



Were the Streets Safe in Victorian Britain?



THE POUND AND THE SHILLING.

"Whoever Thought of Meeting You Here?"

VICTORIAN BRITAIN

A Lawless Nation?



Source 1:
Police gazette,
1845

Most of the visitors to the Great Exhibition came on days when the tickets cost a shilling, or five pence. About 4,500,000 people came on these 'shilling days'. These were working people, who came from all over Britain. The first 'shilling day' was expected to lead to a great deal of trouble. One MP, Colonel Sibthorpe warned that there would be crime and disorder.

So on the first 'shilling day' there was a heavy police presence. But nothing happened. In the five and a half months that the Great Exhibition was open, only seven people were arrested and there was hardly any vandalism.

The men who policed the Great Exhibition were members of the Metropolitan Police force.

This force had been established in 1829 and its police constables were given the nickname 'Peelers' after Sir Robert Peel who was Home Secretary at the time. Until the 1820s the main emphasis in law and order was on punishment, because there were few police forces.

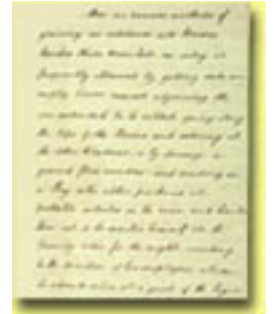
There were 400 offences that carried the death penalty, including picking someone's pocket of anything worth one shilling (5p) or more and stealing anything worth £2.00. Sir Robert Peel abolished almost all of the capital offences (those that carried the death penalty) and also began to reform prisons, as well as setting up the Metropolitan Police Force.

Peel wanted to put the emphasis upon preventing crime, rather than punishing criminals. Some of the novels of Charles Dickens, who was writing in the 1830s and 1840s, show how lawless the streets of British cities could be.

In 'Oliver Twist' Fagin runs a gang of pickpockets, and Bill Sykes is a violent and dangerous criminal. In 'Great Expectations', Pip is befriended by the convict Magwitch, who had escaped from a hulk.

At first the Police Force was not very popular. People were very concerned that the new police should not be like the military and therefore great care was taken to ensure that police constables did not look like soldiers.

This is why peelers wore top hats instead of helmets and carried truncheons instead of rifles, although cutlasses were available for emergencies!



Source 2:
Breaking into
a house



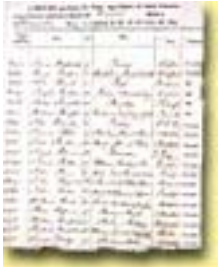
Source 3:
Breaking into
a warehouse



Source 4:
Photos of
prisoners

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Source 5:
List of
prisoners, 1849

The success of the Metropolitan Police Force, however, led other parts of the country to set up their own forces. However, it did not become compulsory for counties and boroughs to have police forces until 1856. The duties of the police were extended as more and more laws were passed.

For example the 1872 Licensing Act made them responsible for supervising public drinking places. Policing was not the only aspect of law and order that changed during the Victorian period.



Source 6:
Convict ship,
1846

The ways in which criminals were punished were also changed. 1857 saw the end of Hulk ships. These were anchored ships, which held prisoners who were either awaiting transportation to the colonies, or were used to carry out public works, such as clearing the River Thames.



Source 7:
Treadmill

The transportation of criminals gradually declined and the last convict ship arrived in Australia in 1868. These changes led to a new prison building programme based upon the model prison at Pentonville. Inside these new prisons, prisoners were separated, forbidden to communicate with each other and given meaningless work to do. But did these changes make a difference?



Colonel Sibthorpe's
views on the
Great Exhibition



The Metropolitan Police

At the beginning of the nineteenth century there were only two police forces in Britain. One was the Bow Street Runners, which was a detective force that had been set up in 1749; the other was the City of London Police Force, which had been set up in 1798. In the remainder of the country, law and order was in the hands of the local magistrates, who could enlist special constables or call in the army. In local villages there could be Parish Constables or night-watchmen.



