

# Discovered During Repair Work

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The new government announced in July that its contract with the operators of the Bibby Stockholm will not be renewed in January 2025. The decision, presented as part of a plan to reduce spending on the asylum system, was widely welcomed. But those who have campaigned for the barge's removal did so from widely differing motives. This is perhaps a good moment to review the nature of the disagreements which have arisen on Portland. What has the island, what have we all learnt from this experience?

I would begin with Maria Stepanova: 'The world we live in is damaged and nearly irreparably broken and... the job of living is the job of reconstruction, of repair work... if you see a hole then darn it as best you can.' The Russian poet derives this from the *tikkun olam* of Jewish mystical tradition. Her own texts, she writes, are 'above all else, connective tissue joining fragments of the lost... a peace-filled craft that fixes and strengthens...' This feels close also to the 'small-scale work' described by Václav Havel in his essay *The Power of the Powerless*.

So asylum seekers are not permitted to work on Portland but some of them, for example, helped to sort through a photographic archive at its museum. They cleared the gutters there, too, and repainted garden furniture. A youth club's computer was fixed. Iranian carpenters took up the floor of a church, replaced the rotten joists under it and then nailed the floor back down. When none of the residents signed up to volunteer, Peruvians, Ugandans, Kenyans and Pakistanis / Balochis started to help maintain a community garden. They built a stone wall and weeded paths.

Repair work may take many forms and with five months still to run, this story is not over yet. The island's cricket club has taken on players. Six local taxi-drivers who had formed a boxing club to get in shape issued an invitation to the new arrivals. One of those who accepted was an Iranian boxing coach from whom everybody then learnt. New funding then made possible the purchase of extra kit. Rapport, respect, repair can spring up in the

unlikeliest ways. The Portland Global Friendship Group arranges a weekly walk, a jogging group, Queer Club, collage, creative writing, film-screenings, fishing. It is working with B-side on a music festival this summer.

The confinement of the barge is what asylum seekers have dreaded most when learning they are to be sent there. But equally forbidding is the limited interaction with local people which they expect from a relatively remote area. That's why the Conversation Club in particular has mattered. This is a safe space in which local people and the migrants can talk. One Iranian attending it told me he had been on the barge for six months awaiting his decision. I commented, a little obviously, that that was a lot of waiting. He nodded.

'So how do you stay strong?' I asked.

'I don't,' he briskly replied. He had been at a Holiday Inn near Oxford before, from which he could cycle into town. Someone lent him a kayak, by which he explored the river. He attended lectures given by Iranian academics about the situation in his country. At a café where you could volunteer, he preferred being on the till because of the different accents he heard there. 'Even if you get residence,' as he put it, 'you are still in a kind of prison if you can't talk fluently.'

So being sent to the barge felt like the end. Conversation Club mattered because it meant he could put the intolerable delay to some use. One of the Global Friendship Group suggested to me that the Club and its popularity are best understood as the flip-side of those hours they spend on the phone waiting for someone from the Home Office to pick up. Someone to whom they will be just another case number anyway. Listening attentively in such a context is repair work, too. We cannot magic into being a Home Office where the phone is picked up and claims processed quickly. But we can listen.

To the atheist Afghan boxer who worked as an interpreter for the British Army and wants to talk religion. To the Russian Physics teacher who questioned out loud the meaning of blatantly

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rigged elections. To the Syrian metal-worker as he describes the crossing from Libya. France had been the inside of a truck. Dad had been an Anglophile. To the Iraqi Kurd who spent months in a hotel where the golf course and formal gardens were off-bounds. Of the paying guests he observed: 'You could see by the way they looked at you. I didn't need to ask.'

It becomes apparent, as you listen, that almost everywhere they have gone there have been Friendship Groups. If there was body language at the golfing hotel, elsewhere care has been taken, computers and churches repaired, Kayaks lent. Overcrowding on the barge recently led to peaceful protest and calls on the new government to speed up the processing of claims: a vigil outside the port was held in solidarity. Home in on this small-scale stuff and one is tempted by a hope that we are not after all, as a country, what we sometimes anxiously imagine ourselves to have become.

Though we are that, too.

A photograph posted to the website shows a grey day and a group of young Asian men standing in a gateway. Stamped diagonally in red across this image runs the word 'Deport'. Below it in white: 'Not Support'. After the news, in April 2023, that Portland would host a barge on which up to 500 asylum seekers would be held, a Facebook group was started. There were naturally those who asked what it was that qualified Portland so uniquely for this.

'Bibby' has had the limelight all to herself but in fact four barges were originally planned, to be moored in different harbours around the country. No other port authority would take one. Some essential backstory: after the Cold War, Portland Port was sold by the Ministry of Defence to Langham Industries, a private company. Langham, later a generous donor to the UK Independence Party, stood to make a reported £2.5 million from the government for taking this 'refugee accommodation vessel'. Its incentives are clear enough. The material benefit to others on the island is less obvious. To some it felt like a combination of social

dumping and a slap in the face.

