

Bone, Straw and Paper:

How French Prisoners of War Occupied Their Time, 1793-1815

by Paul Chamberlain

During The Great War the Royal Navy played a significant role in defeating Napoleon's ambitions; preventing invasion by his Grande Armée; protecting British commercial interests; and launching many amphibious operations around the world in an effort to defeat France and her allies.

While the Admiralty was sending forces abroad to prosecute the war, this august body was also engaged in protecting the nation's interests nearer to home. The Admiralty fought a continuous campaign in the countryside of Britain against unemployment; against the sabotage of the country's fiscal prowess; and a not insignificant war against the corruption of the nation's morals by pornography. The enemy was to be found amongst the large prisoner of war population in Britain during this period. How the Admiralty prosecuted this war, and who helped Their Lordships, will become apparent as this story of prisoner of war activity unfolds.

Prisoners of war were the responsibility of the Admiralty. In 1795 all prisoner of war business was transferred to the Transport Board (which presided over the Transport Office). The Board consisted of a number of Commissioners, both naval and civilian. The Board appointed an Agent at each depot; respon-



One of the courtyards at Norman Cross showing prisoner busy with their laundry. This picture was painted by Captain Durrant when he was stationed at the depot as part of the garrison.

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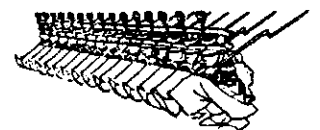
Norman Cross Prison Depot showing prisoners and their various activities; including laundry, playing with pet animals, playing boules, and fencing. Painting by Durrant.

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sible for the prisons, staff and prisoners. These Agents had to report regularly on the state of affairs at their depot, and were kept on their toes by regular visits from the Board's Commissioners, who reported on what they found.'

The Commissioners were the main power within the prisoner of war system, and, on the whole, had a reputation of being firm but fair, within the regulations governing the system. They ensured that all Agents and staff at the depots performed their duties; making recommendations to, and occasionally admonishing, those employees who were lax in their work, or who abused the system.

Before ordering any changes at a depot, they obtained as



much information on the matter as they could, from the prison staff, prisoners and any civilians who were involved. They were always accessible to the prisoners themselves, and would investigate any complaint these captives had. All information gleaned in this way was reported back to the Board.²

The Agents at the Land Prison and Ship Depots were naval officers of the rank of Captain, chosen for their administrative abilities. The Agents at the Parole Depots were gentlemen of some standing in the community, such as lawyers, but not tradesmen, who might have a pecuniary interest in the prisoners in their charge.

During the period 1793-1815, upwards of 200,000 prisoners of war arrived in Britain. Of this total, 122,440 were taken during the Napoleonic Wars 1803-15. The highest prisoner total in any one year was 72,000 in 1814. When a prisoner arrived in Britain, he was sent to either a Land Prison or Prison Ship Depot. The major Land Prisons were: Dartmoor, Forton (Gosport), Liverpool, Mill Prison (Plymouth), Norman Cross (near Peterborough), Perth, Portchester Castle and Stapleton (Bristol), while there were minor Land Prisons at other sites throughout Great Britain. The Prison Ship Depots were situated at Chatham, Plymouth and Portsmouth. Officers and civilians of rank were offered their parole in that if they signed an agreement to abide by the Parole regulations (this included an agreement not to attempt escape) they were allowed to reside in Parole Depots. These were selected towns and villages around England, Scotland and Wales in which they lived amongst the civilian population.³

Prisoners of war remained confined in the prison depots for many years. During the 1790s a captive could expect to be exchanged and sent home within two years of being captured. After 1803 the exchange system broke down, and relatively few prisoners were actually exchanged. As an example of the length of time that some captives remained in Britain; when the *Hector* Prison Ship at Plymouth discharged its prisoners at the end of the war in 1814, there were many on board who had been captured on gunboats and coastal craft assembled along northern France during Napoleon's invasion preparations of 1803-05.⁴ In 1814 Forton Prison was home to the crew of the frigate *La Creole* taken on the outbreak of war in 1803.⁵

Many prisoners of war experienced a long period of confinement. How they coped with captivity is the subject of this article. However, this narrative will be confined to those activities adopted by the natives of France, Spain, Holland, Germany, Italy and the United States of America that have left us a reminder of their stay in this country.

The most demoralising aspect of captivity for a Napoleonic prisoner of war was the enforced idleness. For the inmates of the Land Prisons and Hulks there was official work for only a few, and this often on an occasional basis. Parole prisoners had the delights of their town or village with which to occupy themselves, but even these lost their appeal after a while. To alleviate this boredom, and to prevent it being channelled into escape attempts and other troublesome behaviour, the authorities encouraged

any activity that kept busy the minds and hands of the prisoners - any legal, wholesome activity that is. The activities adopted by the prisoners were many and varied, some official, some approved, and some most definitely not condoned.

There was some official work available to a few prisoners, although the British did not employ their captives on work outside the prison walls, as foreign prisoners were so employed in France. When the pool of French labour was depleted due to the conscription of the adult male population, the French Government gladly availed itself of its large prisoner of war workforce. This situation did not apply in Britain where there was an ample supply of civilian labour.

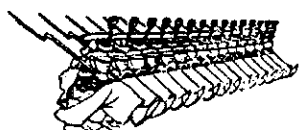
When Convict Hulks were first created during the late eighteenth century it was envisaged that the convicts would provide a cheap source of labour for various projects such as fortifications and dockyard construction. The use of this cheap labour was resented by the civilian workforce, as a result of which the convict labour was never used to its fullest extent.⁶ The imposition of prisoners of war as workers in the community would have resulted in civil unrest and so was a domestic impossibility.

