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Counterfeiting on the Bermuda Convict Hulk *Dromedary*

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Figure 1. Early nineteenth century quill drawing of the port side stern of the convict hulk *Dromedary* partly hidden behind the darker hulk *Weymouth*, moored in HMS Royal Naval Dockyard at Ireland Island.

Author's

collection

In 1979 two divers undertook an important recovery project in the murky harbour waters of Bermuda where once a British naval installation dating back to the early 1800s had been. They found a time capsule of artefacts from the period 1826–1853, when convicts were kept in the hulk *Dromedary* moored in HMS Royal Naval Dockyard at Ireland Island, Bermuda (Figures 1 and 2).

The two divers were the author and his partner Mike Davis, who dredged up large quantities of discarded small objects that reflected life on board the *Dromedary*¹. Many of the items proved to be evidence of the work of skilled convict artisans. The hand crafted items included intricate carvings for trade and barter (Figure 3) as well as moulds for counterfeit Mexican and Peruvian dollars,

English shillings and for gaming counters.

The artefacts indicate that a thriving industry and trade had existed, involving convicts, their overseers on board the hulks moored at the dockyard, officials, local traders and residents in Bermuda. Documentary evidence has helped to explain the found evidence of coin forging moulds and verify that an illicit trading network involving forged coins existed between convicts, officials and local residents.

Artefacts, documents, especially contemporary accounts, and personal communication have also helped to reveal a complex story of a life of misery and desperation suffered by the convicts incarcerated on the hulks moored at Bermuda's dockyards and in particular on the *Dromedary*.

The site

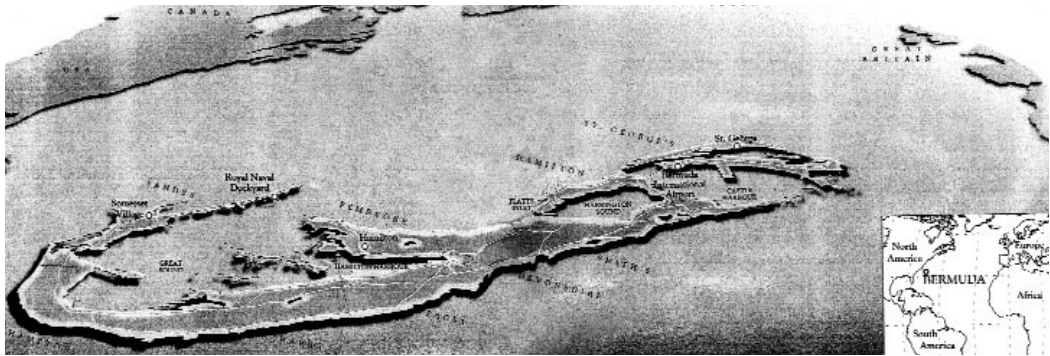


Figure 2. Modern aerial-view map of Bermuda showing the USA mainland top left and Great Britain at right. The Royal Naval Dockyard is centre-left.

Courtesy Bermuda

Tourism



Figure 3. *Dromedary* hulk convict carvings made from cave flowstone, coral and mother of pearl.

The *Dromedary* site is not a wreck site but is in fact an accumulation of rubbish discarded overboard during the hulk's working life at its dockyard mooring. As such, it was not recognised under the United Kingdom Wrecks Act of 1959 to which Bermuda was subject. To overcome

this problem and give the site official recognition the author and his co-diver successfully applied to have the existing legislation amended. As far as the author knows, this site is now the first in the British Commonwealth to be given the designation of 'Historic Underwater Site'.



Figure 4. The *Takes Tyme II* with the dredging crew in the dockyard harbour. This picture (with the author standing second from right and Mike Davis sitting second from left) gives an idea of the type of boat traffic in the Dockyard during the quieter winter months.

Photo Mark O'Singa

The site was excavated under a Crown licence issued to the author. In an effort to keep the collection of artefacts together and protect the excavation site the author has set up a trust called the *Dromedary* Trust.

