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**Prisoners at Work: A Collaboration between professional photographer Andy Aitchison, Barbed graphic design studio (HMP Coldingley), and the Howard League for Penal Reform.**

The photographs reproduced here represent an alternative way of communicating the experiences of those incarcerated in British prisons through visualising and contextualising 'prisoners at work'. The photographs were taken by Andy Aitchison, a freelance professional photographer with experience working in the prison system, and commissioned and produced as an exhibition piece by design studio, Barbed Design. Barbed Design is part of the Howard League for Penal Reform and based in HMP Coldingley, Surrey, England. The studio employs and trains prison inmates in graphic design, IT, and pre-press. Managed by an experienced graphic designer, and with regular participation from visiting experts, volunteers and professional teachers, Barbed is a working design studio. It is run as a profit-making enterprise which competes for and carries out design work for external clients. All profits are put back into the charitable work of the Howard League for Penal Reform. What is unique about Barbed, in addition to its location, is that employed prisoners are paid minimum wage. They pay tax and national insurance, start bank accounts and pensions, and they are protected by employment legislation. These conditions enable Barbed staff to contribute toward supporting their dependents while incarcerated. The photographer Andy explained his involvement and the aims of the project as follows:

Andy Aitchison: When Eleanor Black, studio manager at Barbed design, called to talk about this project, the ethos made complete sense to me. One of the main factors stopping ex-prisoners re-offending is gaining employment once they have been released. I asked myself why not offer them proper experience while doing time? Why pay them rates-per-week that are below the minimum wage per-hour for the rest of society? Being denied their freedom is the price they pay for the crimes they committed. Denying them a chance to help themselves and their families by working for £1.20 a day must be soul-destroying.

They have a design agency called Barbed Design based in the prison which pays the prisoners minimum wages. They feel it's working very well and they wanted to show what conditions are like for other workers in the prison, and what sort of wages they're getting. So the idea was that we'd go round each section of the prison taking pictures, portraits of people doing their work, and get them to talk about how they feel about

their job, what sort of money they're receiving and how it's affecting them. Their pay scale ranges from six pounds to 20 pounds-a-week.

Chris Greer: Were the prisoners enthusiastic about taking part?

AA: A few said no, but most of them were more than happy to talk about what they do and the little wages that they get. Barbed employs six prisoners they are all very well connected within the prison. Other prisoners want to work there because the wages are better. They want to be involved as much as they can with it, and they respect the people that work there.

CG: What about the security and approval process in an environment like a prison? To what extent were you constrained...?

AA: Once the images have been taken they have to go through further security checks by the prison using MAPPA guidance [Multi Agency Public Protection Arrangements], and that resulted in a lot of the portraits being rejected outright. In some cases I've been able to use the image without showing the full identity of the individual. But as a photographer you have to work with that sort of thing because not everyone wants to be seen. I work quite a lot with undocumented migrants and refugees and they don't want to have their faces seen and their story told together, and you've got to work with that. So for everyone I photographed [in Coldingley], I tried to do a shot where you could see them – a straight, normal portrait – and also one where you couldn't see their face. So I had that covered if the prison officers said I couldn't use certain pictures. In one case, I took a picture of an orderly in the kitchen, and he was chopping salad, and I got him to turn round for a shot, and he had an eight inch chopping knife in his hand with a bit of salad hanging off it. That one was rejected on the grounds that it wasn't acceptable to see a prisoner with a knife in his hand, even though he's a chef working in a kitchen.

CG: How did you feel about that?

AA: I like to take images that are kind of quirky, like the photograph of the prisoner making a prison gate (see picture 4). It's quite an ironic picture that a prisoner is making a gate that's to incarcerate him... perhaps not directly, and for very little money. And there are certain pictures like that, and the one with the guy with the knife. I can see why it's not suitable to be seen. But he is making a salad, he is chopping lettuce, and it's only a piece of lettuce hanging off the knife, but we couldn't use certain pictures. I took some photographs in the laundry, and in the laundry they have these big cages that the sheets and everything come in, and each person has made their own little shelter. They've got plenty of padding, and sometimes they sit down, and I took pictures of them all sitting down having a cup of tea with their feet up, reading the paper, in the laundry cages. And that image wasn't considered suitable as a way of showing the prisoners working. They were looking too comfortable, so that one was rejected as well.

But to be allowed access I had to work to their requirements. Barbed and myself, we pushed the boundaries as far as we could, but we still had to work to certain requirements. That's probably the case in most prisons.

CG: And in terms of other prisons, how is this work developing. What's happened since the first Prisoners at Work exhibition?

AA: I've been working with quite a few other prison organisations to produce similar pictures. I had someone phone me up last week saying that they want to produce an exhibition along the same lines – how much would it cost, how can they do it... I've been working with an organisation called Inside Out Trust, and went up to Liverpool last week to photograph a workshop where they recondition bicycles and wheelchairs, and they send them to the Gambia, and to Pakistan, through an NGO. So prisoners basically recondition these bikes and wheelchairs. I took portraits of them doing that, and that's another set of pictures that's going to be used by the organisation, for their annual report. I've just had a spread in *Inside Times*, the prison newspaper, so hopefully now when I go into prison I'll be able to remind the inmates of that, and they'll probably have seen it. The prison paper is something they probably get to see quite a lot of in there...

All images reproduced with the permission of Andy Aitchison, Barbed Design and the Howard League for Penal Reform. The Prisoners at Work exhibition will be visiting City University, Islington, London in September 2007: for further details, contact Chris Greer – [Chris.Greer.1@city.ac.uk](mailto:Chris.Greer.1@city.ac.uk).

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The Howard League for Penal Reform: [www.howardleague.org/](http://www.howardleague.org/)

## **Photo Captions**

01

Stan, a kitchen orderly, making corned beef sandwiches for packed lunches. £ 11.40 per week.

05

Dean, looking for work in the prison job centre.

06

Gary, wing orderly (personal laundry) £9.00 per week.

16

Big Dave, commercial laundry man. Dries the sheets after washing. £11.40 per week

18

Norman, wing cleaner polishing the floor. £5.40 per week.

19

Denzel, print workshop technician showing off his bling. £9.00 per week

20

The designers of Barbed design in the studio. They receive the minimum wage, they pay tax, national insurance, contribute to the prison and can support family outside.