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Prison hulks – text only

Headline: Floating hell

Strap: Convicts experienced notoriously miserable conditions in Georgian and Victorian Britain – and inmates of prison hulks endured the harshest of these deprivations. Anna McKay reveals the horrors of these "wicked Noah's arks"

Body text:

Early one misty morning in 1855, Henry Mayhew and John Binny stepped aboard a dilapidated ship moored on the Thames. Its large wooden hull was studded with barred portholes; instead of flags, a rudimentary washing line hung between the ship's masts. The overall impression was one of oppression and decay.

The *Defence* struck a curious contrast to the gleaming steamboats and sailboats streaming past: for one thing, rather than carrying passengers, it housed convicts. Formerly a naval man-of-war, it was now a prison ship, also known as a hulk.

Mayhew and Binny, both journalists and social reformers, had previously toured the prisons of London. They had inspected the solitary cells at Millbank, the exercise yards in Pentonville, and the female workrooms in Brixton. But the hulk system was unlike any other prison they had encountered.

The walls of this one were wooden, barely held together by rot. Led by a warder, the journalists descended into the belly of the ship. Here, each deck was divided by two rows of strong iron railings flanking a central passageway. Behind were open cells festooned with dingy hammocks, providing space for 240 men to sleep on each deck. As Mayhew and Binny looked on, a morning bell sounded and sleeping prisoners sprang into action, stowing hammocks, washing in buckets and scrubbing tables ready for breakfast.

If the scene inspired both wonder and despair in these men, their reactions were nothing new. For decades, prison reformers had protested at the use of hulks. And the *Defence* was not fit to be a prison, being nothing more than "a rotten leaky tub".

Easing overcrowding

Hulks were first introduced in England in 1776 as a temporary measure to ease overcrowding in prisons. The conflict today known as the American Revolutionary War had broken out the previous year, abruptly halting the transportation of felons – men, women and children – to Britain's North American colonies. Instead, ever-increasing numbers of inmates were crammed into various types of prisons across the country.

In an attempt to address the problem, parliament passed an act allowing the use of prison hulks, initially for two years. In lieu of transportation, male convicts would be sentenced to hard labour and imprisonment on disused ships on the Thames.

The contract for managing the first hulks, moored at Woolwich, was given to Duncan Campbell, a West Indies merchant and transporter of convicts who was appointed the first superintendent of prison hulks in England. He adapted his own ship, the *Justitia*, which had previously been used to transport convicts from London and Middlesex to Maryland and Virginia. Tearing down internal cabins, he installed bunks that allowed less than 50cm width for each man.

The inmates reacted with horror to their new confinement. “On their first coming on board, the universal depression of spirits was astonishing,” wrote Campbell, “[and] they had a great dread of this punishment.”

That depression and dread was well-founded. Within months, sickness ripped through the *Justitia*. Of 632 men incarcerated on that hulk between August 1776 and 26 March 1778, 167 died – more than one in four. Their bodies were buried in unmarked graves on shore, unless collected by relatives – or illicitly passed to anatomists for dissection.

In total, about 25 hulks were stationed along the Thames Estuary at Woolwich, Deptford, Chatham and Sheerness. Some operated for months, others for decades. And it wasn’t long before the *Justitia* and other hulks at Woolwich – including the *Tayloe*, *Censor*, *Reception* and *Stanislaus* – attracted the attention of prison reformers.

After philanthropist John Howard visited the *Justitia* in 1776, he reported to parliament that he could see from the sickly looks of prisoners that “some mismanagement was among them”. Many had no shirts, shoes or socks. They either had no bedding or shared a blanket, and they slept on wooden boards, with the healthy lying close to the sick prisoners. One convict told him that “he was ready to sink into the earth”.

Howard discovered that the “good, wholesome brown biscuit” that Campbell claimed to provide prisoners was in fact mere bags of crumbs or was “mouldy and green on both sides”. In 1776, one day’s rations to be shared by a “mess” of six convicts comprised five pounds of dry ship’s biscuit, half an ox cheek and three pints of split pea soup. On two days each week they ate oatmeal, five pounds of bread and two pounds of cheese. They drank weak beer and water filtered from the river. Campbell initially permitted visiting family members to bring supplementary food but eventually forbade the practice as “they conveyed saws and other instruments for their escape” inside.

In short, living conditions were close to unbearable. In an 1819 memoir, swindler and thief James Hardy Vaux wrote of “the horrible effects arising from the continual rattling of chains, the filth and vermin naturally produced by such a crowd of miserable inhabitants, the oaths and execrations constantly heard among them”.

