

Riot acts

Twenty years ago, inmates of Manchester's Strangeways prison rioted and took control of the horribly overcrowded jail for 25 days, shouting their demands down from the roof to journalists and the authorities. It was a turning point in British penal history, says **Ciara Leeming**

It was the ultimate reality show, a full decade before the emergence of Big Brother. For 25 days in April 1990, the largest protest in prison history was played out on the nation's TV screens.

It was April Fools' Day when inmates took to the roof of Manchester's Strangeways prison. Twenty-four hours earlier, London had been rocked by poll tax riots. Nelson Mandela had recently walked free from a South African jail and the Berlin Wall had fallen.

As 1,650 prisoners ran amok, the media predicted that the death toll would reach 20. Half handed themselves in on the first afternoon and by day 10 just 13 protestors were left – dwindling to five by the final day.

Almost 150 staff and 50 prisoners were injured and two people killed – a prison officer from a heart attack and an inmate from a beating. Twenty-three rioters were later tried for their part in what happened and handed lengthy extensions to their sentences. Strangeways itself was left in ruins and cost £55 million to repair. It re-opened in 1994, re-branded as HMP Manchester.

The Strangeways protest fed into the Madchester youth craze. Locals would drive past to watch prisoners freaky dancing on the roof and Strangeways t-shirts were printed. More importantly, it was also a pivotal moment in penal history. The public inquiry led by Lord Justice Woolf shone a light on the inhuman conditions inside the country's jails – an issue until then low on the public agenda.

His report, published in 1991, is credited for triggering a cultural shift within the prison service.

Prison ombudsman Stephen Shaw, then director of the Prison Reform Trust, explains: "One of the key messages in Woolf's report was that if prisoners are not treated humanely, justly and with decency they are likely to take the law into their own hands, putting other inmates, prison staff and the general public at risk.

"That may sound obvious but a disaster is often needed before public policy will be changed. The legacy of the Strangeways riot is the Woolf report. It remains the most impressive account of prison policy in the last 100 years."

The Strangeways riot was actually the 26th protest at the jail within a month. Most had been small sit-down protests but a few days before two inmates had managed to climb on to the roof and stay there for 20 hours. Two months earlier, the Prison Officers' Association had warned that overcrowding would lead to riots, suicides and a rise in drug abuse inside England's jails.

It all kicked off during a Sunday chapel service – which happened to be recorded – when inmate Paul Taylor read out a short speech. "I would like to say, right, that this man has just talked about blessing of the heart and the hardened heart can be delivered," he said. "No it cannot, not with resentment, anger and bitterness and hatred being instilled in people."

In the melée that followed, an officer's keys were taken and inmates barricaded themselves in. When they realised the prison guards had withdrawn, they gained control of the area.

Despite the wild reporting, there were no ritualised beatings or castrations. Six protesters were later tried in connection with the death of sex offender Derek White, but no one was convicted.

Brendan O'Friel, governor at the time of the riot, is full of praise for his staff. "I can remember the first evening when the prisoners were trying to get into the prison control centre, our area, and were breaking the doors," he recalls. "It was very traumatic and my staff did extremely well to keep as cool as they did. There were all kinds of sub-plots going on – including the targeting of sex offenders – and on the first day there was a really serious danger of people being killed.

There were 1,650 men crammed into 970 single cells – and having to slop out

"We had to do a lot of very hard work to rescue people, get the injured to hospital and inmates to other prisons. We evacuated 1,200 prisoners in 24 hours and had no escapees. We had one death, which was very sad, but anything could have happened."

There were copycat disturbances in prisons in Cardiff, Bristol, Hull, Kirkham, Leeds and elsewhere. O'Friel believes they were to blame for him not getting the go-ahead from the prison service to bring Strangeways to a swifter end – something he believes could have been done within a few days.

"The prison service seemed to get distracted by the copycat riots and almost forgot about us. It was only when David Waddington, the home secretary, came to visit us during the third week that he gave us the authority to end the riot once and for all."

While there is criticism of their methods, the consensus today is that the protesters' grievances were valid. Their demands – put forward during the siege through the media – included improved visiting facilities, the right to physical contact with