

Fir Tree Grange Probation Hostel by Tom Parkin



Prior to Fir Tree Grange (Smelt House) becoming a probation hostel it was owned by the Coats family for some 300 years. The Coats family also owned land and farms in the local area. In 1891 the deeds were transferred to the new owner's i.e. Fryers/ Bigland, Hutchinson, and Backhouse. The Backhouse family were major entrepreneurs in the development of the booming north east of England coalfield. They owned the mineral rights to numerous pieces of land and in addition to their mining interests they were also bankers to many other industrial developers in the region. In 1922 the ownership of Fir Tree Grange was transferred to Doris Lucy Fryer as sole owner and she married Edward Curre- Shaw on 28 Sept 1937. The ownership was subsequently transferred to Durham County Council.

Introduction

I first became involved as a volunteer at Fir Tree Grange Probation Hostel (FTG) in 1992. Initially I was very anxious about even visiting! However I was very interested in the sociology of 'crime and punishment' so I offered to become a volunteer. Although I had worked for years in an extremely male orientated environment (the building trade) this was a real challenge. I knew almost nothing about the Criminal Justice System (CJS) and knew even less about the role that hostels played.

I was completely outside my comfort zone – and I wondered just what my role was regarding my involvement with 'these criminals'? Did my role involve being a - friend, a jailer, a social worker, or a probation officer?

However, I gradually got more and more involved by doing a few shifts shadowing the permanent staff. I then worked on my own during the day and subsequently on my own overnight. It was very scary overnight – the doors were locked at 11-30pm and like the residents the staff went to bed until 7-00 am. It was not unknown for a few residents to open the upstairs windows and after shinning down the drainpipe disappear for a few hours- returning in time for the head count first thing the next morning. This was sometimes just before the police arrived to report an overnight burglary in the local area. We would then make enquiries to see if everyone was present and accounted for.

I worked at FTG from 1992 to 1994 while at university - and full time during a gap year. The basis of the talk that I gave to the History Society in February 2016 was taken from the dissertation I completed for my Durham University MA Degree entitled. 'Just Deserts or Just Cutting Costs'. The dissertation was about the introduction of the 1991 Criminal Justice Act. My presentation had to be on a subject about which I had firsthand knowledge- and FTG fitted the bill exactly.

'Prison is an expensive way of making bad people worse. I am moving the tide of public and judicial opinion to reduce the jail population - They can now be punished without being sent to prison '

D Waddington, Home Sec 1990 as reported in the Guardian Oct 1993 p7

The dissertation was an attempt to define why the Right Wing Monetarists drive for 'efficiency, economy and effectiveness', could result in increased discrimination in the Criminal Justice System. Just as now (2016) the Tory government economic policy was to reduce the overall size of the 'state' – by state we mean public services. By privatisation and cutting back on the financing of teachers, police, and the CJS etc. it was moving the UK's economy to be less European, and more in line with that of the USA.

The presentation I gave was divided into three sections.

1 Fir Tree Grange Probation Hostel – here I looked at the hostel's organisation and its role and responsibilities.

2 The Criminal Justice System – I hoped to place FTG within the wider context of 'crime and punishment'

3 The Staff and Residents – I gave an insight into the group dynamics and look at an individual case study.

1 Fir Tree Grange Probation Hostel

FTG was 'a relatively unique establishment' within the context of the UKs prisons, bail hostels, probation hostels etc. It was not a type of prison –and much better than the normal bail hostel. It was funded and run by Durham County Council (on behalf of the Home Office) through government grants and local funding. There were only a handful of similar hostels in the country.

It had places for up to 35 residents (usually about 20) and these consisted mostly of 16 to 25 years old young males from the North East. Although residents could be sent from anywhere in UK this seldom happened. The hostel could not accept offenders who had committed very serious crimes as they would be remanded in custody – and then go to jail if found guilty. However, some offenders could be problematic if they were introduced into the hostels community environment e.g. Arsonists, sex offenders, those violence to authority figures etc.

FTG met a number of objectives in that it satisfied the courts by providing

- a controlled / supervised environment e.g. curfew of 11-00pm

- training in life skills, DIY, cooking, budgeting
- training in social skills,
- behaviour modification and
- it addressed offending behaviour.

