



Fig. 1. The Newgate Prison exercise yard.
Fig. 2. Below deck on a transport ship to Australia

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NEWGATE TO BOTANY BAY

Pathology Manager **Stephen Mortlock** charts the perilous journey that convicts were forced to take to Australia.

What do stealing a cotton frock, cow rustling and attempted murder have in common? They were all crimes that could get a person deported to Australia from 1787 to 1868. During that time, 164,000 convicts were transported to Australia on board 806 ships. For many, Newgate Prison would be where they were held while waiting for a transportation vessel bound for Australia.

Newgate Prison in London was the oldest and one of the most important prisons in 18th century. It was not only the place of detention for all those awaiting trial at the neighbouring court

and a holding pen for those awaiting execution, it also was a debtors' prison. It was a pretty dismal and unhealthy place.

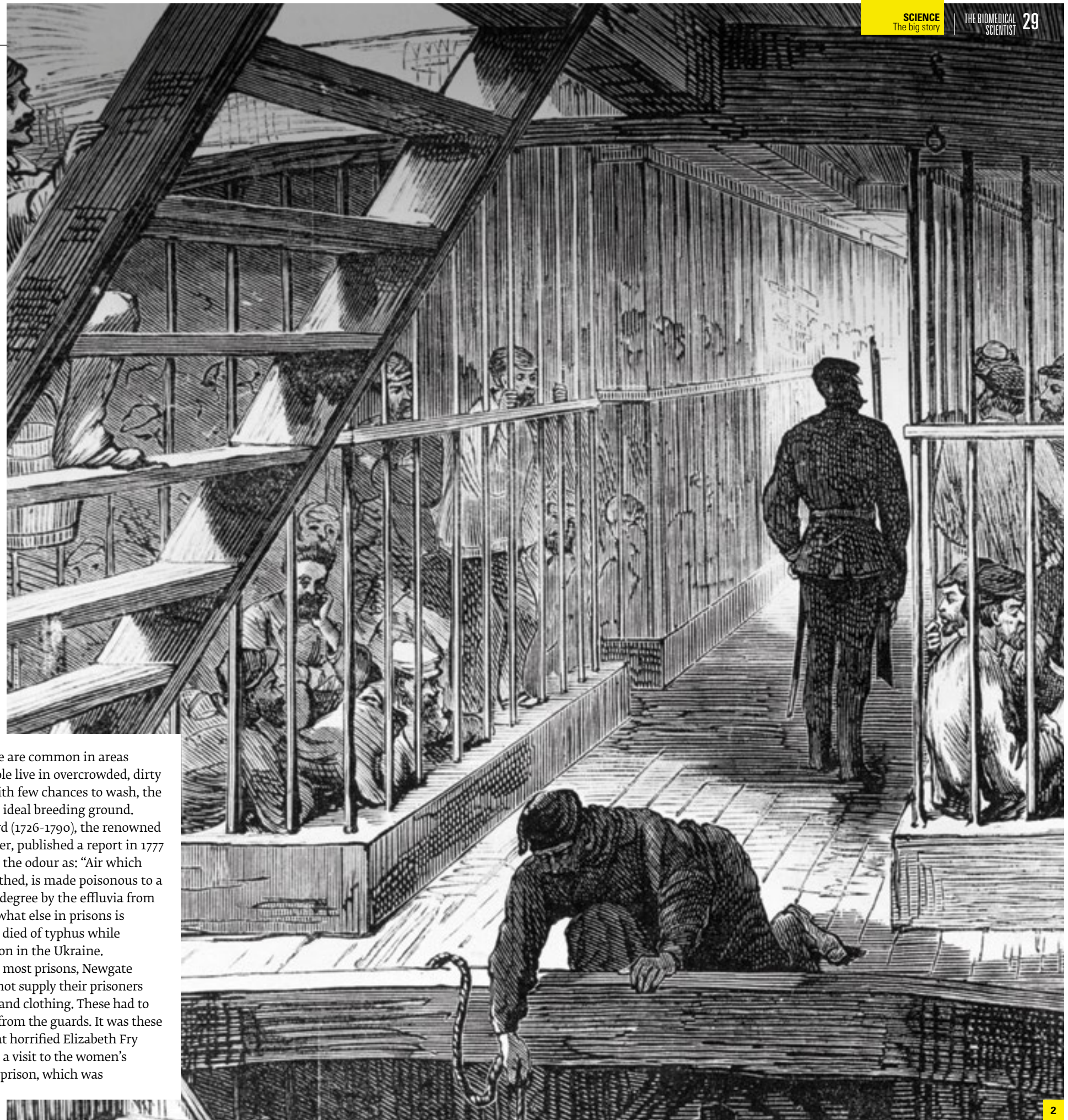
Overcrowding

Newgate was notorious for its overcrowding, unhealthy environment, with approximately 30 people dying there every year from disease. Physicians often refused to enter and people passing by held their noses. In 1750, the odour got so bad that 11 men were hired to wash down the walls of the prison with vinegar and install a ventilation system. Unfortunately seven of the 11 men contracted "gaol fever", (gaol or jail fever probably refers to epidemic typhus or louse-borne typhus) caused by *Rickettsia prowazekii*, which is carried by body lice.

