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‘A Fine Passage’: Insights into Early Australian Convict Transportation

Issue 1: Convict Messes on the First Fleet

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Summary

On the passage to New South Wales, convicts were organised into ‘messes’, usually the naval mess of six, to be issued with rations and utensils, and for the purpose of cooking and eating meals. On some ships, the messes were also used to regulate which men were allowed on the weather deck at different times for exercise, and to organise the cleaning of the lower deck where the prisoners were housed.

The victualling lists for the First Fleet enable us to reconstruct the messes for the male convicts on that voyage. From this we learn that men with trade skills such as carpentry, that would be useful on board the ship, and those who were ‘used to the sea’, were assigned to common messes so they could be released to work with the crew throughout the voyage. Middle class convicts seem to have been able to choose their own mess, probably for a fee. It is more difficult to identify the messes among the female convicts, because significant numbers of them were moved between ships in the course of the voyage. But there is evidence that young women were messed together under the supervision of older women, and mothers with young children were placed together.

Convict Messes

When they were first brought on board the ships that would carry them to Australia, convicts were organised into messes of six men or women for issuing, cooking and eating the rations, and sometimes for other purposes, such as cleaning the prison.

The log of the *Alexander* records that on the 6th of January 1787, the day that 184 convicts were brought across from the hulks, each prisoner was issued with bedding and each mess was provided with a water keg and a bowl. By the time of the *Hillsborough* (1798), the mess utensils included water kegs, large round tins and smaller pots, spoons, bread bags and pudding bags (in which to boil meat and pudding), and each group of six was issued with soap, scotch barley, mustard, ginger, pepper, and portable soup.[1]

Practices varied somewhat from ship to ship, but the mess captains would generally collect their rations from the steward, tag the meat with a tin tally to identify the mess, and deliver them to the cooks. The cooked meal would later be collected by one of their number, and eaten by the messmates from a common bowl placed on the floor. On some ships, the male convicts would be released on deck for exercise, or called up for inspection, according to their messes. And in some cases, responsibility for cleaning the prison or washing their clothes was also determined in this way.

There is no evidence that, in the early years, the convicts were permitted to choose their own messmates, but by the 1820s, some surgeon superintendents would allow them to do so.[2]

The First Fleet Victualling Lists

Almost nothing is known about convict messes on the First Fleet: they were one of those quotidian details which the various journal keepers did not think to describe. However, it is possible to learn something about them from the victualling lists, which identify by name and ship, the convicts who were issued with fresh provisions at Tenerife, Rio de Janeiro and the Cape.[3] (There was another victualling list used for issuing the provisions in their first year in the colony, which is not relevant for this paper.[4])

The lists for the male convicts were drawn up at Tenerife, the first point of call on the outward voyage, and they remained stable thereafter because there was almost no movement of men between ships. Philip Farrell and Thomas Griffiths, the two *Scarborough* mutineers, are listed on the *Prince of Wales*, where they were sent on 20 May 1787 after being flogged. This was before the fleet arrived at Tenerife.[5] Thomas Kelly, a man sent onto the *Lady Penrhyn* at the Cape to look after the Governor's horses, is listed on the *Alexander*, where he had first been embarked.

The women's lists are more complex because there was a great deal of movement between ships, and the person who compiled them was not consistent in his approach. Some women are recorded under the ship to which they were transferred at Rio de Janeiro, but Mary Coombs is listed among the *Charlotte* women in the victualling lists – she left England in that vessel, but was moved to the *Friendship* at Rio de Janeiro and then the *Prince of Wales* at the Cape. The very next entry is for Eleanor Frazier or Fraser. She was embarked on the *Prince of Wales* but is listed among the *Charlotte* women, where she was apparently moved at Rio de Janeiro.

It seems likely that the original lists were based on rolls drawn up on the individual ships, and the question for this research project was whether they might provide us with insight into the structure and composition of the convict messes.[6] Each list was divided into groups of six, and a profile of each convict in these groups was developed to ascertain their ages, social backgrounds, trades or work experience, to identify any commonalities. While we cannot be certain about every mess, this hypothesis was broadly confirmed in the patterns discussed below.[7]

Assignment to a Mess

There is no apparent consistency in the way that (most) men were assigned to a mess. In some cases, the ship's officers seem to have relied on an existing alphabetical list; in others, men were allocated in turn based on the hulk or prison from which they had come. Men from counties in the west of England were added to existing messes on the *Charlotte* and *Friendship* when they called at Plymouth, rather than being assigned to new ones. The messes on the *Scarborough* seem to have been reorganised at Portsmouth when the *Charlotte* arrived there and some of her convicts were shipped across.