The hostel regime consisted of a main building – a bungalow in the grounds - and a two cluster houses in nearby villages. It operated on a 'core and cluster system' which allowed the residents to progress from a

- 'totally supervised regime' in the main building 15 rooms (assessed)
- to having more independence in the bungalow (3 rooms) and
- Having residents living in the cluster houses (2) in preparation for returning to the wider society.

As they developed their life skills, social skills and stopped offending they gradually received less direct supervision in preparation to move back into society. (This was the theory??)



The staffing at FTG consisted of

1 The Warden –the holder of this post was a Senior Qualified Probation Officer who had overall responsibility and they managed FTG on behalf of Durham County Council Probation Service. The Criminal Justice System is very much a ‘top down organisation’ with its rules and regulations all contained within a legislative framework. A major demand on the senior staff was to maintain a high residency rate in order to keep the place financially viable. This sometimes meant accepting residents that maybe should not have been admitted !!!

2 The Assistant Warden – this was also a Senior Probation Officer. However, they had a more ‘hands on role’ in that they would provide Pre Sentence Reports for the courts to make an ‘informed judgement’ on the needs of specific offenders. Their reports would also identify why FTG was the best option for the offender.

3 A Probation Officer - they liaised with the courts, assessed the residents etc. key work training. These three qualified probation officers had years of experience.

4 In addition there were five assistant warders who ‘ran the hostel’ from a central office. The office was locked at all times and contained a daily log about each resident’s behaviour. In addition it had on file information about court appearances, probation officers, family members, home addresses etc. Calls would be received from probation officers, police, and families would be in regular contact. During my time the team consisted of 3 men and 2 women.

5 There was A DIY trainer who ran courses to teach the residents simple practical skills in, electrical work, plumbing, bricklaying, joinery and gardening.

6 The Cook/ Domestic trainer also provided courses on cooking, cleaning, budgeting, hygiene etc. A major part of this was trying to teach the residents to live within their very limited budget.

Essentially the whole regime was directed at ‘raising individual self esteem’. In reality many of the residents were ‘no masters of crime ‘- but

dysfunctional individuals who had great difficulty coping with even the basics of day to day living.

Therefore FTG's activities were an attempt to replicate a working week. Many residents had never worked, or been brought up in working families. Therefore the hostel provided a structured daily environment. This was both in terms of the working day and by providing daily positive social experiences. The timetable for the average weekday was as follows

7-30am –The wardens would visit each room and making sure the residents were wakened (and present)

8-00am to 9-00pm – the residents would get their food from their lockers to make their breakfast (as per cooks training)

9-00 to 12-00am – They would be allocated to be with the trainers in the various workshops, e.g. go gardening, or learn to cook

12-00 to 2-00pm lunch. This was in the hostel and the food was either from cookery course they had been engaged with - or self made from the locker room / pantry where each individual kept their food.

2-00pm to 5-00pm a repeat of the morning activities

5-00pm – The end of the organised day saw the residents free to have an evening meal, go out etc (however some residents had curfew conditions which restricted their movements)

At weekends the residents could go out, or go home depending on the court sentencing conditions. Many stayed in the hostel from Friday night to Monday morning. This was a long time for 'idle hands'- idle hands with 'little or no money' One of the biggest problems for the residents and the staff was that they 'never had any money'. Residents received dole money. Out of this they bought everything e.g. food, toiletries etc and what was left was theirs. However, unlike university students who have similar problems in 'budgeting for the week' they had no middle class parents to 'bail them out'.

At weekends the major problem for staff was that on their return from home you never knew what mood they were in – or what had happened to them. They could have had problems with their family, friendships, girlfriends,

further offending - or simply them having to come back. We had no way of knowing what activities they had been involved with while at home and we could only wait for the incoming phone calls.

Summary

The object of the hostel staff (and the way the regime was set up) was to provide a comprehensive and caring environment while challenging the residents behavioural and offending problems. In addition the hostel ensured the bail conditions as laid down by the court were met. It also ensured there was as little discrimination as possible for those less capable members of the resident group, bullying, etc.

Therefore, FTG clearly met a number objectives in that it satisfied both the courts conditions and met the needs of the offenders by providing a

- controlled / supervised environment
- training in life skills,
- training in social skills,
- behaviour modification and
- it addressed offending behaviour.

