

'A prison on water, plus the chance of being drowned': Reformatory ships and industrial school ships in England, 1856-1914.

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In 2024, a joint review between His Majesty's Inspectorate of Prisons and Ofsted raised concerns about the declining quality of education in Young Offender Institutions.¹ There was concern over lack of access to education, which could impede the youngsters' rehabilitation and prospects. Children in YOIs were found to have fewer hours of lessons per day than those in mainstream schools. Work experience opportunities were also found to be limited, leading to the youths' lacking skills and training to secure employment after release. A key point was that institution time could be an opportunity to provide much-needed education, and through this avoid a return to custody.

These conclusions are not new. Over 150 years ago, the idea of providing education and training to reduce reoffending was tackled in a unique maritime environment. The 19th century reformatory ships were an attempt by the Victorian middle class to rescue and retrain juvenile offenders before they potentially progressed to adult criminals. The idea was to utilise old wooden ships as reformatory ships. These would be able to house a large number of boys who would be trained for a life at sea.

As early as 1815, reasons for juvenile delinquency were identified as 'want of education', 'improper conduct of parents' and 'want of suitable employment' (p. 53).² These were the core issues reformatory schools (introduced in 1854) aimed to address by using a separate system for young offenders focusing on training and education rather than punishment. In the 19th century, there was widespread concern amongst the middle and upper classes about the perceived rise in juvenile crime. Amongst various solutions was the introduction of reformatory schools, which removed children from their homes, educated and trained them.

These schools focused on reform, training and education although they still had strict regimes and punishments.

Before the 19th century, children above the age of seven had generally been treated as adults in criminal proceedings. Ideas about how to deal with juvenile offenders slowly started to change. It became apparent that sending children to prison with adults was not working and that mixing with older, more experienced offenders might integrate these youngsters into a life of crime. In reformatory schools, youths were trained for work so they could learn to earn an honest living rather than return to crime. One problem was finding work for them when they left the school. England was a maritime country at this time, and sailors were constantly needed. Shipping was also changing with the invention of iron ships which were faster and could carry more cargo. Therefore, old wooden sailing ships were becoming obsolete, and many were lying unused in the docks, costing the Admiralty to moor them. With these ships readily available some were repurposed as reformatories. The isolation of being moored out in a river also provided the total removal of the boys from their corruptive environment.

There were four different types of training ships in the 19th century. The Royal Navy established the first training ships for those they considered 'good' boys, often from wealthy families. Then there were training ships for poor boys of good character. They had not committed a crime and were frequently orphans whose father had been a sailor. Next, there were two types of ships involved in reforming boys who had been before a magistrate, the reformatory ships and the industrial training ships. The reformatory ships were for boys who had been convicted of a crime. These boys had usually previously offended more than once, were aged about 12 to 16 years old and were sent on board for up to five

1. Ofsted, His Majesty's Inspectorate of Prisons. (2024). *A decade of declining quality of education in young offender institutions: the systematic shortcomings that fail children*. <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/thematic-review-of-the-quality-of-education-in-young-offender-institutions-yois/a-decade-of-declining-quality-of-education-in-young-offender-institutions-the-systemic-shortcomings-that-fail-children>
2. Muncie, J. (2021). *Youth and Crime* (5th Ed.). Sage.

years. The industrial training ships were for boys who had been brought before a magistrate but not convicted. Often younger than the reformatory boys, they might be sent on board for sleeping rough, having no means of support or living in a house of ill repute.

Akbar was the first reformatory ship established in 1856 and moored in the River Mersey at Liverpool. Next, *Cornwall* was established in the Thames in 1859. The third and final reformatory ship was *Clarence*, certified in 1864, also in the Mersey and solely for Roman Catholic boys. There were ten industrial training ships around Great Britain, five in England, two in Wales, two in Scotland and one in Ireland. The English ones started with *Wellesley* established in the Tyne at Newcastle in 1868, followed the same year by *Southampton* in the Humber at Hull. The *Formidable* was certified the next year and was near Bristol. There was then a short gap before *Mount Edgcumbe* was started in Cornwall in 1877 and the final English ship, *Shaftesbury*, in the Thames in 1878. The Welsh ships included *Clio* and *Havannah*; *Cumberland* and *Mars* were in Scotland and *Gibraltar* in Ireland.

