

'Floating hells': Prison hulks and responses to prison overcrowding 1776-1857

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Prison hulks — repurposed ships used as floating prisons — were a notorious government response to prison overcrowding at the end of the 18th century. With their masts and rigging removed, they could be towed from site to site, and held around 300-500 male prisoners awaiting transportation. Pressed into service as temporary measures, they became part of the prison landscape for 80 years, until the system was finally disbanded. The hulks were immortalised in *Great Expectations* by Charles Dickens, first serialised in 1860-1. The novel was set in the early decades of the nineteenth century, where narrator Pip found himself an unwilling participant in the escape of a prisoner, Abel Magwitch. Having escaped from a hulk near to the foggy marshes of the Thames Estuary, Magwitch rose from amongst the graves to terrify young Pip. Eventually recaptured, he was escorted back to the ship, and it is here that the reader first encounters the hulks: 'By the light of the torches, we saw the black Hulk lying out a little way from the mud of the shore, like a wicked Noah's ark. Cribbed and barred and moored by massive rusty chains, the prison-ship seemed in my young eyes to be ironed like the prisoners'.¹

We encounter Magwitch and the hulks through the eyes of a child, and thus their image is one characterised by fear, vulnerability and powerlessness. Pip was told that 'people are put in the Hulks because they murder, and because they rob, and forge, and do all sorts of bad'.² There is a certain 'otherness' attached to the hulks; they were both familiar and unfamiliar. In their former lives as naval vessels, many had played a part in the Battle of Trafalgar and should have been symbols of national strength. Now, left to rot in the

Medway, their physicality invoked nothing but fear and unease. Across the first half of the 19th century, prison hulks faced extensive public and parliamentary criticism. Memorialised by Dickens, they were seen to represent all the evils of the British prison system: they were overcrowded, dangerous spaces, and were not seen as conducive for reforming inmates.

State responses to prison overcrowding

Effective from 1718, the Transportation Act legalised the process of deporting people convicted of crime — men, women and children to work as indentured servants or labourers in the American colonies, in Maryland, Virginia and the Caribbean.³ By 1775, the export of prisoners to America numbered roughly 960 a year — supplementary to numbers held in prisons, gaols and lock-ups across Britain.⁴ When the first shot of the American Revolution rang out at Lexington and Concord in April 1775 its impact was far-reaching. The War of American Independence that followed ground the process of transportation to a halt.

At home, Britain's prisons were pushed to breaking point. Prisoners were kept in overflowing county and borough prisons and joined by new would-be transportees sentenced after 1775. The haphazard administration and small scale of late 18th century gaols and houses of correction meant that institutions were not able to cope with increasing numbers.⁵ For a period of time, the state held onto the belief that the war against America would be resolved and transportation would resume. In the interim period, it turned to public servants to come up with alternative housing arrangements to help ease the overcrowding crisis.

1. Dickens, C. (1861). *Great Expectations* (E. Rosenberg, Ed. 1999). Norton, 36.

2. See footnote 1: Dickens (1861), 18.

3. Morgan, G., & Rushton, P. (2004). *Eighteenth-Century Criminal Transportation: The Formation of the Criminal Atlantic*. Palgrave Macmillan.

4. Shaw, A. G. L. (1966). *Convicts and the Colonies: A Study of Penal Transportation from Great Britain and Ireland to Australia and other parts of the British Empire*. Faber and Faber, XI, 574.

5. McConville, S. (1981). *A History of English Prison Administration: Volume 1, 1750-1877*, 50.

Driven by the pressures of war, at the end of the 18th century, ideas about efficiency and organisation began to shift, and management was placed into the hands of men open to new thinking. The Minister for the Northern Department's under-secretary William Eden was one such individual, appointed to find a solution to the overcrowding problem. Eden was the author of *The Principles of Penal Law*, published in 1771.⁶ This advocated a reduction in the number of capital offences and emphasised the need for reform.

