

TURNING OVER A NEW LEAF

When prisoners look forward to the end of a sentence, it is rarely with a book: 65 per cent of our prison population have a reading age of under eight; a tenth are illiterate.

But now a pioneering scheme, through which inmates teach fellow inmates to read, is spreading the word. **Matt Seaton** reports. Reproduced from The Telegraph Magazine 22 Feb 2003

A middle-aged man with a dark moustache and touches of grey in his black hair is sitting at a table poring over a red-jacketed book. Another man sitting next to him points with a ballpoint pen at letters in the book. The hubbub outside reverberates around the room, which is bare but for the chairs and the table pushed against the municipal-yellow wall. Both men are wearing no-label blue jeans and maroon sweatshirts.

'Fr-og. Bl-ow. Gr-ass. Pr-oud,' says the first man, with some hesitation but then a note of triumph as he completes each word. The man's name is Haji. When he ran a small business in west London, he spoke mainly Urdu. He could barely speak English, let alone read or write it. But here, in Wandsworth Prison, south London, he is one of more than two dozen inmates who are learning to read – or have already succeeded in doing so. The scheme in which they are taking part is the brainchild of a peculiarly tenacious septuagenarian, Christopher Morgan, and is paid for by the charitable fund he established, the Shannon Trust.

Whatever your image of the prison-visiting do-gooder, Morgan cuts a rather unlikely figure in the role. A former soldier, executive in the tobacco industry and farmer, he became involved in prison issues 'almost by accident'.

'When I retired from industry [around 1990], my wife was nervous that I'd make a nuisance of myself around the house,' he says. 'Then she saw an ad in the paper for the Prison Reform Trust, asking for volunteers to write to prisoners, and said, why don't we both try this? Out of curiosity, rather than any expectation of doing any good, I thought I'd give it a try.'

A few weeks later, Morgan was allocated Tom Shannon, a prisoner doing life for murder in HMP Maidstone. So began, haltingly at first, a remarkable correspondence between two men of utterly different backgrounds and circumstances, who yet found a curious fellowship. Though his letters were full of misspellings, Shannon proved a natural raconteur; brusque and blunt, yet good-humoured and even comic, his pen-portraits of life in prison are full of incident and make vivid, often shocking reading.

Morgan felt that Shannon's letters formed 'a social document' that deserved wider circulation. After numerous rejection slips, Morgan – dogged as ever – found an enthusiastic publisher in Doubleday. The correspondence, with a foreword by the former chief inspector of prisons Judge Stephen Tumim, was published as *Invisible Crying Tree* in 1996.

The book was a modest hit, briefly entering the bestseller charts, and shifting a very respectable 8,000 copies. But its value went beyond that: Sir David Ramsbotham, who had just taken up the post of chief inspector of prisons, was very struck by the book. 'It was hugely influential,' he says. 'What I was trying to do was to get my inspectors underneath the

radar. What Shannon did was give a clue to what questions to ask.'

Because Tom Shannon could not profit by his prison writing – and Christopher Morgan would not – the Shannon Trust was founded with the purpose of helping former lifers to adapt to life outside prison. At first, Morgan's chief aim was to use the proceeds to help put Shannon in touch with his two teenage sons, with whom he had lost contact after his estranged wife went to live in America. 'I wanted to give him a reason for taking an interest in life,' says Morgan. 'The problem is that he is terribly institutionalised now.'

He did succeed in bringing the boys over for a reunion, but there is no continuing contact. Shannon and Morgan still correspond, but Morgan has had to accept that 'he is not coming out'. His theoretical release date is long past but he sidesteps all attempts to prepare him for parole. It is as if the outside no longer has any appeal.

As long as the Shannon Trust still had funds, then, it was in need of a new cause. Rather than spend it in dribs and drabs 'on a course here, a course there', Morgan settled on the idea of a literacy project. Most prisons run reading classes, but Morgan realised that there were far too many inmates unable or barely able to read for a prison's education wing to cope with. Estimates of the extent of illiteracy among inmates vary, depending on who you speak to.

'One statistic that sticks in my mind is that 65 per cent of the prison population has a reading age of less than eight,' says Sir David. 'A very large number has no literacy at all. And the prison service is not good at tackling the problems of people who can't read and write.'

'At least one in 10, possibly a fifth, cannot read or write,' says Prison Officer Neil Lodge. 'I've got at least 10 people who were turned down by the education department.' (They didn't have the required level of basic literacy.) Lodge is a reliable source, for he screens new prisoners with a test specifically to identify inmates who might profit by the Shannon Trust's scheme – an adaptation of the Toe by Toe reading programme devised by the educational psychologist Keda Cowling.

