

Australian History: Pre-History to Early Settlement

The Events, People & Ideas that Shaped Australia

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Chapter 6: Establishment- The First Fleet

Captain-General and Commander in Chief Arthur Phillip

Arthur Phillip, at the age of sixteen, began his maritime career in 1755. He learned the rudiments of his profession during the seven years' war, where he experienced both British misfortunes and subsequent glories. By the age of twenty-three, his naval accomplishments and capabilities were evident, leading to his promotion as a Lieutenant. With the end of naval conflicts, Philip returned to the land and engaged in farming, as was customary for country gentlemen. He also got married.

However, the allure of the sea remained strong, and after some time, Phillip once again offered his skills to the Portuguese in their war with Spain. His conduct and success were of the highest order, prompting a call to fulfill his duty to fight for king and country. In 1779, he was appointed as the master and commander of the Basilisk fireship. He continued to rise in rank and participated in various battles. By 1783, he set sail for the East Indies to provide reinforcements, where he displayed superior bravery and negotiation skills.

Phillip's focus gradually shifted towards more peaceful endeavours. When it was decided to establish a settlement

in New Holland, subsequently known as New South Wales, he was considered a suitable officer to lead the enterprise, given his professional knowledge and habitual prudence. The details of his equipment, voyage, and settlement in the southern hemisphere can be found in this book.

Arthur Phillip is arguably one of the most important figures in Australia's history, being the commander of the First Fleet and the founding Governor of the penal colony that would eventually develop into Australia. It is important to understand the reasons why the British sought to establish the new colony- which was an enormous distance from Britain. This chapter will consider the reasons for the establishment of New South Wales.

Britain's Prisons and Legal System

As young students of history one of the key elements you must understand, is that historical events do not happen in isolation. Indeed, as humans have made advances in technology which has enabled travel across the seas, it has become even clearer that historical events in one place can lead to major alterations in the history of another location.

Whilst travel and communication were very difficult at this point in history- events in one nation could have large ramifications in the decision making of authorities in another nation. In the previous chapter you learnt about the Endeavour and the claiming of New South Wales for Britain.

Let's take a brief detour in our story about the new colony to learn about the British loss of another colony- and what that meant for the Australian story.

The Industrial revolution had resulted in the large movement of people from an agrarian lifestyle in small villages with a move to big cities to work in factories. There was massive overcrowding, lack of work and poverty in these cities. This resulted in an increase in petty crime – often committed to help people to just survive.

At this time in England there was a “Bloody code” which listed over 200 crimes punishable by death! Some of the crimes that you could be put to death for included; pickpocketing goods worth a shilling (roughly \$80 today), stealing horses or sheep, cutting down trees, stealing from a rabbit warren and wrecking a fishpond. You might think that these judgments are very harsh. You would be right! The British legal system at this time certainly favored those with wealth and power. It was a very unequal society. The rich made the laws that protected their interests. Any act which threatened their wealth, property or sense of law and order was criminalised and made punishable by death.

Judges often granted some leniency (particularly for children found guilty of these crimes) and granted them terms of imprisonment. With so many people being jailed for small crimes, the prisons became very overcrowded.

Britain had been sending criminals across the Atlantic since the early 17th century, to Virginia and Maryland and to the West Indies to serve as cheap labour on plantations. However, after the American War of Independence in 1783, America refused to take any more convicts- and the prison population increased significantly.

Even with the transportation to America, the British prisons where overwhelmed and in 1776 a new Act of Parliament allowed the use of floating prisons or hulks for two years as a temporary solution to the problem of overcrowded jails. The floating prisons where so bad that many prisoners thought a death sentence was preferable to being sent to jail on the floating ships! These floating ships became even worse after the American War of Independence. We can learn about the conditions of these ships by examining Old Bailey trial transcripts, hulk registers and quarterly returns, criminal entry books, transport registers and newspaper extracts.

Let's take a moment to discover what life was like on one of these floating prisons, through the story a boy- James. James' story was typical of those imprisoned on the hulks. James' prison ship was moored in Portsmouth. He would get up at 5 am in the morning and would roll up his hammock and store it away. Imagine your bed could be rolled up- it wasn't a very comfortable place to sleep in. They had communal bathing in water troughs! They had to get dressed in front of all the other convicts, there was

absolutely no privacy. They wore prison uniforms, to distinguish them for ordinary labourers.