A report commissioned by Bournemouth University in 2022, 'Forgotten Towns', found that the island's economy has suffered from chronic under-investment since the Navy's departure in 1996. There has been no serious replacement for the engineering apprenticeships, for example, previously available on or around the base. Employment is now largely seasonal and precarious. Weymouth and Portland recorded one of the biggest majorities for Brexit anywhere in the UK. The island had in 2018 the lowest social mobility in the country. In 2019 it had NHS provision for the care of the elderly, an X-ray machine, minor injuries and an out-patient clinic. Only the last of these remains. And so on.

Some of the unease, then, is justifiable, but the views being expressed on Facebook soon took on a wildly demeaning tone. Obscene rumours about members of the Global Friendship Group were circulated. One photograph of them was doctored to include Leonard Farruku, an Albanian who committed suicide on the barge, and the convicted paedophile Gary Glitter. Female volunteers are routinely stated to be trans. One of those involved in posting this material has been arrested and is under investigation.

Those urging islanders, then, not to 'support' asylum seekers, have in fact also been engaged in an active campaign of intimidation towards those who do choose to support them. The Facebook site is not administered by Conservative Party employees, as comparable groups in and around London are. But Portland is clearly an active front in the present culture wars around immigration.

The Facebookers have been reduced to drawing upon meagre imaginative resources. 'Incidents' involving men from the barge are described in online posts. Police are not called but are then accused of covering up what 'happened'. Welcome to that grey inter-legal zone where virtual outrage is cooked up for the digital lynch mob. Welcome to the rehearsal.

We are this country, too, but the best answer

to 'Deport Not Support' is not necessarily its counter-shout of 'No Borders, No Nations, Stop Deportations!' Lord Dubs, who himself arrived as a child refugee and is a life-long campaigner on this, does not argue for open borders. He argues instead (and the figures bear him out) that the UK takes far fewer asylum seekers than comparable European countries. The 'numbers' argument doesn't add up.

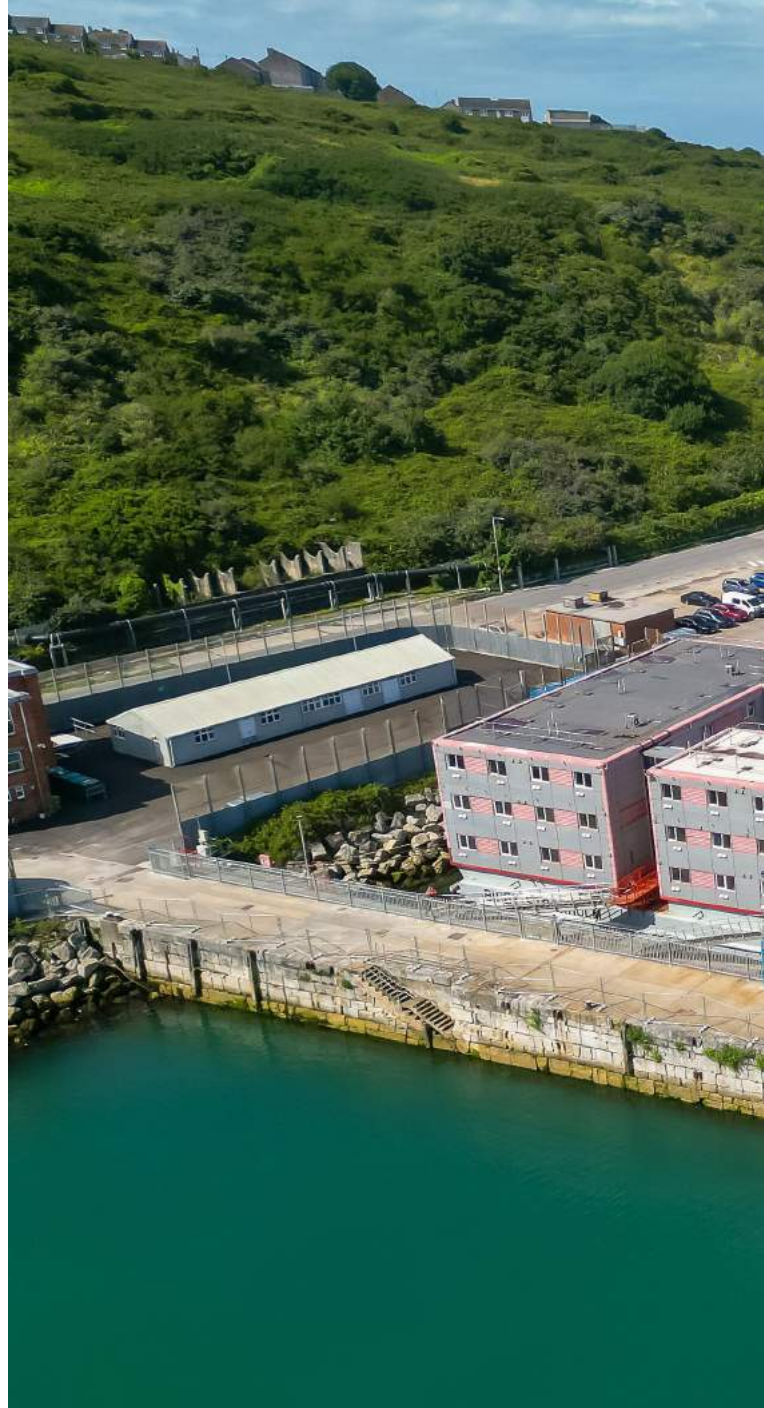
The evidence on Portland as elsewhere is that these are young people here to contribute and the job market certainly needs them. Friendship Groups, some argue, are very well but miss the imbalance in a relationship where one side does the kindness while the other does all the gratitude. 'One positive and significant step would be to let those who wish to do so work,' immigration lawyer Samantha Knights KC put it to me. Immigration Rules at present only permit working after a year and then only in certain very restrictive categories so that the provision is of little use to most asylum seekers. The Friendship Group, when I put this to them, agreed. But in the absence of better government policies, as one member, Laney White, put it, 'the need for help is real.' Let us hope such policies are on the way.

