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### **THE ANARCHIST BLACK CROSS**

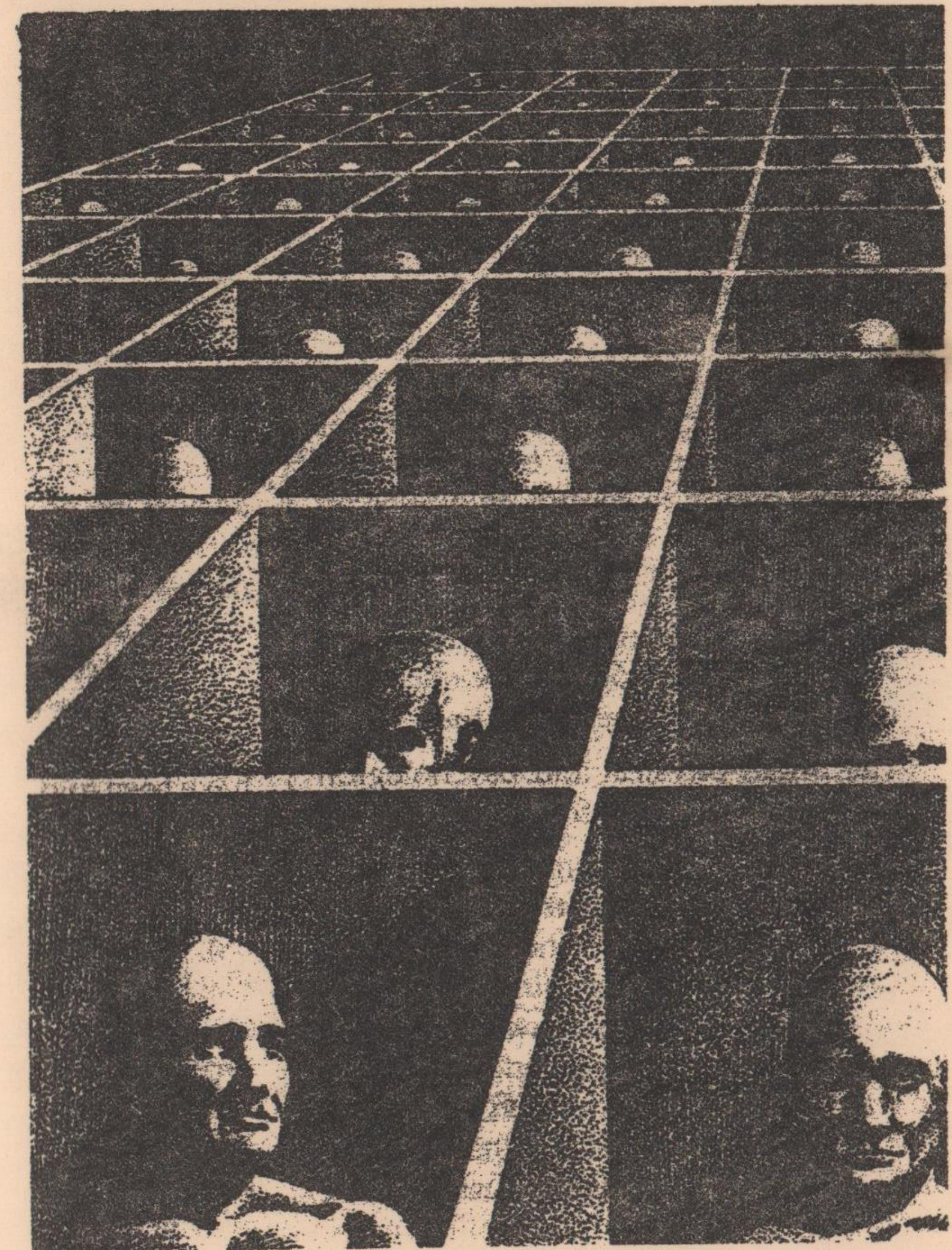
The ABC is a network of groups that give practical support to working class prisoners, particularly people inside for resistance to capitalism, ie revolutionaries, anarchists, strikers, and prisoners fighting back inside against the brutal system that holds them hostage. We also support people framed up by the police, people imprisoned for breaking the law to survive, women resisting male violence and self defence against police and racist attacks. Our work consists mostly of letterwriting, demos, some financial help, and publicity of individual cases, collective resistance and the true nature of prisons and crime. As it stands we are a small network, and our work is limited, but we try to link our actions into a wider movement of communities fighting back against a society built for profit. On our own we aren't going to change the world, but we invite prisoners, their friends, family and supporters, and anyone who is interested in our work to get in touch and get involved.

