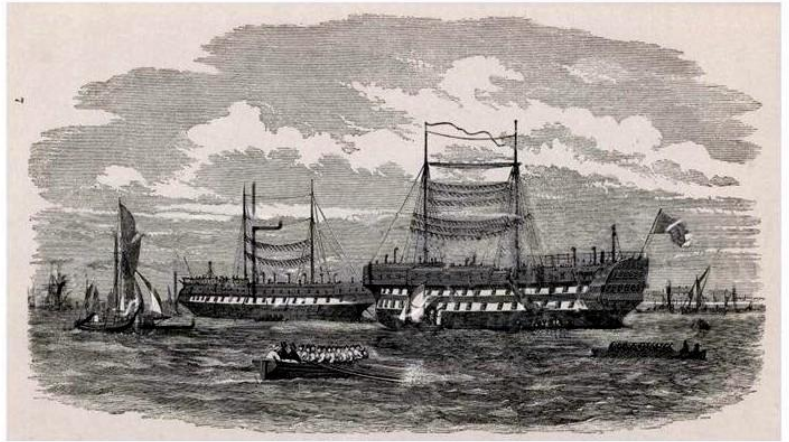


Lewes Invalid Convict Establishment

The Lewes Invalid Convict Establishment, also called St. John's Convict Establishment was located in the Old Jail which was to become the Naval Prison at Lewes in East Sussex. It was a temporary location for approximately 300 invalid convicts of whom some 20 or 30 were mental cases, some bordering on insanity and a considerable number were convalescents after accidents or acute diseases, sent from able-bodied prisons and some were chronic invalids.

The need for such a prison arose from the demise of the prison hulks which up until the 1850s had housed convicts in the most of appalling conditions. Invalid and sick convicts had been housed in a prison hulk called the *Unité* which was an old French vessel moored at Woolwich. In 1847 there was an inquiry into the general treatment and the conditions of the hulks at Woolwich, which found that on the *Unité* the great majority of the patients, were infested with vermin and their persons, in many instances were begrimed with dirt. No supply of body linen had been issued and many of the men had been five weeks without a change; all records had been lost of the time when the blankets had been washed. Neither towels nor combs were provided for the prisoners and the unwholesome odour from the water closets was almost unsupportable. On admission of new cases, the existing patients were directed to leave their beds and go into hammocks and the new cases were turned into their vacated beds without changing the sheets. There was some attempt to improve the conditions on this hulk but it was not until 14th July 1857 that the prisoners were finally to leave and were moved to Lewes. This happened when another hulk moored close by (*The Defence*) caught fire and the semi-invalid prisoners aboard were evacuated to the *Unité*, which could not cope with the increased numbers. They were then all transferred to the Invalid prison in Lewes and the more able bodied convicts from *the Defence* were sent on to Woking.



The Prison hulks 'Defence' and 'Unité'



As can be seen by the Lewes Naval Prison sign the prison had formerly been the House of Correction built in 1793. Although sold to the Admiralty c.1854 it was used as a temporary Invalid Convict Prison from 1857-60 until the new prison at Knapp Hill Woking was fully operational. Before this, it was also used to house Russian prisoners, as a report in *The Times* for October 23rd 1854 announces the arrival of 204 Russian Prisoners at Lewes. A previous report in *The Times* dated June 12th 1854 stated that an engineer had been to inspect the old gaol and that after his favourable reports; the Government had purchased it to hold the POWs.

Sources:

BRANCH JOHNSON, W. *The English Prison Hulks*. Phillimore 1970.

<http://freepages.genealogy.rootsweb.com/~blaker/reminiscences/commence.html>

The Times newspaper online.