The Metropolitan Police Force was set up in 1829 by the Home Secretary Sir Robert Peel. He had already set up a police force in Ireland in 1822. There were 2,800 officers headed by two commissioners. As well as being called 'Peelers', they were also known as 'Bobbies'.

The early days of the Metropolitan Police Force were not very good. Of the first 2,800 recruits, 2,328 were dismissed from the force for breaking regulations.

In 1842 a plain clothes branch was set up with eight members. This aroused great public opposition. There were many protests that it would be unfair to have policemen out of uniform, as the public would be unable to identify them. But eventually the Criminal Investigation Department was established in 1878.



Prisons

In the eighteenth century prisons were often run privately and warders charged the inmates for food and other services. Extra payments could also lead to separate rooms, and frequent visitors. Wealthy prisoners could live almost as well in prison as they could outside.

But for the poor, the situation was very different. Prisoners were squashed into rooms, which could hold fifty or more people. There was no hygiene and typhus, known as jail fever, was widespread.

The first attempts to reform prisons came in the 1770s when John Howard, a magistrate, visited prisons and then passed an Act of Parliament that led to warders being paid a salary rather than charging fees. Elizabeth Fry, who campaigned to improve prison conditions, began to visit Newgate Prison in the early nineteenth century and her efforts led to the setting up of Holloway prison for women.

But the most important changes in prisons came in the middle of the nineteenth century, when a new design of prison was introduced. This was called the 'separate system'. Here prisoners were kept in separate cells in wings radiating out from one central block. This enabled the warders to keep an eye on the prisoners as easily as possible.





Source 1

Task

1a. Look carefully at the source. Which crimes had been committed?

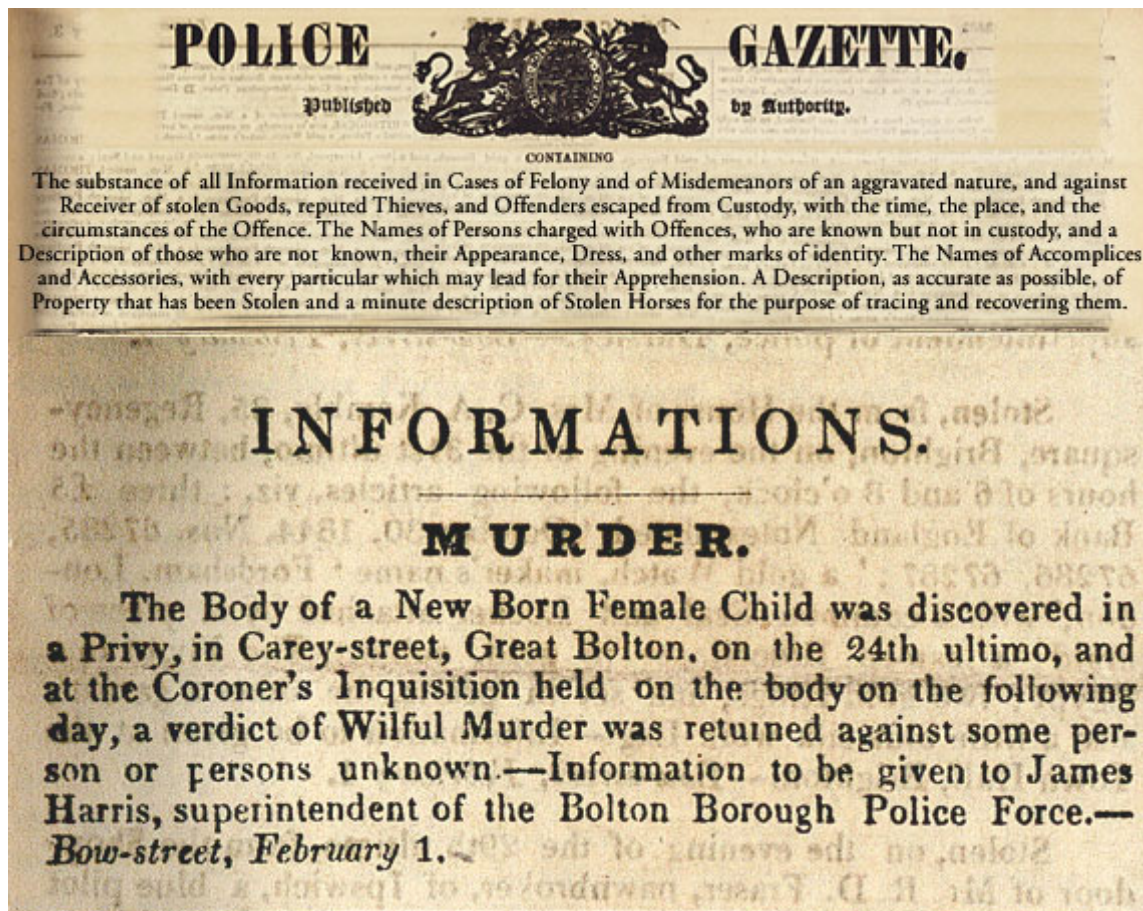
1b. How did publishing information such as this help:

