

# Bibby Stockholm: The Political Economy of Offshore Asylum Accommodation and Confinement

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### Introduction

On April 5th, 2023 the UK government announced plans to house 500 asylum seekers on the *Bibby Stockholm*, a floating barge which will be docked at Portland Port, Dorset. The decision was heavily criticised by pro migrant rights groups such as the Refugee Council who argue it is ‘entirely unsuitable for their (asylum seekers) needs’, which will only isolate potentially vulnerable people (Wallis 2023). The announcement came in the wake of the recent Illegal Migration Bill and the pledge to end the accommodation of asylum seekers in hotels. The Home Office proposes that the barge will be part of a wider suite of changes to asylum accommodation, with plans to house people in former military bases and army barracks such as RAF Scraton in Lincolnshire and Catterick Garrison, N. Yorks, as well as disused ferries (Taylor 2023). Whilst claiming that increased numbers of asylum seekers and the backlog of asylum cases has ‘overwhelmed’ the asylum system, the proposals were justified as a cost cutting mechanism to deal with the 6 million pounds a day bill for hotel accommodation. This is both despite the extensive costs of housing people in the *Bibby Stockholm* which estimates put at £20,000 a day and the fact that hotels have been relied upon because of a total lack of planning by the Home Office. The Home Office proposals also come in the wake of recent far right and neonazi mobilisation against hotel accommodation housing asylum seekers. Alongside, the rise of racist NIMBYist protests which have been organised from early 2023, exemplified in the disturbances in Knowsley in February 2023.

In this context, the barge is part of a wider set of punitive policy responses which aim to scapegoat and target people claiming asylum as ‘illegal migrants’, who are represented as draining the resources of the ‘British taxpayer’. Immigration Minister Robert Jenrick made this logic crystal clear when making the announcement on accommodation when he argued that:

We will not elevate the interests of illegal migrants over the British people we are elected to serve. We have to use alternative accommodation options, as our European neighbours are doing - including the use of barges and ferries to save the British taxpayer money and to prevent the UK becoming a magnet for asylum shoppers in Europe (Home Office 2023).

In light of this, the decision to use the barge is not exceptional but the case is useful to illustrate how asylum accommodation has become part of the security infrastructure used to police immigration and as a logic of 'deterrence'. At the same time it offers us an opportunity to consider both the symbolic and material politics of asylum reception and accommodation as part of the wider manufactured crisis of 'illegal migration' and channel crossings (which punitive and poor quality accommodation are viewed as responding to). In this short text, we ask what is the significance of housing people on the barge 'offshore'? And what symbolic and material interests align in the decision to contract the *Bibby Stockholm* as asylum accommodation in coastal Dorset?

This is not the first time that barges have been used to house asylum seekers. It is not even the first time that the *Bibby Stockholm* has housed those seeking asylum. The barge was used by immigration authorities in the Netherlands from 2000 as a 'detention boat'. Whilst the UK government has pledged that the barge accommodation will be 'basic but safe', accounts by undercover journalist Robert van de Griend paint a very different picture of the conditions on the barge as it was used previously in Rotterdam (van de Griend 2006). van de Griend (2006) details the appalling conditions, health scares and state abandonment of those on the barge: summing up what he saw as 'Shit on the wall, rape, arson, assault and disinterested colleagues'. In 2023 the barge will be 47 years old, the average lifespan of a modern ship is 25-30 years which begs further questions about the suitability of the accommodation and the safety of those on board going forward.

As the case of the Netherlands confirms, the UK government is not alone in using ships to house asylum seekers. Notably, the Scottish Government has housed Ukrainian asylum seekers in two ferries at Leith in Edinburgh and at King George V docks (with a joint capacity to house 3,400 people). Because of the cramped and overcrowded conditions on the ferries there have been substantial outbreaks of scarlet fever and other associated physical and mental health risks (Byrant 2022). In 1987, the *Earl Williams* ferry became notorious as the 'first floating immigration detention centre' in British mainland waters (Bazalgette 2018) when it was docked at Harwich Essex, mainly holding asylum seekers from Sri Lanka. Whilst migrant advocate groups revealed the inappropriate and unsafe conditions on board at the time, the conditions were apparently not spartan and unsafe enough for the right wing press with *The Daily Mail* calling asylum seekers 'gatecrashers in cushy berths' (Bazalgette 2018). Announcing the proposal to use the *Bibby Stockholm* in 2023, the Telegraph and Daily Mail

both sounded appalled at the idea that asylum seekers on the barge would have access to a gym *and a bar*.