Eden considered the state's options: war had caused the cost of overseas freight to rise sharply, and so sending prisoners to alternative British colonies was too costly. Mass hangings and chain gangs, the latter of which had not been used in England since the 18th century, had long since come to be regarded as barbaric and politically risky.⁷ Thanks to the high costs of waging war against the American colonies, the government was reluctant to invest in new or local prisons — Newgate was in the process of being redeveloped, but more sustained investment came later, with Millbank Penitentiary opening in 1816. Eden settled on prison hulks — decommissioned and partly dismantled ships — as the most acceptable and economic alternative to transportation. He advocated detaining male prisoners on hulks along the banks of the Thames at Woolwich, combining a spell of imprisonment with hard labour along the shoreline. In 1776, the British government passed the Criminal Law Act: it was designed as a temporary measure, lasting only several months.⁸

Over time, floating prisons were moored up in estuaries including Portsmouth and Plymouth, with the highest concentration along the Thames and Medway, at Woolwich, Deptford, Chatham and Sheerness.⁹ Those along the Thames Estuary initially received prisoners sent from gaols and overflowing prisons from across Middlesex but soon accepted from further afield. Only two ships were stationed at Plymouth, with more

at Portsmouth. In England, the hulk system ended in 1857 — what was supposed to be a temporary act therefore lasted around 80 years. At the end of the 18th century, Eden and his colleagues continued to search for permanent solutions, settling on the idea of transporting Britain and Ireland's prison population to New South Wales, Australia.¹⁰ The 'First Fleet' sailed in 1787, deporting its first group of prisoners, many of whom became settlers. This system continued — with interruptions, and objections from colonists — until 1868.¹¹ Male prisoners sentenced to penal servitude were held on board hulks prior to their transportation to the Australian colonies — This system was an important stage in this process.

Management — private contractors

Duncan Campbell, a merchant who previously held the contracts for transporting prisoners from London and the Southeast to the American colonies, was chosen as the first superintendent of the hulks at Woolwich by the Justices of the Peace for the County of Middlesex, beating competition including reformer Jeremy Bentham. Campbell lobbied for the role, recognising a good business opportunity — the payments from the enterprise acted as a stopgap until transportation resumed. He

Male prisoners sentenced to penal servitude were held on board hulks prior to their transportation to the Australian colonies.

supplied his own ex-East Indiamen ships, the *Justitia* and the *Censor*, as the first hulks at Woolwich. Rather than have them languish in port grounded by the American embargo, he could instead use them for financial gain. Campbell was no stranger to viewing bodies as commodities; in his youth as a midshipman for the Royal Navy he had also served on board a slave ship. Through marriage, he also owned enslaved people, as his wife's family owned an estate in Jamaica, 'Saltspring'.¹²

Campbell was soon permitted to expand the hulk system to cope with overcrowding. With the help of

6. Lee, S. (2009). Eden, William, first Baron Auckland (1744–1814), penal reformer and diplomatist. Oxford Dictionary of National Biography.

7. Gatrell V. A. C. (1994). *The Hanging Tree: Execution and the English People, 1770-1868*. Oxford University Press.

8. Criminal Law Act 1776, 16 Geo. 3. c. 43.

9. Campbell, C. (2001). *The Intolerable Hulks: British Shipboard Confinement, 1776-1857*. Fenestra.

10. On the ill-fated convict experiment in Africa, see: Christopher, E. (2011). *A Merciless Place: The Lost Story of Britain's Convict Disaster in Africa*. Oxford University Press.

11. Maxwell-Stewart, H. (2010). Convict Transportation from Britain and Ireland 1615–1870. *History Compass*, 8(11), 1221-1242.

12. Byrnes, D. (1993). From Glasgow to Jamaica to London and Australia – The Elusive Duncan Campbell (1726-1803). *Journal of the Clan Campbell Society of Australia*, 62, 11-16.

the Treasury, he purchased disused warships from the Admiralty — these were plentiful in a time of war, as major battles were fought at sea. The government was willing to allow the system to expand as long as large investment was not required. In 1787, Campbell positioned two new prison hulks at Gosport and Langstone Harbour near Portsmouth. This move indicated that the hulks were set to become a major component of the convict system — one year previously, in the summer of 1786, the government settled on the idea to found a penal colony in Botany Bay, New South Wales.¹³ The ‘First Fleet’ sailed from Portsmouth in 1787, with neighbouring prison hulks supplying male convicts.¹⁴ Setting up hulks in the area made prisoner labour more widely available — more

repairs were made to dockyards as Campbell’s profits expanded.

Campbell’s management was subject to little regulation. The terms of his contract were that he would not only provide hulks for the custody of prisoners at Woolwich, but that he should also supply proper officers, guards, clothing, medical assistance, and rations. Figure 1 is a table of the rations given out to prisoners on Campbell’s *Justitia* hulk around 1788. They were recorded by reformer John Howard, who visited the hulks on the Thames on two occasions — he found the hulks to be clean, the bread of good quality, and the prisoners healthy.¹⁵ Yet the rations in Figure 1 were divided between six men, leaving little protein to sustain a day’s hard labour.