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# **IN THE STRONGBOX**

by **ROBERT MAWDSLEY**



**LIFE IN STRONGBOX CELLS  
IN PARKHURST PRISON**



## INTRODUCTION

Prisons are designed to keep control over us, through fear of going inside, fear of the 'mad beasts' we're told prisoners are, fear of the consequences of breaking the rules, fear of each other, of dealing ourselves with the violence and frustration, with crime, with a life that is out of our control. It serves the purposes of the class that runs our lives, that controls our work, our prisons, to have us divided by crime in our communities and afraid, condemning 'criminals', approving when they are sent to prison. While the rich, who benefit most from a society run for profit not people, the real criminals, laugh all the way to the bank.

There are many myths that surround prison. These myths make it easier for us to be kept in fear, for those on the inside to be divided from those on the outside, to hide the fact that we are the same people, one class, with common interests. These myths contradict each other. One myth is that prison is a 'holiday camp', with prisoners living in luxury at the 'taxpayers' expense'. We have printed this booklet to try to begin unravelling this myth, to begin the process of exposing the day to day reality of prisons.

This pamphlet describes what it is like to spend time in a 'Strongbox' cell in Parkhurst Prison, written by a prisoner who has spent long periods in the Strongbox, and is still held in isolation from other prisoners. These cells supposedly hold the most dangerous and violent men in the prison system when they "get out of control". In fact they are often used to isolate, to demoralise, to break the spirit of prisoners who have questioned or resisted the brutal, dehumanising system that is prison life, who have refused to submit and play by the rules. Often they succeed in destroying the spirit, leading to depression, submission or suicide.

We know this account of life in the Strongbox is heavy going in parts. But to have a chance of changing life for the better, we need to fight on every battleground, wherever the hierarchies and brutalities of capitalist life bear down on us. Too often prison struggles are ignored, although prison is a threat that lies behind over all of us.

