



**O**N 9 May last year, two inmates escaped from Leyhill Open Prison in Gloucester. In a daring bid for freedom the pair embarked on a 17-hour overnight trek. Twenty hours later, weary but resolute, they arrived at their final destination – a stricter prison.

Burglar Benjamin Clark, 23, and Audie Carr, 29 convicted of assault and possession of an offensive weapon, claimed they could no longer cope with life in Leyhill, as it was “rife with drugs”. The pair, former heroin users, thought the regime at HMP Gloucester would ensure their stay at Her Majesty’s pleasure was drug-free.

Clark and Carr are not alone. Glyn Jones walked out of North Sea Camp Open Prison in protest at being offered drugs and drinks by other inmates within hours of arriving, while John Rogan fled from the same prison because he was being pressurized by other inmates to smuggle in drugs. Lifer Scott McEwan escaped from Castle Huntly near Dundee because he said he had become hooked on heroin within months of arriving. Inmates at HMP Wealstun in Yorkshire have even resorted to hanging ‘NO SALESMEN PLEASE,’ notices on their cell doors, according to a Chief Inspector’s report produced last year.

**ONE-WAY TRAFFIC**

The fact that there are drugs in prison is not news. Reports from Independent Monitoring Boards – the prison watchdogs – read like a litany of despair on the subject: “drugs continue to enter the prison ...” “the continuing fight against the importation of drugs ...” “we never cease to be amazed at the way in which drugs are smuggled into the prison”.

And while there is much praise for prison officers’ attempts to stem the flood of illegal substances – there are some concerns about staff turning a blind eye to the problem in a minority of prisons. “There appears to be a fairly general acceptance that drugs will come into the prison and that drugs are a part of prison life”, reads one report from HMP Pentonville.

And a damning report into HMP The Mount in Hertfordshire, published last summer, reads: “Staffing levels have not been adequate to enable rigorous drug-testing of prisoners. Further, the staffing shortages seem to have occasioned a tolerance of the levels of supply and use in the prison.”

While some offenders use prison as an opportunity to kick their habit – many others are unwavering in their determination to ensure that drugs – primarily cannabis and heroin – make their way in.

Drug dealers in prison use visitors, auxiliary staff and corrupt prison officers to get the drugs in. Earlier this year prison officer Norman Egerton was jailed for six years for attempting to smuggle 147 wraps of heroin hidden in his shoes to inmates at Forest Bank in Manchester.

The Prison Officers’ Association claims that understaffing, lack of resources and overcrowding



True romance? CCTV footage from Saughton Prison of an inmate receiving drugs from a visitor via a kiss

mean that guards are sometimes faced with difficult choices – such as whether to sort out a violent incident or a drug transgression, “I would hope that officers don’t turn a blind eye but I’ve no doubt it sometimes happens,” says POA General Secretary Brian Caton.

“When I went to prison the first time I smuggled in £150 worth of heroin in with me”, says former prisoner Kevin Johnson. “I managed to take it all myself in a weekend. Later on I got a girl I knew to bring some in for me. I knew she’d done it for other prisoners in the past. It was so easy. We kissed and the heroin went from her mouth to mine. Then I managed to stick it up you know where and that was it.”

Other methods include lobbing projectiles such as tennis and golf balls, oranges and even hard-boiled eggs – all packed with drugs – over the perimeter fences.

**CLASS A CURRENCY**

Business is conducted via the prison phones or smuggled-in mobiles. Hard cash rarely changes hands – instead inmates trade in the currency that really matters inside: phone cards and tobacco. Otherwise arrangements are made for money to be exchanged via friends and relatives outside.

“You’ve maybe got a couple of guys at the top who are really making money out of it,” says Kevin. “Otherwise the middle men – the ones who deal with the day to day business aren’t making anything. They are kept in enough gear so they never rattle and they’ll have enough chocolate or tobacco the whole time they

Sam Hart is a freelance journalist

# Rogue traders

Smuggled in under the guise of kisses, oranges and even eggs, drugs are an inevitable part of life in British jails. **Sam Hart** on the inside story of the drug trade in prisons

are there – what else do you need in prison?”

Filmed for BBC's *Frontline Scotland*, guard Norrie Cockburn, from Edinburgh's Saughton Prison told a reporter: "Obviously a perfect world would be prisoners without drugs, then we could get down to real work with them. But you'd have to say that if the drugs are in the hall then they will probably be a bit quieter."

"It's obvious that it makes life easier for the staff if everyone's out of it," agrees Barrie Taylor, a former prisoner and current drugs counsellor.

A Prison Service spokesman told *Druglink* that it is "unrealistic to expect prisons to be totally drug-free". He pointed to the fact that demand is extremely high with up to 39,000 drug users in the prison system at any one time. He said it only takes one security lapse to allow a sizeable amount of heroin into the system. Just three ounces – an amount that can easily be squashed into three large marble-sized balls then disguised in a body cavity or swallowed – will keep heroin users in an average sized prison supplied for a month.

## CRIME GANGS

But there is growing concern that in some areas dealing in prison is becoming a more organised and sinister affair. Last year, prison chiefs raised the alarm when drug barons in the North West began targeting prisons to offload a glut of cheap drugs.

And Johnston has noticed a hardening in attitudes

“

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”

over the last few years. "I was terrified of getting into debt with the dealers – I'd rather rattle than let that happen. But now I've noticed that lads just run up a debt and then say their life is in danger and ask to be put on the block (a high protection unit) until they get transferred. When I was inside that was like admitting you were a nonce or something, but now there's no shame in it."

At its worst drug dealing can pervade the whole prison and beyond – causing unrest and violence among inmates with even non-users being ensnared in the problem. "They would use people from the drug free wings to go and do pick-ups from the visitors' centre," says Taylor. "They attract less suspicion that way."

The Prison Service claims it has kept drug-misuse relatively low compared to rising levels in the community. Its Drug Strategy Unit has attempted to stem the supply of illegal substances entering prisons through security measures such as CCTV in visiting areas, monitoring of phone calls, a trial use of mobile phone detectors and mandatory drug testing (MDT). They are also drafting in the Police Scientific Development Branch to offer security advice.

Search dogs have been the most successful method to date. One dog in HMP Manchester was the object of death threats from drug barons because he was so good at his job.

MDTs show that drug-misuse has halved since 1997 to 12.2 per cent in 2004. This however, still falls short of its 10 per cent target and the Prison Reform Trust points out that while the overall trend has been downwards – figures have started to creep up again over the last three years. And prisoners say that the tests are causing some inmates to switch from cannabis to harder drugs which the system eliminates quickly and are therefore harder to detect – although there is little hard evidence to back this up.

## CATCH 22

The Prison Service maintains that any attempt to totally eradicate drugs in prison would 'involve disproportionate, draconian measures' that would wreck its work to help stop re-offending.

Visits, it claims, would need to become non-contact and "visitors would need to be subjected to far more intrusive searches – which could be challenged under human rights legislation." Pressure groups maintain that if the current levels of overcrowding and understaffing in the prison system are allowed to continue there is little hope of real change.

"The Prison Service has to take up the slack for the lack of treatment in the community and not surprisingly is unable to cope," says PRT's senior policy officer Enver Solomon, "The problem is likely to continue if we persist in locking people up in overcrowded prisons instead of providing more community drug places."

So, for the foreseeable future at least, prisoners wishing to live in a drug-free environment may still see escape as their only option. ■