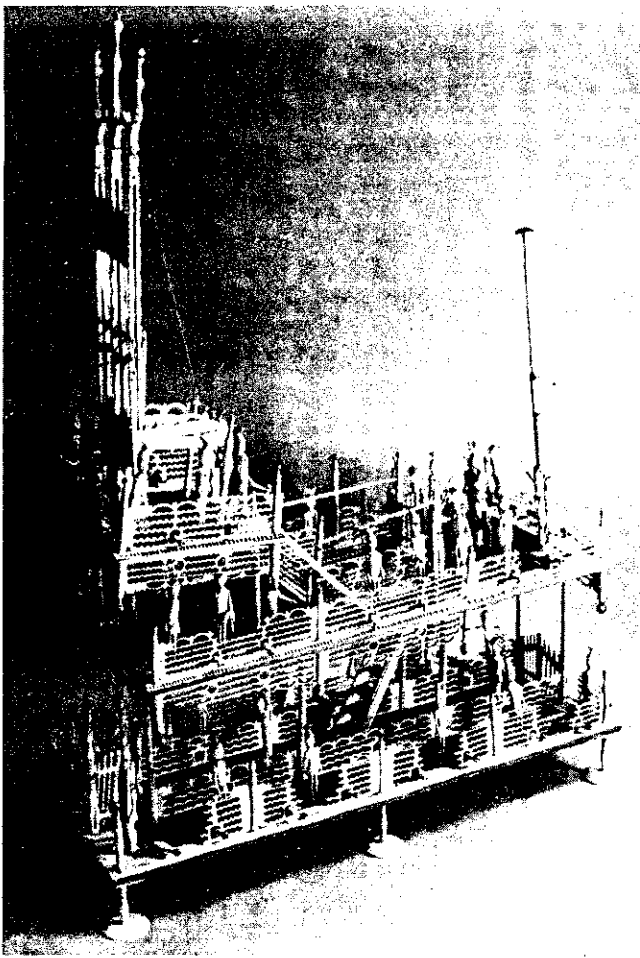
The Transport Board was always diligent in preventing prisoners of war from working outside the depots in any great number. Occasionally a few prisoners might be employed as casual labour to assist in repairs to the exterior of a prison, but only under the supervision of civilian labourers, and only if they could be properly guarded.

Life in a Land Prison or onboard a hulk could be one of unremitting monotony. There was a roll-call each day, and the Surgeon would visit the barracks daily to inspect the general conditions and listen to any health-related requests or complaints. One prisoner from each mess would attend the cook-house and collect the ration for his colleagues. Part of the routine would be the daily ablutions, including laundry, at the wooden troughs stationed in the courtyards, or on the upper deck of the hulks. The prisoners would also use these areas for their amusements and such sports as they could organise. One of the illustrations shows a prison yard at Norman Cross. This picture is by a Captain Durrant, who was a militia officer stationed at some of the prison depots, and who spent his leisure time painting the scenes around him.

Many prisoners were conscripts and came from all walks of life, be they of practical or intellectual disposition. The war prisons contained leather-workers, jewellers, watchmakers, teachers and Government officials who could put their education and training to good use. Industrious prisoners who had artistic talents could find work within the prison as actors, authors, artists and teachers.

Portchester Castle had a typical range of activities adopted by the prisoners, and was a veritable hive of industry. Within the depot could be found manufacturers of straw hats, stockings, gloves, purses and braces. There were tailors, shoemakers, caterers (selling home-made sweets and biscuits), lemonade sellers, comedians (Punch and Judy-type puppet shows, and marionettes), and even, according to one





Bone guillotine in the Norman Cross Collection.
© Peterborough City Museum.

prisoner, goldsmiths. Education was not neglected; there being self-styled professors of mathematics, drawing, languages (English, French and Latin), writing, fencing and dancing. St. Aubin, a French officer held at the depot for a while, stated that many prisoners arrived at Portchester unable to read or write, but left with a good versing in these skills. At Portchester the prisoners constructed a theatre in the basement of the keep, which had a stage, scenery, seating, and a twelve-piece orchestra.⁷

A Parliamentary report dated 25 July 1800 stated that:

*"...the prisoners in all the depots in the country are at full liberty to exercise their industry within the prisons, in manufacturing and selling any articles they may think proper excepting those which would affect the Revenue in opposition to the Laws, obscene toys and drawings, or articles made from their clothing or the prison stores, and by means of this privilege some of them have been known to carry off upon their release more than 100 guineas each."*⁸

Indeed, some prisoners earned enough money from their endeavours to be able to employ a servant from amongst their colleagues.

When these manufacturing activities conflicted with the local civilian industry they were curtailed. The objection was that the prisoners, supported out of the tax revenue paid by the local inhabitants, were allowed to undersell the latter in their own local industries. Thus in some Parole Depots in Wales the

Frenchmen were stopped from making pastry and confectionery; and straw plait manufacture was banned at Norman Cross and Portchester Castle.

All the land prisons had a market, and civilians were permitted on board the hulks to trade with the prisoners. Prisoner vendors would erect stalls or simply display their wares on the ground, and sell to the locals or to each other. Dealers from outside the prison would bring with them the produce of the neighbourhood, such as clothing, feeding utensils, tools and materials the prisoners could use for their work, and foodstuffs. The prisoners could sell items they had made, both to civilian sightseers who looked upon the prisons as curiosities, and to locals who acted as Agents for the sale of manufactured work.

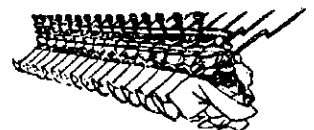
In 1797 Captain Fremantle RN and his wife Betsey visited Portchester Castle and saw three thousand French prisoners. Betsey wrote *'...they are very industrious and make all kinds of little works. We bought a Guillotine neatly done in bone'*.⁹ An English officer of the prison garrison wrote of this market:

*"...every possible encouragement was given to the exercise of ingenuity among the prisoners themselves by the throwing open of the Castle yard once or twice a week, when their wares were exhibited for sale, amid numerous groups of jugglers, tumblers, and musicians, all of whom followed their respective callings, if not invariably with skill, always with most praiseworthy perseverance. Moreover, the ingenuity of the captives taught them how on these occasions to set up stalls on which all manner of trinkets were set forth, as well as puppet shows and Punch's opera...Then followed numerous purchases, particularly on the part of the country people, of bone and ivory knickknacks, fabricated invariably with a common penknife, yet always neat, and not infrequently elegant. Nor must I forget to mention the daily market which the peasantry, particularly the women, were in the habit of attending, and which usually gave scope for the exchange of Jean Crapaud's manufacture for Nancy's eggs, or Joan's milk, or home-baked loaf."*¹⁰

These markets were strictly regulated, constantly patrolled by the guards and turnkeys. This was to ensure that neither vendors or buyers were cheated. Commissioner Searle, writing from Bristol in 1808, gives us this description of the market in Stapleton Prison, which was allowed from 9.00am until 12.00 noon each day:

*"The sale is carried on in a small enclosure, in view of the prisoners, by parties delegated by them from among themselves assisted by the Turnkeys, whose business it is to prevent fraud and imposition on all sides, and to prevent the introduction and disposal of forbidden or improper articles. The indecencies found at Norman Cross are almost unknown here. The intervention of indifferent parties between buyers and sellers probably renders it too difficult without immediate detection."*¹¹

Every article made by the prisoners had its price attached, together with the name of the individual who made it. Unfortunately the name was only attached in a temporary fashion, so the majority of prisoner of war work that survives is anonymous. A



few items, however, have the maker's name either carved or written on them.

