

Interview

Interviewer: Lorraine Gamman

Interviewee: Dean Stalham

L: What was in the first cell that you were incarcerated in?

D: The first cell was Pentonville on E-wing. Double bunk.

L: What was it made of?

D: Metal slats. Really hard mattress. Thick plastic pillow. Bedding was thick green matted wooly. You know all the awful sheets. It had stainless steel toilet, stainless steel sink, and it had kitchen type furniture. Mini wardrobes. It had a hole in them, not everyone could get a lock. But it was a hole a lock could go into. A lot of men would carry their lock around with them. There would be a kitchen cupboard on the wall. Say about three foot long. None of them had handles. A table, just a regular formica table with four legs.

L: What was your experience sleeping on the mattress?

D: Oh god. You'd have to find a position you were particularly comfortable in and stick to it. There's no rolling over and tossing and turning. It takes so long for your body to form to that mattress. There's no point in moving about. Plus, it's so thin you can't...

L: Have you ever been around furniture being vandalized?

D: Wood in particular is scratched into, drawn on, dug out and hacked. I've never been in a position when it's been smashed up.

L: What did you find the most frustrating about being in a cell?

D: Going to the toilet. No privacy. You can build a cover with a string and blanket. Which you tie from the bunk to the window and you sit behind it. There's no separation. Some prisons have a half a wall with a toilet behind it, but not every prison has that.

L: So you would say that one of the first things if you were designing for a cell is how to give the inmates some privacy

D: I would look at the cell like it's an open planned flat and work out how to compact the kitchen... One cupboards for food one is for clothes. If you look at kitchen design now they fit things like a Tetris kind of thing. So I would work out the most compact way of putting those cupboards in the cell, rather than have them spread out.

L (4:20): What about the actual space itself? If you had the choice between having a bed or having a roll up matt what would you choose?

D: I'd definitely go with a pull-down bed. One that goes up into the wall. That would give you space before you go to bed.

L: Do you think roll up matts would be a disaster?

D: Yeah, that would be a disaster. People wouldn't get any sleep and there would be a health issue with that. If you're doubling up in a cell you never know from week to week what cellmate you're going to get. If you're new in the first month or so they literally throw someone new in with you every three or four days.... And they're throwing someone in with you with the worst boils and abscesses on their bum and back. It's a health issue. But the fold-up bed thing to the wall is a definite plus.

L: They're looking to make the furniture more robust. What do you have to say about that?

D: You can't break the metal beds...

L: Do you think the mattresses can be improved in any way?

D: Oh yeah...They're really hard. Rock hard... There're more people that don't care if you don't have a good night sleep. If someone gets in an agreement to redesign prison cells, why not make the beds as comfy as you possibly can?

L: What did you write on when you were in prison? Was it damaged at any point?

D (8:45): [The table area} You make that area your own anyways, it's a sanctuary for any prisoner. The table area –because if you've been in the cell the longest – that's your area. And anyone coming in would know not to mess with it. So you can keep it in a pretty neat state.

L: Was the furniture hard to use?

D: They didn't have handles... The only thing you can have in your cell art-wise is matchsticks. You're allowed to use pictures but you use toothpaste as glue.

L: What I'm interested in is how the inmates innovate inside of the cells. Have you seen anything and thought "that was a good idea"?

D: The toilet doors were always a good idea... creating a place for privacy. Lots of men make different kinds of boxes to keep things in. Mainly small boxes. They'll make them out of matches and stuff, or they'll decorate old cigarette tins or things like that. Or they'll make containers that they can hold their pens in... It makes the environment nicer as well. It makes it look nicer.

L (11:40): Have you seen anyone turn over their wardrobe to make it function better?

D: Yeah. The one on the side will be for shoes and then they'll find a wedge thing to leave the door open, so that will be for their shoes or their prison bag. They get more out of the space or furniture. Some prisoners have bags and bags of tomato sauce sachets. They need something to keep their things in order, so they'll convert boxes into stuff. They'll take 2 litre water carriers and paint them up and that will be for their tomato sauce as well.

L (12:40): I know they have plastic chairs. Have you seen anyone try and exercise with those?

D: Yeah, in my play I have prison weights. Water carries with broom handles for the handles. The more you can lift the more containers you add to the broom. The prison weights, they fit straight under the bed. Prison bags are good for holding lots of stuff in. A prison bag is a clear plastic bag about 4 foot high. They're really thick plastic so they don't rip. Put all your books in there, all your letters. Roll it up and put it under the bed. Loads of stuff goes under the bed.

L (14:00): Do you hang up your clothes or do you roll them? Do you fold them?

D: There's this one cupboard that is a wardrobe... The hangers are attached to the bar already. You can't pull the hanger out. That's another thing to do, devise a new hanger. There's not enough to go around, so you're lucky if you had three hangers. So that's for your shirt, your sweatshirt...

L: When your clothes are being washed what do you do?

D: you have a net bag, and all your washing goes in the net bag and they wash your net bag. They throw the net bag in the machine... If you've been in for a while you accumulate good things. You trade. If there could be a wardrobe devised with really good hanging space that doesn't affect security, that would be great for a cell. You do get really good at folding things when you're in prison (proceeds to talk about folding boards used outside of prisons in retail). If you had an item that does it (folding) in seconds... even if it was made out of plastic or rubber. Cardboard even.

L (18:20): So in the food section, people have their ketchup, their tea. What do you have in your cell?

D: Well most men use plastic cups to put away their stuff. That's it really, you don't have much more. There's the Double Bubble Man...

L: What sort of food do men have in prison? What can they order?

D: They can order tuna, noodles.... When I was first in some prisoners were ingenious they'd gave a bit of copper wire hanging from a light switch with two razor blades on it, and they'd put it in a bucket of water and boil the water up in it. And the way they make toast is they'd fold the mattress in half, and then they'd fold up a fire resistant sheet into a tight ball. They'd put the toast on the slat of the bed, set fire to the blanket and just hold it underneath the bed. It would make the toast in just a couple of seconds.

L (20:55): So in your cupboard, you'd have the things you bought for the week. How much money do you have to spend?

L (22:15): What bugged you the most about being in a cell?

D: The frustration of having a window you can't look out of. It's so high up. That's part of the wind up to be honest.

L: What about not being in control of your own light switch?

D: Yeah. Any they never answer the red bell either.

L (24:10): What about chairs?

D: Chairs a chair, really. They were completely made out of blue plastic. You can buy chairs now that fold into the table. Anything to make the cell a bigger space until you need it is a good idea. If there was a

table that sprung underneath and you could pull them out when you need them. I suppose you could easily break those, but lots of men don't want to break up their cells.

L: Can you think of any top-tips for cell design?

D: I would not have television in cells. They're the biggest cause of fights, because of choice of what you want to watch. You have to rent the tele and it's two feet away from your head, so it fucks your eyes up... It's never more than two or three feet away from you. Guy on the bottom bunk doesn't get as good a view as the guy on the top bunk. I would ban television from cells.