The excavation

Excavation of the *Dromedary* site began in 1979 and continued for over twenty winters before it was completed. Excavation took place during the winter months, due to dense algal blooms and holiday boat traffic during the warmer seasons. The modern dockyard harbour is a busy marina with regular marine traffic (Figure 4). Years of marine waste and construction debris created a build-up of sediment up to three metres deep on top of the artefacts from the *Dromedary*. This layer had to be first removed before dredging of the artefacts could proceed. The artefact layers were then dredged to a depth of a further three metres.

Recovered from the site were well-

made counterfeit coin dies, some forty coins, both genuine and counterfeit (Figures 5–11), a cast bronze 'pig', bottles, crockery, gaming counters, dice and dominoes, buttons and tags for official use and intricate carvings and jewellery made from the local coral, mother of pearl and iridescent calcite or 'cave flowstone'.

The *Dromedary*

The *Dromedary* was originally a 1,100 ton Bombay 'country ship' known by various names including *Sha(w) Kai Kusseroo*, *Shah Kai Kusroo* and *Shah Kaikusroo*. She was built in Bombay in 1799 and was approximately 150 feet long by 40 feet across. She sailed as a trading ship along the Malabar Coast and to the Malacca Straits, and served as a British military transport ship before she was commissioned by the Royal Navy as a frigate in 1805 and re-named HMS *Howe*. In 1808 the *Howe* was re-named HMS *Dromedary* and used as a Royal Navy



Figure 5. Moulds for the obverse and the reverse of an 18__ Peruvian 8 reales forged coin.



Figure 6. Mould for the reverse of an 18__ Mexican 8 reales forged coin (possibly the one shown in Figure 8).

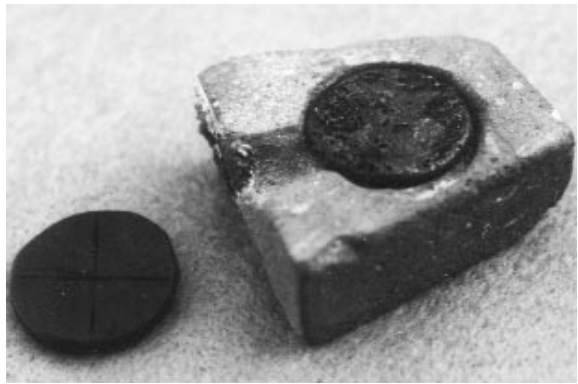


Figure 7. Brick mould used for casting the two gaming counters shown.

Storeship.²

Australian and New Zealand connection

HMS *Dromedary* made at least two voyages from England to Australia that we know of. In 1809, Lachlan Macquarie was to sail on the *Dromedary* for New South Wales to take up the post of governor. When the Macquaries boarded the vessel lying off the Isle of Wight they found her critically overcrowded with insufficient

provisions for the voyage and conditions severely cramped. Macquarie immediately transferred 39 men from the *Dromedary* to HMS *Hindustan* and had the wooden berths torn down and replaced with hammocks. This created 'sufficient room and safety between decks, and improve[d] the cleanliness of the vessel.'³ He also sent ashore 2 officers, 50 privates and 41 women and children who were instructed to follow in the next available convict transport.



Figure 8. Obverse and reverse of a cast forgery of an 1834 Mexican 8 reales. Diameter 39mm, density 8.38gm/cc.



Figure 9. Obverse and reverse of a cast forgery of an 1822 Iturbide Empire Mexican 8 reales. Diameter 39–40mm, density 6.92gm/cc.

