



# *House of* **CORRECTION**

Prisoners are singing, sewing and sautéing for their supper, says *ANASTASIA BERNHARDT*





in prisons, especially for the families of victims. But if you believe in a fairer society, then you've got to give them that support.'

And as nearly half of all prisoners say they have no qualifications, it comes as no surprise that reoffending rates are so high. While there is no hard and fast solution, the creative and luxury industries are stepping in to fill the gap with initiatives that give inmates genuinely useful skills to help them to find employment after release – and keep whirring minds occupied behind bars.

'They find talents in prison that they would never have thought they had, from beautiful calligraphy to woodwork and drawing,' says Adam, who shows me a Rudyard Kipling poem a prisoner sent to him in a colourful curling script.

'But that's not to give the impression that it's a rather nice place for an artisan-style education. It's just not.'

Keeping idle hands busy was the adage that spurred Lady Anne Tree 20 years ago to found Fine Cell Work, a social enterprise that trains prisoners in paid, skilled and creative needlework. Though she died in 2010, her work is continued by Katy Emck, Lady Tree's first employee and who tells me, 'We started with £2,000 in my bedroom. It sounded ridiculous at first, people just don't imagine fine embroidery to come out of prisons.'

Just as you wouldn't expect prisoners to be absorbed by needlework (96 per cent of their stitchers are men), the pieces Fine Cell Work produce are equally extraordinary, working with artists and designers including Kit Kemp, Ai Weiwei and Stella McCartney. Bestsellers include a geometric cushion using leftover pieces of wool and a pineapple motif by interior designer Melissa Wyndham.

These are not rough about the edges pieces to buy 'for charity' but seriously desirable homewares. At around £100 per cushion they certainly have the luxury price tag but when you consider that each piece takes around 150 hours to complete, it feels a bit like – well – daylight robbery.

As it marks its 20th anniversary this year, Fine Cell Work celebrates training over 4,600 inmates and producing

**ABOVE:**  
Restaurant  
quality food  
at The Clink  
**BELOW:** Exterior  
of The Clink  
restaurant at  
HMP Brixton

‘**W**here the flame of civilisation burns low, you have the means to blow it into life.’ It’s a beautifully poetic sentence; just perhaps not one that you would expect to find

scrawled in biro on a prisoner feedback form. Its author was Nicholas, an 80-year-old prisoner in Dartmoor, reflecting on his time spent with the Prison Choir Project alongside 16 fellow inmates.

Founded in January this year, the programme’s architect is Adam Green, a baritone who has sung for companies including the English, Scottish and Welsh National Operas, and who started out with the straightforward idea of bringing music to prisons to offer a little relief from the oppressive monotony of the daily prison grind.

The idea is not a new one – Grange Park Opera’s Wasfi Kani has been running the Pimlico Opera in prisons annually since 1987, but it’s the scale and frequency of Adam’s ambition that impresses. Earlier this year, he took a professional orchestra and full cast into Dartmoor Prison to perform Bizet’s Carmen with a prison choir he had personally trained over the course of a few weeks.

‘We started rehearsing on a Monday and by Thursday of the first week they had learned all six choruses from Carmen by memory and were ready to perform,’ says Adam. Which, if anything, is more a crushing indictment of the levels of boredom experienced in prison than of virtuosic ability.

With around 84,000 people currently incarcerated in the UK (a number that’s doubled since 1993) and a reoffending rate of 46 per cent, something is clearly terribly wrong. The prison system has been overcrowded every year since 1994 yet the number of staff in the public prison estate has fallen by 29 per cent in the last four – it’s no wonder that the rate of self-harm in prisons has proliferated and is up by 40 per cent in just two years. Alarm bells should be ringing.

‘It should seem obvious that people who are in prison need to come out better than when they went in. It’s a knackered system,’ says Adam, ‘however, public perception is a very difficult thing to swing in favour of people who are







FROM ABOVE: Pentreath & Hall cushions at Fine Cell Work; Carmen at Dartmoor prison; Fine Cell Work stitcher, Melissa Wyndham Shell cushion at Fine Cell Work

bespoke commissions for institutions like the V&A. It currently commands the largest workforce of hand-stitchers in Europe – 290 and counting.

‘Prisons are essentially deserts of contact and creativity, and a lot of people want to fill their time with something productive,’ says Katy. Fine Cell Work stitchers can spend around 20 hours a week working, earning up to £15 a week to put aside for their release, amounting to as much as a few thousand pounds.

The effectiveness of the programme is staggering. Only eight per cent of their post-prison trainees reoffend. ‘Sewing helps them to pass the time and feel a sense of pride,’ says Katy. ‘Prisons are such sad places that when you put something as trivial sounding as embroidery in that context it can be a very powerful thing.’

One initiative that has been really effective at giving inmates employable skills is The Clink charity, which aims to break the cycle of crime by training prisoners in hospitality through its in-prison restaurants open to the public at Brixton, Cardiff, High Down and Styal. Inmates taking part in the programme are 41 per cent less likely to reoffend as a result.



Prisoners with six to 18 months of their sentence left to serve work a 40-hour week in The Clink restaurants, gaining City & Guilds NVQs in food preparation and front-of-house service in a simulated working environment, with allocated mentors to help graduates find employment upon release.

Ex-inmate Grant says, ‘The Clink gave me the opportunity to have a life once released from prison. I discovered my passion for cooking and thanks to the training I received I could forge a career once I was released.’

While prisoners can use the scheme to secure their futures, diners benefit from the one-off opportunity to sup within the walls of a prison – and leave at the end of the night. Don’t think you’re getting any old slop, this is serious and imaginative British cooking. They even grow their own veg. The Clink Gardens also earn inmates qualifications in horticulture.

And it is perhaps this sense of normality that has been the most important part of any of these projects. Kate Symonds-Joy, who played Carmen in the Prison Choir Project, reflects,

‘In some ways there was an idea that we were doing something extraordinary but in fact it is the ordinariness of it which I’m told appeals to one prisoner. Sometimes I was able to forget that we were in a prison. We could have been rehearsing for an am dram production in a village hall.’ ■