

Colonising Australia (1788-1901)

Transportation to Australia

| Transcript

Narrator:

Britain transported more than 160 000 convicts to Australia between 1788 and 1868. Transportation was the punishment for three types of crimes: petty crimes, such as stealing bread, vagrancy and pickpocketing, largely committed by city people; violent crimes, including murder, rape and robbery; and crimes of rebellion, such as supporting the ideals of the French Revolution, breaking the machines that were replacing farm jobs and rebelling against the monarchy, particularly if you were Irish or Scottish.

In 1787, the First Fleet departed from Portsmouth, headed for Tenerife, where it would pick up supplies. There were about 750 convicts on board, spread over 11 ships, and 550 sailors, soldiers and family members. In the early years of transportation, conditions were horrendous. Convicts were held below deck in the confined spaces of the ship's hull. The hatchways were locked. There was no fresh air and the ships leaked. They were hungry, wet and cold. They were crusted with salt from the seawater and lived in their own sewage, unable to move about or exercise. They suffered from scurvy and boils, and outbreaks of typhoid.

After Tenerife, the Fleet headed for Rio de Janeiro. But on the way, they got stuck in the doldrums, an area known for long, calm periods. For sailing ships, no wind means no movement. They began running out of supplies and water rations were reduced to just one and a half litres a day. Infestation was another problem. Rats, bedbugs, lice, cockroaches and fleas plagued not only the convicts, but everyone else on board too. When they finally made it to Rio de Janeiro, they took on fresh water and food, cleaned the stinking ships and made repairs. But the convicts remained in the hold the whole time. Their last stop on the voyage was Table Bay, Cape Town. Here they stocked up on livestock, plants and seeds they needed to start the colony in New South Wales.

After 24 000 kilometres and eight months, the First Fleet arrived at Botany Bay. Their supplies were already dangerously low. They knew it would take time to grow crops and they expected to find food sources around the colony. But they weren't able to read the country. They didn't know what was edible and what was not. There was bush tucker all over the place but they didn't recognise it as food. The crops they did plant failed.

The conditions on board the First Fleet were terrible, but the Second Fleet was worse. It's come to be known as the 'Death Fleet'. The death rate was 5.4 percent on the First Fleet. For the Second Fleet, it was 40 percent. The voyage of the Second Fleet was run by a private company: Camden, Calvert and King. Their focus was minimising costs to maximise profits. This company had previously transported slaves and they used these same ships. Convicts wore slave shackles, iron bars between the ankles, instead of the comparatively humane chains and ankle irons of the First Fleet. Shackles made it almost impossible for the convicts to move. Thomas Milburn was a convict on the Second Fleet.

Thomas Milburn: *We were chained two and two together and confined in the hold during the whole course of our long voyage... we were scarcely allowed a sufficient quantity of victuals to keep us alive, and scarcely any water... I was chained to Humphrey Davies who died when we were about half way, and I lay beside his corpse about a week and got his allowance.*
(Letter to his mother and father, 26 August, 1790)

Narrator: The Second Fleet arrived at Port Jackson in June, 1790 with supplies that the starving colony desperately needed. This is how one woman describes the conditions of the arriving convicts.

Female Convict *Oh! if you had but seen the shocking sight of the poor creatures that came out in the three ships it would make your heart bleed; they were almost dead, very few could stand, and they were obliged to fling them as you would goods, and hoist them out of the ships, they were so feeble; and they died ten or twelve a day when they first landed; but some of them are getting better.*
(Letter from Sydney Cove, 24 July, 1790)

Narrator: From the 1820s, conditions on board the transport ships improved. The British government also began encouraging others to emigrate to Australia. They offered land grants to free settlers if they could bring significant amounts of money to the colonies. The early settlers shared many of the same conditions on the ships as the convicts. Free settlers, unlike convicts, were allowed on deck. But they ate the same food, suffered the same diseases and experienced the same bug and vermin infestations.

Mary Thomas and her family emigrated to South Australia to establish a newspaper. They brought a printing press, two people to work the press and two agricultural labourers. Although they were relatively rich, when supplies were low, everyone on board was affected.

Mary Thomas: *This day our allowance of water... was reduced to one pint for each person... It was as black as ink, with a thick sediment at the bottom, and smelt worse than a stagnant ditch. Those who go to sea, however, must make up their minds not to be over-nice or over-particular about anything.*
(Journal entry, 23 August, 1836)

Narrator: The people who came to the colonies, both by force and free will, laid the foundations for what became the Federation of Australia when the colonies united in 1901.