The prisoners provided cheap labour. For breakfast they were issued their meal- 12 ounces of (dry) bread and one pint of cocoa. They had to eat in silence. Once James finished his meal- the first work of the day began. They would clean the ship until 7:30. James, a healthy young man would then receive his orders for the day's work on shore. He would usually work on unloading ballast and timber from ships.

The work was hard. James found the heavy chains on his ankles very difficult. He knew at any time the guards could (and often did) add weights to his legs for misbehaviour. The men had a lunch break and then continued their work until 5:30. They then rowed back to the ship and were given dinner. This should have consisted of 6 ounces of meat, 1 pound of potatoes, 9 ounces of bread. However, mismanagement and corruption often meant they didn't receive their rations. Prisoners then had time for prayer and study. At 8:30 prisoners usually returned to bed, exhausted and ready to collapse into bed, ready to repeat the routine for another day.

Despite these difficulties, there was hope of return to family at the end of the prisoners' sentences. Those less fortunate could be transported to a place for which these poor

convicts would have almost no chance of returning. Transportation to Australia meant, for most convicts permanent separation from family, and significant hard labour on arrival.

As we study the First Fleet, and those convicts who subsequently came on other ships from Britain, it is important to remember the stories of these (mostly men) who were transported to New South Wales. They were taken from families, at a time when the tyranny of distance was not easily bridged. The crimes many people were transported for, in our society, would barely get a police officer to issue a warning. As we embark on learning more about the settlement of Australia, we will learn about these convicts- transported halfway across the world. They were poor and powerless, and sent from their families.

British Decide to Settle at Botany Bay

One of the main reasons the British sought to settle Australia was the need to transport prisoners somewhere else now that America was no longer available. However, there were other pressing issues that led them to send a British fleet to Botany Bay. Both the British and the French were claiming positions on the east and west coasts, although these claims were conditional, as no formal settlements had been established on the land. The concept of terra nullius (Latin for "nobody's land") played a significant role in Britain's settlement of Australia.

It assumed that a country did not have an owner unless it had a settled population. The British claimed that Australia was terra nullius, despite their interactions with Aboriginal people, as the Aboriginals were considered itinerant hunter-gatherers. But why did the British view land as unowned when it was inhabited by hunter-gatherer societies?

This thinking was influenced by Enlightenment thinkers such as John Locke (we will learn more about the influence of the Enlightenment in later chapters). These Enlightenment thinkers believed that you could only own or claim land if you settled in the area and engaged in agricultural activities, such as farming and constructing permanent housing and communities.

They also believed that mere proclamation of ownership, as Captain Cook had done when he first mapped the East Coast of Australia, did not establish British ownership over the land. To claim the land for Britain, known as sovereignty, it would need to be permanently settled and utilised.

As we learned earlier in this book, other nations had also visited parts of Australia and could make similar claims as Captain Cook did. Therefore, for Britain to claim the land, they needed to send a fleet of ships prepared for settlement. There was a concern that the French might still try to outpace Britain in claiming parts of New South Wales.

The crucial task of establishing a settlement in New South Wales was assigned to Arthur Phillip. It is worth noting that Arthur Phillip was always wary of the French due to his

undercover activities in France from 1784 to 1786. Arthur Phillip sought guidance on how to act "in case of being opposed by any European ships when he arrived on the coast of New South Wales."

Another reason for establishing a new British colony in New South Wales was the potential strategic importance of having another base in the Southern Hemisphere. This would improve access to resources, secure shipping routes, and provide strategic bases and naval supplies.

Ideas and Philosophy- Preparing for settlement.

On May 13, 1787, a group of over 1,400 people in 11 ships set sail from Portsmouth, England, to settle at Botany Bay.

Arthur Phillip was a driving force in making sure that all necessary protections and provisions were made ready for the long voyage to New South Wales, prior to setting sail. Among the various requests that would prove to show Arthur Phillip as a man of wise forethought, was his request to be allowed to select the best site for the new settlement based on his own judgement. Remember Captain Cook had suggested Botany Bay- however as we will read later, this was not the most suitable location. He also asked for permission to grant lands to people in the settlement, have the authority to exile to New Zealand, or other neighbouring islands convicts, as well as grant freedom to convicts.

