



A visit to HMP Dartmoor on Wednesday 31st May 2023

Carl Portman

Manager of Chess in Prisons



I was delighted to finally honour a longstanding commitment to visit HMP Dartmoor. I was meant to go in the wintertime but snow prevented the trip and it's the first time I had to call a 'no show' but this time the weather was wonderful and the five-hour drive was worth it!

HM Prison Dartmoor is a Category C men's prison, located in Princetown, high on Dartmoor in the English county of Devon. Its high granite walls dominate this area of the moor. The prison is owned by the Duchy of Cornwall and is operated by His Majesty's Prison Service. Dartmoor Prison was given Grade II heritage listing in 1987.

The prison was designed by Daniel Asher Alexander. Construction by local labour started in 1806, taking three years to complete. In 1809, the first French prisoners arrived (Great Britain was at war with France) and the prison was full by the end of the year.

From the spring of 1813 until March 1815, about 6,500 American sailors from the War of 1812 were imprisoned at Dartmoor in poor conditions (food was bad and the roofs leaked). These were either naval prisoners or impressed American seamen discharged from British vessels. Whilst the British were in overall charge of the prison, the prisoners created their own governance and culture. They had courts which meted out punishments, a market, a theatre and a gambling room. About 1,000 of the prisoners were Black. A recent examination of the General Entry Book of American Prisoners of War at Dartmoor, by Nicholas Guyatt, found 'Eight Hundred and Twenty - Nine Sailors of Colour had been entered into the register by the end of October 1814.'

You can find more about the prison here:

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/HM_Prison_Dartmoor

It now holds around 640 prisoners although they are having to take more because of pressure on the prison system. I was invited by one of the governors. Michael Walker, and he was supported by prison governor Stephen Mead.

The day consisted of three sessions, two in the morning to speak to prisoners about how chess affected and shaped my life from 'finding' the game as a 12-year-old to still loving every game, many decades on. I spoke about how chess possibly saved me from going down a rocky road when I was young, living in a violent and abusive household. Chess was my world, my creative outlet and I was the one in charge of my decisions at the board. This resonated with both groups. I also spoke about the amazing people I have met through chess, and the places I have visited to play our marvellous game. The notion that an ancient game is still of major benefit and influence in a modern setting was not lost on them. I also went through some general tips on a demonstration boards, dealing with questions from the groups, and I set up some puzzles and problems for the players, and this was greatly enjoyed with full participation from an eager group.



Carl talking to prisoners about how chess can change lives, just as it did for him.

In a place where prisoners have time on their hands, chess can be the friend that they need. Chess is portable and inexpensive and can be played in cells (unlike pool for example) and players can integrate, study and play. It shines a light in a dark place.

I had a tour of the huge kitchen just before lunch. The prison grow their own vegetables and other foods and the standard of the food and the preparation was extraordinary. Inmates made the meals and gained qualifications for learning how to cook. I could see how proud they were of the kitchens and the food they prepared. The menu was the most varied and interesting that I have ever seen at a prison, catering for meat eaters, vegans, vegetarians and people with gluten and other issues.

The governor, Mr. Mead took some time out not only to visit the chess room but to see me privately. He was very keen to keep the chess going at HMP Dartmoor and could clearly understand the benefits of the game. It is purposeful activity in every sense and should be acknowledged on any prison inspection report. Chess incorporates English, mathematics, history, geography, art and even religion so there is a whole raft of subject matters wrapped up in one chess session.

I should at this point mention that I was not only honoured but completely taken aback to find that the Governor, Mr Walker had made a special chess cake for my arrival (see photo) and

this was shared between staff and chess playing prisoners. It was such a lovely gesture, and one I have never experienced before. Such a thoughtful act, involving much preparation shows how much a visit to talk about and play chess can mean. It also happened to be my favourite cake, so I enjoyed an extra-large slice and I would need the energy for the afternoons.



L-R Governor Stephen Mead, Carl Portman and Governor Michael Walker with the specially made chess cake (by Governor Walker!)