## Offshore and Empire

It is important to recognise that the 'offshore' has long been a space to confine 'unwanted' and surplus populations, shaped as this is by the history of British and European Empires (Davies et al 2021). Commissioning the *Bibby Stockholm* to house asylum seekers floating in a port which is both at once 'at sea' and confined to one place is indicative of historical experiments in incarceration and border control. Floating prisons were regularly used by the Imperial British State, such as in the case of the Irish uprisings in the 1920s, where political dissidents were held in naval prison ships to remove them from mobilising the local population (Kahili 2021). Floating prisons have continued to be used by the British state, for example Portland Port previously housed a floating prison from 1997-2005 (more on this below). The floating prison in Britain can be traced back to the Hulk Act in 1776 which formalised the use of confining poor and criminalised people on Hulk barges on the Thames and along the Southern Coast. At the time used as an alternative to forced removals to penal colonies or forced labour camps (Campbell 2001). Slave ships crossing the middle passage perhaps best exemplifies how racist imprisonment, shipping and the sea were bound together under European colonialism. Island prisons and labour camps were also used by nearly all European colonial projects, whether this be the notorious Devils Island in the French South Pacific, or the Andaman Islands in the Indian Ocean. The familiar rationale of these offshore spaces was that political dissidents, indentured labourers, aliens, the enslaved, vagrants, unwanted populations etc could be incarcerated away from mainland 'civilisation', held in a legal limbo where the rule of law was suspended and where connections to political as well as intimate and social relations could be destroyed. As well as being confined, these populations were regularly used as a source of cheap and highly disciplined labour. It is perhaps no surprise that early immigration practices were experimented on island countries such as Mauritius (Sharma 2020), through offshore quarantine centres, and in offshore detention practices such as Ellis Island which focussed on confining and filtering productive and unproductive bodies. The IR scholar Laleh Khalili (2021) has also argued, that such sites of racialised discipline 'offshore', are connected to racial hierarchies that we see in international shipping, where ships are configured around a structure of labour in which postcolonial migrants from Asia and Africa are confined to dangerous and lowly paid jobs through deeply unequal contracts. It is significant in this context, that the *Bibby Stockholm* was designed to house labourers working on construction sites, oil rigs and in ports.

The unique potential of the floating prison, immigration detention centre and later floating asylum accommodation is that it offers a space of confinement which is both within reach of, but not on, the mainland with its everyday social relations. This means that people are symbolically and materially separated from everyday life whilst confined to this maritime

space. However, whilst the benefit of a ship might be the potential for mobility (sailing across an ocean across or international borders etc), this is denied in the immobility (however, temporary in the case of asylum accommodation) of sites such as the *Bibby Stockholm*. The use of the barge offshore is thus a further the materialisation of racial segregation which runs through UK and European immigration systems (Tyerman 2022).

### Why use the barge?

Despite clear historical evidence of the unsafe conditions on the barge and its clear unsuitability as a place to house asylum claimants who will be further marginalised from communities of support, the Home Office has pushed ahead with the *Bibby Stockholm* plan. The initial contract for the barge is 18 months with the possibility of extension. Reflecting on Jenrick's comments above and the stated desire 'not to elevate the interests of illegal migrants over the British people we are elected to serve' we might indeed argue that it is perhaps *because* of the potential for poor conditions and the distinct spatialisation of the barge offshore that the UK government has moved ahead with the plan.