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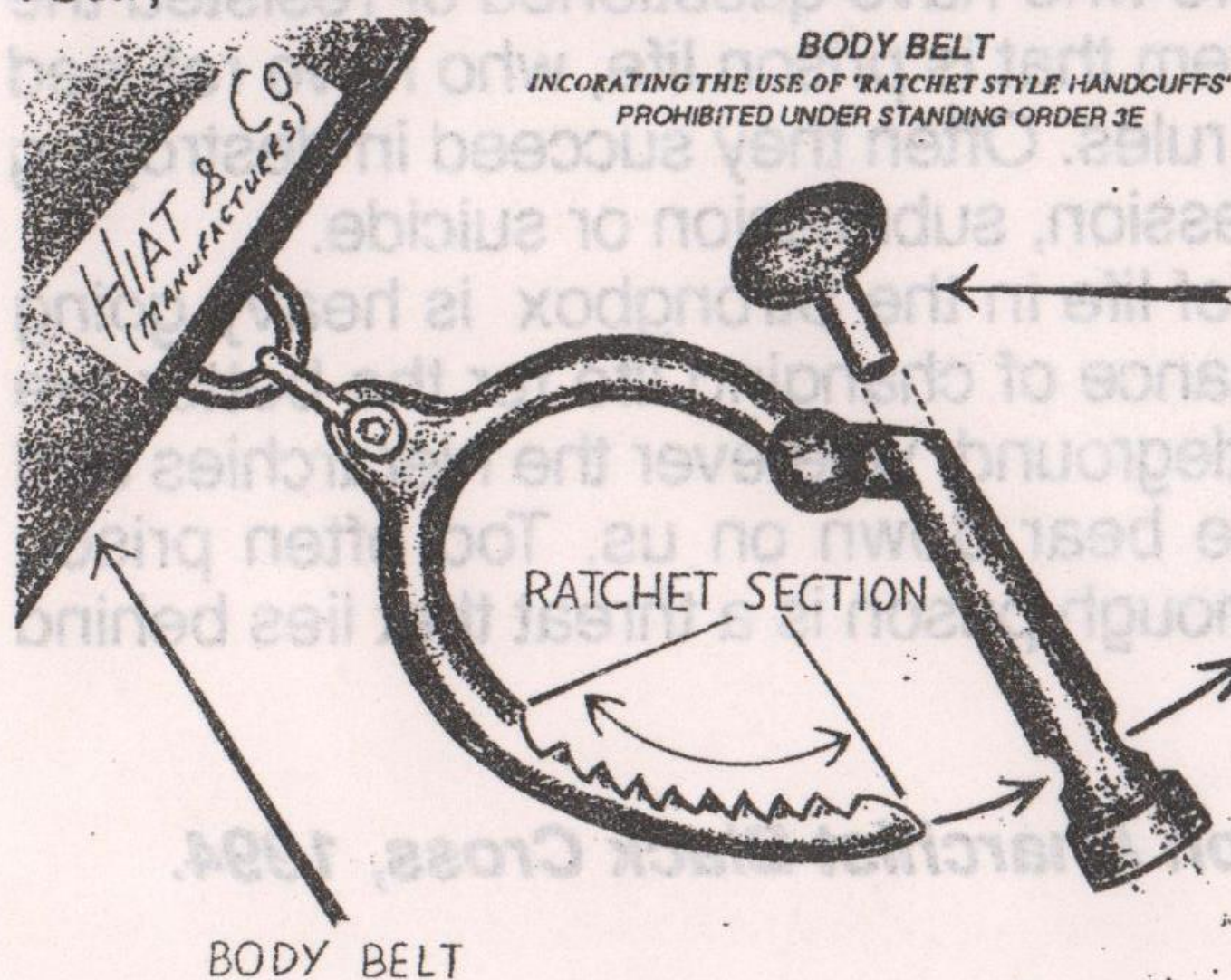


## CELLS 21 & 22

Strongboxes no 21 and 22 respectively are located on 'F2' landing, situated away from the landing via a locked gate followed by two doors giving access to the two cells themselves. The gate is almost parallel to 'F2' landing wall, whilst the first door is approximately ten feet away, where the second door is confronted some eight feet beyond which Strongbox 21 is situated to the left and Strongbox 22 to the right. Access to the Strongboxes is by heavy duty coated steel doors, reinforced with two heavy-duty bolts, one ordinary bolt, and the door-lock itself. When a prisoner is taken to the Strongbox he is generally escorted by some 6 or 7 jailers, dressed in light-brown overalls and wearing protective clothing, consisting of protective gloves, helmets with visors, various arm-, elbow-, knee- and shin-pads; several will carry perspex shields some 5 feet in height and approximately 2 feet broad. The hospital jailers usually use the office area of the Hospital Wing to put on such clothing, prior to which all the inmates will have been locked in their cells on both 'F2' and 'F3' landings, to prevent what they are observing the proceedings about to follow.

### BODY-LOCKS

When 'escorting' a prisoner to the strongbox, a jailer either side of him will have an arm-lock on each arm together with a wrist-lock, with both arms and wrists bent counter to the joints. A jailer behind will be holding the inmate's waistband high at the rear, while another in front forces the inmate's head down, by holding it at the back with both hands, near the ears, having the forehead almost touch the knees, so that only small steps can be taken - should the prisoner be allowed to walk. If he is not allowed, other jailers will take a leg each and carry him round to the Strongbox, while another



will open the gate and doors.

### STRIPPED

Once the inmate reaches cell 21 or 22, he is immediately forced onto the floor, lying flat, where he is systematically stripped of all his clothing, article by article, limb by limb, allowing only one limb at a time to be relatively free, but under the control of a jailer, until the article of clothing is removed. This procedure is laboriously completed until the prisoner is naked. At any time, should the inmate struggle, or become vocal, all body-locks are tightened for a period until the prisoner is forced to relax and become totally passive. Each body cavity is then explored to ensure there are no hidden objects, then each jailer one by one withdraws from the cell, until the remaining two control the inmate's arms and legs from the rear. Then there is a countdown five to one, at which point these two jailers withdraw, swiftly banging the steel-coated cell-door closed, putting into place the two heavy duty bolts and the smaller bolts.