'It took me about nine months. Now I can read my own letters – and write them, too'

Officer Lodge has been a key figure in the Shannon Trust's success at Wandsworth. A big, round-faced teddy bear of a man with seemingly bottomless reserves of enthusiasm, he was born in Yorkshire in the mid-Sixties but emigrated to Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe) with his family in 1970. When he left school he worked in the police force, before moving to South Africa to do private security work. He came back to Britain in 1988, but still has a southern African accent. After a decade working his way up from bar work to brewery management, he quit and joined the prison service. Still, a small enamel badge pinned on his tie has a picture of a beer mug with the word 'Cheers!' underneath. 'As a licensee, you have to deal with people constantly,' he says. 'Now, instead of customers, I've got prisoners. But it's much the same: you need to use a bit of empathy.'

Lodge works in the VPU, the vulnerable prisoner unit. Some inmates here might be convicted police officers, for instance, or hit-and-run drivers who have killed children, but the majority are sex offenders. 'There are officers and people within the system who prefer not to work with sex offenders,' says Lodge. 'But to me, they're just prisoners. You very rarely pick up their files and see what their offences were. You can't have axes to grind.'

In fact, it is in the VPU that the scheme has been most successful. The VPU is fortunate, possibly, in having a more broadly based demographic mix than other parts of the prison: it houses a true cross-section of society, from professionals with university degrees to recent immigrants with barely any English.

After holding a meeting to explain the programme late last year, 'I had probably a 90 per cent enrolment – that's 26 inmates straight on the scheme,' Lodge reports. Most of them have now graduated. These are prisoners such as Gareth, 23, who left school with no qualifications whatsoever. 'I couldn't read *The Daily Telegraph* when I started,' he says. Now he is studying for a GCSE in English, and hopes to get three GCSEs under his belt by the time his sentence expires next year. 'Then, hopefully, I can get back into college – I want to do car mechanics.'

'All I wanted to do at school was mess about,' says Eddie, 38. 'When I came here, I could read a little bit and write a bit, but not much.' For Eddie, the Shannon Trust scheme has meant that he has overcome perhaps the greatest humiliation for the prisoner who is illiterate: being unable to read his post. 'I started in June last year; it took me about nine months. But now I can read my own letters – and write letters, too.'

The beauty of the Toe by Toe system, as envisioned by Christopher Morgan and his son David (who stepped in to keep the project running when Christopher was forced to take time off on account of illness earlier this year), is its economy and simplicity. Instead of taking place on an education wing, it is designed to

work on the prisoners' own wing, which makes it more contained and easier to run. It requires no external teaching staff, just Cowling's little red book (the title *Toe by Toe* reflects how the students' progress is measured, one small step at a time). 'The only thing I can really claim is the idea of inmates teaching inmates: the mentor scheme,' says Morgan.

Prisoners work in pairs: one as mentor, the other as 'mentee', as they term it. John, one of the key mentors in the VPU, even had experience as a specialist teacher of people with dyslexia. 'It's very fulfilling for me,' he says. 'I'm using the skills I consider I have. Apart from the fact that I feel I'm doing something worthwhile, it does give one a bit of a position here – that's a fringe benefit.'

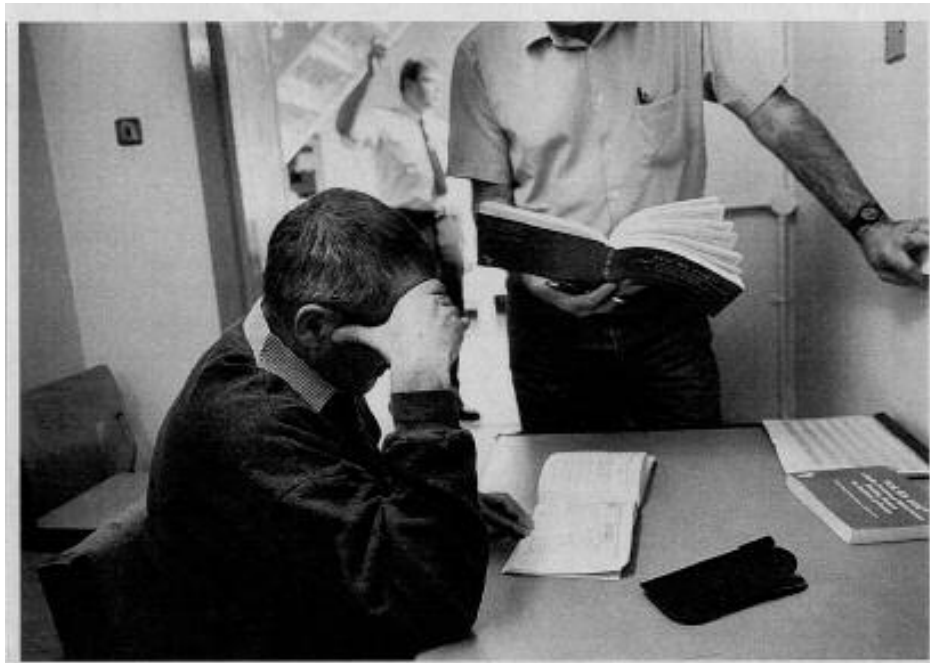
Mentors are paid (£7-8 per week – the equivalent of three packets of rolling tobacco, any jail's alternative currency), but that is not their main motivation. To be a trusted prisoner means having more freedom of movement and association, spending less time 'banged up', and simply keeping busy with something that provides job satisfaction. 'It's one of the few jobs with real purpose,' agrees Bob, a thoughtful 58-year-old mentor. 'With *Toe by Toe* you can see people developing – it's not only their reading, but it affects their behaviour, too. There was one inmate who used to be violent. Because he's now achieved this level of success, he's a much more stable creature.'

