

The First Fleet



The Fleet

The First Fleet was led by Captain Arthur Phillip. In total, the Fleet consisted of 11 ships. There were two escort ships (HMS Sirius and HMS Supply), six convict transport ships (Alexander, Charlotte, Friendship, Lady Penrhyn, Prince of Wales and Scarborough) and three store ships (the Borrowdale, Fishburn and Golden Grove). Captain Arthur Phillip was on board HMS Sirius. Altogether, the 11 ships carried around 756 convicts and 550 crew members, marines and their families. The First Fleet left the harbour of Portsmouth in England on 13th May 1787.

Convicts

In the 1770s, steam power was discovered, which created many new industries in cities around England. Many people left their homes in the country to find work in the new factories using steam power in order to earn more money. Because of this, cities became overcrowded and dirty. The increase in population saw an increase in crime and unsafe living. Overly harsh punishments were given to criminals for their crimes: one of these was transportation. Transportation meant that prisoners were sent to one of England's colonies to work for the rest of their sentences.

Until 1787, convicts from England were sent to British colonies in North America. However, after the Revolutionary War, the Americans drove the English out and it became the United States of America. The British no longer had colonies in America and they needed a new place to send their prisoners. The First Fleet was the first group of ships to transport convicts to the British colony in Australia. The convicts were taken to Australia to perform the hard labour such as digging the land and constructing buildings.

The Journey

The First Fleet travelled south from England and stopped at Tenerife in the Canary Islands on 3rd June 1787. When the ships stopped here, they collected lots of fresh water and fresh vegetables. This helped them to stay healthy and to sustain them for the next part of their journey. The weather was hot and humid as the fleet sailed through the tropics. Below the decks, rats, parasites, bedbugs, lice, cockroaches and fleas made life very uncomfortable.



After eight weeks, the First Fleet landed at Rio de Janeiro on the South American coast on 7th August 1787. The ships were cleaned and old clothes were burned to get rid of lice and fleas. They remained here for about a month before departing for Table Bay at Cape Town and landing on 13th October 1787. It took them about five weeks at sea to reach this destination. While they were there, they took on supplies of cattle and fresh vegetables.

Arrival to Australia

On the 12th November 1787, the First Fleet set sail for their final destination, Botany Bay. They arrived at Botany Bay on 20th January 1788. However, after he found this area unsuitable for the settlement, Captain Arthur Phillip decided to move the entire Fleet north. The First Fleet arrived at Port Jackson, Sydney Cove on the 26th January 1788. The journey took approximately 252 days and sailed for 24,000 kilometres.

Cultural Differences

When the Europeans landed at Port Jackson, they did not expect to meet anyone else. They were surprised when they were confronted by the Indigenous Australians. They did not understand the culture or way of life of the Indigenous people. Many of the settlers treated the Indigenous people with great disrespect and cruelty.

The settlers did not understand many aspects of the Indigenous culture, such as the cultural laws, many different languages and systems of lore. An example of Indigenous law is to seek permission from the owners before entering their land, which the Europeans obviously did not do. When the Indigenous people saw the First Fleet arrive, they ran to the shore and shook their spears at them. They were outnumbered by the settlers and overpowered by their sophisticated weapons.



Within a short time of arriving, the European settlers had cut down many trees, set up camp to house 1000 people and tied up many animals. They had declared the land as royal crown land and this led them to believe they could take anything they wanted from the land. According to the British Government, the Indigenous people had no rights to this land as it was seen as British land. The Indigenous people would not regain their natural rights for many, many years to come.