On a later voyage to Australia in 1819, the *Dromedary* left England with a cargo of 369 male convicts. In January 1820 she arrived in Hobart and 347 convicts were put ashore. That same month the remaining 22 convicts were landed in Sydney⁴. On her departure from Sydney the *Dromedary* carried the missionary Samuel Marsden, the infamous ‘flogging

parson’, to New Zealand⁵. The *Dromedary* and the *Coromandel* stayed almost a year in New Zealand waiting for, and loading, 203 logs for spars for the British Navy.⁶ On her return voyage to England the *Dromedary* called into Sydney in February 1821 and picked up Commissioner John Thomas Bigge with his precious cargo, the documents later referred to as the Bigge



Figure 10. Obverse and reverse of a cast forgery dated 1825? of a George IV English 1 shilling. Diameter approximately 25mm, density 8.33gm/cc. The obverse shows irregular indents which may have been punched.



Figure 11. Obverse and reverse of a cast forgery of a George IV English 1 shilling (probably a discarded reject). Diameter approximately 26mm, density 9.67gm/cc.

Reports, the result of an exhaustive enquiry into the running of the Australian colonies of New South Wales and Van Diemen's Land.⁷

One of the most infamous passengers on the *Dromedary* had been Jorgen Jorgenson, the self-proclaimed protector of Iceland, who in 1813 sailed in this

ship from Gibraltar to England. Jorgenson would later serve a ten-year sentence as a convict in Van Diemen's Land from 1826 to 1835.⁸

By 1826 the *Dromedary* had been moved to Bermuda and converted to a convict hulk, and in 1864 she was sold locally and broken up.

In the 1840s Sir George Grey, Home Secretary, produced a manifesto which encouraged convicts nearing the end of their sentences to have the remainder of their time commuted if they agreed to permanently settle in Australia or the Cape of Good Hope. The *Merchantman*, one of the last convict ships to leave Bermuda, sailed from Boaz Island in December 1862 for Fremantle, Western Australia.

Another Bermuda convict hulk, the *Coromandel*, was originally the *Malabar* which operated in Australian waters; Malabar, a coastal area south of Sydney, is named after it.

Convict Testimonials

To answer the many questions raised by the existence of the *Dromedary* site artefacts, extensive use was made of the archival resources of a number of public institutions in Bermuda, Australia and England.⁹ The information uncovered includes first-hand accounts by convicts, government employees and Bermuda locals. When pieced together, a picture emerged of a well organised, corrupt system operating within the British Imperial system.

One already well-known testimony was left by the Irish nationalist and eventually Australian convict, John Mitchel, who wrote a vivid description of the prison hulks in Bermuda in his 'Jail Journal'.¹⁰ Having been sentenced before a 'stacked' jury to fourteen years transportation, Mitchel found himself in Bermuda on board the *Dromedary* at the Royal Naval Dockyard in 1848 (see Figure 13 where his cabin is identified). He was in Bermuda only for a short time (due to recurring bouts of asthma) but because he

possessed considerable journalistic ability he was able to render a detailed and valuable impression of events and times of this isolated convict outpost. His journal revealed the appalling reality of the life of a convict, not as an idealised term of penance, which was the way in which the authorities wished to present it, but instead as a grim struggle for the basic necessities of life and for life itself.

Mitchel left Bermuda for Australia on board the convict transport *Neptune* in the company of other convicts who had taken up the government's offer for them to stay in Australia to complete their sentence. Among these were many deserters who had also opted for life as a convict in preference to life within the British Imperial forces.

Another account was by William Sydes, alias Jones, a forger and passer of 'base coin', who returned to England after finishing his sentence in Bermuda on board the prison hulk *Coromandel*. On his return he soon found himself in Preston Workhouse, a 'House of Correction'. From there he was transferred to the *Justicia* hulk¹¹ moored between the Essex shoreline and Woolwich, described by Dickens in his novel *Great Expectations* as that 'black Hulk lying out a little way from the mud of the shore, like a wicked Noah's ark, cribbed and barred and moored by massive rusty chains'.¹²

Before being sent to the *Justicia*, Sydes recorded the memories of his convict transportation period in Bermuda and left them with the chaplain of the Preston Workhouse. This deposition has been indispensable to the present author and his understanding of the period relating to the Bermuda Dockyard and the *Dromedary*.

