



Meet the leaders from prison's past and find out how they have contributed towards shaping the identity of the Singapore Prison Service.

1825–1833

Sir Samuel George Bonham
Assistant Resident



Assistant Resident George Bonham received the first convicts who stepped off a two-masted square-rigged ship called Horatio, with open arms. He found them well-behaved and manageable, as they were trained under a liberal convict system. Before long, Bonham terminated the services of the paid wardens and replaced them with convicts on much lower salaries. This motivated the other convicts to strive for similar good behaviour, so that they, too, could aspire to be promoted and escape the drudgery of hard labour.

Image credit to: https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/George_Bonham

1833–1841

George Dromgold Coleman
Head of Public Works and Superintendent of Convicts



George D. Coleman extensively employed convicts for public works around the booming Singapore town and laid several key roads: Beach Road that cut along the shoreline, connecting the Malay enclave to the Chinese community; Thomson and Serangoon roads that penetrated the heart of the jungles; Budoo (Bedok) that provided access to the east coast of Singapore, while Bukit Timah Road acted as an artery for the transportation of goods from the Malay Peninsula to Singapore town, doing away with the need for boats. The “beautiful straight country roads” stretching between Geylang and Changi, and Newton and Kranji, were also built by the skilled hands of convicts. Additionally, they were instrumental in establishing infrastructure, such as drains and sea walls.

Image credit to: https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/George_Drumgoole_Coleman

1841–1845

John Turnbull Thompson
Government Surveyor and Superintendent of Convicts



Turnbull engaged the convicts in a systematic survey of the island's developed land so proper land leases could be issued. They used simple tools, such as chains made of rattan, a long rod and an ordinary compass, but were accurate in charting their results.

Image credit to: https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/George_Drumgoole_Coleman



1845–1855

Colonel Henry Stuart Man
Head of Public Works and Superintendent of Convicts

Henry Man led construction projects and highlighted to the government the vast savings accrued from using skilled convict labour. He is credited with training the convicts in artisan skills, such as carpentry, brick making and laying, blacksmithing, lime extraction from coral, stone quarry and tree felling. Man also built the wall compounded by Bras Basah Prison. The road leading to Outram Prison was later named 'Man Road', after Henry Man for his contribution to the British Administration.

1855–1857

Colonel Ronald MacPherson
Executive Engineer and Superintendent of Convicts



During his tenure as Executive Engineer, William Butterworth (Governor of Straits Settlement) initiated MacPherson to design a new church (St Andrew Cathedral) in the Gothic Revival style to replace the demolished St Andrew's Church. The St. Andrew's Cathedral was a credible example of prison industry and skill, built from plans prepared by MacPherson entirely by convict labour. MacPherson was later appointed as the Resident Councillor of Malacca (1858), Penang and Singapore (1860) until 1867 when the British government agreed to establish the Straits Settlements as a distinct Crown Colony as the merchant community and the middle class began agitating against being ruled from British India. MacPherson continued as the 1st Colonial Secretary of the Straits Settlements until his death in 1869.

Image credit to: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ronald_MacPherson#/media/File:Ronald_MacPherson.jpg

1857–1881

Major John Frederick Adolphus McNair
Colonial Engineer and Comptroller of Convicts



McNair set up a large brick field along the river bank off Serangoon Road, where there were deposits of good clay. The convicts were taught by a skilled European brick maker to mould bricks. Eventually, their craftsmanship in both making and laying bricks would earn them a silver medal during the Agra Exhibition in India in 1867. The convicts' creativity was embodied in the rattan chaise lounge they designed, which became widely used throughout the region. McNair's contribution to early Singapore's architectural landscape was vast. He oversaw the construction of Victoria Theatre, battlements of Fort Canning, Arts House (formerly the Old Parliament House), Asian Civilisation Museum (formerly the Court House), Cavenagh Bridge and the Istana (formerly the Government House).

Image credit to: <https://biblioasia.nlb.gov.sg/vol-16/issue-4/jan-mar-2021/st-andrew-cathedral>



1882–1893

Major William Robert Grey

Inspector of Prisons for the Straits Settlements and
Superintendent of Prisons at Singapore

After the death of Superintendent Digby Dent at Bras Basah Goal, following a riot, Grey was provided with penal training before being sent to Singapore from England. He served as Superintendent of Singapore Prisons for seven years before being promoted to the Inspector of Prisons for the Straits Settlements. In an article published by 'Daily Advertiser' in 1892, Grey was described as an "efficient and well qualified officer, a true friend to the prison warders and a kind fatherly protector to prisoners". He retired on 20 November 1893 and passed away suddenly on 15 October 1896 at the age of 69.