Bone-work

Of all the manufacturing activities in the prisons, the most prolific and that most associated with these prisoners of war was the production of bone models of ships, houses, guillotines, anything in fact that the prisoner's ingenuity and imagination could design and build. The models were also made of many other materials including wood, ivory, tortoise shell and metal (iron, brass, copper and even silver). Additional materials used in this work included glass, hair, paper, cloth, straw, dyes and pigments, although the most commonly used material was the bone saved from the meat ration, the best pieces becoming a negotiable commodity amongst the prisoners. There was an almost unlimited supply of bone from the large weekly consumption of meat at the depots. A prisoner at Forton, Germain Lamy, related that:

*"...beef bones and mutton bones were kept on all sides, those that could not work selling them at good prices to those who could."*¹²

Beef bone was the most common because of the greater quantity that was available. In some of the larger models whalebone has been used.

The bone was first cleaned by boiling, and the resulting glue-forming substances saved for use in the model-making. The bones used in all the models are always very white in colour; this bleaching being achieved by exposure to either sulphur (used in the prisons as a disinfectant), hydrogen peroxide (used to bleach straw for plait manufacture), and lime (also used in the prisons).

Ivory was occasionally used when it was made available to the prisoners, to be used for small items such as the feet and lid handles of trinket boxes. The wood used for modelling was available in unlimited quantities, since much of this material was used in the construction, repair and heating of the prisons. The type of wood depended on the source. From within the prison would come oak and fir, while box, mahogany, lime and walnut were often supplied by civilians who actually commissioned specific items of work.

Many metals were used, again obtained from within and outside the depot. Iron, brass and copper were used in both sheet and wire form. Many ship models may be seen with the hull below the water-line covered in copper sheet, in imitation of the ship-building custom of the day to protect the hull from the depredations of the Toredon worm. Gold and silver are sometimes to be found lining parts of a model. In the Merchants House Museum, Plymouth, there are some models of contemporary French artillery equipment made of bone with silver fittings. These precious metals came from the personal ornaments of the prisoners, and from the gold and silver coins that were in circulation. The coins were beaten out into thin sheet and then cut up for the models.

The rigging for these models was made of hair, either human or horse. Hair was also used to make such curious articles as hair bracelets, finger rings and necklaces. Paint was used to colour the ships, trinket boxes and straw marquetry and came principally from the civilians in the markets. Many of the

trinket boxes have pictures painted on or in them.

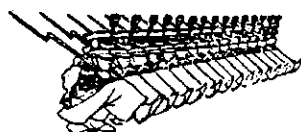
Before fashioning any of this material into a model, the prisoners had to make or purchase the necessary tools. Tools were present amongst the prisoners in great abundance, ostensibly for manufacturing but also put to good use as offensive weapons. In 1805, as a result of many escape attempts and some unrest, the Agent at Norman Cross impounded all implements and tools which were locked away during the night and reissued to the prisoners the next morning. The tools were made from pieces of hoop iron (from casks used for food storage), bolts, nails and knives. These were converted into knives, chisels, gouges, saws and a wide selection of other tools, including fine engraving tools, pens and brushes for forging banknotes.

The ship models are of all types, from ships of the line to small rowing boats, and were produced with intricate detail. They vary in size from such ambitious efforts as the two metre ship in the Watermen's Hall in London, made by American prisoners (and mounted on a stand made of wood from HMS Temeraire), to miniatures of about five centimetres in length. The majority however, are about sixty centimetres long. Many are mounted on bases of polished wood or straw marquetry, and some are enclosed in cabinets of wood or straw-work.

It is something of a myth that these models were all produced by a lone prisoner, working deep in the bowels of a hulk, with only a stub of a candle for illumination. In fact, much of the prisoner of war manufacturing activity was highly organised and involved many men. A group of prisoners would combine their talents to produce such models, each individual making a certain part, to be assembled by yet another into the finished item. While many of the ships were based on actual vessels, the makers had to rely on their memory for the details, and it was here that they allowed their imaginations free rein. Almost every part of the model would be decorated with carved scrolls, leaves, flowers or pierced filigree patterns, with ornate carving on the stern galleries and even carved deck furniture. It must be remembered that the prisoners were making these models for the local civilian market and so any addition to the model that would help it to sell would be utilised. Many of the bone ships have names; given to make the potential buyer think they were purchasing a model of an actual vessel.

Some models have been set upon a base representing a dockyard slipway with naval items lying alongside. Many of the larger models have a pair of draw strings protruding from under the transom, often tied to a bone head. When pulled they reveal a simple system that makes the guns disappear and run out; an ingenious broadside effect. The smaller models are just as elaborate, with carved figureheads the size of a grain of wheat; gun ports a few millimetres square; and sails made of wood shavings or translucent ivory of tissue paper thickness.

It was not only ships that were modelled out of bone. Museum collections around the country contain working model guillotines, often very ornately carved and rather fanciful models, most probably reflecting some of the events that had happened dur-



ing the lives of these men. A fascinating model to be found in Peterborough Museum is a bone chicken, about 20 centimetres in height, with the feathers carved from strips of bone. Many models have incorporated simple mechanical devices to make them move, while other items include musical instruments, chess sets and a wide variety of models produced by men with little to do but pander to their ingenuity. Many gaming items were manufactured, perhaps to be sold and used amongst the prisoners themselves. Domino sets, dice and pieces for the game 'Jack Straws' may all be seen in museum collections.

Many other items were made from bone, wood and straw. Peterborough Museum houses a fascinating collection of models of French military equipment made by French officers on parole at Oswestry, Shropshire, between 1811 and 1814. These were originally the property of Henry Tozer, the Agent for this Parole depot. The models are made primarily of wood and include ship's guns, field artillery, caissons, mortars, tools, shear-hoists, shells and powder barrels.

