**Chatham convict prison**

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Chatham convict prison opened in 1856. It was a ‘public works’ prison, built to accommodate convicts who would hitherto have been sentenced to transportation. Its architect, [[Major-General Sir Joshua Jebb](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Joshua_Jebb)]( https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Joshua\_Jebb), Surveyor-General of English prisons, planned to use convict labour to build a network of coastal defences extending downriver from London and along the South Coast. The prison was therefore situated at the mouth of the River Medway’s estuary, facing a creek separating St Mary’s Island from the mainland, along which convicts excavated and built three colossal dockyard basins. This task took over twenty-five years to complete, quadrupling the size of [Chatham Dockyard]( /19c/19c-chatham-dockyard). Holding upwards of 1,600 men, the prison was initially constructed from prefabricated wood and corrugated iron sections - literally, a ‘flat pack’, designed to be dismantled and moved elsewhere once work at the site eventually finished.

Only five years later, in 1861, a riot broke out involving over 800 convicts. Both Jebb and the prison’s governor blamed the ‘Chatham Mutiny’ on a ‘gang of desperate burglars’ whose escape plot they had foiled, and who then set about fomenting discontent among fellow prisoners. A day before the riot, following a dispute over soup rations, a convict described by the governor as a ‘daring ruffian’ leapt upon a mess table, ‘made a violent harangue to the other men … dashed his dinner among them, and said it was not fit for pigs.’ When a similar incident occurred on the prison’s parade ground the following afternoon, the ‘spark of insubordination … thrown on the inflammable minds of the convicts, spread like wildfire’. The rioters ran amok for three hours before troops finally arrived, destroying ‘nearly everything they could possibly destroy … the stoves, the clocks, and every pane of glass … the chief warden’s office, and every record in it’.[[1]](#footnote-1)

During the decades that followed, incidents of violence and disorder continued: in 1882, an assistant warder at Chatham claimed that attacks upon staff ‘with the fist, stones, bricks, &c. are of almost daily occurrence.’[[2]](#footnote-2) By this time, the prison had acquired a fearsome reputation among convicts, who nicknamed it ‘the slaughterhouse’. According to one senior prison official, they were ‘made to live a life of hell upon earth.’[[3]](#footnote-3) Discipline was stricter than at other convict prisons; indeed, even Chatham’s chaplain confessed that ‘I writhe under the discipline of this prison, it is so very strict.’[[4]](#footnote-4) The labour regime was equally harsh: in addition to the backbreaking work of dockyard excavation, convicts drained St Mary’s Island and surrounded it with a two-mile-long sea wall and embankment, ‘almost constantly working in deep and tenacious mud.’[[5]](#footnote-5)

Even worse was brickmaking, the task to which the American fraudster Austin Bidwell was assigned upon arriving at the prison in 1874. In a memoir, he recalled his first sight of Chatham’s vast public works: ‘Mud, mud everywhere, with groups of weary men with shovel, or shovel and barrow, working in it.’ His work party made their way along a ‘sort of road had been made over the mud with ashes and cinders … for about a mile until we came to the clay banks or pits’, where clay and sand were mixed for bricks in a steam mill called a ‘pug’.

Our duty was ‘to keep the pug going’ - keep it full of clay to the top. The clay was in a high bank; we dug into it from the bottom with our spades, and filled it as fast as possible into our barrows. In front of each man was a ‘run,’ formed by a line of planks only eight inches in width, and all converging toward and meeting near the ‘pug.’ The distance we were wheeling was from thirty to forty yards, and the incline was really very steep … One had no period of rest between the filling of one's barrow and the start up the run.[[6]](#footnote-6)

Faced with toil of this kind, often for years on end, some convicts deliberately placed their arms or legs in the way of moving carts in the hope of transfer to an invalid prison. An ‘epidemic’ of self-injury at Chatham peaked in 1871, its medical officer performing thirty-three amputations that year. Convicts would judge a vehicle’s load as it approached ‘because the unloaded waggons would merely give them a pinch, whereas the loaded waggons would crush or sever the limb.’ To prevent this, a civilian engineer reported, when a traction locomotive neared a work party, ‘the whole of the men are faced right about, and are made to stop their work and to remain in that position until the engine has passed, so that they shall not be able to throw themselves so easily under [it].[[7]](#footnote-7)

In 1892, once work on the new dockyard reached an end, the prison closed and its cell-blocks were dismantled. The [[Royal Naval barracks](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Royal_Naval_Barracks,_Chatham)]( https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Royal\_Naval\_Barracks,\_Chatham) built on its former site are today home to the Universities at Medway campus, and one of the dockyard basins built by convicts now serves as a [[marina](https://www.mdlmarinas.co.uk/marinas/mdl-chatham-maritime-marina/)]( https://www.mdlmarinas.co.uk/marinas/mdl-chatham-maritime-marina/). Throughout the [[Chatham Maritime Estate](https://www.cmtrust.co.uk/)]( https://www.cmtrust.co.uk/), the products of convict labour are everywhere to be seen. Yet there is little to indicate that this was once a place where, in the assessment of one former convict, ‘more human blood was spilt and more human lives lost through excessive labour than in any other prison in the country’.[[8]](#footnote-8)

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