

VICTORIAN HARD LABOUR

It was believed that prisoners should be put to work whilst in prison but there was less agreement as to what the work should be. In the early days of the 19th century, after publication of the Howard Report, it was believed a criminal had to be shown the value of working for a living and in some prisons, they did productive work.

in the early 19th century, prisoners were allowed to make small tools and ornaments to earn money. Often prisoners worked for local businesses and were paid a small wage, so that they could buy a few items and save some money for their release. The authorities were always suspicious that the prison keeper could be making his own profit from this. By the mid-19th century it was believed that prison was meant to punish, not provide an income and so hard labour became popular. The work was meant to punish and break the prisoners will, therefore, the tasks were hard, monotonous and often pointless.

The tasks included:

The Treadwheel of Treadmill

The Treadwheel was introduced in 1818 to provide useful employment for prisoners. It consisted of a large hollow cylinder of wood on an iron frame with steps about 7 inches apart. The criminal, steadying himself by handrails on each side, trod on these, his weight causing the mill to turn. Originally these mills were used to produce something to give the prisoners a "sense of purpose". In some prisons the wheel drove a mill to make flour or pumped water. In other prisons particularly after 1865, most treadmills had no purpose other than keeping criminals busy.



Prisoners usually did ten minutes on and five minutes off the tread wheel for up to ten hours. The work was done in silence. Male prisoners condemned to hard labour had to spend at least 3 months of their sentence on the Wheel or Crank. To ensure each prison was always working hard, convicts had to take set numbers of steps before every meal. Until they reached their number, there was no meal for them.

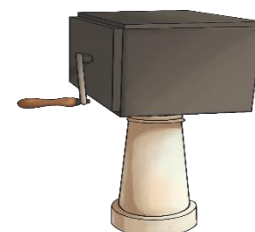
Shot drill

This was another form of hard labour without reward. The prisoner had to lift a heavy iron cannon-ball, bringing it up slowly until it was on a level with their chest, then carry it a measured distance (usually 3 steps to the right), put it down move back three paces and repeat the task with another one. Warders shouted orders while prisoners, sweating profusely, moved cannon-balls with precision from one pile to another.



The Crank

Crank labour was introduced as the separate system spread. It was a pointless soul-destroying form of labour but one that could be carried out in the cell. The Crank consisted of a large handle with a counter. The prisoner had to do many thousands of turns a day without any product of their hard work. Sand or gravel was simply churned around a drum. The crank handle was attached to a set of cogs, which pushed a paddle through sand, and Warders could tighten up the crank, making it harder to turn. Each turn of the handle was recorded. Most prisoners had to complete 10000 turns a day. Meals came to depend on a required number of turns being performed. A prisoner needed 2000 to get breakfast 3000 for dinner and 3000 supper and a further 2000 before they could go to bed. Crank labour was considered particularly suitable for prisoners confined in isolation in their cells.



VICTORIAN PUNISHMENT

What adjective would you use to describe Victorian punishment?

How are Victorian punishments different to punishments used by the Romans?

Why did the Victorians want the prisoners to do 'Hard Labour'?

Were prisoners paid for their work? Why?

How many times did a prisoner need to turn the crank before they could have breakfast?