Straw Work

Both Norman Cross and Portchester Castle had, for a while, thriving straw plait industries amongst the prisoner population. At Norman Cross this was initially in the manufacture of straw hats and bonnets, but this was forbidden by the authorities from the earliest years of the prison's existence.

Straw plait was a staple industry of many English communities during the Napoleonic Wars, especially in the counties of Bedfordshire and Hertfordshire. During the 18th century fine straw hats had been imported in large quantities from Italy, but the war impeded supplies from abroad, and so the home industry became more important. The manufacture by the prisoners competed with that of the civilian population. Prisoners of war were fed by the State, and were supplying the English market with untaxed merchandise, in competition with the very people who contributed to their maintenance. As the war continued, the Government found more and more articles to tax, so as to raise the necessary funds to continue the conflict. Among these articles were straw hats and bonnets. The prisoners arranged for accomplices from amongst the guards and the civilians attending the markets to smuggle the straw in, and the manufactured hats out. Thus tax was avoided. Commissioner Sir Rupert George wrote that it was evident that the prisoners did smuggle in:

*"...the straw manufactured for the purpose of being made into hats, bonnets etc. by which the Revenue of our country is injured, and the poor who exist by that branch of trade would be turned out of employ."*¹³

The straw plait industry was very labour intensive and so the number of prisoners involved in the trade must have been considerable. It is assumed that much of the straw for this work came from the prisoner's bedding. While a small amount may initially have come from that source, most was supplied to the depots by local merchants. When this straw was used for marquetry it was acceptable to the authorities, but when used in the manufacture of plait the

trade in such material was stopped.

Wheat at that time grew to a height of about one metre, and after harvesting the stalk was cut into lengths of about 25 centimetres. It was then sorted into different grades according to thickness. It was then ready to be split into very fine plait; the finer the plait the better the quality of the finished hat or basket. Tools for splitting straw were made and used by the prisoners, and some of these unique (for the time) items, first used at Norman Cross, were adopted by the straw plait industry in Luton, Bedfordshire. The museum at Peterborough has in its collection some straw splitters made of bone with wooded handles, and others made of bronze, all used at Norman Cross. Other inventions were used:

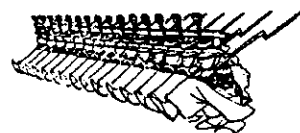
*"At Norman Cross they revolutionised the straw plaiting trade. Up to their time the straw was plaited whole and called 'Dunstable', but it was a case of necessity being the mother of invention. Their supply not being equal to the demand, one of them invented the 'splitter'. This consists of a small wheel, inserted in a mahogany frame, and finished in the centre with small sharp divisions like spokes. From the axle a small spike protrudes, on which a straw pipe is placed and pushed through, the cutters or spokes dividing it into as many strips as required. By this contrivance the plait could be made much finer, the strips could be used alternately with the outside and inside, or even the inside alone, which is white, and is known in the trade as 'rice straw'."*¹⁴

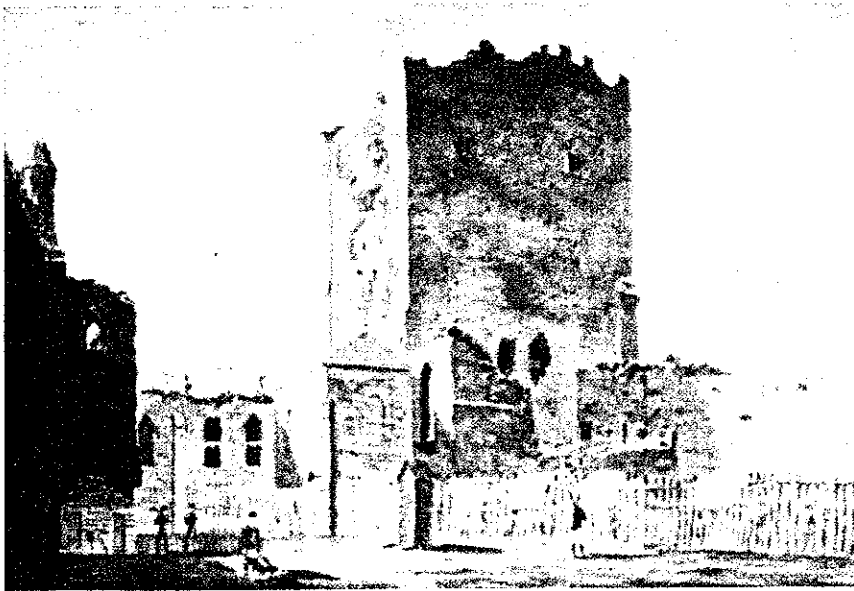
After splitting the straw would be bleached; dyed various colours; plaited in various styles, and flattened. This raw plait was sold by plait dealers to those who made hats and baskets, and these would be sold in the prison markets, albeit clandestinely.

Soldiers and civilians involved in this illegal straw plait trade ran a great risk. Soldiers caught aiding this activity received the lash for their participation, unless they were officers. In 1807 a Lieutenant Mortimer of the Militia garrison at Norman Cross was discovered to be involved in the selling of straw plait from the prison. The ensuing military enquiry forced him to leave the Militia service, but not before he had paid all money owing to the prisoners.¹⁵ Civilians were awarded prison sentences. Three such participants were tried at Huntingdon in 1811; one was sentenced to twelve and the others to six months imprisonment.¹⁶ However, the straw plait trade was a profitable one for both prisoners and their accomplices, and such a trade was extensive. As long as all straw work was strictly confined to various ornamental items, on which there was no tax, then it was allowed. The production of straw plait for hats was prohibited by an order of June 1798 but this did not stop the illicit manufacture of such materials. The Board wrote to the Agent at Norman Cross in November 1808:

*"If the manufacture of plait could be effectually prevented, it is not our wish to prohibit the prisoners from making baskets, boxes, or such like articles of straw. The prisoners might purchase wool and make frocks, for their own use; if any should be sold, a stop is to be put to the manufacture."*¹⁷

Straw was used to produce a wide variety of legal marquetry work, such as pictures, fans, tea-caddies,





The inner bailey of Portchester Castle showing the wooden stockade that divided the courtyard, and prisoners at work. Painting by Durrant.

© Hampshire Museums Service.

silk holders and trinket boxes, with each piece of straw being separately coloured and attached.