The Home Office plans to locate 500 male asylum seekers on the *Bibby Stockholm*. Those to be housed are described as 'single men' who have entered the country through irregular, or to use the state's language, 'illegal routes'. They will be allowed to leave the barge but the accommodation will be patrolled by private security and there will be a maximum length of time people can leave the barge for. Staff will be expected to contact any person who has not returned to their accommodation before 11pm (although this is not labelled as a 'curfew'). In this context, the barge promises detention-like accommodation which is devoid of comfort and long term liveability. This correlates with the hostile environment where migrants are not hosted as those making legitimate rights claims but instead 'illegals' to be deterred by the system. This plays off the longstanding figuration of the 'bogus asylum seeker' who is merely treated as an economic migrant, or instead, a consumer 'shopping' for the best deal in 'soft touch' Britain (Bhatia 2014). In the contemporary binary of illegal vs genuine refugee, the 'genuine refugee' will not be deterred by poor accommodation because the genuine refugee has been through 'hell', they are constructed as a passive victim who holds no rights other than the most basic humanitarian subsistence (*to be kept alive and not killed*). They are racialized as being unworthy of full subsistence, political and economic rights and as an unproductive parasitic presence. It is worth noting here that the racialisation of asylum seekers is both sexualised and gendered, with the young single men deemed the archetypal bogus asylum seeker who has 'queue jumped' the most vulnerable (read women, children, old people) by crossing the English Channel and who is frequently posed as a criminal and sexual risk to young white women. The Home Office decision to force this accommodation on 'single men' further legitimates these claims and follows the logic that these people's treatment will demand little public empathy.

The racialised criminalisation of asylum seekers as ‘illegal migrants’ is also arguably reproduced by the structure of offshore accommodation. Modelling accommodation on confinement and detention (which is already normalised through European asylum reception) actively constitutes the illegality of those seeking asylum. Especially in light of people who are portrayed as having crossed the Channel ‘illegally’ on small boats. It also plays off the wider criminalisation of those seeking asylum (Bhatia 2014), for example the Home Secretary Suella Braverman on April 26th 2023 linked the presence of those seeking asylum in communities with a rise in criminal activity:

In my conversations with many police chiefs around the country, they are now reporting back to me that [about] drugs gangs. They’re dealing with people who came on small boats. Not in all cases, but it is becoming a notable feature of everyday crime fighting on the streets of England and Wales (quoted in Adu and Syal 2023).

The links between racialisation and criminalisation have a historical precedent, particularly around the framing of the imminent social danger of ‘gang violence’ (see below for more on this). We can also consider how this criminalisation manifests part of what Mainwaring and Silverman (2017) conceptualise as the ‘sovereign spectacle of detention’. This push towards detention-like accommodation reveals the state’s desire to treat the asylum seeker as a criminal to be punished, which demonstrates that the state has sovereign control to regulate ‘dangers’. At the same time the treatment of the asylum seekers as criminals - kept in surveilled and secure mass accommodation - works to *evidence* this ‘criminality’. *They are ‘illegal’ and thus need to be subjected to carceral strategies; subsequently their confinement proves that they are criminals.* Here we need to consider the links between former experiments in racialized punishment across the British Empire and hierarchies of worth which are remade in the case of the *Bibby Stockholm* and other practices of confinement and immobilisation. This has both symbolic and material registers.

Jenrick’s appeal to be saving the British taxpayer from resource draining ‘illegal migrants’ needs to be read in the context of both the longer histories of creating and confining ‘surplus populations’ alongside the contemporary ideology of austerity and the cost of living crisis (precipitated by profit driven inflation and wage stagnation). Images of asylum seekers being hosted in hotels has been presented as treating ‘foreigners’ in a manner superior to that of ‘hard working’ British people struggling for subsistence. Despite the well evidenced poor conditions of most hotels and the long term mental health effects of this accommodation (Grierson 2021), the asylum seeker hotel is regularly presented by the media, conservative MPs and the Home Secretary as a 5\* luxury holiday (for example, Cole et al 2022). This is significant in the context of neoliberal austerity and the cost of living crisis where people seeking asylum are presented as benefiting from the resources of the state whilst British citizens’ wages decrease and state services crumble. Gargi Battachrya (2015) has argued that

inside the ideology of endless austerity that the UK finds itself governed by, it has become naturalised that there are not enough resources for everyone to be treated with dignity, respect and equality. The response to this is an imagined race to maintain even the slimmest margins of material and symbolic privilege (we can view this both in terms of ‘wages of whiteness’ Narayan 2017 and the steady normalisation of a ‘lifeboat ethics’ in the face of ecological collapse). The Home Office’s decision to enforce poor and unsafe accommodation on single male asylum seekers can thus be read as a spectacle to signify and prop up the (degrading) benefits of British citizenship and whiteness.

