Sixty voyages of convict ships transported 11,551 Irish male prisoners to Sydney between 1823 and 1837. The prisoners had been held on two hulks, the Surprize which lay at Cove and the Essex at Dún Laoghaire. Both were demasted frigates brought into service to reduce overcrowding at Cork and Dublin gaols. Experienced naval surgeons were engaged for each voyage.

Conditions were similar on both hulks. Violence erupted at times when factions targeted sickly prisoners. The diet was at starvation levels; the prisoners being fed at a rate of 3d. per man per day. No work was organised on either vessel. The clothing issued was poorly made; flimsy and insufficient to keep out the cold. The medical service was minimal; the overriding concern being economy.

Edward Trevor (1763-1837), General Superintendent of Prisons and Hulks, controlled the embarkation of the prisoners. He was a pervasive presence at departure whether from Cork or Dublin. Frequently he rejected the naval surgeons’ attempts to re-land seriously ill prisoners. Trevor’s commitment was to despatch as many prisoners as possible; whether fit or unfit. In this resolve he was aided by the surgeons of both hulks.

The Inspectors General of Prisons praised the conduct of the hulks and held Edward Trevor in good standing. However a hiatus existed between the official view and the reality as the inmates attempted to set fire to both hulks.

Some prisoners concealed illnesses in order to take their chances at sea. A few attempted to remain in Ireland but failed. There were 131 deaths of prisoners on the voyages but those suffering phthisis on arrival were likely to die within the year.

The Surprize and the Essex remained in service for 14 years before being broken up during October 1837.

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