- i) The police?
- ii) The general public?



Source 1

This is a request for information to help solve crimes. It is from the Police Gazette dated 3rd February 1845. The Police Gazette was a weekly newspaper that the government produced giving details of crimes committed and information needed.





FORGERY.

About 7 o'clock p.m. on the 24th ultimo, a Forged Cheque for £7 10s., was uttered to Mr. Dickenson, the landlord of the 'Worcester Arms' public house, George-street. By a Man, 24 years of age, 5 feet 4 inches high, and dark complexion; dressed in black, and has two thumbs on the right hand.—*Metropolitan Police, D Division January 27.*

ROBBERY FROM THE PERSON.

Further information respecting the Highway Robbery at Burghclere Bottom, between Whitchurch and Witway, Hants, as advertised in the 'Police Gazette' of the 6th ultimo. WILLIAM MARTIN alias WINCHESTER WILL, and JOHN HOUSE alias NEWBURY JACK, alias BUTCHER JACK, are strongly suspected as being the persons who committed the same offence. MARTIN is about 48 or 50 years of age, 6 feet high, rather round shoulders, and downcast look, long features, and is a cripple, one of his ancles is three or four inches larger than the other, which prevents his shoe from being laced close; he is a native of Winchester, and supposed to be dressed in a brown smockfrock, black hat, and fustian trousers. HOUSE is about 26 years of age, about 5 feet 9 or 10 inches high, thin stature, brown hair, looks poorly, and has disease on the back of his hands; dressed in a light blue butcher's twill coat, with pockets in front, black hat, and plaid neckerchief; his father sometime since kept an inn, at Wolverhampton, but is now living at Stanford Dingley. They are in the habit of attending fairs and markets, &c., principally in the counties of Hants, Berks, and Oxford.—Information to be given to David Harvey, superintendent of police, Kingsclere, Hants, who holds a warrant for their apprehension.—*Bow-street, February 3.*

(PRO ref: HO 75/18)



Source 2

Task

2a. Read source 2 carefully. How many different ways of breaking into a house are described?

2b. Why was house-breaking a very common offence in Victorian Britain?

2c. Design a poster. What advice would you give a householder if you were telling them how to prevent criminals from breaking into their house? You could design a poster or leaflet about this.



Source 2

A prison governor who asked some of the inmates in his prison, how they had committed their crimes wrote this. In this source an inmate describes how to break into a house.