While the idea of reformatory schools was to remove the youngsters from potentially harmful homes, the ships themselves had safety issues. Ships are hazardous places and a sailor's life is a dangerous one. In the 19th century, seamen had one of the highest mortality rates.³ While training boys on these old ships was practical and economical, they were being placed in a dangerous environment. This created a paradox between trying to save the boys from a possibly destructive home environment by putting them in another dangerous situation. In addition to the risk of general accidents in a working environment, the boys also faced the risk of falling overboard and drowning. There was also the risk of fire on the wooden ships, and all the reformatory ships had fires at some point, with the *Clarence*, moored in the Mersey, being burned three times. There was also the danger of disease in an enclosed environment and the risk from other volatile and violent boys. However, not only were these dangers recognised and accepted, but some contemporary commentators thought the risky lifestyle would appeal to some juvenile delinquent boys. The volunteer committee running the *Cornwall* thought criminal boys' love of danger and adventure made

them ideal sailors. It was considered that the boys' unmanageable tempers made them more able to cope with the 'risks and hardships of a seaman's life'.⁴

In the original PhD research on which this article is based, the lives of 150 boys who had been on the reformatory ships were traced, 50 from each of the three ships *Akbar*, *Cornwall* and *Clarence*. Their lives were followed using archival material, criminal records, civil registration records, the census, historical newspapers and other records detailing their lives. This research gave an indication of the family backgrounds of the boys sent on board and what happened to them afterwards. The key question was whether the ships had a positive influence on them, and whether they left the ships for a life at sea or whether they returned to crime on their release.

The reformatory ships were old wooden man-of-war ships. When a boy was committed to a reformatory ship he had to first spend time in prison — usually 14 days. This was so the public could see the boys were still being punished and so parents did not consider the reformatory with free education and training as a positive option for their children. The short, sharp shock of the mandatory prison sentence gave the boys a taste of prison and what it would be like if they did not take the opportunity for reform offered to them. However, the reformatory system

meant the boys had a far longer time in the state system; they could be on the ship for a further five years. From 1899, the initial goal term was abolished, and boys could be sent directly to the reformatory ship.

One aim of the reformatory ships was to attempt to create some type of middle-class family orderliness for the boys. With the captain acting as a father figure to his large brood of boys, by taking the boys back to a childlike dependency the aim was to reform them in a way the middle class saw more appropriate. According to maritime law, the captain had absolute authority on his ship; to lose control would jeopardise the safety of the vessel. The mid-19th century familial ideology placed women and children as dependants of the male head of the family, and this gender power structure was attempted in institutions. An appropriate male role model would teach the boys acceptable masculine values. While the emphasis was on obedience, morality and punishments, there was also time for play and occasional treats.

The idea of providing education and training to reduce reoffending was tackled in a unique maritime environment.

3. Carter, T. (2014). *Merchant Seamen's Health, 1860-1960: Medicine, Technology, Shipowners and the State in Britain*. Boydell & Brewer Ltd.
4. *Morning Post*, (1859, June 16).

The boys were organised into smaller watches or messes to utilise this 'family' model. They slept, ate and worked together, forming their own little unit with one boy chosen as their captain.⁵ The boys followed a busy timetable; each day included six hours of industrial training and three hours of education. While the focus was on industrial skills, the boys still had basic reading, writing, and arithmetic lessons. More advanced boys could learn geography and history. Religious instruction was important, with prayers every day, and the boys were allowed on shore to attend church on Sundays. The education aimed to build an honest, working-class character. Lack of education and school non-attendance have been found to be factors in juvenile offending.⁶ The education was practical; the boys were taught what would be most beneficial to them in life. It was considered important to teach the working class to read so they could follow the Bible and reading often had a priority over writing. Both were taught on the ships. Maths was also necessary if the boys were going to become successful mariners, so they could calculate navigation routes. Art gave boys the skills to draw maps and charts, geography taught them seaports and ocean routes. As the boys were committed on board for up to five years, this gave them a lengthy time for education. With the boys in an enclosed environment, there were no issues with non-attendance, a common problem in schooling at the time.

