

PRISON LIFE

Hard Labour

Prisoners in Victorian times, both men and women, spent most of their time working. The prison was expected to be self-supporting financially so the prisoners were put to work.

In Dunedin from 1862, men sentenced to hard labour worked on local infrastructure projects, such as excavating Bell Hill, breaking rocks, and on harbour reclamation. They helped build roads, including Māori Road and Vauxhall Road. And prisoners were housed at Taiaroa Head from 1888 to work on the fortifications there.

The daily routine began at 6am when the hard labour gangs marched off to work. They returned to the prison at 5pm, were given supper and locked up at 5:30pm. They were allowed to read until 8pm, then it was lights out. They slept in hammocks.

The Daily Grind

In this prison, from 1904 the regime was a little easier. The prisoners were woken at 6:45am and a muster was taken. Breakfast was served in the cells at 7am, followed by a general parade and the prisoners were searched.

They then marched off to work at 8am. Dinner was at noon. Those employed in the prison workshops stopped at 4:30pm and had half an hour's exercise. The hard labour men returned at 5pm and were searched again. Everyone was locked up 5:30pm and given dinner in their cells. Lights out was at 7:45pm. Even the prison officers had to be in their quarters by 10pm.

The prisoners worked only half the day on Saturday. At 2pm they had their weekly bath and fortnightly haircut, and were given clean clothes.

On Sunday mornings they attended compulsory religious service and then exercised. After the midday dinner, they attended another service and did more exercise. They were then locked in their cells at 4pm with the week's regular routine ahead of them.

Hard labour was abolished in 1954.