1893–1897

Sir Edward Marsh Merewether KCMG*, KCVO**

Inspector of Prisons for the Straits Settlements and
Superintendent of Prisons at Singapore



After passing the civil service exam, Merewether was accepted as a cadet in the Straits Settlements Civil Service (SSCC) in 1880 and rose quickly to become Justice of The Peace for the Settlement of Penang in 1890, Superintendent of the Census in 1891 and then Inspector of Prisons in 1893. In 1883, he married Honoria Clementina Mary Braddell, the daughter of the first Attorney-General of Singapore, Thomas Braddell. Merewether was last appointed as Governor of the Leeward Islands, serving from 1916 to 1921.

* Knight Commander of the Order of St Michael and St George

** Knight Commander of the Royal Victorian Order

Image credit to: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Edward_Merewether

1897–1904

Robert Norman Bland

Inspector of Prisons for the Straits Settlements and
Superintendent of Prisons at Singapore



Bland joined the Colonial Civil Service of the Straits Settlements as a Cadet in 1883, learning Mandarin and Malay, and later Law. Bland spent 27 years working his way up the civil service ladder through various different roles and positions, often holding multiple positions at the same time.

In 1897, Bland was appointed Acting Inspector of Prisons for the Straits Settlements and Superintendent of Prisons at Singapore. In October 1903, Inspector of Prisons Bland was posted to Malacca as Resident Councillor, before being officially posted to the Office of Treasurer, Straits Settlement in 1904. He finally retired in 1910 as Resident Councillor of Penang.

Image credit to: <http://www.lilianbland.ie/lilian/bland-family-history/>



1904–1906

J.B. Elcum

Inspector of Prisons for the Straits Settlements and
Superintendent of Prisons at Singapore

Elcum, who was Director of Public Instruction Straits Settlements, was appointed to officiate as Inspector of Prisons Straits Settlements on 5th July 1904. He went on to become Director of Education for the Straits Settlement and Federated Malay States in 1906 and was also later made a Visiting Justice to the Singapore Prison in 1907.

1906–1909

G.A. Hall

Inspector of Prisons for the Straits Settlements and
Superintendent of Prisons at Singapore

Hall had arrived in Singapore in 1904 to be Magistrate at Singapore besides acting as Inspector of Prisons. In 1907, Hall was appointed to be Commissioner Court of Request Singapore, but continued to act as Inspector of Prisons. Hall was later appointed to act as District Judge, first magistrate and Superintendent of Prisons in Singapore, Malacca and Penang. Hall held the post until 1909.

1909–1909

Littleton Edward Pipe Wolferstan, M.A Cantab*

Inspector of Prisons for the Straits Settlements and
Superintendent of Prisons at Singapore



Wolferstan has been in the Straits Settlements Civil Service since 1889. He acted successively as private secretary to the Governor and as District Officer at Bukit Mertajam and Balik Palau. In 1897, he acted as Second Magistrate at Singapore, and in 1900 became Sheriff and Deputy Registrar of the Supreme Court. After his short stint as Inspector of Prisons, he went on to hold principal positions such as Secretary to the High Commissioners, Federated Malay States, and Senior District Officer, Province Wellesley.

* Master of Arts in Cambridge Neuropsychological Test Automated Battery

Image credit to: <https://winsonsaw2003.tumblr.com/post/643263845022957568/im-looking-for-descendants-of-littleton-edward>

1909–1910

Harold William Firmstone

Inspector of Prisons for the Straits Settlements and
Superintendent of Prisons at Singapore

Firmstone replaced Wolferstan as Inspector of Prisons for the Straits Settlements and Superintendent of Prisons at Singapore in 1909, after Wolferstan was appointed District Judge and First Magistrate of Singapore. In 1910, Firmstone was appointed as Magistrate, Singapore and went on to become Senior District Officer, Province Wellesley. Firmstone later became Resident Councillor of Malacca, before becoming Resident Councillor of Penang in 1920.



1910–1912

Sir Hayes Marriott KBE CMG*

Inspector of Prisons for the Straits Settlements and
Superintendent of Prisons at Singapore



Marriott joined the Straits Settlement Civil Service in 1896 as a cadet. Between 1897 and 1900, Marriott was a District Officer at Alor Gajah, Malacca. From 1905 to 1908, Marriott was appointed Collector of Land Revenue, Singapore. In 1911, Marriott was appointed as Superintendent of Census and Inspector of Prison. He was later appointed as the acting Resident of Malacca in the same year till 1912.