Figure 1. Diet for prisoners on board the *Justitia*, Duncan Campbell’s hulk at Woolwich, c.1788 (John Howard’s *Account of the Principal Lazarettos in Europe*).

	Each mess is for six men, with seven pounds of bread every day
Breakfast	Every day: a pint of barley or rice made into three quarts of soup.
Dinner	Sunday: Six pounds of salt port or seven pounds of beef, with five quarts of beer.
- - -	Monday, Wednesday, Friday; Six pounds of bullock’s head.
- - -	Tuesday, Thursday, Saturday; Two pounds of cheese, and five quarts of beer.
Supper	Sunday, Monday, Wednesday; Friday. A pint of pease and barley made into three quarts of soup.
- - -	Tuesday, Thursday, Saturday; A pint of oatmeal made into burgoo.

A decade earlier, Howard had spoken to a parliamentary inquiry about the hulks, stating that prisoners were in a poor state of health, and not enough food or clothing had been supplied to them. The ships’ biscuits they were supplied with were mouldy, or simply bags of crumbs.¹⁶ The beef — bullock’s head, a particularly cheap cut that was mostly bone — was slimy and sour. When Howard made these early visits, he voiced concerns about the death rate on board the hulks at Woolwich — around one in four was alarmingly high.¹⁷ Records indicate that pulmonary tuberculosis was the leading cause of death, followed by other chest disorders. This was largely down to the poor sanitation and ventilation on board, as tuberculosis was spread through the air from one person to another. Howard also felt that there was a

lack of standardisation across hulks in different locations. This was common across gaols at the time, but there was a drive to correct this.

The state’s reliance on private enterprise to manage affairs enabled some of its contractors, like Campbell, to exploit their position. Facing growing public criticism, Campbell relinquished control of the hulks in Portsmouth in 1791 and then stepped down from his role entirely in 1802. His tenure as superintendent of the hulk establishment occurred at the same time government organisation underwent a fundamental shift, developing new, efficient forms of management.¹⁸ On the domestic front, this culminated in the formation of the Home Office in 1782. It had been a government department for twenty years by the time Campbell resigned. New legislation relating to

13. See footnote 5: McConville (1981).

14. Hughes, R. (1987). *The Fatal Shore: A History of the Transportation of Convicts to Australia, 1787-1868*. Collins Harvill.

15. Howard, J. (1798). *An Account of the Principal Lazarettos in Europe...together with further observations on some foreign prisons and hospitals, and additional remarks on the present state of those in Great Britain and Ireland*. Printed by William Eyres, 216.

16. British Parliamentary Papers (BPP). *Punishment by Transportation and Hard Labour* (15 April 1778). Sessional Papers, vol.36, pp.926-932. Testimony of John Howard, 928.

17. See footnote 9: Campbell (2001) p.37.

18. Pellew, J. (1982). *The Home Office, 1848-1914, from Clerks to Bureaucrats*. Heinemann.

convict hulks was passed, enabling the Crown to name an Inspector who was obliged to visit each hulk every quarter to examine the behaviour and conduct of officers.

Aaron Graham, a magistrate from the London police at Bow Street who came to the attention of parliament for his role dealing with the Royal Navy's Spithead and Nore mutinies in 1797, was appointed as Campbell's successor.¹⁹ Graham's tenure saw death rates reduce; hammocks replaced unsanitary sleeping platforms and increased airflow, rations were augmented, and decks were washed more frequently. By 1814, Graham was succeeded by John Henry Capper, a Home Office clerk. This appointment consolidated the notion that the confinement of prisoners was Home Office business. The hulks shifted to more direct Home Office control by 1820, although officially they remained outside of the jurisdiction of central government until 1847. As such, they were still difficult to regulate, continually overcrowded, and prone to mismanagement.

Who were the prisoners?

The rise in Britain's prison population at the end of the 18th century was linked to periods of economic depression — when the wars against France and America came to an end in 1815, there was a huge unemployment crisis, coupled with food shortages. Cities coping with increases in population saw crime rates rising sharply, with the most common crime being small-scale theft.²⁰ Male prisoners sent to the hulks could be on them for a matter of months before they were shipped to the Australian colonies, but many spent years on board. In fact, men could serve out their entire sentences on the hulks. Some were never transported, and so the hulks became the only prison system they experienced.