The services FTG provided worked well as an alternative to custody. In addition when we look at it compared with the cost of prison etc. it proved to be very cost effective. (See below)

2 The Role of the Hostel within the Criminal Justice System

It is estimated the average cost in 1993 of alternative court sentences were as follows

Community Service Order (average of 8 months)	£610
One Year Probation (no conditions)	£1100
Two year “ (with conditions e.g. a hostel)	£2100
Six months goal	£5000
One Year goal	£10000
Three year prison sentence	£25000

These figures above show why prison sentences are very often 'the last resort' for the courts. **(In 2014 a one year prison Cat C cost £33,167)**

At FTG the vast majority of resident fell into three categories

1 Those sent directly from court on 'bail' and waiting trial

2 Those sent from the court after being referred by their supervising probation officers for a 'bail assessment period' – and for a Pre Sentence Report

3 Those already on probation with a condition of FTG residence as part of a sentence from a court.

These categories made a significant difference to the way members of each group viewed their stay at the hostel.

1) Those on bail and awaiting trial would often be 'dumped at FTG 'because prison overcrowding meant there was often nowhere else for them to go. Alternatively the court may have offered them the choice of 'being held in prison' - 'going to a bail hostel' - or 'going to FTG'. FTG was a more open regime and a better place to spend a few days or weeks before returning to court. However, some saw it as an easy means of escape and went 'missing shortly after their induction'!!!

2) Those on an assessment period could be resident a few weeks or months. These residents had an incentive to 'behave' –or go to prison as alterative. However, a major problem for them was could they 'keep it together' while being assessed.

3) Those with a condition of residence could be in FTG for up to two years. These 'long termers' often became over confident and pushed at the hostel's boundaries. Staff would tend to accept 'more hassle from them' in that they knew them personally and 'it was just how they behaved'

Local courts – Local magistrate courts saw the benefits of FTG and used it as best they could. Bishop Auckland and Newton Aycliffe magistrates often knew the offenders (and their families) and saw the FTG regime as a last chance for those appearing before them to turn their lives around.

Local police – The local constabulary identified FTG was just a further complication in attempting to manage the local criminals. FTG provided them with a constant stream of ‘offenders’ who possibly came from a more sophisticated (urban) environment. They could create new local contacts in supplying drugs, methods of carrying out further crimes etc. FTG residents were new to the area the locals and could use them to provide further criminal links. On the other hand at they were identified as a threat and get into gang fights in Crook or Bishop etc.

The police would bring the residents back in the police cars and complain bitterly about us ‘not keeping control of them’. (However, we were an open hostel – not a prison) If there was a major ‘bust up’ in the hostel we felt the police appeared to ‘take their time’ in responding. It appeared we were ‘not really on the same side of the fence’.

However, the residents alleged there was one benefit for the local police. It was that the local police could offload local crimes onto the charge sheet when our residents went to court. Instead of two burglaries on the charge sheet they could add a couple more to clear the books. Residents would complain to us ‘I did do that house- but those others are nowt to do with me’.

Local villagers – Given FTG housed mainly young single men they attracted mainly young single women or girls into the grounds. Teenagers would hang around in the grounds – and the residents would try to ‘sneak them into the bedrooms’.

Local houses were burgled (including my own in Valley Terrace) and no doubt this was down to residents of FTG. In my case the police took finger prints and said they would get back to use with the results – we are still waiting!! Therefore we had firsthand experience of the way FTG impacted on the village.

Although there was a NIMBY attitude to FTG it did provide work locally and the residents and staff boosted the local economy.

Summary –

For the courts and the government FTG was a cost effective way of sanctioning the petty, persistent, criminals who came before the bench.

For the local police it was a complication they did not need.

For the locals it did have an impact of the crime rates yet also provide a few jobs. It also gave the village increased income in the shops, pubs etc.



3 The Staff/ Resident Relationships

‘There is much potentiality for violence arising as much from the mix of individuals as the personality and behaviour of any one individual. Inflammatory incidents would suddenly explode without warning and often in the response to seemingly minor irritations’ P38

With a constant turnover of residents the group dynamics within the hostel would change from day to day. This affected the staff enormously. We had to try to keep a lid on the situations as they arose minute by minute. In reality it was quite often a ‘powder keg’!!!!

There was always a 'them and us' divide and the staff only found out part of the whole story. However, we usually knew more than they thought we did. There were often power struggles when the 'alpha male' and his cronies were challenged by an influx of new residents. This developed into 'opposing 'gangs' who attempted to control the resident group as a whole. The residents were made up of leaders, followers, natural victims and those who had more sense and just kept their head down.