(Sydes would have been on the *Justicia* at the same time as the Dickens fictional character, the convict Abel Magwitch).

After assessing the excavated artefacts of the *Dromedary* site and those of an earlier convict site in the Old Town of St George's (a world heritage site) it became more evident that counterfeiting was probably widespread among the hulks. For example, illegal workshops are suspected to have operated on board other prison hulks, including an American POW hulk, the *Somerset*.

Ned Myers, an American naval patriot, spent time incarcerated on the POW hulks in Bermuda during the summer of 1813. Whilst later incarcerated at Melville Island in Nova Scotia during the 1812–15 war he spoke of counterfeiters and their forgeries.

The Bermudian newspaper, *The Royal Gazette*, records an informative article in 1830 on forging activities on one of the hulks:

*We are sorry to communicate that counterfeit coins, are in extensive circulation in this Colony. Through the vigilance of the Magistrate at Ireland Island, the offence has been traced to two convicts who are now confined on board of one of the Hulks in separate cells. The coins counterfeited are Spanish Dollars and tenpennies, English half crowns and shillings. The shillings are remarkable well executed, but may be easily detected, being thicker, and of a darker colour than the good coin, they have a greasy feel, which the good have not. We hope these few remarks will be sufficient to put the public on their guard against taking bad money.*¹³

In this case two individuals may well have been responsible for casting the forged coins, but there is no doubt that a network of convicts was involved in the preparation and distribution process, including those who were outside the convict system.

The testimonials of convicts such as William Sydes were filed 'out of sight' while others were dismissed as purely anti-British sentiment. As far as the government was concerned, these accounts were best left forgotten and buried. A later convict deposition, however, that of Baxter Grundy, was to have profound consequences. Grundy's deposition ended up on the desk of Sir George Grey, and its damning accusations against the convict establishment led to the full powers of the Home Office being used to authorise a committee to look into the allegations made. This inquiry was headed in Britain by Captain John Williams and in Bermuda by the governor, Captain Charles Elliot. The inquiry lasted from 1847 to 1850 and resulted in Grundy gaining a full pardon and the eventual elimination of the hulk system in Britain and Ireland.

Transportation

When the American War of Independence began in 1775, North America was no longer available for the deportation of convicts from Britain. Under-Secretary William Eden set up legislation in 1776 that gave Britain a brief respite from the overcrowding of its prison system, by having its surplus convict population housed in disused 'men-of-war' and slave transport ships that had been modified as hulks.

From 1787 British convicts were

transported to the Australian colonies, the first arriving at Sydney in January the following year. Throughout the Australian convict period Bermuda retained a workforce of convict labour that was housed in hulks.

Bermuda

Bermuda is located just over 1,000 kilometres off North Carolina on the east coast of the USA and is made up of 7 main islands and 70 islets. HMS Royal Naval Dockyard is located on the west end of Bermuda and is part of a chain that includes the linked islands of Somerset, Boaz Island and Ireland Island.

Unlike Australia and the Americas, Bermuda was never considered a penal colony. Along with Gibraltar, Bermuda was recognised as a vital component of the defensive network of fortresses and dockyards that protected British colonial expansion and interests. These components or ‘depots’ required a considerable workforce of convict labour to convert natural rocky prominences into the formidable defensive bastions seen today, and the hulk system helped to provide such a workforce as well as cheap labour. The hulk system in Britain was eliminated by the mid 1850s but in Bermuda the system continued for almost another decade.

