Video: ‘Victorian prison treadmills - the brutal reality and the lessons for today’

Transcript

What do you do with prisoners serving short sentences of imprisonment? It is a question that has plagued British policymakers since the rise of short-term imprisonment around the turn of the 19th century.

Over the last 200 years, there have been many schemes and experiments. But one of the more extraordinary ideas was this machine. Just beside me, the penal treadmill.

Now, this doesn't look like the kind of treadmill you might be familiar with, that you might see at the gym today.

The modern exercise treadmill, with its flat moving platform, requires you to run or to walk.

The penal treadmill forces you to climb - which is much harder - using wooden steps fixed to a large wheel, which here is mostly covered up. But if you can imagine a hamster wheel, elongated and inverted.

This penal treadmill was not designed to improve your fitness. The penal treadmill was invented to ‘grind men good’. To fulfil the two aims of the modern prison - punishment and rehabilitation.

However, by the time that this penal treadmill was installed here at Beaumaris Prison in Anglesey, north Wales, in the late 1860s, it had become a machine of punishment, and to many, an instrument of torture.

Beaumaris Gaol functioned as a local prison between 1829 and 1878. It wasn't a very big prison, so the treadmill here was relatively small. It could hold up to 12 men at any one time. But treadmills and other prisons could hold 20 or even 30. You might have noticed the evenly spaced boards or partitions. By the 1860s, most treadmills had partitions to separate prisoners and to stop them from talking to each other.

Every day for six hours in total, the men were confined in these boxes. Each man climbs for 15 minutes and then had a five-minute rest, sitting on these retractable benches before starting all over again. Here is the rod that the men held on to, to keep their balance. And the top of the wheel was covered up, in order to keep the men level with the wheel axle.

Over the course of a day, each man climbed approximately 7,500 ft. That's the equivalent of climbing to the top of The Shard, London's tallest building, seven times in one day. Imagine doing that every day for several weeks.

And then there was the noise. Treadmills like this one were built with heavy machinery, which clunked and groaned as the wheel turned. Imagine the noise of the machine. The cries of pain from men pushed to their limit. And the smell of human exertion. And for what?

At Beaumaris, the power provided by the treadmill was used to pump water around the prison. At most other prisons, treadmills were unproductive. They did nothing. But that wasn't the original intention.

The penal treadmill was invented in about 1818, when prisons were increasingly being used as places of punishment, where those convicted of less serious offenses would be sentenced to short terms of imprisonment.

These prisoners needed some kind of suitable employment. They couldn't just be left idle. Those who had been sentenced to ‘hard labour’ needed some kind of work that was punishing and truly hard.

At the same time, reformers were keen that prisoners left prison no worse and ideally better than when they come in, what we would nowadays call rehabilitation.

The treadmill fulfilled all of these requirements. It kept prisoners occupied and it required no special training. It also provided a form of labour that was hard and truly punishing.

The power generated by climbing or turning the wheel could be used for a whole range of applications, from grinding grain through to driving textile looms. At the same time, the prisoners would see the product of their labour, which would help to cultivate a work ethic among them.

This technology spread rapidly. By 1824, there were treadmills in more than 50 British prisons and even more in Ireland, North America and Australia.

To begin with, some felt the treadmill had benefits. It improved prisoners' health, it was claimed. However, soon counter evidence emerged of the harm inflicted by the treadmill. Surgeons reported cases of lung damage, hernias, and rheumatism. Faulty treadmills collapsed, causing injury and loss of life.

A false step could result in a mangled limb or even death. Plans to use this labour for economic gain also came to nothing.

Use of the treadmill declined in other countries, but not in England and Wales. In the 1860s, a new generation of penal reformers hellbent on making imprisonment as unpleasant as possible heavily promoted this machine of punishment. After a month or so of climbing the wheel, they argued, who in their right mind would choose to commit a crime and return to prison?

There was no evidence that the treadmill had any impact on crime rates or the size of the prison population. Instead, an increasingly severe penal regime which deprived prisoners of sleep and food, and which subjected them to the treadmill and other hard labour machines, caused lasting physical and psychological damage to the individuals who suffered it.

How did we get to this point? To the use of torture in British prisons?

I think it was a consequence of the growing separation of prisoners from the rest of society. Prisoners were increasingly physically isolated through the construction of high walls, restricted access for visitors, including journalists, and the strict control of information about what was happening behind the walls.

At the same time, prisoners were increasingly dehumanised, often by political rhetoric that emphasised the need to be 'tough on crime', a sentiment that we often hear expressed by politicians and others today.

This separation caused ordinary people to become disinterested. Nobody really cared, and the prisoners were forgotten. In this sense, the story of the treadmill provides a cautionary tale with particular relevance to the present.

In a democracy, we rely on the vigilance of voters. Ordinary people need to care about what happens inside prisons.

In 1898, following a successful campaign by journalists and former prisoners, hard labour machines were officially abolished in English and Welsh prisons. The last treadmills finally stopped turning in 1901. Policymakers expressed a renewed commitment to pursuing the two aims of imprisonment; punishment and rehabilitation.

However, over the last 120 years, the need or desire to punish has continued to limit opportunities for rehabilitation. The story of the treadmill might prompt us to ask, is it even possible to punish and rehabilitate? What matters more? What should be the purpose of imprisonment and the prison? And finally, what should we do with prisoners serving short terms of imprisonment?