



Chess in Prisons

A report for the ECF Yearbook 2019

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Background

The job specification is 'to foster the pursuit of chess in prisons'. It is a broad church of a job with plenty of scope, undertaken as a voluntary position. This allows the post holder to be flexible in the approach to prison chess work.

Prisons I have visited in 2018 are:

HMP Hewell and the Grange (twice)
HMP Stanford Hill
HMP Bedford
HMP Coldingley
HMP Grenden

I am also the chess correspondent for the prison newspaper INSIDE TIME. I do this independently of the ECF and it potentially reaches some 80,000 prisoners in the UK and indeed abroad. I continue to receive a healthy volume of correspondence from inmates telling me about their love of chess and the way it changes their lives for the better on the inside.

This included one from a prisoner who said that chess also helps on the outside because chess clubs open at the same time that some people go out to commit crime – now they go to play chess instead. That's a nice thought and is another benefit to have real chess clubs as opposed to online games – the social benefits should not be underestimated.

I continue to use a well-trodden programme when I visit prisons. That is to say I donate some chess equipment, meet the governor or his/her representative, hold a chess Q&A and coaching session for the prisoners and then give a simultaneous exhibition, which is almost always the most eagerly anticipated aspect of any visit. There are some good players in prisons, some I would say would play perfectly well at county standard.

On a personal note I am heartened to see how many prisons are stocking my book 'Chess Behind Bars' (published by Quality Chess) in their libraries and feedback from inmates has been very encouraging indeed. The main message people seem to take on board is to think before acting.

(31 December 2018)

I was delighted to be asked to attend the London Chess Conference last December at which I attended a workshop on prisons chess. This included people undertaking chess in prisons work in Norway, Sweden, Spain, Germany Australia and other countries and it was a very productive meeting indeed. The general consensus was to gather and share data to show the effects that playing chess can have on the prison population. Such data might be used when putting forward arguments (for want of a better word) to Ministers for more support in each country. Ministers do after all like hard data, but it is a very tricky subject to measure.

This work is in its genesis but it is a very exciting challenge and we shall see what develops. I also had a meeting with Malcolm Pein, Chief Executive of Chess in Schools and Communities who are also developing their programme of work for chess in prisons. We agreed that it is a natural, progressive (and efficient) step to share information between organisations so that we do not overlap on prison work, but to share information where we can for the good of the initiative which will suit both the CSC and ECF. This is a very important link-up going forward. Such work (prisons chess) should not be done in isolation.



Going forward I want to bring the issue of chess in prisons deeper onto the media radar. I am grateful to Malcolm Pein for sharing our initiatives in the Guardian newspaper which certainly set people thinking about the subject. I also want to do more work with government – especially post Brexit (I know, I had to mention it) when things might begin to settle down one way or another and Ministers can start to concentrate on home issues once again. There is lots to do but it is all rewarding work and has a positive effect on people – which surely is what chess is all about.

[Donating chess clocks to HMP Coldingley](#)

I want to thank the English Chess Federation for continuing to support the chess in prisons initiative and in this regard, Mike Truran has been a great support to me throughout. Thanks also to Alex Holowczak who left the Director of Home Chess position replaced by Adrian Elwin who I am now working with on the chess in prisons role. Many thanks also to Chess & Bridge of London for donating magazines for prisons. Finally, I want to thank members of the chess community for donating books and equipment. I promise you that they are not only well utilised but treasured when donated to prisons. You all make a tangible difference.

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(31 December 2018)