Prisoners held on board the hulks hailed from diverse backgrounds and were incarcerated for a variety of offences; men and boys could be imprisoned for stealing hats and handkerchiefs, or livestock,

pickpocketing, bigamy, killing deer, and stealing horse's saddles.²¹ Home Office registers reveal that men were not sent to the hulks according to the severity of their crimes, nor were they solely from urban areas. By 1800, as much as 28 percent of the population was in receipt of poor relief.²² Of course, not all 'poor' men and women turned to crime in order to cope with rising pressures, but a small proportion did.

After being convicted in court, and their fates decided, male prisoners were either marched to the hulks in chains, or ferried down the Thames towards Woolwich, Sheerness or Chatham. Prisoners who were sentenced to transportation would be sent to any hulk that had space to house them. Prisoners dreaded the hulks for a number of reasons: although a cell in

Newgate could be crowded and disease-ridden, isolation from land created a unique sense of separation from society and ruled out the possibility of escape. Prisoner petitions reveal multiple cases where men asked to be transferred off the hulks, either back to prisons on land, or to Australia. Such was the case of John Bevis, who argued he was wasting 'the prime of manhood in this receptacle of vice and misery' (p. 84) on board the *Stanislaus* in 1794.²³

Administrators had decided that the costs of holding prisoners on board hulks could be defrayed against the gains made by hard labour. Completed

work in the dockyards during the so-called 'age of sail' was in fact crucial to strategy and warfare. Prisoners dredged rivers, making them easier to navigate, they constructed administrative buildings and barracks for soldiers, they hauled ballast and timber. They were paid for their labour but only a third of their wages, amounting to one penny, was given to them per day at the discretion of the master shipwright or officer overseeing their work.²⁴ The rest was saved and handed out at the end of sentences. It was small recompense, but this, alongside the opportunity to learn to read and write, and receive three meals a day — however meagre — sparked rumours that some were tempted to commit crimes to earn transportation sentences.

Records indicate
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death, followed by
other chest
disorders.

19. Easton, C. (2019). Counter-Theatre during the 1797 Fleet Mutinies. *International Review of Social History*, 64(3), 389–414.

20. Emsley, C. (2017). *Crime and Society in England, 1750-1900*. Routledge, p.13.

21. See, for example, the Home Office series HO9 (1802-1849). Convict Prison Hulks: Registers and Letter Books, The National Archives, Kew (TNA).

22. Porter, R. (1982). *English Society in the Eighteenth Century*. Penguin, p. 110.

23. TNA. HO42/28/37 (1794). Letter from Richard Bevis aboard the *Stanislaus* hulk. 83-84

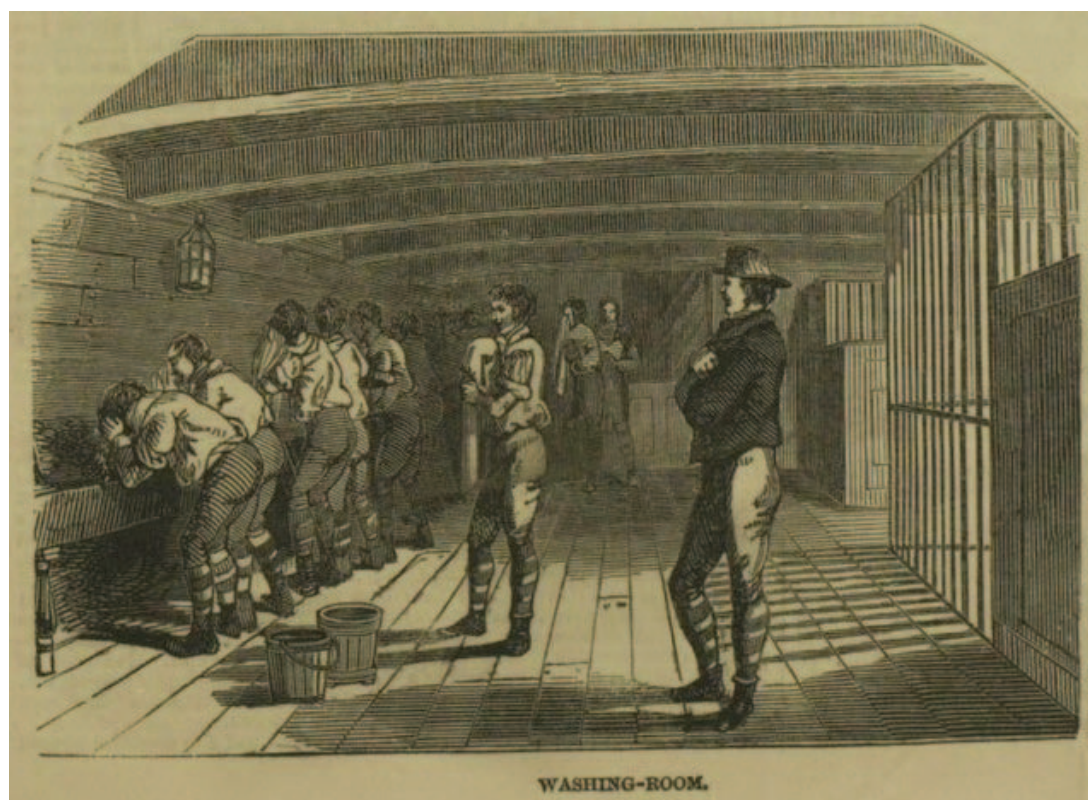
24. TNA. ADM1/3526/3 (1802). Letter from Samuel Bentham, Inspector General of Naval Works, Portsmouth, to Evan Nepean.

