted at very short notice. We had worked out ourselves that things like security systems and central heating systems would need to become Y2K compliant, but it seemed we would spend an hour or so making that happen, and then needed another three hours completing reports to demonstrate that we had done this. Tony kept his temper better than I did.

I’ll never know myself whether the amount of work done across the world to prevent the Millennium Bug was largely unnecessary, and for BPS I don’t blame the Home Office for wanting to make sure that we all knew what we needed to do. But I was astonished then at the amount of time we were expected to devote simply to reporting ‘upwards’, in detail, what we had done. Later I was to realise that the expectation to be able to ‘give account’ is very strongly established in central Government, particularly as they need to be able to answer questions from journalists. It could be argued that this is all very necessary in a democratic society, but I do also know that it consumes huge amounts of staff time, a topic I’ll return to later.

Meanwhile it was on Tony’s own initiative that he wanted to be doubly sure that BPS wouldn’t have a problem in January 2000. On New Year’s Day, a public holiday of course, he and his team of Office Managers each between them visited every BPS office to check the security and heating etc. All was well. And along with the rest of the entire Western world, for us the whole Y2K “crisis” was over and forgotten by lunchtime.

A key aspect of my work with BPS, which spans both my roles there, was to try to find a way of both defining and achieving what counts as effective performance. Probation’s senior managers, both in Berkshire and elsewhere, received regular exhortations to be effective managers, whether on a course for new senior managers or from other colleagues, consultants, trainers or civil servants. Management by Objectives (MbO) was in vogue for a while, but the difficulty there was that the objectives often cited proved unsatisfactory in practice in the Probation setting for a whole range of reasons. There was talk of the need for the “three E’s” – Economy, Efficiency and Effectiveness – and for three years there was a whole Inspectorate programme devoted to inspections of “Efficiency and Effectiveness”.

Linked to this, at one point the Inspectorate declared that it was for each of the 54 Probation Services to organise their own arrangements for “Internal Monitoring and Inspection” of their own Service, and that the role of HMI Probation would be partly to oversee and guide this as part of their ‘E&E’ programme. Since I had the Service Development role at that time, this became my responsibility, and after listening carefully to all the advice and briefings I introduced a (kind of) system for BPS. As I understood it, Monitoring involved us recording and collecting data systematically and repeatedly to enable me to advise the Committee and senior managers regularly on how we were doing in various respects. Inspections were separate usually ‘one-off’ exercises where we mainly examined cases or reports, and assessed the quality of work with offenders – something that couldn’t be done through the routine monitoring.

To this end we planned and conducted two “independent internal inspections” (as I called them) each year for two or three years. They were ‘independent’, partly because within BPS I didn’t have responsibility for service delivery, but also partly because for each inspection I ‘recruited’ a reputable outsider to be part of the team designing and conducting it. My memory for details of these is now quite hazy, but I’m fairly sure we did a different aspect of the work each time, and that the growth of the idea of ‘national standards’ for Probation was becoming increasingly prominent at this time. I soon discovered that it was one thing to read a case file as a manager, and think, <“Yes, the officer seems to be managing this case fine”>, and it was another to test each aspect of the case against the growing list of national standards. Frequently, there would be one minor incident, glitch or delay that put a case ‘outside’ the national standard, and before you knew it you had a high percentage of cases that ‘hadn’t met the required standard’. We’d been very proud of our very efficient Community Service team in Berkshire, and they had prepared their files administratively with care for our inspection, and yet our findings were disappointing. The work clearly required much more attention to detail than our staff were used to providing. There were also lessons for me, that I was able to use later, about designing inspection methodology…

At the time, however, my greater concern was how to put into action a system for the Monitoring aspect of my role. I envisaged some kind of regular report, maybe once every three or six months, in which all the different reports would be assembled in a consistent format – but what should that format be? The more I thought about it, the more things I could think of – or, frequently, more things that other people advocated – that needed ‘measuring’, and each of them required different methods in order to measure them. From about 1995, I came up with the idea of “Resources, Standards, Satisfaction and Results” (“RSSR”). We would group our thinking about performance into these four headings, with Resources and Standards being about “inputs” – Efficiency - while Satisfaction and Results were about “outcomes” – Effectiveness. This is not the place to give a detailed account of what I was thinking, but my reflection on it now was that it was very nearly a good idea, but it was not good enough because I never a found a way of making it happen properly in practice. And it is possible that even if one did, it might be at disproportionate cost to an organisation with less than 250 staff.

However, at the time Malcolm generously gave me my head in trying to introduce it into the culture of BPS, and some tantalisingly promising ‘embryo’ reports were produced for ‘County Managers’ meetings. And there was huge mirth when we once had a consultant to one of these meetings, who asked us the ‘usual’ question of what we thought we were trying to achieve, and almost all the SPOs/Managers mock-chanted in unison “Resources, Standards, Satisfaction and Results.”

When I started as Chief, I know I was still aiming to use this structure for my reporting to our employing Committee, but within a few months I suddenly realised that I was hugely overcomplicating the problem, and so I simply discarded it. A key reason I did this was because of where we’d got to in terms of defining the Results we were trying to achieve with the individuals under our supervision. The following section describes this parallel piece of work.

It had been my view from the start of my PO career that for the person under supervision ‘contact’ was compulsory. I had operated an informal ‘standard’ for that ‘contact’ until the 1990s, but then national guidelines and then standards started to come in, which specified promptness of first contact and frequency of subsequent contacts, and strictness of enforcement. Although these were ‘inputs’ – the work ‘put in’ by the officer – they were legitimate requirements by our paymasters, so I saw them as standards that needed to be achieved, as an end in themselves, independent or not of whether anything else was being achieved with the offender. So therefore, what were we trying to *achieve* – Results – in addition to simply maintaining contact?

This was where I came to develop something that most SPOs and well as POs found very difficult to grasp at first. As I describe elsewhere in this book, I have regularly noticed that POs’ ‘Initial Assessments’ are often very thorough in describing ‘what the problem is’, but often very weak in outlining ‘what they plan to do about it’. I came to the view that we needed to focus assessments more on ‘where we want to get to’, rather than ‘where we are starting from’. Instead of ‘describing problems’ I thought we should try and describe where we planned to get the person under supervision to. I had clearly been influenced by the idea of ‘Managing by Objectives’, and was seeking to apply it to our direct work with offenders. The key problem was to define those objectives.

As I describe in Chapter 16, the methodology for my 1996 Oxford Fellowship research project centred on identifying ‘Employment-related Interventions (EIs)’ and ‘Employment-related Outcomes (EOs)’, and I’d devised a range of EOs from ‘Retained a job for over three months’ down to ‘Attended a job interview’ – a key point being that it only counted as an EO if it was being achieved for the first time. I therefore assembled a list of potential ‘Outcomes’ for people under our supervision, under a range of headings, the idea being that the headings were ones that research showed were often associated with offending behaviour. (Later, these headings came to be called - unfortunately - “criminogenic needs”, a term I disliked, and which Jack Straw as Home Secretary disliked even more). I used my friend Bruce Seymour from South Wales, who had jointly led an effectiveness project in Mid Glamorgan, as a check that my approach made sense.

I spent a series of meetings with managers and practitioners outlining my proposed approach, defining where we want to get to with each offender, as distinct from defining where we’re trying to get away from. Many officers found it hard to think in terms of the ‘positive destination’ instead of the ‘negative departure-point’. But for many staff the penny finally dropped, and at a time when work pressures were noticeably mounting, the fact that I was actually requiring less work of them was also appreciated. The documentation we used, which involved no longer writing out lengthy separate Initial Assessments, can be found on my website.

And this in turn enabled me to devise in 1997 the first version of what became the Three Purposes of Probation, calling it the Chart of Effective Supervision: Implement the Sentence, Reduce Likelihood of Reoffending, and Minimise Risk of Harm to others. My BPS version, and my early Inspectorate versions, had the three things entirely separate – later on I was able to show that they are ‘separate but they also overlap’. What I did do early on, almost as an accident, was to give the three purposes a separate colour each. This proved to be extremely helpful, as I found people referencing it back to me - “Ah, this is ‘yellow-box’ work, isn’t it Andrew?”

Meanwhile, as I graduated to the role of Chief in 1998, I was incorporating this Chart into ‘RSSR’ and into my Committee reports, but I suddenly realised that by doing this I was distracting from the Chart’s central importance. Also at this time, I was able to download the first of the new Performance Inspections by the Inspectorate (by using my extra ‘non-Probation’ computer, and a dial-up connection) and learned what inspectors were now looking for - rightly, there was a renewed emphasis on quality practice with cases and reports, and I knew I had to bring this expectation sharply into focus. So from then on I dropped RSSR and focused the attention of BPS staff on the three-colour three purposes, plus some other key targets set by the Home Office, as can be illustrated by some of the material recorded on my website in fuller detail.

For many POs it was quite a big change to focus on where they should be trying to get to, and having that defined as hitting three ‘targets’, and I spent time visiting team meetings and holding special discussion sessions in which the value of this approach could be explored – especially to establish that the way I’d defined it was entirely consistent with most practitioners’ idea of ‘good quality practice’. Three things encouraged my view that in practice we were on our way to making this approach work. At one team meeting, one officer – an experienced-and-earnest PO, but not a high flier – suddenly said to me, “Now I understand what it is that you want me to do!” At a full staff conference, one group of officers performed a short sketch – not a hostile one – on the theme of “Andrew’s very keen on archery”. And most importantly, I started to see the performance results coming through during 2000.

This was only just in time before the Inspectorate’s visit in the autumn of 2000, and I’ve recorded earlier in this book about the favourable result achieved by Berkshire in that inspection, albeit that was only confirmed in March 2001. There was an irony in that, which is worth mentioning here. That irony dates from the start of this whole process of overhauling our record-keeping system, back in 1998, when I had been promoting the idea that ‘Part B assessments’ could be recorded simply by specifying the outcomes to be achieved rather than by writing a whole new page of script. Just then, the Inspectorate announced that they would be doing a thematic inspection of Part B assessments. I did not want this at any price – the Inspectorate would be measuring our work against a traditional approach that we were in the process of setting aside because (I believed) our radical new approach would be both more efficient and more effective. Malcolm was in the last few months of his time then, and so he said we should simply decline to take part, and advised the Chief Inspector accordingly.

The then Chief Inspector, Sir Graham Smith, observed to Malcolm, “I don’t think anyone’s ever actually refused an inspection before”. He offered what he thought was a “compromise”, which was not the point for us, and – thankfully, on my part – we avoided this event, though I noticed we were not the only ‘absentees’ from it in the end. When I read the report, my view was confirmed that we had been right – it had been all about what I would call traditional standards and comprehensiveness of assessment. Later on, I often had to temper the enthusiasm of my inspection team by asserting that assessments did not need to be ‘comprehensive’ in every single instance, but simply ‘sufficient’, or ‘fit for purpose’. However, I was also aware of the irony that by then I had made the move from being the reason for the apparent first-ever refusal of an inspection to the role of chief inspector. (I was fortunate that Sir Graham did not bear a grudge when he interviewed me in February 2001.)

Overall, however, by the time I left Berkshire in 2001, in my view we in BPS had defined and achieved – to an encouraging extent – effective Probation supervision in a way that could be demonstrated in terms of ‘performance’ but which was also consistent with what most practitioners would see as ‘good quality practice’. The material that I have written elsewhere on how to make that happen is based on, and developed and updated from, that experience.

I therefore want to emphasise that for me the drive to make BPS a high-performing organisation consistently providing good quality practice was my core aim as Chief. I was involved with much other work at that time, as I will be describing, but for me that other work was the icing on the cake – the ‘cake’ itself was BPS’s own Probation practice.

With this in mind, I return now to the offender employment work nationally that I was still continuing when I was Chief. Immodestly, I thought that perhaps now I was Chief my promotion of offender employment work might carry more weight than it had done before. Probably a more important factor was that I was increasingly ‘sailing with the wind’ – rather than against it – from this time onward with my aims for this work. Within the Probation world itself, I kept on with convening four meetings every year of the regional (South-east) ‘Working Group’ of offender employment managers, and also four meetings of the national ‘Working Group’. But since much of this work required joint working with the relevant Government department for employment (it kept changing its name), and various ‘quangos’ under that department, and also various NGOs (non-government organisations), I spent a lot of time working with them, either singly or collectively in various settings. Nationally, I took over from Roger Statham the convening of the National Offender Employment Forum, hosted at the Home Office, while locally I took further forward the Thames Valley Offender Employment Forum – we set a measurable joint objective about offender employment levels in the area that was actually achieved.

Although my own work status, and academic achievement, gave me some authority in this role, I would still have found it difficult to claim a more detailed understanding of the work if I hadn’t had Jim Openshaw working for me in Berkshire, and if I hadn’t had access to some specialist staff from other areas, such as Mike Quille and Amanda Dempsey. In particular, Jim’s skills as a salesperson meant that we worked with the ‘demand side’ – employers – as much as we did with the ‘supply side’ – offenders under BPS supervision. And I could ‘evangelise’ about working with employers, with some evidence.

On the subject of “offenders”, however, I gradually realised that what looked at first like a minor semantic issue was having far-reaching negative effects, which I then aimed to rectify. The innocent-looking problem stemmed from the widespread use of the term “ex-offender” by Government department, quango and NGO people from the ‘Employment world’. The term had powerful meaning in the Employment world because it was one of a number of what they called “vulnerable groups” in the employment market – there were various positive actions to help you into work if you ‘belonged’ to one of these “vulnerable groups” (e.g. single mothers, or those with a disability). However, it transpired that in the Employment world “ex-offender” meant someone who had been in prison or other custody, whether serving a sentence or on remand. This potentially excluded over half of the Probation Service current case numbers nationally, although some of them could perhaps be brought back in on the grounds that they had been in custody at some point in the past.

The sharpest illustration of the issue came when the new Labour Government introduced its “Welfare to Work” (W2W) initiatives in 1998. Jack Straw was Home Secretary at the time, and aiming to help Probation’s work, and I have been advised that when he signed up to the W2W programme for ex-offenders neither he nor his immediate advisors realised that a large chunk of the Probation case numbers would be excluded from this initiative. Because of this, and other related issues, I repeatedly pressed in various bilateral and group meetings for a change in terminology. I usually got an acknowledgement that there was a problem, but also a reluctance and an uncertainty as to how to change it.

I had a proposed solution, but it involved a major shift in thinking within the Employment world. For a start, much as I wanted all Probation cases to be eligible for everything for which “ex-offenders” were already eligible, I could foresee problems with grouping them altogether as a “vulnerable group”. For one thing, there were certain offenders who we wanted to prevent from getting certain jobs, for public protection reasons (e.g. a convicted paedophile as a school bus driver). The Employment world at the time was simply not geared to the role of preventing anyone from getting a job, as was shown when they were initially very slow to become involved in local MAPPAs (Multi-Agency Public Protection Arrangements) in the 2000s. For myself, alongside the various events at which I promoted increasing offender employment, I also spoke at a couple of events which were about Disclosure arrangements, and how the then future Criminal Records Bureau was going to be helping to prevent certain offenders from getting the wrong jobs.

With this in mind, I was therefore proposing a new ‘business case’ approach to developing offender employment. I saw it as problematic to classify all offenders, past and present, as a single “vulnerable group”, and so I argued that the business case for special employment initiatives with Probation cases, including ex-prisoners, should be based not on ‘vulnerability’ but on ‘crime prevention’. This also provided a rationale for the public protection aspect of the work.

However, this was a ‘big ask’ of the Employment policymakers. Ironically, at that time it was only very recently that they had consciously decided to change the term they used for the people they worked with from “claimants” to “clients” – at just about the same time that in the Probation world we were ceasing to use the term “clients”. I found myself regularly pointing out this irony, and sometimes also remarking that their positive intentions would prove problematic when they found they needed to be ‘constraining’ of a “client”.

More importantly, it would have been a major problem for the Employment people to adopt a unique category that was not a “vulnerable group”, so I was not entirely surprised that my proposal never quite made it in the form I’d proposed. But I did notice that during the 2000s a stronger level of help with employment for Probation cases did appear to become available, through an improved level of interdepartmental co-operation between Home Office and Employment dept., - possibly a benefit of there now being a National Probation Service - and I was glad to see that. Also at this time my offender employment work led me to become also involved in various ‘European’ work, which I cover in Chapter 15.

One awkward theme for me throughout the time I ‘led’ on this work was my relationship with the people from the ‘education and training world’. The heart of the problem was that they, quite reasonably, would seek to sell their ‘wares’ to the ‘criminal justice world’ on the basis that offenders often needed to improve their individual abilities and skills in order to gain employment. The problem, as I saw it, was that often the gaining of a qualification often became a ‘substitute achievement’ – i.e. instead of a job – rather than a stepping-stone towards gaining a job. I would find it necessary regularly to quote Mark Lipsey, the American researcher, whose meta-analysis of thousands of cases showed that it was the actual gaining of employment that made reoffending less likely, while simply improving skills without gaining a job did not - if anything, the reoffending became slightly more likely. I therefore kept finding myself in the position of supporting a training initiative, but with the qualifying comment that such a measure was “necessary, but not sufficient.”

This did mean that I was taking an unapologetically ‘instrumental’ approach to education and training for offenders, but as far as I was concerned I was in the ‘crime reduction’ business. If other people wanted to fund and support education initiatives for prisoners etc, where the educational gain was to be an end in itself, that was fine – but don’t look to me for practical support for that. So I insisted on perhaps-petty but arguably-significant terminology such as putting ‘Employment’ before ‘Education and Training’ rather than after, since I didn’t want Employment to be the optional extra afterthought, I wanted it to be clearly the key objective. Later, when I first joined the Inspectorate, the latest Government initiative had been about “Basic Skills” for many offenders, which was a good idea as far as it went, but I wanted our related thematic inspection to be about Employment and Basic Skills. What I often found useful, however, was to use the term ‘Employability’ to capture all the various stepping-stones that an individual needed to cross in order to gain employment. In this way I could sometimes agree a shared objective with a training organisation, while retaining a focus on employment being the ultimate object of that exercise. Of course the ‘ultimate-ultimate’ object was to reduce reoffending. So overall my solely-instrumental interest in education and training was therefore consistent with what I called an ‘entirely business-case approach’ to my advocating for increasing the ‘employability of offenders’ as a crime reduction measure.

While all this was going on, a new huge piece of work loomed into view at the end of 1999. This was not the ‘Y2K’ problem, covered earlier in this chapter, but now the prospect of the transition to the future National Probation Service. For BPS this meant in addition a merger with the Oxon & Bucks area – a merger that our employing Committee had twice voted down. At the consultation stage for the new legislation I had been concerned over what line I should take in discussion with my Committee. I was not attracted by the possibility that my employers might want to get into a major confrontation with Government over this – there would have been no prospect of them winning if they had. But how could I get them to feel comfortable about stepping back from their former resolution – especially as it was the only thing that had ever gone to a vote?

The Committee discussion about the consultation took place in 1999. Many of the details in the paperwork now escape me, but there was already a clear determined policy that all Criminal Justice areas were to be lined up with the existing Police areas (and indeed the Crown Prosecution and Courts areas duly did so too). Preventing that was plainly not going to happen. But the new areas could either be part of a new arrangement of local employers, or it could happen as part of a new national Service, centrally managed by the Home Office. I decided to advocate that the Berkshire Committee should support the latter option; I thought that if we discussed the most ‘extreme’ option, which I expected to be unwelcome, then the Committee would be pleased to reject that and thereby be more comfortable with supporting the option of the new ‘local’ areas. I was wrong again – the Committee backed my suggestion with little argument. In any event, this meant they no longer ‘opposed Thames Valley’.

At this time, Eithne Wallis was Chief of Oxon & Bucks, while Stephanie North, her Committee Chair, also happened to be the national Chair of CPC, the Central Council of Probation Committees. Neither of them seemed at all appreciative that Berkshire Probation Committee was not going to obstruct their plans - they might have felt that it didn’t matter now, but I do remember Stephanie being quite put out that Berkshire had gone for the ‘national’ rather than the ‘local’ option. As events unfolded, in a way that is typical of how certain decisions are made in this country, the dilemma of whether to make the new Service national or local was decided by making it both national and local. A new national Directorate of the Home Office would preside over 42 local Boards. The CPC and many in the Probation world saw this as a success, seeing it as the ‘best of both worlds’. For my part, I wanted it to work, but I feared that the duplication might make it a case of falling between two stools. As the next ten years unfolded I saw the arrangements from various angles, and noted how policy was increasingly driven centrally – not necessarily a bad thing, but I found it hard to identify how these local new Boards, now remunerated for the first time, actually provided tangible ‘added value’ to the arrangements.

A digression at this point: The original name for the new Service was at one time announced to be the “Community Punishment and Rehabilitation Service” – which many detractors swiftly and inaccurately relabelled as CRAPS. In any event it was an ugly attempt at rebranding, probably decided by Paul Boateng, the Home Office Minister of State. It was in 2000, during a Probation conference in London, with worldwide representation there, that I believe Jack Straw as Home Secretary amended the relabelling to National Probation Service.

By then, another new development had taken place. Eithne Wallis was appointed as the incoming National Director of the new Service. I learned this on my cellphone when I happened to be standing outside Cleland House, one of the Home Office buildings at the time. I respected Eithne’s talents, and I remember saying at the time that I thought it was a good thing for the future Service, but it might not be such a good thing for me personally. However, soon after that event, BPS senior managers happened to have a scheduled meeting with our counterparts in OBPS (Oxon & Bucks), and we found them all being very downbeat. When we asked them what the problem was, it gradually emerged that they had been under the impression that while Eithne was their Chief, they’d be able to ‘take over’ Berkshire under the new arrangements, while now that she’d gone they feared that BPS would be ‘doing the takeover’ instead. We were baffled by this viewpoint – we thought that we had embarked together on a piece of joint work, needing to decide together what would be best for the future of Probation in Thames Valley, and we hadn’t seen it as some kind of power struggle. But then, as events worked out later, perhaps we were being somewhat naïve…

This was not the first culture clash that we experienced as the 18 months prior to 1 April 2001 unfolded. When we organised an event for Senior POs from across Thames Valley, at the end of the meeting several of us went off to have a drink together, inviting all-comers as usual (it wasn’t ‘compulsory’ though). A couple of OBPS Seniors came, and commented that this was completely alien to them – work and social normally stayed strictly separate. But for some of us, the opportunity to unwind and review at the end of a demanding day was often welcome – though nobody thought any the less of colleagues for either joining in or not doing so. Then, as the big day approached, I recommended to the ‘shadow Board’ that there should be a ‘launch conference’ for the new organisation, for all staff to come together and gain a tasting experience of being part of that new organisation. For BPS people, this made good sense, but I was surprised that almost all the OBPS people were quite baffled by the idea, and were unwilling to see the point of it.

More seriously, when we discussed the need to identify differences in codes and conditions of staff of the current organisations, and how we might plan to resolve these, we learned that after five years of the existing OBPS, there were various differences between former Oxfordshire and Buckinghamshire staff that had still not been resolved even now. And in April 2001, there would be some Thames Valley premises closed for a legacy extra day after Easter, while some would be open – we disagreed about whether this mattered.

As I’ve already said in Chapter 1, I would have liked to become Chief of the new Thames Valley service, but I hadn’t seen it as the most likely outcome, even after Eithne had gone. But I was determined to do what I could to leave a positive legacy, as were my senior managers. Tony ensured that our Family Courts team was handed over to the new CAFCASS (Children and Family Court Advisory and Support Service) in good order, with good premises and good staffing, and a fair share of our budget. Under Pip and Susan our core Probation practice was doing well, and was under a continuing upward trajectory. BPS actively proposed that the HQ for the new service should be the new-build premises that OBPS HQ had just moved into in Bicester – I think that this surprised many OBPS personnel who had expected a power struggle over that. This produced inevitable uncertainty for the 20-plus other staff in our own HQ in Reading, which required some planning and handling – they may well have a different viewpoint about the ‘generosity’ of our decision.

Alongside this, I developed the system I’d already devised for Berkshire so that allocation of staffing could be matched as closely as possible to projected work demands. I applied this across the whole of Thames Valley, and found that in Berkshire our field offices were slightly more generously resourced than those of OBPS – this was not a complete surprise, since our policy had for some years been to prioritise resourcing operations over support and management. On the other hand, this meant that the supposed ‘efficiency gain’ for merging Oxon and Bucks was not in evidence. But the exercise, and other joint planning, meant that Thames Valley was able to provide its business plan for 2001/2 to the Home Office by 12 January 2001 – we were one of a small number to do this.

When I left Berkshire at the end of March 2001 I had by then been involved in two Thames Valley merger plans. The first had fallen at the last hurdle, but the second had gone through as part of a nationwide reorganisation. The 2001 Thames Valley merger, despite the relatively minor issues I’ve outlined above, was I think one of the more successful ones that year. Some in the west country and in Wales struggled with bigger controversies, while the huge London merger was on a scale of its own. I gained the impression that Home Office civil servants only half-understood the magnitude of the issues involved in merging entirely separate independent employing bodies. It was not like reorganising a civil service department, which continues to draw on various civil service support services for property, infrastructure, staffing and money. As Chief, I had obtained in 1998 an excellent Audit Commission publication, ‘Less Dangerous Liaisons’ – it helpfully described the considerations and potential pitfalls involved in making a merger work. Its overall lesson was that sometimes the intended benefits of the planned merger actually happen in practice, but very frequently they don’t (therefore, please take note of their offered advice). This experience was to prove useful again in my next role…

### What I felt:

It was that personal experience of when we reduced from (in effect) four Assistant Chiefs to three, after Simon Noble’s heart attack, plus the observation of other larger and/or differently organised management teams, that led me to adopt the slightly flippant maxim that “Managers are like motorways – they create more traffic”. It is of course a variation on Parkinson’s Law that ‘Work expands to fill the time available for completion”.

I like the analogy, because, like motorways, we certainly need to have some managers in order to make certain existing things happen more efficiently and effectively. Yet we also know that sometimes motorways in themselves create journeys that previously were not done at all – so they both ease traffic, and also create more traffic. And I think that managers do much the same. Of course, some of that new traffic might be a ‘good thing’ – but then again, is all of it a good thing, if its density starts to handicap the other traffic?

Equally then, when weighing up the business case for either increasing or decreasing the number of managers in a management team some considerable thought needs to be given to the negative as well as the positive effects of the change. An additional manager produces an inefficiency because there is one more person for everyone else to coordinate with, and the new person will also start to undertake work that has not been done hitherto. So does the additional work add more value to the organisation than the cost of the manager (and the ‘support’ for that manager, if any) and the inefficiency that the new post also brings? Sometimes it does, of course, but also there are many occasions when it probably doesn’t.

My viewpoint led me to be very careful about proliferating managers or management layers. There was a ‘cost’ to this viewpoint: that ‘cost’ was to the senior managers themselves that I was supervising, both in Berkshire and later on in the Inspectorate, because they found themselves to be doing particularly demanding jobs. In my opinion, our lean BPS senior management team meant that we had to work hard, but we had clearly delineated responsibilities, and could exercise our own judgement within those responsibilities, which made us efficient and effective compared with other organisations. I also believe that this made them rewarding jobs, in particular because those postholders could decide things for themselves within their own area of responsibility, and additionally relate their efforts more directly to what the organisation as a whole was collectively trying to achieve. I had experienced that combination of hard work and reward both as Assistant Chief and as Chief in that lean type of structure. This experience influenced my thinking when I later operated in the strange world of central Government.

Our employing Committee, on their own initiative, laid on two events in the last week of Berkshire Probation Service at the end of March 2001. The second of these was a dinner and disco at a Bracknell hotel for all the BPS staff who chose to attend, on the very last evening, Friday 30th March. The Committee members tactfully stayed away so that staff could let their hair down, and in my view it was a great success, an upbeat celebration of the recent past – “Farewell to BPS” - and a positive attitude being taken into the immediate future. For me, the event epitomised the ethos of BPS at the time, that we worked hard together, and sometimes played hard together too – not in a ‘macho’ way, but in a spirit of celebrating working together.

I was very touched indeed that evening when a number of staff put on a performance of a couple of musical numbers, finishing with Tina Turner’s Simply The Best – and then they approached my table and presented me with a teeshirt emblazoned with “BPS – Simply The Best”. After a moment or two to ponder, I decided to bestow on the assembled throng the dubious treat of me stripping to the waist to discard my dinner suit, in order to put on the teeshirt. Hopefully the resulting cheering was not wholly ironic. And it left me equipped to participate in the ensuing dancing – with similarly tasteful effect no doubt. It felt a very moving occasion overall, and hopefully a suitable way of marking the passing of a decent public service organisation.

Meanwhile the first of the two events that week was a farewell event for me personally, which the Committee attended with numerous BPS staff, at a lunchtime in a splendid Reading Town Hall venue. I was given a generous ‘eulogy’ by Tony Rolley. But what would I be saying in response? It was quite late on before the event when I hit on the words that I decided to use, along with my thanks to the assembled throng: “I have ADORED being Chief Probation Officer for Berkshire…”

For this job had been about managing a ‘whole’ public service - ‘making it happen’ – in the words of John Harvey-Jones. Later I had the good fortune to be asked to lead the Probation Inspectorate, a team whose job was to scrutinise and be ‘commentators’ on the Service, but in this job I had been leading a team of ‘do-ers’. That meant that despite all its pressures this job was the best job I ever had.

## Chapter 14: HM Inspectorate of Probation, 2001-11

*“Is this really how we run the country??”*

### What these jobs were like:

From April 2001 to July 2003 I was one of a number of HM Inspectors, but was then Deputy Chief until April 2004, and then HM Chief Inspector of Probation until June 2011. Although the Inspectorate was by then statutorily independent, we were dependent on the Home Office’s various support services for our property, equipment, pay, expenses and “Human Resources” (HR, i.e. staffing) etc. Our own support administrative staff that worked within the Inspectorate were civil service staff who in principle could be moved at any time in or out of the Inspectorate and assigned to various sections within the Home Office itself or to other “arm’s length” bodies that were attached to the Home Office.

From 2007 we had similar arrangements with the new Ministry of Justice (MoJ), although for reasons which may become clear I was keen to reduce to a minimum our dependence on the various support services that were run from outside the Inspectorate. So although the Inspectorate was statutorily separate from the Civil Service, I learned a lot over my ten years about how the machinery of Government worked in practice, and not just in the Home Office and MoJ. It was for me a sobering experience.

When I received from Home Office HR my appointment letter in 2001 I had wondered briefly whether they perhaps had a brilliant deadpan sense of humour. I read the instruction that I was to arrive at 10.00am on 1st April at the Home Office reception desk, and to ask for Sir Graham Smith (the then Chief Inspector) – though a quick look on the calendar would have showed it was a Sunday. It sadly transpired that, no, this had not been an attempted April Fool joke, but disappointingly a mere error. This was a mildly amusing incident; in fairness the HR people treated me pretty well personally, and during my two years as an Inspector I only needed to focus on doing Inspections. But later, as Chief, my working with – often even struggling with – the wider machinery of Government frequently became a time-consuming and frustrating large part of my job, a topic I’ll return to later.

During my two years as Inspector I reported first to Frances Flaxington, then to Mary Fielder, and finally to Liz Calderbank – who then had the unfortunate experience of suddenly having to report to me instead, following my promotion to Deputy Chief in 2003. (She remained stalwartly professional throughout.) The general rule was that most Inspectors were on secondment from senior management posts in their ‘home’ Probation Area during that period, and were allowed – encouraged, even – to work from home when not directly on inspection or at an Inspectorate meeting. When they did come to London or Manchester for such a meeting this was an allowable expense. I was one of the small number at that time who was instead directly employed, so I paid to travel to the London office each time I came in. Our ‘office’ was on the 4th floor of the Queen Anne’s Gate Home Office block, and it was a fairly simple commute from my home: 10-minute fast walk to Reading station, 25 min High Speed Train to Paddington, and another 25min Tube to St James’s Park. (The same building, completely refurbished and remodelled, now has the address of 102 Petty France, and is the MoJ building, including within it now – since I left - what remains of the London office of HMI Probation.) Initially I was working in a shared open-plan area of workstations, something I’d not really had to do at all since I’d been a student in Leicester – but that was entirely reasonable.

Then in 2002/3 our office was relocated to the second floor of Ashley House, Monck St, a further five minute walk away from St James’s Park, which we shared with HMI Prisons and some other “arm’s length” bodies. I remained located there until my retirement, but that building has now been demolished and replaced with flats. We had a generous amount of floor space there, for a lot of staff who were rarely in the London office, so it was not surprising that in a climate of needing efficiency savings it was eventually taken away. We were well equipped with new IT in Ashley House, and when I became Deputy Chief I gained my own separate room as my office. When the Home Office was able to move into its brand new building in neighbouring Marsham St, it was good to be able to say – e.g. to journalists – that as independent Inspectorates we were close to, but not actually in, the Home Office.

From 2002 -6 I felt able to afford a First Class season ticket, and I caught a train between 6.00 and 6.30 most mornings from Reading, and was in the office by 7.30, which was a good period for clearing planned or miscellaneous tasks out of the way before any scheduled meetings. As various demands became increasingly pressing early in 2006, and I was finding that I was catching my return trains at either 22.45 or 23.25 from Paddington, I went for the drastic remedy of renting a flat in Vauxhall from April 2006. I hoped that one of the benefits of this was that I could fit in an early morning run before walking to work. Indeed I did run, almost every morning, along the Thames path to Tower Bridge and back, which took me from c5.40-c6.55 each time, but it meant that after a shower and breakfast I actually arrived at work later than in the past, around 8.00am.

The financial cost became too great for our evolving circumstances at home, and I gave up the flat in July 2007. And it was a Standard Class season ticket from then on, which as I explained in Chapter 6 I found less stressful! It was mildly tiresome to be either fighting for a seat at the ‘wrong end’ of the train, or simply standing for the journey, but I found I got used to it quite easily, because I no longer expected anything better for those journeys. I could still work, or not – as I chose – in any case while commuting this way. I was back to only running at weekends from then on, which contributed to me putting on some weight from 2007-11, which I then had to take off again after retirement.

During my time in the Inspectorate we had an office in Manchester throughout: Grove House near Trafford Bar for my first year, then Trafford House Sixth floor, overlooking Manchester United’s stadium, for the rest of my time there. This had good floor space and a good meeting room, but as we moved more operations and staff to Manchester it became a little tight for space. But I found it made perfect sense to have as much of our support services there as possible, as staff there were capable, pleased to be with us (mainly), and therefore we had a fairly stable staff group in Manchester, whereas there was a tendency for London staff to be more expensive, less capable, or, if more capable, then able to move on quickly to better paid jobs. We were rather fortunate that the three staff we retained in London by the time I left were some of the genuinely able and reliable ones.

Meanwhile, over my ten years with the Inspectorate I made many visits to Manchester, initially overnight in medium-price hotels, booked by others, but in time I mainly booked myself into the Premier Inn near Old Trafford. Because of the way train travel was priced, it was usually cheaper to travel up in the evening before and stay overnight in Premier Inn or similar than it was to travel at peak rate on the morning of the meeting. In the later years, when we had six meetings a year of all Inspection staff, we held five of them in Manchester, with just the one in London that coincided with the Annual Report launch, because Manchester meetings were cheaper, and easier to organise and support.

Nevertheless, both I and the Assistant Chief Inspectors needed to be in London a lot of the time because of the constant liaison with a range of Government Departments, related bodies, and colleague Inspectorates – this was quite demanding at times on the Assistant Chiefs, since apart from Peter Ramell they all lived some way from London.

I’ll therefore now briefly mention here my experience of working with other Inspectorates, which was a prominent and time-consuming aspect of my personal work throughout.

I maintained a huge respect for HMI Prisons, where Anne Owers was Chief for most of my time. They had a well thought-through methodology which they operated very effectively, and completed a large number of inspections per year for the size of their organisation. I learned a lot about the detail as well as the principle of their work when I joined them on an inspection of HMP Altcourse on Merseyside. But they were not easy partners. Their job was a very different one from ours, much more different than most people seemed to appreciate (The question kept recurring: “Surely we should just be merging these two Inspectorates?”).

The difference wasn’t simply that they visit custodial establishments – of many different kinds, incidentally – but more importantly there was a difference in purpose. Their judgements concerned whether inmates were treated with decency and humanity. This was, and is, of course entirely desirable, but is an entirely separate question from whether offenders are being managed effectively, which was the job of HMI Probation. There is some overlap between the two purposes, naturally, but there were some difficulties when we did joint inspections on ‘public protection’ work with offenders before and after release from prison. Some ‘restrictive interventions’ on an individual (as we would call them) – in order to protect the public or an identified potential victim – can seem from a ‘humanity’ perspective an unduly harsh way to treat that individual.

With ‘decency and humanity’ being its main focus, HMI Prisons was perhaps unique in the Inspectorate world, and also enjoyed a high profile and reputation in the wider world. The sheer quantity of work they did gave substance to that profile. It had rightly been pointed out to me by others when I started as Deputy Chief that our own numerical output of inspections did not compare well with theirs, given our very similar size, and for this and other reasons I radically increased the pace of our own inspection programme.

Another aspect of their work was that their approach meant that they inspected the ‘work’ being done – whoever did it - rather than the ‘organisation’ that was doing it. This was an approach that I advocated for our Inspectorate too. So although I didn’t need a precedent I could cite the HMI Prisons approach if necessary to explain why our own brief included inspecting the ‘work’ of electronic monitoring providers (for example), or ‘work’ by any other new private provider of Probation should it come along. In summary, although I sometimes found HMI Prisons to be awkward people to do business with, those tensions between these two similarly-sized Inspectorates were probably healthy tensions, and I respected what they did.

HMI Constabulary was a much larger organisation than ours (though, in fairness, proportionately smaller in relation to the size of the 43 Police Services whose work they inspected compared with us and the then NPS). They seemed to me to operate largely in a world of their own, almost as the armed wing of the Home Secretary, being his/her main means of influencing police policy and practice. In that sense they were ‘more than’ simply an inspectorate, and to be honest I sometimes found them a rather maverick organisation that had some rather ‘quasi-macho’ ways of doing things.

When I started at HMI Probation, there was an Inspectorate for Magistrates’ Courts, which was then turned into the HMI Courts Administration covering all Courts, and then subsequently abolished by the incoming Coalition Government in 2010. One of their biggest problems was that although they could only inspect how well the “administration” was working, not judicial decisions, it was still experienced by the judiciary as encroaching on their judicial independence, so HMICA always had an awkward life. Nevertheless, I think it disappeared as much out of the enthusiasm of some senior civil servants to enact the incoming Government’s desire to reduce the number of ‘semi-autonomous bodies’ as out of its unpopularity with judges.

Over at health and social care, I witnessed the abolition of the Social Services Inspectorate and the creation of CSCI (the Commission for Social Care Inspection) in 2004, and then its own abolition about five years later. It merged with the Healthcare Commission to form the Care Quality Commission. This was all part of the Labour policy to merge the Inspectorates into a ‘Big Four’, which succeeded with the already-big inspectorates, but failed with the much smaller criminal justice ones. (To illustrate: at that time, the annual budgets were roughly £3-4m each for HMI Prisons and HMI Probation, not much more for inspecting either Crown Prosecution or Courts Administration, and c£13m for HMI Constabulary, while inspecting health and social care was nearer £100m, and Ofsted some £200m.)

Ofsted seemed the strange one to us. In my first couple of years they were quite distant and separate, having not yet taken over inspecting children’s services. My early experience was of them being quite distant during an ambitious joint inspection of ‘joint’ child protection arrangements around the country in 2002. Then suddenly, when the Social Services Inspectorate was abolished, it was their job to lead on subsequent inspections of child protection and other children’s services, while we also had to work with them quite closely on inspection youth offending work (of which more further below).