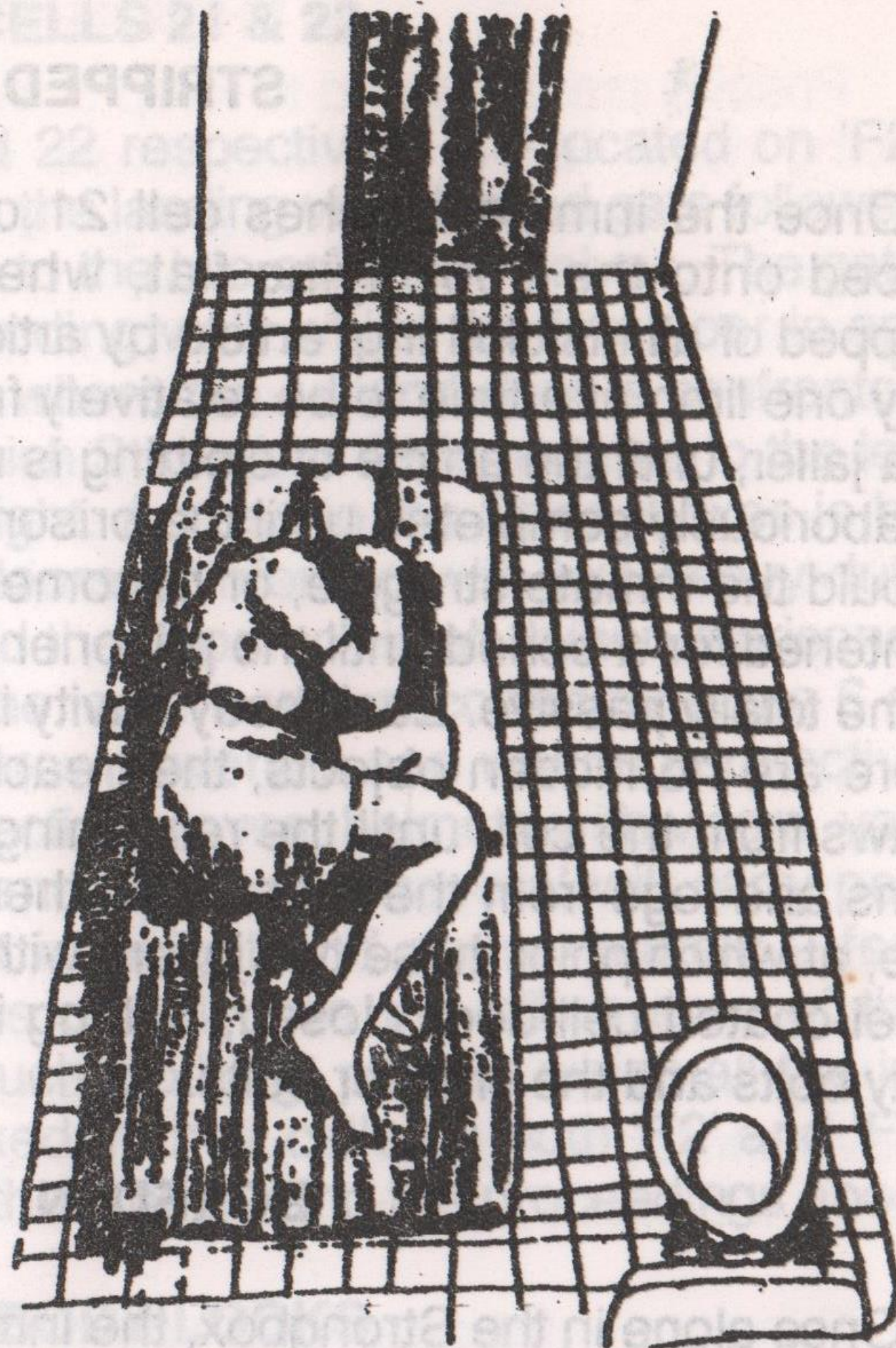
### BOXED IN

Once alone in the Strongbox, the inmate usually has available for use, a mattress of bare black foam, often without any cover, along with one, possibly two rough canvas blankets on which to rest or sleep. For clothing he usually has provided a light-brown protective suit, consisting of a long-top and short trousers, the texture of which is similar to wearing heavy-duty plastic. Steel rings are incorporated into the waistband of the shorts in case a body belt should be used to further restrain the prisoner; steel rings are also incorporated into the neck of the protective jacket and from one side of the neck to the to the shoulder whereby a plastic loop is passed through the steel rings fastened and then cut off, thus preventing the inmate from removing the top. Similar plastic loops can be used for the shorts if necessary.