There are various methods of gaining an entrance into Houses, besides those described, an entry is frequently obtained by getting into an empty house nearest adjoining the one intended to be robbed, going along the tops of the Houses and entering at the Attic Windows, or by opening a ground floor window and sending in a Boy who either packs up all portable articles in the room and hands them out, or he secretes himself till the family retire for the night, according to the direction of his employers. whom he admits when all is quiet. if the boy is

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Source 2

discovered, his excuse is that he met a man whom he never saw before who obliged him to come in at the window but he did not tell him what to do. his eyes are speedily suffused - tears have a mighty effect. Thieves say, in honest people - some good natured dame in the family takes the boy - attributes all blame to some unknown naughty bad man and sends the boy away with perhaps a few pence in his hand to meet his confederates round the first corner, gain at the credulity of their fellow creatures and to try their luck upon some other and perhaps less fortunate neighbour -

(PRO ref : HO 73/2)



Source 3

Task

- 3a.** Why was it more difficult to break into a warehouse than a house?
- 3b.** What evidence is there in sources **2** and **3** that burglaries in Victorian Britain were well planned?
- 3c.** Use the information from source **2** and **3** to write your own entry for the Police Gazette (source **1** will give you some ideas) asking for information to help solve a burglary.

Source 3

This was written by the same prison governor who wrote source 2. In this source an inmate describes how to break into a warehouse.

Warehouses mostly become the spoil of the Burglar, they being for the most part made fast outside, where from the presence of valuable property, a guard is left on the Premises; a plant is put upon the place. The guard is observed to go to some neighbouring pot house to take his pipe and pint of Beer in the Evening. The plant is continued - it is soon discovered what time the watchman leaves his trust and when he returns. This point gained an opportunity is taken to get the lock. A piece of Steel, the shape of a key, coated with wax, tallow, or blackened by the flame of a Candle is introduced into the

(PRO ref: HO 73/2)



look. Upon the coating, the impressions of the
swords are imprinted and in this way, should
the skeletons they have in hand not answer
the purpose, a key is soon formed. Three or four
settings may be required. Enabled to gain
admittance, the next step is to lay a plant
upon the guard; for this purpose one of the
party, possessing the "gift of the gab" is chosen
and sent to the house frequented by the guard,
sometimes a few nights before, but always on
the night of the intended robbery. He tells a

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good tale. sings a song, is noticed by, or notices his man. an acquaintanceship is soon formed, he vouches the guard is the kindest and most convivial fellow in the World, feigns drunk. insists upon the other drinking at his expense, let it suffice, he keeps the poor watchman engaged till the signal is given by his confederates that all is right, when he takes his departure, leaving a shilling for another glass for his dupe. thus making certainty doubly sure.



Source 4

Task

4a Look carefully at the photographs and the details of each prisoner. What can you learn from these photographs about the prisoners in Oxford gaol? Think about who they were, their ages and crimes.

4b Which of their crimes is the most serious in your opinion and why?

4c Would similar sentences be given today for these crimes?

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Source 4

These photographs show four prisoners from Oxford Gaol. Their photographs were taken because the government was trying to prove a theory that criminals looked different from other people. They were hoping to use the photographs to reach conclusions about what criminals looked like so that they could then be easily spotted! [D=Days, HL=Hard Labour, Stlg=Stealing]



(PRO ref: PCOM 2/352)

<http://www.learningcurve.gov.uk/victorianbritain/lawless/source4.htm>



Source 5

Task

- 5a. What can you learn about the prisoners kept onboard the Warrior from this list?
- 5b. What is the most common crime shown on the list?
- 5c. Do you think that all of the punishments are fair? Think about the seriousness of the crime committed and the length of sentence the prisoner received.
- 5d. Try to compare the different types of crimes to see if the punishments are consistent.

Source 5

HMS Warrior was one of the convict hulk ships used to keep prisoners before they were transported. This source is an extract taken from a list that shows the prisoners that were aboard HMS Warrior in December 1849.



A RETURN, specifying the Name, Age, Offence of which Convicted, Place and Time of Conviction, Sentence, Bodily Health, and Behaviour of every Convict confined on board the *Warrior* Hulk at *W. Church* during the Quarter ending the *thirty first* Day of *December* 1849, as required by the Act of 5 Geo. IV., Cap. 8 sec. 14.