The individuals at Ofsted that I worked with over the years were always personable, but I gained the strong impression that they were forever under strong direct political pressure as to how they should act (and write), and I was surprised to find that it was the Department that decided when their reports should be published. I felt that both the Home Office and the MoJ were far more respectful of the independence of ‘their’ inspectorates than the Department of Education (in its changing titles) was of Ofsted’s supposed independence. For a start, in our case it was the Chief Inspector who decided what and when reports would be published, not the Department.

In particular, Ofsted was under great pressure to make their inspections “more light touch”, and the following sequence of events illustrates the difficulties with this. The Chiefs or other representatives of the various inspectorates involved in child protection had agreed after a series of meetings on how the next phase of joint child protection inspections should be undertaken from about 2004/5. As I recall, we had at last completed the first phase of local visits, which had not been logistically an easy thing for Ofsted to organise. (Sympathetically, I had compared the selecting and planning of these visits with conducting the seeded draw for the group stage of the Champions’ League: one from Pot ‘A’, two from Pot ‘B’ and so on.) Then at the next meeting, Ofsted announced that their Secretary of State had told them that these inspections were still not ‘light touch’ enough, and they should be scaled back even further. I said that this might be what the Minister wants now, but sooner or later someone else will be looking at the inspection programme, and questioning us with amazement, “Is this all you do??”

This questioning happened, probably earlier than I had expected, when the infamous case of the death of “Baby P” (later Baby Peter Connelly) came to light in November 2008. Ofsted had only very recently published a favourable report on Haringey Children’s Services, based on the ‘light touch’ approach of mainly examining local policies and interviewing senior managers. They took that report off their website very rapidly as in three weeks they rushed out a new report requested by Secretary of State Ed Balls which led to a series of local dismissals instigated by national and local politicians in the climate of huge public outrage at the time. After that, there was less pressure to be ‘light touch’, and greater willingness to look directly at the actual work being done, instead of just inspecting the management arrangements – something I had called “inspecting by job interview”. However, an existing Government policy of hostility to programmes of ‘routine inspections’ continued after that time, a topic I’ll return to.

During my first two years I also did some joint inspection work on Drug Treatment and Testing Orders (DTTOs) with the National Audit Office (NAO), whose job it is to assess whether aspects of central Government are providing ‘value for money’. On this occasion we did much of our fieldwork (visits etc) jointly – minimising the impact on the services we were visiting by avoiding two separate visits - but we published separate parallel reports. The senior NAO staff I liaised with were focused and well organised, and properly looked to us as being the ones who understood the operational issues with the work we were looking at. On the other hand, they made so many demands on us when exploring operational issues that it sometimes felt as if we were the ones being inspected!

But I learned a lot during those first two years: some of it was, as I already knew, about how easy it is to criticise others by using hindsight, while some of it was about haphazardly central government funding is sometimes distributed. For example, in the case of how DTTOs had first been implemented, there had been the sensible plan of designing a new sentencing option, then piloting it in a few areas, and then on the basis of the evaluation of the pilots, expecting to decide at that point whether to roll it out nationwide. That plan had gone OK at first, but suddenly in 2000, before the evaluations of the pilots were completed, the Home Office had been told that if they didn’t roll it out that very year they would lose the funding for it. Faced with this ‘use it or lose it’ ultimatum, the Home Office rolled out DTTOs nationwide, even though it was unclear whether the pilots had been successful.

In my previous role, I had been one of the Chief Probation Officers told in June 2000 to implement the new sentence in our area from 1 October 2000, this requirement coming just six months before the wider huge transition into the National Probation Service – at the time I had not been delighted at all by this additional imposition by the Home Office. Yet now in my new role, as Inspector, I couldn’t say that they’d made the wrong decision – in an imperfect world, an executive often has to choose between two or more unpalatable options, and on this occasion the Home Office probably had chosen the right one.

Ideally of course, the funding could have been ‘postponed’ rather than ‘lost’, but that is to look at the question the wrong way round from a funding perspective. If the money were not spent as allocated in the relevant year, then it would need to go elsewhere, and once ‘elsewhere’ (perhaps to another Department altogether) it is most unlikely to become available again. I quickly learned that in central government the ‘failure to spend’ an allocated budget was almost as much of a ‘sin’ as it was to overspend an allocated budget. I could see the reasons for this, but to me it didn’t seem healthy in a public service.

Also part of my regular interaction with the wider Civil Service I saw for myself how beliefs, policies and mantras can become self-reinforcing in a large organisation – NB it is not just in the Civil Service that this can happen. It can easily happen that leaders value people who agree with their ideas, and in turn certain people get the idea that the way to progress in the organisation is always to tell their leaders what those leaders want to hear (or what they think their leaders want to hear). One episode when I was close to experiencing this phenomenon was when I was invited to a meeting chaired by a middle-rank policy advising civil servant to discuss setting a ‘public protection target’ for the Probation Service for the coming year.

As a starting point, they had ascertained that during the current year the percentage of current cases already assessed as “high risk” who had committed a ‘Serious Further Offence (SFO)’ in the year was less than one percent – it was a figure like 0.6% from my fallible memory, meaning that by that criterion Probation was ‘achieving a success rate’ of 99.4%. But the chair(man) of our meeting had a job to do – he had to recommend to the Minister what the target for next year should be. He proposed a new target of something like 99.6%. In the ensuing discussion I explained why I thought that this was not a good idea, and that for performance purposes different criteria should be explored. Some other attenders expressed mild concern but didn’t have alternative ideas. After a short while the chair announced that the consensus of the meeting seemed to be that his proposal was the correct way forward, and indeed this was what he would recommend to the Minister. No one else demurred from this assertion at this point, probably partly because they didn’t have alternative proposals, and perhaps too because they felt they were now bound to support what their more senior colleague had decided. At this point I took advantage of the fact that my post meant that I was separate from the Civil Service – I told our chair that I was now asking him to write down as part of his note of the meeting that the Chief Inspector of Probation formally disagreed with this advice. I felt that I couldn’t do more – it was his job to offer advice, and that was what he was doing – but I wanted to separate myself from any role in being part of offering this particular advice. I expected to hear no more about it after that, until the targets for the NPS for the following year were announced.

Indeed I did hear no more, but I noticed in due course that the target did not appear. When I did next see the Minister (it tended to be only two or three times a year), and I mentioned the proposed target, he laughed and said, “That didn’t seem a good idea at all, did it?” I have no idea whether my intervention had played any part in this unexpected outcome – but in any event the more important point is that eager subordinates can easily guess wrongly what their leaders want to hear.

That particular Minister (technically Under-Secretary of State) was Gerry Sutcliffe, not an intellectual I would say, but practical-minded with an easy-going manner. Previous to him I had particular warmed to Paul Goggins, who took his job seriously but with a pleasantly self-deprecatory style, and later on Maria Eagle was similarly earnest. Fiona Mactaggart had perhaps been the most impressive in terms of ability, but I was advised that she chose to leave Government after a while as she was discontented with that role. Crispin Blunt was the equivalent Minister under the Coalition Government until I retired, and he was conscientious even though it seemed clear to me that he was hoping for a move to a Department better suited to him.

Under both the Home Office – to 2007 - and the MoJ – from 2007 – these “Under-Secretary” Ministers were the third-level Minister in their Department, being ‘junior’ to the Minister of State, who in turn was junior to the relevant Secretary of State (SoS). I had occasional dealings with the Minister of State, for example Baroness Scotland and David Hanson, though these were almost as rare as my direct contacts with the Secretary of State in person. My overall main impression of Ministers from my ten years in London was of transience. In my early days, as when I had been a senior manager in Berkshire, I and others would be quite excitedly inquisitive about new Ministerial appointments, and might speculate about what such-or-other appointment might bring to our work. Soon this changed to a feeling that we were just witnessing a procession of faces, however earnest their intentions.

From my perspective, there were four interactions with the relevant Secretary of State that had some impact. The first consists of my three direct experiences of David Blunkett, where I was very favourably impressed by what he said and did each time, even though I found myself becoming increasingly critical of his policy decisions as time went on, especially concerning the introduction of IPP (Imprisonment for Public Protection). As an Inspector I attended a meeting held at Lord’s Cricket ground for him to speak to Home Office staff as the incoming Home Secretary, and he stood almost within the mass of staff as he explained that he wanted “the Criminal Justice System to stop baffling the public” – I felt he had a legitimate point, even though it later led to some reckless policymaking. Later when I was Chief he attended our Annual Report launch, and he conducted himself in a very inclusive manner, and later still I saw him conduct himself brilliantly at a Youth Justice event when he allowed a succession of young offenders to ask him questions directly – he responded clearly, directly and undefensively.

The second interaction was with Charles Clarke, over the case of Hanson and White which I mention again further below. The point here was a bilateral formal discussion about the nature of public protection work by probation staff, where I explained that the way forward was by steady year-on-year incremental improvement in the individual practice by individual officers, because there was no ‘magic bullet’ solution to preventing every single case in the community from ever committing a ‘Further Serious Offence’. He recognised that this was a long-term rather than a short-term solution, but despite being a politician he told me he’d back me on that approach. But within less than a month he’d had to resign over a sudden immigration-related scandal…. Such is the nature of how this country is managed – long-term strategic planning can be easily swept aside by short-term events that few people will be able to remember the details of a few weeks later, and this was only a very small example of that happening.

The third interaction was with John Reid over the merger of the inspectorates, that I mentioned in Chapter 3. We never had a bilateral meeting on the subject, but he’d heard me speak on why I thought that starting a new single Inspectorate for the CJS could be a good idea. He’d not asked me to do this, and there was no question at all of any prior ‘deal’ on the subject, but it may have played a part in his favourable decision concerning my continuing appointment that he later made.

The fourth was with Jack Straw, covering two matters that arose during his time as Justice Secretary, and I cover both matters in the next section. With one he backed me in a line we had taken in one of our reports, and in the other he backed our Inspectorate concerning our planned Youth Justice inspections, squaring the matter with at least two of his Cabinet colleagues in order to enable us to continue. I particularly appreciated Jack Straw’s usually helpful contributions at this time, plus my continuing in post during his time, because back in 2001 it was his signature as then Home Secretary that was on the letter that had seemed at the time to have brought my Probation career to a close.

One major change that I experienced as Chief Inspector that had barely affected any of my predecessors was that our Inspectorate came into the public spotlight to a certain extent. The Probation Inspectorate had never previously had the regular profile in the national media that either Ofsted or the Prisons Inspectorate experiences already had, because most local inspections had been written up as detailed technical works, with conclusions only of interest at best to local media, and ‘thematic’ inspections were often similarly technical in tone. There had been brief flashes of interest in the years before I started when the Probation Inspectorate’s report led directly to the end of the CRAMS software for managing Probation work, and also when Paul Boateng read the summary of a report on race and announced to the world that “the Probation Service is riddled with racism”. But it was with the rise of the importance of Probation’s public protection work that the role of the Inspectorate was bound to attract increasing national media attention, as indeed I had expected because of the obvious parallel attention already given to child protection issues. So I was not personally the cause of the increased national media attention that our Inspectorate started to experience, but I think I was the first Chief Inspector who needed to have a plan as to how to handle it, not just reacting to individual incidents.

I took over just after my predecessor Rod Morgan had completed his joint report on the case of the death of the Nottinghamshire policeman. It was perhaps for this as well as for any other reasons that I was pleasantly surprised to be interviewed for quite a full ‘profile’ piece by Richard Ford for The Times. Nevertheless I was not otherwise overly troubled by reporters for my first two years in post, other than responding to queries about our thematic reports much in the manner that my predecessors had. But I suddenly found myself operating on a completely different scale when it came to our report on the Hanson and White case early in 2006. I’ll outline this notorious case further below, but here the point is that because of its very high public profile I found myself as the focal point of a sequence of highly managed media events.

I should point out here that at this time the Inspectorate had no media staff of our own, and the arrangement was that on an event-by-event basis we would be allocated a person from the Home Office’s own media team. The ethic of that team was that if that individual found that there was a potential conflict between their assigned role on the day and the Home Office itself they should act ‘for’ that assigned role, even if it meant apparent criticism of the Home Office. The phrase sometimes used was that for that assignment the individual would be acting “inside a Chinese wall” within the Department. I should add that as far as I could tell this arrangement was always implemented honourably in my personal experience. However, it became clear before long that we would actually need to start employing our own media person, for continuity and planning as well as for these events. (We and the Prisons Inspectorate eventually appointed an excellent media officer, Jane Parsons, in 2010, who managed the two very different ‘halves’ of her job very skilfully up to my retirement and after.)

On this occasion back in 2006 I was strongly advised by the Home Office media people (I was given two people for this event) that my report was so high profile that we would not be able to do the usual thing of giving it to reporters the day before publication and “embargoing” its use until the next day – someone would be bound to ‘break the embargo’ on this one, I was told. Instead, we would invite reporters to Ashley House for 10.00 am, where they would be issued with copies of the report to read, in that room in closed conditions, and then we’d have a Press conference at 11.00 in that room. There were some 30-odd people plus cameras in the room, when I entered, together with the two Inspectors who had done most of the work for that report. After fielding the various questions for some time – though certainly less than an hour – I emerged to find that our report was already on the electronic media, and I walked down to the “Westminster studios” as they are known. These are premises at 4 Millbank where there is a TV and/or radio studio used by each of the main broadcasters on each of the separate floors, including the basement. On this occasion, and on various later occasions to a lesser extent, I was escorted from one broadcaster to another, being interviewed either inside the studio, or to a camera on the stairs or outside, or on the edge of the inner atrium. And again on this occasion, and on later occasions too, I would eventually find myself on the pavement outside and alone again, walking back to the office, relieved that the hard part of the day was now over, because the news agenda had now moved on to the others, the ones on whom we’d reported – it was very rare for a journalist to want to come back to me regarding the same story.

It was for different reasons, and in a different way, that I did find myself on the receiving end of an ongoing story after all in April 2006. Perhaps partly because of the Hanson and White case I found that the Guardian wanted to do a profile piece on me, and asked Erwin James to do it. His photographer colleague tried very hard in various ways to get an interesting photo of me, but I almost always make a lousy photo, so that part didn’t work particularly well. Nevertheless Erwin gave me quite a generous accurate (in terms of what I’d said) write-up, although I was less pleased that the sub-editor had given the whole piece the title of me saying I was “proud of being an insider”. I had indeed pointed out that unlike my predecessor Rod Morgan I had worked in Probation, so in that sense I was an “insider” unlike him, and also that I had been proud of the work I’d done when in Probation, but the compressing of these two comments gave an unfortunate impression in my eyes – but it was forgivable. The greater problem turned out to be something else I’d said, which was my comment pointing out that the proportion of Probation cases that committed a further serious offence while under supervision was a very low one. As always, I was seeking to keep a matter of undoubted public concern in proportion, although, as always also, I readily acknowledged that each individual incident was a dreadful experience for the victim(s) and/or their families.

I noticed during the subsequent week that a couple of other news and/or feature outlets mentioned the interview, specifically picking out one or two points, including this one. The Daily Mail, however, chose to take a completely different line the following week when on the Easter Monday – presumably a ‘slow news’ day – I found myself on their front page being vilified for saying that I was “proud” that 200 offenders had committed serious crimes while on Probation. Although I was very unhappy about it, and I did send them a letter which I’m fairly sure was never printed, there was nothing more to be done that wouldn’t have simply extended the publicity. In news terms it was a non-event in reality – “today’s chip paper” the next day - and in terms of public reaction I received the grand total of one letter from a member of the public (which I answered), and that was that. My only gain was that I was able to say in a speech to a huge gathering of Probation managers the next week that my opinions had been misrepresented by both the Guardian and the Daily Mail in the previous month…!

### What I/we did:

Going back to my first two years, as a main-grade Inspector from 2001-3, these felt largely stress-free and not too demanding. I learned how inspections were then done, and produced work which seemed to be to the satisfaction my line manager Assistant Chief. After my recent highly demanding time in Berkshire I experienced my new working life as rather relaxed and ‘civilised’ in its pace and conduct. I had plenty of time to be inducted into the organisation, and into what I needed to know about the wider Home Office, and to be a participant observer on a couple of inspections. There was also plenty of time for discussions in hotel bars and elsewhere about what we had seen and heard during the course of the day when out on inspections, and what we each thought of current developments in the Probation world. I saw it as all very sincere and thoughtful, and I perceived it as a little like a world that was reputed to have existed at one time, where earnest practitioners of equal status shared and learned from each other in a courteous and considered dialogue. To me the work seemed fairly undemanding unless you were the lead Inspector, whose job it was to collate the findings and draft the report. However, even when lead Inspector I learned that for most inspections there were precedent reports from which I found I could pick up a structure and sequence to follow without too much difficulty.

To illustrate, I started by ‘observing’ in an inspection in Gloucestershire, which involved spending some time with a former Newport officer doing home visits in the Forest of Dean, an interesting world in its own right. I assisted with an inspection in Wiltshire, which had its own nostalgic element to it for me. We were mainly observing interviews or interviewing staff in groups at this time. Where we did examine work directly it was looking at Court reports in various locations – as I’ve mentioned elsewhere, I was somewhat shocked at the number of these that seemed to lack any ‘explanatory’ value.

I led a ‘follow-up’ inspection in Cumbria, where my interview with the Chief was interrupted by my suddenly seeing out of the corner of my eye a red squirrel casually crossing the grass outside. I did another ‘follow-up’ in the West Midlands. It was then decided that it was now long enough since I had left Gwent for me to be able to lead the inspection there late in 2001, as well as assist in South Wales. In Gwent, as was standard practice then, we did an exercise of reading case files and ‘scoring’ them in one week, and then returned some three weeks later to do the interviews and observations. One memorable event from that inspection: Near the top of a fairly remote hillside where a Community Service group was just about to attack the undergrowth with scythes I had to point out that with no safety boots supplied this work group should not go ahead as planned.

At the time, much Home Office attention was given to the “enforcement” of Court Orders, with the aim of ensuring that ‘community orders’ should become more strongly recognised as credible ‘punishments’. National Standards specified the promptness of first contact, the frequency of contact during the first 12 weeks, and promptness of action to be taken following a “second unacceptable failure” by the person under supervision to report as required. So from c1998 onward the Inspectorate had undertaken a leading role in designing and organising case inspections to measure performance against the National Standards.

Accordingly, during my first two years in the Inspectorate a large element of my direct inspection work seemed to be about deciding and carrying out detailed specification about what actually ‘counted’ as meeting various deadlines for first appointment, frequency of contact, frequency of assessments and reviews, and ‘taking action’ on ‘unacceptable failures to report’ – and indeed what counted as an ‘unacceptable failure’. As many of us had known for some time, it’s quite easy to set some simply-worded standards and then there’s a lot more work when it comes to specifying what they mean in practice, and in sufficient detail so that there is a reasonably clear line where one can say that the standard has either been met or not. This was not that difficult in relation to ‘Enforcement’, once one applied some proper thought to the problem, but it raised further questions about other aspects of supervision, and how we were scoring them, which I was able to explore myself from 2003 onwards.

Meanwhile, with the format for all these inspections already well established, I did not find it too difficult to write them up quite quickly during 2001-3. More difficult was when I had to write up a ‘thematic’ inspection of DTTOs (Drug Treatment and Testing Orders, as they then were) early in 2003, but soon I was able to craft this into a series of interesting observations about how these were developing. On a broadly positive note, I blandly summarised that the NPS had “come a long way in a short time.” On one level I was content with the feeling that I was grateful to have a job at all, in view of the January 2001 disaster, and therefore also content to carry out what my new organisation required of me.

On another level I felt some unease. No one else except Sir Graham Smith, who retired in 2001, had been a Chief Probation Officer – though many had been Assistant Chiefs - and there seemed little appreciation of how inspections ‘looked’ from the point of view of those whose work was being inspected. I remembered that as a Chief I had been able to accept criticisms where someone noticed something I hadn’t previously noticed myself, but I hadn’t welcomed someone writing down as a criticism something that I’d told them was a concern of mine already – and I felt the Inspectorate sometimes still did that. And I particularly hadn’t liked being criticised for the way I’d done something, when it delivered the right results, simply because this wasn’t the way that the inspector thought it ought to have been done – and I noticed that some of my new colleagues were still doing that.

Furthermore, it seemed to me that most of what we had to say was in the category of “Quite interesting, but so what?” – you could say that my own DTTO report was a good example of that. Thinking about what I would have found helpful if I were still a Chief, I was conscious that it would be better if we could ‘measure’ how well work was being done, and do it in a way that could be compared with others. This approach should be potentially motivating to both weak and strong organisations if it were communicated with them in the right way. In fairness the Inspectorate in the 1998 to 2003 period was not that far away from being able to do that, but in my view it hadn’t quite got there yet.

One of the handicaps it had to overcome was the long-established tendency actively to avoid making overt comparisons between different organisations. The inspection I’d experienced in Berkshire in 2000/01, where the ‘rating’ appeared in just one single low-profile easily-missable line in the text, had been the first tentative step away from that tradition and in a new direction instead. So when I became Deputy Chief in 2003, I didn’t need to find a completely new direction for the Inspectorate, but instead I aimed to give it a further sharp shove in the direction in which it was arguably already going.

Usefully, the Inspectorate had already established published ‘criteria’, including those it used for examining cases and reports. Indeed, as a Chief Probation Officer I’d found it beneficial to be able to plan aspects of our practice in Berkshire in order to meet these criteria. So as an Inspector I was somewhat surprised to find how unprepared some Probation staff were for understanding what Inspectors might be looking for in files and when interviewed. To take the example from 2001/2, which I also mention elsewhere, in reports for Courts we were looking for evidence that the writer was exercising some judgement, and thereby making an informative assessment, concerning the offender and the offence(s) that had been committed, both currently and in the past, and yet a large proportion of Court reports seemed to be consciously ‘free of’ making any such judgements. There seemed to be, by some, a misguided fear of committing some kind of improper ‘discriminatory behaviour’. Of course we also saw some hearteningly good work, in files and in observed interviews, with officers demonstrating good assessments and good influencing skills.

The problems with inspection methodology as I saw them were firstly about how far the work we saw and made judgements about was truly representative of the work of the area, and secondly the high value that we were setting within the overall inspection assessment to what people told us in interview about what they were doing.

The file reading was a reasonably representative sample of files, though it needed a little tightening up, but the interviews we directly observed were necessarily an extremely small and entirely random selection. It was very enjoyable for us to witness these interviews and make our judgements about their ‘quality’, and in terms of looking directly at the work being done it seemed a highly desirable practice on our part – but one could not remotely claim that those 15-20 interviews were in any way ‘representative’ of the work of the whole area. An anecdote from the inspection in Berkshire when I was still Chief there in late 2000 may illustrate this point in an indirect way. We had a PO in one office who was earnest, hard-working, but could be a little ‘eccentric’ in his methods. At the end of the afternoon of the Inspectors’ observed interviews in that office, I happened to see the Senior for that team at an informal gathering to share how the day had gone. She sidled up to me and said, “It’s alright, Andrew, I sent \_\_\_\_\_ on a prison visit today.” Now, I as Chief Probation Officer emphatically had not asked her to do this, but neither was I inclined to criticise this initiative that she had taken. But in my new capacity as Chief Inspector, I didn’t want that kind of ‘initiative’ playing a part in potentially skewing inspection findings. Logistically, we couldn’t possibly arrange and scrutinise a ‘representative’ sample of single interviews from an area, but it was possible to scrutinise a representative sample of case files – while including face-to-face discussion with the officer in charge of each of those cases.

Accordingly I arranged that we would tighten up the work-sampling – for example, we, and not the area, would now decide concerning any ‘substitute’ files, and I also felt that we needed to review the nature of the judgements being made of each individual piece of work in each casefile. A lot of this work – making dozens of judgements with each individual casefile - was done by local staff, albeit ‘supervised’ by an inspector. Now you might think that this would lead to ‘soft’ judgements by people apparently marking their own homework, but this wasn’t the problem. Indeed there was some research around at the time, which chimed with my own experience of managing internal inspections, that practitioners were often the harshest judges of their colleagues’ work. In contrast, senior managers, who were perhaps more conscious of the implications, often tended to be the ‘least harsh’ in their judgements. In any case, a lack of ‘benchmarking’ of those judgements could lead to findings that were skewed either way.

So one early task was establish a benchmark or guidance for the groups of staff, either Inspectorate staff or local staff, on how to ‘score’ each judgement for each case. In addition to this, there was also a problem that the quantitative scoring system at the time had the unintended effect that when an officer had done a very routine piece of work perfectly competently it had an unintended relatively ‘disadvantageous’ effect on the potential total score, because it wasn’t (and couldn’t ever really be) ‘Excellent’ – and only ‘Excellent’ ratings could lead to a ‘100%’ total score. I reformed the system of aggregating the quantitative scores to avoid that problem, as I describe briefly further below.

Another problem as I saw it was that a large part of each inspection report continued to focus on what managers (and some practitioners) had described about what they thought they were doing. We were interviewing various staff at various levels, either individually or in groups – always an interesting experience for us – and then we drew conclusions from what they had said. Over time, I came to call this “inspection by job interview” as I felt that the process was as beguiling for the interviewers as it was (and is) for interviewers on a job selection panel – but it was also similarly unreliable as an indicator of actual (or potential) performance in reality.

Why were we using this approach? The methods that Inspectorates use tend to vary with fashion and with political climate, and at the time we were in a period when a ‘lighter touch’ was advocated, and a prevalent view at that time was that that all one really needed to do was inspect the management arrangements rather than the work itself.

Frankly, during inspection visits I enjoyed those discussions in themselves, and often felt that my role at this time was a bit like a management consultant, with the similar feature that I didn’t have to take any ongoing responsibility for the consequences should any of my comments lead to action by the organisation I’d visited. But although I enjoyed the discussions in the moment, I found them unsatisfactory as an experience personally, since it wasn’t my job to follow them through – so I sometimes described these discussions as “managementus interruptus”. But much more importantly I was unconvinced that they made for effective assessment – later on, I described it to one civil servant as like assessing a football manager by how much he shouted and jumped up and down on the touchline.

Additionally, during inspections and in other contacts, I gained the distinct impression over time that a sizeable proportion of senior managers were humanities graduates (as I am), who had excellent analytical skills and showed great awareness of how their organisation worked, but who seemed incapable of making any change happen. Their numeracy skills often also seemed poor, so that they often left decisions involving the management of money, time, or case numbers to those who they thought had the necessary technical skill – but who didn’t have the understanding of the actual work itself.

To take a simple example of the problem, it should be obvious that, over the course of a year, maintaining a steady caseload of 30 people on six-month Parole licences will add up to considerably more work than one of supervising 30 people on one-year Probation Orders. One only has to consider the substantial work involved in opening and closing a case, plus the fact that supervision is normally more intense during the first few weeks of any order, plus the point that on average a Parole case will be harder than a Probation case. Just in terms of numbers the first involves 60 different offenders in the year, while the second just the 30. Yet I often found myself talking with senior managers who didn’t seem to have grasped this. As another Chief much later said to me – one who had tellingly come from outside Probation – “They don’t really understand about stocks and flows, do they?”

At least there was one aspect of the political fashion of that time with which I was in full agreement, and on becoming Deputy Chief and then Chief Inspector I made this our prominent principle – this was that the purpose of Inspection is to promote improvement in the service being inspected. One might have thought that such an idea shouldn’t need saying, but in the heat of an inspection process, particularly if it starts to get into a power struggle, it can become easy to get distracted into simply proving the other person ‘wrong’, or – to use a phrase I heard more than once from HMI Constabulary staff – to “beat them up.” So the Government was right to publish a policy in July 2003 asserting that the purpose of inspection was to promote improvement. Unfortunately, while some of the ideas in that document about how to do that in practice were good, some were not, and many of the difficulties I experienced during my final eight years at the Inspectorate were that my ideas about how that should be achieved in practice were different from many of the ideas that were currently in vogue as a result of that Government policy.

So at a time when ‘light touch’ inspections of the management arrangements were seen as the way forward, there I was trying to get us to give less attention to the ‘management arrangements’ and instead try to inspect the actual work itself. We therefore focused increasingly on how to access and examine, fairly and consistently, a representative sample of cases in each inspection, assessing how far the work in each case was achieving each of the Three Purposes of supervision with that case…

…Yes I revived, with only minor changes, the idea I’d heavily promoted in Berkshire that there were the Three Purposes of supervision, and sought to give it common ground with the stated aim of the then new NOMS (National Offender Management Service) by referring to “enforcing every sentence, making offenders less likely to reoffend, and minimising risk of harm to the public.” Over subsequent years I’ve tweaked the wording a little, but the core point of these Three Purposes has remained the same.

With those Purposes in mind, the reader of each case file was required to make qualitative judgements about numerous pieces of work with each selected case, basically having to decide in each instance whether it was ‘Sufficient’ or ‘Not Sufficient’ in terms of the quality of that action in order to achieve one or more of those Purposes. It would be too longwinded and too complicated to describe the various complications, variations and total details here of how that worked, but I am emphatic that it was very different from having a mere ‘process checklist’. Instead, we had a means of giving a numerical score to indicate how often certain purposeful pieces of work with offenders under supervision were being done ‘sufficiently well’. In that way we were producing a quantitative score for the quality of practice in an area, by ‘adding up’ all the qualitative judgements.

In my view, the key benefit was that both the managers and the practitioners whose work had been inspected could see where they most needed to improve, as well as how they were doing compared with the rest of the country (‘benchmarking’). I felt that we were not usurping their management role by telling them precisely how we thought they should make any changes, but we were doing something that no one else could do, by telling them where they currently stood, in terms of the quality of their work.

I resisted giving an ‘overall result’, a ‘rating’ for the organisation as a whole, which Ofsted and some other Inspectorates have always done – and at least one of my successors has since introduced - for a number of reasons. An ‘overall rating’ distracts attention from the different strengths or weaknesses in the work being done. I also observed that huge amounts of time were consumed by inspected bodies arguing the score with inspectors, and then arguing ‘on appeal’ etc, and then ‘defending’ their organisation locally, instead of focusing their energies on where they needed to improve. In particular, I didn’t like the idea of ‘Excellent’ organisations being given ‘inspection holidays’ (being ‘let off’ the next inspection), which gave the impression that an inspection was a ‘punishment’ rather than an opportunity to learn, which even an excellent organisation can still learn from.

But there were costs to this approach too. It was hard work for the inspection staff, and particularly for the Assistant Chief Inspectors, to run intensive programmes of inspections with demanding schedules, to time and budget. It was controversial in certain quarters; before 2007 I kept having to explain why we were looking at actual practice rather than being content with looking at management. Then, after the 2007 Baby Peter case, when assessing practice then suddenly came back into fashion in Government policy circles, I kept having to explain why we couldn’t examine practice in even more demanding ways, such as with ‘unannounced inspections’. Our methodology did in fact evolve during this period, but it evolved in accordance with what we had learned to date and what we knew we could now make work in practice, rather than in simple response to external pressure.

Having said that, I should confirm here that at HMI Probation I inherited a trend in inspection methodology that was already moving in the right direction. At least cases (and reports) were actually being examined and scored already, albeit I thought this process needed more purpose, focus and consistency. It had already moved beyond the ‘tick-box’ approach of just noting whether an item had been included, and was starting to require a qualitative judgement about whether the item of work had been done well or not. Quite fortuitously, I had contributed to one key element in the case inspection ‘tool’ because one of its designers had decided to adopt the structure and terminology I had used in my 1996-8 Employability research, of Interventions and Outcomes. Nevertheless this approach needed much further evolution, in terms of the scoring system, the definition of what we were looking for, and in obtaining more consistent judgements by the various persons examining the files. Those were the further steps I needed to take.

One of the key steps originated from an incidental conversation with an Assistant Chief in Notts, John Kay, who happened to have been my supervisor in Leicester nearly 30 years earlier. He mentioned that “Sufficient” was a good word to use to indicate that a piece of work was ‘good enough’, and it didn’t cause offence in the same way that “Adequate” often did – it often sounds as if you’re saying that this work was ‘only merely adequate’. Indeed, I remember having what felt like a weird discussion with senior Ofsted people not much later, when they told me that when they awarded their formal rating of “Adequate” this did of course mean that it was a result that was “not good enough”. (< “So why call it ‘adequate’”?)

This is something of an oversimplification, but my reflection on that earlier conversation with John led me to a system where the quality of each piece of work assessed in a file-reading exercise was to be classified as either Sufficient or Not Sufficient, meaning that it scored either one point or no points. This permitted the scores to be aggregated so that we could report that a total of “x%” of the work, or of a particular type of work, had been “done well enough.” (We designed in ways of ‘discounting’ any work that that case had not needed, and also ways of identifying, and acknowledging separately, any pieces of work that we had considered either Excellent or Poor.) I was particularly keen to be able to do this, as one of the really good questions I was asked at the Press conference for the Hanson & White report was whether the poor work we had found with that case was “typical”. On that occasion I replied with cautious confidence that I thought that such work to manage Risk of Harm was usually done to a good standard about two-thirds of the time – but in saying that I privately knew that I was merely using an ‘informed guess’ on my part in that answer. As it happens, when our case inspections started to report regularly under the first Offender Management Inspection (OMI) programme, the average score did come out close to the ‘two-thirds good enough’ mark.

The increased focus on ‘work item done well enough’ rather than merely ‘work item present’ required some consistency of judgement by a range of extended inspection teams, including by the file readers from the local area ‘recruited’ for the purpose for each inspection. (We wanted to extend understanding and ‘ownership’ of our definition of ‘quality of work’ to practitioners and managers from each area.). So, with one Inspector (later Assistant Chief) Kate White, by 2005 we recruited and managed a new team of Practice Assessors, seconded from their existing employers, to specialise principally in the file-reading task. My expectation had been that the treadmill of constant file-reading almost every day of almost every week would be demanding and morale-sapping for these new appointees after a full year, but as things turned out I was surprised at how many stayed to the end of the absolute maximum of two years for their secondments. Suki Binning was the obviously outstanding candidate within our very first very capable intake.

At the recruitment stage we tested their existing assessment skills, and then honed them during their secondments, because after their work with us we also wanted them to take their skills back to their employers – another reason for the two-year maximum for their secondments. All future Inspectors we recruited also had to undertake the same test of their case assessment skills, and very quickly our existing Inspectors also revised and regulated their own skills too, reinforced by our regular ‘benchmarking’ case scoring exercises. Like the judging teams for Olympic gymnastics or ice dancing, we never had perfect alignment, but our monitoring of our own scoring practice continued to assure us that our alignment was good enough, and fit for purpose.

We still had to remind the organisations whose work we were inspecting that they shouldn’t hook themselves too much on whether a score was, say 61% compared with another organisation’s 62% - but if the difference was of ten percentage points then there was clearly some management action that they needed to take concerning the finding. By the time of the second ‘offender management’ inspection programme, “OMI2”, we felt able to give a form of headline ‘ratings’ for each range of scores for this programme and also for the then new programme of inspections of Youth Offending work. However, these were not the conventional ratings, such as Ofsted finding that a particular school is deemed to be either “Outstanding” (Excellent) or “Failing” (Poor), or whatever. Instead we rated what level of improvement was required with specific areas of work.

Taking each of what we identified as the three main purposes of supervision, we could say how often the work to achieve each of those purposes was being done well enough. If it was being done well enough c70+% of the time that work only required “Minimum Improvement”, while lower scores required either “Moderate” or “Substantial” improvement. For less than 40% of the time it required “Drastic Improvement” - this was a category we only introduced at a late stage, when a couple of inspections of Youth Offending work produced such poor scores that we needed to introduce that new category – no ‘Probation’ inspection produced such low scores.

Inspecting youth offending work took a long time to get going. YOTs (Youth Offending Teams) had been established across the country after 1998, led locally by Children’s Services in 150-plus separate areas, and nationally by the Youth Justice Board, which at that time was responsible jointly to the Home Office (later the MoJ) and the Education (etc) Department.

However, until 2003 there had been only a couple of stops and starts in how these new YOTs might be inspected, but in that year, just before I became Deputy Chief, it was agreed that there would be a five-year programme of joint inspections, involving inspectorates for criminal justice, local authorities, children’s services, education and health in both England and Wales (which had separate inspectorates for many of these).

It was quickly apparent to me when I came into post that many of the familiar problems with joint inspections were very probably going to bog the work down. I feared a regular repetition of the seemingly endless meetings to agree criteria and other planning of the programme, often repeated when the Chief or senior team of one Inspectorate vetoed what had been agreed, and then the same process all over again with each individual inspection before the final report could be signed off by everybody. So I adopted a mantra of “jointly managed, but singly led” as a policy for all joint inspections, and I found that in practice almost all my counterparts came round to complying with this assertion of mine most of the time. In practice it meant that when we were the lead Inspectorate, we involved our partners in the planning and staffing of each inspection programme, but we ‘assumed’ the authority to manage each individual inspection to ensure that it was completed on time. (Yes, this meant that with some other inspections, where another Inspectorate was in the lead role, I complied if and when the lead Inspectorate did or said something that I did not consider ideal.)

The key thing was that at this early stage of YOT inspections, in 2003/4, I asserted with my partners that as they had now agreed the criteria etc, the job of planning, scheduling and writing up each individual YOT inspection would be led by HMI Probation. I could see no other way that we could complete some 30 inspections every year, when we had done only a few in the first year – I was hugely relieved when our partners acceded to this.

The whole process remained infernally complicated to manage, smoothed a little by us taking in to our inspection teams seconded Inspectors from police, children’s services and healthcare, some of which we paid for from our budget and some we didn’t, and with different joint working arrangements with the relevant Welsh inspectorates. Assistant Chief Inspector Liz Calderbank (and later Julie Fox and Alan MacDonald) deserves huge credit for her patience and persistence in seeing this up and running. We completed the whole first programme late in 2008, which looked like the planned five-year timescale but was nearly six given that we’d started early in 2003, but in the circumstances I was very pleased about the precedent we’d established together.

However, it was clear from what we’d done so far, that the quality of youth offending work was very variable indeed, far more variable than that of Probation work. I’d be overstating the problem only slightly by saying that in certain areas, the work barely touched on steering sentenced young offenders away from crime, and was predominantly an extended childcare or youth and community work welfare programme. As a result of our inspections there was a rebalancing of the work in those areas, to include a more substantial ‘criminal justice’ element. By April 2009 we were ready to lead the next inspection programme, focusing primarily on inspections of cases, visiting all 150-plus local areas in just three years this time, and covering some of the wider aspects of youth offending work with a series of thematic inspections. And of course I now ‘badged’ it as inspecting “youth offending work”, not “YOTs”.

The ‘political’ dimension of inspections when dealing with local authorities continued to be a major handicap to us. One aspect of this was in the nature of the complaints we occasionally received. It is true that in my time I had to deal with a couple of complaints from Probation Areas about specific inspections – which I think we handled scrupulously – but there were several concerning youth offending inspections, and these carried an additional political element. This meant that I was sometimes responding to a Council Leader or an MP, rather than just a Head of Children’s Services or similar. This gave an added ‘edge’ to any dialogue, although we remained able to hold our line.

The other aspect of this ‘political’ dimension was strategic. We were required (rightly) to link our inspections to the new planned system of Comprehensive Area Assessments (CAA) of every local authority, a joint inspection programme being planned and led by the Audit Commission from about 2008. However, their planning of CAA had to be approved by a particular sub-committee of the Cabinet Office, and that sub-committee’s policy was one that opposed what they saw as direct ‘routine inspections’ of the work being done. The mantra at that time was to undertake a direct inspection in a particular area only when a ‘risk assessment’ of other data suggested that such an inspection was necessary.

I was therefore under huge pressure to modify our methodology of visiting and examining cases in every area, but I insisted – and still would – that it was in everyone’s interest that the practice in every area should be directly looked at on a regular basis. Merely looking at the available performance statistics (such as they were) would not provide the desired purpose of indicating whether a particular area ‘needed’ inspecting or not. And in any case, inspection was about learning how to improve, however good or bad you already are. I pointed out that no one argued that HMI Prisons shouldn’t visit every prison at least every three or four years – but I was told “That’s different.”

