



# A Victorian Prison

Why were Victorian Prisons so tough?

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# Introduction

Victorians were worried about the rising crime rate: offences went up from about 5,000 per year in 1800 to about 20,000 per year in 1840. They were firm believers in punishment for criminals, but faced a problem: what should the punishment be?

There were prisons, but they were mostly small, old and badly-run. Common punishments included transportation - sending the offender to America, Australia or Van Diemens Land (Tasmania) or execution - hundreds of offences carried the death penalty.

By the 1830s people were having doubts about both these punishments. The answer was prison: lots of new prisons were built and old ones extended.

The Victorians also had clear ideas about what these prisons should be like. They should be unpleasant places, so as to deter people from committing crimes. Once inside, prisoners had to be made to face up to their own faults, by keeping them in silence and making them do hard, boring work. Walking a treadwheel or picking oakum (separating strands of rope) were the most common forms of hard labour..

## Tasks

Look at Source 1

1. Coldbath Fields Prison was named after a well nearby. It was an old prison, re-built in 1794, holding men, women and children. In 1850 it was changed to take men only and extended again. It was known as a tough prison, used for local London criminals on short sentences:

a) Find:

- the old prison
- the new prison
- the Treadwheel House
- the Flour Mill
- the Bakery
- the Kitchen
- the two Laundries
- the Oakum Shed
- the Chief Warder's House
- the Governor's House
- the Governor's greenhouse
- coachhouse and stable
- the Fever Hospital
- the exercise yards
- the Cocoa Shed

b) Imagine you have just been appointed as the new prison governor. Take a tour around your new prison, visiting all of the places on the list above. Add one sentence of your own comment, as governor, on each.

- c) There is a logical purpose behind many aspects of the design of this prison. Explain the design or placing of: the Fever Hospital, the new prison, the Treadwheel house and flourmill, the Governor's House.
- d) Imagine you are a warder standing at the centre of the Rotunda of the new prison. How many cells can you see from your position??

Look at Source 2 a & b

- 2. The work on the treadwheel was to hold on to a bar and walk up the wheel. You did ten minutes on and five off, for eight hours, climbing the equivalent of over 8,000 feet in the process.

The prisoner in source 2b is doing hard labour in his cell. He would have to turn the crank in his cell a set number of times to earn his food. Unlike the treadmill, which was used to power machinery in the prison, the crank simply turned paddles in a box of sand.

You were not allowed to talk during these jobs. This was strictly enforced: the punishment book at Coldbath Fields records 11,624 offences against this rule in one year.

- a) Use Source 1 to explain what machinery the treadwheel might have been used to drive.
- b) Which of these two jobs do you think was the most exhausting?
- c) Which was the most boring?
- d) What was the purpose of making convicts do these jobs?
- e) What was the point of the "No talking" rule?
- f) These photographs show how hard labour was enforced at two different prisons. Why do you think they did not all use the same method?
- g) Do you think this kind of prison life would make people change their ways when they came out?

Look at Source 3

- 3. This is the prison record for Mary McDonald who was convicted of theft in 1873.
  - a) Look at Mary's prison record, what can you find out from it that shows she has been in trouble before?
  - b) What was Mary's occupation before she was arrested?
  - c) Look at the items that Mary has been accused of stealing. How do you think she got these items?
  - d) Why do you think she would have stolen and pawned them?
  - e) In Victorian times, criminals were usually punished with Hard Labour, transportation to a penal colony or execution. If you were the Judge at Mary's trial, what sentence would you have given her.

Look at Source 4

- 4. This is an extract from the discipline records for convicts shipped to Hobart in Van Diemens Land (now Tasmania):

- a) Read through the list. What kind of offences have the people been disciplined for?
- b) Look for the record of Frederick Edwards. Can you find how long he was sentenced for transportation? (HINT : Look under his prisoner number).
- c) Look at Ann Mackenna's record. She has more than one sentencing term. Why do you think this is?
- d) Do you think the people on this list are adults, children or a mixture of both? Why?
- e) Do you think these punishments were fair or unfair?
- f) People who were transported were usually sentenced for a fixed time, such as 7 years. Do you think they were allowed to go back to Britain after this time had passed?