Number on the Ship's Book	Name	Age	Offence	Convicted		Sentence
				Where	When	
2398	James Wottingham	19	Larceny	Salford	3 July 1843	15 Yrs
2413	George Gardiner	22	Steal; Eugene Hughes 2nd 44	Stafford	27 June	34
2443	Job Church	25	Rape	Buckingham	17 July	Life
2515	Joseph Gorton	30	Felony & Horsestealing	Oxford	12 July	Life
2552	Giles Tunstall	30	Burglary	Chelmsford	17 July	Life
2558	William Thompson	29	Break into a dwelling house & help money	Lincoln	15 July	Life
3603	John Guyatt	20	Larceny	C. C. Court	30 March 1845	10 Yrs
3835	James Allen	17	Stealing flannel trousers	Worham	1 July	7
3838	John Parker	20	Steal; a pair of Shoes	Buckingham	10 July	10
3842	Joseph Bland	32	Desertion	In France	15 June	14
3844	James Bolton	27	Uttering Counterfeit Coin	Guildford	30 July	15
3853	John Brown	18	Steal; a Carpet Bag containing boots	Luxeter	29 June	14
3857	John Buggins	26	Housebreaking & Steal; Merino	Warwick	19 Oct	10
3864	John Carter	23	Housebreaking & Steal; wearing Apparel	Guildford	30 June	10
3868	William Clarke	20	Steal; a Handkerchief from the person	Middlesex	1 July	10
3870	Edwin Clifford	17	Stealing a Watch	Worham	25 July	15
3875	William Cranfield	23	Stealing a Gelding	Chelmsford	20 Oct	10
3876	Richard Crompton	36	Uttering a forged acquaintance Receipt for money	Chester	1 Aug	15
3878	James Daley	17	Stealing a Watch	Middlesex	1 July	7
3884	John Devereux	40	Stealing a Net	Newbury	6 July	7

(PRO ref: HO 8/102)



Source 6

Task

Look carefully at source 6 and **look back at source 5** to help you complete the tasks below

6a. Describe what you think conditions would have been like on board HMS Warrior.

6b. Draw up a list of possible advantages and disadvantages of using hulks.

Look back at source 4 and 5

6c. What differences are there between the prisoners at Oxford gaol and those on HMS Warrior?

6d. Are there any similarities between the prisoners?

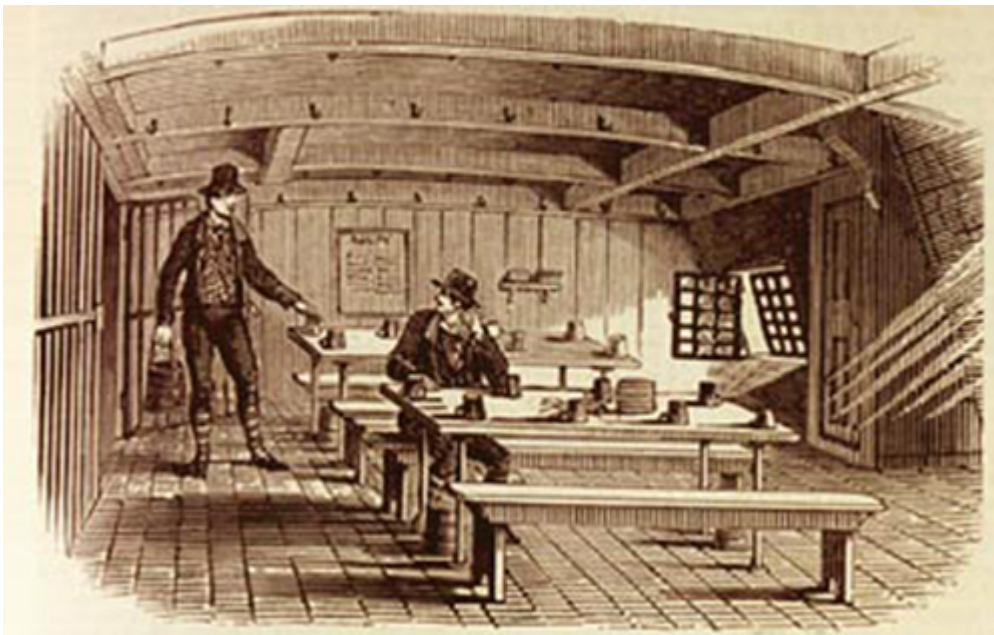
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Source 6

These three engravings were made in 1846 and show the convict hulk ship HMS Warrior.