Getting absolutely nowhere with everyone I spoke with, this was when I finally went direct to the Justice Secretary Jack Straw. To my pleasant surprise, he bought the case I made straight away, because after his witnessing of public criticisms after other individual catastrophic incidents (Victoria Climbié he mentioned – this was just before Baby Peter) he found it a reassurance to be able to say that there was an inspection regime that visited every area regularly. He also assured me that he would square this with his Cabinet colleagues covering Education and Local Authorities (Ed Balls and Hazel Blears at the time), which is what he must have done. Our input to CAA was from then on quietly accommodated, with the minimum of fuss, until it was finally launched early in 2010. Finally, in a massive anti-climax, CAA was then abolished overnight by the incoming Coalition Government in its first month in May of that year.

As a related point, I always argued that youth offending work was “half criminal justice work, and half childcare work” and that’s why it was jointly owned by the two different Government Departments. However, I also felt that because YOTs were led locally by local authorities, there was a ‘default’ tendency for their policy and practice to ‘drift’ towards the childcare side of the work – so within the MoJ I would argue strongly that the MoJ should stay alert to ‘holding on’ to ‘their’ 50% of this work. Although I had never actually advocated this, I was not overly sorry when the MoJ was eventually given the sole lead for this work, presiding on its own over a reconstituted Youth Justice Board from 2011/12, during the year after I retired.

Within the Inspectorate, most former Probation staff had little experience of working with local authorities. I’d had a little more involvement in this than most of them, because of our several experiences in Berkshire: the Community Crime Prevention partnerships where we had initially taken a lead role, the abolition of the County Council and the move to six unitaries, and the start of the working relationships with five new Youth Offending Teams in a small county. It was not therefore a surprise to me that we found that much greater ‘political’ element in our youth offending inspection work compared with our Probation inspection work, as I’ve outlined above. Elected members of a local authority were much more ready to argue and contest inspection findings, and indeed many of them were drawing on their experiences of making arguments and representations and thereby gaining adjustments to inspection findings made by other Inspectorates such as Ofsted in the past.

But our methodology, resting principally on our judgements of the quality of work with a representative sample of cases, had the merit of making it difficult for an inspected body to contest our findings. So instead there was the occasional attempt to rubbish the whole methodology by condemning it as a ‘tickbox exercise’, or one that focused on inputs rather than outcomes. But we had strong answers to those accusations, since the ‘ticks’ represented judgements about quality of work done with real cases, and that these ‘inputs’ represented the work that much research elsewhere had shown were the ‘inputs’ that produced the right outcomes. We were therefore largely successful in fending off the contentious criticisms from individual complainants, and in so doing also created a renewed expectation that Youth Offending work was at least 50% about reducing the likelihood of reoffending (which some YOTs seemed to have lost sight of).

There’s a danger that I can extend this chapter further, making it even longer than it already is, by describing more what I was aiming for us to achieve, and the details of what we did achieve. However, unlike my work in my earlier roles, much of what the Inspectorate did is now available in the online National Archives, and much of what I wrote personally at that time about Probation and Youth Offending work is both there and on my website. I will therefore try to confine myself to some of the headline points about our inspection work, since anyone wishing to explore or pursue those points further is welcome to look on my website.

Overall, our aim with our ‘core’ inspections of Probation and Youth Offending work can be summarised as follows: We wanted to give useful feedback to the managers and practitioners who did the work in each local area, advising them about our assessment of the quality of their work, measured in a way that could be broadly compared with other areas of the country as well as the country overall. We itemised which aspects of their work needed the most improvement, and by being both explicit and consistent about how we defined what ‘good quality work’ looked like, we aimed to encourage those managers and practitioners to improve their work. We did this because we knew that trying to inspect instead through measuring ‘proper outcomes’ such as reduced reoffending – a desirable aim – simply cannot work because such information comes too late and is too problematic in other ways to be useful as feedback for learning purposes (see website).

Instead we identified the work that the wider world of research was consistently showing was likely to lead towards effective results, in terms of the Three Purposes that we had named, and devised criteria for assessing the quality of that work. By this means we could examine a representative sample of cases from each local area, and decide with each piece of work with each case whether it was done well enough (Sufficient, or Not Sufficient, or ‘not applicable’), and then aggregate those qualitative judgements into a series of quantitative scores. Those scores were our assessment of how often each broad area of practice was being done Sufficiently well. To put it another way, how often were the practitioners in that local area Doing the Right Thing with the Right Individual in the Right Way at the Right Time? Furthermore, because our methodology was transparent, it was possible for the local managers and/or practitioners to continue to monitor and assess the quality of their own work in future, as they aimed to improve - if they wished.

Although we had, in addition to the complaints, quite a lot of positive feedback about the nature of our inspections, I was disappointed to find little evidence that local managers picked up the opportunity to use our materials to help improve local practice. In fairness I recognise that these managers were experiencing a constant turnover of organisational change at the time: having recently moved from employing Committees to local Boards, they were then required to move to Trusts, and shortly after I retired came the “transition” to the new directly-employed National Probation Service (NPS) and the badly-named Community Rehabilitation Companies (CRCs). But it was still disappointing that our materials were not used more widely.

Meanwhile the dilemma for the Inspectorate with our own methodology continued to be how far we should avoid being ‘out of date’ by updating our methods and criteria in the light of new information or new circumstances, or how far we should avoid ‘moving the goalposts’ too much by changing all the criteria. To manage this dilemma our aim was to be open to evolving some of the details of our methodology – as we did when we designed our second programme of Offender Management Inspections, for example – but hold steady to the consistency of our underlying strategic approach. This was to present a clear and consistent picture of the Three Purposes of supervision, and openly describe how we defined and measured each of those, and by doing so seek to encourage all the relevant service delivery organisations to pursue a path of incrementally improving the quality of their practice year after year.

If you look at the results we were finding in both Probation and Youth Offending work by 2011/12 there was a cautiously encouraging picture of the progress being made in both areas of work – but it was also clear that seemingly constant structural reorganisation was also handicapping that progress. As an Inspectorate, my assessment is that we were – of course – a positive influence in helping to promote good quality core practice, but that progress was hard to maintain on our side, and even harder to maintain on the service delivery side because of handling the constant changes and other external demands, so our ‘success’ as an Inspectorate was, I would say, real but limited in its effect.

At this point I should also mention that during my time at the Inspectorate the team also achieved a major transition in how we used Information Technology. When I arrived inspectors were still using paper questionnaire-forms when examining and ‘scoring’ case records - manually collated - and we were on the point of modifying them so that the answers took the form of large black dots that could be scanned and thereby collected and collated by computer. Over time this evolved into an online form, making data collection much quicker and less at risk from error, and alongside the evolving methodology outlined above enabled us to provide aggregated and segmented performance information of tangible value.

Almost all of the credit for that development should go to the technical staff who worked on it over the years. Alongside this I was more personally behind a separate parallel development through which I wished to plan and manage the deployment of inspection staff during the course of each financial year. Building on the spreadsheets of deployed staff hours that I had used during my later years in Berkshire, I sought to establish an Access database so that what I called “deployable inspection hours” could be allocated to each substantial task or project, and ‘credited’ to each Inspector or Assessor allocated to that specific job. Initially we called this program “Excalibur” for some lighthearted reason, and then soon shortened and amended this to “Calibre”. The Access software turned out not to work properly on our network for some reason, but the program was reborn using different software. From my perspective I was very pleased with it because it gave me a rational means of planning inspection programmes for the year ahead, as can be seen in the Annual Plans from 2004 onwards, and it gave managers a reference point for showing that work was being distributed reasonably fairly between inspection staff over the year as a whole. It was not, and could not, be ‘perfect’ at this, but did it reasonably well.

I was pleased that it was ‘good enough’ for my planning and management purposes without creating the need to inflict timesheeting on operational staff – indeed it created no extra work for them. This was in contrast with the position with one of our partner inspectorates, where the finance officer explained to me in a meeting how detailed timesheets were completed, collated, and reported to enable the costing of each inspection, but it was all retrospective, so that it did not help with future planning as far as I could see. The high level of detail collected also made it difficult for any conclusions to be drawn for future benefit. However, I was grateful to him for looking at ‘my’ system, and saying to me: “Ah, while we are using the ‘Actual’ method of resource allocation, I see you are using the ‘Absorption’ method…” It was nice to know that what I thought I’d perhaps invented was already a recognised approach, and one with a name! (More can be found about how this system worked in my archived writings.)

This was important and sometimes time-consuming background work that helped to improve our mainstream inspection programmes, though not at all obvious to the external ‘viewer’ of our work. Another example of such background work was the time that I and other senior staff spent on liaising with other inspectorates on CAA and on Safeguarding, as already outlined. A further example was following the establishment of the Criminal Records Bureau (CRB, as it was at the time), and we realised that we’d need to do Enhanced Checks on almost all our own staff, because our Youth Offending inspections gave us access to data that identified individuals under-18; we would be expecting such checks by YOT managers on their staff, so we would look reprehensible if we didn’t check our own staff. It was a remarkably long and convoluted process, taking up considerable time for me and for some of our key staff, to get this done. The breakthrough came when one particular member of the CRB, which was based in Liverpool, took on responsibility for liaising with us and helping us to get the job done, and establish a pattern for dealing with new staff and for three-year renewals in subsequent years.

I also undertook another initiative personally, to try to help me keep a ‘feel’ for the current state of mainstream work with offenders alongside the rational methodology that we were developing as described above. Once we realised that our Inspectorate was not about to be absorbed into other Inspectorates I embarked on a series of visits to each Probation Area, and some YOTs. Over the course of just over two years in the mid-2000s I visited for a whole working day each of the 42 Areas of that time, making four visits in the case of London. In each case my plan was to allow the Area to show me whatever they wanted to show me, rather than have me prescribe a programme, as I wanted to be clear that it was a “visit” not an inspection. My stipulation was that the programme should include about an hour of dialogue with the Chief, and should separately include some face-to-face contact with practitioners where they would have the opportunity to talk with me about their work and how they experienced it. On one level that was a big request on my part, but in every case it seemed that people were very keen to have this relatively informal and open-ended contact with the Chief Inspector, and to the best of my knowledge the visits were appreciated.

I found it helpful to get the Chief’s perspective in each instance, to gain some understanding about the realities – as they perceived it – of the various demands from ‘above’ as well as the pressures from ‘below’, and of course what aspects of the job were still rewarding. Because it was a visit and not an inspection these were fairly relaxed discussions, and it may have helped that they knew I had been a Chief myself in the past, albeit under the old structure. Practitioners were almost always particularly enthusiastic about the work, even when they had grumbles about the pressures – though of course it was likely that managers might put in front of me the more positive-minded staff. But many meetings were with the staff of a particular team, or Approved Premises (hostel), so the scope for staff selection was not that great. For my part, I greatly enjoyed these visits, and I have to confess that on one occasion the Chief and I carried on our conversation well past the planned finishing time, and digressed way beyond work matters to enthuse about old films etc.

Practitioners sometimes wonder what senior managers do all day, and one thing that I think must be obvious to all genuine senior managers but is not so obvious either to practitioners or to many civil servants is how time-consuming it is to deal with all the staffing matters that come up. In Berkshire we had an “HQ Officers” meeting every week, and at least an hour or more of that meeting might be taken up dealing with whatever staff issue(s) might then be current. In the Inspectorate the total staff group was much smaller, but the issues were not that different. Complaints and indiscipline were fortunately rare in my experience, but took up a huge amount of time when they did, particularly for the manager who was leading on dealing with it – but he or she would need to brief or consult senior colleagues to ensure we were being consistent and fair. Underperformance and sickness were more frequent issues, and again it was important to be consistent and fair, so key decisions often needed to be made by the team as a whole. It was often surprisingly difficult to decide when it was time to intervene, and then how to intervene, in a way that did not obviously contrast with past practice, or might set an awkward precedent for the future. My aim was to try to ‘have hindsight in advance’ – “In the future, if we do this, will it look like a precipitate overreaction? Or if we don’t, will it look like a passive failure to act?” In the moment, this can be surprisingly hard to read, but we tried to make sure we made an active decision one way or another rather than simply let things drift passively.

Naturally I can’t give identifiable examples of these issues. One fairly simple general example is when one receives a second or subsequent medical certificate for a member of staff signing them off for two weeks. At what point does one take action, either to refer the person to the occupational physician or to start to organise some redeployment to cover for them, or both? Taking action after the first fortnight would look hasty, but allowing it to drift past six or eight weeks might look irresponsibly lethargic. And of course every case is different, so you can’t have an identical rule for everyone. In both my jobs as a Chief we had relatively ‘routine’ staffing issues such as these moderately frequently, and also the occasional spectacular and unusual staffing issue that took up much time, particular for the relevant senior manager leading on it.

Related to this, one chunky but ‘less visible’ element of this job was when we needed to recruit new inspection staff. This became quite a demanding operation for me and a number of our own staff each time we did this, for reasons I outline below, so I soon moved to a position whereby we would do just one recruitment exercise for HM Inspectors per year. This meant that at the end of the exercise we would have a number of candidates who had ‘passed’ the assessment centre we had run, in rank of order of the scores they had achieved, with (typically) the top two or three gaining the immediate vacancies, and the remaining three or four on a ‘waiting list’. I advised those on the waiting list that should a further vacancy arise during the subsequent twelve months they would be invited to take it up, if they were still interested and available, but at the end of the twelve months their candidacy would ‘expire’, and if they were still interested they would need to apply again under that year’s exercise. In practice this process worked pretty well, with the list usually lasting long enough most years for us to maintain our complement of Inspectors through the year, and equally it was quite rare for a candidate on the waiting list not to gain a post by the end of ‘their’ year.

During the first few years of my being Chief, my strategic aim was to try to get as many of our existing Inspectors, and also our newly-recruited Inspectors, onto Civil Service employment contracts. This was to be a benefit to us, because of the potential at that time for the merger of the Inspectorates, and the risk was that in the event of a merger we would be obliged by the Home Office HR people to send back any secondees we had at that time. And indeed, such secondees might easily find that that their parent employer would now find them surplus to requirements and would need to make them redundant. So it was in the interest of the Inspectorate, and of the Inspectors themselves, as I saw it, that if I could get them onto Civil Service contracts they would at least have the job security of knowing that they would have priority for retention in any new Inspectorate, and failing that the security – not absolutely guaranteed, but very probable -of the prospect of redeployment at equivalent level within the Civil Service.

However, this meant that when recruiting new Inspectors I had more than one agenda to satisfy. For me, I needed to know that candidates would be competent Inspectors, which meant that I wanted to test their abilities to do the job – show me what they could do, not merely tell me what they could do. So I wanted to put them through exercises that demonstrated their ability to analyse relevant information, and in particular to assess cases and score the quality of the work. However, in addition, I needed them to be able to satisfy the general Home Office (later MoJ) HR requirement that they had demonstrated general ability to perform at ‘Grade 7’ level of civil servant. Therefore the resulting assessment centre that Inspector candidates went through consisted of two or even three parts, usually conducted over more than one full day of assessment activities. The last activity was the formal interview, which needed to be chaired by an HR professional – I was fortunate in usually getting the same excellent one each year – and also included, as per our Inspectorate policy, a professional Diversity advisor.

During my last couple of years of being Chief I found I needed to turn my strategic aim on its head! There was no longer the immediate threat of merger (though a brief theoretical threat of abolition, in which case our existing staff were already protected as best I could). Instead the problem was that the growing financial constraints meant that newly-recruited Grade 7s would now be offered starting salaries that were noticeably below that senior managers in the Probation and (especially) the Youth Offending worlds would already be earning. The solution was to return to offering secondments, because this gave us the means of matching the current salaries of the successful candidates. It also meant that I no longer needed to satisfy the ‘Grade 7’ dimension of the assessment centre.

I would add here that over my time both in Berkshire and in the Inspectorate I regularly explored methods of assessing candidates for various posts in which I tried to identify the individuals who could actually do a good job rather than merely talk a good job. Hence the exercises were designed to show me what they could do, using tasks that were as directly relevant to the specific post as I could make them – easier with some posts than others. I was sceptical about ‘off the shelf’ exercises offered by various companies, although I did believe that there was a potential role for verbal reasoning and numerical reasoning tests. For example, Home Office HR were outraged when Peter Ramell and I devised a simple numeracy skills test for the candidates for the post of Finance Manager in the Inspectorate – “You can’t do that!!” - yet we pressed ahead and found that five out of six of the candidates, including one very confident self-important fellow, could not get past Question One successfully…

On the other hand, I would have to acknowledge only limited success in my efforts over the years – I think that what we did was much better than simply relying on how someone looks in a one-off job interview (wider research shows that simple interviews are poor predictors of future performance), but there are so many aspects of a candidate that one simply can’t ‘test for’. The fact that with very few exceptions indeed we mainly maintained a very able hard-working and conscientious workforce – Inspectors and other staff – was still partly down to a large slice of good luck alongside our strenuous efforts.

And alongside the recruitment of Inspectors were the separate recruitment exercises for Practice Assessors from 2004/5 onwards, which also became an annual exercise, also in two substantial parts. Our system of strictly-limited secondment periods meant that we were managing a regularly high turnover, but we were more ‘in control’ of these exercises. But in terms of scheduling, let alone managing the content of, all these assessment exercises these were major pieces of work each year. Such was some of the often time-consuming but ‘less visible’ dimension of our work.

Returning now to our more ‘visible’ work, our role in the development of Public Protection and Safeguarding work was inevitably much more prominent in the public eye, and here I would argue that we made three strategic contributions. Again, I have written much about the following points elsewhere, so this is only a summary of the matter here. The first was to come out and publicly declare, explicitly and unequivocally, that it was simply not possible to eliminate the risk to the public of a current case committing a Serious Further Offence (SFO). We did that first when publishing our report on the case of Peter Williams, and then again in each of our subsequent reports. On each occasion we also made clear our view that – instead – it was reasonable for the public to expect that the staff of all the relevant authorities should do their job properly. On one occasion I remember undergoing a ‘swift’ interview to camera where the interviewer asked me a question about whether the improved practice that I was proposing would guarantee the safety of the public. I said that such a guarantee was not possible, and I could hear a gasp from the Home Office media relations officer who had ‘delivered’ me to this interview – that was not the “line to take” according to their own briefings, though of course it was up to me what I said.

The second was, as already described, to make it acceptable to measure the effectiveness of the ‘twin’ areas of work (Public Protection and Safeguarding are ‘twins’) not by simply measuring the ‘success rate’, the percentage of current cases who do not commit an SFO (Serious Further Offence) while under supervision. It’s important information, but not a helpful performance measure for the purpose of helping people improve their current practice. Our ‘positive’ alternative which dealt with how to measure the work, and also how to “assure” the public, was to say that staff should “take all reasonable action to reduce to a minimum the risk to the public”, and to demonstrate that we knew how to measure that, and would be continuing to do so regularly.

The third followed on from this, and concerned multi-agency practice, which everyone agreed needed to improve so that difficult cases would not “slip through the net due to communication failures”. Hitherto, when the various Inspectorates undertook a joint inspection on this and other themes, there was a lot of focus on the arrangements for ensuring that the various agencies were “talking to each other”. This was understandable, but it didn’t get beyond the question of whether communication was possible and encouraged, and didn’t get to whether people actually did in practice communicate when they needed to, and even more importantly whether that communication led to effective action being taken. It was through our initiative that later joint inspections used the methodology of examining a sample of cases so that we could answer that question of whether that effective joint management of cases was actually happening in practice – and of course *how often* it was happening.

Because anything we wrote or said about Public Protection tended to attract huge publicity, albeit usually only for a day, I tried to find more and different ways of expressing the same key points, to see if any of them might catch on. In the case of a report we had to do on “Approved Premises” (as Probation Hostels had been relabelled), triggered by a Panorama programme which showed through secret cameras in a Bristol hostel that it was possible for residents – some of whom were on licence following serious original offences – to go out during the day and evening, and no one knew where they were. I sought to emphasise the point that former offenders who had been lawfully released from prison were no longer “locked up”, and it was therefore possible for them to do something bad again – but Probation and others could and did take actions to make that possibility much less likely. The former offender was no longer physically restricted – nor “monitored” for that matter in the way that some people seemed to imagine – but he or she was obliged to comply with certain requirements, and action could be taken afterwards for non-compliance. So I came up with a phrase, “Not Locked Up, but Subject to Rules”, and I put it in big print as the very title of this report, so that I could hold it up to camera if needed.

On that occasion, that tactic was only moderately successful – holding the report to camera did not produce the followup question I had hoped for. But in a separate parallel development I did find myself talking on the phone to a newspaper leader writer, and making the analogy that a football referee couldn’t prevent a player from misbehaving, but he could and should exercise a sanction if the player does misbehave – and that was roughly the same position that a probation officer was in: the person under supervision was ‘not locked up but subject to rules’, so the supervisor couldn’t prevent misbehaviour but could administer sanctions. With my agreement, that analogy did duly appear in that newspaper’s editorial column the next day (Guardian 8/11/2006).

A separate success from that report pleased me at the time. This concerned one of the conclusions that we had reached when writing that ‘hostels’ report, which concerned a related case in the Bristol area where Probation locally had been criticised over a couple of recent cases where an offender under supervision had committed a murder. We looked at the cases, which had been relevant to the ‘hostel’ inquiry, and concluded that broadly everyone involved had done all that anyone could reasonably expect to manage both cases properly. But it was still a pleasant surprise to find that in its very brief account about our report, the Sun (27/3/2007) included without adverse comment the sentence that inspectors did not think that the two murders could have been prevented. At the time I was hopeful that our long-term message about staff ‘taking all reasonable steps’ was starting to get through. I wanted the public, and Probation practitioners themselves, to expect this Public Protection work to be judged using these criteria, and to have confidence that the Inspectorate knew how to make those judgements fairly, consistently and competently.

The other analogy that I used more frequently when talking with journalists and other external parties was the one about hospital intensive care. I’d argue that if a close relative of yours is rushed into hospital intensive care for some reason, and then dies, you don’t automatically assume that the doctors and nurses have somehow ‘failed’ – but you do want reassurance that those doctors and nurses etc have all done ‘all that they reasonably could’ to prevent that death. The argument did seem to carry some weight when I used it, but I’m unsure whether it helped to temper expectations in the longer term.

The 2006 report on Hanson and White, who murdered the banker John Monckton in the hallway of his home, had been my first main opportunity (after the Peter Williams report) to define to a wide public audience what it was reasonable to expect. We found some shockingly poor practice, notably a requirement on one of the offenders to report to an office that was inside a geographical area from which he was excluded by one of the conditions of his Licence; on the other hand, one couldn’t state unequivocally whether avoiding this action or completing any other action by the supervising staff would have actually prevented the murder. So we made it clear that we were focusing on what the public had a right to expect – that staff should do their job properly – and criticised the way that various staff had rather passively left things to each other, describing it therefore as a “collective failure”.

The response by NOMS was to require an ‘action plan’ from every Probation Area to show that they were implementing the list of supplementary recommendations we’d made in the report. For me, this rather missed the point that we’d wanted individual ‘qualified’ officers, who’d obtained a two-year ‘professional’ qualification, to show and take more initiative themselves in taking responsibility for managing their cases effectively. We hadn’t wanted them to have more lists of instructions to follow, which often have the effect of reducing people’s sense of responsibility and initiative – and candidly I rather regretted including those supplementary recommendations in our report.

Our report on Anthony Rice, who committed a murder on release from Life Licence, caused two ‘political’ controversies. We said that in this case there had been a “cumulative” failure, in that although there had been some shortcomings in the way that his Licence had been managed, in our opinion there was also clear evidence that Rice had been too dangerous to release in the first place. Naturally this caused great offence at the Parole Board. Furthermore we felt that one of the factors that had led to the decision to release Rice, and which had also played a part in the weaknesses in his post-release supervision, was that the ‘balance’ between the duty to protect Rice’s human rights and the duty to protect the public had been got wrong. I had been aware of the risk that rightwing commentators might make too much of our conclusion, and that did happen to some extent, but I felt both before and after the event that our observation should not be withheld.

There is a whole wider related topic to this, which concerns the role that the legal profession plays in the criminal justice system, and which I have already touched on in this autobiography. Clearly there are enormous strengths that are gained by having exacting and scrupulous arrangements for ensuring fairness in how the system works, and the role of the legal profession is essential to this; however, in my experience it has not always played a positive role when it comes to ensuring effectiveness in managing people who have offended. At the time of writing this is most notably evident in the workings of the Parole Board, which, having become deemed to be a Court-like process, is increasingly dominated by judicial and legal considerations. Public Protection is cited as one of its top priorities, but I am not fully convinced that a judicial process is the most effective way of achieving such a purpose (not that a ‘perfect’ means of achieving this is candidly available).

Safeguarding, I’ve said, is the complementary twin to Public Protection, aiming to achieve much the same purpose by focusing on potential victims, where PP work focuses primarily on potential offenders. As mentioned already, we participated fully in regular joint inspections on Safeguarding arrangements led at first by the Social Services Inspectorate and then by Ofsted. Many of the same issues arise, with public panics caused by individual notorious catastrophic cases, and which then impact on routine practice in unhelpful ways for many years to come. The substantial rise in children being taken into care across the country following the Baby Peter case did not affect our work directly, but we were more immediately conscious that some Youth Offending work in some areas became more conscious of the need to ‘safeguard’ current cases as potential victims of harm, and less conscious of the need to safeguard others from some of those current cases as potential offenders.

On one occasion when I had spoken to a Youth Offending service audience about the need to give as much attention to the Public Protection element as to the Safeguarding element of their work, one audience member approached me afterwards with an anecdote. In her area, an 18-year-old young man with special educational needs (below average IQ etc) had mistakenly been seen as a danger to a group of 15/16-year-olds with whom he was often seen (simply because he was the “adult” and they were the “children”); in reality he was the victim, being bullied by them until they directly caused his death – the bullies had not been seen as a potential danger to vulnerable individuals. This was an extreme event, but one which provided an illustration of the point I was seeking to make, and I would like to believe that our Youth Offending inspection methodology has helped Youth Offending services to operate a better balance between the Safeguarding and the Public Protection aspects of their work.

A major complication in both of these two areas of work is public attention, and the obverse of that same coin is confidentiality. The Peter Williams report had been shared, pre-publication, within supposedly responsible parts of central government, but some relatives of the victim were distressed when some leaked details of that report appeared in the press before they had had the courtesy of being shown it themselves. Remembering this, I was very careful when drafting the Hanson & White report to guard my drafts throughout the process. My secrecy meant that when the Observer published a front-page account of what I was going to say it was a complete fabrication – I know this because when I was told this story I was at home on that Sunday morning in the act of still writing the key sections of that report. I can only guess that someone who claimed that they were a well-informed “insider” made their own ‘best guess’ at what I might say, and sold this idea a being sound ‘inside information’. I was therefore less surprised when exactly the same thing happened again with the Rice report: me at home writing the report, and then hearing that the Observer was announcing what I was going to say.

More importantly, I had to decide how to manage the courtesy of the ‘advance disclosure’ to the relevant victims on each occasion so that they heard from me before hearing from the media. With Hanson & White I took up the fortuitous option of allowing the journalist Dominic Lawson, a close relative of the Monckton family, to see the report and brief the family, and despite the media frenzy I described earlier this seemed to work well both for the family and for us. With Rice I probably made a mistake: I acceded to the request to allow the Hampshire police’s victim liaison people to be the conduit – it seemed a reasonable idea at the time that someone with an existing relationship with the victim’s family should be allowed to do it. On the evening prior to the press launch I also allowed a copy to go to Number Ten Downing St. As I walked to work the next morning from the Vauxhall flat I heard various accounts on several radio stations announcing confidently what I was expected to be saying in my report later that morning. They were all very wide of the mark except one – the report from the BBC’s Danny Shaw sounded as if – well – as if he had read my report. There was no real damage from this now, except with the other people whom I had prevented from seeing advance copies, especially in the Home Office itself, who could perhaps feel miffed with me. But it left me curious about the ‘leak’. I had the chance a few months later to ask Danny about this, as at least I was confident that it had to be either Number Ten or the Hampshire Constabulary that had leaked this; naturally, Danny was able to claim that he couldn’t remember, an ‘unlikelihood’ that I could forgive him for as a journalist doing his job.

Changing the subject, but on a connected theme, one perennially sobering aspect of working in the CJS has always been to note the marginalised role that victims of crime have in the way the system works. Although it was historically for good reasons that legally crimes were deemed to be against the Crown rather than simply a matter of personal dispute, it did lead to a position in the late 20th century that victims were starting to assert that they and their experience and perspective should be treated with more consideration at all stages in the criminal justice process. Politically the idea of giving more weight to the victim perspective gained a great deal of support at the turn of the century, but during my period as Chief Inspector there was less clarity about what that should look like in practice, and therefore what should be attempted in reality and how.

For our part, there were various attempts to gain the views of victims about the service they’d received from each Probation Area we were inspecting, but to be candid this seemed unsatisfactory. As with many ‘customer surveys’ there were some blandly positive findings – Probation’s Victim Contact services were usually well delivered and broadly appreciated – to be weighed against some occasional real screams of anguish from individual cases. One letter made a big impact on me the more I reflected on it over time, because this person had taken the trouble to handwrite a letter about their experience of the CJS as a whole (not just of Probation) in the handling of ‘their’ case. The picture this person described was a series of well-meaning individuals coming up their garden path to talk to him/her as “The Victim” in this case. Each individual was polite and took time to listen etc, but it was never the same person who came, and each time there was a visit “The Victim” had to start all over again in describing their case and what they hoped might happen next. That person got the distinct impression that the service for victims was just a series of these individuals who never spoke to each other or passed their information on, and that there was no coherent service for victims at all.

And indeed there wasn’t, and at the time of writing there still isn’t, although I have supported the Victims Commissioner’s bid to establish such a service. What I felt at the time was that this matter was potentially an ideal topic for joint CJS inspection. We should not just talk with managers of the various agencies about their arrangements for talking with each other, and passing information on – which very probably existed, subject to data protection constraints etc – but I felt we should talk with a representative sample of victims of their experience from start to (almost) finish of ‘their’ case to see how many of them had had either similar or contrasting experiences from the case outlined above. It took some time to get this idea onto the agreed annual plan of joint inspections by the CJS inspectorates, but before I retired it entered the agreed Plan for 2011-13. It took the form of focusing on victims of domestic violence and sex offences, and the lead Inspectorate was to be HM Crown Prosecution Service Inspectorate, with our full support. I must therefore credit my successor Liz Calderbank in delivering HMI Probation’s contribution to the resulting inspection.

Meanwhile, in my post-Inspectorate ‘career’ I have been pleased to be a source of advice to the Victims Commissioner Helen Newlove from 2015 to 2019, supporting the idea of a coherent Service for victims, although I’ve remained cautious about the potential for legal representation for victims. My dilemma is that since the 1990s I’ve always thought (and said) that the reason why victims have historically had such a minor role in Court proceedings is because victims are not legally represented there – but on the other hand I’m not overly keen on either the expense or the potential time-consuming consequences for the CJS of proliferating the roles for lawyers even further.

Most other thematic inspections completed during my time as Chief Inspector were also “Joint” inspections with other inspectorates, often formally commissioned by the CJJI (Criminal Justice Joint Inspection) Group, but sometimes involving inspectorates such as the Healthcare Commission (as was) when we examined the experiences of drug-related offenders. The CJJI Group emerged as the result of the October 2006 late decision by Ministers not to force a merger of the then five CJS Inspectorates into a single Inspectorate. As I have outlined earlier, the ‘price’ for not forcing an outright merger was that the Inspectorates agreed to do more joint work, and also to work with a Steering Group consisting of the relevant Ministers plus some independent members. We worked hard to recruit some very able and conscientious independent members, but the resulting arrangements were probably quite unsatisfactory for all involved for a combination of reasons, though such arrangements were still limping on when I retired.

The fact is that in practice Ministers didn’t want that much involvement in reality in directly commissioning the long-term planning of inspections, leaving the independent members with the appearance but not the reality of influence. Furthermore it was difficult for them to have genuine influence on the Chief Inspectors themselves, who did at least have their own clear ideas about what they thought their Inspectorates should be doing. The series of joint inspections that emerged from 2006-13 is evidence of reasonably good co-operation by the CJS Inspectorates, despite the fact that the mechanism designed to facilitate that was probably experienced as unsatisfactory by all the participants.

On a positive note, our viewpoint in one thematic inspection was vindicated. We’d looked at the enforcement of electronically monitored (EM) curfews, and been critical of their lack of transparency. The details of this are complicated, and there were strong operational reasons why the EM companies were asked to work this way, but from the offender’s point of view they could keep committing ‘violations’ of the curfew without any tangible consequence, and then suddenly find themselves breached and imprisoned without apparent warning. NOMS objected to our criticism, but in a meeting with Jack Straw, he backed our criticism – enforcement should be practised transparently.

### What I felt:

During my first two years in the job after arriving as an Inspector in 2001, having worked at a pretty demanding pace in Berkshire over almost all the previous ten years or so, things felt frankly rather comfortable. In the first couple of weeks I noticed that as I made my way on a Monday morning to Reading station – which I’d previously had to go through anyway to get to my Reading office – I no longer had in the back of my mind a worry about what might have happened in one of our Probation Hostels over the weekend. And although the early weeks at the Inspectorate were especially gentle, even later when I was deemed to be working at full speed the pressure didn’t seem that great. It was true that on a full inspection week one might be away from home from Sunday afternoon to Friday afternoon/evening, but the only time that felt really like any pressure at all then was if I was the lead Inspector. Overall, I remember commenting to myself that I felt as if I had joined a team of friendly co-operative colleagues who worked conscientiously but not with excessive energy, and who discussed things earnestly and were ready to help each other, a bit like a ‘nice’ team of Probation Officers in the 1970s.

As for working within the bigger world of the Home Office, I likened it to being a little like being seconded to a prison. It was necessary to “render unto” that host authority those parts of the work that legitimately belonged to them, and then one could get on with the ‘Probation’ parts of the work with quite a large measure of discretion. This seemed to work well for me, with both the Home Office and later the MoJ, who as I have already said treated the ‘independence’ of the Inspectorate quite decently in my opinion.

However, I later found that it was often very time-consuming to get all that work done within our large host bureaucracy once I became Deputy Chief and then Chief. There were so many lateral ‘link people’ to keep in the communication loop, to consult with or be consulted with, and clarifications to establish or confirm with, in for example the then National Probation Directorate. I came to the view that it remained perfectly possible to achieve a good 7½ hours’ worth of work-output per day every day – the only problem being that in this setting it now took about 11 hours per day to achieve that 7½ hours’ worth of work-output.

From this I deduced an informal theory that the larger the organisation then the more work-input has to be put in to achieve the required level of work-output. There was an obvious connection between this and my earlier informal theory that you only gain – at best – about 60% extra productive output for the appointment of each extra manager (because so much of the new manager’s time is used up on ‘mutual adjustment’ with other managers etc). A different rendering of that theory was that the larger the organisation then the less gain that would be achieved from each new manager – maybe only 40% or less. A law of diminishing returns was coming into effect – making the earlier analogy with the building of extra motorways even more apposite.

Related to this was my feeling of bafflement at my experience of all these other organisations – mainly other sections of Government or related public services – and how they worked. During my early years with the Home Office I was taken aback at the way that department seemed to manage its budgets – you were nominally allocated a budget but given few means of actually managing it. Accounting was by when the money was spent, not when it was committed – although during my later years the MoJ made a big thing out of the fact that it was about to go over to a system of ‘commitment accounting’ (at last!). Your budget could easily be raided by others, without your say-so, during the middle of the year if there was a pressing need elsewhere to do so. Staffing was of course the biggest item in these devolved budgets, but if a control was imposed from above – as would happen periodically – in the early days it took the form of a restriction on “head-count” rather than on money, probably because this was more controllable from above, through the HR section.

I discussed finances with the accountants, who were decent intelligent people trying to manage public money rationally. I learned that although they might offer ‘up’ their organisation their proposed budgets based on some rational calculations and allocations, the agreed budgets that came back down from the top tables were the outcome of a series of compromises that seemed to have been arrived at by bargaining rather than by calculation. For my part I found that it certainly didn’t seem to help me or my Inspectorate much that I used a system of transparent projections in order to construct my annual budget each year, as I noticed that other ‘Heads’ were more successful in ‘pirating’ budget increases by using more political clout than I seemed able to use. On the other hand, I did get some pats on the back for my transparency – and some interest from some other branches of public service management - so perhaps it helped to ensure that our inspectorate didn’t disappear in the 2010 culling of various “arm’s-length bodies”, together with the Courts Administration Inspectorate for example.

Alongside this was my experience of attending various meetings with senior officials and junior Ministers over the years - it had two hallmarks. The first, in the early years, was the echo of the “sofa Government” that Tony Blair attracted some adverse comment for in more senior circles. At my level this meant that the other person would invite me to sit opposite, with us both on comfy low chairs while we informally discussed various topics. Candidly, this was not a way of working I warmed to, as I want a more businesslike discussion across a table, being able to take notes easily, and I welcomed it when I got this more businesslike tone with Phil Wheatley during my later years. The ‘comfy chair’ was beguilingly informal, but for me not great for organised dialogue.

The second hallmark was the sheer transience of my opposite numbers. Bearing in mind that my appointment as Chief Inspector in April 2004 was officially only an interim arrangement, it was with wry amusement that I noted less than two years later that although I was still doing my job, very very few of the people with whom I was needing regular dialogue had been in their roles as long as that – indeed some had arrived and gone again in those two years. For example, someone would contact me from NOMS and announce that he was now the “Director of Offender Management” and ask for an introductory chat. This was clearly important to my mind, so I’d clear the way for giving him a good briefing, and indeed we’d have an excellent introductory meeting. Then in less than a year he’d be gone, and I’d need to talk with a new one. It had some similarities to my earlier days as the ACOP Offender Employment lead, when I had found myself ‘inducting’ a succession of slightly less senior civil servants into the subject of offender employment in the 1990s.

It struck me that in contrast with the traditional image of the British Civil Service - of a staid conservative cadre of narrow-minded hierarchical men (mainly) who rarely moved out of their fixed roles – what I was seeing was the opposite. Indeed, rather than being the figures of stable conservative consistency that were successful in resisting the transient efforts of Ministers to achieve change, as portrayed in Yes Minister in the 1980s, the civil servants I met seemed ready to implement with alacrity every policy change that came along. While it was reasonable that civil servants should aim to implement Minister’s policies I saw little evidence of reality checks being attempted, and this was partly because there was so much turnover of personnel that there were few who understood the business enough to be able to offer informed influence. Even the people who I thought should have known better – because they had had operational experience - seemed content to try and deliver ‘improvements’ by sending out new lists of detailed instructions, ‘National Standards’, and ‘guidance’… In fairness, this had also been the practice in a number of Probation areas already, and even I had previously issued detailed guidance on occasions, so it wasn’t just a ‘civil servant problem’. But since it had become obvious that this approach didn’t work I felt that we should all have moved on a little by now.

As I saw it, a huge amount of energy was consumed by the upper levels of civil servants, unquestionably working very hard indeed, but with very little useful or tangible output. The energy mainly went on interacting with each other, constantly consulting, drafting and redrafting and formally approving documents that would become redundant less than a year later. Even in the Inspectorate world, though not so much with the CJS inspectorates, it seemed to me that the desire to be “responsive” – fair enough up to a point – often spilled over into changing too much too quickly in order to be in tune with the latest political pronouncement. As I surveyed the constantly shifting sands of the various glimpses I got of Government activity all around me, of which I was of course a part, I found that I was regularly asking myself in some amazement, “Is this really how we run this country?”

