

Monthly Meeting Report – From Prison to Palace – Veronica Bird

From Prison to Palace was the title of Veronica Bird's presentation to Teesdale u3a. Veronica was brought up in a very poor family of nine children, and after an abusive childhood, decided to make a career in the Prison Service. She started work in Holloway and then worked her way up to become Governor of Armley Prison in Leeds. During this time she had responsibility for some of the most notorious criminals in the country. She was awarded an OBE for outstanding prison service. Veronica described how the Queen cleverly moved people along during the award ceremony, as she only had about 20 seconds with each person. Asking questions of the Queen was not encouraged although apparently Tommy Cooper asked her if she liked football. When she replied 'no' he said 'so can I have your cup final tickets?'

With the help of a 'volunteer' from the audience Veronica described the admission procedure, where a prisoner is stripped, inspected for lice etc, showered and then dressed in prison clothes. It is reported that the blue/white shirts sell for top prices in the local markets. Veronica met many other important people in her work and with the help of 2 more volunteers, she described her meeting with Prince Andrew and Princess Anne. Princess Anne is a strong supporter of the Butler Trust, which celebrates and promotes the best in UK prisons, probation and youth justice. Veronica was invited to visit Russian prisons, where she said prisoners work very hard making uniforms and where the officers carry a gun.

Veronica then regaled us with several stories describing pranks which prisoners had got up to: prisoners boxing up Christmas cards where rude words had been added to the back page of the card; spring bulbs were planted by prisoners which came up spelling out similar rude words.

She listed some telling UK statistics: 57% of inmates can hardly read; there are 200,000 children with a parent in prison. She was sympathetic to the role of judges, prison governors and parole boards who had a difficult job to do. This was a stimulating talk delivered with humour and compassion. Veronica gives the proceeds of her talks to charities.

The next meeting is on Thursday 28th September when Keith Offord will be speaking on 'Aristocrats of the Air'.

Ian Reid
27/08/2023