Marriott intended to retire as Colonial Secretary of the Straits Settlement at the end of 1927, but was extended till 1928. Marriott finally left Singapore for retirement in 1928. After arriving in England in 1929, he contracted pneumonia (due to drastic weather change) and died in 1929.

* Knight Commander of the Order of the British Empire (Companion)

Image credit to: <https://www.npg.org.uk/collections/search/portrait/mw177469/Sir-Hayes-Marriott>

1912–1912

W. Bartley

Acting Inspector of Prisons for the Straits Settlements and
Superintendent of Prisons at Singapore

Bartley was Acting Inspector of Prisons for the Straits Settlements and Superintendent of Prisons at Singapore in 1912

1912–1913

C.F Green

Acting Inspector of Prisons for the Straits Settlements and
Superintendent of Prisons at Singapore

Green was Acting Inspector of Prisons for the Straits Settlements and Superintendent of Prisons at Singapore.

1913–1920

Steward Codrington

Inspector of Prisons for the Straits Settlements and
Superintendent of Prisons at Singapore



In 1916, Codrington was appointed as Collector of Land Revenue, in addition to his duties as Inspector of Prisons for the Colony. Upon his promotion from Officer of Class III, Straits Settlements Civil Service, to Class II Federated Malay States in 1919, he was tasked to become Second Magistrate, Police Courts Singapore and then in 1920 as Collector of Land Revenue, Penang before becoming First Police Magistrate in Kuala Lumpur.

Image credit to: <https://www.penang-traveltips.com/governors-of-the-straits-settlements.htm>



1920–1921

Colonel Reginald Charles Francis Schomberg, D.S.O*
Acting Inspector of Prisons for the Straits Settlements and
Superintendent of Prisons at Singapore



Schomberg was acting Inspector of Prisons for the Straits Settlements and Superintendent of Prisons at Singapore.

Schomberg served mainly in Asia. His military career took him to India (1902–11), he served in the Malay states guides (early 1910s), he went to Mesopotamia (1915) and Palestine (1917), Malaya (1919), India (1922), and Ladakh (1923). He retired in 1927. He also held several diplomatic posts. He was British consul-general in French establishments in India (1936–37, 1938–41); and consulate-general for Portuguese possessions in India from 1939. From 1944 to 1945 he was colonel in force 136 (part of the Special Operations Executive) in China.

*Distinguished Service Order

Image credit to: <https://www.greatwarforum.org/topic/251696-malay-states-guides-officers-c-1914/>

1921–1929

Lieutenant Colonel J.H Tyte
Inspector of Prisons for the Straits Settlements and
Federated Malay States

Tyte's association with Malaya extended over a period of thirty years. Tyte arrived at the Straits Settlements in 1901 to take up a position as First Assistant Master Victoria Institution, Kuala Lumpur. After returning from combat tours and special missions, Tyte was appointed Inspector of Prisons in November 1921 and remained in the post till his retirement.

He captained the Selangor football team for four years and played cricket and hockey. He also played billiard in exhibition matches with top exponents within Malaya.

1930–1942

Captain Otho Lewis Hancock, OBE*
Inspector of Prisons for the Straits Settlements and
Federated Malay States

Hancock, a British soldier and colonial diplomat, was appointed as Inspector of Prison in 1930 at the age of 37 after relinquishing his post as Director of Prisons at Gold Coast, Australia. He was educated at King's College Taunton and Exeter College, Oxford and served in the first world war. Hancock and his wife were both killed at sea in 1942 off the coast of Singapore, together with their son (also named Otho, an officer in the Royal Air Force). Records indicated that on the last day of fighting before the fall of Singapore, they were on the vessel, the S.S. Kuala, which docked at Pom Pong Island whilst evacuating from Singapore as it was being bombed by the Japanese.

*Officer of the Most Excellent Order of the British Empire



1945–1946

From October 1945, a series of military courts were set up to prosecute the Japanese military and their collaborators. In 1946, 44 Japanese officers in charge of the Outram Road Prison were put on trial. They were found guilty of ill-treating prisoners and were sentenced to death by hanging, life imprisonment or jail for between one and 12 years. Convicted Japanese war criminals were imprisoned at Changi Prison. Executions for those condemned to death by hanging were also carried out there.