My sceptical viewpoint was compounded further by the realisation that on numerous occasions I felt I was witnessing some organisational behaviour that I started calling ‘The King’s Breakfast’, after the poem by A A Milne. (It starts, “The King asked the Queen and the Queen asked the Dairymaid, “Can we have some butter for the Royal Slice of Bread?”) Communications &/or instructions seemed to go ‘down’ the hierarchy regularly, and sometimes up again, often in circumstances when it might have been quicker for the first person to ‘just do it’ him/herself, while even more often the sequence led to a subtle-but-significant change of meaning from that which was originally intended.

A very large organisation is indeed very difficult to manage, especially when its overall purpose is unclear, so I’m not suggesting that there were easy solutions. But I found it quite wearing at times to feel that I was using a huge amount of time and attention, unproductive in itself, in taking forward the Inspectorate’s work, just for dealing with the workings of our ‘host’ Government Department. Some such work was obviously necessary, but it felt very disproportionate at times, and it was this, that I called “organisational politics”, that I most looked forward to leaving behind when I retired.

In contrast, I knew that when I retired I would greatly miss the satisfaction I gained from feeling that the Inspectorate had gained a coherent sense of purpose – promoting improvement by others – with a series of coherent annual plans of inspection programmes whose design and implementation were clearly geared to achieving that. I joked in our internal meetings how much I enjoyed seeing staff “walking briskly and purposefully” between sessions, in order to get on with some individual work they’d planned for that same day. Things were not perfect, of course, and there was and is always scope for improvement, but in my eyes I saw a team of able individuals working together to achieve a shared purpose, and I really liked that.

Moving into unadulterated immodesty for a moment, an episode that especially exemplified what we were aiming to achieve came from an inspection of youth offending work – and it gave me enormous satisfaction. It came in the form of a testimonial that we received, unsolicited, from a local authority senior manager responsible for a YOT in Wales, who gave us feedback that made my heart sing. He described how he’d had negative experience of inspections by other different inspectorates in the past, and when he’d received our initial highly critical assessment he had been outraged at first. But then he’d looked in detail at what we’d said, and realised that he and his people had become highly complacent, and that we were right. Our people had also been entirely constructive in the way they had conducted themselves, he said, and so he and his people were ready to learn from our assessment and move on.

Now I personally had had absolutely nothing to do with this particular individual inspection, and the specific credit for his positive feedback goes of course to the team led on that occasion by Julie Fox. However, my personal pride came from the knowledge that everything he said was a vindication of the plans I had made that our inspections should “promote improvement”, not by beating people over the head, but through constructive dialogue employing structured sound evidence. In my final year in the job, I could not have been happier about this.

While I was not sorry to leave behind the “organisational politics” – as I called it – of the continuous interaction with the wider machinery of Government, I felt great satisfaction with the core job of being Chief Inspector. Nevertheless, as I said on the day I retired, it was just the second-best job I’d ever had. If it’s the case that Probation practitioners and managers ‘make things happen’, while inspectors ‘commentate’, much as I’d enjoyed being ‘in charge of ‘the commentators’ I’d gained even greater satisfaction being ‘in charge of’ making it happen when I had been Berkshire’s Chief Probation Officer. Having had both experiences illustrates how much my career was fortunate.

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For a final observation in this chapter, I would like to summarise here my experiences and thoughts about structural reorganisations.

First, going back a chapter, there is an irony that from an early stage I was a supporter and advocate of the plans to change from 54 separate Probation Services to a single NPS in 2001, even though it resulted in my being made compulsorily redundant then. With my then employers, Berkshire Probation Committee, I argued for them to support the option of the fully centralised single NPS rather than the 42 quasi-separate Probation Areas, the option that eventually ‘won’ at that time.

Second, as Chief Inspector, although I wasn’t overly keen on a supposedly ‘simple’ merger with HMI Prisons, as was being planned in 2004, I was a strong advocate of the 2004-6 plan for a single Inspectorate to cover the whole of the CJS – they already had one in Northern Ireland after all, and it should be good for examining ‘whole processes’ (as I called them) in the CJS. With this in mind HMI Probation published my paper ‘Inspecting the CJS: Starting from First Principles’ in March 2005 in support of the then plan, though with the strong message that the benefit depended on the new Inspectorate needing to be able to start from first principles in terms of fresh inspection methodology. (I’m not detailing that here, though the paper can be found on my website.)

However, I learned many important things from those two experiences – plus others – of structural reorganisations, albeit that I had already been aware of those things from previous study and reading. One of these is that strategy must come before structure (alphabetical order, conveniently): The whole strategic purpose for what the new organisation is to achieve must be paramountly clear – if it is not clear, or lost sight of, the new structure just becomes an end in itself, and quickly the old inefficiencies are replaced by new inefficiencies instead. The most notable aspect of any planning period prior to structural change is therefore people worrying about their own jobs, with many people at the top prioritising their attention on gaining a new post for themselves. In the case of the planning for the new single CJS Inspectorate I found no interest at all by the other Inspectorates in thinking about how future inspections might be designed and conducted – or indeed their specific role and purpose in future – and as the end of 2006 started to approach I could see that the merger was in practice going to consist very probably of “putting five cats in a bag, and letting them get on with it” in the way I most feared.

My MA Business History studies from the early 1980s had indicated ‘Strategy first, Structure afterwards’ as the necessary first step. Furthermore I’d found that the 1995 Audit Commission paper ‘Less Dangerous Liaisons’ had given specific advice about careful detailed planning for mergers, otherwise the benefits of the change would be unlikely to be realised. So I had thought that I would be able to use this and other advice to enable ‘our’ structural change to become a success, but by October 2006 I could see few prospects for success in practice.

It was therefore actually a relief to me when Ministers called off the merger of the Inspectorates, virtually at the last minute so to speak. It also meant that I got to retain my job, as I’ve described in an earlier chapter. So from then on my plan was to establish the role of HMI Probation as a distinctive element within the CJS joint inspection ‘team’, with clear ideas about our role and purpose, including a new ‘branding’. (I’d never been an enthusiast for our logo at the time, that looked like the crosshairs of a sniper’s rifle, and I was pleased that simply for the modest price we normally paid to design the cover for our Annual Report we gained a new logo in 2007 that was much better in my view.) And we continued to promote our ideas for the methodology of joint inspections.

During my final year or so before retirement the Coalition Government came to power in May 2010, by which time I’d already arranged my planned departure date. Apart from the immediate announcement of the abolition of CAA (Comprehensive Area Assessment), as already mentioned, the main early impact on our Inspectorate was the review of “arm’s length bodies”, part of the attempt to reduce the number of quasi-autonomous government organisations maintained at public expense. So once again the question arose of merging the Prisons and Probation Inspectorates, and once again I was mobilising my case about our different roles and purposes, while also promoting our ability to do joint work on certain topics when we needed to (the Prisons Inspectorate didn’t want us to merge either, of course). It was at this stage that the Courts Administration Inspectorate suddenly bit the dust, and a decision was also made to abolish the Youth Justice Board, although later there was a reprieve and a modified role for a continuing YJB.

By this time, the Probation Service nationally had undergone two further reorganisations since 2001 alone. In 2004-5 it had lost its separate identity as a National Service in its own right, and become part of the then new NOMS (National Offender Management Service), and then in the late 2000s all the local Boards were required to convert themselves into Trusts. The latter change – seen by many as being a parallel with NHS Trusts – only paved the way for the even bigger change in 2014/15 of splitting the Service into a fully centralised NPS dealing with “High risk” offenders on the one hand, and on the other hand 21 separate private-sector CRCs (Community Rehabilitation Companies) to manage the other offenders. At the time of writing this arrangement is in itself subject to substantial further review, with ideological viewpoints being argued fiercely on both sides.

As with other aspects of public service - e.g. transport, especially the railways – it seems to me that who actually owns the service is not really the point. Neither public nor private ownership has shown itself to have a monopoly on either competence or incompetence. However, some arrangements seem to have greater likelihood of success, and with my background I see direct management of Probation by publicly accountable people as offering better prospects. What is much more important is clearly defining what it is that we are requiring our public service(s) to achieve, as I have set our elsewhere.

My point here is that I came away from my Inspectorate experience with a reinforced view that strategy – including defining purpose(s) clearly – is much more important than structure. Unfortunately, in public life the ‘solution’ of leaping for a restructuring arrangement always seems to appear a much more attractive solution. I believe that my track record shows that I have not been afraid of restructurings, and indeed even now I think that such options should always be considered, provided the strategy has been decided first. But some advice from the venerable cricketer WG Grace comes to mind if I’m asked about potential new structuring arrangements for any organisation, although he was talking about the captain’s options on winning the toss at the start of a match: “Always think about putting the other side in to bat first. Then don’t.”

## Chapter 15: New Zealand, University of Oxford and ‘European’ work

*“…a solution that didn’t involve spending more money!”*

### New Zealand:

Early in 2009 I suddenly received a phone call from the then section of the MoJ that dealt with international matters. The New Zealand Government was asking if there was someone who could assist with a review of their Community Probation Service. It could be argued that I could have sent one of the Assistant Chief Inspectors, but when I heard that the other two ‘outsiders’ being brought in were the national heads of NZ’s Social Services and the NZ Commerce Commission, I felt justified in nominating myself for this role.

In short, in the end the job involved my making seven separate visits to New Zealand over the two years from April 2009 to February 2011, each visit taking up a full week, with a video conference of an hour or so in each of the other months during this period. The deal was that we calculated a ‘day rate’ that was the calendar day portion of my annual salary with on-costs, and charged the NZ Govt for ten days for each of my visits, with the money going to the MoJ as a part-reimbursement of my salary. So I didn’t have to take annual leave, and each trip involved catching an early afternoon flight from Heathrow on a Friday, pausing at Los Angeles for two hours, and then arriving in Auckland early Sunday morning, catching a connecting flight to Wellington, and then spending the rest of Sunday adjusting, ready to start work on Monday. I flew back on Friday afternoon, and of course arrived back Saturday lunchtime. The NZ Govt paid all my hotel and travel expenses direct, including Business Class air tickets, so despite the fairly demanding schedule each time it didn’t seem that arduous. Most of the time I was able to maintain email contact with the Inspectorate, and also draft papers that I was writing at the time, on the plane or in the various business lounges – and when my laptop battery ran down I saw quite a few films on the plane too.

The two logistical complications were, first, in April 2010 when the Iceland volcano grounded all flights in Europe, and I was stranded in an airport hotel in Los Angeles for five days. (But the internet connections continued to work, so I kept up with much of the work at home.) The second was in February 2011 when I was caught up in the Christchurch earthquake that month, and had to come home without my luggage, since that was being stored in a building that had become unsafe. (It was shipped back to me three months later.)

The work itself was fascinating, since there were strong parallels with developments I had witnessed in my own country. I have described this in more detail elsewhere – see the Further Reading – but in short a serious attempt had been made to manage NZ Probation with detailed procedure manuals. Then, in a review of cases following an instance of a notorious serious further offence, it was found that few cases were complying with their own detailed required procedures. The NZ Govt was under pressure to take action, which was why they assembled quite a high-status “Expert Panel” to advise them what they should do. Paula Cairney, a former New York lawyer who had settled in New Zealand and recently chaired the Commerce Commission, had a particularly high standing – and impressed me with her quiet understated authority and consideration. Our colleague Peter was also an impressive performer.

In my first week I visited offices in Wellington and also in and around Napier, and my findings were exemplified by the comment of a Senior, who regularly ‘audited’ his officers’ records, when he observed, “Often, the assessment meets all the requirements, but it’s still not a very good assessment.” Although I was cautious at first about jumping to a conclusion too quickly, my fellow members on the Panel backed me strongly when I advocated a change that involved much less micromanaging and much more delegation of responsibility. Over the next two years we oversaw the Change Programme, which was of course not free of problems, but overall it was viewed very positively.

When Paula and I went to see the Minister, Judith Collins, for my final meeting, just after the Christchurch earthquake, the Minister commented that usually any review they commissioned always came back with a recommendation that the Government should invest a substantial amount of money in order to address the problem. However, in our case, we’d devised and implemented “a solution that didn’t involve spending more money!”

### University of Oxford

Earlier in my career, while still an Assistant Chief in Berkshire, a very different opportunity had come my way. The University of Oxford CCR (Centre for Criminological Research) established a Probation Studies Unit in 1996 under Ros Burnett. I was one of the first two “Probation Fellows”, appointed following a real grilling from the Deputy Head of the CCR, David Sanders. (It struck me afterwards that this interview was far more exacting in content than any interview I’d had for Chief or any other Probation role.)

The original idea of these Fellowships had been for Assistant Chiefs, or SPOs at a pinch, to go to Oxford for six or twelve months full time to do some piece of agreed research. I felt I couldn’t be a full-time Fellow, and I also knew I’d have to go back to full-time ACPO in January 1997 as Paul Goodman was due to be off for three months’ long planned holiday (on an agreed programme of accrued leave), so I ended up having a Fellowship of nine months half-time. BPS continued paying my salary etc, and agreed for me to spend two days per week in Oxford or on fieldwork from April to December that year. My colleague Assistant Chiefs took away some of my work temporarily, but with Paul Goodman’s extended leave due I knew my term would have to end on time. In practice for my secondment I either went to Oxford, or later on went on ‘fieldwork’ visits for my research, for two days per week. I later wrote a short paper on my experience of this period, which I called ‘It’s Jolly Good Being a Fellow’, available on my website.

Lots of aspects of the life in Oxford were pleasant and beguiling, including polite drinks parties at Pembroke and at St John’s (Pembroke a poor College, and St John’s a rich one) where I had good conversations with a PhD student in chemistry at Pembroke, doing something with ceramics that conduct electricity, and a Crown Court judge at St John’s who was baffled by ‘Equal Opportunities’ and what he called political correctness. He was an ex-army man, so I used the analogy of the topics you knew you shouldn’t discuss in the Mess: Sex, Money and Politics. It had always been ‘bad form’ to discuss these topics in the Mess, and nowadays it was bad form - i.e. discourteous - to use certain old fashioned terminology when referring to black people, women or people with disabilities etc. This argument seemed to carry weight, and I have found it useful to illustrate that one is not being oppressed by ‘thought police’ when exhorted to use new language, but it’s about establishing new standards of courtesy and consideration for others. (Plus a lot more than that, obviously.)

It was at this point in my career that, as I mentioned earlier, I now found that I needed to work through weekends regularly. In the short term, this enabled me to complete my visits to eleven different Probation areas, and codify information gleaned from a total of 739 case files by me in person – although even then it had to be entered onto an SPSS database by two postgraduate students at Oxford for me. I was issued with a licence for the SPSS software for one year, and I started work on preparing my paper just as the Fellowship was ending. There was a ‘Colloquium’ (posh word for conference) at Oxford in the December, to which Eithne was invited, and then suddenly my time in Oxford was over. I’m afraid that despite all the positive aspects to my time there, I also came away with some mixed feelings because of what I felt was the complacent sense of superiority, and affluent privilege, that permeated the academic life there alongside the genuinely high academic standards.

But I was pleased with my project, and I got suitable encouragement and support there at the time, so I was keen to write the thing up properly – which in fairly demanding circumstances at the time took me until February 1998! The published paper, *Increasing the Employability of Offenders: A Study of Probation Service Effectiveness*, can be found on my website.

### European ‘transnational’ work

My offender employment work in Berkshire and for ACOP led to a series of events and projects of a ‘transnational’ nature. In 1993 I was nominated by ACOP to ‘represent’ England & Wales at a ‘European Offender Employment Group’ meeting over three days in Edinburgh. Even with separate ‘representatives’ from Scotland and Northern Ireland the total Group was about twelve individuals, plus one or two support staff. This became my first experience of working with headphones and simultaneous interpretation, provided by a rota of EU-funded interpreters throughout. Can I remember anything specific I learned about our subject from that occasion? – not really.

What I can remember is the baffled looks on the faces of the delegates over the form that the very generous Scottish hospitality took. The Deputy Provost for Edinburgh welcomed everyone on the first night with a series of jokes about how they hated the English, and then we did a (genuinely excellent) ‘Ghost Walk’ in the December night – where we heard about a succession of grisly incidents where Edinburgh citizens had repeatedly done barbarous things to each other. On the final night a splendid dinner was laid on in a private dining room in the magnificent Caledonian Hotel, with haggis on the menu. After the first two courses had been cleared away, with no further announcement the door flew open and a full 24-carat version of ‘piping the haggis’ swung into action, with bagpiper in full regalia, the ode by Robbie Burns, and the waving around of the haggis on the end of a magnificent huge sword. The quality of the event was excellent, but the startled looks on the faces of my fellow delegates from other European countries were an absolute picture.

The other memory is more retrospective, and it’s about ‘preferred language’. That event was conducted in French and English only, and each delegate chose which one to use. On the Edinburgh occasion the ‘split’ was about 50/50 – the southern Europe delegates chose French, and the northern Europe delegates chose English. Within a few years the ‘split’ changed completely, and since about 1996 almost every delegate at any of these multi-national events – except the French themselves of course – has chosen English for preference.

My continuing ACOP duties, and the Oxford Fellowship, as well as attendance at these international conferences, led to further opportunities for me. The EU ran various transnational projects through its Leonardo Programme, and I became involved in two of these. For one of these, ‘TRYP’, I conducted a group interview of some inmates at HM YOI Huntercombe, and produced some input for my European partners. For the other, ‘KAMRA’, there was a series of mini-conferences in Vienna, Lisbon, Milan, Bremen and Leiden, all at weekends, before a major write-up by Walther Hammerschick, the Austrian leader of the project. I also later contributed to a different event as a speaker in Rome. In all these cases, the events were run at weekends, so the interference with my main work was marginal, although there was some ‘opportunity cost’, since often I would have been working in the office at the weekend otherwise.

Expenses were claimed from the relevant Leonardo Programme, and were reimbursed to Berkshire, together with the modest fee that was payable for the work I did. On many of these trips my wife Lesley came with me, and we could usually manage to spend the Sunday daytime in the relevant city having a break, before our evening flight home. We were always careful to pay separately ourselves for any expense incurred by Lesley.

In all these instances, except the Rome conference, I was mildly embarrassed by the fact that everything was conducted in English, as it was evidently becoming increasingly established as the default international language. My own language skills were nominal – politenesses only except for some French and Italian – but I was advantaged by my language. My partners were managing all their work in what was for them a foreign language.

I came away from all my ‘European’ experiences with very mixed feelings. On one level I thought it was absolutely terrific that we should be able to meet and learn from each other about what was going on, and how things were organised, in different parts of our continent. And it was good that we tried to draw together findings and lessons in order to promote improvement. But on another level I was not sure what it was actually possible in practice for these events to achieve. Many academic inputs, particularly from southern Europe, seemed to me to be long descriptions of activities, but lacking in analysis or explanation, and even our own KAMRA report seemed to me to be in the category of ‘Quite Interesting’, rather than potentially ‘game-changing’. But equally I’m not sure what more was feasibly achievable.

The Rome conference was a separate event – although it referenced the ‘TRYP’ project - for which I was invited in person in order to provide what they billed in the programme as an “anglosassone [Anglo-Saxon]” perspective, though I called it an English perspective. The day, 25 June 1999, also provided an entertaining study in cultural mismatch.

The event was in a first-floor room that could just about hold 50 people, all of whom except me and Lesley were Italian and had travelled from all parts of Italy. It was billed as a 9.30-1.00 timing. I had prepared extensively with a talk of just over half an hour, using 30 PowerPoint slides, all using graphics, which I had prepared in Italian, aided by a translator from our BPS contractor. As I always did, I arrived early to make sure everything was set up and working before the throng also arrived. We did some last minute editing of my slides because the interpreter the hosts had provided for me said that I’d been given the ‘wrong’ word for “offender” in the context I was using. However, by 9.30 hardly anyone else was there anyway.

Gradually, people drifted in, and immediately sought out coffee and embarked on animated conversations with fellow delegates. It was nearly 10.30 before the event actually started, and then there was a coffee break that began about 11.15 which went on for another 40 minutes or so. I was due on last before the 1.00pm finish with lunch, so I was getting quite concerned by now. For the whole period I, as the sole non-Italian delegate, had a ‘personal’ interpreter – a rather glamorous young woman who whispered in my ear for most of the morning, so that I had some idea of the preceding proceedings. (Lesley, who had trapped herself into being part of the audience, was not impressed…)

It was probably after 12.30 by the time I got started, and even then I was not overly worried because as always I had timed my piece, and I was confident that it would not go over 30 minutes. But I’d made the big mistake of forgetting that this time I was working with what’s called ‘consecutive interpretation’. It meant that after every sentence I had to pause, and my interpreter then put it into Italian, as best she could. For although my slides were in Italian my talk was not, and even though I’d tried to make it as ‘plain language’ as possible it was still not an easy job for my now-getting-rather-tired interpreter. I don’t think that there’s ever been any other occasion that I’ve overrun my slot, but this time it was getting past 1.30 when they asked me to stop.

They had seemed to quite enjoy the bit where I distributed the envelopes with the “This Won’t Cost You a Penny” coffee-mat / handout, with penny attached, inside, but clearly it didn’t matter how late you started you should be able to have your next cigarette break, and buffet lunch with wine, on time. With my business suit and name badge they found me hilariously ‘Anglo-Saxon’, while of course I found them entertainingly Mediterranean.

Later, as Chief Inspector, I was fortunate in being able to attend events run by the CEP (Confederation of European Probation) in Netherlands and in Lugano, Switzerland. Meanwhile, Inspectorate senior managers gained the chance not just to attend such events, but also undertake pieces of work to help develop Probation work in eastern European countries such as Romania, Bulgaria and Georgia. One of them, Alan MacDonald, furthermore gained a two-year secondment to develop Probation in Albania. Towards the end of his first year away, he organised a day conference there to promote the work he was doing within the various relevant Albanian organisations. He asked me to speak at it.

At first I was about to decline, as it clashed with Lesley’s birthday – but when I mentioned it she said she was quite keen on spending it visiting Tirana (us paying for her of course). A work commitment prevented her from flying out with me the day before, so she had quite a hairy journey out on a Hungarian airline with a very smart change in Budapest, but she arrived OK just after I had finished delivering my input. Meanwhile I had successfully hunted down and bought a birthday card in Albanian (birthday cards were not ‘mainstream’ in Albania, it seemed), and we had an enjoyable evening out in Tirana afterwards. This was 2011, and the city seemed to be largely a huge building site, in transformation into a modern city after its decades of isolation under Hoxha.

All my European activities felt worthwhile at the time, even though – with the exception of the Albanian visit - it was hard to identify anything tangible being achieved at the point they took place. My viewpoint was and is that, all being well, it all contributed to a very long-term path to a better future for Probation work and the wider justice system(s) across the continent. Since I am unable to demonstrate that that’s the case, this is more of a hope than a belief.

## Chapter 16: Diversity

This and the next chapter offer an opportunity to reflect on what’s changed – and perhaps what hasn’t – over 40-plus years in relation to a number of themes, both major and minor, though from my personal experience and perspective. ‘Diversity’ obviously covers a range of themes in itself. In the work context I have always as a manager found it important to make a clear distinction between ‘service delivery’ and ‘organisational development’. This was because I found that too often people focused on making detailed changes to the organisation – some of which were certainly necessary – yet often this was inadvertently at the cost of giving sufficient attention to changing the way we actually delivered the service. So although the first part of this chapter focuses on the organisational development aspect of Diversity, this shouldn’t distract from my underlying belief that it is only the first necessary step in the process, and that Diversity practice only becomes ‘Sufficient’ when it is applied to service delivery as well.

There was of course a personal journey that I had to make myself to reach this point. With my modest, but still relatively privileged, ethical family background I think I grew up with the idea of being open to other people and experiences, and the importance of trying to treat people ‘equally’. This was largely theoretical, because in my entire childhood in Cornwall and Bath I probably came across a person who was obviously of different racial descent, or with a disability, less than five times in total.

At my first school in Cornwall, at about the age of six, we had a black boy of a similar age, whom I assumed to be African, who could run faster than anyone else, and I remember thinking that this must be because he was used to “running away from lions in the jungle”. In Bath, when I was about nine, my mother had a woman from a Ugandan church stay with us for a few days, which seemed a pleasant and interesting experience. Later on, my mother was friendly with a Danish woman, whose children attended a local private school, though as it happened the rest of us didn’t greatly warm to her or her sons. These were memorable, because of course in every other respect my entire childhood was spent mixing only with ‘White British’ people, both adults and children – and probably about 99% of these were ‘White English’.

My secondary school was a boys-only grammar school. The effect of having virtually no contact with girls of a similar age until, fleetingly, during various Sixth Form events, was a definite handicap to my emotional growth, but there was no doubt in my mind that females were ‘different but equal’. The only disability I remember coming across at school, at any age, was a boy who arrived with a glass eye, which he could remove for our enjoyment on request. Behavioural or mental disorders were also largely outside my experience. The unusual aspect of our grammar school, for a grammar school (I realised afterwards in retrospect), was its ‘class’ make-up – most of my friends lived on council estates or comparable ‘poorer’ areas. Bath had so many fee-paying schools that many local ‘middle-class’ parents could afford to send their children to them. Most of the time I was mainly oblivious to supposed differences in class myself, but if I went to tea somewhere the white sliced bread and automatically-sweetened tea would suddenly make such contrasts noticeable to me. I gained more direct experience of ‘class’ differences later on when I worked first in a chocolate factory and then as a hospital cleaner in York after university.

York University itself opened me to fellow students of other nationalities – mainly American – but not many. And indeed when I went on to Leicester I’m not sure whether there were any BME (Black and/or Minority Ethnic) fellow students, certainly not among the 30+ Probation trainees. There may have been one or two in the 60+ social services cohort, and there was certainly a blind student among them – she was impressively determined, though I remember thinking that her job prospects were going to be very limited. Were there any BME officers in the Leicester Probation Office in 1974/5? – candidly, I don’t remember any. (I think that there may have been talk of “hoping” that such officers may come through soon.) On the other hand, I lived in the heart of Highfields, a part of the city which at that time was over 90% occupied by Gujarati-speaking people who had mainly arrived recently from East Africa.

I’m fairly sure, however, that the gender-split of my fellow students was broadly what we were advised was typical across the country at the time. As I understood it, female POs were just under 50% of the main grade across the country, except in London where they were by then just over 50%. However, in the higher grades they were very unrepresented indeed. This picture was broadly true for Wiltshire too when I arrived in 1975 – my Senior, Jay Wall, was the only female SPO out of the six for the county, as well as being the newest. When I left in 1983, with Jay having retired, Marjorie Ainley was the only female SPO out of the eight for the county.

I’ll follow through the gender-split theme in Probation’s organisational development at this point, as there’s a whole potential social study that could be made from it. In the 21st century the Probation world has become a clear female-majority body from top to bottom. On one level this is quite a major transformation from the 1970s, although on another level Probation at that time was arguably by then quite an ‘outlier’ compared with the other ‘social services’, and so it was perhaps bound to change this way in time.

In 1980 a slim but in my view invaluable book from NAPO, costing only £1, written by Owen Wells, summarised some research he had done under the title of ‘Promotion and the Woman Probation Officer’. A large number of POs who had applied for promotion to SPO had completed a questionnaire, and the aggregated results were, to me, fascinating. Contrary to what had been expected before the research started, there was no evidence of a prejudice against women by appointing panels; the same proportions of women and men who had applied for SPO posts were successful at the selection stage. There were indeed ‘horror stories’ of women in interviews being asked inappropriate questions etc, but the results in terms of the outcomes were proportionately OK. What Owen Wells highlighted was that many more men were applying in the first place – arguably odd, since they were only 50% of the main-grade POs.

Furthermore, in terms of the reasons given for applying for promotion, the female candidates gave far more “professional reasons” (Owen Wells) for making the applications. Male officers much more frequently mentioned improving their income to support their families, while female officers more frequently mentioned the ways they hoped to improve the service. Owen Wells went on to argue for a series of practical measures for encouraging women to apply for promotion, and of ‘pre-promotion courses’ for all potential candidates (I think). The aim was to achieve a 50/50 level of potentially able candidates submitting applications.

This made a big impact on me when I read it in 1982, as I was applying and failing to be appointed on repeated occasions at the time. It was particularly noticeable to me that women candidates were very much in the minority at interview, but if there was a woman candidate, or two, at the interview, then my experience was that a woman was appointed. I can’t be 100% sure, since I didn’t know all the candidates at every interview, but I think that of my 16 interviews for SPO, about ten were male-only shortlists, but of the others the first five produced a female ‘winner’, and the sixth was my own success in Gwent (a strange event itself, described earlier). The juxtaposition of my personal experience and what I was reading of Owen Wells led me to what was a very sobering train of thought well before my successful interview.

The first step in my train of thought was that on the face of it my personal experience would suggest that interview panels were strongly in favour of female candidates – I could easily have taken that view and decided that there was no point applying again. Second step: On the other hand, Owen Wells was showing, with evidence, that in terms of appointments made there was no disproportionality. Thirdly, therefore, I had to accept that if I was consistently failing then I was doing something wrong and needed to learn how to perform better in interviews. I realised that I couldn’t use the apparent ‘failings’ of the outside world as an excuse, and I must redouble my efforts. The final sobering thought, however, was my reflection that this whole process revealed to me a new subtle way in which disadvantaged groups could sometimes be additionally disadvantaged. If I’d been female, or black, or both, and had personally experienced the same series of ‘failures’, and also read the many stories of others who had had similar setbacks, I might well have decided that there was no point bothering any further, and given up (or turned to political campaigning instead). The fact that I had to face up to having no ‘external’ reason for my failure gave me the stimulus to work harder and try again, and therefore in a peculiar way actually ‘advantaged’ me compared with the black or female version of ‘me’ who might have given up.

That overall experience led me to be quite sensitive to the feelings of some of the people under me later who aspired to progress their careers, particularly if they were black or female. I couldn’t make things better for them if they’d had a setback, but I tried hard to help them think clearly about how these processes worked in reality (i.e. luck), and to draw the right lessons for their next step.

For this and other reasons I have never argued for ‘quotas’ but I have been a strong advocate of ‘targets’ within our staffing strategies, as I illustrated earlier. With Probation, it was clear to me that the internal demographics of our staff nationally would lead to the desired changes over time, and the ‘positive action’ we carried out was in order to hasten that already-inevitable process without lapsing into the damaging and unfair policy of ‘positive discrimination’.

While still on the subject of organisational development, my personal experience of BME staff remained almost non-existent until arriving in Berkshire in 1989. We had had none in Wiltshire during my whole time there, and in Gwent there was a “Black” officer in Newport when I arrived, a man from the Tiger Bay community in Cardiff, and in time he successfully transferred to the Cardiff office.

One of ‘my’ Newport officers was Jewish, and it was a shock to me to learn that her identity had led to a problem for her at her previous location elsewhere in Gwent. She told me that one of her cases there had been normally amenable with her in their regular contacts together until at some point he ‘discovered’ she was Jewish, refused to see her again and demanded a change of officer. What upset her was that her Senior agreed to give the man a change of Probation Officer – which she of course experienced as being very undermining of her. The irony struck me at the time, particularly knowing the Senior myself, that very probably he had acted in a mistaken view that he was ‘helping’ the officer, by taking the disagreeable “client” away from her. Often the ‘worst’ decisions have arisen from well-meaning intentions – frequently a case of poor thinking-through rather than malice or mischief. It is in these areas that Diversity training for managers as well as staff can be most helpful.

An important breakthrough in my own thinking came while I was still in Gwent. We were having a discussion in a car on our way back from a NAPO Branch meeting in Swansea, and I was struggling with why ‘white-on-black’ racial prejudice was necessarily ‘worse’ than ‘black-on-white’ prejudice. My colleague pointed out to me the connection with power differentials in society – it was the abuse of power that made racist behaviour so pernicious, even when it took the form of ‘jokes’. I found that enormously helpful in all my later thinking about what was relevant – and what was not – in promoting what we later came to call Diversity practice as a senior manager.

The Berkshire Probation Service of 1989 had a handful of qualified BME Probation Officers and quite a few other BME staff – but no managers. There were strong aspirations in terms of statements and policies of Equal Opportunities etc, but uncertainties and debates about how best to turn these aspirations into realities. In terms of organisational development the latest idea, implemented just after I arrived, was that staff application forms should have no titles or forenames, to make the person’s gender (and arguably sometimes the race) less obvious to those doing the shortlisting. It did little harm, but I couldn’t see that there was much point in it. In many cases it was often quickly obvious, from the school attended, or something in the statement, which gender (of the main two) the candidate was. In any case where a decision was marginal I was more likely to favour a female or BME candidate anyway. Furthermore, of course, no one had demonstrated that the problem was with shortlisting panels anyway. Finally, for the interview, letters had to go out discourteously addressed to (e.g.) “J Smith” and then at the interview itself we had to get from them their first name.

There was great excitement in 1990 when we appointed our first BME SPO, and a woman at that – Berkshire only had two females out of about 12 SPOs before that. Cherry Fletcher, a candidate from the West Midlands, came through entirely on merit on the day. But many things went wrong for her from when she started – of which by far the worst was the sudden death of her husband within the first few weeks of her arriving in post. But before that I as her line manager I had been very keen that we shouldn’t make a fanfare of her appointment, because I wanted this kind of event to be part of a ‘new normal’. However, unfortunately the announcement of “our first Black SPO” was made at a staff conference soon after the interview, and I think this set up an awkward mix of emotions among staff, especially the mistaken view that she must have been appointed for ‘political’ reasons rather than on merit. More amusing to me was the response of the Governor of the prison, for which post Cherry had been appointed. I had phoned him on the day to say we’d appointed a candidate from the West Midlands, and giving him her name (obviously). A few days later he phoned me in an agitated state to complain, “You didn’t tell me she was Black!” – but then, when I said it didn’t seem relevant to mention that, he couldn’t say why I should have told him that. In fairness to him, it would probably have been better for him to have heard it from me rather than from his staff – but I was driven by the idea that this was not something for us to make a fanfare about.

Also in fairness, the prison did their best to welcome and treat her properly as their SPO when she started, and were initially sympathetic to her bereavement. But I’m not sure that Cherry ever really recovered from her husband’s death, which was perhaps a key cause of her indifferent performance as an SPO – which in turn had the unfortunate and misdirected consequence that the cause of advancing BME staff was viewed by some less positively.

Fortunately, the appointment of a second female SPO to BPS, Rose Burgess from West Yorkshire, was viewed much more positively, while at senior management level we basked quietly with the feeling that our ‘target-based’ approach to advancing BME staff was tangibly succeeding: we were over our 11% target for the management group as a whole. We were to go back under our target when Rose successfully left the service to gain the more senior position of Manager of the Slough Youth Offending Team – however, that event only confirms that such targets should not be seen as organisational performance measures in their own right, but only as a means of indicating progress towards the strategic aim of achieving a broadly diverse staff group at every level across the sector.

BPS (Berkshire Probation Service) also supported our Black Staff support group, with which I liaised as the Assistant Chief who led on Equal Opportunities. This was helpful to me in seeing some things from the viewpoint of some of our BME staff. This was a time when there was acute sensitivity about language, and especially the word ‘Black’ – the consultant to the support group told me that it had a political definition, with a capital ‘B’, and was the appropriate label for all non-white ethnic groups. Nationally, many others disputed this viewpoint – and subsequently the term BME has become more widely accepted - but that was not the dominant view in Berkshire at the time.

It also meant that any use of the word ‘Black’ in any other context could be seen by some people as insensitive. Some even said that you shouldn’t say “Black coffee”, but later this subsided as in that instance Black is not being used pejoratively. However, I was genuinely mortified after I had spoken to an audience of invited community groups, with the aim of recruiting more volunteers, especially BME volunteers, and our Training Officer Kay Vanstone came up to me afterwards and whispered quietly to me “Don’t say Black mark, Andrew”. For I had indeed made some lighthearted comment that some particular action after the meeting was not compulsory so no one would “get a Black mark” for not doing it. It was a mere gaffe on my part, but I felt seriously mortified, even though it was a relatively trivial point and no one had visibly taken offence.

However, I had a further reflection on this event very shortly afterwards. My colleague Simon made a comparable gaffe when visiting our main Reading office. However, it seems that it was discussed for several days afterwards in that office, and then finally someone was delegated to see me as the Equal Opps Assistant Chief to get me to take my colleague to task. I duly spoke with Simon, who was duly as mortified as I had been. I reflected that I was sad for Simon, that his gaffe had unnecessarily become almost a major incident in the life of BPS, while mine had rightly been blown over, and learned from, in less than a minute. I was grateful to Kay.

Meanwhile, Berkshire Probation Service continued to look male-dominated for most of the 1990s, which caused quite some disquiet among staff, who were aware that women were breaking through into Senior and Assistant Chief posts in some numbers across most of the country during this period. But my own appointment as Assistant Chief in 1989, followed by Paul Goodman’s arrival in 1991, and especially Simon Noble’s appointment in 1993/4, confirmed an impression that women weren’t wanted at our level. As I mentioned earlier, Simon was unlucky in that a female candidate, one I knew well and viewed highly, simply failed badly at the interview stage, and Simon succeeded on merit on the day – but many people couldn’t give him that credit.

At frontline management level, we gained some female appointments with some ‘service development’ managers (my division at the time), but we were into the latter 1990s before a couple more women SPOs came through. Karen was relatively young and brash – worryingly so to some – but although a challenge to manage she proved very good; the other, Dorothy, was not that far from retirement, but the story she told me of her first year as a Probation Officer was a helpful reminder of older attitudes. Her (male) Senior had pointed to two of her fellow first-year officers, and commented that they were future high flyers (in fairness to him, his prediction was proven correct) – but he’d added, “You’ll do well to get through your first year…” Not the encouragement she’d been hoping for. As a Senior herself, Dorothy was both popular and effective.

As previously covered, the senior management team was transformed during 1998, with me replacing Malcolm as Chief, and Susan Brooks arriving to replace Paul Goodman, and Pip Coker arriving to replace me. During my time as Chief most of the SPO-level appointments we made were female – on merit - and BPS’s staff and management profile looked quite ‘normal’ – possibly ‘advanced’ – by 2001. But I’d say this happened through the existing national demographic gradually working its way through ‘naturally’, albeit encouraged by a positive spirit established by formal policies and informal behaviours.

From 2001 onwards, both in HMI Probation and in our wider host Departments the progression of women into the most senior management positions became quite normal in my view. There were some residual issues with individual salaries, which I fought hard to rectify, sadly unsuccessfully. These issues were caused not by differential salary scales for men and women – these had ceased many years previously – but by the protection of existing salary levels that men were more likely than women to have previously gained through longer and less interrupted periods of continuous service.

There was still a need, rightly, to take action to promote the advancement of BME candidates to the higher levels of public service, and on a couple of occasions I hosted such a Probation senior manager for a week to offer a taster of ‘management life’ at my level. The problem, as ever, when you take these ‘positive actions’, with the very best of intentions, is that if and when such a candidate comes through into a senior post, it creates a seed of doubt whether they have done so on merit – which can be very unfair on them. Not every person who achieves a senior position, whether white or BME, necessarily turns out to do that job particularly well. It’s been unfortunate and unfair when the shortcomings of an individual BME senior person have been seen as a reason not to support the overall cause – my optimistic view is that well into the 21st century we have now generally moved beyond that viewpoint.

Still on the subject of organisational development, I would have to acknowledge that the realities of what we now call LGBT issues were almost completely outside my immediate experience before 1989. I was broadly aware of the subject in general, and knew through NAPO that there were of course gay probation staff, but I wasn’t conscious of knowing any personally. I always saw it as a private matter, for individual ‘choice’, and one that I knew that many people preferred to keep to themselves. So I saw other people’s ‘preferences’ as something that was none of my business – unless they were to take the initiative and tell me, which no one did. Occasionally, the thought might cross my mind briefly that a particular individual – colleague or not – might be gay. But as the matter was ‘none of my business’ I’d dismiss the thought. As far as I was aware at the time, it would make no difference to how I would interact with them, so there was nothing further to be said or done. I certainly believed in their right to equal treatment in the workplace and elsewhere, and was unhappy about ‘Section 28’ when it came in, but I was not aware of any implications for me or my work in practice before I arrived in Berkshire.

