

CONVICTS TO CONSCRIPTS

Highlights of Australian History

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THE CONVICTS

Who were the convicts?

8 John Duffy was one of many people who were transported for poaching. The following story tells how this came about.

Country life and poaching

During the 1700s and 1800s in Britain, conditions for poorer farmers and workers in country areas changed for the worse.

There were many reasons for this change. Businessmen who lived in the cities were able to charge low prices because they owned big farms. Poorer farmers could not compete with these low prices and were forced into debt.

9 New machines, which replaced workers on farms, were invented. One of these was Jethro Tull's seed drill which enabled more seed to be planted.

The enclosure movement, which forced small farmers to sell their land, made larger farms for rich people.

10 Poor conditions and lack of money forced many country people to steal game (animals, birds and fish) from other people's property. This was called poaching. The punishment for poaching was severe. It was the rich people who made the laws and it was their lands that the poachers stole from. Death or (later on) transportation was the punishment for poaching.

11 These were some of the reasons why people in the manufacturing towns in England committed crimes. In many cases, it was in order to stay alive¹.

14 Why Australia was chosen

Poor conditions in the country and city areas of England in the eighteenth century resulted in a lot more crimes being committed. This was made worse because there was no properly organized police force until 1832, when Robert Peel put forward his plan for the introduction of a police force similar to what we have today. The London 'bobbies' get their name from Robert Peel. British prisons were overcrowded. America refused to take any more convicts after it defeated Britain in its War of Independence. Convicts were kept in old ships hulks which were anchored in the rivers. These became health hazards.

15 Where could Britain send her convicts? Several places were suggested, but Australia was finally chosen. Sir Joseph Banks influenced this decision. He had sailed to Botany Bay with Captain Cook and believed that this would be a good place to send convicts. It had a good water supply and enough fertile soil to be self-supporting. It had a good harbour for convict ships, and convicts would find it difficult to escape because it was isolated.

The other reasons for choosing Australia were it was close to Asian trading posts and it gave Britain a chance to keep an eye on French activities in the Pacific.

John Duffy at sea

19 I have never been through anything worse than the six months on the convict ship in which I came to Australia. We were crowded together below the decks in the foul air. In storms we were sometimes waist deep in water. Many of us were ill, but our cells were never cleaned, so disease spread. A horrible time – I had never been at sea before, and I was so lonely.

At night we slept in bunks, one above the other. Each bunk was six feet square and was supposed to hold four people. This gave us each only 18 inches of space to sleep in.

We each had a pair of shoes, three shirts, two pairs of trousers, a pillow, a blanket, a prayer book and a bible. Many of us never saw these things because the greedy captain kept them for himself to sell in Sydney.

It was on the other side of the world, the antipodes – the seasons were different, and the food, and there were natives. I could only wonder what life would be like for me.

¹ This is a far cry from why people commit crimes today, they were not criminals, they were survivors. It was survive or die – what would you do? Would you fight to stay alive or just lay down and die? The laws of the land were unjust and designed to make the poor poorer and the rich richer.

Convicts at work

There were three kinds of work that a convict could be given.

- (1) Work for the government
This was usually work in a chain gang to build roads, bridges and public buildings.
- (2) Assignment
A convict would be given to a free settler to work on his farm or in his shop.
- (3) Secondary confinement
People who were murderers or hardened criminals were sent to prisons on Norfolk Island or at Moreton Bay to do hard and dangerous work.

21 Flogging

Flogging was a common way of punishing convicts. Here is the description of a man sentenced to 100 lashes for trying to escape.

As he was being tied to the triangle, the convict said to the person who was going to whip him that he had no money to pay for light strokes. The convict was stripped ready for whipping. He secretly put a musket ball in his mouth. The doctor was standing by ready to show where the strokes should fall.

It would be hard to imagine a more brutal flogging. Every blow of the whip made the blood gush. After each stroke the whipper would pass the whip through the fingers of his left hand, from which the blood would drip in streams.

The convict's back was a raw piece of flesh from which so much blood had dripped that it had filled his shoes. Yet he did not cry out or say anything.

When the whipping was over, he opened his mouth and the bullet, broken into several pieces, dropped out. The convict could not stand up, and was taken to the hospital where he stayed for five weeks.

22 Letter from John Duffy to his wife and family

All I have to be careful of is not to talk back or give cheek to my master. If I do I may as well be hanged at once because they would take me to the court where I would be whipped and sent to Norfolk Island.

I have eight years to serve with my master, and then I shall have a ticket-of-leave. That means I will be able to work for myself. If I can do that for four years and not get into any trouble, I will be a free man in this country. We will be able to have our own farm.

24 Ticket of Leave

Ticket-of-Leave was a conditional pardon given to some convicts.

RULES

- (1) Leave address at police office.
- (2) Do not move from district to district without a pass from the police.
- (3) Be at home from 10 p.m. to daybreak unless you are with employers or have a pass from them or a police magistrate.
- (4) Report in person to the police office in your district in December and June, or send a certificate saying you are sick.
- (5) Be on good behaviour at all times.

NOTICE TO TICKET-OF-LEAVE MEN.

Police Department, 21st February, 1842.

Notice is hereby given, that I am authorised by the Lieutenant-Governor to offer the Indulgence of a Conditional Pardon to such well-conducted Ticket-of-Leave Men as will serve in the POLICE, as hereinafter stated, at the expiration of their respective terms of Service; viz.

TICKET-OF-LEAVE Men, whose term of Transportation is Seven Years --- to serve with good conduct for six months, fourteen years --- one year, life --- fifteen months.

It is, however, to be clearly understood, that no Pardon will be issued under these Regulations until such Ticket-of-Leave Men shall have been in the Colony for either Four, Six, or Eight Years respectively, according to their terms of Transportation being either for Seven Years, Fourteen Years, or for Life.