In 1849 ‘the crowded state of the Devon County prisons’ forced Devonport Town Council to appropriate 12 cells in Exeter and Bodmin prisons (Trewmans Flying Post, 20 September 1849*) leading to the construction of a dedicated Borough Prison for the town at Pennycomequick. It was designed by James Pier St.Aubyn, a well known architect (and first cousin of Sir John St.Aubyn) in a style reminiscent of the fourteenth century. It was constructed by Messrs. Hoskyn and Co. of Devonport on a 3 acre site near the south Devon railway. Accommodation for 70 prisoners (with the potential to house an additional 120 if necessary) was provided at a total cost of £13,135 3s 7d which equated to £187 13s per cell. The entrance and officers’ buildings were deliberately designed to be attractive with Bath stone dressings for the doors and windows and local hammer-dressed limestone for the walls, the prison buildings within the walls were, of course, very plain. The prison was a modern design including a chapel, offices, heating apparatus and a shaft for ventilation in the round tower at the rear.

Inmates
The prison was used to hold those convicted by the Devonport or Stonehouse magistrates for minor offences, especially drink related. Sentences were quite short: 80% of all Victorian prison sentences were for less than one month, and with or without hard labour involving repetitive and monotonous work deemed to be good for the soul and redemption. In a prison so near to the dockyards this meant oakum picking - unpicking or unravelling the strands of rotten rope discarded by shipping. A horrible and boring job which shredded fingertips – the rope was usually wet, briny and tarry and not easy to unravel. It was a huge cost for the Navy until convicts did it for ‘free’. It was not until 1896 that the Comptroller of Prison Industries announced that female prisoners should no longer pick oakum but that dolls would be purchased for them to dress instead (The Sketch, 2 December 1896*).

The Governor at Devonport, James Edwards, was more enlightened than most. Rather than viewing the success of the prison as it being full at all times he viewed its effectiveness in terms of the number of prisoners released back into the community. In 1875, William Tallack, Secretary of the Howard Association (forerunner of the Howard League), responded to criticism of Edwards that there were only 12 inmates in the prison, 5 of whom were due to be released imminently. He commented that other governors, especially Exeter, were jealous of Edward’s achievements and that ‘At Devonport it is but seldom that prisoners return to gaol, except that many call to thank the Governor for training them to an honest life of industrial self-support.’ Daily News, 26 June 1875*.

In 1870 Mr Frederic Row, JP, MD, gave a lecture at the Guildhall on Prison Discipline at Devonport Gaol, praising its efficiency and low running costs of £15 per head per annum (Bath was £45) and its emphasis on rejecting ‘all attempts to subjugate its inmates by means of painful impositions of unproductive labour.’ The table (left) prepared by Dr Hudson at the Royal Albert Hospital calculates the nutritional value of the prison diet. Devonport offered a variety of meals as conducive to good health and prevention of illness: just 4 inmates were sent to the infirmary that year and no deaths in custody recorded since opening. Diets were used to incentivise production: a tramp, sentenced to 14 days, refused to pick oakum and was told his low diet would continue – ‘The next day he did as ordered’ and earned his keep and more. Row concluded that ‘small prisons and asylums are better in every respect than large ones,...and Devonport ‘by far the least expensive if not the Most efficient, establishment of its kind in the United Kingdom.’ (Reports and Transactions of the Devonshire Association 1870, pp321-329)

‘Devonport Borough Prison’ The Illustrated London News 21 February 1857* and below as it is today

*Newspaper extracts (c) British Library Board

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