Bermuda has always been seen as a vitally important link between the British Colonies in North America and in the West Indies. During the seventeenth century, privateers and pirates based in Bermuda posed serious threats to the returning Spanish ‘Plate’ fleets. Virginia’s company ships, the ‘Adventurers’, also posed a constant threat to the Spanish ships. These predators of the Spanish fleets found a

natural ally, which they were able to use to their advantage, in the Atlantic Gulf Stream, a warm current that flows up from the Bahamas, passing at a steady six knots between Virginia and the north of Bermuda before continuing its sweep across the Atlantic. As well as human predators, the returning Spanish Plate fleets also had to contend with two environmental dangers when passing through the area surrounding Bermuda: the hurricanes that frequent the area during the summer months and the islands’ notorious low-lying outer reefs—the most northerly reefs in the world. Little wonder Bermuda was also known as the Devil’s Isles.

As well as being known as Devil’s Isles, Bermuda was also called Somers Islands after Sir George Somers, whose ship ran aground on the shallow reefs off the eastern end in 1609. Somers was on his way to the Virginias in the *Sea Venture* when his ship foundered and he and his crew became the first residents on the islands. The name Bermuda is derived from the Spaniard Juan de Bermudez, who visited the Island at least twice, the first time being around 1512.

Bermuda convicts

Convicts were not permitted to stay in Bermuda on completion of their sentences, the only known exception to this rule being a William Facey who was permitted to stay at the Governor’s discretion. Rather than have them return to Britain, convicts in Bermuda were given the option to move to South Africa (where they were refused entry) or Australia, with offers of a reduction in their sentence. However, many were homesick and opted to complete their full sentence at the Dockyard and be

allowed to return to their homes and loved ones, sometimes with newly acquired skills of reading and writing and a useful trade.

Sadly, many of those convicts who returned to their homeland found themselves destitute, taking to drink, and eventually returning to a life of crime. These victims of circumstance, as well as the hardened habitual criminals, often found themselves back in the courts receiving a second sentence of transportation, usually doubled to fourteen years, and then shipped to Australia.

Hulk conditions

On board the hulks in Bermuda both official and unofficial trade took place between the convicts and the locals, especially for fresh foodstuffs to combat the constant problem of scurvy. Counterfeit coins were used for bargaining, gambling or for illicit purchases, which could then be traded through the notorious Huxters shops that were operated illegally by the bosun and his mates within the hulks at night (Myers mentions large sums of money being gambled). The presence of organised gambling supports the notion that crew and officials on the hulks had full knowledge of a forging 'foundry' on board, there also being little available space below deck to keep such a workshop hidden during the daily checks.

Conditions on board the hulks were inhumane. Ceiling height below deck on a typical frigate was scarcely more than five feet, and in the cramped cells hammocks for sleeping were hung three deep. Oxygen was so sparse that the pork fat lamps had trouble burning and belched out a thick smoke. Fights and riots were common (during which belongings including handcrafted artefacts were often

thrown overboard) as were homosexual relations and brutalisation, all creating an environment of misery and fear. Mitchel writes of his waiting to hear the dead bolt to his cell fall, separating him from the night time corruption. Humidity in the summer in Bermuda is very high, and along with cockroaches, rats, ants and centipedes the conditions would have been physically and mentally almost unbearable. This was home for the convict after a full day out in the blinding white limestone quarries cutting and moving blocks to build the dockyard. From these quarries came the multi-coloured calcite cave flowstone which the convicts utilised to make their carvings. Convicts were shackled, but as a rule only for the first two years of their sentence. Sydes describes the overall conditions in Bermuda as ten times worse than those in Britain.