There is a toilet with a concrete surround in each of these cells, in the corner; no inlet or outlet pipes are visible, these are built into the structure of the cells. Neither is a toilet chain present in the cells. The toilets are flushed from above by a jailer who has



access to an area some 14 feet above each cell (access to which is via a door on 'F3' landing) from where he is able to flush the toilets via a lever mechanism. At the same time this is the method by which prisoners in these cells are observed, through a small spyhole in the ceiling the same size as those used in ordinary cell doors. There are steel hatches, some 3 inches by 10 inches in the cell doors of these two strongboxes, but these are seldom used for observation. Rather, this is the method by which the prisoner's meals are passed through to him, using paper plates, a small paper dish and stereof foam cup, along with a light plastic spoon to eat with.



The prisoner is required to keep all these items secure, for if they are destroyed, his next few meals are often withheld, but if he passes these items back through the cell-hatch, then he may be allowed in most instances his next meal. A sign is located between the two cells, reminding staff to always collect used dishes first from the inmates before giving them their next meal, of which proportions are significantly small, possibly due to the size of the plates and dishes, though not always for this reason alone.

#### **WHITE LIGHT WHITE HEAT**

Lighting in these cells is conducted by fluorescent strips; in cell 21 this is some 3 feet in length, while in cell 22 it is some 18 inches long. Nonetheless, in both instances the glare from these

lights can often become intolerable, due to their strength, and no light switch is available in either cell for them to be switched off. Small night-time light bulbs built into such lights in ordinary cells are often absent or not working, therefore throughout the whole day and night the inmate is often in a state of constant alertness, suffering headaches and lack of sleep. An added burden is the fact that while a bell-button is available in each of these cells for the prisoner to call jailers, the actual bell is operated from 'F2' landing, where jailers can switch it on and off at will.

From personal experience of a number of lengthy periods of several months duration in these cells, at no time did these bells ever operate. I believe that it is customary for the hospital jailers to ensure the bells are constantly switched off. Therefore, any prisoner in cell 21 or 22 is unable to have his fluorescent lighting off at night, unless he is fortunate enough to catch the jailer above when he comes to ensure the prisoner is still there; always providing the jailer is willing to come around to the cells and switch the light-switch off, providing again he can hear any such request from his position above the cells. Headaches are common and constant.

Heating in these two cells is provided by two means. Firstly there are under floor heating pipes which are regulated from outside the walls by a thermostat operated by the jailers. It is regular practice for these to be permanently on whilst an inmate is in these cells, to the point where the floor can become extremely hot, often to the extent that it is like placing a hot poker to the soles of your feet, and relief has to be sought by sitting on the concrete surround of the toilet for long periods. It is possible for the prisoner to lie down on his mattress, but after 15 to 20 minutes he will be forced by the heat to air his mattress first against the wall, to help cool it, then be required to seek another area of the floor on which to place the mattress, until that area becomes too hot. As a consequence, therefore at night, if the inmate is trying to sleep, he will regularly be required to awake in order to carry out this procedure, which will inevitably add to stress and tension already inflicted as a result of his confinement in such cell and the effects of heavy sweating, due to the constant heat, and the effects of dehydration.