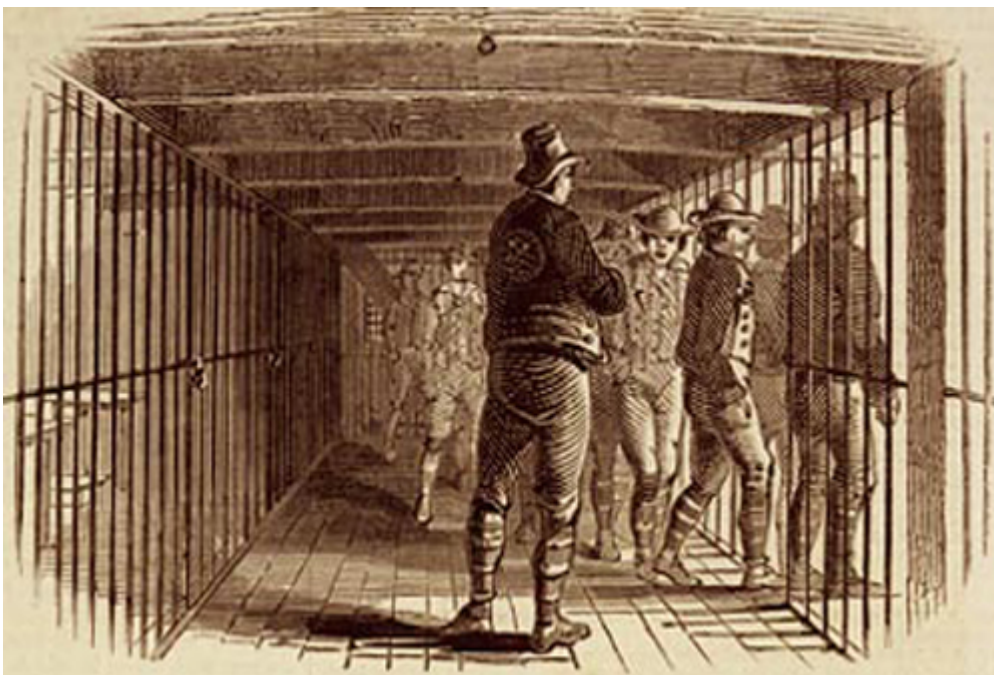
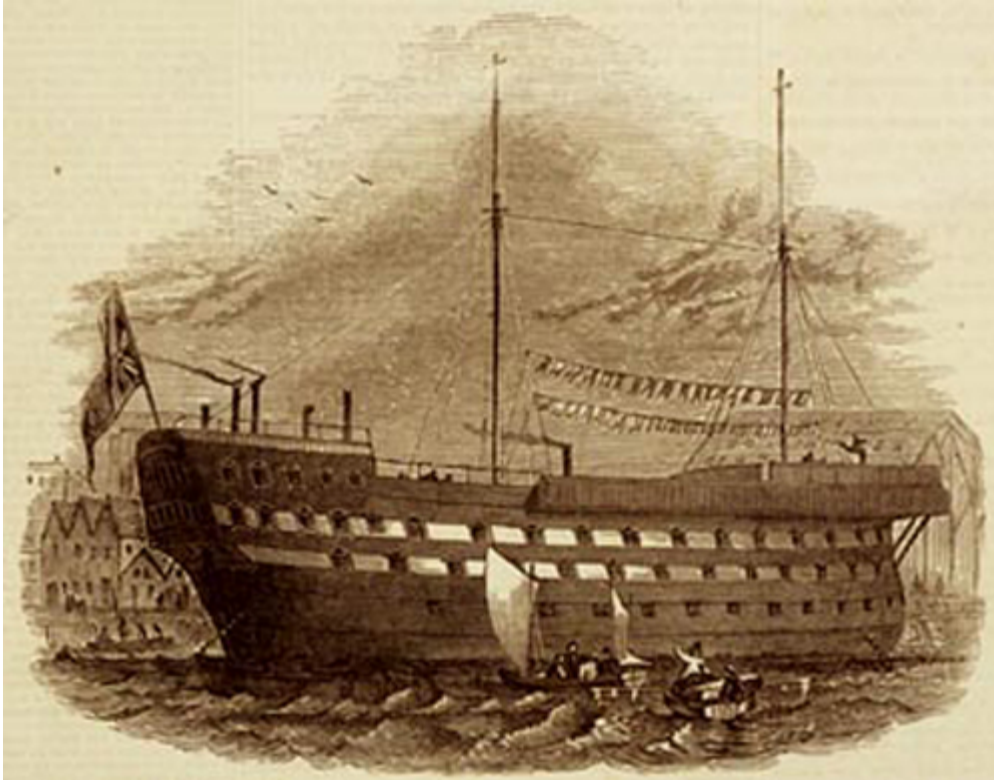
(PRO ref: ZPER 34/8)