Industrial training was the focus of learning. Some day-to-day tasks, such as scrubbing the decks, were included in the 'industrial training'. The boys were taught skills all sailors would need, such as knotting, net and sail repairing, rowing and furling a sail. There was some crossover between education and industrial training, such as navigation or compass work, where theory started in the classroom before moving on to practical application. While the main large vessel was stationary, the ships had smaller boats; some went ashore daily to collect post and provisions, and others took longer voyages for a few weeks with the older boys once they reached the age of 15. These smaller vessels also gave the boys practical experience of handling a boat.

Imparting the value of labour was believed to be pivotal in reforming juveniles; they were being trained to earn an honest living to keep them from returning to crime. The focus was on training the boys to go to sea,

where there was plenty of work. It was not considered whether the boys wanted to go to sea. Other trades, such as tailoring and carpentering, were also offered; these were activities that were utilised on the ships, so the boys could learn alongside the staff on board. Boys could work alongside the ship's cook and they were trained to repair their own clothes and shoes, while some worked alongside the ship's tailor.

The daily life on board kept the boys busy, allowing them less time for mischief-making. The ships were run by strict naval order, instilling order and discipline. These regimented timetables would have been a marked change for boys used to living on the streets with little parental control. On the *Akbar*, the boys got up at half-past five in the morning, dressed, stowed their beds away, swept and washed the decks before breakfast at seven. There would be a parade on deck,

followed by prayers before the boys split into watches for school or seaman duties. There would be more training or school in the afternoon, with free time before supper and prayers before bed.

Recreation was considered an important part of the ship regime. After a day's work, free time in the evening showed the boys they could be rewarded for working hard. This 'play' was another attempt to give the boys an idea of the ideal family, and

they could be children for a short time. Physical activities were beneficial to use up excess energy, important for growing boys cooped up on a ship. The boys were encouraged to participate in boxing, as this was thought a better option to defend themselves on the streets than using knives. As a common activity amongst sailors, the boys were also taught to dance. The iconic hornpipe sailor dance gave the boys nimbleness while strengthening their arms and ankles. Daily drill, common in the military, was introduced as exercise and considered an appropriate activity for the working class.

Activities had to be adapted to an enclosed environment on board, although in later years, fields on shore were rented so the boys could exercise. The boys could play marbles on deck, perform plays or read. All the reformatory ships had a library on board, holding magazines, periodicals and books. Books were usually donated and included reading material deemed suitable for the boys, such as Bibles or the *Naval Brigade News*. Library books on board often had an adventure or maritime theme. Books were given as

Reformatory ships were an attempt by the Victorian middle class to rescue and retrain juvenile offenders.

5. *Liverpool Daily Post*. (1857, January 28).

6. Godfrey, B., Cox, P., Shore, H., & Alker, Z. (2017) *Young Criminal Lives: Life Courses and Life Chances after 1850*. Oxford University Press.

prizes and included titles now considered classics, such as *Tom Brown's Schooldays*, *Around the World in Eighty Days* and *Robinson Crusoe*.

With so many boys on board, there needed to be some form of consequences to behaviour in the form of punishment and rewards. The orderly regime on board mirrored that which the captain and staff would have been used to in the navy and strictness was vital to control a large number of boys. Some of the issues on board were what would be expected from teenage boys: surliness, disobedience and quarrelling. Some offences were more serious such as bullying and theft, and even physical assaults on staff and other boys. The boys were not allowed knives on board, but knife incidents happened; in one case on the *Clarence*, a boy slit the throat of another boy while he was asleep in his hammock and on the *Akbar* in 1881, a boy tried to stab one of the officers with a pocket knife.⁷⁻⁸ Boys were frequently punished for insubordination, neglect of duty and resistance to officers. The ship's staff were trying to form the boys into ideal citizens, the boys rebelled to attempt to have some control over their lives.