In this respect BPS gave me many new experiences. It was open information that one of my new Assistant Chief colleagues, Alan Nicholson, aged 50+, lived with his partner Jim in Tilehurst, and indeed I lodged with them for about a month before moving house myself. I learned that they experienced periodic anonymous homophobic abuse from some of the neighbouring population. In time it became clear to me that a number of our other Probation staff were open about being gay – one became SPO manager of one of our hostels, and later at least two of our newly promoted female SPOs were gay.

Meanwhile another PO experienced quite substantial homophobic abuse from a BME student he was supervising on placement! This led to an earnest and difficult meeting that I convened with the pair and their representatives – the NAPO representative stayed very quiet, seemingly fearful of looking to be ‘against’ either the gay supervisor or the BME student. Once we had established that there was no basis for any allegation of racism by the supervisor, it was not difficult to back him in seeking to change the student’s homophobic behaviour, though the details of what happened after that now escape me.

The arrival of Susan Brooks and Pip Coker in 1998 added a further dimension since they were each in same-sex relationships, albeit they each took very different approaches to handling this point in public. While it was not a secret, for Susan it was a low-key matter when she came to introduce the matter by saying “I have a friend called Julia”. In contrast, Pip introduced the subject to me on her first day in the job by saying “Let’s be clear – I’m a dyke”. By the time I left Berkshire in 2001 I felt I’d experienced a whole new world of outlooks.

In the Inspectorate I felt that the subject of lesbian and gay staff became almost similarly part of a ‘new normality’, and our attention when actively promoting Diversity was primarily on race – for the sound reason that in service delivery terms this was the aspect that was the biggest problem for the Criminal Justice system as a whole. But this still included a lot of discussion about how we handled ‘race’ within the Inspectorate too. So we were brought up short when Zach, our office manager in the Manchester office startled us by saying, “Look, I’m a gay Paki, and I think you spend far too much time banging on about race and stuff the whole time.” The point that registered with me was that already my long-term hope that a time would come in the future when racial differences – and other Diversity differences - would seem no more remarkable than noting whether someone was left-handed or right-handed. Zach’s observation, and the way he said it, led me to think that perhaps we were starting to move towards arriving at that position. We’ll see!

I have little to add on the Transgender or Bisexual ends of the spectrum. If any staff I ever knew were on the Transgender spectrum I was unaware of it; yes, I was aware that some staff had had relationships with both men and women, but this point in itself never gave me anything additional I needed to manage.

As for disability, my main experience in practice has been of working with Adrian Scaife, our second Information Systems Manager in Berkshire, whom we had appointed as the deputy manager a year or so earlier. He had very impaired use of his legs since birth, and our Probation Headquarters office was highly unsuitable for someone with such a disability. He decided to take up our offer of appointment by using his sticks to get in and around our office, rather than his wheelchair, and he stuck with it. Later he got transferred into working on Home Office and then MoJ IT systems – the London building accommodated his wheelchair better than we had been able to, and he was allocated a parking space for his car to commute from Reading too – a credit to the Civil Service.

With the Home Office and MoJ, one detail we had to accommodate was the obligation to interview any candidate who applied for a post such as HM Inspector, if they declared a disability and met the minimum requirements for the post. Since we didn’t want to get into disputes over meeting the minimum requirements we allowed slots for such interviews, and fortunately in reality this didn’t give us too much of a problem. At least once the individual simply didn’t show up, and I suspected that we were just being ‘tested’. There was also the ‘requirement’ for a 3% quota of people with disabilities, that couldn’t work in practice for a range of reasons. Overall, although I accept the good intentions, I’m not sure that these statutory requirements and quotas are the best way forward.

Ultimately, the idea is that a strong Diverse organisation will be better equipped to provide an effective service fairly to the Diverse population that it is there to serve. To this end, organisational development is ‘necessary but not sufficient’, and effective Diversity practice only becomes ‘sufficient’ when it can be shown to be applying to service delivery too. By that criterion, in my early years in the job my own original good intentions were probably ‘insufficient’.

Of course any opportunity I had to do this work well was very limited. In Leicester I was allocated a supposed voluntary after-care case of a young man of Asian descent who had served a prison sentence for drug dealing. I visited him on his day of release in what turned out to be his splendid family home in Glenfield, and it was quite clear that my services were not required. I wrote a Court report on a young BME man in which I cautiously thought that Probation might be appropriate but in discussion with my supervisor the reasons seemed insufficient and so I went for a fine instead. I don’t remember any other BME cases, and I don’t remember being particularly surprised that the large and growing population in Leicester of people from East Africa of south Asian descent were rarely appearing then as potential Probation “clients”.

In Swindon, early on I had a Probation Order case of a young man from a Sikh family, whom I’m sure I aimed to treat just the same as everyone else. So it may have been my own shortcomings as much as the diffidence of him and his family that meant that we all stayed at arm’s length from each other – he completed satisfactorily and didn’t reoffend, but my assumption is that he just ‘grew out of crime’ as many young people do.

I was sad at the time that one of the two Swindon cases I can now remember taking back to Court for breach action was a young man of Caribbean descent. He wasn’t stroppy, but he just repeatedly failed to respond to letters, even those hand-delivered by me, when he just ‘drifted away’ from seeing me after a couple of early interviews. Whether a ‘later me’ might have done any better in those early contacts I don’t know, but at the time his chronic non-response left me feeling that I had no choice but to serve a summons on him – ironically he was at home when I called with this! Fortunately, our Court took the view that the original offence had not merited a custodial sentence anyway, so they only imposed a fine and discharged the Order – which was OK with me.

Female cases were a different matter. Broadly speaking, they have tended to represent around 10% of Probation cases, and my own experience has been consistent with that. I would say that the traditional informal view of Probation and other criminal justice staff in the 1970s was that women were treated more gently than men by the criminal justice system as a general rule, and that often Probation Orders were made as a ‘welfare measure’ in many cases. However, articles started to appear in the late 1970s arguing that women were often treated more harshly in reality. The argument, which had some merit with certain types of cases, was that women offenders were sometimes seen as particularly ‘unnatural’ (for a woman) and could be punished accordingly. Although I didn’t buy the whole argument, these articles did get me thinking more seriously about the ways I/we should be treating female offenders in a way that was ‘different but still equal’. One obvious example was that case, mentioned earlier, where despite my instinctive desire to treat all cases the same, I ‘allowed’ a female new probationer not to have to attend the system of induction groups for new probationers that we had only just established.

The two custodial institutions I then worked at were both all-male. On the other hand they had significant, if still small, minorities of BME cases – possibly small because young BME inmates were less likely to be categorised in the prison system as suitable for open conditions. In any event, no individual cases come to mind from those years, even though I was vaguely aware that the prison staff at Usk found some of the young BME men from Wolverhampton some of the more difficult individuals to manage.

Newport, as a port town, had some interesting racial minorities in the general population, but this didn’t make a big impact on our Probation case numbers. I was increasingly aware that nationally there was growing concern that BME offenders were being treated disproportionately harshly. Most of our officers were also conscious of this. However, with our own BME case numbers being very low, it wasn’t easy to see what changes to our own practice were either necessary or possible.

Berkshire was quite different, and I had to learn a lot quickly there. Reading had a BME population, predominantly of Caribbean descent, of about 11-13% of the general population, while Slough had over 25%, who were predominantly of south Asian descent. Furthermore, during the 1990s it became apparent to me that whereas people of south Asian descent had previously been noticeably ‘under-represented’ in the CJS, this was now changing. People of Caribbean descent had been ‘over-represented’ in the system, and this was continuing. We made this a strong element in our training for magistrates during the period leading up to implementing the 1991 Criminal Justice Act (October 1992).

BPS also ran its own Equal Opportunities Advisory Group (EOG) - its own staff plus an external consultant Dr Ansari – and a Community Advisory Group on Race Issues (CAGRI), in which representatives from various community groups in Reading and Slough attended quarterly meetings to offer advice about how to improve our engagement with people of various ethnic origins. At some point, maybe 1992, Equal Opps became part of my Assistant Chief responsibilities, and I tried to work out what I wanted these and other initiatives to achieve.

Our CAGRI representatives from Slough were particularly keen on there being leaflets about BPS written in certain south Asian languages. I worried about how these would ever be distributed, until I came up with the idea that we should make the next issue of our existing information leaflet a single edition in a multi-lingual format. The additional benefit of this was that it communicated to all readers that we operated in a multi-racial community. Yes, it made the leaflet itself a little bulky – it was in four languages, selected as advised through CAGRI - but it prevented the problem of finding the right leaflet when a particular user of a different language might actually need it. Overall, I’ve no illusions that this made a big difference to the outside world – I don’t think it did - but it was not a bad ‘message’ for us to be sending out at the time.

As ever, in the EOG our zealous staff sought more ways of influencing or even constraining management decisions, focusing mainly on organisational matters, and in particular wanted us to appoint a full-time ‘EO manager’, as a number of other local Probation Services – usually larger ones - had done at the time. On my part, I couldn’t see there was proper work for either a full or part-time ‘manager’ for Berkshire, and furthermore I thought we should retain the responsibility for the subject at senior management level, rather than deflect it ‘down the line’ – a criticism often levelled where this had happened. When I became Chief I continued to chair the EOG, which in a way evidenced that I was serious in my assertion. I also started a Gender Issues Group, in order to stimulate more focus on practice issues, female offenders and also ‘masculinity’ issues for some male offending, but I don’t recall being successful in this leading to any practical outcome. NB at that time we called it ADP (“anti-discriminatory practice”) – “Diversity” came later. There was one item of this practice that I did with the EOG that I was pleased with, however, which is covered further below.

Previous to that piece of work, the early 1990s saw a massive dispute nationally about the “ethnic monitoring” of Probation cases (even calling it “ethnic monitoring” was part of the dispute). Everyone agreed that some monitoring was necessary so that we could all track what was going well and what wasn’t with various cohorts of offenders, and how we could therefore improve – the problem was entirely over how that should be carried out. The Prison Service immediately carried out what they were required to do, and classified all new cases into the categories employed in the national 1991 census. But these categories were imperfect, and objected to by some, in ways that are too detailed for me to recount here, and my recollections of the details are now hazy anyway. Viewpoints were adopted and defended vigorously, so various attempts to ‘compromise’ failed, and for a long time Probation nationally had extremely patchy records of offenders’ ethnic origin or racial identity.

By the time I became Chief a system had been finally agreed nationally, although it was somewhat cumbersome in incorporating elements of more than one system. But at least it was possible to make it consistent with what would be the imminent 2001 national census categories – as best as I can recall. The important thing for me was that recording this status for each of our reports and cases was a necessary element to promoting good practice and I wanted to see it carried out.

The most tangible example I can remember of making good use of the monitoring system concerned Court reports on female BME cases. Analysis of all the reports BPS had completed over the previous year or two showed that a higher percentage of our female BME cases had ended up with custodial sentences compared with the sample as a whole, while the percentage for the male BME cases had in fact been in line with the overall sample. However, the female BME cases totalled just about 13 cases in all, so there only needed to be about two ‘harsh’ cases to push this sample well out of line in percentage terms. The obvious answer was therefore for me to have these 13 or so reports retrieved and copied, and then I and the rest of the Equal Opportunities Advisory Group (EOG) read them all through to see what we thought.

Even the most zealous members of the EOG found it hard to identify where any of the individual officers could have done anything differently and better. We all had one or two tentative observations about possible improvements, but there were no ‘smoking guns’ of bad practice – which was at least a reassuring finding in itself. Nationally, at the time the problem of females from Africa and elsewhere being used by others as ‘drug mules’ – and then getting long deterrent prison sentences - was a significant cause of why BME females were strongly ‘over-represented’ in the prison population nationally. None of our cases was directly in that category, but the offences of a few of our sample were in that category of seriousness.

I was pleased with the exercise, in that it demonstrated to the EOG that we were taking the service delivery aspect of “ADP” (Diversity) seriously, and indeed that they could help with that. It could have revealed some defective practice that needed modifying, and it didn’t do that, which was at least reassuring. And it encouraged my view that ethnic monitoring was not just a bureaucratic requirement or a theoretical benefit, but it could be used for practical benefit. In particular it offers the opportunity, through what is called by some ‘segmented’ reporting, to highlight any area where different ethnic groups might be receiving disproportionate treatment at some point in the system.

This was something that I would take into the Inspectorate, alongside other efforts to promote good Diversity practice. All the Inspection staff were very keen to ensure that we should be looking for alertness to a wide range of Diversity issues, and a number of detailed questions were included in our case inspection ‘tools’. My view about these was and is mixed; it was better to include them than not, but detailed questions on process in this and other aspects of case management have a limited value only. It was at least as important to demonstrate the potential benefits that could be gained when ethnic monitoring data is collected and deployed.

I therefore supported all efforts by the MoJ to get this implemented in reality in every Probation area, and followed this up with illustrating in an Annual Report and in an aggregated Inspection Findings report how ‘segmented’ performance reports can provide evidence as to whether or not any particular group is being under or over-represented in any particular outcome.

My personal assessment in 2011, when I retired, of how Probation had done with the Diversity agenda over the previous 40 years, was and is that relative to almost any other public service organisation Probation overall had done extremely well, often in a pioneering role. It should be said, in my view, that Napo was a leading instigator of the changes in policies and practices, from the 1970s onwards, although managements took up the agenda in the 1980s with some enthusiasm too in my experience. Obviously some specific criticisms can be made, especially over the ethnic monitoring dispute of the 1990s, when a more pragmatic approach might have kept the progress moving forward, but in the long view the progress has been very good. Within the organisation, the transformation has been largely very positive – if anything the problem now is a slight shortage of male practitioners. In terms of service delivery, although staff still rightly seek to avoid complacency, the overall picture is that in terms of how Probation treats the individuals it works with, there is little evidence of disproportionate outcomes for any individual groups. Probation should continue to avoid complacency, but overall it has done well so far.

My own contribution to all this? Candidly, I don’t think I’ve been able to bring much from my personal practice experience, compared with many other people more skilled than I am, but I’ve made some decent efforts as a senior manager. Despite my desire to move the service delivery aspect on further, I probably did slightly better in reality with the organisational development aspect, notably taking a positive role with the expansion of many more women into management – though that’s for them to judge, of course.

## Chapter 17: Miscellany: Smoking, ICT, Money, Trade Unions, and more

For this chapter I have assembled a Miscellany of themes covering some of the ‘other’ aspects of the working life I’ve experienced or witnessed during its course. Mostly, it is a case of noting “My, haven’t things changed over the course of 40-plus years!”…

I start with Smoking (at work), and move on to Clothes, Court Reports, ICT, Money, Trade Unions, Other Equipment and Health & Safety: Personal Safety.

### Smoking:

*“Officers must not forbid clients to smoke in their office”*

This instruction, in writing, from our Chief Probation Officer in Wiltshire in about 1976/7 will seem particularly anachronistic now. Even at the time it seemed fairly remarkable, and it is a minor regret of mine that I never retained a copy of that ‘Gold Circular’ for posterity.

However, typically of Lawrence Frayne, there was a strong honourable motive behind his thinking. His experience had been – as indeed most Probation Officers quickly learned at the time – that a high proportion of the people we supervised (“clients” as they were often designated) were smokers, especially those who had been to prison. Lawrence was a non-smoker himself, but he felt very strongly that a key aspect of our daily work as a PO was that whoever we were interviewing should be put at ease. He felt that an important part of putting someone at ease was to permit them to smoke. He issued this instruction, and its reasoning, on one of his Gold Circulars (these were the Chief’s periodic instructions and were duplicated onto bright yellow paper, one for each officer, two or three times a month) when he heard that some POs had taken the view that they didn’t want cigarette smoke in their personal workspace.

For of course we all each had our own room in those days, and I don’t underestimate what a valuable asset this was for our daily work, as well as a privilege. Personally, I had smoked at one time, and had not transformed into a zealous ‘anti-smoker’ afterwards, and I was quite relaxed about “clients” smoking while we talked in my office. However, I am also a lifelong asthmatic and hated cigarette smoke as a child, so I was a little taken aback that some of my more sensitive non-smoking colleagues were being given this instruction.

In prisons, in my experience at the time, everyone seemed to smoke everywhere just about all the time, so the standard-issue little aluminium ashtrays were ubiquitous, and the interviewing rooms were particularly smoky. This was because although a prisoner could not be given tobacco by a visitor to take away after the visit, he/she was allowed to smoke during the visit itself whatever the visitor ‘shared’ with him/her. Almost all smoking by prisoners was of handrolled cigarettes of loose tobacco; on a rare occasion when I brought in an ounce of Old Holborn (particularly strong) for a particular earnest discussion with one particular prisoner the man got through virtually the whole pack during our interview.

Nevertheless, expectations in the wider world were changing, a little, and when I moved to the Newport office in 1987 I found that most officers didn’t smoke – at least not in the office – and some of the younger ones had no compunction about forbidding their interviewees to smoke in their office. Yet it was still quite an innovation for Colin and I as SPOs to forbid smoking in shared offices, such as in the front office where the clerical staff worked.

Therefore, having done this, it created a real dilemma when we had to decide about the new tea-room in the basement. Non-smoking officers wanted this to be non-smoking, while clerical staff who were now not allowed to smoke in their shared ‘front office’ wanted somewhere in their break where they would be allowed. Both Colin and I took the view that smoking should therefore be permissible in the tea-room, since the officers who wanted to be smoke-free already had their own smoke-free areas, in their own offices. But this was not well received by the non-smoking clerical staff, of course. In hindsight, considering how the culture of smoking has changed so radically nationally and even internationally since the turn of the century our decision on that occasion now looks very misguided.

We felt that the POs had the option of retreating to their own smoke free offices, and that it was unreasonable to deny other staff access to somewhere indoors where they could smoke. When watching smokers from nearby offices huddling in street doorways etc from the late 1990s onwards – and outside pubs and restaurants since 2007 - I have mused about how expectations and norms have changed since that ‘considerate’ ruling made in the 1980s by Colin and me.

The expectations about having a smoke-free environment while actually working had at least advanced by 1987, compared with that earlier experience when I was a trainee in 1974/5, with seven sharing a room, and at least four or five of us were smokers, and cheerfully shared cigarettes throughout the day – and I had been part of that. Life had hitherto taught me that non-smokers in effect deferred to smokers – at University it had been commonplace for some tutors as well as some students to smoke during seminars. It was just something that non-smokers had had to put up with – as I did at the time, whether I was in a ‘smoking’ phase of my life or not.

From 1989 onwards, in Berkshire Probation Service (BPS) headquarters office, the trend against smoking in the workplace continued. One ACPO smoked the occasional small cigar in his office, and there were only two or three other staff (of about 30) who were smokers. The bigger problem was that we hosted the training unit, so we had many staff visiting from across the county. My fallible memory suggests to me that in my early Berkshire days the participants of each meeting or training event might have been empowered to decide whether smoking was permitted during their meeting. But in any case a decision soon came that all the shared areas in the building, including the training unit, would be a permanently non-smoking area – with the exception of the smaller of the two training rooms. This small meeting room could be booked for events where smoking was permitted, and it could also be used for smoking breaks from the main room if available.

Unsurprisingly (in retrospect) the effect of this was that the small room became unusable for anything except smoking. No one, not even most smokers, would book this room for any working purpose because of the entrenched smell of stale tobacco. We banned smoking in the whole building from then on, and gave that small room a deep clean. Many other offices in Reading town centre were doing the same around this time, and it became a common sight to see people huddled in the rain having a smoke in the street or alleyway before work, or when on a break. By this time, we had only two staff members in total in HQ who smoked, the Chief’s secretary and one IT worker, and they developed a ‘smoking’ relationship, having a cigarette together in the alleyway outside two or three times a day. When the IT worker got pregnant, and gave up smoking for her confinement, she still went outside for each break with the secretary, often in the pouring rain - !! - to keep their friendly relationship going.

In my Inspectorate days the modern ethic had by then arrived in terms of not smoking in or even just outside the workplace, and few smoked anyway. There were one or two nicotine addicts who needed a ‘break to go outside for ten minutes’ every other hour or so, and we tried to remember to ensure that suitable breaks for that purpose were included in certain long meetings. Until the general nationwide smoking ban from 2006/7 we might also see a colleague smoke with a drink after work, especially when out on inspections, but after the ban that colleague would be “just popping out” for a few minutes half way through a drink. Vaping with e-cigs had not got seriously started by the time I retired.

### Clothes:

*“You don’t want to be like a vicar who wears motorbike leathers”*

I’ve mentioned already that I wore a (smartish) blue pullover rather than a suit to my interview to become a Trainee PO. I think I may have telephoned Mr Black, the York SPO, afterwards to tell him that I’d been accepted despite not wearing the recommended suit. For many years afterwards I engaged in a steadily losing battle against convention and expectations, reflecting either an increasingly realistic perspective on my part, or a loss of principle – take your pick.

In 1973 I had been used to wearing jeans and tee-shirts, plus woollies in winter, for a few years, and wore Levi’s corduroys for ‘best’, with a tweed jacket. My then wife Helen made me a white shirt to wear for my first placement in Leicester, and I think I had a broad brown corduroy tie, for use ‘in case of need’. What I can’t remember is whether I actually wore the tie during that first three-week observational placement. What I do remember is that soon after I voiced to my tutor at some point my view that it shouldn’t be necessary to wear a tie to do a good job as a Probation Officer. Suddenly this became an Issue with a capital ‘I’, and I was asked to see two other more senior members of staff, one of whom was John Haines I think (later of CCETSW, and later still the Deputy Chief Inspector of Probation). I was counselled quite sternly that trying to dress down in an effort to be alongside the ‘client’ was ill-advised: “You don’t want to be like a vicar who wears motorbike leathers in order to show how trendy he is.”

I found this quite unhelpful, as I certainly wasn’t trying to impress anyone else. It wasn’t a big Issue for me, just a train of thought that people shouldn’t be judged by their clothes, and for me that meant that I’d rather not wear a tie. So this big question mark hung over me until January 1974 and I started my next placement with John Kay in Leicester City. At my first meeting with him he just said to me, “I don’t think that what you wear matters too much – except in Court, where it might affect your credibility in the eyes of the magistrates or Judge, and you wouldn’t want that to disadvantage your client.” That made immediate sense to me, and I agreed I’d wear a tie in Court, and an open collar the rest of the time. The big Issue was over in a trice.

I maintained this approach for most of my working days right through to the end of my time in Swindon in 1981. Although most of my early Swindon male colleagues wore ties, they sometimes joked as I put my tie on to go to Court that they could remember a time when there was a single ‘office tie’ that was kept in the general office for anyone to use when needed, alongside the ‘office hat’ for female officers. Whether this time had ever really existed I don’t know, but it was part of some colleagues’ collective mythological past.

Formal interviews were, however, a different thing. As I’ve also mentioned already, I hired a suit from Moss Bros in Leicester for my Wiltshire interview in 1975, and not until two years later did I buy a suit for myself – a very 1970s stylish brown tweed suit – for my 1977 wedding (second marriage). I bought another suit after joining a Rotary Club in 1979, and these two saw me through the interviews I had from 1980 to 1983. I do also remember that for some reason – mainly as a novelty-value experience I think – I once wore my tweed suit to a home visit to a well-to-do home one evening to interview a juvenile defendant and his middle-class parents for a Court report. They did look startled, and also seemed to treat me with some deference, but overall this didn’t cause me to think that I should change my normal practice.

Most of the colleagues of around my age, in Swindon or elsewhere, wore fairly informal clothes too, and often without a tie, as far as I can recall. A few wore blue jeans to work, though I always took the view that blue jeans were an informality-step-too-far – not easy to explain why. Women colleagues were similarly informal. I do remember that at one NAPO conference I went to the official welcoming reception by the local Mayor, and I was like most of my colleagues in full union informality, including blue jeans (as I didn’t consider myself to be on duty), and it suddenly occurred to me that to the Mayor and his corporate delegation we must look like an absolute shower. But it was our union conference, and I felt that I should still be able to wear what I wanted to it – yet a seed of doubt had been sown.

When I moved to HMP Erlestoke I decided that I would wear a tie all the time when on site, because I saw it as a mutual-respect point between me and the Prison Officers – they were all required to wear a tie as part of their uniform, so although their full uniform was not required of me, it somehow seemed to me to be respectful of them that if they had to wear a tie then I should as well. I wanted them to respect the job that I did, and I wanted to show that in return I respected the job that they did. By the time I came out of Usk at the end of 1986 I’d been wearing a tie on working days for over five years, and it didn’t seem much of an issue any more. In Newport I think I wore a tie most of the time, but I’m not sure now. Informality was still the rule by most colleagues.

I know that when appointed Assistant Chief I decided I’d have to wear a tie all the time at work, for the credibility of the role. My logic was undermined when Paul Goodman arrived as a colleague ACPO in 1991, as he often forwent a tie, yet retained very high credibility both inside and outside the Service. But by this time my habit was established, together with a transition from sometimes still wearing corduroy trousers (smarter than Levi’s now) to work, to always wearing a suit, which I did from 1990 onwards.

I was in a suit, and increasingly with an unfailingly clear white shirt and plain tie, for the last twenty years of my working life, as I moved to the idea that I wanted my clothes to be the least interesting part of what I had to offer. This wasn’t all down to ‘Yes Minister’, but it did resonate with me when they did the scene where when planning a TV broadcast the PR adviser tells Hacker to wear his conservative outfit if he’s going to announce something radical, and a jazzy distracting outfit if he’s got nothing of substance to say. In this way I completed my transition as a dresser from perceived rebel to arch-conservative.

### Court Reports: A sacred cow

*“You’ve just witnessed the slaying of a sacred cow”*

Court reports were a major aspect of the work of almost all Probation Officers for Probation’s first 100 years. I’ve given them this generic title, since they have had various names: Probation Reports (sometimes delivered orally), Social Enquiry Reports, Social Inquiry Reports (SIRs), Pre-Sentence Reports(PSRs), and then various recent labels such as Fast or Standard Delivery reports. For most of my career they were SIRs and then PSRs – “PSR” being the most apposite name for them in my view.

My own training came at the time when a controversy about whether there should (almost) always be a “recommendation” to the Court had been mainly settled in favour of making recommendations. Further discussions about the role and purpose of SIRs continued to recur regularly – notably about whether it was ever ‘acceptable’ to recommend a custodial sentence, or alternatively whether it was always good practice to recommend a non-custodial sentence. I remember being impressed by an article by Peter Raynor, ‘Is There Any Sense in Social Inquiry Reports?’ in the late 1970s that gave a useful overview of what these were for, and described how I too thought they should be written.

I’ll make the additional observation here that in my own experience – and therefore opinion – Court reports were often a key source of job satisfaction. Success over time, with a case, is when ‘nothing happens’ – i.e. the individual doesn’t reoffend – so there isn’t a particular moment in time when one might get the sense of satisfaction from that job being done well. (If you get it by meeting them in the street two years later and they’re doing well, it’s still two years after the event.) But a report is a tangible piece of work; there’s the sense of completion when you sign it off, and there’s an additional sense of reward if the Court goes with what you hoped for, especially if that was against the odds.

With the Criminal Justice Act 1991 SIRs were changed to PSRs, and, among other changes, “recommendations” became “proposals”. A whole book could easily be written about the various ins and outs of all these various Court reports over the years, and their controversies, which might even still be of great interest to all the practitioners, managers and academics who were involved with all those debates over those years – but this isn’t it.

Instead, I am here going to focus on just one aspect of their significance in the Probation world as I experienced it. In doing so, I should emphasise that I always considered that there was an important purpose for these reports to fulfil, and a particular skill needed to carry it out. Yet my argument here is that, unfortunately, with our constant desire to raise and then safeguard the role and status of our Court Reports, over time ‘we’ overplayed our hand in my opinion and inadvertently made them into a sacred cow.

This tendency was exemplified by the pervasive culture in Probation from c1960-2000 that was strongly resistant to any externally-imposed changes being made to the way we did our Court reports. I was outraged if, for some exceptional reason, I was given less than three weeks to do a report in Swindon. This was despite the fact that before long I found I could easily do them in less than a fortnight. So when I noticed that colleagues in other areas felt that anything less than *four* weeks was unjustified I did start to have some doubts about the validity of the ‘principle’ we were fighting for. If the defendant was being remanded in custody it was also hard to make the case that three weeks was necessary ‘for Probation’s convenience’ if two weeks would be less harsh for the defendant. (Though in fairness to us, it wasn’t always easy to get an appointment at the local prison within a short timescale.)

Although the detail of remand practices varied a little across the country, Courts tended to accommodate Probation requests for three or even four weeks as the standard period – much in the same way that they accommodated solicitors’ adjournment requests - until the pressure from Government to “speed up justice” arrived in the 1990s. I’m generalising now, but overall the option of ‘streamlining the more straightforward cases’ as a way of helping to speed Court processes was largely resisted by the Probation world, and instead the sanctity of the format, the remand period and the autonomy of how we did these reports was for the time being safeguarded.

At the same time there was another peculiar pattern emerging in many locations across the country, although this was by no means universal, and this concerned the way in which reports were being written. In what I put down to an earnest desire to avoid “discriminatory language” many officers wrote reports that were frankly simple descriptions of the facts as already known and also of what the defendant told them – such reports were free of any explanation, assessment or opinion, and therefore free of any ‘added value’ to the Court. I later saw many of these in various locations in my first two years as an HM Inspector – so I am not making this up.

In my previous role as Chief Probation Officer I had had concerns that some of our Berkshire officers were not attempting to offer explanations, which was why at that point I pursued the drastic and initially unpopular solution of prescribing a ‘sentence completion’ format for Berkshire’s Court reports, which obliged officers to offer opinions, and explain them, as I described earlier. After that momentous County Managers’ meeting, in which I unusually allowed the agenda item to overrun in order to see a proper discussion through, and then press through my decision, two of the managers approached me after the meeting eventually ended. “What on earth was that all about?” they asked, as these were two of the managers present from a ‘non-Probation’ background. It was in that moment, as I became sharply aware of why the discussion was so obviously highly controversial to ‘Probation people’, and yet apparently unremarkable to these two, that the thought came to my head, and then to my lips: “What you’ve just witnessed is the slaying of a sacred cow.” (“Oh -” they said, “- that’s fine”. It seems that it was an entirely clear explanation.)

The analogy continued to be helpful to me soon after I became Deputy Chief Inspector in 2003. Martin Narey had taken over overall responsibility for Probation as well as the Prison Service, and was seeking to impose some structure to Court reports by forcing through from above a new version of that distinction between straightforward reports that could be done quickly – now to be done on the same day - from the ones that needed a remand. What he found hard to understand was the passion displayed by those resisting any changes to the way in which reports were to be prepared.

My explanation to Martin was that Court reports held a great symbolic value to POs, as when you qualify as a PO your report no longer needs to be countersigned by someone else. (I know that it had meant a lot to me when I qualified, and although I was always open to persuasion about new ways of writing them I had always resisted any ‘bureaucratic’ interference with their status.) I confirmed to Martin that my point was not that his reform shouldn’t be done, but he needed to realise that it was a ‘big thing’ he was doing, as he was interfering with a sacred cow.

And of course one of the reasons such reports were so highly valued by POs themselves was that it was one of the more tangible sources of job satisfaction. I’ve described earlier how this was often the case for me, and I know that it was for many of my former colleagues too. On the other hand, that is not a valid argument for never changing them in any way.

My subsequent reflections: At the time I would probably have said that there were too many reports, completed over a process that was often too laborious and/or too slow, and too many of them lacked ‘added value’, i.e. explanatory content. I believe that some streamlining and flexibility was indeed necessary. However, by the late 2010s it was also clear that by then we had moved from one extreme to the other in our practice, with probably not enough reports being done now, and with many of them being too rushed. There has been a performance target to increase the proportion of reports completed quickly, and none to increase the quality of the reports themselves.

There is a genuine policy and management issue to be tackled concerning how to make Court reports (and the linked initial case assessments) ‘fit for purpose’. I’ve outlined what I call the ‘assessment conundrum’ in the chapter I wrote for the 2014 book for forensic psychologists by Zoe Ashmore and Richard Shuker. In brief, if you want to know how much time and resource to devote to assessing each individual case, you need to know how complex the case will be to assess before you start the assessment. I believe that there could be a sensible way of dealing with this, although it would need staff and managers to operate it intelligently - and I’m sure most Courts would welcome that.

Meanwhile, I very much regret the extent to which the role of Court reports diminished in the 2010s. It is symptomatic of how things often work in our public life that when a change is needed in some area of public service that we then continue with further changes until we arrive at the opposite extreme. Yes, I still think I was right to force through that original change in Berkshire, but I also think we should be trying harder to identify and implement a reasonable ‘fit for purpose’ approach somewhere in between the two extreme potential options.

Information & Communication Technology:

*“You just tell me to “Make It So.””*

One major transformation that took place during my Berkshire years was in the information technology, which took place between 1996 and 2000. There is a background to this, which I will outline first.

Some of the potential changes that ‘computerisation’ might bring to our work had at least been thought about since the 1970s. When I was in Swindon I remember a researcher coming round from the University of Bath who was working on a project called EISSWA (I can’t remember what this stood for) who interviewed a number of us to ask us “What sort of information would you like to be able to access and/or would find useful in your day-to-day work?” I don’t think that any of us were much use to his project, and we hummed and haa’d about perhaps wanting to know more about research findings etc, but I don’t think we really ‘got’ what he was talking about. But we did notice that the Home Office’s National Activity Recording Study of 1979 (I think) demonstrated how computers could aggregate the time spent on different activities reported in that survey by working Probation Officers across the country.

We knew ‘computers’ were coming, and vaguely realised that they could store information efficiently, and perhaps manipulate it too. In 1983 I attended some evening classes in the town of Usk introducing the ‘BBC computer’ and some very basic programming, but I had no opportunity to build on it. That year I also saw for the very first time a word processor when I visited Gwent Probation headquarters. I had some understanding of how I wanted to manipulate data when I undertook the project on young offenders in custody, described in Chapter 11, and was only dissuaded from seeking to computerise the data when Colin Roberts wisely advised me to manage it myself using the Cope-Chat cards. But I was delighted that the computer people in Gwent County Council were willing and able to help me with the 1987 project to log the one-off survey of the county’s Probation caseload, and provide reports from it.

However, it was only in 1988 that each ‘team’ in Gwent was issued with a single Olivetti computer, for use by the Senior Clerical Officer (SCO) only. (I described in Chapter 12 how our two in Newport were immediately stolen – though to my surprise we were soon given two replacements.) Probation staff, including the SPOs, were discouraged from touching them – we were supposed to request the information we wanted, such as lists of cases, and the SCO would provide it. This meant that it was very difficult for us to learn how our new tool might be able to help us, but for the SCO at least the wordprocessing facility was a huge improvement on relying on a typewriter.

Meanwhile, at home I had bought and used a ZX Spectrum, and learned to load a game from a tape deck and play it, before taking the plunge and buying an Amstrad 8512 so that I could embark on my MPhil. As well as learning to type using the correct fingering – reinforced by typing up 40-50 hours of taped interviews – I also learned some basic database management from its computing facility. I gained a glimpse of how computerisation might aid our future work.

In Berkshire, my view strengthened that it was a mistake to see ‘IT’ as something you just gave to the ‘techies’ to sort out for you, as something separate and even menial, not something for ‘professionals’ to have to bother with. It was clear to me that although I would never become that technically proficient myself, it was essential for me as a manager to have a sufficient understanding and appreciation of the new technology in order to learn and engage with it constructively – to help me do my job better. I hoped that when we started introducing IT more widely into our Service we could do it in a more integrated way.

During the early 1990s in BPS, only our secretarial staff were really concerned with IT, and changes in IT, outside the Information Unit. Wordprocessing was already well established, with Microsoft’s Word programme being the main tool, and the advent of ‘Word for Windows’, and indeed the whole Windows environment, was something we and others were conscious of sounding important and exciting. But we didn’t grasp what it meant in practice until it arrived in 1995/6. Some managers were given ‘Notebook laptops’ in 1996, and we learned to play Solitaire on them, which at least introduced us to working with a “graphical user interface” (Windows) before the proper rollout began.

Meanwhile, our Information Systems Manager, Bob, was aware of how rollouts often went in other organisations. He was right, by the late 1990s, that for one thing many organisations saw it as an opportunity to get rid of most of their typists. He warned me of the fluctuating ‘three stages’ of IT rollout, in terms of how staff often responded to it. Stage One was “What’s this?” - suspicion of what the changes might bring, Stage Two was “I want one to play with,” but Stage Three was “Get this thing off my desk!”

Malcolm was still Chief when we started this process in 1996-7. Once he appreciated the potential power of the internet he became enthusiastic for a fully integrationist approach to the future rollout. At that time the Home Office was telling us that we would be funded for us having one computer for every three POs; we saw this as very unsatisfactory, and Malcolm made a point of bidding – successfully - for extra money (about £15k from memory) from Berkshire County Council to enable us to have one computer for each PO. In our 1998 inspection, the HM Inspector took me to task for this initiative, since the current official Home Office strategy by then had changed, and referred to POs only needing access to a “single source” for their IT support. However, he graciously backed down when I managed to find the earlier Home Office strategy that we had been quoting in our bid, which ambitiously – and rightly – had referred to POs each needing access to their own workstation for their IT.

The main rollout actually took place largely during my first year in post as Chief, by which time we were mainly well prepared in terms of planning and training. Unlike in other areas, we didn’t embark on culling the secretarial staff, and instead we reprofiled them into more of an administrative role as part of the ‘Support Administration’ division organised by Tony Rolley. My main job as I saw it, as incoming Chief, was to steer changes in expectations and culture in our use of IT across the organisation as a whole. I wanted to keep reinforcing the point that using IT was for everybody, not something that one handed over to ‘lower grade staff’. Both Tony and I embarked on gaining NVQs (national vocational qualifications) each ourselves as ‘IT Users’, partly because we wanted to and partly to indicate to others that we were serious about saying it was important. Although we didn’t ‘announce’ this, our participation quickly became known, and I believe it may have been a small encouragement to the many of our reprofiled Support Admin staff who were also working towards their own NVQs. Indeed Tony’s team established BPS as an official NVQ Centre for staff from other organisations too to gain their own NVQs.

During the equipment rollout I required every staff member to respond to me personally once they came online for email, and checked them off a list to ensure each one had responded. Only a few were slow to pick this up, and when I also attended the last session of each new IT training session I would lead a discussion about how people were finding it in practice.

Not surprisingly, even with some of those who were complying, there was still a feeling that they as ‘professional staff’ were now being required to do a menial technical job of entering their own records and other data, and some felt that this was not a ‘good use’ of their time or previous training. My argument was that the IT revolution and the skills required to use it were not a ‘new Probation work skill’ but instead was simply a new ‘life skill’ that everyone in just about any job would need to be able to exercise both at work and at home in the future. My analogy was with driving a car – “You don’t expect your employer to have you driven around in taxis the whole time, you take it for granted that you’ll drive your own car. It’ll be like that in future with IT – everyone will expect to be ‘driving’ their own computer for their everyday work.”

One PO, a very diligent and conscientious officer, possibly aged over 50 by then, was brave enough to admit to me in one of these training sessions that he was still very anxious about learning to use IT. Then about six months later I learned that he’d proposed and implemented for his team a system of shared electronic record keeping of daily contacts. Through ‘learning by doing’ he had become an active proponent of the benefits of IT – I was of course delighted.

When Bob left, his former deputy Adrian took over. He helped me to create the tools for resource management, and performance measurement, that I actually needed – as opposed to the cumbersome and expensive Home Office IT software that was sometimes rolled out, but which didn’t actually do the job properly. We regularly held what I would call a ‘dialogue’ between ‘what I was looking for’ and ‘what the various systems were able to provide’, and between us we could then devise a way forward.