Coinage and looting

The Mexican silver dollar was recognised as a trade coin and circulated throughout the islands from the seventeenth century on. The main source of these coins in this area appears to have been sunken and foundered ship wrecks. Lefroy's now famous memorials state that:

... a Grand Inquest does present that whereas it comes to passe that sometimes Shippes fall upon these Coasts and are distressed, which when our Inhabitants doe perceive they presently goe aboard them and then by fforce and in a voylent way Take and Carry awaie what they can come by night fall A cutting and haleing down the rigging tearing down sailes even to the Amazement

*and the Astonishment of the shippes Companies.*¹⁴

The seafaring Bermudians were renowned for engaging in occasional acts of piracy and looting of wrecks. Bootleggers and part-time pirates is not an unfair description of the Somerset and St David islanders. They were known to come alongside the hulks in their Bermuda sloops for trade and gossip, unscrupulously following up on any lucrative opportunity. Seventeenth century Bermudians were the first in the western hemisphere to use diving apparatus (wooden tubs) in the salvaging of wrecks. And they were notorious for having no scruples concerning those for whom they worked and would readily change allegiance between the Spanish, the Portuguese and the British governments, depending on who had the fattest purse at the time. Sydes notes in his affidavit of 1851 that ‘... to find an honest Mudian ... the island would take a lot of sifting’.

The Bermudian locals had the knowledge of the wrecks, but not necessarily the knowledge of converting the encrusted and blackened coins into passable coinage. The convict metal-workers within the hulks did. The hulk convicts would have been able to clean up the encrusted coins and in exchange would have been able to obtain from the locals items and materials they may have needed. In this way the cleaned coins would have found their way into circulation in Bermuda and wherever else they were taken. The convicts were obviously able to retain some of the silver coins for themselves and use them to press out moulds from which they cast their forgeries or ‘gambling tokens’. Records show that many of these forged coins

found their way off the hulk to circulate on the outside.

By the nineteenth century Bermuda accepted and used coinage of both the New and Old Worlds. This multi-national currency was accompanied by the extensive circulation of forged coins which were creating a significant problem for the authorities. The presence at the *Dromedary* site of forgeries of and forging moulds for Mexican, Peruvian as well as English coinage reflects the circulation of such a multi-national currency.

Material distribution

The distribution of deposited material on the *Dromedary* site showed distinct patterns. For example, no items that characterised the site deposit were found on the inboard side of where the hulk would have been moored, and all the material seemed to have been discarded on the offshore side. We know from documents that the inboard gun ports had been closed and sealed, probably for security reasons. This suggests that the discarded material and refuse had been thrown out mainly, if not exclusively, through the gun ports; and the offshore gun ports were the only ones available.

It was also noticed that the pattern of material distribution on the offshore side was not a continuous line. There were small areas of high concentration of material interspersed with areas where very little material was evident. The regularity of this pattern clearly showed where the gun ports had been: directly above the areas of heavy deposit. This verifies that although refuse was undoubtedly also discarded from the galley and heads, situated on the top deck, most material including that from

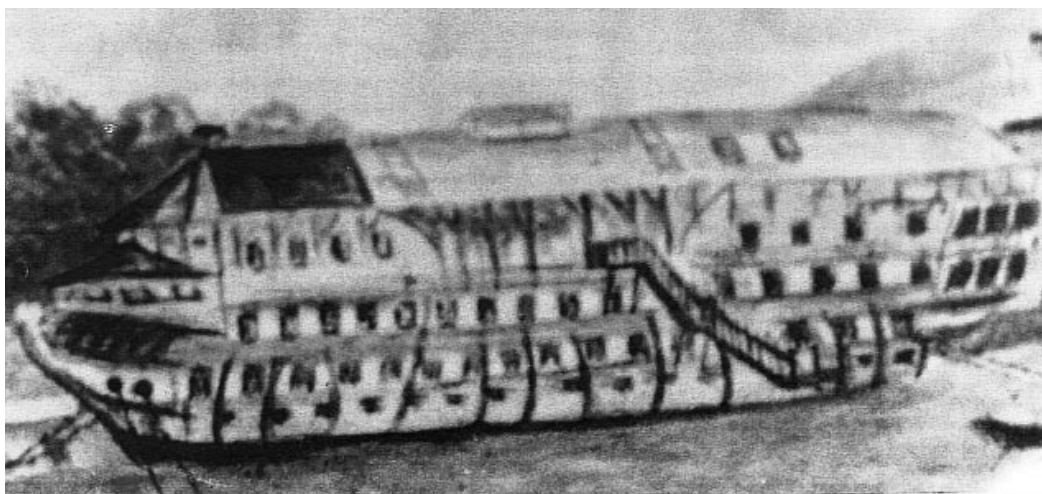


Figure 12. Contemporary water colour sketch of the port side of the *Dromedary* with the three deck levels of gunports that were open for refuse disposal facing the viewer. Author's collection

