

LIFE ONBOARD THE HULK RETRIBUTION 1809 TO 1810

Two lives ... two fates.

William

Our William French was incarcerated on the Retribution on the Thames at Woolwich on 6-Sep-1808 while awaiting to be transported to Australia for 7 years for stealing 8 turkeys and 6 ducks. Taken ill he was transferred to the Savage hospital ship and died there on 22-Aug-1810 aged 27. We originally thought this would have been on Plumstead Marshes on the ridge near the Tripcock Trees close to the River Thames, but it now seems that this was later practice and in 1810 he would have been buried within the Royal Arsenal at Woolwich in the east part of the Warren. The cemeteries were visible as rows of hillocks with no defined boundaries. Bones were found during building work in 1859 and 1912. William was a poor and illiterate ag lab, and following his conviction, his destitute wife with a babe in arms and child aged 18 months was removed from her parish under the Poor Law. If you were literate and not poor you could escape such troubles. Compare James's story.

The Retribution at Woolwich from 1803 to 1814 may previously have been the 50-gun HMS Preston which was commissioned in 1757 and hulked in 1785, initially as a crane vessel, see pages 77 & 336 of David Lyon's *The Sailing Navy List All the Ships of the Royal Navy - Built, Purchased and Captured - 1688-1860*. The captain and first mate of the hulk were George Reed & William Bridle.

James

James Hardy Vaux was a fellow convict who, while then the same age as William, was well-educated with middle-class connections and was often not short of a few bob, usually not his own. In contrast to William's, James's wife was also fairly comfortable off and on hand to help at this time. James's criminal career spans 40 years. He was put onboard The Retribution on 21-Jun-1809 awaiting the second of three transportations to Australia, where he embarked for on 15-Jun-1810. According to Noel McLachlan, James Hardy Vaux lived for at least 59 years..

The Memoirs

The full text of James Hardy Vaux's Memoirs is available via Google Books. James doesn't do paragraphs, but his volumes were also re-published by Heinemann in an edited version with notes (*and paragraphs*) by Noel McLachlan in 1964.

The following transcription is from pages 108-112 of Chapter 10 of Volume 2 of the

MEMOIRS OF JAMES HARDY VAUX WRITTEN BY HIMSELF. IN TWO VOLUMES.

VOL II.

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1819.

... ship for this colony, as I was not in circumstances to subsist for any length of time in a prison; and I wished, if possible, to avoid going to the hulks, as I had been fortunate enough to do on my first transportation. My wife, also, who had paid me the most dutiful attention since my confinement, was earnestly desirous to accompany me in my exile: and, with that view, she waited on a gentleman to whom I referred her, soliciting his interest to obtain that favour; but, although he used every effort, the application was refused, she having no family, and the secretary of state having set his face against such an indulgence, on account of the bad reports received of those women who had already been suffered to go out free with their husbands. I was equally unsuccessful in my application to be sent out by the ship *Anne*, which was on the point of sailing. At length my wife received a private intimation that I should be removed to the hulks the next morning; in consequence of which, my mother and sisters, whom I immediately summoned, came to take leave of me. I had only acquainted them with my misfortune since my being respited, and they were of course equally astonished and grieved at the news. My wife remained with me that night, and at four o'clock in the morning, myself and eleven others were conveyed by water on board the *Retribution* hulk at Woolwich.

I had now a new scene of misery to contemplate and, of all the shocking scenes I had ever beheld, this was the most distressing. There were confined in this floating dungeon nearly six hundred men, most of them double-ironed; and the reader may conceive 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; and above all, from the shocking necessity of associating and communicating more or less with so depraved a set of beings. On arriving on board, we were all immediately stripped, and washed in large tubs of water, then, after putting on each a suit of coarse slop-clothing, we were ironed, and sent below, our own clothes being taken from us, and detained till we could sell or otherwise dispose of them, as no person is exempted from the obligation to wear the ship-dress. On descending the



Portrait of James Hardy Vaux
from Knapp and Baldwin's *New Newgate*
Calendar circa 1825.