In short, whilst ‘British taxpayers’ sit in freezing houses, eating turnips<sup>1</sup> and working for fastly depreciating wages, they can at least say they are not on a floating barge. This becomes a racialised moral case for punishing the ‘illegal’. It is important to note that far right campaigns against asylum seeker hotels make nearly identical claims as the UK government, with slogans like ‘5 star hotels for migrants, whilst Britain freezes’ (Dearden 2023). Whilst relying upon white supremacist imaginaries of who is deserving of subsistence and the resources of the state, this equally pits those struggling to meet basic needs against migrants in a way that aims to destroy multi-racial working class solidarity (Nayaran 2017). By blaming asylum seekers for draining the resources of the state, this is ultimately a gift to the ruling elite and capital (especially agribusiness and the fossil fuel industry) which continues to amass historically unprecedented profits and whose role in the cost of living crisis is entirely obscured.

Because of the spatialisation of the barge in Portland harbour and the criminalisation of people claiming asylum, the accommodation and occupants are likely to be placed in a tense relationship vis a vis the local population and everyday social interactions. As scholars of migrant detention and refugee camps have evidenced, the spatialisation of refugees and asylum seekers in peripheral spaces often works to constitute people as peripheral and unwanted subjects (Bird et al 2021 although practices of solidarity often develop to contest this Tyerman 2021). We know that the nationalities who make up UK asylum claimants are overrepresented by former British colonies and spaces of imperial intervention and extraction such as Afghanistan, Eritrea, Iran, Iraq and more recently Albania. The nearest settlements on the Isle of Portland are occupied by a largely white and semi-rural population with limited refugee diasporas (and an overall population of 13,117). As asylum seekers from the global south are already negatively racialized and deemed culturally ‘different’ (often through the twin registers of Islamophobia and orientalist notions of dangerous criminality sexualised masculinity) the confinement of people in securitised and detention like accommodation in a harbour works to reproduce racist registers, in that it makes this group of people look ‘out of

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<sup>1</sup> This refers to the supply chain crisis in 2023 where salad and tomato products were slow to reach supermarket shelves. The highly ridiculed response to this by Theresa Coffey, the secretary of state for the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, was that people should try eating local seasonal British products like turnips.

place'. It is noticeable that as soon as the barge was commissioned that local community groups and the local MP Richard Drax voiced their opposition to its location. However, we should not necessarily read this as a problem for the government. To an extent, social tensions amounting from the location of controversial accommodation is part of the logic of contemporary migration governance in the UK. Opposition itself can be used to signal both a popular mandate of anti-immigrationism and that the UK system is overwhelmed and not working for the 'British people'.

The details of how accommodation, private security and human rights inspections will function on the *Bibby Stockholm* are still scarce and influx. However, we might also further speculate that as well as distancing those claiming asylum from the local community this may also provide a further barrier to practices of solidarity and political organising for migrant rights and against detention and the hostile environment. The place of offshore carceral sites has historically served to sever links and solidarity with local 'mainland' communities. This raises questions as to whether activist groups and NGOs will be able to access the barge and inspect the conditions and treatment of those onboard. In the case of hotel accommodation we have already witnessed strategies of securitisation which limit who can access hotels (this has been justified in some cases because of far right threats of violence) leading to further practices of segregation. In the case of the *Bibby Stockholm*, this may have a detrimental effect on making the state and private contractors accountable for potential human rights abuses (as was the case in the Netherlands). On the other hand, we should consider how the barge may provide a potential space for solidarity and resistance from those claiming asylum. People will be in close quarters with each other, with spaces to publicly meet and collectively organise.<sup>2</sup> As we have seen in other examples of detention protests, the regime of securitisation often works to mobilise people into action and resistance. We should be alive to the messy and endless possibility of resistance to segregation and the violence of border regimes.

