



English Chess Federation Manager of Chess in Prisons – Carl Portman

A visit to HMP Wakefield – 24th August 2022

All photographs are used with the kind permission of HMP Wakefield



Carl on a wing at HMP Wakefield

This visit had been outstanding for a long time due to the Covid-19 Pandemic and other reasons, so I was delighted to finally deliver on my commitment to visit HMP Wakefield on behalf of the English Chess Federation to give a chess simultaneous exhibition against ten players and hold a chess Q&A session with the prisoners.

HMP Wakefield is a Category A establishment, which is to say it houses some of Britain's most dangerous prisoners. It has held many infamous prisoners, but the day was about chess, not who or why people were there.

Wakefield Prison was originally built as a house of correction in 1594. Most of the current prison buildings date from the Victorian era. The current prison was designated a dispersal prison in 1967, holding 144 inmates and it is the oldest of the dispersal prisons still operating across England and Wales. From what I saw it was still very fit for purpose.

'Here we go round the mulberry bush'

The exercise yard at Wakefield once had a mulberry tree, around which female inmates who were also mothers used to exercise. This has been linked to the nursery rhyme *'Here We Go Round the Mulberry Bush'* as attested by former prison governor RS Duncan in his 1994 book. This origin of the song is also explained on the prison's website. There is no corroborative evidence to support this theory or to say it isn't true. The tree was removed in May 2019 as it had died. Thankfully (miraculously), a cutting from it was taken by a retired prison officer and two small 'beginnings' were planted. I saw that two healthy bushes are now growing, which is excellent news.

The prison Governor, Tom Wheatley, and the Head of Reducing Offending Christine Lindsay both supported my visit. Without such commitment and vision, I would never be able to set foot in a prison. Christine spent the day as host. Despite having recently had an operation on an ankle she pressed on and gave me a tour which was absolutely fascinating. Her passion not just for putting on a chess event, but for

her job in general (helping prisoners with rehabilitation through education and thereby hopefully to reduce re-offending) shone through and everywhere I went I could see that Christine had managed to put the magic touch to the working environment for her and her staff – who I also met and had lunch with (Thanks again Christine). It is remarkable how a coat of bright paint can transform drab prison walls into a boost to the spirit just by walking down a corridor. A picture here, a motivational quote there – it all serves to make for a more positive environment for both prisoners and staff.

Christine showed me the woodwork shop, where prisoners make wonderful artefacts from furniture to children's toys, but the shining light was the workshop where inmates recycled old mattresses to make new divans that were then sold. They have not been doing this for long. It is a new initiative and I think the only one on the prison estate, but already they have prevented almost 800,000 metal springs from going into landfill. This is remarkable, and just one of the positive stories that happens in a prison that the general public seldom if ever get to hear about.

That lunch incidentally was made by prisoners, working for their catering qualifications and everything about the prison said 'education and self-improvement' to me.

Back to the chess. I played ten opponents simultaneously and all were of a good standard. That is to say, they would easily take their place in a club team and local league. I was delighted that amongst the team players was one prison officer. Let's not forget that many officers encourage chess and unsurprisingly play against inmates. Chess is a game for everyone, after all.

The games were all hard fought. The openings were sound and the middlegame to endgame struggles were often quite complex. Only in the endgames did I manage to capitalise on mistakes – which is the essence of any sport in truth. You not only need to be aware of an opportunity, but you have to strike immediately. There's no time to be lost in chess, or in life.

I managed to win nine games and the final one was agreed drawn. I had my opponent on the run in the opening and hassled his queen which he had brought out way too early (not a good idea in chess) but he played a very committed 'Gung Ho' attack against me – pushing Harry the h-pawn all the way to h3 near my castled king, then he brought his queen and rook in, desperate to checkmate me, but I managed to keep calm and forced some key exchanges in the end. In fairness I did allow him a very important move back earlier on in our game but overall, he deserved his result. Well done indeed.



The games were all intense struggles

Thus, I was pleased with 9½/10 with no losses.

Q&A session

After the simul we enjoyed a fascinating Q&A session and I was asked many questions about chess. The first was the most difficult. 'Who is the youngest player you have ever lost to?' I couldn't answer this. I still can't, as I have no idea! Prisoners were keen to learn more about how to study, castling choices, *en-passant*, pawn structures, knights v bishops, when to exchange pieces what is the best opening, chess personalities, my experience of chess in other prisons, and especially that old chestnut the 50-move rule, which for some reason many prisoners do not understand. They seem to think it is an 18 or 27 move rule, but I have no idea why.

I am the chess columnist for the prison newspaper 'Inside Time' and the players were eager to point out that they always read and enjoy the column and the puzzles I provide. At all times they were respectful to me, the prison staff and one another – all that mattered was the chess. This is how it always is. What a credit they were.

I donated several chess sets, books and magazines (on behalf of the ECF) and also met with the governor afterwards to discuss the benefits of chess in prison and encourage the regular playing of the game at HMP Wakefield. Both Governor Tom and Christine are receptive to this, having seen the effect of chess on the prisoners, some of whom would simply not have mixed outside of the chess scenario. I look forward to seeing if any progress is made. Chess as ever unites people: it brings them together in a way that real life does not seem able to do. It is a productive use of time in a place where time is all that people have.

My sincere thanks are extended to the team at HMP Wakefield, and to the ECF for their continued support of chess in prisons.

Testimony: This is what the prison said after my visit. The final paragraph is what makes it all worthwhile, and so rewarding for me.

Carl visited HMP Wakefield on the 24th of August. We have a lot of avid chess players here who eagerly awaited his visit. Carl pit his wits against 9 prisoners and one member of staff in chess games simultaneously.



Carl's Q&A was very popular

It was astonishing to see a group of men who would normally not even be in the same room together let alone have a group discussion. But they were all in the chess zone, totally focused on their own individual games. Carl was amazing I don't know how he played all those games at once and the prisoners were in awe of him.

Once the tournament was finished Carl answered many questions from the group who were enthralled in his knowledge and anecdotes. This has made it evident that chess breaks down

barriers between people, and brings people together harmoniously with a common interest and goal to play and improve their chess skills. This is something that we will endeavour to repeat at Wakefield in the future to build a regular chess tournament amongst different groups of prisoners and staff. The books that Carl gave us were donated to the library so that have the opportunity to read them. The magazines were given out to the participants to read and share on their respective units.

Thank you Carl for your visit both the prisoners, staff and the Senior Management Team (SMT) were amazed at your skills and whilst prisoners were playing against you they were no longer in prison, they were in that game of chess, mind body and soul, and prison didn't exist. It shows the power of chess and the lessons that can be transferred to daily life and how it can mitigate some of the pains of imprisonment.

Regards

Christine Lindsay
Head of Reducing Offending

'They tried to bury us; they didn't know that we were seeds'

Mexican Proverb