



The National Archives  
Education Service

# A Victorian Prison

Why were Victorian  
Prisons so tough?

## Topic and English

Comprehension and Writing tasks

## 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".

# Monday read the background and examine source 1

## Task One:

### 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:

### 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
2. 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.



3. 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.
4. 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??

# Tuesday explain your answers fully

## Task Two:

Look at Source 2a and 2b

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?

# Wednesday answer the questions and write your concluding speech as judge

## Task Three:

Look at Source 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?

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## The silent system

In silent prisons, prisoners were not kept physically separate but they were not allowed to communicate. Inmates were forced to do boring, repetitive tasks in complete silence. They were made to pick oakum, walk on treadwheels, or turn crank handles thousands of times.

The idea was that the silence and boredom would allow prisoners to reflect on their crimes. The silent system prisons led to increased rates of prisoner suicide and mental health problems.



DORMITORY AT COLD BATH FIELDS PRISON.

Prisoners sitting on rows of hammock-type beds in the dormitory at Coldbath Fields prison, London, watched over by a warder (circa 1860)

These separate and silent systems did not lower the reoffending rate in the way it had been hoped. In 1877 the Government brought all prisons under its control. By the 20th century the separate and silent experiments were ended. Prisons began to discontinue the use of pointless hard labour, eg treadmills and cranks, and they were finally abolished in 1902.

## **Alternative methods of dealing with prisoners in the 20th century**

In the 20th century, prisons became the main form of punishment used in Britain. Transportation ended in the 19th century, corporal punishments were used less frequently, with flogging limited in 1914 then finally abolished in 1948, and the death penalty abolished in 1965.

### **Modern prisons**

The harsh regimes in prisons began to change significantly after 1922. Prisoners were allowed to associate with each other, arrow marked uniforms and shaved hair was abolished, and heating, better food and access to education were provided.

Prisoners were given better food, allowed to wear their own clothes and had access to education courses. The aim became to reform and rehabilitate prisoners through education and training. However, as prisons have become more and more overcrowded after 1960, access to training and courses has been more limited.



Prisoners are categorised as either A, B C or D depending on:

- the severity of their crime
- their age
- the level of threat they pose to the public
- their risk of escaping

Prisoners are then sent to a prison for their category.

Category	Type of prisoner	Type of prison
A	Most serious, a significant danger to the public	Traditional closed prison, most secure
B	Serious crimes but do not require maximum security	Traditional closed prison
C	Not likely to escape but not suited to open prisons	Traditional closed prison
D	Low-risk first-time offenders, minor crimes	Open prison

There are no category A prisons in Wales. HMP Belmarsh in London is a category A prison. HMP Cardiff is a category B prison while HMP Swansea is a category B/C prison. HMP Berwyn near Wrexham opened in February 2017 and is a category C prison. It is the largest prison in England and Wales and can hold 2,106 prisoners.



An outside football pitch at HMP Berwyn

## **Open prisons**

Open prisons were established in 1934 and have more relaxed rules. They are a new method of punishment as they differ so significantly from category A prisons. Prisoners are allowed to leave the prison in the daytime to go to work. Prisoners have keys to their own rooms and there are no large walls or fences.

There is a curfew and prisoners have to return to the prison at night. There are courses and training for inmates. Many open prisons have their own farms or workshops to train inmates for careers. They became popular due to the overcrowding of prisons following the Second World War. Their focus is on resettling prisoners into the community as a way of preventing reoffending.

Many inmates in an open prison are low-risk first time offenders who have committed minor crimes. Others are transferred from higher category prisons near the end of their sentence to prepare for life back in the community.

Open prisons have had bad publicity in recent years after some scandals about the amount of alcohol and drugs that prisoners have access to. HMP Prescoed near Usk is a Category D open prison.



## **20th century women prisoners**

Holloway prison in London became a female-only prison in 1903, and was the largest female prison in Western Europe until its closure in 2016.

Family liaison is held as a priority but the geographical spread of women's prisons can make maintaining family links difficult. There are no women's prisons in Wales.

## Young offenders

Borstals were introduced as an alternative to prison for young offenders, and the first one opened in Kent in 1902. Boys aged between 15 and 21 years old were imprisoned here. They were designed to educate and reform young offenders, so inmates had access to education and training courses. There were strict rules in borstals, and until 1962, boys in borstals were whipped. Borstals were abolished in 1982.

Around 60 per cent of those released from borstals went on to reoffend, so the Government introduced **Youth Detention Centres**, which were intended to provide youths with a 'short, sharp, shock'. However, this tougher stance also failed to impact on reoffending as the rates actually increased.

In 1988, **Young Offenders Institutions** were set up. These were for offenders aged between 18 and 21 years old. Inmates have 25 hours a week of education. These are considered a last resort after probation and non-custodial sentences have failed, and those that are remanded in such places still have the highest rates of reoffending.

Young offenders can also be sent to secure training centres, secure children's homes or juvenile prisons.

HMP Parc in Bridgend is the only facility in Wales for youth detentions and is a male-only prison. There are no Young Offenders Institutions in Wales.

# Thursday and Friday

- After reading all the information about prisons write a persuasive argument. Do you think prisons have changed for the better or the worse? You need to decide which side you are on and argue your points. If you are neutral you need to write a discussion giving both sides and then giving an overall conclusion.
- Beginning.            Middle            End



# Persuasion

Use the persuasion template to plan your writing

Your topic is...

Reason 1

❖ Name point that supports  
your point of view

Reason 2

Reason 3

# Organisation Toolkit

Remember to...

- Write an eye-catching title that says what you are writing about (*e.g. Protect the Dolphin before it is too late*)
- Write an introduction that states the point of view to be argued
- Write your points in paragraphs starting with topic sentences. These signal the argument to be made in that paragraph.
- Think about what your opponents might argue and include a counter argument; either in each paragraph or at the end
- Write an ending that re-states your point of view.

# Discussion Writing

Use the discussion template to plan your writing

Write your discussion title here

**For**

**Against**

❖ Point 1

❖ Point 1

❖ Point 2

❖ Point 2

❖ Point 3

❖ Point 3

# Organisation Toolkit

Remember to...

- Write an **title** that says what you are writing about (*e.g. Jet travel: stop it or keep it?*)
- Write an **introduction** that states what the discussion is about (*There are many stories of sightings of a monster in Loch Ness. However, people disagree whether it exists or not*)
- Organise the text in one of two ways:
  1. Write all the arguments for the case. Write one **paragraph** for each point, starting with **topic sentences**. Then do the same thing for the points against.
  2. Present each argument and counter argument in a separate **paragraph**, which starts with a **topic sentence**
- Write a **conclusion** that sums up the argument and gives a reasoned opinion.