## Class Interests

As we have briefly documented, the use of the *Bibby Stockholm* provides another event in the spectacle of the UK states' bordering project, with its imaginaries of 'threats' posed by the relatively small number of people crossing the channel on small craft who are portrayed in militarised language as an 'invasion'. Drawing on Stuart Hall (1979), we can argue that the current strand of populist right wing authoritarianism relies on constructing an electoral coalition through the manufacturing of 'crisis' such as this. Primarily, by scapegoating and punishing poor and negatively racialized subjects and 'sexual deviants' which at different times are configured as illegals, migrants, travellers, grooming gangs, knife gangs (Hall's 'muggers'), or the trans community as well as criminalising solidarity with these groups.

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<sup>2</sup> Thanks to Thom Tyerman for this insight.



Of course, it is important to consider the macro scale of this politics which aims to secure the continuity of the British ruling class and its patterns of accumulation and power (Burton Cartledge 2021). However, there are also distinct class and financial interests that are pursued in the border-security economy which are important to note (on detention see Martin 2021). Corporate Watch has provided detailed mappings of *who* benefits from the UK border economy, accounting for example the profits amassed from detention facilities and detention flights (e.g. Corporate Watch 2022). We might also note the financial interests behind security infrastructure in Calais and the English Channel. For example, the UK government has spent 1 billion pounds on drone technology to surveil the Channel from 2017-2021, with international companies such as Tekever and Elbrit Systems making huge profits (the latter being an Israeli defence company which provides 'battle tested' drones to the MOD which are regularly used on occupied palestinian people) (Fitri 2022). Similar interests shape the procurement of the *Bibby Stockholm* and its location in Portland Harbour.

## Portland Port

As previously mentioned, The *Bibby Stockholm* is planned to be docked in Portland Port, Dorset. We might ask *why* the Home Office has chosen a rural location in Dorset to house 500 asylum seekers? Considering this helps demonstrate the political and social relations underpinning this and other state procurement decisions, as well as the interests invested in the broader border-security economy. The port was previously a military naval base and was bought by the current owners Langham Industries in 1996. Langham industries have a previous record in supporting the UK's carceral state. One of the first contracts they secured after acquiring the port was from the prison service for a floating prison HM Prison Weare which stayed on the site from 1997-2005. The prison was forced to close in 2005 after the Chief Inspector of prisons described the conditions as 'oppressive and cramped' (Duggan 2023). Again, the reverberations of maritime empire are felt in the after life of the floating prison. The ship was subsequently renamed 'Jascon 27' and left Portland to be used in the oil industry as accommodation for migrant workers in Nigeria's extractive, exploitative and highly polluting oilfields, which are notorious for provide huge profits for multinationals such as Shell (on the environmental impact in Nigeria see Enyoghasim et al 2019).

Langham Industries who ultimately profited from the floating prison and will profit from the docking of *Bibby Stockholm*, is a maritime and engineering company owned by the Langham family who hold significant landed estates in Dorset. The current managing director is Christopher Langham, the son of the company's founder. As indicated by the Chair of Portland Port Bill Reeves, the docking of the *Bibby Stockholm*, is part of a wider expansion of the port as it comes with significant extra investment alongside the £4,500 a day paid by the state to moor the barge in the harbour (Lawrence 2023). This is alongside the company profiting from



new agreements with cruise liners which began docking in the Port in April 2023, despite the hugely negative environmental impact on local residents and marine life.

Despite rhetorical opposition against the Home Office's plans from the local MP Richard Drax (for links to Drax's own financial and property linked to slave plantation ownership in the Caribbean see BBC 2022), the Langham Family have close ties to the Tory party. Langham Industries donated money to support the re-election campaign of former Dorset MP Douglas Carswell in 2014 (TheyWorkforYou 2023). Catherine Langham who is listed as a co-director of the company, is a Conservative Party Councillor and was involved in the local campaign to leave the EU in 2016 (Dorset Council 2023; Electoral Commission 2016). Within the internal lobbying, corruption and class composition of the Tory government such political and social links are central to securing profitable state contracts within the private sector.