During wartime, prisoners were also drafted into the army and navy, providing manpower in return for early pardons.²⁵

Back on the hulks, labour dominated daily life. Prisoners rose at 5am and dressed. Wards were then unlocked, and the men washed themselves in water troughs — like those pictured in Figure 2 — before heading back to stow their hammocks. Whenever weather permitted, hammocks were brought upon deck to be aired. Rules dictated that the decks were to be washed twice a week and swept every morning and afternoon.²⁶ As the decades progressed, discipline and

routine became tighter — after cleaning the ship, prisoners were mustered — or counted — and rowed out to work in the dockyards until noon. All prisoners returned to the ship for lunch, which lasted 1 hour. Their duties in the dockyard then continued until 5.30pm. Men washed before supper was served. Evening prayers and schoolwork followed, and by 8pm they were counted one last time before bed. An hour later, an appointed officer visited each deck to check whether lights, bolts and locks were secure.²⁷ This kind of strict routine was designed to impose order and reform bad habits. There was never an idle moment.

Figure 2. *Washing room on board the Warrior at Woolwich (Convict System, Economy of the Hulks. The Illustrated London News, 21 February 1846).*



Threatening order: Escapes and violence

Working in open dockyards tempted some to attempt escape. Many resorted to violence in the act, hitting guards and even stabbing overseers. Uprisings made compelling news stories, and brought the hulks to the attention of a reading public: *The Morning Chronicle* covered an insurrection in 1802 at Woolwich, reporting that a group of fourteen prisoners rushed up to one of their keepers and, 'armed with large clasp knives', demanded that he open the gate to the

dockyard.²⁸ The report stated that the prisoners knocked the man down, took the key, and made their escape. They were pursued by several keepers who shot at them with loaded muskets. The incident was reported in great detail, right down to the wounds suffered by one who was shot from a distance of 30 feet: 'the bullet 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'.²⁹ Some prisoners managed to escape, but were rounded up by troops of the Royal Artillery.

25. Emsley, C. (1980). The Recruitment of Petty Offenders during the French Wars 1793–1815. *The Mariner's Mirror*, 66(3), 199–208.

26. BPP. *Third Report from the Committee on the Laws relating to Penitentiary Houses*. Appendix B, Article 4, 154.

27. *The Illustrated London News*. 21 February 1846.

28. *The Morning Chronicle*. 7 August 1802.