When I had first heard Officer Lodge speaking to an assembly of *Toe by Toe* graduates a month earlier ('I'd like to see every one of you going out at the end of your sentence a better person and a more educated person than the one who came in') I have to admit that inwardly I discounted it as rhetoric for the benefit of the non-inmates present. After all, this kind of idealism is about the last thing you expect to find in a prison – and from the lips of a prison officer, too. And yet, again and again, you hear it echoed in the testimony of the mentors and mentees themselves: as Bob says, with reading comes self-esteem and a kind of 'virtuous cycle' of self-improvement. 'Now I can read I feel better in myself,' says Stan, 46. He reads a daily newspaper (the *Sun*), and has started the Harry Potter stories.

Besides the remarkable Officer Lodge, the Shannon Trust has been fortunate at Wandsworth in finding a governor sympathetic to its cause. 'For me it was obvious that this was going to work from the way he [Christopher Morgan] sold it to me – or shared his vision,' says Governor Stephen Rimmer.

Rimmer (who has now left Wandsworth and been succeeded by Jim Heavens) was appointed in the wake of Sir David Ramsbotham's damning 1999 report on HMP Wandsworth. As Morgan says, the prison had a tradition of proving a 'graveyard for governors' reputations', yet Rimmer's reforms and more liberal regime seem to have borne fruit. As one of the mentors comments, 'It has changed beyond all recognition.'

There is another, more pragmatic reason why the Shannon Trust's scheme should appeal to prison authorities. A major obstacle faced by prison education staff is that, despite a rising population, their budgets are always the first to fall prey to cost-cutting. At Wandsworth itself, as



Prisoner Jim learns to read, under the guidance of his mentor, Bob.
Photograph by Felicia Webb

'One inmate used to be violent. Now he's achieved this success, he's much more stable'

a prison officer confides off the record. 'Education has been slashed.' *Toe by Toe*, taught by prisoners to prisoners, represents a marvellously efficient programme, requiring only a modest investment of prisoner officers' time. 'It's autonomous – I just facilitate,' insists Lodge.

The plan now is to use the experience gained at Wandsworth as a template to roll out the scheme nationwide. Significant hurdles remain: while *Toe by Toe* has been a resounding success in the VPU at Wandsworth, a parallel effort in the main prison has largely foundered due to the instability of the population. (On a remand wing, where there is a high turnover of prisoners, things are more difficult.) The other pilot scheme, at Wormwood Scrubs, has also been frustrated – chiefly by the disruption caused by a major refurbishment of the prison (also following a highly critical inspection). Jan Wilcox, a governor who has been the Trust's main contact at the Scrubs, says that she hopes to see the scheme relaunched when their lifers' wing is re-established. 'We've got the will to do it,' she says, 'but there's so much going on at the moment here: first we've got to get some stability.'

Because the success of *Toe by Toe* depends on the continuity of the mentor-mentee relationship, it can flourish in wings where there is a steady,

long-term population. But the role played by prison officers is just as vital. Earlier this year, Neil Lodge won a Butler Trust award for his work on the scheme in Wandsworth (the Butler Trust is a charity which recognises the work of staff involved in the care of prisoners). Since then, another warder, an officer named Susan Healy, has had considerable success at HMP Bullingdon, near Bicester in Oxfordshire, establishing reading groups on all five wings. Such motivated individuals are essential.

The Shannon Trust now has the backing of the prison service, from the office of the director general Martin Narey (soon to be commissioner for the correctional services) down. It has also secured solid funding. Still, Sir David Ramsbotham sounds a cautionary note. 'I never fail to wonder at the prison service's amazing knack of not using good things,' he says. 'The British public doesn't realise how much is underpinned by the voluntary sector. Without it, everything good would grind to a halt.'

To this end, Christopher Morgan is planning to re-launch Shannon's reading programme early next year, with the aim of recruiting a group of volunteer representatives to spread the word around Britain's prisons. Crucially, also, he has succeeded in bringing on board the Prison Officers Association, which, under its new chairman, Colin Moses, is keen to foster a different image of itself from the old Labour bloody-mindedness of the past. Individual warders can still be cynical about initiatives from 'do-gooders', Morgan acknowledges, but with the backing of their own association he hopes more will give the *Toe by Toe* scheme a try.

'The change in the guys is overwhelming,' Susan Healy recently wrote to Morgan. 'I see smiles. I see shyness disappear. I see withdrawn men change to confident men. I would just like to say a big thank you for all the people's lives this is affecting in a positive way. That includes mine.' *Some names have been changed. For further information about the work of the Shannon Trust, write to PO Box 236, Oxford OX2 6XU (0870-241 0729; www.theshannontrust.org)*