## Background

Prisons at this time were often in old buildings, such as castles etc. They tended to be damp, unhealthy, insanitary, over-crowded. All kinds of prisoners were mixed in together, as at Coldbath Fields -men, women, children, the insane, serious criminals, petty criminals, people awaiting trial, debtors. Each prison was run by the gaoler in his own way. He made up the rules. If you could pay, you could buy extra privileges, such as private rooms, better food, more visitors, keeping pets, letters going in and out, books to read etc. If you could not, the basic fare was grim. You even had to pay the gaoler to be let out when your sentence was finished.

Law and order was a major issue in Victorian Britain. Victorians were worried about the huge new cities that had grown up following the Industrial Revolution: how were the masses to be kept under control? They were worried about rising crime. They could see that transporting convicts to Australia was not the answer and by the 1830s Australia was complaining that they did not want to be the dumping-ground for Britain's criminals.

The answer was to reform the police and to build more prisons: 90 prisons were built or added to between 1842 and 1877. It was a massive building programme, costing millions of pounds. The big extension to Coldbath Fields prison can be seen in Source 1. Many Victorian prisons are still in use today.

People wanted to reform prison for different reasons. Christian reformers felt that prisoners were God's creatures and deserved to be treated decently. Rational reformers believed that the purpose of prison was to punish and reform, not to kill prisoners with disease or teach them how to be better criminals.

There was more to Victorian plans than just bigger and better buildings. In the 1840s a system of rules called "The Separate System" was tried. This was based on the belief that convicted criminals had to face up to themselves. Accordingly, they were kept on their own in their cells most of the time. When they were let out, to go to chapel or for exercise, they sat in special seats or wore special masks so that they couldn't even see, let alone talk to, another prisoner. Not surprisingly, many went mad under this system.

By the 1860s opinion had changed. It was now believed that many criminals were habitual criminals and nothing would change them. They just had to be scared enough by prison never to offend again. The purpose of the silent system was to break convicts'

wills by being kept in total silence and by long, pointless hard labour. The Silent System is associated with the 1865 Prisons Act and the Assistant Director of Prisons, Sir Edmund du Cane, who promised the public that prisoners would get "Hard Labour, Hard Fare and Hard Board".

Hard labour can be seen in Sources 2A and 2B.

Hard fare: a deliberately monotonous diet, with exactly the same food on the same day each week.

Hard board: wooden board beds replaced the hammocks that prisoners had slept on before.

Change took place again in 1902, when the treadwheel was banned.

## Teachers Notes

This lesson could form part of a study of crime and punishment through time. Victorian prison policy is an important topic in this story.

Alternatively, the lesson could be seen as an aspect of Victorian Britain, showing as it does, the prevailing attitudes to crime, human nature etc. It also reveals the Victorians' determination, once they were faced with a problem, to work with energy and resources to solve it.

Further, the clarity and detail of the prison plan, the accompanying detailed pictures of that very prison in action, make it a good starting-point for discussion of issues of crime policy today. The arguments of punishment versus rehabilitation and retribution versus a new start are well-illustrated in these documents

### Sources

Illustration : Photograph, court yard of Wormwood Scrubs Prison, groups of prisoners pulling carts. COPY 1/420 f.180

Source 1 : Ground plan of HM Prison Cold Bath Fields WORK 30/5978

Source 2a : Prisoners on a treadwheel at Pentonville Prison 1895 COPY 1/420

Source 2b : Photograph of prisoner at hard labor in his cell at Wormwood Scrubs Prison. COPY 1/420 f.171

