

Convict Hulk Essex | Donal O'Sullivan

It was early in the year 1824 that the inhabitants of Kingstown as it then was began take notice of the hull of a sailing ship that had recently been towed into the harbour. It was a convict hulk brought over from Plymouth a temporary prison where convicted felons could be accommodated before they were transported overseas to New South Wales.

How the hulk actually looked at the time we can only surmise this rather crude woodcut, which appeared some years later in the Dublin Penny Journal. There is also a short description of her in Robert Gibbing's book on the recollections of John Graham, convict: " Her carved bow was hidden by an overhanging washhouse, the only rigging on her stunted masts were clothes lines and amidships on deck was an ugly wooden shed used as a storehouse for convict hammocks."

However, we do have a drawing showing how her hull looked in her prime. This is it. And here she is with her three masts, her square sails and her rigging. One of the reasons we have such information is that in her day the Essex – that was her name – was a very famous ship indeed. In fact, she was one of the most famous ships in the early history of the US navy. She features in many books dealing with naval history in the days of sail and there are copies of her plans in US National Archives, in the Peabody Museum in Salem, Mass. and in the Smithsonian Institute in Washington.

For the record her length was 141.5 ft. her breadth 37.8 ft. ~ her depth 18.11 ft. She displaced 860 tons. The length of her keel was 118 ft. and the height of two of her masts was 84.ft and 72 ft.

The Essex has two particular claims to distinction. To American historians she was one of the extremely fast sailing frigates which when the Republic was in its infancy fought very gallantly – and indeed, very successfully – against the hitherto invincible Royal Navy.

The Essex was remarkable for a second reason she was built and financed totally by private enterprise. In 1799 with renewed war bringing new insults to the American flag and losses of ships and men, the inhabitants of the New England town of Salem decided to build a 32 gun frigate and lend her to the Government. To some extent they were reflecting a widespread feeling that it was only right that the major contribution towards the protection of commerce should come from those most affected, the inhabitants of the towns on the Atlantic seaboard

It is certainly true that true that the people of Salem entered into the project with much zest: everything for the ship came from the town and the surrounding countryside. The timber was felled locally and brought into the shipyard on sleds. When the rope cables had been complete, the workmen took them on their shoulders and marched with them in procession headed by a drum and fife. The launching~ which took place on 30th September 1799 was a civic occasion witnessed by 12,000 spectators and celebrated by salutes from the battery and all the guns on the ships in the harbour.

Her designer and supervisor of construction a famous Captain William Hackett – a designer of genius, it is said, but of uncertain temper that went quite went of his head from time to time. Understandably, perhaps because he was dependent for his materials on a wide range his suppliers and tradesman. He had particular trouble with a certain metallurgist and foundry owner foundry owner, Col. Paul Revere – the Paul Revere – who was the supplier of what were described as “malleable copper spikes”

I will pass over the r the early achievement of the Essex in the protection of American interests in the Atlantic and in the Mediterranean. Her last voyage was to be her most memorable. She was the first US fighting ship to round the Horn and sail into the Pacific where during the British-American war of 1812-14 she did enormous damage to British commercial interests. So much so, that the British Government had to send a small squadron ~ the heavily -armed frigate, Phoebe and two sloops- of -war to deal with her. Eventually, the Phoebe and one of the sloops caught up with her in Valparaiso, which was then a neutral port.

To the end of his days the American captain ~ David Foster ~ must have regretted not attacking the Phoebe as she sailed up alongside him in Valparaiso because he was cleared for action and could have done enormous destruction with his is carronades at that short range. But he refrained, conscious of the fact that they were both in a neutral port.

There is an air of tragic inevitability about the last days of the Essex in Valparaiso. A dance attended by her crew had been in progress just as the British appeared on the horizon and about half the men were ashore. Nevertheless a signal gun brought them back very quickly but although cleared far action very promptly the Essex had lost her opportunity to gain the open sea and show her pursuers a clean pair of heels. The British squadron decided to stay outside blocking her escape. But ashore officers and men mixed freely, the officers frequently dining with each other. Sadly, the captains were friends, having known each other in the Mediterranean.

Finally, on the 28th March 1814, the Essex tried to regain the open sea. She might indeed have done so were it not for the fact that just as she was rounding the southern headland a sudden squall carried away her main topmast. The loss faced Porter with a sudden emergency and the necessity to make a sudden quick decision. He decided to return to the harbour. It was afterwards suggested that with the Essex’s superior sailing qualities Porter could have even still have got away. Instead, he ran into a small bay three miles from Valparaiso. Here the Phoebe had her at her mercy.