On the *Alexander*, the messes must have been reconstructed in the early stages of the voyage, since a number of men died prior to sailing and in the first few weeks at sea. Only deaths after Tenerife can be identified in these lists.

The ship's officers on the *Friendship* put a great deal of effort into grouping the men by trade, much more than was required for the management of the ship. By comparison, there is little evidence of trade groups on the *Charlotte*, although some men from the same town or region were often found in the same messes.

The Working Messes

From the First Fleet onward, it was conventional for the ships' officers to employ convicts with suitable skills to work alongside their crews on the outward voyage. Prisoners could not be compelled to perform these duties, so they were compensated with greater freedom, spirits and additional provisions, and in some cases, money.

Until now, there has only been evidence of two First Fleet convicts being so employed – John Power, who was working with the crew of the *Alexander* in watering the ship at Tenerife when he took advantage of his freedom and escaped; and an unnamed man who fell overboard from that ship in the mid-Atlantic and drowned whilst working on deck.[8]

But a close study of the victualling lists confirms that this practice was widespread. The *Scarborough* had at least 21 men 'used to the sea' who were allocated to these working messes, the *Alexander* at least 22, and the *Charlotte* at least 10 – much larger numbers than previously understood.

Keeping such men together in common messes made it easier to release them at different times of the day and night for work. Not all of these men were sailors – some were watermen, some were carpenters, others had been labourers who worked loading and unloading ships while they were in port.

Thus, one of the working messes on the *Scarborough* was composed of the following: John Neal, who had been working on a ship at Wapping when he was convicted; Thomas Hylids, a ship's carpenter; John Boyle and Joseph Paget, both seamen; George Lisk, possibly a seaman. The sixth was Francis

Carty, about whom very little is known, except that he left the colony early, probably as a crew member of a visiting ship. His prayer book was found in a shark in the mid-Atlantic in 1792.[9]

With so many convict seamen enjoying the freedom of the ship, it is easier to understand why Farrell and Griffiths thought that they would be able to navigate the *Scarborough* if they succeeded in seizing control.

Some of these working messes also included men with organisational or accounting skills who could assist in managing the ship and its convicts. One mess on the *Alexander* had two men who were 'used to the sea' – Samuel Bird, a waterman, and James Richards, who had stolen 15 casks of spirits from a Customs warehouse and was later involved with boats in the colony; and two with a commercial background – William Parr, who had been a merchant's clerk, and John Henry Palmer, who had operated a labour exchange and employed staff himself. The trades of the other two men are unknown.

On the *Alexander*, there was a butcher's mess which included a master butcher, a kosher butcher, and three men who had separately been convicted of stealing sheep and hogs (and thus apparently had some experience in the meat trade). Ships carried livestock for the officers and free passengers, and the convicts would be supplied with fresh meat while they were in port.

Another mess on the *Alexander* had two men with hairdressing skills, of obvious value in managing a convict ship. A third man had been a gentleman's servant and possibly a valet, but the others had no noticeable connection to hairdressing.

It is difficult to understand the need for some of the groupings on the *Friendship*. One mess had four carpenters and cabinet-makers, a shipwright and a blacksmith, clearly of value in working the ship. But there was a mess with brickmakers, bricklayers and a plasterer; another with gardeners, millers and a baker; another with shoemakers, another with weavers; yet another with a jeweller, a silversmith and a watchcase maker.

Middle Class Convicts

The victualling lists also point to the co-location of middle class convicts, and men who were used to a more genteel way of life. Thus, one mess on the

Scarborough included a former coachman and gentleman's servant; a man who had been in service in Bond Street, one of the more prosperous suburbs of the West End; and another who had been in service to the clerk of one of the King's councillors.

There are a number of such groupings: on the *Alexander*, one mess contained a former soldier who could afford to purchase a discharge from the army, and a former midshipman who had worked as a clerk for a number of prominent figures in London society. None of the other men in this mess was obviously middle class, so it is difficult to arrive at a definitive conclusion – but the effective management of a convict ship did not require middle class convicts to be messed together in this way.

At the very least, these men had been allowed to choose their own messmates, but it is also possible they had paid for this privilege. It was common for prisoners with money to pay for less crowded and more salubrious accommodation while they were in prison, and there are a number of examples where well-to-do convicts paid the master of the ship to be accommodated in a private cabin on the outward voyage.

This evidence from the First Fleet victualling lists suggests that there might have been another layer of privilege further down, where convicts could pay a small sum to mess with other men (or women) of their own social standing. The men and women of these messes might have enjoyed greater freedom, but they would almost certainly have purchased additional food and condiments for use by the mess throughout the voyage.