Since body lice are common in areas in which people live in overcrowded, dirty conditions, with few chances to wash, the prison was an ideal breeding ground.

John Howard (1726-1790), the renowned prison reformer, published a report in 1777 and described the odour as: "Air which has been breathed, is made poisonous to a more intense degree by the effluvia from the sick; and what else in prisons is offensive." He died of typhus while visiting a prison in the Ukraine.

At this time most prisons, Newgate included, did not supply their prisoners with bedding and clothing. These had to be purchased from the guards. It was these conditions that horrified Elizabeth Fry (1780-1845) on a visit to the women's section in the prison, which was



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Left. Newgate Prison antique architectural illustrations
Below. *Vibrio Cholerae* Bacteria
Opposite. HMS Sirius

overcrowded with women and children. In 1817, she helped found the Association for the Reformation of the Female Prisoners in Newgate. She also promoted the idea of rehabilitation instead of harsh punishment which was taken on by the city authorities in London as well as many other authorities and prisons.

The Thames hulks

To ease overcrowding in the gaols, the authorities decided to imprison convicts in the converted hulks of old merchant ships and naval vessels moored on the Thames. Parliament passed the “Hulks Act” in 1776, with the *Justicia*, a former transportation ship, the first prison hulk.

Demand was so great that new hulks were introduced in Deptford, Chatham, Woolwich, Gosport, Plymouth, Portsmouth, Sheerness and Cork. They varied greatly in shape and size but all had one thing in common – the conditions on board were appalling. The standards of hygiene were so poor that disease spread quickly. The sick were given little medical attention and were not separated from the healthy. Two months after the first convicts had been placed on board the hulks, an epidemic of gaol fever spread among them and persisted for three years.

Dysentery, typhoid and cholera were also widespread. At first, the sick lay on the bare floor, still chained in leg irons. Later, they were given straw mattresses and had their irons removed. Mortality rates of around 30% were quite common. Between 1776 and 1795, nearly 2,000 out of almost 6,000 convicts on the hulks died.

New destination

In 1718, the first Transportation Act allowed the courts to sentence felons guilty of numerous offences to seven years transportation to America, but this was halted in 1776 by the outbreak of the American War of Independence. Although convicts continued to be sentenced to transportation they served all or part of

their sentence aboard the hulks, male convicts were confined to hard labour doing projects on or near the Thames.

Transportation resumed in 1787 with a new destination: Australia. This was seen as a more serious punishment than imprisonment, since it involved exile to a very distant land. In the early 19th century, as part of the revisions of the criminal law, transportation for life was substituted as the maximum punishment for several offences, which had previously been punishable by death.

The youngest to be transported was Mary Ann Wade. She was tried and convicted at the Old Bailey in 1789 for feloniously assaulting Mary Phillips, on the King’s highway, putting her in fear, and feloniously taking from her person, one cotton frock, valued at 3 shillings (about £60 at today’s prices) and items to the value of 4d. She was sentenced to death by hanging, later commuted to transportation for life. She spent 93 days in Newgate, before being transported to Australia. She was 10 years old.

In Sheffield, 17-year-old Job Denton (who was declared by his parents to have a severe mental disability) was charged with stealing a colt and although the jury recommended that he be deported due to his mental state, this was commuted into “home confinement”. Unfortunately, three years later in 1840, the *Northern Star and Leeds General Advertiser* reported that a young Mr Denton had moved on from the theft of the odd horse to stealing cows. This time there was no leniency – he was sentenced to 10 years of transportation.

The voyage

Many of the convicts sent to New South Wales in the early years were already disease-ridden when they left the hulks. As a result, there were often typhoid and cholera epidemics on the vessels heading for Australia. The first convoy of 11

ships, left Portsmouth in May 1787. A wide variety of people made up this legendary first fleet with many wanting to establish new lives in the new colony. And there were more than 700 convicts.

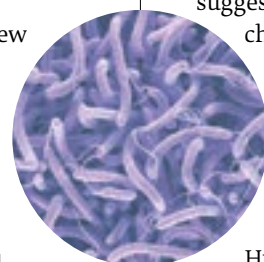
All female convicts from Newgate under sentence of transportation were sent to the *Lady Penrhyn* as part of this fleet. One of these was 21-year-old Mary Springham, who was found guilty of stealing two guineas, nine shillings (about £186) and a snuffbox. She was sentenced to seven years’ transportation.

