were bursting at the seams. Had ranks of the IRA in Ballymurphy the Provisional IRA was full of new lines, than out there in the midst recruits and the RUC Special. But the British had a big problem: sure for internment would grow. Issued by their rough treatment at the hands of the troops that the British might be forced to introduce internment prematurely, before their intelligence had improved.

It worked like a trick. The August 1971 internment operation was based on RUC Special Branch files that were so out of date that only a handful of the new IRA were caught. As stories emerged from the jails that old men and civil rights leaders had been interned instead of gunmen and bombers, nationalist anger grew, the SDLP led a Catholic withdrawal from public life and the stage was set for Bloody Sunday. Five months later, nationalist alienation was almost complete and it was mostly down to Gerry Adams.

His luck couldn't hold of course. His strategic talents had been recognised by the IRA and he was made commander of the Second Belfast Battalion, in West Belfast, the most active IRA unit in the North. But in March 1972, he married a 17-year-old, Colette, a Omagh na mBan activist he had met on republican protests in Ballymurphy; that night the house was raided by troops and he was interned.

Gerry Adams’ life, and Irish history would have been utterly different had he stayed in Long Kesh. But in July 1972, the IRA declared a ceasefire and the British agreed to meet a delegation of its leaders in London. The IRA in Belfast, added a condition to the deal: Gerry Adams was to be released and included in the team meeting William Whitelaw, the new Secretary for Northern Ireland. And it was also during his leadership that the first bombing of London occurred, sending a large squad, led by the Price sisters, to detonate car bombs in the city centre.

But he was also suspected of involvement in planning the disastrous bombings of Bloody Friday, an over-ambitious operation that involved detonating 30 car bombs in Belfast city centre in little over an hour. The emergency services could not cope, warnings were inadequate and nine people were killed, all but two of whom were civilians.

And so what does Gerry Adams do now? Retire to his Donegal hill and welcomes Mary Lou and the other Sinn Fein MPs. Or does he continue to the leadership the first bombing of London occurred, sending a large squad, led by the Price sisters, to detonate car bombs in the city centre.

The ceasefire came to nothing but it left Adams a free man, ready to rejoin the fight. Within weeks he had become the Belfast commander of the IRA and over the following year he copper-fastened his status as a talented military leader. In the autumn of 1972 the Belfast command struck a blow against British military intelligence uncovering a spy unit called the Military Reaction Force and killing at least one of its members masquerading as a laundry worker. During his leadership the first bombing of London occurred, sending a large squad, led by the Price sisters, to detonate car bombs in the city centre.

The seeds of the peace process were being sown during these turbulent times, but no-one could have guessed it at the time. The IRA had been criminalised, processed through the courts, then imprisoned like common felons. The protests they would launch to restore political status would culminate in the 1971 Troubles, which were notable not just for the shocking death toll of young men but because they paved the way for Sinn Fein to fight elections.

The resulting ballot box and Armalite strategy was more a contest than a fashion cause. Either the ballot box could prosper or the Armalite could, but not both together. Planting a bomb in a town centre might challenge British rule but the consequent damage, loss of life and jobs would also alarm the ordinary electors. The one he had to give way and Adams made sure it was the Armalite.

On his release from jail and ascent to the IRA leadership, Adams had a plan to re-organise the IRA militarily and politically. The political change would put Sinn Fein under IRA control (a change that, incidentally, has never been reversed) in order to make the party relevant to the needs of ordinary people. That in turn would supposedly create political support for the IRA and so sustain their struggle. It was wrapped together and packaged as something called ‘The Long War’. That was the theory. In practice it meant that a little bit less resistant to the idea of fighting elections under the existing political system, and thus, indirectly, boosted the still incipient peace process. The question that will puzzle historians in the future is whether this was remarkable foresight on Adams’ part or mere serendipity.

AAS HE surveys his loyal followers this weekend and welcomes Mary Lou and the other Sinn Fein MPs. Or does he continue to the leadership the first bombing of London occurred, sending a large squad, led by the Price sisters, to detonate car bombs in the city centre.

The seeds of the peace process were being sown during these turbulent times, but no-one could have guessed it at the time. The IRA had been criminalised, processed through the courts, then imprisoned like common felons. The protests they would launch to restore political status would culminate in the 1971 Troubles, which were notable not just for the shocking death toll of young men but because they paved the way for Sinn Fein to fight elections.

The resulting ballot box and Armalite strategy was more a contest than a fashion cause. Either the ballot box could prosper or the Armalite could, but not both together. Planting a bomb in a town centre might challenge British rule but the consequent damage, loss of life and jobs would also alarm the ordinary electors. The one he had to give way and Adams made sure it was the Armalite.

On his release from jail and ascent to the IRA leadership, Adams had a plan to re-organise the IRA militarily and politically. The political change would put Sinn Fein under IRA control (a change that, incidentally, has never been reversed) in order to make the party relevant to the needs of ordinary people. That in turn would supposedly create political support for the IRA and so sustain their struggle. It was wrapped together and packaged as something called ‘The Long War’. That was the theory. In practice it meant that a little bit less resistant to the idea of fighting elections under the existing political system, and thus, indirectly, boosted the still incipient peace process. The question that will puzzle historians in the future is whether this was remarkable foresight on Adams’ part or mere serendipity.

...