In particular, I had looked at various approaches in other areas to co-ordinating information about identified offenders who were a Risk of Harm to others - to me they had seemed to be OK for collecting and storing information but not helpful in terms of actively managing the case. Discussion with Adrian showed me that we could produce a very live database on our Lotus Notes application. We then discussed what fields could be included and how it would look, and then I asked him what more he needed from me in order to start the creation of this new database. Adrian said to me, “You just tell me to Make It So”.

At that time we could communicate electronically within the then 54 Probation Services, using Lotus Notes, but did not have access to the internet proper, or indeed to the Home Office, which used MS Outlook over a separate network. This meant that my risk management database was quite secure, and worked well in that the relevant PO, SPO, ACPO and I could all keep up to date at the same time and/or intervene when events were moving rapidly, without issues of information leaking outside Probation – I found this a huge benefit.

On the other hand, I found I needed on my desk a separate standalone computer, with a separate dialup connection, so that I could email to the Home Office or others outside Probation when I needed to, or indeed download Inspectorate reports. One of the additional benefits of this was when I decided to download onto my standalone a copy of the Inspectorate’s report on the first area that had had the new “Performance Inspection”. This made it very clear what the Inspectorate would be looking for when it came to Berkshire in about a year’s time, which was very helpful for some of the ‘improvement’ work we then did, described in Chapter 13.

Of course, the three ‘central’ initiatives of CRAMS, RMIS and YK2, also described in Chapter 13, were the dominant IT themes when I was Chief. Subsequently, I was on the ‘other side of the divide’ when I moved into the Home Office. Now I had to learn MS Outlook; I could email prisons and the Directorate now, but not individual Probation Areas at first – these only came ‘online’ to us over the next year or so after 2001.

Meanwhile in the Inspectorate we developed gradual ‘computerisation’ of our inspection forms for case files, in a series of iterative developments, plus our ‘resource deployment’ Access database – see Chapter 14 for these. Although, early on, much of our IT equipment from the Home Office and MoJ seemed clunky, with many functions disabled to prevent us breaching security, the quality improved rapidly, so that in my last year or two I and my team could conduct work remotely and ‘on the move’ with only minor hiccups.

The rapid continuing revolution has of course progressed much further since then. I’m well aware of how in places it has continued to fail the Probation world – notably the long-term failure of NOMIS to become a case management system properly fit for purpose – but despite that it has been a remarkable transition from a 30-year perspective, and I enjoyed being part of it.

### Other Equipment:

*“Can anyone change a £10 note?”*

Telephones:

When I started work, for as long as I could remember, all telephones had always had the circular dial, and they were also fixed by the length of their cable to a point which had been fitted by an engineer. Except in Hull (an anomaly), the whole national system was run by Post Office Telephones, until British Telecom was established as a separate organisation. In the large Leicester office, one could obtain an outside line by dialling ‘9’, and calls were received by a person on the switchboard answering the incoming call and ‘putting it through’. The one variation I ever experienced was that in HM Prison Gartree, in the offices on the wing the phones were not fixed to the point in the wall, but there was a large ‘jack’ plug that meant that the phone was to be unplugged and locked away in a cabinet when the office was unoccupied. This seemed to me a most exotic arrangement at the time.

On arriving in Swindon I found that there was a ‘shortage’ of phone lines in the town as a whole, and I might have to wait several months before a phone could be fitted at my home in Old Town. However, my wait was shortened as I was listed as an essential user for my work – indeed in Wiltshire every PO had their phone rental reimbursed every quarter by the employing Probation Committee. Nevertheless I had to have a ‘party line’, which meant that there was another user somewhere in Swindon with whom I shared the line – only one of us could use it at any one time, and it was possible for us to listen in on the phone conversations of the other, not that we did of course.

The Swindon office only had a four-figure number when I arrived – a symptom I guess of why there was a shortage of phone lines, though during my time there it gained a five-figure number (as I also had at home), and in due time all local numbers became six-digit. Since it was only a small office the switchboard was part of what our clerical staff had to manage, fielding incoming calls and giving us outgoing lines on request.

Then at some point we had a new switchboard fitted at Milton Road – when finished it gave us some of the functions that I’d had in Leicester. What was memorable for me was the process of having it fitted. We were told that it would take two weeks to do. On the first Monday a BT engineer came, and by the end of that morning he had all the wires hanging out of a cabinet on the wall. From then until the Thursday of the following week, whenever I happened to go through that room to get to the general office the engineer was always reading a newspaper, and as far as I could see nothing new had happened. Then, on the Friday of the second week all the wires went back into the cabinet and we had our new switchboard system. Of course it’s possible that a whole lot of other work was done, but although I was a strong believer in the merits of public ownership of various industries at the time it did cause me to have some doubts about its efficiency in reality.

Around this time BT had introduced an alternative to the conventional phone, called a Trimphone – easier to move with one hand, modern looking, and with a different ring tone. We never had that, but at some point – I think in Swindon - a system was installed of some other new style of phone, but they looked and felt like toy versions of the real Trimphone – small, light, plastic with a tinny ringtone. But it was either with these, or with the next system in the 1980s, that we finally got phones which could be dialled by pushing buttons – that seemed a great advance. I probably also had a push-button phone in the new-build office that I was allocated at some point when at Prescoed.

My first mobile phone was allocated to me in Berkshire in March 1992, a Motorola which you regularly swapped between two clip-on batteries. You could store up to 10 numbers (later, 100), but otherwise you pressed the ‘bubble-wrap’ style buttons to dial the number. We were nominally ‘on call’ at evenings and weekends, and given an allowance for this – which after a short while we voluntarily reduced, as the amount didn’t seem justified. For although there was some initial apprehension about this new ‘duty’ I made another unusually correct prediction when I told my colleagues that the person who was most likely to be calling us up on these phones was Malcolm. I can only think of two or three occasions in total when I was phoned by someone other than Malcolm or a colleague ACPO, requiring ‘emergency advice’.

By 2001 I had got through a couple of new models of mobile phone, and I think by the end I had gained the capacity to phone the UK from abroad on it – a benefit with my European work. At the Inspectorate the implicit culture was that the mobile phone was still in some way ‘private’ or ‘ex-directory’, and our official contact points were the official landlines in either London or Manchester – and we had BT ‘charge’ cards for using landlines when not in our own office. This made no sense to me, and as Chief I phased out the charge cards and made the mobile numbers the official contact points listed in the Probation Directory.

Nevertheless the Home Office and MoJ culture was so well established that even though I only ever listed my mobile number on my standard email ‘footer’, a number of civil servants looked up my official landline number in the staff Directory and tried to use that to get hold of me. This was self-defeating if my secretary happened not to be at her desk to answer this – that was how the landline system was set up – the whole point of my listing the mobile number was that people could get straight through, or leave a direct message without having to involve another member of staff. I could see no logical reason for perpetuating a system of officially using landline connections – unless the object of the exercise was deliberately to handicap incoming calls.

In about 2008/9 I learned of another new development, a Blackberry – in my eyes it was principally a hand-held device that could sent and receive emails, even on our highly secure system, from almost any location, using the data transmission system then called GPRS. I ordered one for me and for the Assistant Chief Inspectors. I found it useful; they found it less so, as they often used their laptops when on the move, mainly for editing reports, which was a very large part of their job, and they could use a “dongle” to log and collect their emails remotely. In particular, I was able to keep up with my emails when moving about in New Zealand, on the project described in Chapter 15.

The MoJ then decided that each member of staff could in future only have one device each – this was at a time when I had a phone, a Blackberry, a laptop and a desktop in my London office. I could see that there was some logic behind the new policy, but selfishly I felt that I had a legitimate and active use for each of my devices and I clung strongly to all of them until my retirement. Since then, the Blackberry has been superseded by more compact and smarter phones, and laptops are often now nearly as good to use as a desktop, so I would expect most people to manage with those two devices now. Our MoJ laptops had often been quite laborious to use, packed with security measures to prevent misuse – fair enough – but the joke was that the ‘Flagstone’ security attachments made the laptop physically as heavy as a flagstone. In fairness, however, when I was stranded at a Los Angeles airport hotel for several days during the 2010 incident over the Icelandic volcanic ash the laptop and its dongle enabled me to keep up with much of my work at home.

Photocopiers etc:

We never had a photocopier the whole time I was in Swindon. For Magistrates’ Court reports the ‘clerical’ typed a top copy and five(!) carbons – the bottom copy was a bit of a challenge to read – and for Crown Court she typed onto a ‘stencil’ which would then be used to make 12 copies on a Roneo duplicator. I’d been used to having quite a decent photocopier during my placement in the very large Leicester office, so I knew what I was missing. If we seriously needed to photocopy any other document we were generously allowed to use the photocopier belonging to the Magistrates’ Court staff, which was the other side of the town centre, so it was a privilege used sparingly.

In 1981, when I moved to Erlestoke Prison, we had the use of an antiquated copier that laboriously copied one copy at a time onto a roll of shiny paper. It helped me cope with being Membership Secretary of Napo Western Branch, but I continued to crave for a decent copier. When, in 1983, I knew I was moving on I jokingly asked the Administration Officer at Erlestoke if he would like me to ‘accidentally’ push the copier onto the ground and break it, so that he could put in a requisition for a replacement modern one – he was horrified.

The copier at Usk Youth Custody Centre was just about OK, and the one in Newport office when I got there was better – especially when we were at last allocated what my Senior colleague and I called a “combine harvester”, one that sorted and stapled large documents. We gained this in late 1987, I think, and we were delighted with this.

However, colour copiers or printers remained well off the agenda until my time as Chief in Berkshire, when for my ‘standalone machine’ I got a modest Inkjet printer quite cheaply – good if laborious for colour slides etc. Then in my later years as Chief Inspector colour laserjet printers first came in at an affordable price. We take each step forward for granted, and it’s easy to forget how we had previously struggled. A price that was paid for this progress was that I noticed in my last couple of years that in many other offices new controls and ‘keys’ were added to photocopiers, to prevent misuse of the machines or to enable to ‘debiting’ of the correct ‘account’. Progress often comes with a cost…

Business cards:

In 1975, in Wiltshire, every Probation Officer was issued with their own set of personal business cards, and I have to confess that to receive mine made me feel that I was valued as part of the Service there. I believe that few other areas did this, even then. I’d heard a story somewhere of a “client” who’d used his PO’s card to identify himself as that officer and gain some credit at a store, so I always made it a rule that when I gave it to someone, or posted it through a door to say I’d called, I handwrote something on the card which I addressed to the individual – this should reduce that risk of misuse.

In Gwent I think we only had cards with the office address on, so you had to write your own name on if you used one. In Berkshire we had named ones for the Assistant Chiefs and Chief, and similarly again in the Inspectorate.

Identity cards:

Sometimes called “warrant cards”, these were important for gaining entry to a prison, especially a maximum security prison – although someone receiving you as a visitor to their home sometimes reasonably asked to see this too. It was only in the 1970s that it became common practice for this to include a photo, and we felt we were very advanced in 1975 to be told that Wiltshire police had made ours for us, designed to degrade if the plastic seal was broken. I felt irrationally very attached to mine, and was sad when I – quite properly – had to surrender it to my Senior when I left Wiltshire in 1983.

I was surprised to find that photos were not the order of the day in Gwent, either with the county Probation Service or in the prison establishment, and they were only introduced during my time there. In practice this didn’t cause any problems, but I felt ‘under-equipped’ until it came. There was a row and a 24-hour standoff at Usk when I refused to accept a card describing me as “Senior Welfare Officer” (an obsolete term), but I got my correct title eventually. Nobody asked me to surrender my cards on leaving Gwent.

In Berkshire we were rightly given cards with expiry dates, though this did mean that they had to be reissued every two years. As soon as I became Chief one of my earliest actions was to devise a card that would also serve as a name badge when worn in its holder. Name badges were culturally controversial with many people, so I knew that the best time to change things was in my first couple of months as Chief. I found it ridiculous that in the name of ‘security’ we obliged visitors to our premises to wear Visitor badges, but staff wore no identification. Meanwhile I’d also always noticed that the name badges that staff from other organisations wore in meetings etc were impossible to read other than with a good long close-up stare – socially awkward – so I wanted to do better than that. Therefore we put the name of the person in quite large print, next to the photo, and the (plastic) card was almost always lying flat and straight across the wearer’s chest because of the design of the ‘holder’ – this made it legible across a large table in a meeting, for example. I was fortunate that the union reps in Berkshire broadly supported my way of thinking on this, so the culture became reset quite quickly in terms of wearing these badges being ‘good communications’. They were also easily slid from the holder to serve as a warrant card for presenting on arrival at a prison.

Unsurprisingly, as Chief Inspector I introduced a similar card combining proof of identity with name badge in meetings – my only regret was that it was not possible to integrate this with the electronics of the Home Office/MoJ card that got one through the electronic doors of various official premises, so we each still needed one extra card for this purpose.

Back in Berkshire, the identity cards served one additional purpose. I had a duplicate copy of every staff member’s card, and had it attached with Bluetak to a board on one wall of my office. These were grouped in columns by team/unit, and the manager’s card was at the foot (not the head) of the relevant column. This implicit message seemed to be well received by visitors to my office, but the main benefit was for me and my increasingly unreliable memory: I could ‘refresh’ my memory for names and faces just before I went out to visit a particular location, and confidently greet – for example - a secretary or ‘new’ officer by name when I got there.

Cars / motor vehicles:

In Leicester I still hadn’t learned to drive, though I think a good majority of my fellow students could and did drive. I never used the moped I’d brought from York, and I only rarely used my bicycle for getting to the University or to a colleague’s house to get a lift.

In Wiltshire we had the unusual privilege of being able to apply to be issued with a Wiltshire County Council car, always a Mini 850, as mentioned already in Chapter 9. This was a boon to me, as I got one about a month after I’d passed my test in February 1976. My private mileage was low, as I lived close to the office, and the cashflow of, in essence, buying petrol each month and then claiming it back at the end of the month, reduced the stress I might otherwise have experienced while I was managing a tight personal budget.

Travelling to Erlestoke from 1981-3, 27 miles each way, counted as “office-to-office while on secondment”, so I could have continued with the ‘pool’ Mini. But after doing my sums I realised that I could buy a base Ford Escort with a County Council loan (low interest) and with the mileage rate on offer it would just about pay for itself over the first two years (leaving a potential problem for later), since I was also able to claim a ‘lower rate’ lunch allowance every day. It made the commute manageable over the Marlborough Downs every day, and also the trips to various other counties for my catalogue of failed promotion interviews.

The Escort saw me through to starting in Berkshire in 1989. The car had done over 100,000 miles in eight years, mostly work-related, by the time I gave it up and took up the option of a lease car under the scheme that Malcolm had just introduced in Berkshire. At a time when all Probation Officer salaries at every level were statutorily prescribed, which made the expensive ‘Home Counties’ a very unattractive location financially, the car lease scheme aimed to provide a financial incentive to come to Berkshire and indeed stay. In practice I don’t think the scheme, good though it was, actually achieved this purpose by more than a tiny handful in numbers, but I think many staff valued it in the same way I’d valued that Wiltshire Mini years earlier. Indeed you could choose your car, and make a contribution to have one of the ‘better’ models, and have a new car every three years, and there was no additional cost for private mileage – so it was a substantial benefit. Its main cost was the increasing figure that the Inland Revenue imposed and charged for it as a “taxable benefit”.

When I left Berkshire I purchased my lease car – a Ford Fiesta – from the leasing company, and ran it until after I retired as Chief Inspector, by which time it had run up over 300,000 miles in 13 years, though this time a lot of that was not work-related. In Berkshire it had been a standing joke that the Chief drove a Fiesta, while his secretary Val drove a Mercedes (her husband was in the building trade I believe). In the Inspectorate I and most inspectors used public transport for most work journeys – though certain locations meant that a car was necessary, and by this late date it was certainly no longer the case that there was any money to be made from mileage expenses. This leads into the next topic.

### Money:

*“Can anyone change a £10 note?”*

Starting with those allowances for our work expenses, I would say that it did feel like a small ‘perk’ when I started that we could claim various amounts for driving our own cars and for various meals that might be taken when not in the office. (Indeed I think I was allowed a ‘bicycle allowance’ of about ½p a mile by the Home Office when training.) These allowances shadowed those available to County Council employees, but of course theoretically POs should be eligible to claim much more often due to our work patterns. So by the time I started, some of the early ‘capping’ had started: No more claiming the allowance for having a car with a large capacity – POs were limited to the lower two categories; no more claiming a dinner allowance for working in the office on ‘late reporting’ after 9.00pm – the special ‘once-a-week’ claim for ‘late reporting’, even though it was in one’s own office, could continue but would be restricted to the ‘tea allowance’ however late one stayed.

I don’t have a precise memory about the amounts. Lunch allowance, which was genuinely useful for day-long prison visits, rose from about just under £2 to just over £3 I think, during my PO/SPO period; tea from about 75p to £1-something. You’d only make a financial ‘gain’ on this if you had a McDonald’s or equivalent, and often a prison visit usually meant in reality a country pub stop – but the fact that that meal was ‘supported’ was mainly appreciated I think. And we didn’t have to produce receipts, so if you wanted to you could gain a tax-free benefit.

Throughout my career there had always been some who moaned that the expenses we received didn’t cover this or that, but I think most people recognised that our allowances for our expenses were pretty reasonable, and even constituted a small ‘perk’. It felt like a major loss when these were gradually eroded over the years through recurring capping and freezing, and the changing tax status. Notably, all the allowances remained exactly the same for the whole of my ten years with the Inspectorate, and eventually receipts had to be introduced. The £14 figure for dinner – genuinely relevant to Inspectors in hotels on inspection and other visits – could comfortably pay for one course of most meals on the menu in Wetherspoons, but you were paying yourself for anything much more or better than that.

Everything is always down to expectations, and ours were higher for most of my career compared with what has been available for most people more recently. For example, we thought it was reasonable that employers offered travel expenses (usually capped at a Standard Class rail ticket price) for candidates invited for interview. It was also good that most Probation Committees offered some relocation expenses when you moved house to their area – these varied from between c£1,500 to c£6,000 in my hazy memory. This was spent very easily as it included paying for estate agent fees.

I certainly benefited personally from these, as it eased my house moves to Swindon, Newport and Reading. I was even reimbursed the grand sum of £30 by the Home Office for my removal expenses from York to Leicester in 1973; I knew an ex-student with a van, who called himself Woof, who successfully undercut the three commercial estimates, but I doubt if he made much money out of it!

Salaries and mortgages:

The figures above need to be viewed in the context of their times. As I’ve said previously, my starting salary in 1973 as a trainee was £1,311. There was a published salary scale that showed that I would have been paid less if I hadn’t had a degree already. The same scale showed that the Principal Probation Officer for Inner London was paid an especially high salary of c£6,000. I certainly never imagined that I would ever earn such a princely salary myself…

But of course inflation was in a rampant phase in the mid-1970s. By 1978, NAPO was starting to talk about aspiring to the “£6,000pa Probation Officer” – which still even then seemed pretty fanciful to me. Yet in 1979 my salary went up to £5,500, I think, and with my wife’s c£4.5k we qualified for a mortgage of £20,000, a rather daunting figure as we looked to move into a larger house in Old Town, Swindon. At this point, Jack Wilcox, the ‘other’ Senior in Swindon, told me how he had hardly been able to sleep for six months after taking out his £2,000 mortgage in 1959. So as I said to Mo at home at the time, “Probably in 20 years’ time, a £20k mortgage won’t seem that much of a big deal either…”

On the bad side, with interest rates at between 11-13% for most of 1973-93, with higher spikes on occasions, hardly any capital was paid off in the first 12 or so years of any repayment mortgage, so in that sense it was a genuine worry. On the ‘good’ side, inflation ‘looked after you’ if you were on a salary, in a secure job, and didn’t need to move house except by choice. Capital gain was achieved by inflation, which is how I think many of my generation in many different careers have come into retirement with some prosperity due to this kind of ‘forced savings’ boosted by long-term inflation.

The savings were ‘forced’ because the mortgage was a large proportion of the salary after tax. I’ll illustrate this with four cameos – so skip this section if you don’t want these details. The figures come from old bank statements:

1973: Net salary was c£100pm; mortgage costs (Leicester)- £30

1975: Net salary:£173; mortgage etc (Swindon 1) - £57

1979: Net salary: £487; mortgage inc insurance (Swindon 2 )- £305

1984: Net salary: £600; mortgage etc (Newport) - £220

Obviously these figures beg many questions. Mainly it illustrates that when I moved house – in each of these years – I went for the financial ‘stretch’. Income tax was very high in the 1970s: the basic rate from 1975-7 was 35% for income over c£1,000pa. Late 1970s inflation gave me net income gains of over £100pm each year, including fixed increments; but promotion in 1983 brought little immediate financial reward, though I obviously gained long-term. I lived a ‘hand-to-mouth’ existence financially for much of my life until 1997, but of course that also begs questions about my other spending choices, especially during periods of marriages, births of sons and divorces. But because I didn’t actually ‘go under’ financially during those periods, and was fortunate in maintaining pension continuity etc, the effect of inflation on house prices was a key factor that would have brought long-term benefit even if the promotions had never happened.

Imprest:

Back at the office, however, it was very rare indeed that a practitioner needed to make any decisions involving direct expenditure. For most of my career, even at managerial level, there was a tendency to refer spending decisions in effect to the administrative staff – “Have we got the money to do x?”

Nevertheless, as a Probation Officer, one had access to the “Imprest account” – of which the main use was as the source of the “Befriending Fund.” In theory the main purpose of this was to reimburse bus fares for ‘some’ of the probationers coming to the office to meet required appointments. Personally, I practically never paid these, and indeed I’m not sure I was ever asked – certainly I didn’t make a point of offering it. I don’t think many other colleagues did either, though I have known of one or two – through Napo – who saw it as part of their job to do so. If I were to articulate my viewpoint, I’d probably say I was uncomfortable with promoting a regular dependence on us as a source of additional income, however modest. Partly I was vaguely aware that the budget for the Imprest account was very modest.

I thought that the Befriending Fund should instead be mainly used for special occasions, to bail out an individual on an especially demanding occasion. But even that seemed very arbitrary, so although I can think of some occasions when we helped a particular family with young children at Christmas I don’t think we did much proactively there either. Instead the more usual problem was that a current individual, or even a deserving-looking case who had come in on office duty, begged for an “emergency loan” for subsistence pending the next Social Security “giro” (cheque). Of course this was arbitrary too, which is why I never felt comfortable with our decisions, whichever way we acted. I also quickly learned that “loans” were never repaid, and should have learned earlier to stop going through the charade of describing them as that. Indeed the radical academic Bill Jordan argued in a paper that giving a “client” cash was an act of dismissal and covert rejection, and other solutions should be found instead.

Be that as it may, there was a memorable occasion one evening in the Swindon office in about 1977 when the three of us in the building at the time decided that this individual who had come into the office (not one of my cases, but I can’t remember anything else about him) would really benefit from being given about three pounds from the Befriending Fund. Our Senior, Jay, was not in at this time, but we decided to ring her up to agree this, and also to access the cash. Jay was fine: “Yes, certainly, and yes there’s money in the cashbox.” (This was important, as sometimes the box was found to be empty at the critical moment.) So we went to the filing cabinet in her office, took the key from out of the small china cup on top of the cabinet, opened the drawer, took out the cashbox and looked inside. There were four £10 notes.

The occasion lives with me because even at the time I realised it was somewhat absurd that to all three of us experienced Probation Officers a £10 note presented an insuperable obstacle. Yes, I’d seen one on occasions by then, but when I withdrew money from the bank each week it was always in £1 notes, and rarely at more than £10 in total at a time for the whole week. Now there were suddenly four tenners in front of us, and to the question “Can anyone change a £10 note?” none of us could say yes. I think that what we did was scrape together the money we had between us to meet the requirement, and then got our money back from Jay over the course of the following week. But it seemed an embarrassing episode at the time, and a reflection of how since then inflation has changed perspectives.

Meanwhile, while a Senior myself in Newport, I’m not sure I had many dealings with Imprest myself, and it could be that my colleague Colin did this for the whole combined Newport team. What I did like was that we benefited from a regular supply of Pot Noodles. The factory in Blackwood that produced these snacks would find that a certain number of items each week wouldn’t have the correct proportions of certain ingredients – edible but not quite the prescribed flavour. They’d send a ‘tray’ or two of these to us each week rather than simply ditch them. I liked this because they kept almost indefinitely, but if someone came in saying they had no money for food we could offer them these, and indeed prepare a couple for them using a kettle of boiling water. If they were genuinely hungry they could eat them, and welcome to do so, but we would not have given them cash…

### My trade union ‘career’

The “union and professional association”, originally NAPO (National Association of Probation Officers), later simply Napo, was and still is at the time of writing the relevant trade union for most Probation staff. I’m pretty sure I didn’t join as a Trainee PO – I’m not sure why. My main memory of that time was seeing a recruitment poster in the tea room at Leicester City Probation Office. It had the headline: “33% off\*!!” This referenced the fact that would seem surprising now that because NAPO was recognised as a professional association one could have Income Tax relief on the subscription – and the basic rate of Income Tax was then 33%. The higher rates of tax at that time went up to 98%, which seemed extraordinary to me even then, but on the other hand this was for incomes of more than £100k pa, a figure almost beyond my comprehension at the time. The therefore witty part of the poster was the placing of that asterisk on the headline, and the added footnote at the bottom of the poster “\*98% off if you earn more than £100,000 a year”.

In Swindon I didn’t join the union on arrival either, and indeed there were only two members there out of the 13 possibles. Some time early in 1976 (I think) the Chair of the local branch (which covered Avon, Gloucestershire and Wiltshire) came and canvassed for members. This was the first time I met Malcolm Bryant, who later on became such an important figure in my Probation career. I decided that I would join the union at the end of my first year, if I was confirmed in post, and that’s what I did, in the summer of 1976.

I then became increasingly active in the union, attending monthly branch meetings on a Friday afternoon, usually in Bristol. When Doug Thorn arrived from London, in late 1977 I think, he was equally active, and with the staff turnover of the time we soon started to have quite a high proportion of union membership in Swindon. I got drawn into joining the Western Branch ‘Professional Sub-Committee’, chaired by a Bristol ACPO. Later on, when I was at Erlestoke, I even became Branch Membership Secretary in 1982.

I also started planning to attend the annual national AGM and Conference, which was three days from Thursday night to Sunday afternoon, in May each year in those days. From memory I backed out at an early stage in 1977 because I had been ill three times earlier in the year. In 1978 I had my wisdom teeth out in hospital and withdrew at a fairly late stage. In 1979 I finally got to go, travelling with colleague Karin Bell in her Maxi to Llandudno, and we had a good time. In 1980 Doug and I set up a savings account for colleagues (called Napoleon, for NAPO) like a Christmas club, to ease the budgeting, and about four of us went from Swindon to Bournemouth that year.

That 1980 Conference was memorable for lots of reasons. I organised the hotel, which was the closest ‘economy’ hotel to the conference centre, which worked well. The weather was glorious, which was one reason why many of the sessions were inquorate due to insufficient attendance. The Executive moved the annual conference to October thereafter, partly to save money on accommodation and partly so that less attendance would be lost to fine weather. However, another factor in Bournemouth was that almost the entire Conference agenda was given over to debating clauses in the new Constitution. Although the most ‘extremist’ proposals were rejected, there was a lot of tedious detailed discussion of some items, and one major change was made whereby the higher grades of officer lost full control over negotiation of their own terms of conditions – as a result, many of those members left and founded new but ‘unrecognised’ unions for SPOs and for ACPOs shortly afterwards.

On this occasion the four Swindon members hosted the then General Secretary Jenny Kirkpatrick one evening for a restaurant meal (I had hosted Jenny for a day with the wider Branch earlier that year). It was pleasant but a bit rushed, as I suspect Jenny was probably rather over-committed that evening.

I missed the 1981 Conference in Bridlington as it was very soon after a holiday in Italy, but I went to Brighton in 1982, Southport in 1983, Eastbourne in 1984, Bridlington in 1985, and Bournemouth again in 1986 – after which I’d had enough. As I wrote several years later, Napo Conference was an eccentric event – all members were eligible to attend (so it was self-selection), every attending member’s vote counted, and constitutionally it was the ‘supreme policymaking body’. As a result the experience oscillated rapidly between being charmingly engaging and utterly infuriating. Decisions were very likely to be made on the spur of the moment from a brilliant demagogic address by a popular speaker. The converse of this was that members of the Napo Action Group (leftwing radicals) tended to cluster round the ‘Against’ rostrum, to heckle individuals who tried to speak against ‘their’ motions.

As for myself, I tried speaking to a couple of motions in Brighton, quite poorly, but at what was I think my second attempt in Southport I had a minor triumph. It was on an unpopular subject, the details of which now escape me, but broadly speaking Christian members were complaining that a resolution just passed involved giving some of their money to a cause they found morally objectionable (possibly a pro-abortion campaign?). I personally disagreed with their position, but my theme was that on a matter of conscience “we should not tyrannise this minority” – and much to my surprise this speech won warm applause and the motion. I didn’t speak again at Conference (although I did queue up to speak once the following year), so at least this very brief career of speaking at the national union conference ended on a high!

I did speak a few times in Branch meetings, though rarely as a proposer or seconder of motions. My one notable triumph in this area was after a couple of years in the South Wales Branch, which was less disciplined than Western Branch in the way it ran its meetings. I noticed that Mark Drakeford (who went on to a long career as a County Councillor in south Wales and then at the Welsh Assembly eventually become First Minister) always managed to contrive, when he wished to, to be the last speaker before the vote was taken. I made it my minor ambition to speak after Mark Drakeford on just one occasion – it wouldn’t matter when, or what the subject was - I just wanted to see if it could be done. I did, just the once, get the Chair to allow me to speak after Mark, and indeed Mark’s motion fell on that occasion (whatever it was – I can’t remember!). I was amused at my own satisfaction with this minor achievement.

Another small ‘achievement’ in South Wales Branch was when we were asked to ratify the settlement of a revision that year to the London weighting allowance as part of the regular annual salary negotiation – it was a union rule that that this needed to be ‘approved’ through voting in branches. I felt that we had no idea whether or not it was a ‘good’ settlement, and the only ones who would have an informed view would be the London Branch itself. We shouldn’t blindly ‘approve’ it if we didn’t know what they thought – so I said we should all abstain. Then we would have voted – but we wouldn’t be risking undermining any view that our London Branch colleagues might have decided. So we did.

One year (1985), in South Wales I organised the accommodation for our Branch members attending the October national conference in Bridlington. I found a reasonable hotel that was very close to the venue, to minimise ‘commuting’ time and to maximise availability of ‘free’ time. We had at least one vegetarian in our group, and on the Saturday evening I got our group in first to the only restaurant in Bridlington that offered anything creatively vegetarian on the menu. Earlier that day I had overheard an animated exchange in a newsagent that exemplified the contrast between how we saw ourselves as diverse and how others didn’t: Newsagent: “We remember you lot from four years ago [Bridlington conference 1981] – we ordered lots more Guardians. I can’t think where they’ve all gone…”

The Western Branch AGM in 1983 had been in my last week in Wiltshire, and in the following week, my first in Gwent, was the South Wales Branch AGM. So by this fortuitous means I was able to ask two different Branches to nominate me for membership of the Editorial Board of Probation Journal, which I duly gained for the coming three-year period. Probation Journal was not the ‘union newsletter’ but a separate quarterly quasi-academic professional journal but which was sponsored by the union. I attended quarterly meetings at Napo HQ in Battersea, led by the then editor Nigel Stone, who I thought did an excellent job.

I had had one short article published the previous year (as well as a couple of rejections), and it was called originally “Well Brian I hit the ball first time and there it was in the back of the net.” My theme was that although there are a few people who were good at both playing the game and talking about the game – whether football or Probation – there were many who were good only at one of these two things, and I’d rather have a colleague who actually played the game well rather than one who could simply talk about it well. Once on the Board I had two more articles published, plus a couple more rejections, and quite separately from this found the whole experience very rewarding and enjoyable. It fitted well with my three-and-a-half years at Usk, adding to my perspective of Probation as a national Service.

Throughout the period from 1980 was the issue of the ‘split’: Although Napo retained the formally recognised role of being the negotiating body for all grades of PO except Chief, many Senior and Assistant Chief POs had left Napo and set up alternative trade unions in an attempt to safeguard their position. I was fairly unusual in South Wales as a Senior that stayed with Napo, for although I didn’t think Napo had treated the managerial grades very well I thought we should not proliferate the union bodies negotiating with employers. I remained in Napo when I first became an Assistant Chief in Berkshire, but was the only ACPO in the ‘BBO’ (Berks, Bucks & Oxon) Branch to do so, and I noticed that my attendance at Branch meetings was awkward for some other members as well as for me on occasions.

Alarming financial circumstances at the time of my second divorce (from Mo) led me to decide to leave Napo, despite my general belief that one should be a member of the/(a) union that formally negotiates one’s salaries etc. My dilemma was resolved after a year or two, when the union for Chiefs, which had negotiating rights for those salaries, opened its membership for Assistant Chiefs – by which time my personal finances were in better shape too. I attended these occasional meetings of SCOOP (Society of Chief Officers of Probation), which later became a section within the much larger union GMB, but I never took on any official role within it. I consulted them about my legal position and options early in 2001 after my non-appointment to the National Probation Service, though soon no further action was needed.

This Napo/SCOOP experience perhaps ‘broke me in’ to the world of the Civil Service, where different unions for different grades of employee had been established long previously. In that context I found that I was pleased when I arrived – perhaps because I was then a former Chief - that since my post as an HM Inspector counted as ‘Grade 7’ I was eligible to join the ‘top’ Civil Service union, the FDA (once the First Division Association). I may have attended a couple of meetings over ten years, including some useful information sessions, but I think I mainly persisted with my subscription out of a sense of traditional principle rather than practical or political benefit.

My view on the role of ‘my’ trade unions, and on trade unions in general, has of course evolved over time. Like most other human organisations, they can do good sometimes and they can also do harm. I still think that more often than not it is beneficial to an employee to have a union and join it – pay is usually markedly lower where unions are weak or non-existent. Where employers successfully maintain constructive relationships with the relevant union(s) there is a benefit there too, although too often in the past the relationship has become destructive in various ways for a host of different reasons, which is why unions are often perceived as a potential threat for employers. The trade union movement as a whole arguably became too powerful in the 1960s and 1970s, but following the steady erosion of their powers from Margaret Thatcher onward there is a case for concluding now that their role in safeguarding the majority of employees has become much too weak.

In Berkshire I learned from Malcolm (who had been a former Napo Branch Chair) what to negotiate with the unions about, what to consult with them about, and what simply to communicate transparently about. We respected their role in relation to their members, but we did not give ground in allowing them to intrude on matters which we considered were for management.

As Chief Inspector, I attended, as an invited observer, three of the annual Napo conferences, and experienced each time – albeit from this new perspective – the familiar two feelings of engaging charm and of utter exasperation. Members were being included and involved in serious thinking about the work and wider political issues, which was good, but they could also be quickly swept into making ridiculous decisions and gestures, such as when Martin Narey as the chief of the whole ‘National Offender Management Service’ at the time was “disinvited” from his slot to address the conference when he was already half way to the venue on the day. But on balance, my ‘union career’ has been a positive experience.

### Health & Safety: Personal Safety:

It’s been a recurring puzzle for me to know how personal safety should be managed in this line of work. The Probation world had traditionally taken a low-key approach to this. In my experience it was normal for both male and female POs to go out alone on home visits to strange addresses and to meet unknown individuals alone well into the 1970s and the early 1980s. Most of us were also aware that it was possible for something bad to happen; as I recall a Chair of NAPO during the 1970s, Murray Bruggen, had to use a stick to support his very impaired walking because of a severe assault he’d experienced much earlier in his career. Most of us, including me, could recall a ‘near-miss’ event when violence had been threatened, but these were extremely rare. We might even joke about the fact that policemen never visited any address except in pairs, while we found it perfectly normal to go to strange places on our own.

An event in Wiltshire in about 1980 caused some of us some wry amusement: The Swindon PO who also covered Marlborough – my friend Karin Bell - went to open up the tiny ‘reporting centre’ there one dark evening and fell down a hole that some workmen had dug outside, and, while she was not seriously hurt thank goodness, the following week every PO in the entire county was issued with a torch.

From my recollection it was NAPO in the 1970s that started to pick up on “Health & Safety” issues, and in a way that specifically included staff safety from personal attack. My colleague Doug in the Swindon office was our NAPO “Health & Safety Rep”, and would raise the subject regularly. However, as I experienced it, most of us listened and accepted many of the arguments in principle that we should take the subject more seriously, but we did not feel inclined to instigate action about it since our main attention was usually on other matters.

But by the mid-1980s there was a gradual change of mood starting to take effect. Over the Probation world as a whole a viewpoint was growing that you shouldn’t visit a strange address for the first time on your own, and a bid arose to make this and other restrictions into a ‘rule’ for the protection of staff. In Newport this issue was kept to a minimum in practice because for several years the culture had developed that most Court reports were produced from an office interview rather than from a home visit (in contrast with my Swindon habit). Nevertheless POs felt increasingly conscious of the potential risk involved with some of the home visits they did make, and there were issues too in our own Newport office building.

The behaviour of ‘Daniel’ in Newport that I described earlier caused us to think harder about staff safety in the office, because although he personally was no more than a disruptive nuisance he did show how vulnerable our front office and other staff were. I had noticed when I visited other offices around the country, from Usk, that many city premises now felt like a fortress to visit – there would be a bare and unpleasant waiting room inside the front door, and then a hostile grilled window for the receptionist, plus a security door through which one was escorted through to access the rest of the building. We didn’t want to replicate that hostile barrier in Newport, but we did want to find ways of making our staff more secure.

Meanwhile Gwent senior management tried to take the problem seriously, and I’m fairly sure that at one point POs who wanted one could be issued with a portable ‘rape alarm’ device – and I think a few of the Newport team took up this offer. In my recollection there was at this time a view that this was a problem “for women officers” – men like me often saw no reason to change what we had been doing for years. For myself, it wasn’t that I was trying to be particularly ‘macho’; it was a case that I was aware of the risk, and my experience told me it was a low risk, and one I was prepared to take. Any officer (whether male or female) who felt differently I would provide for, though during my Newport time it happened to be mainly the female staff who called on action from me or others.

At one point one of ‘my’ POs found herself in a very uncomfortable interview with a very creepy man in her attic office, and it took her a long time to get rid of him. Although I was sympathetic I know she didn’t feel that she got the support she was looking for from me when we discussed it the following week. Shortly after, another PO said that in the early evening she was due to interview someone for the first time whose file suggested that he could be a potential problem. She didn’t want me to sit in on the interview from the start – she wanted to keep things as ‘normal’ as possible – so we agreed that I would observe her through her office window from another office window which was at right angles to it. If she gave me an agreed signal I would then nip round and make an entrance. As it happened, my presence was not needed (though she said afterwards that she valued knowing I was there).

However, during those forty minutes I found myself musing about how staff safety was going to be managed in the future. Would this need to happen more often? Would a male officer ever ask me to do this? And: should the onus turn round? – Would the day come when the manager would be negligent if he/she failed to prevent a PO from taking certain risks? Once again, I didn’t predict the culture change to the post-2000 Health and Safety way of managing things, but it hasn’t come as a complete surprise.

As a footnote, though, I would observe that since the late 1990s office design nationally has improved. New buildings have largely achieved the necessary separation and internal security without presenting the hostile image that I frequently saw in some of the 1980s premises. The fact that when you visit the office you are being ‘managed’ is much less intrusive, and with many other types of office premises also being managed in the same way it feels less ‘discriminatory’ – perhaps. But of course not every office in the country will yet have that new design, I assume.