The journey began with fine weather, and the convicts were allowed to go up on deck, but the weather became hot and humid as the fleet sailed through the tropics and the ships encountered some squally tropical weather that led to a woman convict being crushed to death and one man thrown overboard and drowned. Rats, bedbugs, lice, cockroaches and fleas tormented all on board. The bilges became foul with an over-powering smell. The chief surgeon reported that 48 people died on the journey (about 3% of the total), but there were also 28 births.

Deaths onboard

The second fleet of 1790 had the largest death rate of all British convict transports. Out of 1,006 prisoners, 267 died at sea and 150 perished on arrival. Many of the ships were former slave transports equipped with slave shackles, iron bars placed between the ankles, rather than chains and ankle irons. This disallowed even the slightest range of movement. Sea water often entered the bowels of the ships soaking all that lay below decks. Reports suggest that the starving prisoners lay

chilled to the bone on soaked bedding encrusted with salt, faeces and vomit, festering with scurvy and boils. The convict Thomas Milburn wrote the following home to his parents. “I was chained to Humphrey Davies who died when



we were about half way, and I lay beside his corpse for about a week just to get his food allowance.”

The death rate began to decrease after 1815, when naval surgeons were placed on board to monitor conditions and the shipping contractors were given monetary incentives to deliver the convicts alive. Surgeon Superintendent Allen McLaren of the *Maitland* kept a medical journal from 21 July 1843 to 23 March 1844 and noted at the end of the voyage: “Embarked: 195 men, Voyage: 159 days, Deaths: 4.” One of the prisoners on the *Maitland* was John Frederick Mortlock, a former soldier who had been sentenced to 21 years’ transportation for wounding with intent at Cambridge in March 1843. He believed that the quickest way to get his inheritance was to kill his relatives. He was sent to the *Leviathan Hulk* in Portsmouth before being transferred to the *Maitland* at Spithead.

He wrote in his journal: “At the commencement of the voyage, I anticipated many deaths, but the sanitary arrangements of our worthy doctor were excellent; the dry holystone between decks, chloride of lime, ventilation, and spare diet, which prevented the loss of more persons, and those deceased were possessed of weak or impaired constitutions. I longed exceedingly for vegetables, of which, unfortunately, no supply was provided. A small quantity of wine, mixed with lime juice, was served out daily, we found both wholesome and palatable when warmed and sweetened.” By the time the *Maitland* reached its destination, although many on board were suffering from Synochus (fever), Ophthalmia and Scorbutus (scurvy), only four persons had died.

Botany Bay

Once the prisoners arrived in Australia, life was no better. Botany Bay was not as hospitable as the group had hoped. The bay was shallow, but there was not a large supply of fresh water, the land was not



The first convoy comprising of 11 ships under the command of Captain Arthur Phillip RN (HMS Sirius), left Portsmouth in May 1787

fertile and the trees practically indestructible. Many new arrivals were sick or unfit for work and the conditions of healthy convicts only deteriorated with hard labour and poor sustenance in the settlement. One convict described the working: “We have to work from 14 to 18 hours a day, sometimes up to our knees in cold water, ’til we are ready to sink with fatigue.” The food situation reached crisis point and it was only the arrival of the second fleet in June 1790 that helped to alleviate the crisis.


It is, however, easy to forget the effect the settlers had on the indigenous population. Unlike the Aborigines, who lived well off the land, the new settlers did not understand the environment. Nor, in the early years, did they have much success in finding fertile land or growing enough food to feed the whole settlement.

They also brought with them many new diseases to which the indigenous population had no resistance, such as smallpox, tuberculosis, influenza and measles. While the exact number of deaths due to disease is unknown, in less than a year, over half the indigenous population living in the Sydney Basin had died from smallpox. Changes to diet also became a source of ill health and disease. Some changes were caused by restricted access to traditional food – from land being fenced off, native animals being shot for sport, and the introduction of

hoofed animals such as sheep (which trampled and destroyed native plants that had served as staple foodstuffs).

Conclusions

The forced relocation of people is among the darkest episodes of history. Opposition to transportation mounted in the 1830s, with complaints that it failed to deter crime, did not lead to the reformation of the convicts, and that conditions in the convict colonies were inhumane. The number of convicts sentenced to transportation began to decline in the 1840s. It was theoretically abolished by the Penal Servitude Act of 1857, which substituted penal servitude for all transportation sentences.

Reformist pressure and objections by colonists to transported convicts continued and led to the development of further “model” penitentiaries, including Dartmoor (1850) where they adopted colonial type labour regimes. As for Newgate Prison, it closed in 1902, and was demolished in 1904. The Central Criminal Court (also known as the Old Bailey) now stands upon its site. 

Stephen Mortlock is the Pathology Manager at the Nuffield Health, Guildford Hospital. He would like to thank the Senior Management Team and all of the staff at the Guildford Hospital for their continued support.