### The Bibby Stockholm

The *Bibby Stockholm* is owned by the Bibby Maritime a subsidiary of the Bibby Line Group, a company based in Liverpool. As noted above the ship was previously used as a floating detention centre in Rotterdam. After several human rights scandals were revealed on board, including sexual assault and suicide, the Dutch government ended the contract. It was next used to accommodate gas field workers in the Shetland Islands. Whilst owned by a Liverpool company the barge is registered in Barbados (Bibby Maritime Limited 2023). This typifies how 'flags of convenience' work in modern shipping which ostensibly allows companies to bypass regulations, taxes and create dual systems of wages (often racialised based on immigration status and nationality Kahili 2018, 236). Whilst having amassed profits from the previous use of the Bibby Stockholm as a floating prison for asylum seekers, the company promises that the barge has been renovated and this justifies the £15,000 a day chartering fee.

Whilst the current corporate structure of Bibby Line Group involves multiple subsidiaries, the company was originally founded by John Bibby Senior in 1807 (as John Bibby & co.). At the time Liverpool was one of the primary ports of the British empire and, formerly until 1807, a centre of the triangular slave trade. John Bibby & Co. accrued wealth through organising merchant shipping from Europe, the Black Sea and to Latin America and later through a passenger and cargo service to the British colony of Burma (Maritime Museum 2023). The company later profited from contracts with the British army by moving British troops across the Empire. Shipping and company accounts reveal how despite the company being set up in the year the slave trade was abolished, that John Bibby profited from three slave voyages and used enslaved labour on board the companies ships (The Reader 2021). Such histories reveal important resonances for how the company continues to profit from exploitation and racialised confinement today.

Whilst the Bibby Line Group and Langham Industries profess to be ‘modern’ and ethically minded companies, investing in technology and maritime infrastructure, the history of the companies, their interests and their recent role in asylum accommodation reveals, instead, how colonial systems of racism and exploitation have been expanded and filtered through liberal capitalism and the ruling class interests of the British state. The ongoing securitisation and *carceralisation* of asylum accommodation helps us understand how the politics of asylum is constructed as a particular form of ‘spectacle’ but one that is also bound to the interests and logics of racial capitalism.

## Conclusion

In this short paper we have explored the case of *The Bibby Stockholm* to ask what it tells us about contemporary border politics in the UK. This has placed the decision to use the barge as ‘offshore’ accommodation for those people seeking asylum in the wider racist and segregationist policies of the British state. We examined how offshoring asylum accommodation follows colonial patterns of offshore incarceration with its divisive and racialized logics of exploitation and control. As recent examples in the Netherlands and Scotland (as well as Australia and the US) demonstrate, the sea has, again, increasingly become a space to confine unwanted and marginalised people. It is no coincidence that the *Bibby Stockholm* has previously been used as a ‘detention boat’ and will be moored on the site of a notorious floating prison. With the turn towards automatic detention and the use of military bases and offshore locations, asylum accommodation has steadily begun to closely follow the expansion of carceral and prison systems in immigration control. Just as criminals are represented as a social danger the ‘illegal migrant’ becomes an ever present dual threat to scare resources and subsistence of the ‘British tax payer’ and as a ‘gang member’. This overlap between carcerality and accommodation is not exceptional but it has further potentially disastrous consequences for people within the UK immigration system and for the continual authoritarianism of the British government. In this context it is worth reflecting on Angela Davis’ point that the prison itself *is a border*.

We have examined some of the symbolic registers through which people claiming asylum have been subject to racist criminalisation and used as the latest scapegoats in the British states repertoire of the sovereign spectacle of authoritarian control. One that the conservative party hopes will work towards recreating the electoral coalition of the ‘Brexit’ referendum in 2019 (fought as this was on the imaginary of getting ‘Brexit Done’ and ‘Taking back control’). In the face of neoliberal abandonment, all the British state can increasingly offer is more violent and punitive spectacles to promise that ‘others’ are no better off than the electorate. The case of the *Bibby Stockholm* also provides important details of the financial and class interests and profits that help galvanise and reproduce the border-security economy and make ever more violent practices of control desirable by private and state actors alike. These financial interests reveal the close links to nepotism through which state

contracts are procured. However, whilst the Home Office presents temporary and spartan accommodation as a further deterrence to those seeking rights of refugee and settlement and where social tensions around the location of accommodation housing people on the move have become more visible, we should not underestimate the potential for solidarity and organising within those who will be housed 'offshore' and people who work in solidarity to break these regimes of confinement.

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