As I mentioned earlier, the Essex’s armament consisted principally of a type of cannon called carronades. Now carronades are capable of inflicting enormous damage at short range but are ore or less useless otherwise. Captain Porter had held off when had the advantage with his carronades in the neutral port of Valparaiso. Captain Hillyard of the Phoebe suffered from no such disadvantages. All he had to do was to stay out of range of the Essex’s carronades and pound her with his long guns. His second in command, Lt. Ingram, protested that it was sheer murder – which they should sail up alongside and fight fair. Hillyard would have none at this: he was afterwards described by one writer as “cool, wary and middle-

aged". Professional naval officers such as him with responsibility for his ship and the lives of his men, could not entertain such sporting notions.

So the Essex was doomed. With her decks in shambles from the fire of the Phoebe, and awash with blood, the Americans refused to surrender. At one of the guns, the gun-crew had to be changed three times, fifteen men having being killed. It is said that the wounded who had not been taken below and who were lying on the decks cheered on their comrades. Even in her extremity the Essex managed to get close enough to the Phoebe to inflict same damage, killing six. Men, including the fair-minded Lt. Ingram. Eventually, she had to strike her colours, having had 58 men killed, 66 wounded and 31 missing.

We know nothing further about the Essex until she arrived as a convict hulk in Dun Laoghaire Harbour in February 1824. There she remained until 1837, a subject of much local scandal and concern. Conditions aboard by all accounts were appalling. Here is an extract from a letter written by the hulk's doctor, John Spear in 1826 – " We had 249 prisoners on board the Essex...they were never free from both fever and dysentery. During the winter months they are from necessity obliged to be confined to their prison below 16 hours out of the 24 "

We can get an impression of how the hulk affected people in the vicinity from this extract from a pamphlet written under a nom-de-plum by Col. John Fox Burgoyne, the first chairman of the Board of Works: "The first sound I heard as I approached the Irish coast was the accent of distress. As the vessel rounded the harbour of Kingstown, she passed under the stern of a convict ship moored near the shore.

"On the opposite rocks were seated same women miserably attired, with children in their arms and in a state of grief and wretchedness. One of them shouted in Irish to the ship from which we heard the voice of a man in reply. The prisoners on board were rioters, who having been sentenced to transportation, were thus taking their last farewell of their desolate families".

Who were the men who were held aboard the Essex? Well, common or garden criminals, for the greater part. Take a look at this table that comes from the State paper Office in Dublin Castle. Of the 5251 persons who passed through the Essex from 1825 to 1835, 3519 (or 67%) had been convicted of various forms of theft. For this exercise, I am excluding thefts related to agriculture which could form a separate category. Political offences don't feature that prominently: there were 21 convicted of seditious practices. Most of the crimes of this sort were of an agrarian nature: there were 18 cases of 'shooting at persons': 7 convicted of what is described as "riotously appearing armed by night"- or "riotously attacking dwelling houses" – 78. Sexual crimes over the ten years were not that numerous. There were 9 convicted of abduction. 3 cases of assault to ravish, 6 cases of bigamy, 25 cases of rape. 54 murderers had been held on the Essex, which might show that the authorities of the time were not quite so ready to inflict capital punishment as we may have imagined.

From time to time there were complaints about conditions on board the Essex. About 1828, Archbold Wilson, who was governor of Marlborough Prison (Portlaoise nowadays) discovered what he described as "matters of the most horrid nature" going on there. He

complained – but nothing happened, apart from a very sharp argument between himself and the gaoler of the Essex. In October 1833 a Mr James Mitchell (a clergyman, I should imagine) protested about the number of young boys herded together with other boys and feared that “unnatural practices” might result.

The man who controlled the affairs of the Hulk – its superintendent and medical inspector – was a certain Dr Edward Trevor. Earlier, when he had been medical superintendent in Kilmainham, he had had disputes with some of the political prisoners held there, Wolfe Tone for one.

He vigorously rejected all complaints. According to himself, Trevor had set the convicts on the hulk to work, strictly regulating the expenses their maintenance and – on the Cork hulk at least marking their conduct weekly as a stimulus to good behaviour. In his report he also states that prisoners were employed in cleaning the ship, cooking, washing linen, blankets etc. Those who had trades were made to use their skill, by which, he states, material savings accrued to the Government.

But after ten years a new wind was blowing through the Irish administration. The Whigs were in Power and Thomas Drummand was Under-Secretary in Dublin Castle. Reform was in the air. In 1836 it was established from enquiries conducted by the Irish administration that convicts on the hulks were left without employment and at night were locked up without any arrangements for separation or supervision. The Lord Lieutenant decided that the hulk system, was “most pernicious” – “a worst form of prison could scarcely be devised” – and at the end of 1836 the convicts were transferred to other prisons ashore.

This was the end of the Essex. In 1837 she was auctioned off for £2000, broken up for the metal the people of Salem had subscribed for in 1799. Who knows? Perhaps some of the spikes from Paul Revere’s foundry might still be lying around in Dun Laoghaire.