Art

Many prisoners took up art as an occupation. The more famous of these artists was Louis Garneray, incarcerated first on the *Prothée* hulk in Portsmouth Harbour, before being allowed his parole at Bishop's Waltham. While on the *Prothée* he taught French to the daughter of the ship's commander. With the money he earned he purchased paint, brushes and canvas, and developed a talent for painting, especially for seascapes. He also produced portraits of the guards, for a price of 6d to a shilling.

Indeed, Garneray turned his captivity into a career opportunity, sell-

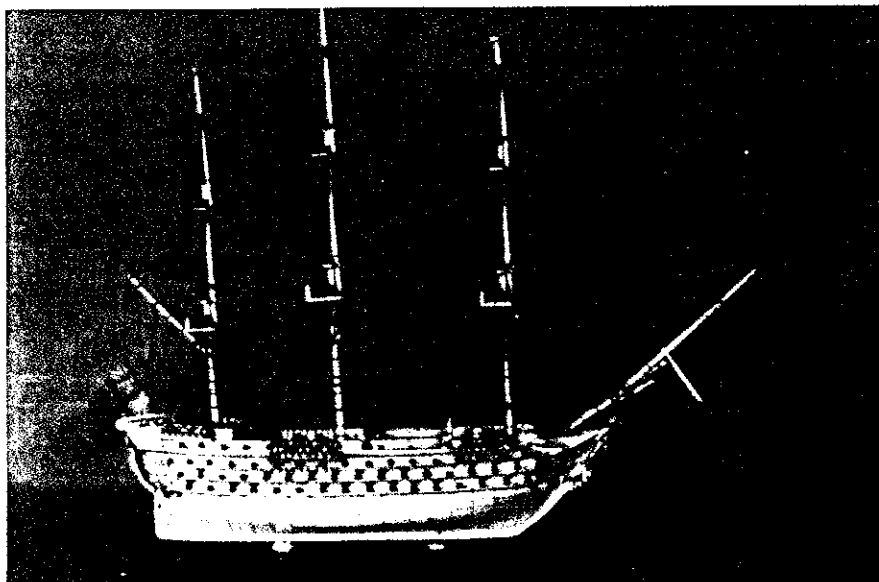
ing his work in Portsmouth, becoming a successful artist in France after the war, and publishing books during the 1840s on his adventures and captivity during the Napoleonic Wars. While his book entitled *The French Prisoner* is strongly anglophobic, and contains many rather fanciful stories of prisoner of war life with himself as the central character, it does give us a flavour of what life in the hulks and parole depots was like, and makes for an interesting read. In this book he tells us of his success as an artist in Portsmouth Harbour, whilst on board the *Prothée*:

"One day I was visited by a little round man, who came uninvited into my humble studio and began to look at my pictures in the most brazen manner, without a word to me! 'These seascapes', he said at last, 'are not



Straw marquetry picture produced by prisoners of war.

© Peterborough City Museum.

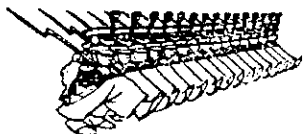


Bone ship in the Norman Cross Collection at Peterborough City Museum.

© Peterborough City Museum.

bad at all for a Frenchman. If you are inclined to be reasonable, perhaps we can come to some sort of agreement. I am a dealer in Portsea.'

As I was very short of money at that time I thought I saw heaven opening before me and I hastened to assure him that in matters of business I was not at all a difficult sort of person. 'My boy,' said the dealer, for it is the habit of the English to treat us with a contemptuous familiarity. 'My boy, you are wrong to speak in such a way. If it had been your fortune to fall in with a Jew instead of an honest man like me this admission would have cost you dear. But it was a good star that brought Abraham Curtis to you.'



*After a short discussion it was agreed that he would take all my pictures, on condition that they were of a certain size and finish, at one pound or twenty-five francs apiece. I was overjoyed at his offer, which I had not in the least expected. I received six pounds that very day for the pictures he found in my studio and took away with him."*¹⁸

Officers on parole occasionally decorated their lodgings with pictures painted directly onto the wall. In a Hardware shop in Newtown, Wales, there is a painting of a warship on the wall of the basement, carefully preserved by the proprietor of the shop. This picture is approximately 2 metres by 2 metres, and is titled *Neptune 74*, being attributed to French officers residing there in 1812.

One parole prisoner even took up interior decorating as a hobby. Pierre Augeraud was a lieutenant in the French Army, being captured in 1812. He was sent on parole to Llanfyllin in Wales, where he resided in what is now the Chemist's shop. He divided his time between gazing longingly out of the window at the Rector's daughter across the road, and decorating his rooms on the first floor with wall murals, depicting imaginary scenes, but some of the detail is reminiscent of the countryside in Spain, where he was captured.¹⁹

While these examples are some of the best art produced by Napoleonic prisoners, they also manufactured some very fine artwork that was not approved by the Admiralty; artwork that could lead the men concerned to the gallows!

In 1797, William Pitt's government issued a general circulation of banknotes. This paper money was an effort to limit the circulation and depletion of the country's gold reserves, and thus aid the finance of Britain's war effort. Paper money only works if there is enough gold available to back all of the notes in circulation, and the system can be undermined by the production of large numbers of forged notes. The French Government realised this in 1797, and produced large numbers of forged British banknotes that were circulated in the West Indies and the United States of America, with smugglers also bringing them over from Calais to Dover. For example, in 1801 a total of £15,549 worth of forged notes was discovered in circulation in this country, half of which was attributable to the low denominations of £1 and £2 notes, while the remainder was mostly £5 notes.²⁰ Forged banknotes became a great problem; with the public developing a mistrust of this paper money. The Bank of England's Inspectors and Clerks were kept busy examining both real and forged notes, and after 1803 these gentlemen were often called upon to visit the hulks and land prisons to examine notes found in the possession of prisoners of war.

Forged banknotes varied in their appearance, depending on the type of paper available and the skill of the counterfeiter. There were two ways of forging banknotes; either by producing copper plates and printing money, which was an expensive way of production; or by use of pen and ink. Some of the best examples of hand-drawn notes were made by prisoners of war, who had plenty of time on their hands with which to develop their skills.