One common offence was absconding. It was more dangerous to attempt an escape from a reformatory ship than a land-based school. A boy would need to steal a smaller boat, abscond while on a shore visit, or attempt to swim away. This could often lead to tragedy: when two boys tried to swim away from the *Akbar* in 1889, one drowned when the bundle of dry clothes he was towing pulled him down.⁹ In another case, a boy from *Clarence* died from exhaustion when trying to swim away.¹⁰ Although the ships were not technically a prison, it was still legal custody and the boys could not just leave the institution. Therefore, the boys were charged in court if they absconded. The boys usually blamed excessive punishment on board for absconding. One *Clarence* boy claimed the work was too hard and he didn't get enough to eat.¹¹ Similarly, a *Cornwall* boy told the police he was starving and had been flogged for no reason while on board. He was not believed and returned to the ship after a month in prison.¹²

While punishments on the ships were harsh, they need to be considered in the context of the time. Corporal punishment was reasoned to be the only form of punishment the youngsters understood because of the abusive homes many came from. Corporal punishment was considered to be a quick and effective form of motivation. Only the captain or schoolmaster could administer punishments, and these had to be recorded in a punishment book. Physical punishment using the cane, birch or stick was common, along with confinement in a solitary cell or restrictions of food. A government School Inspector annually checked the ships, and he sometimes commented that punishments were unnecessarily severe and were sometimes more than allowed in the Home Office rules.

There were also rewards for good behaviour, showing the regime went beyond simply controlling the youths and that it was instead trying to show them the

rewards for acceptable behaviour. These rewards included trips out, such as when the *Akbar* boys were treated to see a pantomime and given an orange each as they left the theatre. Wealthy benefactors usually donated these trips, so the public did not complain about money being wasted.

Staff on board the reformatory ships were usually naval men, except for the schoolmasters. In an advert for a seamanship instructor on the

Akbar, it specified he must have served in the Royal Navy, be aged under 45 and 'must be active, of strict sobriety and even-tempered'.¹³ While this naval experience meant the men were used to living on board a ship, it did not necessarily mean they had the skills to train youngsters. All ships had a captain superintendent in charge and a chief officer. The number of seamen instructors to teach nautical training varied according to the number of boys on board. There were also tradesmen who did essential maintenance work and taught their trade to small groups of boys. Most ships had a carpenter, tailor, shoemaker, cook and bandmaster. The schoolmasters had large classes, with ratios varying from one teacher to 45 boys on the *Akbar* to one teacher to 50 boys on the *Cornwall*.¹⁴

The boys followed a busy timetable; each day included six hours of industrial training and three hours of education.

7. *Liverpool Daily Post*, (1881, August 8).

8. *Liverpool Echo*, (1881, October 26).

9. *Liverpool Mercury*, (1889, August 24).

10. *Liverpool Mercury*, (1873, May 7).

11. *Liverpool Echo*, (1879, December 16).

12. *South London Chronicle*, (1869, September 18).

13. *Hampshire Telegraph*, (1891 September 19).

14. Brumby, J. (2023). *Reformatory and Industrial School Ships in England, 1856-1914: Establishment, Experiences and Outcomes* [Unpublished PhD thesis]. Leeds Beckett University.

Only half the boys would be in school at any one time, the rest would be doing practical training.

The boys did not usually serve their full sentence on the ship and were generally released on licence. A boy could be licenced by the captain as soon as he was deemed fit to be released, if the licence terms were broken the boy could be sent back to the ship. Licencing on the reformatory ships was usually after three years had been served, a sentence could be up to five years. The licence gave the boys a helpful transition to everyday life, they were free but on probation. The chance of being released on licence was also an incentive for good conduct. To be allowed out on licence a boy had to be sent to live with a respectable person. If the terms of the licence were broken, such as by bad behaviour or committing a crime, the boy could be recalled back to the ship. As part of the aftercare provision, the boys were monitored for three years after the initial licensing period.