1946–1953

Commander G. E. W. W. BAYLY, M.R.N.V.R*, O.B.E**
Commissioner of Prisons



In 1946, Singapore became a Crown Colony of the British and the Prisons Department (now known as Singapore Prison Service) was instituted as a government agency. Bayly, who was Superintendent of Prisons, Straits Settlement since 1936 became the first Commissioner of Prisons.

Bayly recognised the need for inmates to be purposefully engaged during their sentence. He introduced reformatory activities, such as educational classes and vocational training for inmates. Bayly, who had been in Malaya since 1935, retired from his post as Commissioner of Prisons in 1953.

*Malayan Royal Naval Volunteer Reserve

**Officer of the Most Excellent Order of the British Empire

Image credit to: <https://www.greatwarforum.org/topic/251696-malay-states-guides-officers-c-1914/>

1953–1957

Major William Lomas Philip Sochon
Commissioner of Prisons



Sochon had supported the idea of a 'prison without bars', which relied on businesses and the public to do their part to accept prisoners into society. Sochon was an advocate of reformatory training and established the first Reformatory Training Centre for young offenders, within Outram Prison in 1957.

Image credit to: <https://www.greatwarforum.org/topic/251696-malay-states-guides-officers-c-1914/>



1957–1963

Major P. L. JAMES
Commissioner of Prisons



During his tenure, James had recommended for the Prisons Department to shift its focus from custodial care to rehabilitation. With the recommendations of the Malayanisation Commission in 1955, James was the last expatriate Commissioner of Prisons, before local officers took over leadership positions. James also oversaw the closure of Outram Prison, the Opium Treatment Centre on St. John's Island and the Pulau Senang Penal Settlement.

1963–1966

Frankie Lee Siew Kwong
Acting Director of Prisons

Frankie Lee Siew Kwong served as the Acting Director of Prisons during Singapore's merger with Malaysia. As the former Administrative Officer of Changi Prison, he was well-acquainted with the operation and administration of the penal system.

1966–1973

Yeow Koon Poh
Acting Director of Prisons



Yeow Koon Poh was the acting Director of Prisons for five years after Singapore became an independent and sovereign state in August 1965. Prior to his appointment, he was a distinguished police inspector involved in a number of high-profile drug raids and theft cases.

1973–1988

Quek Shi Lei
Director of Prisons



Quek Shi Lei joined the Prisons Department as a Welfare Officer and rose up the ranks to be the Director of Prisons. He was later appointed as the first Chief Executive Officer of the Singapore Corporation of Rehabilitative Enterprises (now known as Yellow Ribbon Singapore) in 1988.



1988–1992

Tee Tua Ba
Director of Prisons



Tee Tua Ba was seconded to the then Prisons Department as the Director of Prisons. He was formerly in-charge of the Marine Police and promoted to Deputy Commissioner of Police. He was instrumental in setting up the Prison Scheme of Service to boost staff morale and attract new recruits of high calibre to join the service.

1992–1998

Poh Geok Ek
Sixth Director of Prison



Prior to Poh Geok Ek's appointment as the Director of Prisons, he was a Police Officer who served as the Director of the Central Narcotics Bureau. The Tanah Merah Prison and Changi Women's Prison were completed under his guidance, and he introduced the use of technology in prisons.

1998–2006

Chua Chin Kiat
Director of Prison



After helping multiple Police Departments including the Criminal Investigation Department, Chua Chin Kiat was appointed as the Director of Prisons. He was instrumental in transforming the Singapore Prison Service (SPS) and coined the term 'Captains of Lives' for SPS' staff.



2007–2009

Ng Joo Hee
Director of Prisons



Ng Joo Hee was appointed as the Director of Prisons after his stint as the Director of the Police Intelligence Department. He oversaw the expansion of Changi Prison Complex, especially with the operationalisation of Cluster B. He was also instrumental in the planning of the new Prison Headquarters.

2009–2016

Soh Wai Wah
Director of Prisons



Soh Wai Wah was a former Police Chief-of-Staff before being appointed as the Director of Prisons. He emphasised the importance of community corrections to facilitate inmates' reintegration into society. During his tenure, the Director of Prisons was re-designated as the Commissioner of Prisons.

2016–2020

Desmond Chin
Commissioner of Prisons



Desmond Chin, a career Prison Officer, was appointed as the Commissioner of Prisons. He played a critical role in driving the 'Prisons Without Guards', 'Learning Prison' and 'Prisons Without Walls' initiatives. He also unveiled SPS' revised core values 'Shared Values in Corrections (SVIC) – Synergy, Vigilance, Integrity and Care'.