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Source 6



(PRO ref: ZPER 34/8)



Source 7

Task

7a. Describe how the treadmill worked.

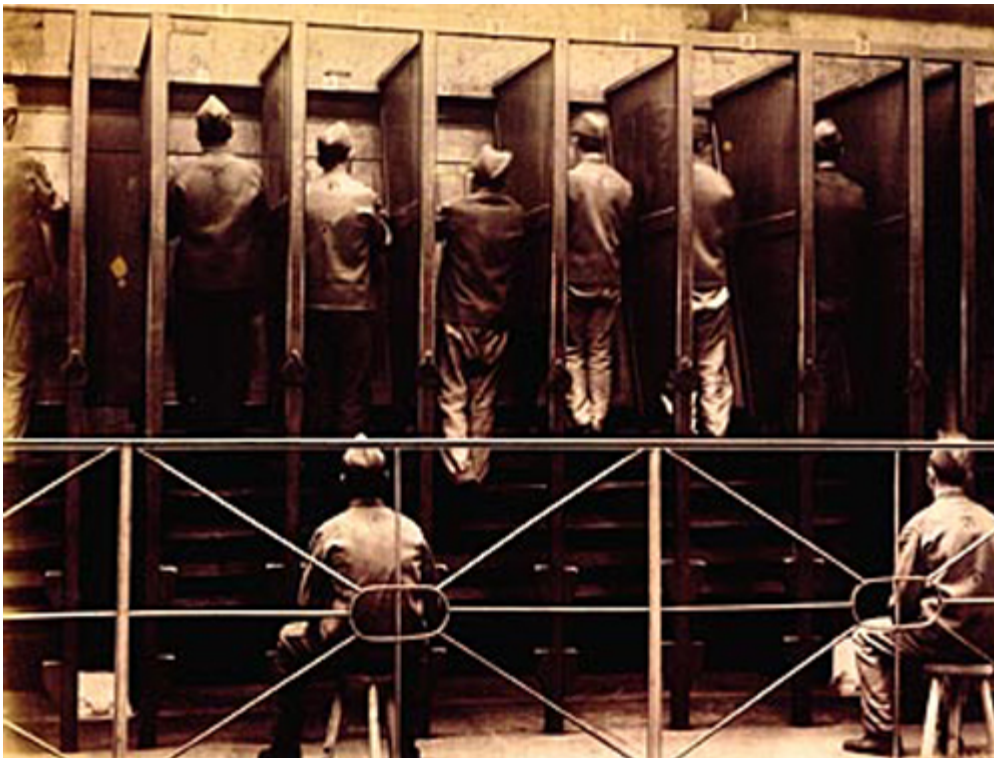
7b. Why do you think that the treadmill was separated into different compartments?

7c. This form of punishment was de-moralising and exhausting. Why, therefore, do you think that prisoners were made to do it?



Source 7

This picture shows prisoners working on a treadmill. Prisoners would be required to trudge up and down the steps for 6 hours a day.



(PRO ref: COPY 1/420)