Forgery by prisoners of war was first detected at

Norman Cross in 1804, and thereafter became a serious problem, especially as far as the Bank of England was concerned. The Bank pursued forgers wherever they might be, and found helpful allies in Their Lordships at the Admiralty, and the Commissioners of the Transport Board. Anyone convicted of forging banknotes went to the gallows, while passing or uttering forged notes resulted in a term of imprisonment or transportation to Botany Bay. However, there was a serious problem in gaining enough evidence to convict an individual for forgery. The person concerned had to be caught in the act of forging, or had to be discovered with pen, ink and paper about their person. To convict someone of uttering forged notes, it had to be proved that the individual knew the note was forged. This was not always easy, as the forgeries were often far away from the forger when discovered. Prisoners of war acquired genuine banknotes when they sold their wares in the prison markets. Louis Garneray would probably have been given real banknotes for his paintings.

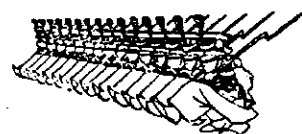
An example of the problem facing the Bank of England occurred in January 1812.

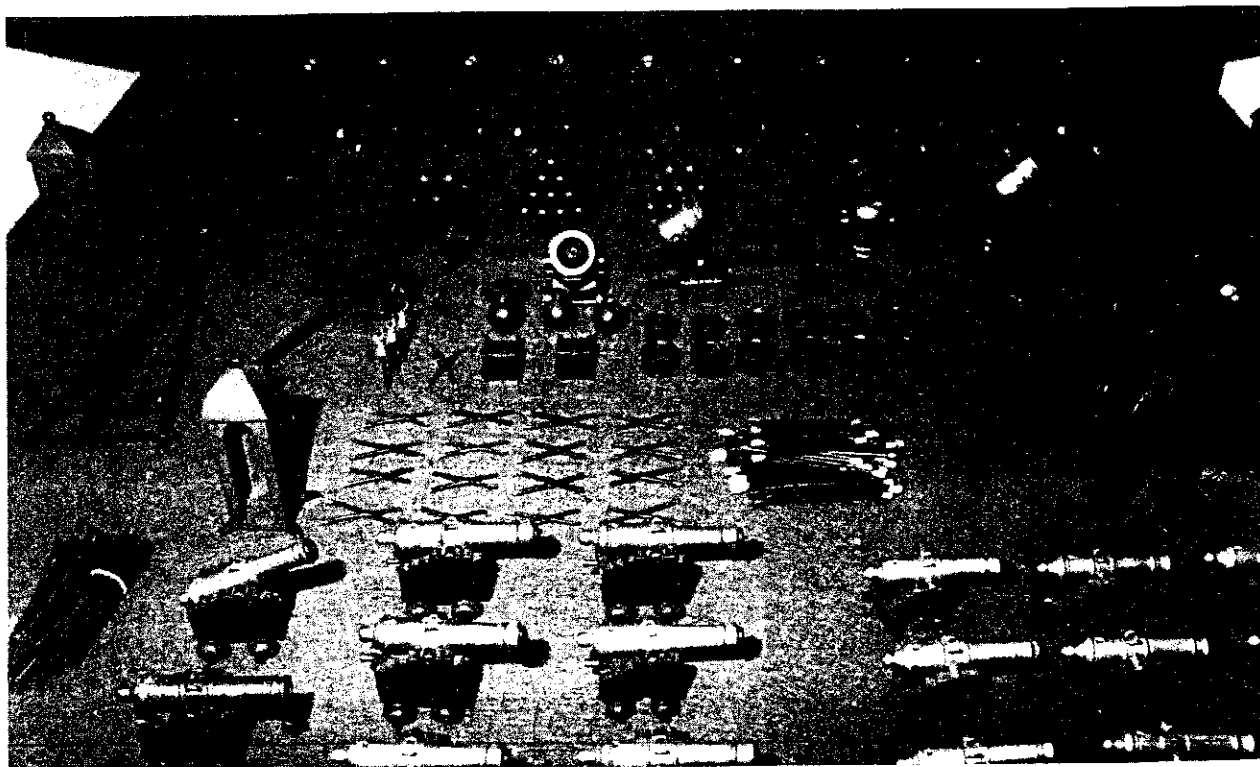
Jean Faragos, a French prisoner, was apprehended uttering a forged £5 note in Portsmouth. He had offered it to a shopkeeper who, suspecting it was forged, apprehended Faragos. Faragos stated that he had received the note from one Louis Paraca, who admitted it and on whom was found another forged £5 note. Now Paraca claimed he received the two notes from a French prisoner named Barrié, on board the *Hector* Prison Ship at Plymouth when he, Paraca, was confined there. Barrié owed Paraca for some clothes and straw-work he did for him. Paraca gave one of the notes to Faragos to buy some handkerchiefs for him when Faragos was allowed ashore on some errands.

The Bank's solicitors advised that the evidence would not be enough to convict, but recommended that Mr Buckley the Constable be rewarded for his diligence in helping to detect this business, and to encourage others to look out for forgeries.²¹

This system of rewards was used to catch a number of forgers in the war prisons. While many prisoners of war made money by literally making money, there were others who could make even more money by informing on these forgers, as was the case at Norman Cross in 1805 (See Table 1). These men were involved in the discovery of a plan to produce forged notes at this depot. The two clerks were able to converse without suspicion with the two prisoners, Coulon and Raige, who acted as informers. The information was passed to Captain Pressland, the naval officer in command at the prison. He in turn passed the information to the Bank of England. This went on for about a month, and resulted in two prisoners being convicted of forgery and hanged. The Bank paid a reward to all concerned, and Coulon and Raige were released by order of the Transport Board, partly as a further reward for their services, and partly for their own safety.

Pressland however, being a public-spirited naval officer, declined his reward as he was only carrying out his duty. The Bank however, insisted that he accept a piece of plate instead of the 50 guineas.





Part of the impressive and comprehensive collection of artillery models made by French officers on parole at Oswestry, and now in the Norman Cross Collection.

© Paul Chamberlain and reproduced with permission of Peterborough City Museum.

Pressland asked for:

*"...a goblet with which to quaff the health of the Governor, Directors and success to the Bank of England."*²²

This system of rewards became a very effective way of discovering forgeries within the prisons, and the Admiralty worked very closely with the Bank of England on this matter. These rewards could cause problems however.