hatch-way, no conception can be formed of the scene which presented itself. I shall not attempt to describe it; but nothing short of a descent to the infernal regions can be at all worthy of a comparison with it. I soon met with many of my old Botany Bay acquaintances, who were all eager to offer me their friendship and services, — that is, with a view to rob me of what little I had; for in this place there is no other motive or subject for ingenuity. All former friendships or connexions are dissolved, and a man here will rob his best benefactor, or even mess-mate, of an article worth one halfpenny. Every morning, at seven o'clock, all the convicts capable of work, or, in fact all who are capable of getting into the boats, are taken ashore to the Warren, in which the royal arsenal and other public buildings are situated, and are there employed at various-kinds of labour, some of them very fatiguing; and while so employed, each gang of sixteen, or twenty men, is watched and directed by a fellow called a guard. These guards are most commonly of the lowest class of human befogs; wretches devoid of all feeling; ignorant in

the extreme, brutal by nature, and rendered tyrannical and cruel by the consciousness of the power they possess; no others, but such as I have described, would hold the situation, their wages being not more than a day-labourer would earn in London. They invariably carry a large and ponderous stick, with which, without the smallest provocation, they will fell an unfortunate convict to the ground, and frequently repeat their blows long after the poor sufferer insensible. At noon the working party return on board to dinner, and at one again go on shore, where they labour till near sun-set. On returning on board in the evening, all hands are mustered by a roll, and the whole being turned down-below; the hatches are put over them, and secured for the night. As to the food, the stipulated ration is very scanty, but of even part of that they are defrauded. Their provisions being supplied by contractors, and not by Government, are of the worst kind, such as would not be considered eatable or wholesome elsewhere; and both the weight and measure are always deficient. The allowance of bread is said to be about twenty ounces per day. Three days in the week they have about four ounces of cheese for dinner, and the other four days a pound of beef. The breakfast is invariably boiled barley, of the coarsest kind imaginable; and of this the pigs of the hulk come in for a third part, because it is so nauseous that nothing but downright hunger will enable a man to eat it. For supper, they have, an banyan days, burgoo, of as good a quality as the barley, and which is similarly disposed of; and on meat days, the water in which the beef was boiled, is thickened with barley, and forms a mess called “Smiggins”, of a more detestable nature than either of the two former! The reader may conceive that I do not exaggerate, when I state, that among the convicts the common price of these several eatables, is, — for a day's allowance of beef, one halfpenny; — ditto, of cheese, one halfpenny; — ditto, of bread, three-halfpence; but the cheese is most commonly so bad, that they throw it away. It is manufactured, I believe, of skimmed milk for this particular contract. The beef generally consists of old bulls, or cows who have died of age or famine; the least trace of fat is considered a phenomenon, and it is far inferior upon the whole to good horse-flesh. I once saw the prisoners throw the whole day's supply overboard the moment it was hoisted out of the boat, and for this offence they were severely flogged. The friends of these unhappy persons are not allowed to come onboard, but must remain alongside during their visit; the prisoners are, it is true, suffered to go into their boat, but a guard is placed within hearing of their conversation, and if a friend or parent has come one hundred miles, they are not allowed above ten minutes' interview; so that instead of consolation, the visit only excites regret at the



Two later hulks at Sheerness 7th August 1822, the Retribution (previously HMS Edgar, 1779) and Bellerophon
© National Maritime Museum

parties being so suddenly torn asunder. All letters, too, written by prisoners, must be delivered unsealed to the chief mate for his inspection, before they are sent ashore; and such as he thinks obnoxious, are of course suppressed. In like manner, all letters received from the post-office are opened and scrutinized. If I were to attempt a full description of the miseries endured in these ships, I could fill a volume; but I shall sum up all by stating, that besides robbery from each other, which is as common as cursing and swearing, I witnessed among the prisoners themselves, during the twelvemonth I remained with them, one deliberate murder, for which the perpetrator was executed at Maidstone, and one suicide; and that unnatural crimes are openly committed.