

LOST IN THE MAZE

August 2009



Photograph credited to Still Burning, [available from Flickr](#) [Accessed 24th August 2009]

In a recent book, *the Castles of Ulster*, a series of black and white photographs of fortified police stations, army barracks and watch towers, taken in the late-1990s by Jonathan Olley, offered poignant reminders of a troubled past. Many of these have since been dismantled as part of the Northern Ireland Peace Process and whilst this type of fortification will have loomed large in our daily lives during the 'Troubles', one site central to this grim period in our history and which has so often captured the contested narrative of this place (and may come to symbolise how recent events will be remembered) is the Maze prison.

In contrast to the immediate physical and visual intrusiveness of the smaller police stations, army bases and watchtowers that punctured the local street scene, the Maze was, before recent partial dismantling, a mere silhouette along the M1 motorway. Most of us, thankfully, will never have visited it and our collective familiarity with the site will be largely thanks to television, newspapers and associations with horrendous events, inside and out.

The last prisoners left the Maze in 2000 but the symbolic nature of the site, and the question of what to do with it, has ensured that its notoriety has continued. Now under central government ownership, the UAHS [Heritage Review of 2006](#) touched briefly upon the sometimes heated discussions that led to the listing in 2005 of a number of the most significant structures on the site, including the [Cellular Health Care Centre](#); [H-Block 6](#); the

[Cellular Administration Block, Zone F2](#); the [Multi-Denominational Chapel](#); and the [concrete perimeter wall enclosing part of Zones F and J](#).

The boggy piece of land that the Maze now occupies began life in 1941 as RAF Long Kesh and was a busy airfield during WWII, largely used for training flights. What remains from this period, including brick-built blast shelters, a concrete pill box and two aircraft hangars, are protected as [Scheduled Monuments](#). Low key use as an Army Command Vehicle Park, as well as the location of the Ulster and Shorts Gliding Club, continued until 1969 when the acquisition of the site facilitated the construction of an internment camp in reaction to the outbreak of the 'Troubles'. This was followed in 1975 by the much larger, more permanent, and fundamentally different H-Blocks, with ancillary structures, in the renamed HM Prison Maze.

Article 42 of the Planning (NI) Order 1991 charges the Department of the Environment with the compilation of a list of buildings of special architectural or historic interest. The DOE listing record for the whole site provides the following brief evaluation: *"A unique example of late 20th century emergency prison design. The Compound Prison displays the organic development of a temporary internment camp, reminiscent of WWII P.O.W. camps around the UK, into a more established structure with the concrete perimeter wall symbolising its increasingly permanent nature and the escalation of the 'Troubles'. The Cellular Prison drew on influences from the USA and was probably the first UK example to utilise the H Block cellular form. The historical significance of the whole prison, in relation to the 'Troubles', is high with the structures, imagery and even name being synonymous with that conflict."*

The buildings at the Maze were certainly not afforded statutory protection on any aesthetic or architectural grounds, although stylistically they have been characterised by one book reviewer, presumably tongue-in-cheek, as *"British Army Gothic"* ([Sweeney, 2004](#)). Built hastily by British Army Engineers in the mid-1970s from concrete, steel and barbed wire, on a repetitive pattern, they are more realistically described by Purbrick (2004, p.92) as *"remorsefully functional structures"*. The elaboration of the principles behind the selection of listed buildings in Northern Ireland, contained in Annex C of [Planning Policy Statement 6](#), would suggest that historic interest was of most relevance as the site can definitely be said *"to relate to important aspects of social, economic and cultural history or which have close associations with well known people or events"*. Having little visual appeal was also not considered to be a barrier to listing.

Two other locally listed prisons, at [Crumlin Road](#) in Belfast and in [Armagh](#); equally foreboding structures and with a similarly grim story to tell, are architectural set-pieces which benefit from associations with the leading local architects of the day. In addition to the

significant age and architectural values that they exhibit, their special historic interest is enhanced due to the earliness of their radial cellular plan form; with Crumlin Road in particular being related to the 'Model' [Pentonville Prison](#) in London built only a few years before. Perhaps these factors together with their longer history, much of it apolitical and predating the most recent bout of civil unrest, has allowed sufficient philosophical breathing space for the proposed redevelopment of both sites not to have attracted the same level of fractious debate as the Maze?

Understanding history through historic buildings is certainly not just about the good bits, as a recent editorial in the magazine of the [Institute of Historic Building Conservation](#) (2009, p.1) recognises: *"Prisons and concentration camps may be less of a problem to the historian or interpreter. They were not built to delight anyone architecturally, so we can more simply preserve them for their history while condemning the inhuman attitudes that shaped them"*. However, there are undoubtedly examples of sites with difficult historical connotations that have not been preserved. The UAHS Heritage Review of 2006 noted that at the end of WWII, *"many Nazi relics were destroyed lest they become shrines"*, whilst, more recently, [Spandau Prison](#) in Berlin was demolished following the death of the last inmate, Rudolf Hess.

Many would like to see the Maze demolished and much of the public debate on its future has centred on the desirability (or not) of it retaining listed building status as a presumed prerequisite for preservation (or demolition). This in many ways is an academic question for, as is the case with State Care monuments, what central government chooses to do with its own buildings is ultimately its own decision, albeit that listing would provide a marginal check and balance. Nevertheless, preservation could happen regardless.

Keeping some physical remnants of the recent painful past, however uncomfortable, seems like a mature choice for society to make as future generations will have something tangible upon which to reflect. On the assumption that the Maze is retained and re-used in some way, interpretation of the history of the site will be important. [Robben Island](#) in South Africa and [Alcatraz](#) in the United States offer useful insights into how this might be successfully achieved. However, whilst nothing can be analogous with what happened during WWII at [Auschwitz Birkenau](#) in southern Poland, declared a museum in 1947 and a [World Heritage Site](#) in 1979, it is worth bearing in mind these cautionary words which do have a wider resonance: *"Many commentators have attempted to analyse the museumisation of Auschwitz and the creation of tourist spectacle rather than the retention of history. It has been dubbed 'Auschwitzland'. It has been called a 'Hall of Mirrors, a half-world between history and art where the attempt to halt time..., to sidestep the processes of decay and dilapidation, involves the artful and conscious construction of illusion, the elaboration of*

mimetic effects which are designed to conceal themselves, in a discourse, certainly of aesthetics, and in some cases also of ethics" (Kiel, 2005, cited in Newton, F, 2009).

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