Table 2 shows the rewards paid to the officers and men involved in the detection and conviction of two forgers on board the *Glory* Prison Ship at Chatham, and demonstrates the extent to which the Bank would pay reward money to detect and deter this activity within the prisoner of war population. However, John Martin, the ship's carpenter, wrote to the Governor of the Bank of England complaining that his reward of £10 was unfair, as he considered that he had played a considerable role in finding the notes concealed within the sides of the ship. Sergeant Thomas Turner complained to the Governor that Privates Mead and Perry were part of his detachment, yet they had received more money than he had. William Gifford, the Gunner on board the *Glory*, also wrote to the Governor complaining that he had been involved in detecting forged notes in the past yet had received no reward.

Now if these men thought that they were dealing with the listening bank, then they were very much mistaken. The Bank of England fired a broadside in the direction of the Admiralty, stating that rewards were only paid to the crew and garrison in the event of a conviction. William Gifford's case was a separate matter. Their Lordships were requested to convey this information to all concerned, together with a message from the Governor of the Bank:

"...we cannot undertake to carry on a correspon-

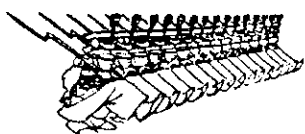
*dence with every petty officer who may fancy that rewards of this nature should be distributed like prize money."*²³

Forged banknotes were used as currency between prisoners and with civilians who traded in the prison markets. The prisoners had an unusual, but no doubt often effective means of transferring money from one ship to another, as a Royal Marine discovered in 1812.

One day a marine sentry patrolling the walkway around a hulk at Chatham was hit on the head by a potato, thrown from another ship. On inspection, he discovered that it had been hollowed out and inside was a forged £2 note. Whether hitting a marine sentry was an added bonus in this form of credit transfer is not known, but this event was noted in the minutes of one of the Bank's meetings.²⁴ Many forged banknotes were found in the possession of soldiers and marines guarding prisoners of war, and their wives, who often ran errands for the captives.

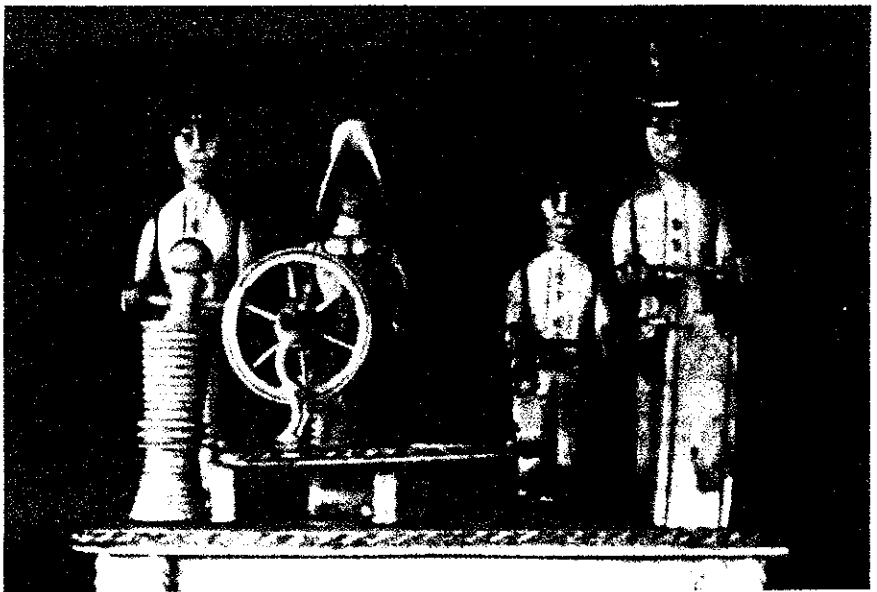
Between 1804 and 1815 a total of 28 prisoners of war were convicted of forgery and hanged, and this total included three Americans. 1812 was good for convictions, in that 7 prisoners were convicted in that year alone. Julien Dubois, a French prisoner at Portchester Castle, was tried at the Lent Assizes in Winchester on 4 March 1812 and *'...convicted of forging a £2 banknote and for uttering the same knowing it to be forged.'* He was executed on 28 March.

The Bank of England was always determined to prosecute offenders, whoever they might be. Private Franklin of the Royal Marines was part of the guard on board the *Glory* Prison Ship. He was convicted of having *'...received a note from a French prisoner and uttered it, knowing it to be forged.'* The forger was discovered to be one Auguste Duboille. Both Franklin



and Dubois went to the gallows.²⁵

In April 1812 the Admiralty asked the Bank for details of the French prisoners who had been executed for forgery so that a notice could be prepared and posted in all the depots as a deterrent. Conviction of forgery carried the death penalty. Conviction of uttering forged notes carried a term of imprisonment. But here was a problem! These men were already in prison. To overcome this somewhat significant obstacle, the Bank arranged with the Admiralty that those convicted of uttering forgeries would be confined in cells in Edinburgh Castle or at Newgate, and all expenses relating to their confinement would be paid for by the Bank. In 1812 transportation to Botany Bay became a punishment for uttering forgeries. But even this sentence was



Mechanical bone figures in the Norman Cross Collection.

© Peterborough City Museum.



Bone chicken in the Norman Cross Collection.

© Peterborough City Museum.

to be the most effective method of detecting and removing from circulation spurious banknotes.

If forging banknotes caused a few headaches for the Their Lordships at the Admiralty, the Transport Board, and the Bank of England, then one particular activity caused many a headache for those people attempting to improve the morals of the nation, a matter with which Their Lordships were only too happy to assist.

Pornography

At Norman Cross the 'depraved taste of some of the British purchasers' resulted in the production by the prisoners of obscene pictures and carvings. Even by 1808, Norman Cross had a reputation for the indecent material coming out of the depot, although other prisons did manufacture such items. The

not the punishment the Bank of England hoped.

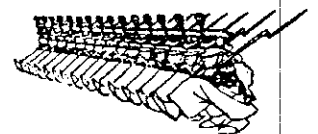
In that year one Nicholas Longueville, incarcerated in Portchester Castle, was convicted of coining Bank Tokens. He was sentenced to transportation. The Agent at Portchester informed the Bank that Longueville was pleased with his sentence, and looking forward to his new life. Longueville's attitude was; no more War Prison; no more conscription in the French Army; no more Napoleonic Wars. He was off to a new life down under. The Bank wasn't having any of this. They arranged to have him sent to Edinburgh Castle instead!²⁶

Forgery was a serious problem at the time in all the prison depots, but the system of rewards seemed



Forged £5 banknote attributed to French prisoners of war.