the officers' quarters and the apothecary, situated in the after deck, had been thrown overboard through the gun ports which were the only avenue for refuse disposal available to the convicts (Figures 12 and 13).

The spread of items also suggests a 'production line' of sorts: with rough stones found primarily at the bow mooring area and the finer, more intricate carvings at the stern. This may have been the result of officers moving the valued and more capable craftsmen aft where there was more room and hence comfort, and where they were safer from onboard brutalities. Here they could be more closely watched and in turn the work produced could be kept from prying eyes. It was in this stern area that the forging coin moulds were found. Thus the underwater location of these moulds below the more secluded and secure stern of the hulk offers us fairly convincing evidence that officials on board the hulk had knowledge of the forging activities and may have been active participants in

the supply of the raw materials and the distribution of the forged coins.

Conclusion

The author's attempt to locate possible remains of prison hulks once moored in the dockyard resulted in an enormous physical undertaking and reaped positive results beyond all expectations. At first many artefacts were discovered, then documentation was found which explained the artefacts and conditions on the hulks. In turn, the artefacts became the physical evidence that corroborated what many of the documents were claiming.

The conclusions drawn from the evidence of the *Dromedary* excavation and the supporting documentary findings corroborate what Grundy, Mitchel and Sydes had maintained in their accounts about the British prison hulks. All three accounts, though written independently, were in essence parallel tales of the corruption within the hulk system (Grundy had known about Mitchel).