The individual residents were always under enormous 'peer group pressure'. They often provided a 'public facade' in order to simply survive on a day to day basis. This facade sometimes dropped during their individual counselling sessions. Here they described their tragic family and personal circumstances and the misery of being away from home for the first time. A typical scenario was the case of M.

The Case of M

M was born in Darlington in 1968 and about 25 when they M came to the hostel in 1993. It was a typical 'revolving door pattern of offending'!!!!

M had a brother and sister and was the youngest member of the family.

M began missing school in their early teens after becoming involved with the police. Being excluded from the family home M went to live in a bedsit at the age of sixteen.

A few weeks later M was given a six month sentence at Low Newton YOI. On release M went to live in a Durham village and after six months M received a further 15 month sentence.

After nine months M came out on parole and subsequently spent a period in a Manchester prison. (Described by M as horrible) M then got a 'condition of residence' in a hostel in Liverpool and became heavily involved in drugs and drinking.

By 1992 (age 24) M had been in prison six or seven times and had found herself pregnant.

M was the first female resident in FTG and this posed numerous ethical and practical problems for the staff. There had been a ban on allowing females into the hostel after 9-00pm – especially into the bedrooms. However, in terms of ‘equality of access, costs and outcomes’ the question was should she be treated as just another resident?

Should M have a room in the main building, be involved in the DIY groups, and have access to the men’s bedrooms etc? Or should M be treated differently and separated from the main group especially at night. This proved to be a very difficult ethical problem. M wanted to be ‘one of the lads’ but did admit to ‘having a close relationship’ with a male resident.

So what was the right thing to do concerning M

A - Treat M as just another resident who may get become involved in the daily problems as other residents living in FTG.

Or

B- Given the gender difference should M be sheltered from the ‘male environment’ of bullying, occasional violence, thefts etc.

Namely, should she be given a place in the hostel regime which would allow her the best chance of completing her placement? (And as stress free as possible given her pregnancy)

Another factor to consider was the welfare of the male staff that would have to monitor her on a 24 hr basis in the main hostel building. I.e. in her bedroom at night etc. We also had to be aware of her health and safety from a legal perspective. If anything happened to her or her pregnancy we could be accused of not administering an appropriate ‘duty of care’. All this had to consider in the light of her drinking, drug problems, sexual relationships etc

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VOTE NOW- A OR B (I asked the history group to vote on what course of action should have been taken – The majority opted for B as did the hostel)

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If we return to M's pattern of offending we find this is typical of many of the residents who arrived at FTG. They had little or no positive family support, they were often poorly educated, had committed numerous petty offences, and had at times been homeless. They fell into a 'revolving door scenario' so typical of many offenders.

They developed a cycle of offending, spending time in custody, being released without money, without qualifications, without a job, or without family support!!! They then drifted back into offending through the influence of their personal 'peer group' who were also involved in petty crime. Therefore the Home Office, the courts, the police and the general public all saw the need to break the cycle – rather than simply 'locking them up'.

CONCLUSION

Therefore, if we consider FTG within the wider Criminal Justice System it met those objectives that satisfied the courts - and the needs of the offenders. It provided a

- supervised secure environment
- a training in basic DIY skills and a basic work ethic
- key work training in social skills
- a behaviour modification regime based on individual conformity and,
- it addressed their criminal tendencies

Therefore the services FTG provided were undoubtedly 'Efficient, economical and effective'.

However, FTG was closed in October 1994 and as usual it was based on a financial decision. That is because, as with many social work or probation inputs, the benefits of schemes like FTG are not instantly seen. It takes time to prove how beneficial a specific type of intervention is- namely because harder to measure the effectiveness of criminal prevention programmes. It is much easier to 'just lock em up so they cannot offend' and in doing so simply punish the individual criminals rather than consider the social causes of crime. Overall the hostel was a success in that about 70% completed their stay at FTG and therefore it made a positive improvement in the helping the residents to turn their lives around.



Looking back over the history of Smelt House (FTG) it is evident that for most of its existence it was the home of wealthy middle class families. However for a short period in the 1980s and 90s this beautiful house was occupied by members of society who would normally have been frowned on by the previous occupiers. It is now privately owned again and there is virtually no trace of its existence as an establishment attempting to reduce crime.

The End - Tom Parkin 31 March 17