Source 3 : Mary McDonald prisoner number 2424 PCOM 2/291 1873

Source 4 : Colonial Office : Tasmania Convict Discipline 1873 CO 280/83

### Schemes of Work

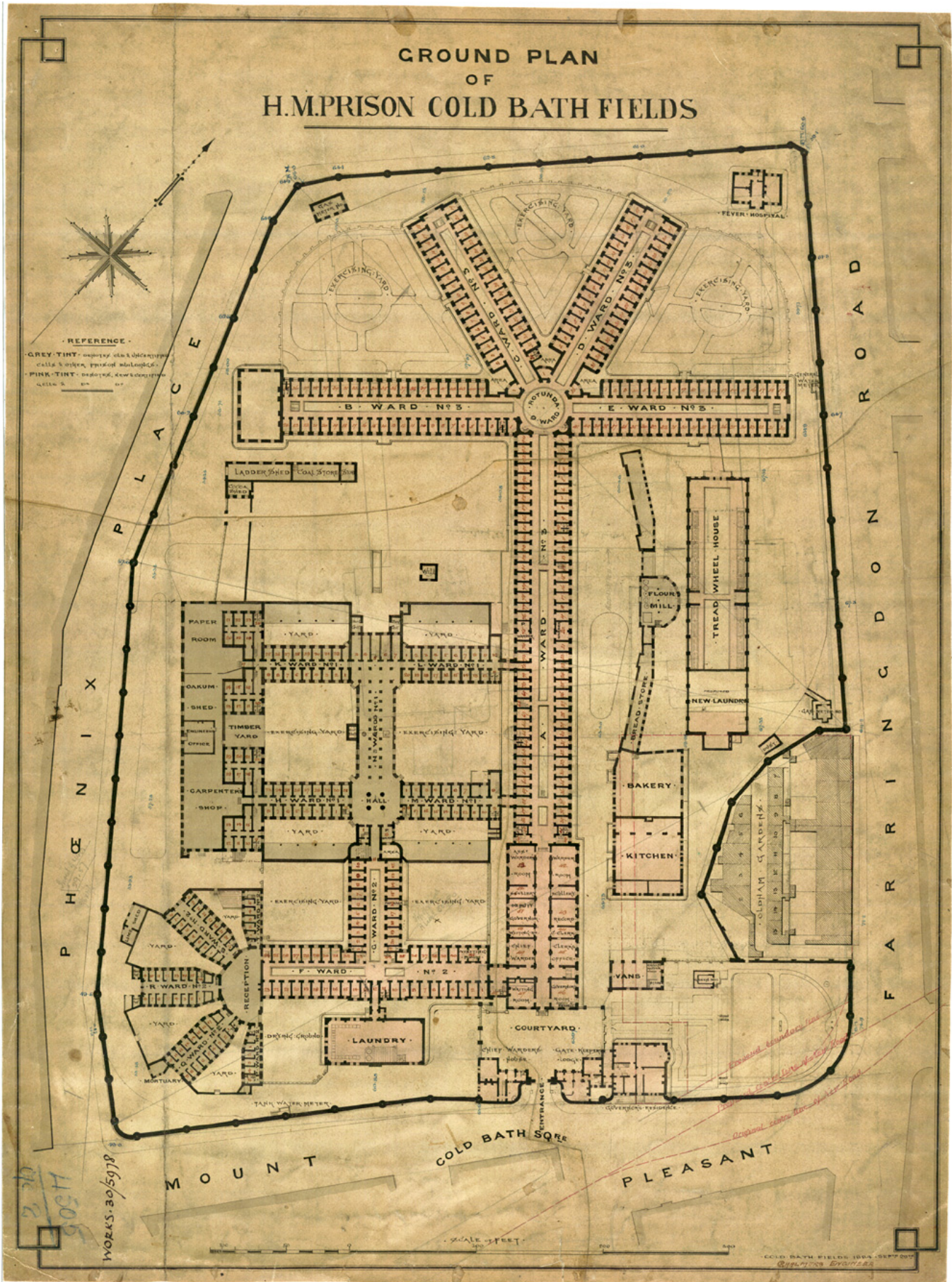
**What was it like for children living in Victorian Britain?**

Key Stage 1 & 2 Unit 11.