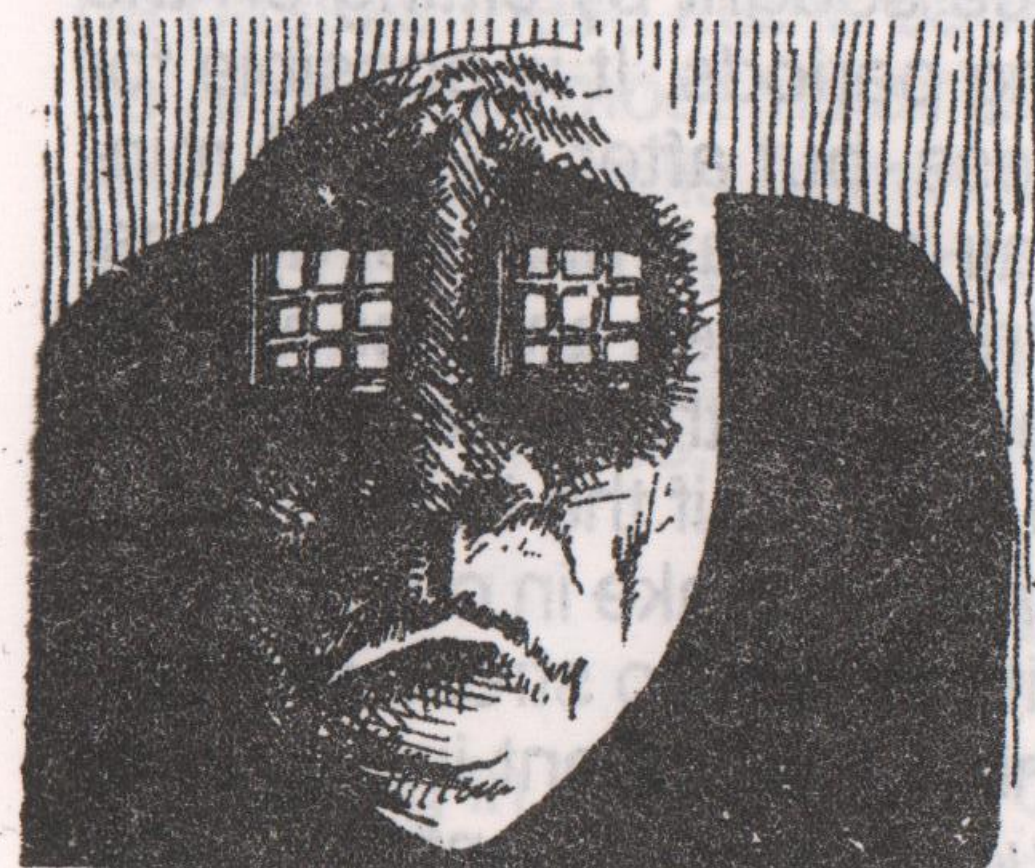


## HOT AIR

Approximately 7 feet above each cell door is located an electric fan-heater, a metal grid covers the ventilation duct inside, for this heater; the fan heater itself being located directly above the each cell door, each being operated by a switch outside the cells, which in turn is under the control of the hospital jailers. At any time they choose they are able to switch these fan heaters on, blowing extremely hot air into the cells, enabling them to become rapidly stifling, quickly leading to headaches, nausea, dry mouth, and parched throat, with the prisoner feeling exhausted and drained, apathetic and lethargic. Relief can only come at mealtimes during the day, when he then has the opportunity of asking jailers to switch the fan-heater off. If the inmate has not been 'quarrelsome' it is possible they may just comply with such a request; if not the possibility exists that the next mealtime, several hours later, may see different jailers willing to switch the fan-heaters off. It largely depends on their attitude and thinking at the time. The constant noise from these heaters seeps into the very spirit and body of the inmate, quickly becoming monotonous and repetitive, leading to further tension and stress and frustration. Should it be left on throughout the night, sleep is often impossible; over a period of time weight loss is noticeable and pronounced, due to the heat and exhaustion.

A container for water is provided in each of these cells, either 3 pints or 3 litres, depending on whether it has been filled prior to the inmate being placed in there. However it is possible for the inmate to obtain further water at mealtimes should the jailers be

willing to get some for him. Should they do so, the procedure here is that the small cell-hatch is opened, the end of a small hose is put through which the prisoner places in his own container. Following this, jailers will pour water into a funnel, kept outside on a hook, and allow what water they have brought to pour through the hose until their container is empty,



upon which the hose is pulled away and the cell hatch closed, until mealtime comes round again. Invariably the water is warm, and obtained from 'F2' recess tap, which is not marked 'drinking water'.

