**Maidstone convict prison**

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Maidstone convict prison opened in 1909, built alongside the town’s nineteenth-century local jail. In an unusual arrangement, the two establishments shared a perimeter wall but were run entirely separately. At the jail, prisoners served sentences of no more than two years, whereas the convict prison held men sentenced to penal servitude for a minimum term of three years, and often far longer. Over time, the convict prison encroached gradually on its neighbour, eventually occupying the entire site, including the older buildings, once the jail closed in 1930.

The convict prison’s population was also atypical. Much smaller than its ‘[public works’ predecessors], with capacity for upwards of 300 men, it was reserved for ‘star class’ convicts. These were men sent to prison for a first offence, though one serious enough to merit a sentence of penal servitude. Largely absent at Maidstone were the ‘career’ thieves, burglars, and bank robbers to be found in other convict establishments. Instead, its ‘star men’ included many ‘white collar’ criminals – disgraced bank managers, bent solicitors, high-profile fraudsters – and an equally high proportion of sex offenders (a category that at the time included men sentenced under England’s sodomy laws for consensual sex with men). There were also abortionists, arsonists, bigamists and blackmailers, as well as prisoners sentenced to death for murder but then reprieved. The latter were mainly men who had committed ‘crimes of passion’ or killed their wives during domestic incidents. As such, they were more likely to receive clemency, and as they were often first offenders, Maidstone became famous for its concentration of ‘lifers’.

It was conceived as a ‘show’ prison, according to one former governor, and was ‘much the best equipped prison in England before the First World War.’[[1]](#footnote-1) A former insurance assessor who was there in the early 1930s, sentenced for a series of commercial arsons, found its ‘efficiency and cleanliness … astonishing’; it was, an officer informed him, ‘the finest bloody prison in the world’.[[2]](#footnote-2) One of his contemporaries, a disbarred solicitor, learned similarly that he had ‘“come to th’ best prison i’ Hingland”’, information ‘bellowed’ at him upon arrival by its chief officer.[[3]](#footnote-3)

Maidstone’s ‘star men’ were subject to a light-touch disciplinary regime: a journalist visiting the prison in the 1920s noticed that its officers ‘give as few orders as possible’, and that the ‘whole body of criminals gave less trouble than a crowd of schoolboys’.[[4]](#footnote-4) According to another report, it was ‘the custom of the governor … to present bunches of primroses and lavender to every prisoner twice a year’.[[5]](#footnote-5) At England’s other convict prisons, the interwar decades were tense: Parkhurst witnessed a series of serious disturbances in 1926 and 1927, and in 1932 there was a major riot at Dartmoor. At Maidstone, by contrast, tractable prisoners built an Italian Garden, enjoyed the use of a bowling green, and participated in an annual sports day. One year, the governor even organised a ‘motor show’, persuading a well-known dealership to lend him a ‘cavalcade of vehicles’, which were driven through the gates and into the prison grounds.[[6]](#footnote-6)

Around a third of Maidstone’s convicts worked as printers, one of the most congenial forms of prison labour. A former convict described its printworks as a ‘large, airy, pleasant place’, where prisoners had ‘permission to behave like intelligent work-people instead of convicts on a treadmill’.[[7]](#footnote-7) Predictably enough, according to another ex-prisoner, it was ‘the shop to which most of the professional men [were] sent’, its ‘army of forced labour’ notable for convicts educated at ‘famous public schools and the universities’.[[8]](#footnote-8) A governor’s report confirms that the shop employed ‘the best class of prisoners’; in the mid-1920s these included [Horatio Bottomley](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Horatio_Bottomley), former proprietor of the populist *John Bull* magazine and MP for Hackney South, whose fraudulent bond scheme had earned him a seven-year sentence. He worked as a proof-reader, ‘the softest job in the prison’, according to a former governor, and was addressed as ‘sir’ by fellow prisoners (and possibly, the governor added, by some officers as well).[[9]](#footnote-9) Labouring alongside him was [Gerard Lee Bevan](https://moneyweek.com/investments/investment-strategy/601637/great-frauds-in-history-gerard-lee-bevans-dangerous-debts), the Eton and Cambridge-educated scion of a founding family of Barclays, sentenced to seven years for his role in a colossal fraud that cost creditors and shareholders an estimated £4.5 million (around £180 million today). Both men lived permanently in the prison hospital, where they slept on comfortable beds and enjoyed luxuries such as butter, eggs and jam, exercising in the hospital garden away from other prisoners.

A decade later, in 1935, a Sunday newspaper reported that Maidstone was home to ‘some the most well-known criminals of modern times’, among them Arthur Price, known as the ‘blind murderer’, a poultry farmer who had drowned his baby daughter following an argument with his wife.[[10]](#footnote-10) Price’s case attracted wide public sympathy: a war injury had cost him his eyesight, which ‘some of the greatest specialists in the land’ attempted (without success) to restore during his time in prison.[[11]](#footnote-11) Other ‘celebrities’ (as the paper described them) included [Norman Baillie-Stewart](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Norman_Baillie-Stewart), an army officer sentenced in 1933 to five years for selling military secrets to Nazi Germany (he would receive another five in 1946, having spent the war in Berlin, where he broadcasted for the enemy), and the fraudster [Clarence Hatry](https://moneyweek.com/508563/great-frauds-in-history-clarence-hatry), whose offences were said to have precipitated the Wall Street Crash of 1929. In his ‘well-fitting’ prison uniform, ‘with half an inch of spotless cuff showing and the check prison handkerchief carefully folded in his breast pocket’, Hatry was remembered by a contemporary as ‘the “Beau Brummell” of Maidstone Prison’.[[12]](#footnote-12)

In 1939, Maidstone’s ‘star men’ were evacuated to the Isle of Wight. The prison then remained open throughout the war and in 1944 became a ‘training centre’, where specially selected prisoners received rehabilitative treatment, an ‘experiment’ that came to an end twelve years later. Today, [HMP Maidstone](https://www.justiceinspectorates.gov.uk/hmiprisons/media/press-releases/2012/02/hmp-maidstone-many-strengths-but-significant-shortcomings/) mainly holds sex offenders and foreign national prisoners. Dating to the early nineteenth century, some of its prison buildings are among the oldest still in use in the UK.

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