Personally, I’m glad that since qualifying I’ve never had to escort the person I’m about to interview to and from a dedicated ‘interview room’ for our talk. I’m sure I’d have got used to it if I’d had to, but I valued seeing people in my own office space, and fish out any files, references or resource material as I needed without having had to plan that, or worry whether or not a room was available. On that point, I’ve only had to share my workspace for brief periods: during my placements as a student, my first six months in Swindon, and as an HM Inspector. I certainly ‘coped’ with that OK, but personally I’ve found that I’m more efficient when working in private, especially when I used a dictaphone a lot. The fact that I usually had my own personal office is yet another aspect of my career where I have felt privileged and fortunate.

## Chapter 18: Reflections – What was the Point?

*“Remember: Andrew is usually proved right in the end!”*

I previously covered, in Chapter 7, how my curious career got started, and subsequently described a little about my personal approach to the job – the What I did and the How I did it - first as a practitioner, then as a manager, and then an inspector. But I’ve saved until now any discussion of my evolving thinking about Why I did it – my beliefs about how Probation overall benefits the wider community, or defining what the public gets in return for the money it expends on the service(s).

Spoiler alert – I come to a positive conclusion. No surprise there, except that I think that specific elements of my ideas still don’t readily fit into the mainstream thinking of either the participants in, or the observers and commissioners of, Probation work.

When I first started to think about Probation as a possible career and worthwhile occupation, in 1971/2, I was first thinking about how I might ‘help’ an ex-prisoner reintegrate into society as a law-abiding member, and from the University Careers library I discovered that since 1967 this work was now done by Probation Officers. This meant that I had to begin to think about Probation’s then more mainstream role of providing such ‘help’ as a Court ‘disposal’ in its own right – it was technically “instead of a sentence” until the 1990s.

And then, because Probation Officers consequently had a role in the sentencing process, by providing reports to the Court in many cases, there was more thinking to be done about Probation’s overall purpose, including: was it actually a body with its own distinctive ‘values’, one associated with a wider movement pressing for continual criminal justice reform? Certainly, for almost all of my career, there has been a widespread interest within Probation in discussing its ‘values’, and more widely still an expectation that Probation either is, or should be, an instrument for progressing various aspects of criminal justice reform. I have always found it difficult to navigate my way through such debates because I have frequently been attracted emotionally to the reformist viewpoints, but have constantly found them unsatisfactory intellectually.

My evolving musings over ‘what I thought I was doing’ inevitably took place within an evolving public policy towards criminal justice in general, and Probation in particular (and also my own evolving experience of course). This is not the place for a lengthy discourse on that recent evolution of criminal justice policies, but for the sake of context I will attempt here to outline its key elements, at least as far as I experienced them and took them into account.

In ‘big picture’ terms, criminal justice policy proceeded in a broadly increasingly ‘liberal’ direction until 1993 (yes, that begs questions about defining ‘liberal’), after which it then swung in an increasingly ‘punitive’ direction until the 2010s, where at the time of writing it is possible that it has come towards the end of that swing of the pendulum – we’ll see. A similar swing of the pendulum, from liberal to punitive, had started earlier in the United States, and a comparable trend during the 1990s can be found in Australia, New Zealand and the Netherlands. During the 1980s, those in the UK who wanted to see still more liberal reforms could at least draw comfort that we had not started going the way of the United States, though during the 1990s they could begin to lament that we had.

‘Liberal’ in this context means attempting to put ‘reforming offenders’ first, and punishing them second, and a linked belief in the importance of keeping down the prison population. ‘Punitive’ here means putting punishment first, and consequently a view that any rises in the prison population are simply there to be accommodated. The complication is that the ‘liberal’ policy itself had two distinct phases: For the dozen or so years from the late 1960s that ‘liberal’ criminal justice policy included increasing ‘conditional’ sentences and early releases, while the trend from 1982 to 1992 was instead to reduce many of those conditional elements. And then conditional sentences returned in a new guise during the first 20 years of the ‘punitive’ policy. ‘Conditional’ here means, in various ways, that the offender would be allowed to live at liberty – a community sentence or early release – on condition of future good behaviour – with the threat that misbehaviour would trigger a committal or a return to custody.

For example, suspended sentences and early release on parole were introduced in the late 1960s, both to help reform offenders and to keep down the prison population, and further conditional sentences were proposed in the mid-1970s. Unfortunately, by the late 1970s it was becoming clear that conditional sentences were having exactly the opposite effect on the prison population to the effect intended – raising instead of reducing it. This led to the sharp switch in policy towards shorter and more transparent sentences in both custody and the community – and this was more successful in the desired aim of restraining the prison population numbers during the 1980s. The 1991 Criminal Justice Act was the culmination of this particular version of ‘liberal’ policy.

In my opinion, the ghastly murder of James Bulger in 1993, and to some extent the comic incident of the ‘Cwmbran crisp packet’, proved in retrospect to be the key tipping point in public opinion about the criminal justice system. (In 1993 an unemployed 20-year-old was fined £1,200 for littering, because he failed to complete a means-test form – the new “unit fines” were abolished soon after.) Up to that time the voices seeking a more punitive justice system were ignored, but from then on not only the Conservatives but also ‘New Labour’ chose to be led more by their understanding of public opinion than by civil servants and academic policy advisers. As is well known, one effect of this approach has been a more than doubling of the prison population – and a less well-known effect is that we are rediscovering that conditional sentences don’t have the effect that most people would expect. (Any rational analysis of what actually happens in reality will confirm that, counter-intuitively, conditional sentences have the effect of increasing the numbers sent to prison, for a combination of reasons that take too long to explain here.)

Nevertheless, the point here is that in terms of the ‘big picture’ of overall criminal justice policy, I experienced a ‘liberal’ trend in the first 20 years of my career, and a very different trend after that. And within those two overall trends there were developments that were particular to the Probation world which gave me plenty to think about and respond to. I’ll mainly focus on the developments in policy and wider thinking during those first 20 years, up to 1993, because that covers the entire period when I was a practitioner and then a frontline manager. I should add that during this time practitioners like me were not so much directly managed as advised, cajoled and/or encouraged as to how we ought to work, and each of us decided for ourselves to a large extent how far we would ‘go along with’ what we were being told.

The key thing to note here about Probation policy is that up to about 1977 we as practitioners and ‘they’ as the main policymakers all broadly believed that good Probation practice was beneficial in its own right for both society and the offender. I do remember, when still a trainee, looking for evidence that demonstrated this beneficial effect. My understanding then was that there were just two studies that looked at reoffending by cohorts of offenders following intensive programmes of “casework” (as the generic term was then) by Probation Officers. As I understood it, one study was inconclusive, but the other, of prisoners leaving a ‘Midlands prison’ a few years earlier, had shown an appreciable improvement. Although these findings were mentioned only almost in passing on my course, they supported my optimistic expectation that over time Probation would be able to demonstrate its overall effectiveness in reducing reoffending, if we targeted the right cases at the Court stage, and continued to improve the way we worked with those cases. Specifically, I had high hopes that the Home Office study of IMPACT, an ‘intensive Probation’ project in London, would soon find positive results.

Most criminological accounts of this period report that the optimistic expectation of what community sentences could achieve came to a sharp halt in 1977 when the “Nothing Works” findings of the American Martinson were published. I have to say that this publication completely passed me by at the time, and I only learned about it some dozen years later. Instead, the thing that did hit me in the face at the time was the announcement, in 1976 I think, of the Home Office findings about the IMPACT project. The dispiriting results I heard were that with most cases ‘intensive probation’ produced no better results, and with the less difficult cases (fewer convictions) the results were actually worse.

For me this was a substantial shock. I was by then in my second year as a qualified officer, and initially I had some fears that these findings would jeopardise the entire Probation Service and my whole future career. These fears didn’t last long, as it was clear that nothing changed in terms of day-to-day practice, as the Courts continued to request reports and to make Probation Orders etc. My Senior, Jay Wall, had always said that she wasn’t worried about reconviction rates in the way I was, and it seemed that essentially she was right that people – including the Courts - either believed that Probation was a ‘good thing’ in its own right, or they didn’t.

What it did lead to for me from then on was a lot of soul-searching as to what I thought I was doing, and aiming to achieve, by continuing to work as a Probation Officer. Most of the time I was simply getting through the weekly treadmill of completing the work in front of me, but inevitably I wanted to make some kind of sense of what it was all for, and that involved discussion with those colleagues who were also interested in the topic. Not unreasonably, we still believed that if we undertook the most effective methods we could still make a difference – there was consensus that some officers were better than others, even if we disagreed on which were which, and the tendency was to believe that every colleague was reasonably OK in their own way. If enough of us improved, then perhaps Probation overall would in due course be able to demonstrate effectiveness. It was partly in this spirit that we embarked, for example, on groupwork programmes and we attempted ‘Family Therapy’ work with certain cases.

Meanwhile I particularly remember coming up with other theories to muse over, as potential explanations of what we were doing. One was that we were ‘mediating’ between the offender and society, trying to get each to understand and accommodate the other better. My thinking was that when writing a Court report I was trying to explain to the Court how and why the offender came to commit this offence, and how he or she could be constructively dealt with, and then during the resulting Order I was trying to get the individual to understand why and how he or she could learn to manage their life in a law-abiding way. This didn’t particularly answer the question of ‘why should society purchase this service?’ so my other theory of this time came up after watching a ‘Yes Minister’ episode in which it was explained that very few people in this country actually wanted to go to the opera themselves, but they wanted to “know that it is there”, as a mark of being a civilised country. The quizzical thought struck me that perhaps the best case for Probation was that like the opera, and other arts, it was one of the symbols of this being a civilised country. On that basis, if people are happy to pay for the Arts Council, then people might be content to continue paying for Probation, provided it didn’t get too expensive.

Earlier, when training at Leicester, I had listened to, but rejected, other more radical views about the role of Probation in the criminal justice system. While a trainee from 1973-5 I had joined the Howard League for Penal Reform and also read radical papers like ‘Up Against the Law’ and ‘Radical Alternatives to Prison’. Many telling arguments against unfair or brutal treatment by Police, Courts and Prisons were effectively made, but I had noted even then that it was easy to criticise others and less easy to make a convincing case that any of the suggested alternatives would work any better for society as a whole.

Probation was rarely in the firing line of these external attacks at this time, leaving me to consider the role of Probation within the training course itself, where the main debate I recall from 1974 was whether Probation could do both ‘Care’ and ‘Control’. From what I remember, in 1974-5 the Labour Government was making an early attempt to ‘beef up’ the supervision of offenders in the community by introducing a ‘care and control’ order, an idea that was resisted by many, saying we’d be “screws on wheels”. The resistance succeeded, as the idea was dropped. I remember feeling partly disappointed, as intellectually I wasn’t persuaded that care was incompatible with control; but to be frank I was also quite relieved, as the job I was then about to enter was now looking less complicated and difficult than it might have otherwise become.

Therefore my main focus during most of the course, and then in the first few years of practice as a qualified PO, was more on practical methodology rather than on theoretical values. My fairly straightforward belief was that, based on establishing a good working relationship with the person under supervision I would aim to ‘help’ him/her to behave in a law-abiding way, to the benefit of that individual as well as of society as a whole.

Linked with the impression I had gained from the course that almost anything counted as doing the job well – as I described earlier – this was why I also confidently believed that the cumulative effect of lots of people like me doing this work with lots of offenders over time would contribute to a reduction in crime. And it seems that I was not alone in grouping all Probation or social work – or “casework” - into a single category of activity in the 1970s: the academic and Home Office researchers who attempted to analyse the effectiveness of Probation were in effect treating it as a single category of activity themselves too.

So, along with all my other musings outlined above, one effect on me of the dispiriting findings on the IMPACT project was to start to consider that if Probation practice overall wasn’t proving to be effective – and yet I was sure in my own mind that some of it was – perhaps there was such a thing as poor practice, which was diluting the cumulative effect of Probation work overall. Not for a moment do I make any claim to have ‘started’ any aspect of the ‘What Works?’ movement that came over from North America at the end of the 1980s, but to many practitioners like me, who had been thinking about what methods were effective, it made sense to us when ‘What Works?’ did arrive. All I do claim is that in the late 1970s quite a number of practising officers like me did start to take a closer interest in trying to work out for ourselves which approaches might seem to work best with which cases. To this end we explored new and different methods in order to try and improve our work, such as ‘general’ groupwork, Social Skills groups, Family Therapy, as I have outlined earlier.

Alongside this was an increasing awareness that academics, and perhaps our senior managers (though not our immediate Senior POs), wanted us not to recommend Probation for the ‘easy’ cases of first-time or less-convicted offenders, but to try and ‘win’ onto community supervision those cases which might otherwise receive a prison sentence. When Community Service Orders (CSOs) were rolled out across the country in the later 1970s, some heated debates took place, especially in NAPO circles, about whether these new Orders – which were seen as more ‘punishing’ than Probation – should “only” be used as a “direct alternative to a custodial sentence”, or whether they could properly be used for other cases too. For my part I saw CSOs as serving a range of constructive purposes – partly because the Wiltshire version of these Orders was a remarkable combination of being both ‘strict’ and very imaginative and creative. Therefore I didn’t see the need for this debate. Furthermore, even by then it was clear to me, from the experience of seeing how suspended prison sentences worked in practice, that the idea of a sentence being solely an ‘alternative to custody’ was in reality merely an enticing delusion.

Yet the logic of the times meant that we had to go further down that road of offering Courts an “alternative to custody”. The explicit policy of the Home Office in the 1980s – only exercised indirectly in those days of course – was to steer Probation towards being a Service that justified its existence by preventing the Prison system from being more full than it might otherwise be. This had arisen following the academic paper ‘A Non-treatment Paradigm for Probation’ of 1979 by Bottoms and McWilliams, and started to be formalised in the 1982 Home Office policy paper, ‘Statement of National Objectives and Priorities’ (“SNOP”). Moreover, some people wanted a more radical application of this approach, to achieve significant reductions in the prison population.

This had a range of effects on my personal thinking and practice. In terms of writing reports for Courts or parole, I felt that I came across quite a number of cases where custody (or continued custody) was not necessary, even though this was likely, and in those cases I could make quite cogent cases for Probation, CSO or early release. There were also many cases where a prison sentence was virtually inevitable due to the gravity of the case, and in some of them I could just about bring myself to deploy the conclusion that ‘if the Court is considering any other type of sentence then the best available non-custodial option is…’ But I didn’t see it as my job to ‘save all but the very worst offenders from prison’, which seemed to be the line coming from the most enthusiastic reformers. Also, although I’ve never liked the word ‘treatment’ very much in the Probation context, I was reluctant to abandon the implication that Probation should cease altogether its efforts to have a therapeutic benefit with some individuals.

Because of that view, in terms of my day-to-day work with offenders this policy strengthened my enthusiasm for ‘throughcare’ work. It seemed to me then (and still does now) that there is a disadvantage, as well as the obvious advantage, to linking ‘doing Probation work’ with someone with ‘letting them off’. If the offender ‘needed Probation’ at the time of going to Court for sentence, where was the logic in then ‘not doing Probation’ with them in some way, just because the Court had passed a different sentence? I almost always opened a ‘throughcare’ file on all my report cases that received a custodial sentence (as one had to with 14-21-year-olds anyway at the time), and as a Senior I expected my officers to do the same. Increasingly I came to believe that often our work with offenders had more impact this way because (some) prisoners felt that by visiting and writing we were taking a genuine interest in them, and therefore they became more open to engaging with the PO. It was noteworthy to me that the contemporary official policy of both the then separate Prison and Probation units of the Home Office was to promote such an approach for Life sentence prisoners by opening a file on them even from before date of sentence.

My Newport POs largely shared this vision, as did the specialist throughcare teams in Berkshire the first few years I was there. It was a source of some personal grief to me that as the first budget squeezes of the late 1990s took hold, it became necessary to move to generic teams (to gain more flexible resource deployment) in the later years. In my experience at the time, and in my observation since then, when Probation work with prisoners becomes marginalised, it degenerates into something some people call ‘Resettlement’. This may often be well-intentioned, but implies that it’s just about getting practical arrangements in place for coping with life in the community, rather than including within it the discussion and reviewing of past criminal behaviour and if possible learning to behave differently in future. This was what I particularly wanted to see included in what we then called ‘throughcare’ work – not a brilliant label I acknowledge – to emphasise that good quality Probation work was something that should be attempted with offenders on custodial sentences as well as those on community sentences.

Meanwhile, back in the 1980s, the emphasis continued to develop that a key element of our job in Probation was to encourage the Courts to pass community sentences in those cases where the “risk of custody” was above a certain level. I’ve described earlier how at one point we in Newport incorporated David Bale’s ‘Risk of Custody’ model in order to target the right cases, and also record our progress. I was enthusiastic about the means this offered of setting good quality measurable objectives for the team, and demonstrating how far we achieved them – but it did also leave me with a nagging doubt. In ‘big picture’ terms, if all Probation was good for was that it was cheaper than prison, where would we be if Courts and the public started to realise that this group of offenders didn’t need to be in prison in the first place? – then they wouldn’t need either Prisons or Probation for these cases! In view of the developments since 1993, of course, I needn’t have worried, but in, say, 1988 I wasn’t confident that Probation’s case as a useful public service was as strong as it needed to be.

Margaret Thatcher had been PM for nine years by then, and many public services had already received – or felt they had received – quite a severe mauling, and it struck me throughout the 1980s that this hadn’t happened to us yet - but surely it would sooner or later? My perception at the time, as I remember it now, was that ACOP (the association of Probation chiefs) also had its concerns, and that they would release some material periodically arguing that Probation was cheaper than prison, sometimes using dodgy analysis.

Indeed, well into the 1990s I would still see someone announcing that a week in prison cost x times more than a week on Probation – a fact correct in itself that I’d periodically seen being trotted out since my training days. But it was obvious to me at the time – so surely it would be obvious to our critics too – that this was a false analysis, since a two-year Probation Order was rarely the “alternative” to a three-year prison sentence (two years in custody allowing for remission then). In terms of a ‘penal tariff’, a Probation Order was more the equivalent of a three or six month prison sentence, and here the cost argument was considerably less compelling. There was actually a much stronger cost argument to be made for a 120-hour CSO in the 1990s, and one I sought to promote to some extent, though I still wasn’t keen on this being the main justification for our existence.

The other argument that started to grow in the late 1980s, and even more so during the 1990s, was the ‘public protection’ argument. I regularly heard some eminent chiefs and/or policy advisers announcing that Probation played a key role in “keeping the public safe” by containing dangerous offenders in the community. This argument worried me greatly at the time, and although many of the predictions I have made over the years have been completely wrong, on this one I was sadly proven right, even to a greater extent than I had feared, as I have covered earlier.

It was because of these doubts that I gave a great deal of time and attention to devising ways of measuring the effectiveness of Probation work in my Berkshire days, and updating and developing it when at the Inspectorate. I have outlined earlier that initially I developed a model based on what I called “RSSR” (Resources, Standards, Satisfaction & Results), and then as Chief suddenly realised that I should sharpen the focus predominantly onto the ‘operations’, and refocused instead on Compliance, Likelihood of Reoffending and Risk of Harm.

I’ve written much more about this elsewhere, and although once again I’ve never been entirely comfortable that I’ve found the ideal terminology I’ve remained sure that what I call the Three Purposes of Probation is the best available basis for managing Probation work effectively. For me it has stood the test of time as both a chief executive and as the Chief Inspector, and over seven years after my retirement the core idea was still continuing at the heart of how the Inspectorate was working. And when the onetime NOMS (National Offender Management Service) of the early 21st century was promoting the idea of “Punish, Help, Change and Control” I saw this underlying concept as being very comparable, since the Punish idea paralleled Compliance, while Help and Change paralleled Likelihood of Reoffending, and Control paralleled Risk of Harm. I have set this out in much greater detail on my website.

The key point here - for me – is that it was late in my career that I found a way of identifying in a just-about measurable way how Probation work benefited society as whole. Probation practitioners hold individuals to account for complying with the requirements of their Order or Licence (a tangible retribution for the offence), and they embark on a series of constructive and/or restrictive interventions to maximise each individual’s opportunity to learn to behave differently, and/or to minimise that individual’s opportunity to do more harm in the meantime. And I defined how each of these would be measured. As the Chief in Berkshire, I felt able to promote the work of my Service in the local community on this basis, and as Chief Inspector to explain that this was what I was looking for from Probation work as a whole (and from Youth Offending work too).

A key difference from when I first started my career is that it is only certain effective practices, rather than all Probation practice, which brings the desired results – this we owe to the helpful effect of the ‘What Works?’ movement. This, together with the even more helpful redirection towards the idea of ‘Desistance’ as a personal journey by each offender, has brought a renewed emphasis on the value of individualised practice. This means finding what works best with each individual rather than applying a menu of block ‘treatments’, or just seeing Probation work as somehow more inherently beneficial in its own right. It is as an individualised service that I see Probation work, at its best, being an overall benefit to society.

Over 40-odd years I’ve got lots of things wrong of course. Although I greatly admired the Community Service scheme in Wiltshire when I was there, I didn’t find how to develop or promote anything comparable later in my career when I was arguably in a position to do so. I was slow to see the constructive uses to which electronic monitoring could be put, if employed within a wider ‘package’ of measures. “Throughcare”, or Probation work in prisons, did not progress on my watch despite my enthusiasm for it. Among a number of failed predictions I was definitely wrong in thinking that the advantages to be gained by creating the 2001 National Probation Service would outweigh its disadvantages.

Nevertheless I think I was a tolerably “sufficient” PO, maybe a bit better than average as SPO, and maybe better still as a senior manager and inspector, although other people will have to be the judge of that. And on a number of subjects I have started by taking a viewpoint that was either not popular, or even flatly disapproved of, and found over time that it has become the established view or policy: examples include RMIS & CRAMS (IT software), offender employment work, how to define and ‘measure’ public protection, and doing inspections by examining what people actually do rather than by scrutinising what their managers say they do. This led me to suggest in my retirement speech in May 2011, only partly tongue-in-cheek, “Remember: Andrew is always proven right in the end!”

As I’ve described elsewhere, I’m not against change – not even necessarily against changes in how Probation is managed – but I have sought to warn against seeing organisational change as the key answer to how to make things better. I’ve sought to promote incremental improvement in day-to-day practice, rather than radical innovation – simple-sounding ‘blanket’ approaches come in fashions, and rarely survive evidenced analysis when ‘rolled out’ for widespread use.

My conclusion, in my last years in the job, that effective Probation work was still about practitioners using their ‘influencing skills’ to “Do the Right Thing with the Right Individual in the Right Way at the Right Time”, was in truth a rewording of what many people in Probation have known for a long time. The art of being an effective manager or inspector is to find and use the best ways of ‘making that happen’ – influencing skills are a big part of that too. If Probation staff and managers can keep focusing on improving that individualised practice year by year, then more offending will be prevented each year. As a result, both those erstwhile offenders and society as a whole will continue to benefit.

*A footnote for academics, theorists, planners and policymakers:*

*Taking an evidence-based approach involves not just drawing on the evidence that seems to support what you already think. Probation planning needs to be much more like the scientific method, as described by Carl Sagan:*

“At the heart of science is an essential balance between two seemingly contradictory attitudes: an openness to new ideas, no matter how bizarre or counterintuitive they may be, and the most ruthless sceptical scrutiny of all ideas, old and new. This is how deep truths are winnowed from deep nonsense.”

## 19. Valedictory: My 2011 Tribute to those who do Probation work well

I’m grateful to Liz Calderbank, who suggested to me early in 2011 that I might want to ‘broadcast’ some general thoughts about Probation at the point of my retirement, and at a ‘neutral’ suitable venue. This is what I decided to say.

**Probation & Youth Offending work: A Tribute to those who do it well**

***A lecture given by Andrew Bridges at the University of Oxford in May 2011***

**Opening:**

Well, good afternoon everyone .... I’m very flattered that everyone here has made the choice to come along today and find out what I’ve got to say on this occasion, virtually my last public appearance as Chief Inspector of Probation. My curiosity is almost as great as yours – like the absent minded but enthusiastic Methodist minister, I can’t wait to hear whatever it is I’ve got to say!

The element of truth in that old joke is that, a bit like preachers who are invited to take the pulpit, you find that when you are asked as a Chief Executive or a Chief Inspector to give a speech on a particular subject, you then have to work out what it is you want to say – it forces you to come up with some seriously thought-through views and opinions on a subject where perhaps you previously didn’t have any!

It’s an aspect of rising to the top – like cream, or that other stuff that rises to the top – that I hadn’t particularly expected when I first came into senior management almost exactly 22 years ago. I therefore had to work out how to give a speech, and at the same time hope that I wouldn’t be found out as a total fraud. I’m hoping to get away today on one final occasion without being ‘found out’.

On that note of caution, I shall nevertheless explain why I have decided to make my farewell speech a “tribute”, and what precisely I mean by that tribute. It’s a tribute because I have always been in awe of the colleagues I’ve seen at every level who’ve got what it takes to ***influence other people for the better*** through the way that they talk with and listen to them.

You can tell from the title of my talk that this is not a case of unconditional praise for everyone and anyone who has ever been a member of a Probation or Youth Offending service1 - You wouldn’t expect that from an Inspector, would you? I and my Inspectorate colleagues have been very critical at times of what we have seen as Poor or Insufficiently good practice, and I’m not going to withdraw now any of the criticisms we’ve made on a number of occasions in the last seven years while I’ve been Chief Inspector.

**The Fourth Estate: a greedy and lazy wolfpack:**

But I am going to have a go at our noble Fourth Estate here: You wouldn’t know from reading Press reports that we ever had anything positive to say about anything that Probation or Youth Offending staff had ever done well. The most striking recent example of this is when we wrote a real ‘Prodigal Son’ story on London Probation last year, saying that whereas their Public Protection work had been very weak in the past, we were pleased to report that it was now considerably improved, albeit there was still some further progress that yet needed to be made.

1 In England & Wales in May 2011, a sentenced offender aged 18 or over is managed by one of 35 Probation Trusts, while a sentenced offender aged under 18 is managed by one of 158 Youth Offending Teams or Services.

Now I know you’re going to find this hard to believe, but our noble sturdy journalist friends are not quite as ‘independent’ as they would have you believe, and with daily news events they have a strong tendency to go to an instant consensus among themselves about what the story is, and then all take the same line in reporting it. They behave like a wolfpack in other words, a wolfpack that is both greedy and lazy. Any England football manager who’s ever lost a match – and that’s all of them then, isn’t it? – can vouch for that.

Because this is where the laziness comes in: if a person or organisation is ‘out of favour’ with the public – as the Probation Service currently still is - the lazy journalist will simply reproduce the usual bad news story, and indeed resurrect an old one to put in alongside it while they’re about it.2 Our report last autumn was about how much London Probation had improved its practice – but the media headlines were all about what they were still doing badly! A month after we published that London report, Ofsted did a remarkably similar Prodigal Son story about London schools: they used to be bad but now they are better (I paraphrase you understand). This was correctly reported, unlike the London Probation story.

Now I do understand the argument that ‘Good News is no News’, and as one journalist has rightly said to me twice “It’s not news that all your dustbins were emptied correctly and on time last week” – and that’s a fair point. But I do get the impression that if Prodigal Sons were out of favour, our press pack could have listened to Jesus recounting the story of the Prodigal Son, and written it up with the headline “Prodigal Son now Stinks”. If you know the parable you’ll know that this would not be untrue, but it would be yet another case of *hitting the headline and missing the point*..... again.

If this is being quoted for the record let me reiterate: “Retiring Chief Inspector says that the greedy and lazy Press wolfpack often hits the headline and misses the point.” This syndrome is of course also seen in coverage of science, medicine and health, as well as of Probation and Youth Offending work.

A further symptom of this is that in my seven years in post I have sometimes been challenged by a journalist, perfectly reasonably, to justify some positive assessment I’ve made – or, less reasonably, it’s been rubbished. OK, these things happen – but I’ve ***never*** ever been challenged on any of our negative assessments: “Don’t you think you’ve been a bit harsh/unreasonable?”, or “Haven’t you just been wise after the event?” - these are questions no media person has ever asked me. Now, in case you’re wondering, I’d certainly have very strong answers to those questions3, but my point here is that for the reasons I’ve already given I’ve never been asked them by journalists.

2 I wish I had royalties for the number of times a new ‘bad news’ story about public protection leads to a ‘reminder’ story about the Inspectorate reports on either Hanson and White (who murdered the banker John Monckton) or Anthony Rice (who murdered Naomi Bryant). Both reports were published early in 2006. Some recent summaries have even quoted us completely incorrectly, the reader will be astonished to learn. In neither report did we describe the failure as “systemic” – with Hanson & White the failure was “collective”, and with Rice the failure was “cumulative”, and we explained what we specifically meant by these terms in both instances.

3 We have gone out of our way to set expectations that are high but not so high as to be impossible – because we want practitioners to achieve the possible, our inspection criteria are pitched so that they are *demanding and yet achievable*.

**Three-dimensional mundane truths rather than two-dimensional exciting fallacies:**

Does this matter? It does if you agree with a point made by Wilbert Rideau, the black man who served 44 years in Louisiana prisons before his release in 2005. In his book *In the Place of Justice* he mentions, almost in passing, that: “The biggest obstacle to meaningful reform is the popular misconceptions about criminals, and society’s misguided efforts to cope with them.”4

One of the many things that impressed me about Rideau, in his book, was that his account is in three dimensions rather than two. With his original crime he did a terrible thing, which he does not excuse, and it was actually committed at a time when he’d been given a break. He wouldn’t have fitted comfortably into the easy category of either a “deserving case” or “undeserving case” in the dichotomy that many people like to operate. Thinking in three dimensions rather than two is so important in Probation and Youth

Offending work, because much of the job is to explain reprehensible behaviour – very reprehensible sometimes – and at the same time one has to reaffirm constantly that to *explain* is not the same as to *excuse5*.

So this is one probably final occasion when I can go on the record, as I have done on a number of previous occasions, to highlight that Probation and Youth Offending work is often done very well indeed. I don’t retract my previous criticisms of when it wasn’t done well – they were still true, at the time – but in the interests of Fair Comment I like to see the positives and negatives in proportion, alongside each other.

However, before my former colleagues, and current victims of our inspections, get too excited about this prospect, I shall go further now in explaining the meaning of my title this afternoon. My topic is not principally about the organisations that currently provide Probation or Youth Offending services: - I, like this Inspectorate that I’m leaving, am not focusing on the *organisations* – I’m focusing on the ***work***, whoever does it.

I’ve seen excellent work done with individuals who have offended - in prisons by Prison Officers, instructors, psychologists and other Prison staff, as well as by seconded Probation Officers; or outside prison by voluntary organisations or even electronic monitoring contractors as well as by Probation or Youth Offending staff themselves. My tribute is to those who do the work well, whoever does it, if they do it well.

Why am I impressed with these practitioners and their managers? Because they are working with *three-dimensional* mundane truths – such as explaining why this individual committed this particular offence on this occasion. But they are doing this work in the context of the *two-dimensional* public debates about the nature of crime that are mainly based on exciting fallacies.

For we have penal hawks that say prison is the only real answer to crime, because it deters the individual and others, and also protects the public; and we have penal doves who say that this only makes people worse and stores up more trouble for the future, and that we should always focus on helping people instead.

4 Wilbert Rideau, *In the Place of Justice*, Random House, New York, 2010; p106 of Profile Books edition 2011.

5 John Major, mainly a decent politician, once disappointingly asserted that people should “understand a little less, and condemn a little more” – this is not the correct dichotomy.

These opposing panacea are both two-dimensional exciting fallacies, as indeed are other panacea such as improving the diet of young people, scaring people straight, or religious conversions – these and others are all variously put forward at various times as universal methods of “curing offenders”. So once again now, I am calling for “Less heat, and more light” in our public debates on this subject.

For I have constantly found it bizarre that the public debate on offending is conducted in such a fashion. We probably wouldn’t get two medical doctors into a studio, and have one arguing that all patients should be treated with antibiotics, and the other doctor saying that they should all be treated with aspirin. Though I must now immediately hasten to add here that I believe strongly that offending should not be regarded as if it were a medical condition, of which people need to be ‘cured’. Moreover, there are certainly potential pitfalls for us from using terms like ‘treatment’ and ‘dosage’ in our work.

I find it much more valuable for practice to think in terms of ‘desistance’, as usefully employed in recent years by those such as Stephen Farrell, Shadd Maruna, and Fergus McNeill6, than think of people who offend as simply being ‘sick’ in some way, and needing to be ‘cured’.

However, and this is where we move from *exciting fallacies* to *mundane truths*, there are some *analogies* that do hold good across the two disciplines. The mundane truth in these and indeed many other ‘personal services’ is that the work is about doing the Right Thing with the Right Individual in the Right Way at the Right Time, although one key difference with both Probation and Youth Offending work is that this individualised service is one that the individual does not necessarily want to receive!

The recipient of the service is therefore not the “client” in that normal meaning of the word, and instead, for the modern effective practitioner, the “client” – the beneficiary of the service being provided – is *society as a whole*, the taxpayer as we sometimes say. Hence success is accordingly defined ultimately in terms of ‘benefit to society’. In the managerial language we currently tend to use, the practitioner is delivering a service to a recipient of that service, but the beneficiary of that service is *society as a whole* – though in many cases we very much hope that the individual who has offended will also benefit in the long run. That’s why I say that it’s *three-dimensional work* being done in the context of a *two-dimensional public debate*.

**What is the practitioner being required to achieve? -  
- Three (or four) purposes of Probation and Youth Offending work:**

What is the practitioner being required to achieve? I’ve previously suggested, and I still do suggest, that there are three measurable core purposes to be achieved in all cases. There are some additional purposes in some cases, but the core three are:

First, Compliance and Enforcement: The purpose of getting the person under supervision to comply with the requirements of the sentence of the Court, including what we now call Community Payback, and to take Enforcement action should they fail to comply - this ‘***ensuring that the individual serves their sentence’*** is a purpose in its own right, and with care it can be measured as such.

6 For example: Fergus McNeill & Beth Weaver, *Changing Lives: Desistance Research and Offender Management* (Glasgow School of Social Work, 2010)

Second, Likelihood of Reoffending: The practitioner should engage with the individual who has offended and get them in turn to engage with a range of *constructive* work – this enables the individual to become ***measurably less likely to offend again in future***.

And third: *Risk of Harm to others*: The practitioner needs to monitor the behaviour of the individual, and, using what we call *restrictive* interventions where necessary, take all reasonable action in order to ***minimise that person’s Risk of Harm to others***. The Probation Inspectorate has established a way of measuring that too.

When working with under-18s there is additionally a fourth purpose, the ‘Safeguarding’ or Child Protection purpose of minimising the risk of that young person coming to harm, either from self or from others.

Although these first three purposes are separate they do also overlap; and although they overlap, they are still separate, like a three-way Venn diagram, and they are measured by three separate means, as I have outlined elsewhere in a paper, available on our website.7 They are three separate but overlapping purposes, measured in three complementary ways – or four, in the case of Youth Offending work.

In some cases, whether adult or young, you might find you also have one further purpose to achieve – a restorative justice purpose. This work is normally a good thing, though I’m not saying much more about it today, as this purpose will apply only in some cases.

So, in summary, each practitioner should engage effectively with each individual under supervision to plan and deliver an individualised service that achieves those *three measurable core purposes*, plus that ‘safeguarding’ purpose with those under 18.

Now I wouldn’t think that that’s too earthshattering for most practitioners and managers, and nor is it too alien to the best traditions of the past. During the 80-plus years of the “Advise, Assist and Befriend” era it was still normal Probation practice to be saying to the probationer something like “Although what we talk about might be voluntary, actually seeing me each week is compulsory”. There were debates about whether Probation work was about ‘care’ or ‘control’, and whether or not you could or should do both – but the majority thought you had to do both, even in the 1970s. We sometimes, on occasions, even positively recommended custodial sentences – and I certainly wasn’t the only one to do so in that decade.8

7 And also reproduced as an Appendix at the end of this paper.

8 True, we were somewhat hit and miss in those days when it came to public protection, though I do recall a colleague of mine in Swindon in the 1970s threatening a young man with breach if he didn’t come with him right now to the VD clinic (as they were then called) to get treatment for his sexually transmitted disease, because the young man worked in a fairground, and my colleague Chalky White rightly considered him a health danger to young women. Chalky was actually reprimanded by the Assistant Chief for exceeding his legal powers – technically correct. But most of us thought - and I still think - that because he then took the young man in person to the clinic himself when his bluff worked – to the benefit of both the individual and any potential future victims - that Chalky did a good job that day, and indeed most other days too for that matter.

**What are individuals who have offended like?**

And what are these people like, the ones who have offended, with whom Probation and Youth Offending staff, and other staff, have to work in order to achieve the three purposes I’ve outlined? Of course, to the tabloid media they are, in the customary two-dimensional language, “thugs, louts and lags”, and to show any trust or optimism towards any of them ever is to be regarded as weak or naïve and to be exposed to the most vitriolic criticism. Even our Ministers are lampooned in the tabloid press as “buffoons” if they dare to show even an ounce of decency towards sentenced offenders. And it’s true that many offenders have indeed done some very selfish, thoughtless or mean things, and some much worse – and furthermore I also agree that it doesn’t do for well-meaning people to play down the nature and quantity of crime, and its impact on individual victims.

But, as people in this theatre will already know well, offenders are not a separate class of monstrous sub-humans – another exciting fallacy – but instead we know that over a third of males over 30 have a conviction for an imprisonable offence, and quite a few more have committed such offences without being convicted. Offending behaviour, in various forms, is as we know much more widespread than is popularly imagined. The mundane truth here is that the Criminal Justice System is only dealing with certain parts of the whole spectrum of offending behaviour that is going on at any one time. Within that spectrum, some of those ‘offending individuals’ have, in doing so, additionally betrayed the trust sometimes invested in them by a Probation Officer or a Judge.

The fact that offending is a wide continuous spectrum also illustrates why the alternative presupposition, to see offenders as a separate group of people who are sick and need treatment, is also two-dimensional, and therefore problematic and ultimately unsatisfactory, even though there are the various parallels with medicine that I think are sometimes interesting to make, when it comes to describing what I mean by an individualised service9.

If we therefore find useful, as I do, the language of those who talk about *desistance*, and even the *path to redemption*, and the idea of thinking of it as a *personal journey*, especially for those with either a long or a dramatic criminal record, how does the effective practitioner assist this journey?

It was in order to achieve the second of those three purposes, to help people to learn and change and thereby become less likely to reoffend, that most practitioners came into these types of jobs. And it certainly helps if these workers are not stuck on just one approach to achieving that. Any worker who thinks that every case they work with just needs ‘helping’, or ‘saving’, or ‘curing’, or ‘punishing’, is certainly failing to handle each case as an individual human being – though they may have some success with the cases who happen to respond to their preferred approach.

I’ll say more shortly about assessments that tell us more about the worker than it does about the person under supervision, but my point at this stage concerns our core presuppositions about offending and those who offend. During my two year Diploma in Social Work at Leicester in the early 1970s, to qualify me as a Probation Officer, some of us were keen in those days to reject the ‘psychosocial’ theories, that offending was a personal dysfunction mainly inside the offender’s own head, and we examined with interest the alternative idea of offending as alienation, and as a quasi-political rejection of conventional society.

9 My *a fortiori* argument here is that if a medic needs to apply a highly individualised approach to doing the right thing with the right individual in the right way at the right time when treating the sick, then that individualised approach is *even more* necessary when dealing with an even wider spectrum of individual needs and circumstances.

In practice, in my career since then I have perhaps come across a few individuals with that conscious aim to rebel against conventional society, but they’ve been a tiny minority. What is most striking to a practitioner, in my experience, is how far most of the individuals we see have very conventional aspirations, and so often their offending arises out of their failure to be able to conform, or to achieve their rather conventional aspirations by legal means. As one very blasé 16-year-old persistent offender put it to me once in Huntercombe Young Offender Institution, not far away from this University, “My problem is that I’ve got a champagne lifestyle and a lemonade income.”