Howard reported that convicts spoke to him in soft tones to avoid being overheard – and with good reason. Meanwhile, Vaux recalled how prisoners were beaten brutally by guards and overseers. He also claimed to have witnessed murder, suicide and robbery. “If I were to attempt a full description of the miseries endured in these ships,” he wrote, “I could fill a volume.”

Exporting the system

The system continued in use long after the initial two-year period mandated, proliferating over the following decades. Convicts suffered the same brand of brutality and deprivation on ships at Sheerness, Chatham, Deptford, Plymouth and Portsmouth. This mode of incarceration wasn’t restricted to the waterways of England, either. During the 19th century, the prison hulk system was exported to places such as Cork, Dublin, Gibraltar and even Bermuda.

The system reached a global peak in 1829, when an average of 5,550 prisoners were held on hulks in England and Bermuda. The vast majority of them were incarcerated for theft or related offences – anything from housebreaking and highway robbery to stealing animals and picking pockets.

Theft on board was, unsurprisingly, widespread: one inspector commented that “It appears to be their whole study to rob and plunder each other.” Prisoners stole to buy alcohol from dockyard workers and guards who turned a blind eye. Gambling was forbidden but, as men

were locked down beneath the hatches each night, they could roam their decks, playing dice and dominoes. Reformers argued that prisoners would never become better citizens if they were locked together in these “Floating Academies” and “Schools of Vice”. Locals complained of riotous noises at night, and guards were said to be afraid of descending to lower decks to settle fights and disturbances.

In 1787, when the “First Fleet” set out to transport convicts to Britain’s colony in Australia (replacing the now-lost colonies of North America), many on board had been selected from Campbell’s hulks. In 1794, 22-year old convict Richard Bevis petitioned to be sent to Botany Bay on the next available ship, rather than “wasting the prime of manhood in this receptacle for vice and misery” on the *Stanislaus*. His fellow prisoner Edward Moseley asked to be “taken out of this floating hell”, stating he was “stout and robust, and every day go thro’ laborious work. I have three times had the gaol fever.” Women were still held in prisons on land, but boys younger than 10 were routinely sent to the hulks. This mixing of men and boys was a source of great consternation among reformers, who wanted them kept separately.

Chaplains visiting the hulks petitioned for segregation. “Let it be remembered,” one proclaimed, “that they are at present *children*, and so situated as to claim our sympathetic concern.” It wasn’t until the 1820s that boys were removed to separate ships, where they learned trades such as carpentry and shoemaking. Until then, those convicts either too young or too old to work on shore during the day were left on board to clean the decks, prepare meals and care for the sick.

For the others, daily life meant endless rounds of hard labour. The dockyards of Chatham, Portsmouth, Plymouth, Gibraltar and even Bermuda were built on the backs of men imprisoned on hulks. Convicts worked from morning till night in these places, building wharves and embankments, digging ditches and levelling earth to widen the riverbed and improve navigation for ships.

Dockyards were dangerous places for unskilled labourers. In 1825, convict Thomas Merrick died after being jammed between two timbers in the dockyard at Portsmouth. The following year at Portsmouth, convict Joseph French fractured his skull and died from timber falling from a cart. And in 1831, one prisoner complained that “there is nothing thought of a convict if he is hurt”, and that accidents happened frequently, “such as arms broke and legs; there are a great many amputations, from the falling of stones and timber”.

In the face of such danger and deprivation, it’s hardly surprising that prison hulks were powder kegs of violence and insurrection.

In August 1802, *The Morning Chronicle* reported on a riot at Woolwich during which 14 convicts “armed with large clasp knives” rushed their guard threatening murder, demanding that he open the gate to the dockyard. They knocked him down, took the key and made their escape, pursued by several guards who shot at them. One convict was shot from a distance of about 10 metres. “The bullet,” so the report revealed, “entered the left side of his head, which drove part of his skull and brains into his hat: he instantly fell lifeless to the ground.”

Some of the rioters did escape, but others were rounded up by the Royal Artillery. Such desperadoes faced a flogging of up to 100 lashes, or being thrown into the hulk’s “black hole” – an isolated cell – with reduced rations. By the 1830s and 1840s, hulk officers feared that influxes of “Swing Rioters” – disaffected agricultural workers – and Chartists demanding political reform would provoke mass mutiny and escape attempts on hulks.

Petitions and pardons

Less violent protests took the form of petitions asking for release or better rations. In 1800, a group of convicts on the *Lion* hulk at Portsmouth spoke of the "barbarity we receive from the officers on board", and said that they were "starving for the want of provisions". Some prisoners asked for early pardons in recognition of injuries sustained in the dockyards; others tried to take up posts in the army and navy. Good behaviour didn't guarantee success in such efforts, but in some cases it paid off. In 1834, 12-year-old David Brough from Dundee, given a positive character reference from bricklayers and masons in Woolwich dockyard, was pardoned.

