

PRISON HULK H.M.S. TEMERAIRE | River Tamar, Cornwall

This is the second in a 4-part series looking at the experience of Cornwall's convicts as part of Britain's colonisation of Australia. Between 1782 and 1787, twenty men were convicted in Assizes Courts in Bodmin and Launceston for a range of offences and sentenced to transportation. They were part of the First Fleet who were landed at Port Jackson on 27 January 1788. This second part in the series looks at the conditions for convicts aboard Britain's prison hulks – which eventually held over 600 men, women and children sentenced by courts in Cornwall before being transferred to ocean-going transport ships. Britain maintained the program of convictism to Australia from 1787 until 1868. Here is the story of a famous ship that became a prison hulk on the River Tamar.

H.M.S. *Temeraire* was a ship used as a prison hulk to hold British convicts before they were transported to Britain's external penal colonies, including Australia. 'Conversion work was carried out at Plymouth between November and December 1813, after which she was laid up in the River Tamar as a prison hulk. ... *Temeraire's* service as a prison ship lasted until 1819.' (1)

Prison hulks were decommissioned ships used as floating prisons in the 18th and 19th centuries. 'Converting the ships to prison hulks involved removal of the rigging, masts, rudders, and various other features required for sailing. Some hulks retained some of these features, but all were rendered inoperable or unseaworthy in some way. The internal structure was also reconfigured with various features, including cells, in order to accommodate convicted criminals ...

'The hulks, which retained only their ability to float, were typically located in harbours. This made them convenient temporary holding quarters for convicts awaiting transportation to Australia and other penal colonies within the British Empire. In 1798 the hulks held more than 1,400 out of about 1,900 people waiting for transportation to Australia.' (2)

'Conditions were tough. Inmates were shackled in irons, rising daily at 5am, before typically undertaking ten hours of hard labour in summer and seven in the winter, and being put down at 7pm. Despite this there is also evidence of periods of idleness. William Branch Johnson, the first modern historian to publish on the hulks in 1957 points out that in "wet weather and on the Sundays, none worked. They sat about dejectedly, moped, grumbled, recounted past misdeeds to companions anxious to profit by their experiences and planned mutinies and escapes" .

'Ironically, for a solution to capacity issues in prisons, the accommodation was terribly overcrowded. The inmates slept, ate and passed time in the same below deck spaces. Sleeping conditions in particular were very cramped, and the overall effect was to provide ideal breeding conditions for the transfer of various diseases including typhus and tuberculosis.

'Clothing was basic but sufficient and the diet adequate, being no worse than that served on naval vessels according to the hulk overseers. Whilst the water available to inmates was probably similar in quality to that available to most of the inhabitants of London. Nevertheless the quality of the food was variable and concerns were raised at the time about the lack of fruit, vegetables and bread and the freshness of the meat. ...

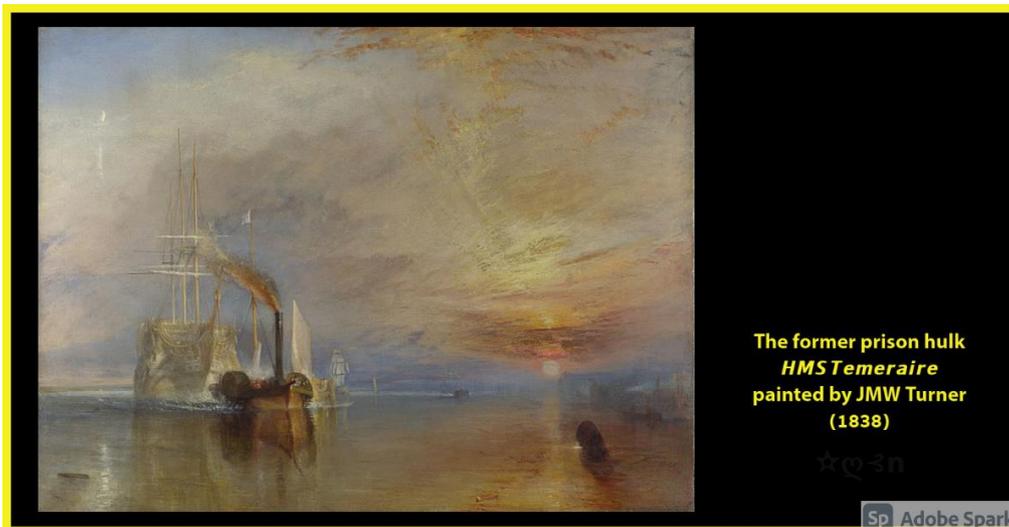
'The psychological conditions were far worse. The reputation of the hulks preceded them, with many preferring to be hanged rather than go onboard. And once onboard things were no better. The first overseer of the hulks, Duncan Campbell, reported that the first convicts received onboard in 1776 were healthy, but despondent – suffering from "universal depression of spirits". And things weren't much better by 1819. In a letter to the Home Secretary, Viscount Sidmouth, Henry Grey Bennet

claimed that convicts were “debased and lacking in pride, driven to a furious cast of countenance, expressive of bad passions and suppressed rage”. ...

‘It could take quite a while to arrive onboard. Certainly a healthy proportion took between 3 and 5 years to reach the hulks. And typically people spent between 1 and 3 years on the hulks awaiting their final outcome. ...’ (3)

After its time on the Tamar as a prison hulk, H.M.S. *Temeraire* became a receiving ship, ‘used in harbour to house newly recruited sailors before they were assigned to a ship’s crew. In the Royal Navy, the use of impressment to collect sailors resulted in the problem of preventing escape of the unwilling “recruits”. The receiving ship was part of the solution; it was difficult to get off the ship without being detected, and most seamen of the era did not know how to swim.’ (4)

In 1838, the Admiralty ordered her to be sold, and she was towed up the Thames to be broken up.



‘This final voyage was depicted in a J.M.W. Turner oil painting greeted with critical acclaim, entitled *The Fighting Temeraire tugged to her last Berth to be broken up, 1838*. The painting continues to be held in high regard: it was voted Britain’s favourite painting in a BBC radio poll in 2005 and it appears briefly in the James Bond movie *Skyfall*. A reproduction of the painting appears on the back of the Bank of England £20 note issued in 2020.’ (1)

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Winner, Gorsedh Kernow 2021 Ober Awenek Award for outstanding contribution to Cornish culture for the social media project ‘Australia: Cornish Connections’ | © 2022

Sources:

(1) [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/HMS_Temeraire_\(1798\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/HMS_Temeraire_(1798))

(2)

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_British_prison_hulks#:~:text=Prison%20hulks%20were%20decommissioned%20ships,the%20related%20term%20convict%20ship.

(3) <https://media.nationalarchives.gov.uk/index.php/prison-hulks/>

(4) [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hulk_\(ship_type\)#Receiving_hulk](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hulk_(ship_type)#Receiving_hulk)

Main pic.: <https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=37144597>