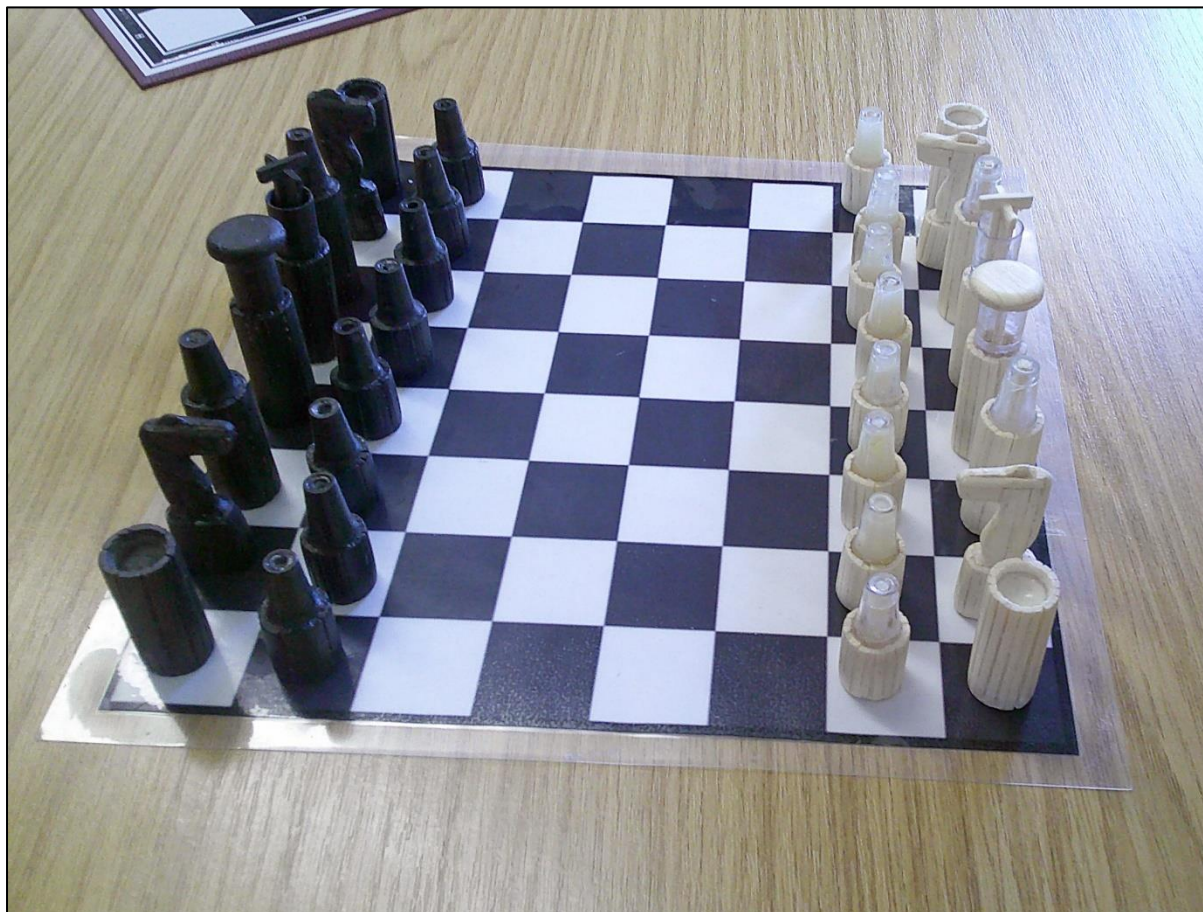
It was back to work after and a two-hour session, where I agreed to play thirteen players simultaneously. These were the men who played regularly and were very keen to improve. There were no easy games, and every opponent played attacking chess, keeping me on my toes.

One thing they knew were openings, but it was interesting that as with people on the outside, their undoing was the endgame. Some very promising positions crumbled because of the intricacies of a tactic here or a pawn push there. In keeping with chess, there were more rook and pawn endgames to play and this is an area where everyone can benefit from studying more, and I include myself.

I also donated an analogue chess clock and the players were keen to see how this worked and to give it a go. One player in particular is good at this and held me to a three minute draw. Bravo!

With the simultaneous exhibition though, I emerged as the victor on all boards, with no losses and no draws but one or two games were very close indeed. It can be difficult playing these simul, not because of the number of people opposing me, but some prisoners like to use their own sets and boards, some of which can be tiny. Indeed one of these was a chess set made entirely of matchsticks and 'vape' tubes which although quite magnificent was difficult to distinguish the pieces, giving my opponent a slight advantage.

I had to be careful not to give up a queen (thinking it was a bishop) for a knight, for example. This set showed how creative and talented prisoners can be and I attach a photograph of that set. He made it in about a month.



Chess set made of matchsticks and vape tubes.

Prisoners are always keen to know what the best openings to play are, when to exchange queens, and how to arrange pawns in endgames. They are also keen to discuss the psychology of chess and whether to play the man (or woman!) the board, or both. My personal view is to take heed of both, but everyone has their own view.

I donated several sets, boards, books, magazines and the clock to the prison and they have also purchased some sets so there's plenty to keep them going. A member of staff (shout out to Lisa) has been giving her own time to run a club, even though she does not play chess herself. This is testimony to how some officers go the extra mile to make good things happen at their prison and is to be highly commended.

The best quote of the day was from one prisoner who, when his mate expressed disappointment that he did not beat me said 'We are all winners today, because we are here enjoying chess.' I could not have put it better myself.

On behalf of the ECF I would like extend my thanks to the Governors and staff for investing time and energy for my visit and for fostering interest in the noble game of chess at HMP Dartmoor which I hope will continue. I should certainly like to thank the prisoners who attended on the day for their commitment, respect, contribution and passion for the game.

Finally, this was a Tweet on the prisons official account posted after my visit.

← Tweet



HMP Dartmoor
@HMP_Dartmoor



We are so grateful to Carl Portman @ECF_Chess for visiting us at Dartmoor this week. Carl met with prisoners across the day, giving an inspirational (and funny) talk about his life, whilst playing against them and providing some master tips! #Chess



11:58 AM · Jun 2, 2023 · 98 Views

Hello Carl,

I just wanted to thank you once more for coming to visit us at Dartmoor today.

It was a really great day, and the effort you went to be with us is very much appreciated.

I know that the prisoners involved were so grateful, and all in attendance found the experience interesting/fun/insightful/inspirational!

Kind regards

Michael