© Governor and Company of the Bank of England.



national output seemed to reach a peak in that year, so much so that in Bristol, the local secretary of the Society for the Suppression of Vice, wrote to the Admiralty to complain about the amount of vulgar snuffboxes, toys and drawings emanating from Stapleton Prison, on the outskirts of the town. As a result, the entire prison market was closed until the actual culprits were informed upon by their colleagues. The guilty individuals were transferred to the hulks at Portsmouth.²⁷ This was the most effective way of combating the problem, by closing the markets and thus affecting all the prisoners until the manufacturers of such material were discovered. Certainly there was a lucrative trade in such articles, with many civilians acting as agents on the outside of the depots.

Many prisoners of war arrived in this country during the Napoleonic period. Many died and were buried in churchyards, where their graves may still be seen. A lasting memorial to these men, however, may be seen in the bone ships, chickens and guillotines; trinket boxes; and paintings in museums and private collections around the country. These items were made to give simple men something to do, and to allow them to raise money with which to better their lot. These bone models gave pleasure to the early nineteenth century tourists who purchased them, and they continue to give us pleasure today.

Table 1
Rewards Paid at Norman Cross Prison Depot,
October 1805

Captain Pressland	Agent	50 Guineas
Mr Todd	Clerk	20 Guineas
Mr Delapoux	Clerk	20 Guineas
Alexander Coulon	German	£30
Francois Raige	French	£25

Table 2.
Rewards paid to Officers and Men on board the
Glory Prison Ship, April 1812

Lt. Lyte	RN	Piece of Plate
Lt. Campbell	Marines	£50
Robert Weir	Master	£50
William Hay	Master's Mate	£50
Robert Needham	Marine Private	£25
David Mead	Marine Private	£25
Thomas Lowe	Marine Sergeant	£20
John Prothero	Marine Private	£20
John Perry	Marine Private	£20
John Martin	Ship's Carpenter	£10
Thomas Turner	Marine Sergeant	£10
Alexander Mayers	Marine Private	£10

Total reward £290

Acknowledgements:

I would like to thank the following for their kind assistance with my research for this article:

Hampshire County Council Museums Service for permission to use the pictures from the Captain Durrant collection, held at Chilcomb House, Chilcomb Lane, Winchester, Hants., SO23 8RD. This is a very impressive collection of watercolours painted by Captain Durrant of the 2nd West Riding Militia,

covering numerous scenes in Kent, Hampshire, Sussex, The Isle of Wight, Wiltshire, Essex, Suffolk and Devon. They include pictures of everything that Durrant saw, from churches to castles to ships to prison depots, at which he was stationed as part of the garrison. This collection of 142 paintings and sketches is an important record of England during the early 19th Century.

Peterborough Museum & Art Gallery for permission to publish pictures of items in their superb collection relating to the prison depot at Norman Cross. The Norman Cross Collection is the finest collection of its kind and well worth a visit. Details can be obtained from the museum at Priestgate, Peterborough, Cambs., PE1 1LF. Tel. 01733 343329.

The Curator of the Bank of England Museum, Threadneedle Street, London, EC2R 8AH. Tel. 0171 601 5545., for permission to publish the photograph of the forgery attributed to prisoners of war. The museum has a collection of such forgeries plus a wealth of documentary material relating to the early paper notes and their forgery in the prison depots. The museum tells the story of money, and also has an interesting display relating to the Bank of England Volunteers of the Napoleonic period.

Notes:

1. For a detailed account of the formation of the Transport Board see Condon, M.E. *The Establishment of the Transport Board - A Subdivision of the Admiralty*, 4 July 1794. The *Mariners Mirror* 58: 69-84, 1972.
2. The Public Record Office (PRO). Kew, holds these Commissioner's reports under ADM105/44.
3. A very detailed account of prisoners of war is *Prisoners of War in Britain 1756-1815* by Francis Abell (London 1914). For an account of the prison hulks see *The English Prison Hulks* by W.Branch Johnson (Phillimore, 1970).
4. PRO ADM103/127. *General Entry Book of French Prisoners of War on the Europe Prison Ship*. Most of these captives were transferred to the Hector prior to release.
5. PRO ADM103/368. *General Entry Book of French Prisoners of War at Forton Prison 1813-14*.
6. Charles Campbell. *The Intolerable Hulks: British Shipboard Confinement 1776-1857* (Heritage Books, Maryland, 1994).
7. Abell *ibid.*, p166-185.
8. British Museum B.P.8/9. Correspondance with the French Government relative to prisoners of war.
9. Ludovic Kennedy. *Nelson and His Captains* (London 1975), p103.
10. Abell *ibid.*, p173.
11. PRO ADM105/44. Commissioner's Report 26 July 1808.
12. Ewart C. Freeston, *Prisoner of War Ship Models 1775-1825* (London 1987), p43. This work is the most comprehensive ever written on the subject of POW models, examining every aspect of their design and construction.
13. PRO ADM105/44. Commissioner's Report 19 March 1808.
14. Thomas James Walker, *The Depot for Prisoners of War at Norman Cross Huntingdonshire, 1796-1816* (London 1913), p138-139.
15. Peterborough Museum E535. Order Day Book for Garrison at Norman Cross, June 1807.
16. Walker *ibid.*, p138.
17. PRO ADM98/235. Transport Board to Agent, Norman Cross, 11 November 1808.
18. Louis Garneray, *The French Prisoner* (trans. L.Wood) (London 1957), p54-55.
19. Murray L. Chapman, *Napoleonic Prisoners of War in Llanfyllin*, Montgomery Collection Volume L, p70-85.
20. Derrick Byatt, *Promises to Pay: The First Three Hundred Years of Bank of England Notes* (London 1994), p43.
21. Bank of England Archive Section (BoE) AB87/1. Letter No.44, 24 January 1812.
22. BoE AB86/2. Letters No.8-12, October 1805.
23. BoE AB87/1. Letters No. 172, 176, 177, 179 and 184, April 1812.
24. *ibid.* Letter Nos. 228 and 234, November 1812.
25. *ibid.* Letter No.168, April 1812.
26. *ibid.* Letter Nos. 199 and 200, June 1812.
27. Dorothy Vinter. *The Old French Prison*, Stapleton, Transactions of the Bristol and Gloucestershire Archaeological Society Volume 75, (Bristol 1956) p162-163.