**How did life change in our locality in Victorian times?**

Key Stage 1 & 2 Unit 12

Source 1 : Ground plan of HM Prison Cold Bath Fields (WORK 30/5978)



**Source 2a : Prisoners on a treadwheel at Pentonville Prison 1895 (COPY 1/420)**



**Source 2b : Photograph of prisoner at hard labor in his cell at Wormwood Scrubs Prison. (COPY 1/420 f.171)**



**Source 3 : Mary McDonald prisoner number 2424 1873 (PCOM 2/291)**

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4


Name, No. Mary McDonald 2424 31 May 73.

and Aliases. Pye-an -

Description

Age (on discharge)	43
Height	5 ft 2
Hair	Dark Grey
Eyes	Dr. Blue
Complexion	Pale
Where born	Ireland
Married or single	Single
Trade or occupation	Wambress
Distinguishing marks	

Scars both eyes - Broken nose - Scar upper lip -



Address at time of apprehension - No settled home -

Place and date of conviction - Southwark 13 March 73.

Offence for which convicted - Purple Larceny - 5 gaols of note.

Sentence - 3 Cal. Mos. A. P.

Date to be liberated - 12 June 73

Intended residence after liberation - 12 Mint St. Brompton, S. E.

Previous Convictions

Summary

17 Sep 68. Pawing a shawl 1 Cal. Mo. Greenwich

3 Aug 69. Steg a jacket 6 Cal. Mos. "

By Jury

Remarks, antecedents &c.

**Source 3 : Transcript of Mary McDonald prisoner number 2424 1873 (PCOM 2/291)**

Name No - Mary McDonald 2424

and Aliases - Ryan

Description

Age (on discharge) \_\_\_\_\_ 40

Height \_\_\_\_\_ 5ft 2

Hair \_\_\_\_\_ L Grey

Eyes \_\_\_\_\_ D Blue

Complexion \_\_\_\_\_ Pale

Where born \_\_\_\_\_ Ireland

Married or Single \_\_\_\_\_ Single

Trade or occupation \_\_\_\_\_ Laundress

Distinguishing marks - Scars both eyebrows Broken nose - Scar upper lip

Address at time of apprehension - No settled home

Place and date of conviction - Southwark 13 March 73

Offence for which convicted - Simple Larceny - St[ealin]g a p[ai]r of boots

Sentence - 3 Cal[endar] Mo[nth]s H[ard] L[abour]

Date to be liberated - 12 June 73

Indended residence after liberation - 12 Mint St Borough S.E.

Previous Convictions

Summary

14 Sep 68 Pawning a shawl 1 Cal[endar] Mo[nth] Greenwich

3 Aug 69 St[ealin]g a jacket 6 Cal[endar] Mo[nth]s "

By Jury

Remarks, antecedents &c

**Source 4 : Colonial Office : Tasmania Convict Discipline 1873 (CO 280/83)**

Name, Police Number, and Ship.	In what Service, or how Employed.	OFFENCE.	Date of Trial.	Sentence, and by whom.	How recommended to be disposed of, and General Remarks.
H O B A R T—continued.					
Week ending 13 May 1837— <i>continued</i> . 198; } 7 yrs., 1 yr., } 1 yr., 6 mths. } Ann Mackenna; Ed- ward; house servant.	- - Mrs. Clare, Macquarie-st.	- - Absconding from her service on the 13th of April last, and remaining illegally at large until the 10th instant, when she was apprehended by Constable Gibbs in the house of William Wright, of Watchorn-street.	11 May 1837	- - Existing sentence of transportation extended 12 months.	- - Principal superintendent, and Alexander Murray, esq., J.P.  - - Confirmed, and to be detained in the female house of correction for three months at the wash-tub.  (signed) J. F.
352; } 14 yrs. } Margaret Bartle; Westmor- land; plain cook and house servant.	- - Mr. Dixon, Macquarie-st.	- - Suspicion of having stolen a 1 l. note.	—	- - Case of felony; dismissed, but recommended to be detained in the house of correction for three months before assignment, and then to be assigned in the interior.	- - Principal superintendent.  Confirmed.  (signed) J. F.
879; } 7 yrs., 3 yrs. } Wm. Gemmill; Geor- giana (2.); labourer.	- - Hulk chain- gang.	Fighting - - - - -	—	- - Present sentence in chains to be extended three months.	- - The principal su- perintendent.  - - Confirmed, and to be sent to Grass-tree Hill chain- gang.  (signed) J. F.
242; } Frederick Edwards; Surrey life. } (2.); stonemason.	- - Stonemason, Custom-house.	- - Absent from his duty, and being under the effects of liquor.	12 May 1837	- - To be kept to hard labour in chains at his trade for three months.	- - ditto - -  Confirmed.  (signed) J. F.
1655; } 7 yrs. } Morrice Howling; Isabella; boy.	- - Marine de- partment, Go- vernment brig Isabella.	- - Having a quantity of tobacco in his possession, without being able satisfactorily to account for the same	13 May 1837	- - To be kept to hard labour on the roads for six months.	- - ditto - -  - - Confirmed; Campbell Town road-party, and then to be sent to Morven for assignment.  (signed) J. F.
379; } 7 yrs. } Samuel Newton; Layton (2.); labourer.	- - - Labourer, prisoners' bar- racks.	Being drunk - - - - -	—	- - To be kept to hard labour for three months on the roads.	- - ditto - -  - - Confirmed; Sandy Bay road-party; then to prisoners' barracks for assignment in the interior.  (signed) J. F.

