

## TRANSPORTING CORNWALL'S CONVICTS (1787-1867) |

*This is the third in a 4-part series looking at the experience of Cornwall's convicts during Britain's colonisation of Australia. Between 1782 and 1787, twenty men were convicted in Assizes Courts in Bodmin and Launceston for a range of offences and sentenced to transportation. They were part of the First Fleet who were landed at Port Jackson on 27 January 1788.*

*This third instalment looks at conditions for convicts during the sea voyage from Britain to the antipodean penal colonies. Over 600 men, women and children sentenced by courts in Cornwall underwent this experience. Britain maintained convictism to Australia from 1787 until 1868.*

*Accounts of conditions for the prisoners during transportation from Britain via the Cape of Good Hope to its various Australian colonies come from the early 1800s (1), and represent an improvement on what was endured by earlier cohorts of transportees, particularly that of the Second Fleet.*

'The job of hiring the vessels used for the transportation of convicts was the responsibility of the Navy Boards. The Navy Boards stipulated that the convict's quarters should be adequately ventilated and regularly cleaned and fumigated, the prisoners properly clothed and furnished with beds and bedding, space set apart as a hospital and an approved surgeon carried in each transport. The conditions on which the prisoners were to be admitted to the deck for fresh air and exercise were laid down, as also was the scale of rations. Provision also was made for the supply by the Government of medicines and anti-scorbutics, though, as experience was to show, on an insufficient scale.

'Typical diseases found on board transport ships: typhoid, typhus, scurvy, dysentery, small pox, consumption/TB. One of these surgeons, Peter Cunningham, writing of the convict ships of the 1820s described:

"Three-quarters of a pound of biscuit being the daily allowance of bread, while each day the convict sits down to dinner of either beef, pork or plum pudding, having pea soup four times a week, and a pot of gruel every morning, with sugar or bitter in it. Vinegar is issued to the messes weekly; and as soon as the ship has been three weeks at sea, each man is served with an ounce of lime-juice, and the same of sugar daily, to guard against scurvy, while two gallons of good Spanish wine and 140 gallons of water are put on board for issuing to each likewise - 3 to 4 gills of wine weekly and three-quarts of water daily, being the general allowance."

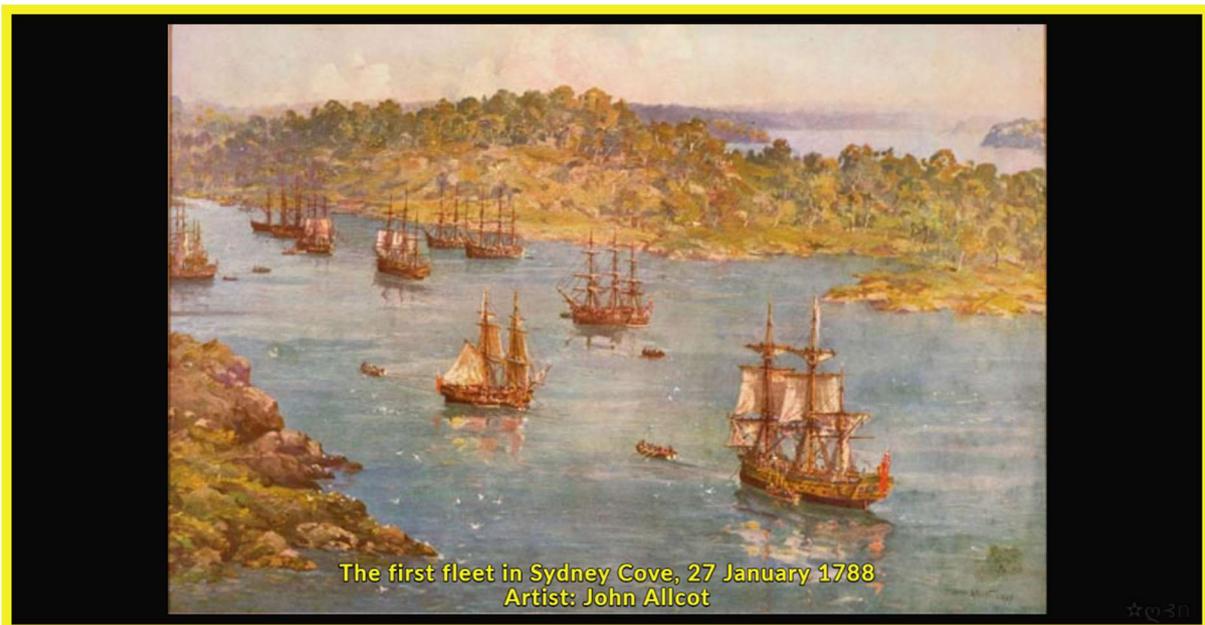
'However, in the absence of supervision from the authorities, the safeguards incorporated in the "charter-parties" were too frequently ignored or evaded. Infringements were not cognizable before the courts of judicature in NSW and if they were to be prosecuted on return to England the witnesses had to be sent home. Thus the contractors were virtually immune from prosecution, and once the transports had sailed the convicts were entirely at the mercy of the ship's officers and the contractor's agents.'

'Conditions on board these convict ships, whether humanely treated or not, would have been extremely uncomfortable. As the numbers of convicts on board heavily outnumbered the numbers of military guarding them and the numbers of sailors, the convicts had to be carefully monitored, and on most transport ships the convicts were chained at night and the hatches locked down to prevent them taking over the ship. According to Sheedy, an account (unsourced) supposedly taken from the 'Tellicherry' in 1806, transporting Irish prisoners including Michael Dwyer, described:

"For the men in the ship's prison, 34 feet long and 27 feet wide, the voyage was less than idyllic particularly in bad weather.

“The worst aspect of the trip out was being chained up at night, as this made the night very long. The system of chains being that you had a small chain attached to your wrist and the other end on a ring attached to a round iron bar. There were two of these iron bars, which ran the full length of our hold, in which there were one hundred and thirty men. This system allowed you to be able to use the sanitary convenience, which was situated at the end of the hold. For instance if you were number twelve on the bar, to use the convenience you had to get the eleven men in front of you to walk up to the convenience ahead of you. When any person was violently ill it often meant the unfortunate victim had to have several of his shipmates up all night with him to allow him to use the convenience, as it was impossible for these men to pass one another, the ring merely sliding along the rail.

“However, the worst position by far was when the ship struck a storm, as the refuse was usually baled out by pail up through the hatch, but with a big sea running the hatches were kept closed. On one occasion we were battened down for two days.”



And then finally, to arrive in a land on the other side of the world, with no connections to previous life experience other than the social and other relationships established with those travelling on the same journey.

NEXT: *The fourth and final part will report the outcomes for the first 20 transportees convicted in Cornwall who landed with the First Fleet in 1788.*

**Onen hag oll. ★🏴󠁧󠁿**

Winner, Gorsedh Kernow 2021 Ober Awenek Award for outstanding contribution to Cornish culture for the social media project 'Australia: Cornish Connections' | © 2022

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Sources:

(1) <http://butlerfamilyhistoryaustralia.blogspot.com/2012/08/laurence-butler-ch-8-conditions-on-convict-ships.html> including quotes from Charles Bateson (1959), 'The Convict Ships 1787-1868', Brown, Son & Ferguson Ltd, Glasgow.

Main pic.: <https://www.mabonativetitle.com/info/SydCove.htm>