Just before Arthur Phillip set sail, he wrote a memorandum about the upcoming journey and settlement of the new lands. England was a very class-based society, where the wealthy and powerful had significantly better lifestyles and sway over the everyday lives of those less fortunate. Indeed, as we have read from the way laws and justice were administered, you might be forgiven for thinking that those in authority cared little for the plight of those less fortunate.

However, Arthur Phillip, despite being from a privileged class, embodied strong Christian principles, and was concerned with the plight of the less fortunate. He was a member of the Church of England, and his Christian faith played a significant role in shaping his character and values. Although he certainly brought with him the sectarian divide that was readily apparent in Britain, he was more lenient than other leaders- which we will discuss later. Despite preparing for a long and dangerous journey, he demonstrated deep concern for not only accomplishing the goals assigned to him but also for the well-being of those with limited power whom he felt accountable for.

The people who were sailing as part of the First Fleet, who had the least power, were those sentenced to transportation as punishment (remember there were a lot of people who would come to the new colony who were convicts). These people were without any real power and would be subjected to the authority of Arthur Phillip. How would he see these

people? How would he treat these people? Arthur Phillip wrote a memorandum- which outlined the way he would deal with convicts. In the primary source, Arthur Phillip expresses his intention to visit the convicts during the voyage to ensure they are kept clean and receive their government-ordered allowance. He aims to make them aware of their situation and emphasizes that their happiness or misery depends on their own actions.

Arthur Phillip demonstrated his concern for convicts, both during the voyage and their future in the new settlement, revealing his understanding of the human condition. He made a commitment to "visit the transports to see that they (the convicts) are kept clean and receive the allowance ordered by the Government." He viewed these convicts not just as individuals who had committed crimes and needed to serve their sentences (which ranged from 7 to 14 years for many), but also recognised their potential for redemption in this new land. He believed that those who behaved well should be rewarded by occasionally working on small plots of land set aside for them, which they would eventually own after completing their sentences. Whilst convicts would be used for cheap labour, the founding of Australia was unique for the rejection of the other source of cheap labour that had been used in other colonies- slaves.

One of the most distinctive stances taken by Arthur Phillip, and which would set the story of Australia apart from colonies such as America, was the stance taken on the place of slavery in this new colony.

The memorandum also addressed the issue of slavery in the new settlement. Although there were ongoing debates in Britain and America regarding the immorality of slavery, it remained legal in both countries at the time of Phillip's memorandum. Slavery would not be abolished in Britain until 1833 (with the Slavery Abolition Act) and in America until 1865 (with the ratification of the 13th amendment). The capture and enslavement of people has been a recurring theme throughout human history, occurring in various civilisations and time periods. It is a mistake to solely focus on the slavery of the past few centuries, particularly the African slave trade to the Americas, as if it were an isolated occurrence.

Slavery has existed since ancient times, often arising when one group conquered another and enslaved the defeated population. The slave trade also operated as a merchant business model, with the Arab-run slave trade flourishing as early as the 8th century, spanning Arabia, East Africa, and the Indian Ocean. The term "slave" derives from the word "slav," as slaves from Central Europe and the East were commonly traded during this period. The Ottoman Empire's economic success was largely dependent on the ownership of over one million white slaves throughout its history.

From the 16th to the 19th century, the Trans-Atlantic slave trade resulted in approximately 10 million people being sold into slavery, captured by African warring tribes, and then sold to white slave traders. It is important to note that Africans capturing slaves was not a new phenomenon, as up

to 18 million African slaves had been sent to the Arab slave trade between the 8th and 18th centuries. With this historical context of slavery in mind, Arthur Phillip displayed profound convictions and aimed to build a nation without the stain of slavery at its core, even though he had a steady stream of indentured laborers due to the convicts.

In his memorandum, Phillip stated, "The laws of this country will, of course, be introduced in [New] South Wales, and there is one that I would wish to take place from the moment His Majesty's forces take possession of the country: That there can be no slavery in a free land, and consequently no slaves." Under Phillip's leadership, this new land would not permit slavery, signifying a significant and transformative change in the way humans had historically acted when colonising new territories.

Despite his stance on slavery, Arthur Phillip still adhered to the social norms of his time, which involved segregating classes and maintaining a clear distinction between convicts and those who arrived freely and voluntarily in the settlement. This was not a reflection of what would unfold in the new land, but rather Phillip's philosophy of how society should function. He believed that in a just society, convicts should have their own land to work as a reward for good behaviour, but they should never mix with individuals in society who had not been criminals.

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