## ROOM WITH A VIEW

Windows in these cells are some 8 or 9 feet off the ground, made up of heavy-duty glass about half an inch thick and about two and a half inches square, consisting of about 27 or 36 panes individually, with two panes missing as the only avenue of ventilation. There is nothing to look out onto given the height of such windows, but any view would likely be obscured by the perspex screen outside, situated over the window, almost flush with the outer cell wall. Bars are located between this screen and the actual cell window itself, so no real view exists for the prisoner.

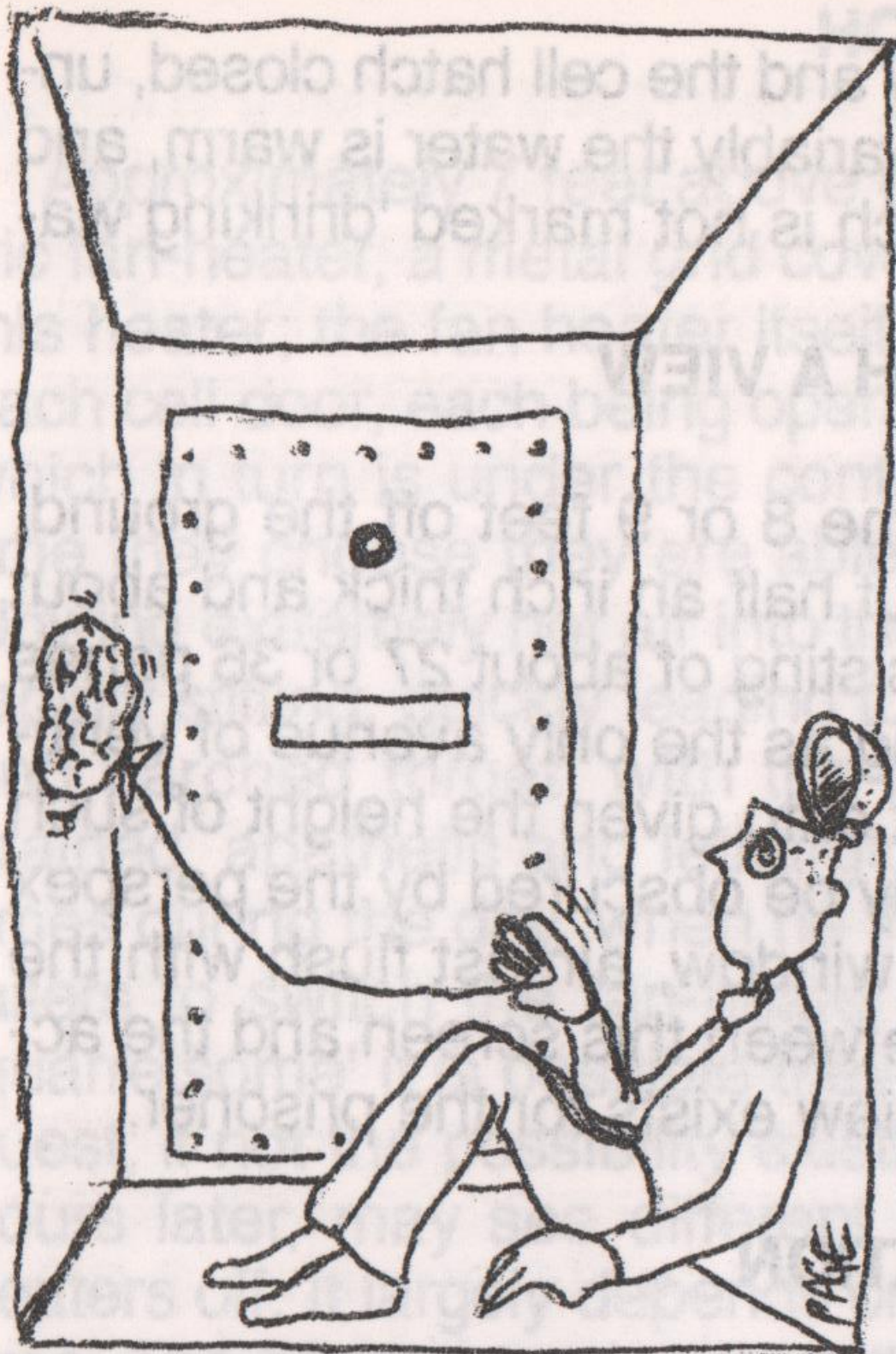
## ISOLATION

Inmates are not permitted to smoke in strongbox cells, and are not permitted any personal items or possessions of any kind whatsoever. They are not allowed any writing materials for the whole period of their stay, nor are they allowed to receive any incoming mail from their families or friends while they are kept in them. At Xmas I was not allowed to have a card sent to me by the chaplain. Prisoners can be, and are, kept in such cells for any period jailers choose to keep them there, which can be several days, several weeks, or as my case shows, several months at a time; day after day, week after week, month after month. In the Hospital Wing, Prison Rules/Statutory Instruments 1964, as far as the jailers are concerned do not apply as they ensure immunity from accountability. S.M.O.s are merely required to approve the actions of their jailers without investigating the reasons or causes for the jailers' actions. It is only AFTER the prisoner has been placed in such a cell that the S.M.O. may be informed and asked to approve their actions, since they run the wing.

## SENSORY DEPRIVATION

The sense of isolation in these cells is acute, bordering on sensory deprivation, for there is nothing to stimulate the senses.





Usually the only sounds to be heard of life are when the jailers from the main prison pass by outside, on their way to dinner or on their way home; the sound of jangling keys and their footsteps on the path outside. No sounds can be heard from the other inmates from 'F2' landing, for the two doors in the passageway block out any sounds from that direction, and no inmates pass, for the outer gate on 'F2' prevents them from entering this area.

These inmates have nothing to turn to, no-one to turn to, they are completely on their own, at what little mercy the jailers have re-

maining. Seldom, if ever, are these inmates charged with any offence of breaching prison discipline, seldom do they face governor's adjudications. Rather, should any reason be given for their confinement in the strongbox it is usually speculative, based on hearsay and rumour, rather than fact, with all explanations emanating solely from jailers, without any of their reasons being investigated at any level whatsoever. Tomorrow the hospital squad could remove me from my cell here and place me in the Strongbox; they can then tell the S.M.O. or Governor I was threatening or aggressive, despite never having been charged with any of these offences here, and that would be that, no jury, no trial, no charge, but another couple of months in the Strongbox nonetheless.