29. See footnote 28: *The Morning Chronicle*.

Newspaper articles often relied upon descriptive imagery to highlight a sense of pace and movement; prisoners were described as rushing, running, disobeying commands and ignoring threats. The dockyard was portrayed as a scene of disarray, swarming with soldiers and noises of alarm; administrators attempted to suppress news stories that would paint the hulks in a negative light, but this was not always possible. Escapes through the dockyards where prisoners worked during the day was most common, but breaking free from the ships themselves also occurred frequently. In 1811, *The Times* reported that 37 prisoners had collectively escaped from one of the hulks stationed at Woolwich, by 'cutting through the ceiling and timbers of the hulk just under her bends' (the thickest planks on the side of a ship from the waterline).³⁰ When low tide came and the ship had grounded, or beached on the mudflats, the men waded through the mud to shore. The article confirmed that the military had recaptured fifteen of the escapees, but that the other twelve were still at large, and that 'many of them had their irons on'.³¹

Prisoners wore a heavy iron chain on one or both ankles at all times. They were also required to wear a uniform to reinforce and mark their separation from society. In the early period, this consisted of a brown jacket and pair of trousers. For those who managed to break off their leg irons, a change of clothes was often enough to slip away. As the circulation of the presses expanded, newspapers began to write physical descriptions of escapees and their clothing as a means to help the public identify them — anything from facial scarring, distinctive eye colour, to tattoos. The *Police Gazette* in 1829 described one escapee William Richie as having a 'fair complexion...and broad visage'.³² When an escape attempt was foiled, entire groups could be punished together by having their rations reduced, being put in solitary confinement, or having a pardon denied.

Attempts at reform

In line with wider penal reforms, administrators attempted to bring in changes on board, with limited success. In the 1820s, when the Home Office took control and hulks moved under more central management, men and boys — some of whom were as

young as eight — were separated. Boys were not put to work, and were instead taught trades including shoemaking, to become apprentices in Australia.³³ While they were spared heavy labour, these boys were still held on board ships, like the *Bellerophon* at Sheerness, and later the *Euryalus* at Chatham. Their conditions were miserable. There had been rumours of sexual assault on the hulks, and members of parliament were particularly keen to consider the morals of prisoners. They grew concerned that children — amongst others — would be morally corrupted living side by side with hardened criminals, and come out of the system worse than they went in.

On advice from the Home Office, prisoners were routinely segregated into separate 'classes' according to their character. Every three months, the names of all men were entered into a 'Character Book', where prisoners were graded from 'v.g' or 'very good', to 'v.b.' or 'very bad'.³⁴ The desired effect of classification was that it should act as a stimulus for good behaviour, as prisoners with a 'v.g.' track record could be recommended for pardon. However, prison hulks were also divided spatially, with better-behaved prisoners occupying the upper decks of the ship. This kind of segregation generally meant that 'very good' prisoners did not cross over with 'very bad' ones. Social separation allowed prisoners to be watched more closely, which restricted illicit industries like coining, or outbreaks of violence. But by restricting their freedom of movement in this manner, men couldn't choose their own social groups. Those labelled as 'very bad' therefore had less chance of being viewed as redeemed.

Across the 19th century, social reformers and prison officials shared the same negative viewpoint that hulks were unfit for habitation and for reform. Even prison chaplains spoke frankly; George William Livesay at Portsmouth stated in 1848 that hulks would 'never become a powerful engine of reform' (p.5) as long as prisoners were not separated by cellular confinement.³⁵ This system aimed to isolate prisoners for extended periods, with the goal of promoting reform through solitude and reflection.³⁶ By 1849, the hulks were under new management once more. Major Joshua Jebb had become a leading figure in both Pentonville Prison's operation and the prison hulk establishment; alongside Herbert P. Voules and Captain Donatus O'Brien, Jebb

30. *The Times*. 30 September 1811.

31. See footnote 30: *The Times* (1811)

32. *The Police Gazette; or, Hue and Cry*. 20 January 1829.

33. Shore, H. (1999). *Artful Dodgers: Youth and Crime in Early Nineteenth-Century London*. Boydell.

34. Mayhew, H. & Binny, J. (1862). *The Criminal Prisons of London and Scenes of Prison Life*. Griffin, Bohn, and Company. p.206-7.

35. BPP. (30 January 1849). *Report of the Manager of the Convict Hulk Establishment for the year 1848*. No.1 Report of Chaplain George William Livesay, Portsmouth, p. 5.