At one level any increase in the number of asylum seekers is a legal-technical challenge with a legal-technical solution: process claims quicker. Don't waste everybody's time and money on policies driven entirely by appearance, their only aim to thwart people and make a lurid exhibition of the resultant suffering.

But knottier questions arise when we ask not only about the economic or legal aspects of this but how to calm public feeling as trusted stories begin to fail around the edges. Where do we look for a shared language to replace that dialogue of the deaf, the 'hyperbolic intransigence of social media', that we have now in place of a public culture? That's not a rhetorical question and I personally don't think we have to look very far at all. 'It is right here, deep below the surface, that we must go', Daniel Halévy once wrote. The place I have in mind is one I pass through each time I travel to or from the Conversation Club.

Portsmouth is the one with a nice pub garden on the corner. What was its petrol station is now a farm shop. A more pastoral English scene, with high green hills above, you could not imagine. The customised bunting around its church reads '1024–2024', to celebrate one thousand years since its foundation.

*The Owl and the Nightingale* dates from the late twelfth century. At first glance it is a strange poem about a legal disagreement which neither bird is able to win. Finally, they agree to make their way to Portsmouth, home to an all-wise and entirely admirable priest called Nicholas. This is often assumed to be a humorous self-portrait of the poet and that does



seem the most natural reading. Anyway, Nicholas will arbitrate.

And what has any of this to do with immigration? 'Our People! Our History!' cries the website of Patriotic Alternative, a far-right group friendly with those Facebookers of Portland who have favoured deporting over supporting. It describes the United Kingdom as 'the only place where the British people, and they alone, can realise their natural, religious and historical right to self-determination... British history,' it states, 'will be restored as a central pillar of every child's education.'

'The political consequences are by now impossible to escape,' writes Stepanova, 'controlling the past, attempting to harness it, monopolise it, rewrite it according to taste, have all become part of electoral and legislative processes in many countries in Europe



*Bibby Stockholm asylum seekers barge at Portland Port*

and beyond.' From Dorset to Donetsk, historical politics are always with us.

*The Owl and the Nightingale* is by turns slap-stick and spiteful and thoughtful. It reads now like some kind of rap battle. It was probably originally intended as an allegory. Scholars, appropriately enough, cannot agree what kind. Through her rapturous love of music, the nightingale sets herself (both birds are female) to address the problems of the young, the claims of strong feeling, the joy of life in the moment. She also makes the case for frequent trips to southern Europe. Some have seen in the poem a seasonal allegory – nightingale's summer to the owl's winter. The owl for her part speaks up less glamorously for the problems of the middle-aged and the old, for the virtues of staying put, of perseverance.

One theme of the poem is beyond dispute: it is

centrally about the difficulty and necessity of keeping one's temper in an argument. 'Hold hard! Hold hard! Exclaimed the Owl, / Your style in all is fake and foul!' We are, it turns out, not the first generation to have experienced trouble with this.

It turns out there was already in the twelfth century a poet who thought we can do better. I think he makes a convincing case. My own small-scale repair work has consisted in listening as I've described, in writing this and in a short play updating *The Owl and the Nightingale* for our times. Its poet knew—and we can use the reminder—that we should keep our cool, even when that is difficult, because wrath 'stirs up the spirit's blood / With raging surges like a flood, / And overpowers the beating mind / Until with passion it is blind. / The spirit thus loses all its light, / Perceiving neither truth nor right...'