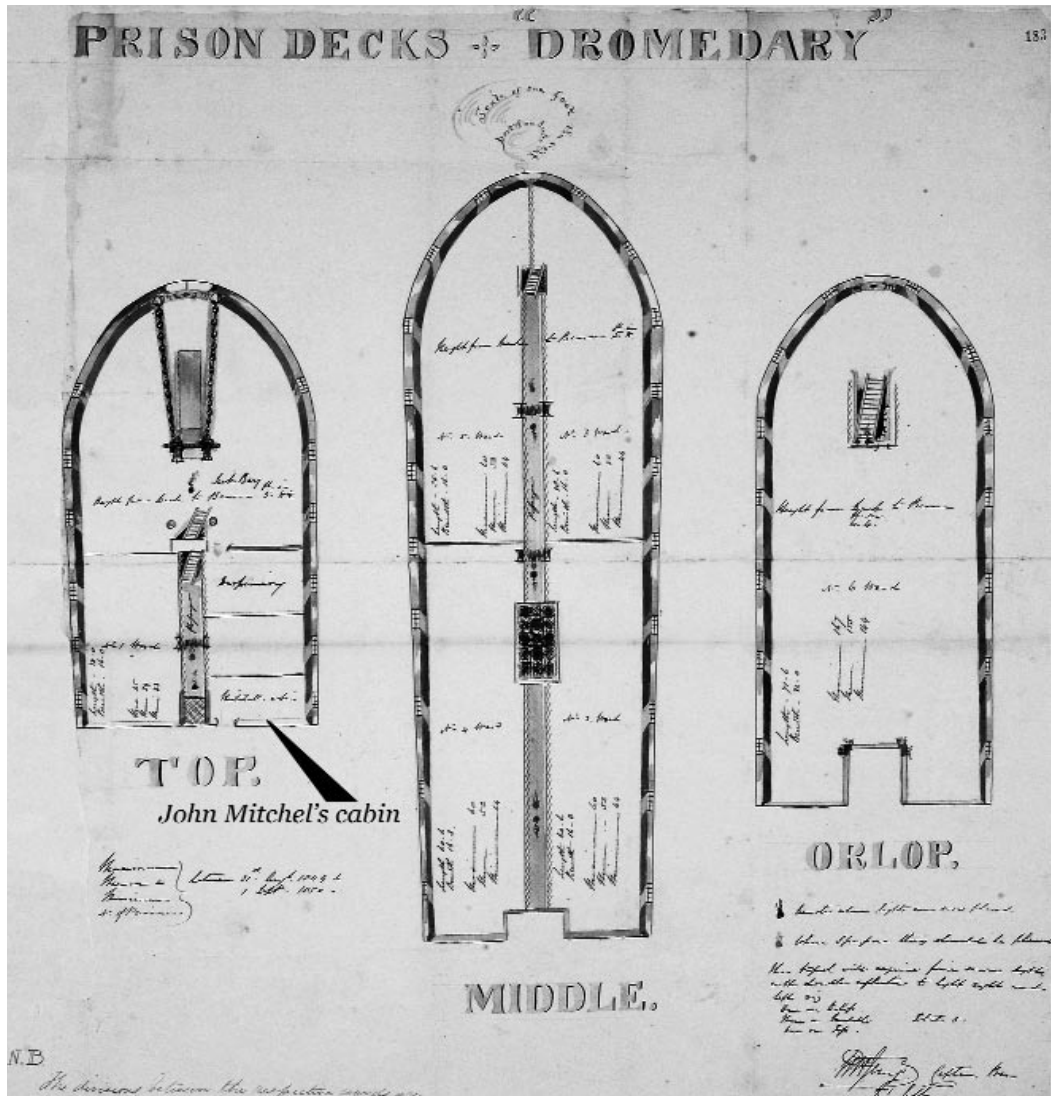


Figure 13. Plan section-views of the three prisoner decks of the *Dromedary*. The starboard gun ports were boarded up from the inside and refuse was discarded from those on the port side. John Mitchel's cabin is shown at the stern end of the top deck.

Courtesy The National Archives Image Library, Kew, Surrey, UK

The *Dromedary* Project has resulted in the recovery of the single largest collection of prison ship artefacts now known in the world. The flowstone carvings have not yet been found outside of Bermuda.

There are a number of important early

links to Australia and New Zealand which makes the story of the *Dromedary* relevant and useful to researchers of the colonial history of these two countries.

Like the convict hulks in England, the *Dromedary* in Bermuda was a den of

forging. In Bermuda the convicts made not only copies of British coins but also coins of the New World, currency that circulated in that outpost of the Empire at that time. Ironically the spread of disease that made the convicts' lives a misery and killed many of them was largely responsible for many of the carvings, coins and moulds being thrown intact overboard. It is also ironic that the resultant underwater rubbish tip is today considered by many to be a valuable historic resource and catalyst for ongoing study.

The significance of the convict material recovered by the author and his partner has been recognised in Australia and has resulted in an exhibition of some 500 of these artefacts being displayed at the Hyde Park Barracks Museum in Sydney from 4 August 2007 until 20 July 2009.

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Notes

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 10. Chapters 2–8.
 11. Probably a spelling variant of *Justitia*; see article by Richard O'Hair and Antoinette Tordesillas, 'Aristocrats of Crime: The Hulk Token of Barrington and Dignam', *JNAA* 13, 2002, p.7 [Editor].
 12. Quoted on page 1, <http://intolerablehulks.com/intro.html>
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Christopher Addams has been scuba diving since the age of sixteen. He was born in Wales and qualified as an engineer. He travelled the world as a ship's engineer and in 1969 settled in Bermuda. He is Bermuda's only registered Marine Archaeologist and is permitted to actively investigate underwater wrecks. In 2002 he gained his MSc based on the results of his work dredging the underwater 'Dromedary' convict hulk site.

