

Transportation to Australia

Great Britain transported convicts and prisoners of war to its colonies in the Americas, from the 1610's until the American Revolution in the 1770s. The American War of Independence (1775–1783) brought an end to this and British prisons became overcrowded, so the British Government was forced to look elsewhere. Following the establishment of a Penal Colony at Port Jackson, New South Wales in 1788, Australia and Tasmania became the focus for transportation. Thousands were transported as convicts, and sometimes their wives and families were sent out with them.

Royal Navy Captain James Cook became the first recorded European to explore the eastern coastline of Australia. He identified Botany Bay as a good harbour, suitable for a settlement, and made his first landfall on 29 April 1770. A fleet of ships led by Captain Arthur Phillip left England on 13 May 1787 to found the first penal colony in Australia. The fleet consisted of two Royal Navy vessels, three store ships and six convict transports, carrying more than 1,000 convicts, marines and seamen, and a vast quantity of stores. The voyage from England via Rio de Janeiro, Cape Town and the Great Southern Ocean to Botany Bay, arrived in mid-January 1788, taking around 250 days. Thus transportation to Australia began, and more penal colonies were established in Tasmania and Queensland. Comprehensive records of these were kept and provide good details of conditions for those involved in this activity around 200 years ago. The other Australian non-convict colonies were "free settlements."

The background to all this was that there was an increase in crime in the Industrial Revolution due to the economic displacement of much of the population, which led to overcrowded prisons. Eight of every ten prisoners were in jail for theft of items like a handkerchief or a loaf of bread, often from an employer. For most non-capital offences, the penalties in the early 1800's were imprisonment, a fine, public or private whipping, transportation or a combination of these. Long term imprisonments were virtually unknown, and sentences rarely exceed 12 months. Many felonies were capital offences, but by 1840, only the most serious crimes like murder, incurred the death penalty. Charles Dickens wrote about living conditions for the poor, so we have a good record and picture of what life was like for many people at that time. 164,000 men, women and children were transported to Australia in total. These were not hardened criminals by any measure; only a small minority were transported for violent offences, and good behaviour was rewarded by a ticket of leave (release on licence) towards the end of the convict's sentence. Transportation of convicts to NSW finished in 1842, although some convict 'exiles' continued to arrive until 1850.

To put all of this into context, one in five Australians has a convict in their family history, including several former Prime Ministers, and many went on to play notable parts in the future of Australia. For Australians, convict ancestry has recently lost its aura of shame. Incidentally, it has also been estimated that more than two million Britons have convict ancestors!

Prison Hulks were decommissioned ships that authorities used as floating prisons in the 18th and 19th centuries. These vessels were without masts and therefore incapable of going to sea. After the Napoleonic Wars, there were many old vessels which could accommodate large numbers of prisoners and thus were suitable for conversion to prison hulks. These were typically located in harbours and they were convenient temporary holding quarters for convicts awaiting transportation to Australia. Conditions on these prison hulks were often appalling and they ceased to be used in Great Britain in 1857. The picture shows the beached convict ship *The Warrior*, at Woolwich, which served as a convict hulk from 1818 until scrapped in February 1834.

Prisoners had access to water for washing as part of their morning routine: "...the wards are then unlocked, and prisoners passed under the forecastle, in regulated numbers, to wash-troughs being there permanently fixed, and supplied with fresh water for that purpose." (Illustrated London News, 21 February 1846).

Convict ships.

The ships used to convey convicts to the Australian colonies, were ordinary British merchant ships. None were specifically built as convict vessels or engaged exclusively for convict transportation, all being used for general cargo, or passenger transport, at various times. However, when a ship was hired for the purpose, it carried only convicts and crew.

The convicts would travel in steerage accommodation, between the upper deck and the cargo hold. This was a deck beneath the main deck and on top of the cargo hold, and often it was so far down in the hold that water would seep up through the planking. Rats scurried about, ventilation and light were poor, and came only from the hatches when they were open. During a storm, access to the main deck was impossible as hatches were battened down tightly. A storm could last for a few days or up to a

week or more but the hatches would stay down. Lights (candles) could not be used during the storm because of the danger of fires.

When women were transported, their children sometimes went with them and we know that on board the Henry Wellesley, the ship that carried Catherine Hart to Australia in 1837, there were around 140 female prisoners and twenty nine children. In heavy weather, many of the prisoners were affected by sea sickness, some of them very seriously, but notwithstanding this, they were all sent on deck daily when the weather was dry. From England the transports may have stopped off at Gibraltar, a port in the West Indies, South America, the Cape of Good Hope, and any one of the Australian penal settlements.

On arrival in Sydney, the convicts' details were checked and until the late 1830s, most were either retained by the Government for public works or assigned to private individuals as a form of indentured labour. From the early 1840s the Probation System was employed, where convicts spent an initial period, usually two years, in public works gangs on stations outside of the main settlements, then were freed to work for wages within a set district. If a convict was well behaved, he or she could be given a ticket of leave, granting some freedom. At the end of the convict's sentence, seven years in most cases, the convict was issued with a Certificate of Freedom. He was then free to become a settler or to return to England. Transportation from Britain and Ireland officially ended in 1868 although it had become uncommon several years earlier. In many cases, it seems that those transported to Australia for petty offences, were able to improve their lives significantly, than might otherwise have been possible in Great Britain. Australia was expanding and labour was much in demand, especially for those who had a trade or skill.

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There is more information about convict transportation and Emigrant ships on these websites: -

<http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/education/resources/19th-century-prison-ships/>

<http://members.iinet.net.au/~perthdps/convicts/ships.html>

<http://mcjazz.f2s.com/Emigration.htm>

<http://www.convictrecords.com.au/resources>

<http://members.iinet.net.au/~perthdps/convicts/ships.html>