Table 4 : Colonial Office : Tasmania Convict Discipline 1873 (CO 280/83)

Name, Police Number, and Ship	In whose Service or how Employed	OFFENCE		Date of Trial	Sentence and by whom	How recommended to be disposed of, and General
Week ending 13 May 1837 - <i>continued</i> 198; Ann Mackenna; Edward; house servant. 7yrs, 1yr, 1yr, 6mths.	- Mrs. Clare, Macquarie-st.	- - Absconding from her service on the 13th of April last, and remaining illegally at large until the 10th instant, when she was apprehended by Constable Gibbs in the house of William Wright, of Watchorn-street	11 May 1837	Existing sentence of transportation extended 12 months	- - Principal superintendend and Alexander Murray, esq. J.P.	- - Confirmed, and to be detained in the female house of correction for three mnths at the wash-tub (signed) J.F
352; Margaret Bartle; Westmoreland; plain cook and house servant. 14 yrs	- - Mr Dixon, Macquarie-st.	- - Suspicion of having stolen a 1/ note	--	- - Case of felony; dismissed, but recommended to be detained in the house of correction for three months before assignment, and then to be assigned in the interior.	- - Principal superintendent.	Confirmed. (signed) J.F.
879; Wm Gemmill; Georgeiana (2); labourer 7yrs, 3yrs	- - Hulk chain-gang.	Fighting - - - - -	--	- - Present sentence in chains to be extended three months.	The principal superintendent	- Confirmed, and to be sent to Grass-tree Hill chain-gang. (signed) J.F.

<p>242; Frederick Edwards; Surrey (2); stonemason Life</p>	<p>- - Stonemason, Custom-house</p>	<p>- - Absent from his duty, and being under the effects of liquor.</p>	<p>--</p>	<p>- - To be kept to hard labour in chains at his trade for three months.</p>	<p>-- ditto --</p>	<p>Confirmed (signed) J.F.</p>
<p>1655; Morrice Howling; Isabella; boy. 7 yrs</p>	<p>- - Marine department, Government brig Isabella</p>	<p>- - Having a quantity of tobacco in his possession without being able satisfactorily to account for the same</p>	<p>--</p>	<p>- - To be kept to hard labour on the roads for six months</p>	<p>-- ditto --</p>	<p>- -Confirmed; Campbell Town road-party, and then to be sent to Morven for assignment. (signed) J.F.</p>
<p>379; Samuel Newton; Layton (2); labourer. 7 yrs</p>	<p>- - - Labourer, prisoners' barracks</p>	<p>Being drunk - - - -</p>	<p>--</p>	<p>- - To be kept to hard labour for three months on the roads.</p>	<p>-- ditto --</p>	<p>- - Confirmed; Sandy Bay road-party; then to prisoners barracks for assignment in the interior. (signed) J.F.</p>