Black Convicts

In some cases, black convicts were placed together in the same messes – John Williams and John Moseley on the *Scarborough*, John Martin and John Caesar on the *Alexander*, and possibly John Coffin and Samuel Chinnery on the *Charlotte*.

There is no evidence that this was outright racism – black convicts were not routinely located with other men of colour. But it was possibly misplaced paternalism – John Martin was African American and John Caesar came from Madagascar, so they would have had little in common.

Women's Messes

As already noted, it is not really possible to identify the messes among the convict women. It was more common for co-offenders and women from the same town or region to be located together. But there is evidence that some women were being grouped together for better management.

On the *Lady Penrhyn*, there was one mess which included three young women (aged 13, 15 and 17) and Elizabeth Beckford, who was at least 60 years of age. It would be understandable if the ship's officers wanted these girls to be overseen and protected by a steadier older woman. This is not a practice that has been observed before.

There were also several messes where women were accompanied by small children. Located together in one, or possibly two, messes on the *Friendship*, for example, were two women with children of 9 and 12 months, and another two with infants that were only three or four months old.

Insights

It is likely that different ships followed different practices in the management of convict messes, but the First Fleet victualling lists provide evidence of some of the ways that these rudimentary social structures could be used. The fact that the masters of convict ships were employing 20 convicts or more to work alongside their own seamen helps to explain why crew numbers on these vessels were so small.

Interestingly, we see not just sailors, carpenters and blacksmiths working on these ships, but butchers, hairdressers and clerks – the economy of a convict ship was more complex than has generally been appreciated.

Those who study convict transportation closely have been aware that well-to-do criminals and convicts from a genteel background sometimes paid to be accommodated in their own berths on the outward voyage. The First Fleet victualling lists seem to suggest that there was another layer further down, where convicts could pay to be assigned to a mess with others of their own

social standing. And for the first time, we gain insight into some of the arrangements that were made for the protection of young women and the accommodation of mothers with small infants.

The identification of messes with common trades also throws new light on the profiles of some individual convicts. John Power was not just employed to bring water on board the ship at Tenerife: he had been working alongside the crew since sailing from England. This raises the possibility that he had assistance from some of the crew in effecting his escape, and it helps to explain why it was feared that he was working with some of the sailors in planning a mutiny later in the voyage.

Francis Carty was assigned to a mess with men who were 'used to the sea': this makes it likely that he was a mariner and that he escaped from the colony by offering his services to one of the ships of the First or Second Fleets. At least some of the men convicted for stealing sheep and pigs had butchering skills – rather obvious once it is pointed out.

There is more that can be done with these lists. . .

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[1] Journal of the *Alexander*, 3 November 1786 to 10 February 1789, UK National Archives (TNA) ADM51/4375; William Noah, *Voyage to Sydney in the Ship Hillsborough 1798-1799. . .*, Sydney: Library of Australian History, 1978, 24 & 26 October 1798.
[2] Peter Cunningham, *Two Years in New South Wales*, London: Henry Colburn, 1827, Vol.2, pp.218-219
[3] TNA T46/22.
[4] TNA T1/668.
[5] There are numerous mentions of the conspiracy, but see John Easty, *Memorandum of the Transactions of a Voyage from England to Botany Bay, 1787-1793*, Sydney: Angus and Robertson, 1965, pp.7-8.
[6] This research was prompted by a question raised by Michael Flynn in a note written for the Biographical Database of Australia in February 2022 – https://www.bda-online.org.au/files/VL1788_VictuallingList.pdf
[7] Details on individual convicts were obtained from Mollie Gillen, *The Founders of Australia*, Sydney: Library of Australian History, 1989; the Biographical Database of Australia, Old Bailey Online, London Lives, and newspaper reports.
[8] Anonymous, *The Voyage of Governor Phillip to Botany Bay. . .*, London: John Stockdale, 1789, p.23; John White, *Journal of a Voyage to New South Wales* [1790], Sydney: Angus & Robertson, 1962, pp.54 & 69; Philip Gidley King, 'Private Journal, 1786-1792', State Library of NSW Safe 1/16, 8 June 1787; Paul G. Fidlon et al (eds.), *The Journal of Arthur Bowes Smyth*, Sydney: Australian Documents Library, 1979, pp.26-27.
[9] Paul G. Fidlon, et al (eds.), *The Journals and Letters of Lt. Ralph Clark, 1787-1792*, Sydney: Australian Documents Library, 1981, p.233.