**Convicts**

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Kentish prisons, like those in many English counties, include establishments that date to the early nineteenth century. [[Canterbury Prison](https://www.canterbury.ac.uk/estate-master-plan/prison-conversion.aspx)]( https://www.canterbury.ac.uk/estate-master-plan/prison-conversion.aspx) - recently redeveloped as part of [Canterbury Christ Church University’s]( https://www.canterbury.ac.uk/) campus - opened in 1808, and Maidstone Prison, link to Maidstone entry which remains in use today, a decade later, both of them replacing older jails. Another part of Kent’s penal legacy is its role in the domestic convict system that replaced transportation. The origins of this system can be traced to the decommissioned warships known as [[hulks](https://www.digitalpanopticon.org/Convict_Hulks)]( https://www.digitalpanopticon.org/Convict\_Hulks), which, moored on the Thames and along the South Coast, served as floating prisons from the Napoleonic era until the 1850s. There were [[hulks](https://www.digitalpanopticon.org/Convict_Hulks)]( https://www.digitalpanopticon.org/Convict\_Hulks) on the River Medway’s estuary at Sheerness, and at Chatham where, as a boy, [[Charles Dickens](https://kent-maps.online/dickens/dickens-chatham/)](/dickens/dickens-chatham) would have witnessed convicts working on the docks; in the famous encounter between Pip and the convict Abel Magwitch in \_[*Great Expectations](/dickens/great-expectations-curated-walk)\_* (set in 1812), the latter has escaped from a hulk moored on Kent’s coastal marshes.

Prisoners sentenced to transportation went first to a hulk; those serving longer sentences and judged healthy enough to survive the voyage were then sent to penal settlements in Australia. The rest languished aboard the ships, which were notorious for disorder, vermin, and disease, employed by day in such heavy tasks as dredging, loading coal and hauling timber. There was also a hulk for boys aged 14 or under: the \_*Bellerophon\_*, moored at Sheerness, which had fought in the Battle of Trafalgar, replaced in 1825 by another Trafalgar veteran, the \_*Euryalus\_*, which was moored at Chatham until 1843. Aboard both ships, the children worked below decks as tailors and shoemakers in brutal, miserable conditions.

The eventual closure of the [[hulks](https://www.digitalpanopticon.org/Convict_Hulks)]( https://www.digitalpanopticon.org/Convict\_Hulks), the last of which burned down in 1857, coincided with the end of transportation: New South Wales shut its doors to convicts in 1840 (although it opened them again briefly at the end of the decade), and Tasmania followed suit in 1853 (small numbers then went to a penal settlement in Western Australia until 1868). Hence the necessity for three huge ‘public works’ convict prisons which opened at Portland in 1848, Portsmouth in 1852, and Chatham in 1856, built to accommodate prisoners who would hitherto have been sent to the [[hulks](https://www.digitalpanopticon.org/Convict_Hulks)]( https://www.digitalpanopticon.org/Convict\_Hulks) or shipped overseas. Unlike other English prisons, where prisoners served terms of up to two years (though often no more than a week or two), convict prisons were reserved for men sentenced to penal servitude, the sentence introduced to replace transportation. Penal servitude’s minimum term was three years; in practice, its maximum life sentence seldom exceeded twenty.

The location of the new prisons was determined by the projects upon which convicts would be put to work. Their architect, [[Major-General Sir Joshua Jebb](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Joshua_Jebb)]( https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Joshua\_Jebb), formerly of the Royal Engineers, imagined a grand system of naval dockyards, harbours of refuge, and coastal defences extending downriver from London and along the South Coast, built entirely by convict labour. Accordingly, convicts began work on the colossal [[breakwater](https://www.portlandhistory.co.uk/portland-harbour.html)]( https://www.portlandhistory.co.uk/portland-harbour.html) at Portland, while at Portsmouth and [[Chatham](https://kent-maps.online/19c/19c-chatham-dockyard/)]( /19c/19c-chatham-dockyard) they extended naval dockyards. At Chatham, this work continued for over a generation, the prison closing in 1892 upon its completion (Portsmouth shut two years later; as a Young Offenders Institution, Portland is still in use today).

In the meantime, work began in 1874 on a much smaller convict prison at the village of Borstal, near Rochester, where the War Department planned to construct hill fortifications. It was built entirely by convicts, who were marched there daily from Chatham until they had erected a block of forty cells, into which they then moved in order to build the rest of the prison. Today it remains in use as HMYOI Rochester. As Borstal Convict Prison, it became famous for a reformatory regime for youths aged between 16 and 21, developed there during the early years of the twentieth century, giving a generic name to a new institution – the borstal - to which this regime was extended after 1908.

England’s last public works prison was built at [[Dover](https://www.nationaltrust.org.uk/the-white-cliffs-of-dover/features/langdon-convict-prison)]( https://www.nationaltrust.org.uk/the-white-cliffs-of-dover/features/langdon-convict-prison), on the clifftop east of [DoverCastle](/20c/20c-secret-tunnels), where a National Trust visitor centre now stands. The first block was built by civilian contractors and the rest by convicts themselves, who began arriving there in 1885. It was designed to hold a thousand convicts, who would be put to work building a new harbour of refuge. This scheme remained on hold, however, due to a steep and unanticipated drop in England’s prison population during the 1880s, and the new prison was neither completed nor fully occupied. It was finally abandoned in 1895, work on the harbour having by then commenced without convict labour. In 1909, a new convict prison for first offenders opened at Maidstone, link to Maidstone entry built alongside the town’s older local jail. By 1930, it occupied the entire site of what is now HMP Maidstone, remaining a convict establishment until the outbreak of the Second World War.

Penal servitude was abolished in 1948, bringing to an end England’s domestic convict system.

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