36. Johnston, H. (2020). 'The Solitude of the Cell': Cellular Confinement in the Emergence of the Modern Prison, 1850–1930. In J. Turner & V. Knight (Eds.), *The Prison Cell: Embodied and Everyday Spaces of Incarceration* (pp. 23-44). Palgrave Macmillan.

oversaw the hulks as they entered their twilight period.³⁷ Jebb, surveyor-general of convict prisons, and colleagues at the Prison Inspectorate claimed the hulks faced 'radical and irredeemable disadvantages' (p.311) when it came to implementing changes.³⁸

As the decades wore on, new modern prisons began to replace outdated 18th century gaols and lockups. Pentonville Prison opened in 1842 and was designed with isolation in mind — the less prisoners could talk amongst themselves, the less they were perceived to morally corrupt each other. Unlike Pentonville, the hulks had not been designed as prisons. These modified ships were far more social as spaces; it was impossible to separate prisoners or stop them from talking. Edward Gibbon Wakefield, who became a colonial politician in Canada and New Zealand had served a 3-year sentence in Newgate, before producing an 1831 tract, *Punishment of Death*. When interviewed by a parliamentary select committee, he stated that dozens of prisoners in Newgate called the hulks 'a pretty jolly life' because of 'indulgences' — they could work in the dockyards alongside their friends, smoke tobacco, and talk at night (p.99).³⁹ Hulks were simply not compatible with new mid-century ideas of what a prison should be.

Conclusion: Closure in 1857

A combination of factors led to the closure of the hulk system in England in 1857: at the forefront was public consternation, the slowing of transportation, and cost. Ten years earlier, the ships were in the public eye when a public health scandal erupted. It was found that the corpses of prisoners were being mistreated and trafficked to anatomy schools.⁴⁰ Following this, the hulks were soon blamed for cholera epidemics, and more reformers weighed in with their critiques of the system. In 1840, transportation to New South Wales ceased, but continued in Victoria, Queensland, Tasmania, and Western Australia. Yet Australian settlers continued to object to transportation and put pressure on the government at home to come up with a more permanent solution to dealing with its prison population. Emphasis was placed on deterrence. Faced with difficulties banishing prisoners overseas, officials agreed that the purpose of imprisonment should be to punish. However, reform — where men and women were better people when they left prison than when they went in — although slow to implement, was no less important.

Perhaps most significantly, the cost of fitting up and preparing new ships for the reception of male prisoners was found to be more expensive than the cost of building new prisons. In early 1855, reformer Henry Mayhew visited the *Defence* hulk at Woolwich and was shocked by the state of the ship, which he called a 'rotten leaky tub' (p.200).⁴¹ It was impossible to see how 500 convicts could be safely managed and kept healthy in a prison that was quite literally falling apart. Outlay for repairs was expensive, and the newly professional class of prison officers and officials like Joshua Jebb began asking questions as to why the government was not investing in building better prisons on shore. Jebb and his colleagues began to gradually move prisoners off the hulks into prisons they constructed on land. In 1857, the *Defence* and hospital ship *Unité*, both based at Woolwich ceased being used when the former was destroyed by fire. Hulks were used in colonial settings for a further two decades; in Bermuda until 1863, and Gibraltar until 1875.

Prison hulks were not the only government response to prison overcrowding in the 18th and 19th centuries, but they were certainly the most notorious. Across their 80 years in England, they represented a haphazard, badly managed system that became more permanent than anticipated. From the outset, the system had clashed with reforms and changes being made across penal institutions. Yet they occurred at a time of seismic change: across the period, there was a decided shift in the idea of what a prison was, and what it should do — should they exist to punish, or reform people convicted of crime? Punishment had moved from executions and public whippings to solitary confinement and education. It was a huge transformation. Hulks were not able to keep pace with change and always stood out as something archaic and outmoded. Although distanced from the image of Dickens's 'wicked Noah's ark', prisons today face similar challenges: there is still overcrowding, as well as financial constraints, reliance on private contractors, and concerns over safety. The hulks serve as an historical example that short-term fixes to prison overcrowding often prove to be more expensive and unpopular in the long run than investment.

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37. Emsley, C. (2012). Jebb, Sir Joshua (1793–1863), prison administrator. *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*.

38. BPP. (1854). *Directors of Convict Prisons: Reports on Discipline and Management of Pentonville, Parkhurst, Millbank, Portland, Portsmouth, Dartmoor, and Brixton Prisons, and Hulks*. *Command Papers*, vol.25, 1-391.

39. BPP. (1831). *Report from the Select Committee on Secondary Punishments*. *Sessional Papers*, vol.7, 1-177. Testimony of E. Gibbon Wakefield. (p.99).

40. McKay, A. L. (2021). 'Allowed to die'? Prison Hulks, Convict Corpses and the Inquiry of 1847. *Cultural and Social History*, 18(2), 163–181.

41. See footnote 34: Mayhew & Binny (1862). (p. 200).