Like him, many do very selfish and mean things as a consequence of their own failure – and I’ve hated being a victim of crime when it’s happened to me – but I’m constantly reminded that a large majority of people who have offended are much more conventional in their aspirations than I had ever expected when I first started this career. Offenders of all ages encompass a wide range of individual human beings, and it is with this wide range that we want our practitioners to work effectively, and to achieve the purposes I outlined a few minutes ago.

**What does *Doing Probation & Youth Offending work well* look like?** What does it look like, when you do Probation or Youth Offending work well?

Most of you know the answer to this already, at one level. As a practitioner you’ve assessed each of your 50 or so cases sufficiently well: you have placed on the record why you think that this particular individual committed these particular current offences at this time, and you have planned what you think should be done in future to make further offending less likely. In oversimplified words, you have analysed what the problem is, and you have proposed what you think should be done about it.

(By the way, I have to advise you at this point that all my experience as an Inspector, and prior to that as a practitioner and manager, has been that practitioners have until now tended to be much better at saying what the problem is, and not so good at saying what they plan to do about it – but today we’ll focus on those who do both well.)

As a good practitioner you will have done both – that’s the assessment and the plan – and then you’ve taken that individual with you as you’ve *engaged* him or her in that plan, and under your direction the main purposes of supervision get achieved, under the three headings, or more, that I outlined earlier.

There are lots of ways of achieving those purposes with each very different and individual case, and the effective practitioner uses good interpersonal skills – ‘social work skills’ we used to call them, but the label’s not important – to *engage* with the individual under supervision, and draw them down the path of *wanting to change* and then *learning to change and improve*, especially to achieve that second purpose of becoming less likely to reoffend.

What was once called the “casework relationship”, increasingly pooh-poohed for most of the last thirty years or so, has recently re-emerged as “engagement with offenders”. It’s clearer now than it sometimes used to be that the effective use of the practitioner’s interpersonal skills should not be seen as an end in itself – as the “casework relationship” sometimes seemed to be regarded in the past – but it should instead be seen as an *influencing skill* – and as a means to an end. It’s a means of influencing someone under supervision to turn up to their appointments, engage constructively in the supervision process, and thus become less likely to reoffend. And it’s the practitioners who do this well that impress me.

Linked to this point I would add, from personal experience in the late 1970s, that the most satisfying cases were the tiny number where I said or did something which then had a ‘transformational’ effect on the person under supervision. To be candid, it was a pretty rare event, and with one exception I had not been *implementing a plan* – rather, I had simply seized an opportunity to get through that person’s defences. These occurrences were rewarding, but very unusual, at least for me.

**Tools that help the practitioner to do the work well:**

Hence an important new factor in the last 15 years has been the advent of structured assessment tools. These were necessary, because researched experience had shown that assessments that relied solely on an individual practitioner’s personal judgement were not particularly effective, and often said as much about the practitioner’s personal interests as it did about the individual being assessed. (Incidentally, I gather that research into medical diagnoses has led to some similar findings in medical practice too.)

The new assessment tools usually incorporate an actuarial element that implies some kind of ‘prediction’ – a prediction that is often misunderstood. It doesn’t say that this individual is, say, 70% likely to reoffend; instead it says that of 100 people *with the same history, profile and characteristics as this individual*, 70 will reoffend and 30 won’t. What the tool won’t, and indeed can’t, tell you is *whether this individual will be one of the 70* or *one of the 30*.

Accordingly, it is when reflecting on this information that the skilled practitioner makes that assessment, first, on whether this person might become one of the 70 or one of the 30, and, more importantly, plan to take the action that will ***make it more likely*** that the person will become ***one of the 30 who doesn’t reoffend***, rather than ***one of the 70 who does***.

What I’ve just described is Simple to Say, but Difficult to Do, which is why I admire the skilled practitioners who do this well.

This also illustrates why it is not reasonable to expect practitioners, or even their managers, to be able to eliminate risk entirely, either to vulnerable individuals or to the wider public – but it is reasonable to expect such staff to do their jobs properly. To do this the skilled practitioner, accountable to their manager, will take all reasonable action to keep those risks of harm to a minimum. Given that they are working with people who are at liberty in the community – people who have offended who are not, or no longer, locked up, but instead are simply “subject to rules” - it should not be surprising that catastrophes can still happen, even when the work has been very good. Thankfully this is a very rare occurrence – in the order of one in 200 of *cases already classified as being of high or very high Risk of Harm to others10* – but it will of course still grab media attention if the impact of the event captures the public’s imagination.

10 I employ cautious ‘in the order of’ statistics, on the principle that just because it is difficult to define precisely where a forest begins and ends this doesn’t make it impossible to say something meaningful about the relative sizes of, say, the New Forest and the Amazon rainforest. In this instance I am basing my evidenced assertion on the pattern of figures for Serious Further Offences (SFOs) alleged to have been committed by people subject to Level Two or Level Three supervision under Multi-Agency Public Protection Arrangements (MAPPA), although there have been some detailed changes in the recording and reporting of MAPPA statistics in recent years. The most recent ‘MAPPA Annual Report’, for 2009/2010, published by the Ministry of Justice as an independently validated Statistics Bulletin on 27/10/10, reported on page 2 that a total of 9,636 cases were managed at Levels 2 or 3 throughout 2009/2010 (8,793+843). It also reported, on page 3, that 34 of these (31+3) were charged with an SFO (i.e. not necessarily convicted, but the outcome isn’t known until later). This gives a ratio of one in 283 just for those charged. However, although figures from previous years are not directly comparable, because of changed counting arrangements, they have historically shown a slightly higher ratio - so I have found it ***safe*** to give a figure of ‘in the order of one in 200’.

We should be sympathetic and not unduly surprised at this: It is human to have an emotional relationship with Risk. That feeling of “It Could Be You” is the one that encourages people to buy National Lottery tickets, even though the odds are worse than at your local casino or betting shop. And it is the reverse version of the same human feeling that is triggered by news of a new victim of a serious crime. The sheer magnitude of the prospective event brings out that emotional feeling that “It could have been me” that distracts us from the true rational very low probability of that event actually happening.

HM Inspectorate of Probation was one of the very first to declare to the public that point that risk to the public could not be eliminated, but it was right that the public should expect people to do their jobs properly.11 By saying this we wanted to avoid using 20/20 hindsight to criticise practitioners for failing to achieve the impossible, and instead we wanted to judge whether they were achieving what was possible. To this end we devised our way of assessing with each case inspected whether all reasonable action was being taken to minimise the individual’s *Risk of Harm to others*.

We have been doing that through our case inspections for several years now, and overall, we have seen some excellent public protection work, and we have found that nearly three-quarters of Probation practice, and nearly two-thirds of Youth Offending practice, has met the high level of quality we have been looking for in terms of that public protection practice12. I would like to see higher percentages of course, but today my attention is on those who are already doing this very difficult job well, and the majority are.

**Who does it better than others? What does good practice look like?**

This does lead me to comment briefly on what I find to be another strange phenomenon. Given that this is all individual practice by individual practitioners, it seems strange to me how quickly some people look to jump to the conclusion that one piece of poor practice, or one dodgy Community Payback placement, means that that whole organisation can simply be assassinated. What seems odd to me is that while sometimes we tend to overcomplicate the job – as I’ll touch on later - sometimes, as here, we simplify it too much. It is madness to dismiss the entire value of a particular Probation Trust, Youth Offending Team, or business or voluntary organisation, just on the basis of one piece of poor practice. Alternatively, however, one can judge an organisation instead on the basis of a *representative sample* of its work – which is what the Probation Inspectorate does.

In our inspections we examine such representative samples, and we make judgements about whether a piece of work was done well enough or not, and we aggregate those 100s of qualitative judgements into quantitative ‘scores’ that report how often different aspects of the work were done well enough. The fact is that even in some of the very low- scoring areas we have still found examples of good practice, and even in the high-scoring areas we have found examples of *insufficient* practice – the difference between the areas is in the proportions of *Sufficient* rather than *Insufficient* quality of work.

11 In February 2006 HMI Probation published An Independent Review of the case of Damien Hanson and Elliot White (who had murdered the London banker John Monckton). The first Principal Finding, on page 4, began with the words: “When an offender is being supervised in the community it is simply not possible to eliminate risk altogether, but the public is entitled to expect that the authorities will do their job properly.”

12 HM Inspectorate’s ‘aggregate’ reports, published in March 2011, showed that to date 72% of *Risk of Harm to others* work by Probation Trusts, and 62% by Youth Offending Teams and Services, was meeting the high level of quality that the Inspectorate was looking for.

And it isn’t just about supposedly good versus bad practitioners either, because no one gets all their own cases right all the time: I’m quite clear that during my eight years as a main-grade Probation Officer I sometimes looked back on a day, or even a whole case, and on some occasions I’d be thinking “I think I did OK there”, while on other occasions it was “Well I got that one wrong”. I very much doubt if I’m alone in that experience.

What makes the difference between whether you get good practice *frequently* rather than *rarely* is if you have the ethos in the organisation of reviewing and learning from experience. A well-managed organisation will find ways of promoting that sense that everyone is constantly learning, and is doggedly pursuing the long haul of continuous improvement. And I have to say that I am a much stronger believer in *continuous improvement*, rather than *innovation*. I don’t think that inventing new gimmicky panaceas is the most productive way forward when there are over 240,000 adult offenders to be managed in the community – it is more productive to pursue the long haul of continuous improvement, although that can include using *innovative ways of improving*.

This approach requires growing a strong *organisational culture*, which is the cumulative effect of numerous self-reinforcing *informal behaviours* and *mutual expectations of each other* by most staff. This positive culture is not easy to achieve or maintain during periods of repeated organisational upheaval – though not impossible! – so I will introduce at this point the contributions that can be made by managers, inspectors, academics and policymakers to enabling Probation and Youth Offending work to be done well.

**The contributions of management, inspection, academia and policymaking:**

And I’ll start this section with a few words about management and inspection.

Management generally is about ‘Making it Happen’, in the words of John Harvey Jones, and so it is very much part of the ***doing*** of the work. Independent inspection is about ***commentating*** instead of *doing* – but commentating on how well the work is being done. Inspection is a very privileged job to have – indeed I’ve upset a few colleagues by pointing out that in theory we can write almost what we like and then publish it at public expense. My point is that inspection is a privilege and that therefore we should take great care with how we exercise that privilege.

I outlined earlier how we produce quantitative scores by aggregating the qualitative judgements we have made about how well practice has been carried out. We aim to do this accurately, fairly, consistently and transparently, and we also aim to behave in such a way that practitioners and managers will want to respond by improving their practice. Inspection is therefore a particularly indirect means of promoting continuous improvement in practice across the country.

(In a brief commercial for the Inspectorate, I’ll also mention that because we measure quality of practice, working with *judgements* rather than *rules*, we provide a benefit that no other organisation can provide, thus achieving what the management wonks call ‘unique added value’. I also suggest that it’s a very poor quality cost-benefit analysis that’s being made by anyone who suggests that having the Inspectorate descend on you once every three years or so, to assess a sample of your work, is somehow imposing an unduly heavy “burden” on providers. On the contrary, our inspections are very proportionate.)

Meanwhile management is about achieving continuous improvement in practice in the first place – actually making it happen. It’s a genuinely complex job, as I can vouch for myself as a former Chief Probation Officer. For as a manager your influence on frontline practice is still somewhat indirect rather than direct – only on rare occasions can you directly witness and seek to influence frontline practice, unlike, say, Gordon Ramsey directing the chefs under him in his kitchen.

Management of Probation and Youth Offending work has to be largely somewhat indirect – as it also has to be in a number of other organisations – and therefore consists of using a wide range of *influencing skills* and strategies to achieve its purpose. The range of activities and behaviours you exercise as a manager of this work needs to be very varied, but essentially it all adds up to finding and using ways of *making good practice more likely to happen*, and poor practice less likely to happen. I think of it essentially as *growing the right behaviours.*

But don’t we just love to overcomplicate this exercise! There’s a whole industry of management trainers and consultants banging on about how to improve your management effectiveness by having Visions, Strategies, Business Plans, Action Plans, Plans for HR, Training, Communications, Equalities and Business Continuity – and you must be able to explain and give account for your ‘governance arrangements’ and relationships with your ‘stakeholders’. Now of course there is a nugget of golden truth inside each and every one of these elements of management life, but we tend to overlay them with so much overcomplicated dross that the cumulative weight of all these activities constantly threatens to displace attention from ensuring that the core work is actually still being achieved.

I have certainly noticed during the last 15 years how much management attention and energy is increasingly directed up the hierarchy, constantly giving account to and supporting the apex, rather than directed down towards the front line and making sure that the core work is being done as well as possible. (Numerous practitioners have told us that they feel that the interview they’ve just had with one of our inspectors is the closest thing they’ve had to ‘supervision’ for several years.)

Some organisations try to overcome this problem by appointing more managers, to spread the load of the extra work, but as some of you have heard me say rather a lot over the years, “Managers are like motorways – more often than not they simply create more traffic”. A large amount of any manager’s time is spent liaising and co-ordinating with other managers, and the more managers there are the more management time is spent doing this liaising, often resulting in each task being done several times, or even creating new *seemingly worthwhile but non-productive* tasks that now seem to need doing. It’s a real skill to be able to determine whether a particular manager post *adds genuine value* to the work of the organisation, or whether it is on balance *mainly creating more non-productive work* to be done.

Management work and behaviour is fascinating – I know, I have an MPhil from the School of Management at the University of Bath, and I really enjoyed it, but the mundane truth here is that effective management ultimately boils down to what makes good frontline practice more likely to happen, and ineffective management is what makes good practice *less* likely to happen – and that’s it! There’s no magic bullet to this, and there are lots of different *influencing actions* (and not just by managers) that can have the same positive effect in the right setting. The good ones are the ones that are all about *growing the right behaviours*.

Of course, practitioners sometimes do the right thing with the right individuals in the right way at the right time most of the time despite the fact that they are not particularly well managed, but they are more likely to work well if they are managed well. So managers impress me when they can show that they were clear what they wanted their organisation to achieve, and then achieved it by *taking their people with them*.

In Probation and Youth Offending work the practitioners are most effective when they believe in their work, so although formal instructions and other documentation might play a small part in the process I think it is when practitioners not only understand what their boss wants them to achieve, but also actually want to *achieve what their boss wants*, that effective practice takes off. In my view the most powerful driver for good practice is an ethos among team members that “This is the way we do things round here”, and where they help each other to achieve that. The team members, whether in a single team or across a large part of the organisation, sometimes grow this pattern of behaviour themselves, but effective managers will be the ones that find ways of *growing those behaviours* in their organisation.

My longer talk about effective Probation management13 also stresses the importance of *designing* the task well, and also equipping people with the *tools* to do the job – but that will have to wait for another time, because my main focus today is on Probation and Youth Offending practice itself, rather than management.

**Could we *‘institutionalise’ the Hawthorne effect?***

However, my point about ‘growing a culture’ becomes particularly relevant when we refocus on what it is that makes practice effective. The current emphasis on the ‘rehabilitation revolution’, and the renewed interest in local initiatives, highlights again a curious truth about practice that I have noted for over thirty years now.

It is very clear to me that practitioners working with offenders and others seem to achieve particularly good results when they see themselves as doing something new and exciting. Forty years ago it was ‘Intermediate Treatment’, then there was Groupwork and Family Therapy, then nearly twenty years ago the ‘What Works’ movement was developing, and showing very promising early results. Nowadays there are many new and exciting local projects and initiatives, including many with a strong element of the arts, using drama or dance – and many of them also produce impressive early results.

However, unfortunately, a lesson from the past is that, after a while, and as the numbers of people who have gone through these programmes increase over time, the results start to do that annoying thing that statisticians call ‘Regression to the norm’. As the particular work ceases to be new and exciting the results start to become average again. Statisticians can indeed be very annoying at times: As we pored over some performance data in my Berkshire days, looking for encouraging trends, our Information Manager would be there, saying “Don’t forget, in data analysis anything unusual or interesting is usually an error.”

13 My ancient presentation (November 2003) to new Assistant Chief Officers of Probation can be obtained from the author. Interestingly, I note that I placed an emphasis on the importance of ‘Quality of Engagement’ by practitioners with offenders, and on the need for management to develop that skill.

But cynicism about effectiveness has never been the lesson I have drawn from this phenomenon. I’m certainly not dissing the whole What Works movement of focusing on evidence-based practice. Because it remains true that work to improve people’s thinking skills, to reduce their addictions, and, especially, to get them into employment – each applied *as needed for each individual case* – is going to be more effective with *numerically more cases* than most other interventions.

And other specialist interventions too, such as anger management and sex offending programmes, will also have an effect with many other cases, where they have been correctly identified and allocated. Well-focused and designed interventions can produce reconviction rates that are between five and fifteen percent lower than they would otherwise have been14.

I’m taking all that as read, as will all the practitioners doing Probation and Youth Offending work well – all these interventions can assist an individual offender on his or her personal journey towards desistance. What I’m adding to all that is an additional factor: what the practitioners themselves see themselves as doing when they are at work – their phenomenology if you like, and the effect that their consequent behaviour has on the person under supervision. What has always struck me is that the thing in common with all the different successful projects, even when using very different methods, is that the practitioners think they’re doing something new and exciting, and their enthusiasm is evident to the individuals they are working with, to beneficial effect15. However, perhaps, when the novelty has worn off their effectiveness has tended to wane.

So I’ve had this working hypothesis in the back of my mind for over thirty years now that this phenomenon is a variation of the Hawthorne effect. This was where they experimented with lighting levels in an American factory in the 1930s, and found that production increased whether the lighting levels were increased or decreased – it seems that it was just doing something new and experimental that did the trick*16*.

Probation and Youth Offending practitioners feel enthusiastic and optimistic about what they are doing and have a strong desire to make it work. Enthusiasm is infectious, and it seems clear to me that if it is well focused the person on the receiving end is more likely to respond positively to this enthusiasm and be inspired to change their behaviour. I’m sure that many of you here will have seen that yourselves on occasions.

14 I’m reporting a very broad approximate range here, which reflects the tone of ‘What Works?’ summaries from a variety of sources. To cite just one, in a dense chapter on the subject, there is a summary table of the “Estimated Percentage Change in Recidivism Rates” for various Adult Corrections interventions on page 39 of *Reducing Offending: A Critical Review of the International Research Evidence, NIO Research and Statistical Series; Report No: 18*, published by the Northern Ireland Office in November 2008. It illustrates the variety of results for different interventions in different settings, and highlights why my claim here could be seen as both too timid and too reckless. However, my comment is also consistent with figures reported by the Ministry of Justice’s Analytical Services, and is designed to capture the right tone of what it might be realistic to expect in the long-term when introducing new structured specialist interventions.

15 For me, this train of thought was triggered in 1979 by my reading of *Prophecy, behaviour, and change: An examination of self-fulfilling prophecies in helping relationships*, by Gerald Smale (Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1977)

16 I do realise that there continue to be revisions to the interpretation of the original Hawthorne experiments in an American factory in the 1930s, when an experimental group of workers improved production when the level of lighting changed, whether it went up or down, so I’m making no claims to strict authenticity here.

Remember, my point here is that this enthusiasm is not a new magic bullet, and it doesn’t displace the relevance of evidence-based practice, but it is a component that I think is not sufficiently recognised. And it is something that has to be taken into account when looking to draw lessons from new and exciting projects, whether local or national, where the initial success may appear to recede over time. For the lesson from such events is not “It’s all a waste of time in the long run”. Instead the lesson is to think about how that enthusiasm and excitement can be either prolonged or renewed, to enable the work to continue to be effective. I give a deliberately paradoxical name to what leaders and managers need to do here – they need to try to *institutionalise the Hawthorne effect.17*

And this of course readily links with the approach I’ve advocated elsewhere, such as in my recent work in New Zealand – skilled practitioners will work positively if they are given responsibility to make their own decisions about how to achieve effective results, and be accountable for those decisions, within set boundaries. We see that in the best practice we examine during our inspections – and we also have sometimes seen the opposite, because what you *tell yourself you are doing* can speak volumes. If you think your job is just to ‘fill in some forms’ rather than ‘to plan the work that needs doing’ you are hardly likely to inspire the individual under supervision to want to change.

Therefore policymakers and academics, as well as managers and inspectors, can all play their part in promoting practice which encourages and enables practitioners to plan and act skilfully, taking responsibility for, and giving account for, their decisions and actions. It’s a bit scary, both for managers who are used to micromanaging, and for practitioners who sometimes ask to be micromanaged, and of course sometimes bad things will still happen, but this job simply doesn’t work if you try to operate it through a detailed procedure manual.

Performance targets are one optional approach here, and they are not always necessarily a bad thing – well-chosen ones can usefully focus attention on an aspect of practice that might need to be sharpened up. But although performance targets can be useful,18 I’m afraid that too often in practice it has been a case of ‘Hitting the target and missing the point’. Unintended perverse incentives can lead to unintended perverse effects, such as when the police were incentivised to bring as many offenders as possible to justice it led to the acceleration of many early juvenile offenders into the criminal justice system in the mid-2000s19.

Policymakers and managers take note: Make very sure that you’ve thought through very thoroughly indeed what effect your decision is likely to have on the behaviour of the people who actually do the work. It’s no good having ‘big picture’ strategic ideas, thinking that you can leave it to some other operational people to work through in practice – that’s not good enough. You have to be able to see both the wood and the trees – or, if you prefer, to become a brilliant strategist as Napoleon was, you would have to be like him in always knowing where every single gun was. Because sometimes *the detail is how the strategy is achieved* (or is undermined if you get the detail wrong).

17 I’m merely claiming a mundane truth by saying that, alongside other considerations, if the organisation can somehow maintain over a long run the sense among practitioners that they are doing something new and exciting, and engage their enthusiasm, then it will be adding to the effectiveness of their frontline practice.

18 For example: Targets for completing Race and Ethnic Monitoring information for each case enabled effective monitoring of proportionate treatment by Probation, and within the Criminal Justice system as a whole.

19 And targets for Probation to complete initial assessments *quickly* led to many of them *not being done very well*.

And, policymakers, please learn from the evidence, as you expect practitioners to do. If there is one thing that is crystal clear from the last forty years, it is that so-called tough conditional alternatives to prison have up to now unfailingly led to more people ending up in prison. From 1968 to the early 1980s, and from the early 1990s to the present, suspended sentences and the promotion of other so-called ‘tough alternatives to custody’ have resulted in steady ***in***creases in the prison population.

This has arisen from the combination of two factors: first, despite everyone’s best intentions, many convicted individuals receive the ‘tough alternative’ sentences when they would not have previously received a prison sentence at all, and second, many of those individuals then reoffend and end up in custody where they might not previously have done so if the conditional alternative sentence had not been passed in the first place.

On one level, that’s their own fault of course, but it’s a reality that illustrates that many people who offend simply *don’t think about what they’re doing* – many of them would benefit instead from training in thinking through the consequences of their own behaviour. (That’s if you can engage with them skilfully enough to get them to attend and engage with that training!)

**If** what you want instead is to focus expenditure on imprisonment where *prison most evidently provides a benefit* then you’ll do what the whole system was doing in the 1980s, and which the juvenile system is doing now: You build a series of non-conditional measures in the criminal justice system that delay the first sentence of custody for many offenders, who then simply ‘grow out of crime’ anyway at minimum cost to the taxpayer. I call this ‘attrition management’ – and it’s both economical and surprisingly effective, on any reasonable cost-benefit analysis.

On the same train of thought, the irony for today is that by far the most cost effective reform to current imprisonment practice is one that for political reasons simply can’t be done. My analysis last year of the careful documentation by the Ministry of Justice of the End of Custody Licence scheme of 2008-10 showed that the final fortnight or so of an ordinary prison sentence involves locking up about 60 individuals at a cost of around 80 to 100 thousand pounds to prevent just one of those 60 committing just over one fairly ordinary offence during those two weeks or so.20 That looks expensive, by any rational cost-benefit analysis, as well as rather hard on the 59 or so individuals who are not going to reoffend during that fortnight.

However, this government painted itself into a corner by saying before the election that it absolutely wouldn’t ever reintroduce early release – so for political reasons, in the context of the two-dimensional public debate about prison, it’s a non-starter.

Overall, my key point here is that in their different ways managers, inspectors, academics and policymakers can all act in ways that make it harder for practitioners to do their jobs properly, or alternatively they can do things that actually promote good practice.

20 The Ministry of Justice Statistical Bulletins on the ECL scheme showed that, in round numbers, the release of 30,000 selected prisoners per annum, for just over a fortnight early, led to around 500 of them committing about 600 offences in total each year. [In 2008 31,318 were released early, and 497 individuals committed 658 alleged offences; in 2009, 29,371 were released early, with 454 individuals committing 584 further alleged offences.] NOMS’s cited cost of imprisonment was then around £40k per annum. That’s about £1,600 for each prisoner for a fortnight, and so the cost of imprisoning the 30,000 per year for a fortnight once again now that the ECL scheme has ended is about £48m. Divide that figure by 600 offences and we have £80k as the cost of preventing each offence. Of course this is not a direct variable cost, but it does become one each time a new prison is opened, or an existing one not closed.

And finally we can also confirm that Probation and Youth Offending work is entirely compatible with caring about the needs of the victims of crime. Sadly, Probation’s historic direct involvement with Victim Support schemes in many areas may be difficult to sustain in the current financial climate. However, the work done by Probation Service victim contact units, which is recognisably carried out on behalf of the Probation Service, will continue to be invaluable when it is done well.

Their work shows that although there are clearly some direct conflicts of interest between victims and offenders, Probation and Youth Offending work at its best is about trying to find constructive solutions for both, and is often succeeding. Well done, those of you who are doing such victim contact work that well.

**Summary:**

So can I summarise my key points? – I’ll have a go:

Probation and Youth Offending work is difficult to do well. You are trying to do the right thing with the right individual in the right way at the right time with a large number of infinitely different human beings. In this sense the work is always three-dimensional work - a mundane truth - but you are doing it the whole time in the context of a wide range of public debates dominated by two-dimensional exciting fallacies.

Management and inspection ***can*** actually get in the way of promoting improvement in practice if it gets it wrong by overprescribing and monitoring rules and procedures designed to tell practitioners what to do in any eventuality that might arise. But if instead we make it clear what are the bottom-line purposes we’re asking practitioners to achieve, and how we are going to measure those, then we can give skilled practitioners the discretion to make their own decisions about how they will work to achieve those purposes with each case, and be accountable for those decisions. That is the much more promising approach for management and inspection – and inspection has moved, and management does appear to be moving now, in that direction.

This means that each practitioner can keep asking herself or himself, not only at formal review times but at other times too:

First: “Am I holding this individual to the terms of the Court sentence or licence?” – that’s promoting compliance, and enforcing if and when needed –

Second: “Am I helping this person to become less likely to reoffend in future, and how will I evidence that?” – that’s using principally *constructive interventions* to achieve measurably reduced Likelihood of Reoffending

Third: “Am I taking all reasonable action to protect others from harm from this individual?” – that’s using principally *restrictive interventions* to minimise the individual’s *Risk of Harm to others*

And Youth Offending practitioners have a fourth purpose to achieve: “Am I taking all reasonable action to protect this young person from coming to harm, either from self or others?” – that’s minimising risk of harm to self.

**Conclusion:**

Relatively speaking, all this is Simple to Say, but Difficult to Do, and yet people who do Probation and Youth Offending work are doing all this well a lot of the time now, and doing that more often and better than before – though obviously I’d very much like it to be even more often. This is what continuous improvement is all about.

Those of you doing this work, in whatever organisations you do it, if you are part of this syndrome of *doing it well now*, and doing it better, and more often, then this is my tribute to you.

**Andrew Bridges  
HM Chief Inspector of Probation 2004-11**16 May 2011

**Appendix:  
A discussion re Outcomes of Probation, from October 2010**

The subject of Outcomes has always been *important-but-difficult*, and now it is becoming increasingly topical as well.

We have a new Government that says as part of its rehabilitation revolution that it wants to fund future work with offenders through Outcomes achieved rather than simply by volume of work done. (NB the language is now often about “Results” rather than “Outcomes” – but for the moment we’ll treat the terms as interchangeable.) Most informed people would recognise why *funding-through-Outcomes* is a very worthy aspiration, and would also recognise how difficult it will be to achieve in practice.

Looking at the NOMS side of things first, and on the specific problem of measuring reoffending, an enormous amount of work has been done in recent years to find a way of measuring reoffending rates in a way that might work as a performance management measure. The current results of this work are the published Local Reoffending Rates. My sad conclusion, however, is that I am entirely sympathetic to what NOMS is trying to do, but in the end I don’t think this works as a *performance management measure*, although it is certainly useful information. (I return to this point further below.)

Next, on the part of this Inspectorate too, we have sought to give due emphasis in principle to the importance of achieving Outcomes from offender management, and to so we’ve pursued a much broader interpretations of what might count as an Outcome. But I have to acknowledge that we have had pretty mixed success ourselves in managing this in practice.

As a brief background introduction to this, I refer to the chart attached, to illustrate that from the Inspectorate perspective there are three types of purpose that are achieved by supervising offenders. Each of these types of purpose has its own category of potentially measurable Outcome: The first is that the requirements of the sentence have been carried out – this is an end in itself, independent of the other two purposes of supervision. The second is that the offender is demonstrably less likely to reoffend; and the third is that the offender’s *Risk of Harm to others* has been kept to a minimum – there is an important distinction between this and the second purpose.

The Inspectorate has referenced this to NOMS’s own plain language terms of Punish, Help, Change, and Control – Punish being the first purpose, Help and Change being the second purpose and Control being the third. Anyone can also see that our inspection criteria, the chapter headings in our OMI2 reports, and some of our thematic reports too, all reference these core purposes and Outcomes as the context in which we assess the effectiveness of Probation work, and some aspects of Youth Offending work too.

I will add at this point that in consultative work that I have been invited to undertake in both New Zealand and Northern Ireland that the Probation Services there have found it helpful to reference those three core purposes, with their Outcomes, although the precise choice of language and terminology does vary a little - indeed I note that the current MoJ language refers to Punishment, Rehabilitation and Public Protection as the labels for what I see as these three core Purposes.

But how to assess the achieving of Outcomes in practice?-  
- Given that inspection is about assessing the quality of individualised practice – How Often is the Right Thing being done in the Right Way with the Right Individual at the Right Time, to sufficient quality? – we have found the core structure of our methodology to be very useful: we look at Assessments, Plans and Reviews, we look at delivery of Interventions, and achievement of Outcomes. You see that too in our chapter headings.

Yet we know that the chapter in our reports on Outcomes, which ought in principle to be the most important, is probably the least robust of our three key chapters in practice. At one time, when designing the first round of offender management inspections, we explored ways of trying to make the Outcomes chapter the first chapter of the whole report, in order to highlight its importance. But we couldn’t make that radical theory work in practice.

What you’ll see instead is that we have aimed to assess whether the three key purposes have been achieved - - Starting with Has the Punish purpose has been achieved? -This principally means “were the necessary appointments arranged to enable the person under supervision to comply with the sentence of the Court, or License?” – and/or “where there was a failure to comply, was enforcement action taken properly?”

We then also aim to ask whether all reasonable action was taken to keep this individual’s *Risk of Harm to others* to a minimum (the Control purpose), and finally we look for demonstrable evidence that the individual’s Likelihood of Reoffending has been reduced (the Help and Change purposes).

In the case of *Risk of Harm to others* we’re looking for evidence of vigilance and action taken when information arises of a potential raised danger to others – what we call the investigative approach – particularly by applying what we call *restrictive interventions*.

With likelihood of reoffending we are looking for achievements made through what we call *constructive interventions*, and we look to credit the case with any evidence, even soft evidence, of new learning or changed behaviours by the individual person under supervision.

It’s all relatively soft stuff, but in this section we’ve been trying to provide the opportunity for Probation to show that the offender has made some measurable progress in becoming less likely to reoffend since supervision started.

Returning to the topic in general, I don’t think that the problems we experience in trying to find ways of measuring Outcomes is due to a failure by managers or service designers to apply themselves properly; instead I think it is symptomatic of the nature of the work itself – it is difficult, though I believe that there are ways forward.

First, offender management is an individualised service (not *one-size–fits-all*), and so the measurement of progress has to allow for that - it’s different with each individual.

Second, more significantly, when any of us attempt to answer the ultimate question of whether reoffending is reducing in reality there is the dilemma of needing to choose between accuracy and promptness -  
- the longer you wait before measuring whether an individual or a cohort of offenders have reoffended, the more accurate you will be, but the more useless it will be as a feedback for current managers and practitioners.

The recent introduction of the Local Reoffending Rates looks to me like the ‘best available’ attempt to find the best compromise between accuracy and promptness, and my sad conclusion is that this ‘best compromise’ simply isn’t going to be good enough for *performance management* purposes. When receiving the latest quarterly report, the Chief Executive is not in a position to be able tell her/his staff specifically what they need to do differently (or more of), in response to the new figures. (However, it will certainly be useful for monitoring national trends.)

In response to these difficulties we in the Inspectorate therefore think we’re going to have to find ways of improving our own methodology, in order to provide as intelligent a measurement as we can of what Probation supervision is achieving. (After all, since we expect others to stay on the path of continuous improvement, we should try to do the same ourselves.) To try to improve our own methodology we’re currently reviewing our Outcomes sections of our OMI2 reports, and we are seeing ways in which they could be improved, in the light of experience and reflection.

I provide below the chart\* I referred to earlier. It is an adapted version of the one we published in our Annual Report in July 2010. It represents what we consider to be the three ***separate-but-overlapping*** purposes, the outcomes of which can be measured for *performance management* purposes. It also shows the relationship between them and the ***ultimate long-term aim of reducing reoffending***. This is still the ultimate aim, but for the reasons we’ve already covered it doesn’t work as a short-term performance measure.

Each of the shaded blocks on the chart are headline summaries of detailed specifications – some of the details need a lot of thinking through, and I am able to assist with this from current and previous experience. Nevertheless, it is achievable in my view, and the chart provides an overview of how Probation Outcomes can be measured.

Andrew Bridges HMCI Probation October 2010

(Paper first given at a regional briefing in Woking on 7 October 2010)

***\*Note: My ‘current’ version of the chart mentioned here can be found on page 6 of my ‘Prescription for making Probation work’ on the website* andrewbridgesprobation.com**

## 20. Further Reading:

The publications and other writings listed here can mainly be found on my website, though not in this sequence. Here I’ve just listed them in date order. They give some idea about what I thought at various times. I provide the date, title, publication if any, approximate length, and succinct description.

1974: ‘Is Casework an Art or a Science?’ (a training course essay), 5 pages; I advocated a rational scientific element to social/probation work even then.

1981: ‘Buddy, Can You Spare Me the Paradigm?’ (unpublished), 4pages: it’s probably for the best that this critique of the 1979 ‘Non-treatment Paradigm’ is now lost.

1982: ‘“Well Brian…”’ (Probation Journal), 2 pages: Stating my preference for people who could actually do the job well rather than merely talk about the job well.

1984: ‘Organisations: Even More Interesting than Shovels’ (Probation Journal), 3 pages: My first attempt to make organisational structure sound interesting as well as important.

1985: ‘The Youth Custody “Explosion”?’ (Probation Journal), 3 pages: Showing that the 1982 increase in YC numbers was merely the continuation of an existing upward trend.

1986: ‘Strategy, Structure and all that Jazz’ (Probation Journal), 2 pages: An early indication that I thought that Probation had more than one purpose to achieve.

1988: Book Review (Probation Journal), 1 page: Re ‘Managing by Objectives’ by Lorraine Parry-Khan: I was more positive than she was about the potential benefits of ‘MbO’.

1988: ‘Youth Custody Figures’ (Probation Journal), 2 pages: A very shortened summary of our large quantitative analysis of c2000 YC cases in the South-West Prison Region.

1989: ‘Sentenced to Dental Work? – a Fable’ (Justice of the Peace), 1 page: Referencing both Samuel Butler’s ‘Erewhon’ and the 1978 ‘Sentenced to Social Work?’ article of Bryant et al.

1991: ‘Waving or Drowning? A Phenomenology of the work of Senior Probation Officers’ (MPhil thesis, University of Bath), 202 pages: study of what 12 SPOs thought they were doing

1996: ‘It’s Jolly Good Being a Fellow!’, 2 pages: A light-hearted account of my life as a part-time ‘Probation Fellow’ at the University of Oxford for nine months in 1996.

1998: *Increasing the Employability of Offenders: an Inquiry into Probation Service Effectiveness* (University of Oxford), 40 pages: “Intervening” did actually increase employability!

1999-2001: A ‘Berkshire Performance Portfolio’ I assembled in 3 + 15 pages, and posted on my website in 2016: Illustrates how and why I think BPS performed well when I was Chief.

2003-2004: ‘How HMI Probation contributes to improving the Quality of supervision’,   
2 pages: two charts illustrating development of inspection methodology and rationale.

2005: ‘Assessing the Costs and Benefits of Inspection: a Case Study’, 19 pages: Written to illustrate that the current costs of inspections were not, as claimed, “disproportionate”.

2005: ‘Inspecting the Criminal Justice System: Starting from First Principles’, 20 pages: My proposal for the role and core methodology for the then-planned merged ‘CJS Inspectorate’.

2006: ‘Serious Further Offence review: Hanson & White’, 52 pages: We found a “collective failure” to manage properly the Risk of Harm to the public.

2006: Speech to c1,000 Senior Probation Officers about Public Protection, 8 pages: At a very sensitive moment, I aimed to provide constructive information and guidance.

2006: ‘Serious Further Offence review: Anthony Rice’, 78 pages: We found a “cumulative failure” here, with defects post-release, though with a man too dangerous to release anyway.

2007: ‘My Memories of Probation in the 1970s’, in (*Moments in Probation* ed Paul Senior), on 2 pages: A succession of mainly light-hearted cameos of my 1970s memories.

2007: ‘What is achievable when managing dangerous offenders in the community?’ is a long PowerPoint Show illustrating my lecture to the University of Birmingham that year.

2010: ‘Public Protection work: Achieving the Possible’ (in *Handbook of Public Protection*, ed Nash & Williams), 14 pages, by me and Kate White, to show what ‘good PP work’ looks like.

2010: ‘History of HMI Probation’, 18 pages, written mainly by John Hutchings, commissioned by me, when abolition was again possible, to show that an Inspectorate can evolve as needed.

2010: ‘HMI Probation Plan 2010-11’, 15 pages: Example of our annual Plan of work for the year ahead, and at what cost.

2010: Foreword to ‘HMI Probation Annual Report 2009-10’, 6 pages: ‘What price Public Protection? – no trite solutions’ offered two cost-benefit illustrations of policy options.

2011: ‘Probation & Youth Offending work: A Tribute to those who do it well’, 20 pages: My valedictory lecture at University of Oxford, included in this book.

2011: ‘New Zealand Probation’s Change Programme’, (EuroVista), 2 pages: My summary account of that transformation from 2009-11.

2014: ‘An Introduction to Probation and Youth Offending work’, (*Forensic Practice in the Community,* ed Ashmore & Shuker), 15 pages: With Kasturi Torchia. For psychologists.

2014: ‘Prescription for Making Probation Work’, 12 pages: My immodest “prescription” of the components of effective Probation management, and how they need to fit together.

2016: ‘Making Probation Work – From Prescription to Recipe’, 12 pages: how to do some of the detailed implementation behind the ‘Prescription’ paper, incl a Case Assessment Tool.

2017/18: To House of Commons Select Cttee re ‘Transforming Rehabilitation’, 2 pages: My comments focused on just two points: Performance Measures, & use of the Voluntary Sector.

2018: My Response to the Government Consultation on “Strengthening Probation”, 12 pages: It starts with Prescribing performance measures – the remainder follows logically.

2018: My introduction to a seminar on ‘Probation Identity’ hosted by ‘KSS CRC’, 2 pages: My discussion-starter was that “Probation” had already evolved, so how might it further evolve?