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Notorious Maze prison demolished to make way for houses and stadium

31 October 2006

Demolition work finally got under way yesterday at the former high-security Maze Prison, where thousands of republican and loyalist paramilitary inmates were detained during the Troubles.

The 360-acre site near Lisburn in Co Antrim will be cleared for housing, a multi-purpose sports arena and what is called a "centre for conflict transformation", with the work expected to take a year.

The razor-wire and perimeter posts, where guards were armed with machine guns, will be replaced by more peaceful symbols, although one of the H-Blocks will be retained, possibly as a museum.

Stormont minister Mr David Hanson who watched the demolition gangs at the former internment camp said the work marked a further step towards achieving the goal of a new future for the North - one which could be shared by the whole community.

"The Maze/Long Kesh has long been associated with conflict. Clearing the site will be part of the mission to transform it into a symbol of economic and social regeneration, renewal and growth," Mr Hanson said.

The minister said he believed it was important to get the private sector involved in the vast potential for developing the site and he called on investors to experience the opportunities offered.

On September 23, 1983, warder James Ferris died from a heart attack as 38 republicans hijacked a meal truck and staged the biggest escape in British prison history

"The proposals for the Maze/Long Kesh site represent a fantastic opportunity to showcase internationally all that is best in Northern Ireland in terms of regeneration, sharing the future and conflict transformation," he said.

The Maze Prison - originally known as Long Kesh - opened its steel gates for the first batch of internees in August 1971 on the site of a former RAF wartime base.

Throughout the three decades of violence, it was a source of conflict and before it finally closed six years ago thousands of paramilitary prisoners were housed there.

One of its blackest periods came in 1981 when 10 republican inmates starved themselves to death in a demand for political status.

On September 23, 1983, warder James Ferris died from a heart attack as 38 republicans hijacked a meal truck and staged the biggest escape in UK prison history.

Tensions within the complex were reflected by events on the ground as witnessed by the December 1997 INLA murder of loyalist paramilitary leader Billy Wright, who was known as King Rat.

As a result of his killing, several innocent Catholics were murdered in revenge.

Most prisoners were released from the Maze under the terms of the Good Friday Agreement and on September 30, 2000, the final four inmates - three loyalists and a

SiteSearch



republican - were transferred to other jails.

The Maze Prison finally closed in September 2000

A potent symbol of the Troubles

By Chris Thornton

In the 24 years that it housed thousands of hardened paramilitaries, the Maze was the centre of a historical whirlwind.

A catalogue of landmark events took place behind the high walls and steel gates that were thrown open to demolition equipment yesterday.

Despised by terrorists, it was nevertheless a huge influence upon them. The IRA in particular used the time spent behind its bars to instruct its men, review their campaign and ultimately advise on the approach to the peace process.

The Maze opened in 1976 on the same site as Long Kesh, the internment camp that it replaced. Republicans still refer to prison as Long Kesh, because the name change was associated with a major shift in policy.

Instead of granting paramilitary inmates political status the Government decided to treat them like ordinary prisoners.

Inside the republican wings of the H-blocks a protest against the policy brewed. Hundreds of prisoners took part in the dirty protest, refusing to wear prison uniforms or wash and wiping their excrement on cell walls.

A series of hunger strikes followed, culminating in the deaths of 10 inmates over the spring and summer of 1981. At the conclusion of the strikes, many of the prisoners' demands were granted by the Government.

Two years later, the jail saw the UK's largest breakout. Thirty-eight IRA prisoners - including Sinn Fein's Gerry Kelly - forced their way out of the high security complex.

Many were recaptured, but others spent years on the run. Some were never caught.

In December 1997, LVF leader Billy Wright was shot dead by INLA prisoners who smuggled guns into the jail.

Thirteen days later, Secretary of State Mo Mowlam entered the prison to talk to loyalist prisoners about the peace process.

And after the Good Friday Agreement, the prison's inmates were granted early release.

In September 2000 the prison was officially closed.

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