Hulks had always had their critics but by the 1840s, with a new nationwide emphasis on reform and rehabilitation, they appeared ever more outmoded. In 1847, the hulks at Woolwich hit the headlines. It was feared that illegal dissections of dead prisoners were taking place on board; inmates felt they were being "allowed to die for the sake of their bodies to go to the school of anatomy". The system was labelled "a disgrace to any country calling itself… civilised and Christian" by MP Thomas Duncombe. In 1848, the *Daily News* singled out the hulk system as corrupt and negligent, observing that the system "continued, notwithstanding its disastrous consequences: and it still flourishes – if that which only stagnates, debases, and corrupts, can be said to flourish". This appraisal argued that hulks had "no redeeming feature", and that the sole reason the system continued to operate was because convict labour was still of use to the government.

When Mayhew and Binny visited the *Defence* in 1855, they remarked with wonder that "a state of things so scandalous could last". Two years later, the *Defence* burned down; its remaining inmates were moved to nearby prisons. That same year, 1857, the hulk system ended in Britain, though hulks continued to be used as prisons in overseas colonies for several more years. A system of incarceration that was, Mayhew and Binny pointed out, as rotten as the wooden timbers of the *Defence* was finally consigned to a watery grave.

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Box-out 1

ABANDON SHIP!

Dramatic stories of escape attempts from prison hulks

A SHOT AT FREEDOM

In 1811, *The Times* reported that 37 convicts had escaped together from a vessel at Woolwich. Using makeshift tools and saws stolen from the dockyards, the men "cut through the ceiling and timbers of the hulk just under her bends [and] made a hole sufficiently large for a man to creep out". Taking advantage of a low tide leaving the ship beached on mudflats, the men waded through the mire to the shore and headed south of Woolwich in the direction of Shooter's Hill, a place commonly associated with highway robberies. Fifteen of the men were recaptured.

HORROR STORY

The testimony of Michael Cashmin highlights the horrors of the floating prisons. In April 1778, Cashmin escaped a hulk at Woolwich but was apprehended near Tottenham Court Road, still sporting part of a fetter on each leg. According to the *Newgate Calendar*, Cashmin was sent back to the hulks for a further 14 years, despite arguing at the Old Bailey that: "I was almost starved to death when I was there; there is never a man there but would escape from that place if he could: I would rather be hanged than be there."

SPADES AND AXES

In 1778, a large uprising erupted in the dockyards at Woolwich during a planned mass escape. Late one afternoon, some 150 men (of 250 convicts working on the Thames at the time) abandoned their wheelbarrows and grabbed pikes from a nearby ship. Having armed themselves, the mob took up spades and carpenters' axes, proceeding to the waterside to attempt escape via the sea wall. There they hurled showers of stones at the 20 armed militiamen who tried to stop them, and who eventually subdued the would-be escapees.

SUSPICIOUS CLOTHING

Newspapers printed detailed descriptions of fugitives to alert the public. After John Mason escaped the *Justitia* in 1836, the *Morning Post* labelled him a "notorious and desperate burglar". Describing him as stoutly built, with "scars on the right side of his head and on the back of his hand", the newspaper advised civilians to look out for a man in the "grey dress of the hulks, with a piece of iron on one of his legs". Prison uniforms stood out, so many escapees donned disguises. Michael Brothers, who escaped the *Defence* in 1856, disguised himself with a stolen hat and long overcoat – but his trousers, hastily sewn together from old bedding, aroused suspicion and he was soon recaptured.

A GREAT ESCAPE

Perhaps the most famous convict to abscond from the hulks was fictional. In Charles Dickens' novel *Great Expectations*, serialised from 1860, the protagonist, Pip, helps convict Magwitch to escape. This "fearful man, all in coarse grey, with a great iron on his leg… who limped, and shivered, and glared, and growled" was recaptured on the Kent marshes and returned to the hulks, which Pip called "wicked Noah's arks".

Box-out two

Prison hulks: damning statistics

4,280

The highest (average) total of inmates on prison hulks in England in a single year, 1842. Of those, 3,615 were transported to Van Diemen's Land (now Tasmania), Australia

216

The number of 10- to 15-year-olds incarcerated in hulks in England in 1841. Three of these boys were under 10 years old

1 IN 4

The approximate fatality rate of prisoners on board the hulk *Justitia* who died between August 1776, when it first received inmates, and March 1778. Out of a total of 632 convicts, 167 perished

60
The total number of years that a hulk called *Justitia* operated at Woolwich. The first ship with that name was moored there from 1776 to 1802; its successor of the same name was used for 34 years, from 1814 to 1848

216
The number of prisoners held on board the *Defence* in 1854 who were granted a pardon, out of a total of 819