### PRISON LOGIC

If any prisoner shows anger or resentment at the way he has been placed in these cells, then what he is actually doing is showing that his confinement is justified as he can then be said to be refractory or violent. If alternatively he tries to tell the S.M.O. or Governor that he has been placed in these cells for no justifiable

reason, then he is again justifying his being in there, as in this instance he is obviously 'mentally ill' (after all he is the Hospital Wing), making such allegations proves he must be ill and therefore his detention justified and lawful to them.

### TRAUMATIC

Detention in these cell is a devastating and traumatic experience, permanently marking an inmate psychologically. I have yet to meet a fellow prisoner who has not been affected by confinement in such cells. Also I have yet to meet an inmate who has been given counselling to lessen the effects of post-traumatic stress, which results from such experiences. Symptoms generally only materialise upon release from these cells, but the effects can be devastating, leading in some cases to suicide, but these effects the jailers and S.M.O.s ignore and are ignorant of, preferring to stick with that little they have been taught, if anything, on such matters. There was a proposal by some members of the prison management team to do away with the strongbox cells in the Hospital Wing and convert them to television rooms, knocking down the middle wall and putting in chairs. This proposal has not been carried through and has been shelved, for hospital jailers opposed it and elected to keep the strongboxes instead, despite the harmful psychological effects they have on inmates. This is one reason (of many) why I refrain from using their terminology and call them 'Healthcare Officers', for their actions, their attitudes towards the inmates here and their thinking suggests strongly to me that they have no right at all to such a label, or to be addressed in such a manner.

It is in our Hospital Wings that a lot of 'accidental deaths' occur as well as many of our suicides, of which I do not believe these prisoners can be said to be solely responsible, for the camel isn't able to break its own back. It takes fellow human beings to help pile straw on it and this is what cells 21 and 22 do for fellow prisoners like Lawrence Clifton\*, who went through similar experiences and similar feelings as these described above.

\*Lawrence Clifton killed himself in Strongbox cell 21 in August 1993.