There has been much discussion among historians and criminologists as to whether institutions such as the reformatory ships were about 'saving' the child from a life of poverty and crime, or were, in fact, a form of 'social control'. The doctoral research on which this article is based found that most boys did not commit any offences

after leaving the ship regime. In a cohort of 300 boys leaving the reformatory and industrial training ships, 20 per cent (60 of the 300 boys) committed some sort of offence after being released. Many of these crimes were committed shortly after the boys left, and while they were still juveniles. The most common offence was theft. It appears that a stint on the ships did reduce the chance of reoffending, but it could also have been that the boys were isolated on the ships during the main teenage years when they were more likely to have offended.

While the main aim of the reformatory ships was to train the boys to work at sea, few did. Of the 150 reformatory boys in the study, only 23 per cent went to some sort of job connected with the sea. Most of the boys who went to sea became merchant seamen or fishermen. An original aim when the ships were established was to train the boys to join the Royal Navy. However, the entrance restrictions to the navy meant this was not an option for many boys. Few met the physical standard required, many were under the 4'10" required to join, and some did not have a birth certificate. It was easier for the boys to join the mercantile marine, and many were successful at joining the army. Numerous boys became labourers, fewer

became skilled workers. As they were on the ships during the years they could have been doing an apprenticeship, if they did not want to go to sea or join the army, there were fewer options available to them.

While the boys on these ships were numerous, it is important to remember they were all individuals, and the ship regime affected them all in different ways, both while they were on board and in their lives afterwards. To highlight these differences, the case studies of two boys are presented. While originally the reformatory and industrial training ships were intended to be different in the types of boys they admitted, evidence shows the two types of ships were similar. The doctoral research on which this article is based studied both the reformatory ships and the industrial training ships. The following examples are from an industrial training ship, as they provide a useful comparison. Both boys were committed to the *Wellesley*, the industrial training ship in the Tyne at Newcastle. Both boys were

named Thomas, and both had been before a magistrate and sent to the ship to reform them, but with very different outcomes.

Thomas Soulsby Williamson was born in Sunderland, Durham in 1877. The third of five children, his mother died when he was young. Thomas was on the *Wellesley* on the 1891 census, and when he left he

joined the Royal Navy. In 1910, Thomas was part of the crew when Captain Scott made his attempt to reach the South Pole. Captain Scott and his comrades were lost on the return journey and eight months later a recovery party was sent out. Thomas was part of this group who discovered the bodies of Scott, Bowers and Wilson in their tent. Thomas also saw active service in the First World War.

Thomas Stayman also followed a career at sea but with different outcomes. He was born in 1868 and sent to the *Wellesley* aged 11 for larceny. After leaving, he went to sea and quickly progressed through the ratings. In 1917, Thomas was charged with the attempted murder of the gunner serving on the *Claverley* where Thomas was captain. Thomas had ordered the crew to fire on a hospital ship and to fire more rounds than permitted. Concerned that he would be reported on shore, Thomas physically threatened members of the crew, resulting in several hours chasing around the ship before he was barricaded in a cabin. He was sentenced to five years penal servitude for attempted murder. Newspaper reports claimed he had been 'mad drunk' during his captaincy.¹⁵

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15. *Exeter and Plymouth Gazette*. (1917, January 1).

These two studies show the range of outcomes possible. A former ship boy who went to the Antarctic and another charged with attempted murder are unique stories. But each boy who passed through the reformatory and industrial training ships had their own life story. Between these two stories at opposite ends of the spectrum, there were hundreds of boys who spent time on the ships during their formative years and a whole kaleidoscope of experiences. The ships existed for a relatively short time in the latter half of the 19th century. The wooden vessels which had been ideal for

housing the boys eventually deteriorated. As shipping practices changed, practical experience on a wooden sailing ship was not as relevant. Social welfare ideas moved more towards helping the family rather than removing children. A reduced need for the ships eventually led to them closing by the early 20th century.

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