

Bermuda: 1823-1863

Clare Anderson

In 1823, a British Act of Parliament authorized the sending of convicts to any colony designated by the King. This opened up the small Atlantic island archipelago of Bermuda as a destination for convicts. Between 1823 and 1863 over 9,000 British and Irish transportees were sent to Bermuda, and employed principally in building the Royal Naval Dockyard on Ireland Island. The prisoners were selected on the basis that they were young and fit. Most of the British convicts had been convicted of larceny, and were sentenced for the relatively short term of seven years. The Irish were transported to Bermuda during the potato famine of 1846-51, mainly for the theft of food, though a few gentleman radicals were also sent. A few military convicts were sent also, for offences such as desertion. They came mainly from Canada. The work was formidable, for the convicts were tasked with quarrying hard, marine limestone and using it to build an extensive breakwater. The available Bermudian or imported British labour was insufficient, the slave trade had been abolished in 1806, and the project could not have been completed without convicts. Bermuda was crucial for British strategic purposes, for a naval station in the Atlantic was much needed in the aftermath of the loss of the American colonies.



The convicts lived on seven hulks, decommissioned naval ships, which were moored off the Dockyard (*Antelope*, *Dromedary*, *Coromandel*, *Weymouth*, *Tenedos*, *Thames* and *Medway*). For a brief period during the 1840s and 1850s, two of them (the *Thames* and *Antelope*) were sent to the settlement on the other end of the island, St George's, while convicts completed work in the Ordnance Department there. A further significant convict labour project was the construction of Grey's Bridge, which linked Ireland Island to Boaz Island, and opened in 1849. The convicts also built a water tank, drains, wash houses, landing jetties, houses for the chaplain and deputy

superintendent, blacksmiths, tailors and shoemakers shops, and a lime kiln and storehouse. Theirs was labour of the hardest and most severe kind.

Convict officers lived on board the hulks with the men, although they had their own quarters and mess rooms. It was an exceptionally challenging posting, especially as it was not unknown for officers to live on the hulks for over 20 years. Indeed, in just three years in the mid-1850s, 101 officers were dismissed for drunkenness, gambling or neglect of duty. Chaplains also lived on the Bermuda hulks, representing both the Church of England and, after the Irish began to arrive in the mid-1840s, the Roman Catholic Church. They performed Sunday services, held morning prayers, taught bible classes, oversaw convict letter writing, and visited and ministered to individual convicts. They also ran the convict library. Convicts attended classes for half a day per week; by 1860 there were three schools in Bermuda, one at Boaz and one on each of the *Medway* and *Tenedos* hulks.



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Hulks were cold and damp in the winter and boiling hot in summer. There were numerous experiments in ventilation – as well as lighting, which was seen as a means of both surveying the prisoners (and checking so-called “unnatural crime”) and keeping the wards cool. The convicts slept together in associated wards, and were marched off the hulks to work every morning. As the dockyard site developed, one hulk (*Tenedos*) was converted into a hospital ship, and used until a convict hospital was constructed on Ireland Island. Previously, convicts had been sent to the royal naval hospital at the Dockyard, for treatment for diseases such as ophthalmia, dysentery, consumption bronchitis, and fever. Certainly, 1,260 of the 9,000 convicts died while under sentence, from illness or accidents (and two committed suicide). Some perished during dreadful yellow fever epidemics in 1843, 1853 and 1856 (though the convict death rate was lower than that of local

inhabitants or soldiers). Each represented a loss to the system; and medical record keeping about the health, physical ability and labour performed by the convicts was meticulous.

Conditions on the hulks were much criticized, and in 1847 the prospect of the construction of an onshore prison was first discussed. Boaz Island was chosen for this purpose, and convicts were put to work levelling the ground and building the prison. From 1852, the hulks were closed one by one, and the convicts were gradually transferred to this new onshore site. Just a few refractory men, who required solitary confinement or segregation, were kept back. The continued nighttime association of convicts in the hulks had gone against the grain of metropolitan penal innovation, which urged cellular separation. In Boaz prison, prisoners were divided; not by walls but by iron bars, which kept them apart but allowed for the free circulation of air.

The convicts were given rations, the quantity and range changing during the transportation period, and comprising at various times bread, fresh beef or salt pork, fish, vegetables (including potatoes, carrots, onions and pumpkin), soup, rice, tea, sugar and rum. They were also paid a small sum of money each day, as an incentive to good work. This was kept back until convicts were released – minus the cost of their return passage. The families of deceased convicts – often a convict's distressed wife, on behalf of herself and their children – made frequent claims on this money. It was usually returned to her, together with the convicts' clothing and personal possessions.

It was perhaps because of the terrible conditions on the hulks, and in particular their close confinement and association, that there were numerous riots and mutinies during the transportation era. There seems to have been particular friction between Irish and English prisoners. The Irish started to arrive in Bermuda in the 1840s, in a poor state of health. Over half had scurvy, and a significant minority were under the age of sixteen. Though the boys were kept apart from the men, the Irish soon clashed with the English. During one 1859 uprising on the *Medway*, one convict was killed and 24 were badly injured. Less dramatic forms of convict resistance included drunkenness, insolence, refusal to work and theft. There were also several escape attempts. Convicts could be punished through flogging, solitary confinement, short rations, stoppage of liquor, or delayed release. A few were returned to the English hulks, or sent on to Norfolk Island, the Australian colonies' much dreaded penal station.

Most convicts were pardoned after serving a proportion of their sentence, or for exceptionally good conduct, for instance saving an officer from convict assault or showing bravery in working in the diving bells (for channel excavations). Others were released on the grounds of ill health or serious injury. Several convicts were also pardoned for their role during the yellow fever epidemics, when they worked in the hospital. Lists of recommendations were submitted bi-annually and closely scrutinized. While waiting for their passage home to Britain or Ireland, ex-convicts could be employed as deputy guards, or take paid employment. One distinctive feature of convict transportation to Bermuda, compared to other sites in the British Empire, is that ex-convicts were not allowed to settle on the islands. Though some tried to gain entry to America (and were often turned away), the overwhelming majority returned home, or went on to Western Australia. Some ended up back in prison; from interviews with them we learn that returned convicts were known as "old 'mudians" or "rock boys." A few convict officers did, however, marry into Bermudian families, and their descendants still live in the islands today.

During the 1850s, there were significant changes in the British penal system. A three stage system was favoured, through which prisoners would undergo an initial period of severe discipline, including separation by night and associated labour by day; a second stage, where discipline was slightly relaxed; and a final period under the relative freedom of a ticket-of-leave. There were no prison

hulks in Britain after 1857. It was in this context that Bermuda was seen as an ideal site of intermediate punishment. Convicts arrived having served the first, disciplinary stage in a British or Irish prison, and if they were well conducted, had the opportunity to take a ticket-of-leave in the Australian colonies of Van Diemen's Land or Western Australia. An attempt to land another group of convicts in the Cape, including the famous Irish political convict John Mitchell, failed, after the colonists refused to allow them to land. As long as they did not commit further offences, ticket-of-leave convicts could take paid employment and live where they chose. In 1861, it was decided that no more convicts would be sent to Bermuda, and all the convicts were withdrawn from the islands by the end of 1863. The first of two batches left for Western Australia in December 1862, and the last convict ship sailed out of Bermuda in March 1863.

Further Reading

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Research Resources

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