

A Real Dilemma

Throughout the 1700's, Britain had many prisoners as it was a time of rapid change. Small country areas and villages were quickly being taken over by factories and cities, and people had to move from their country areas into these cities to find work. But life was hard and poverty was common. People turned to petty crime to survive, as the wages were very low and didn't always cover the cost of living.

After a time, the prisons in England became very crowded and the government decided to send convicts to penal colonies in New America. A penal colony is a settlement in a remote location. It was also useful to separate prisoners from the general population, and it acted as a deterrent to others if they thought about engaging in criminal activity.

Up until 1782, the solution to send convicts to North America was a great idea, as they provided free labour to the new settlements that were being established there. However, America had a revolution, also known as the American War of Independence, and colonists who had lived there for some time, wanted America to become a free society. Disagreements with Britain were common, and the two countries soon became enemies. By 1783, the transportation of convicts had to be stopped, but this created a problem back home in Britain.

By the 1780's, things were getting desperate, as prison cells rapidly became overcrowded with criminals. Soon, large ships, called 'hulks' had to be built to house them all, and these were moored in the busy rivers and harbours of southern England. Clearly, new colonies had to be found.



After the successful voyage of Captain James Cook, who discovered and charted a new land in the southern hemisphere called New Holland, the British government decided to make this the new destination for its penal colonies. Australia presented as the perfect place to keep prisoners, as it was a large island and very isolated, and a long way from the homeland. It was also thought to be uninhabited, except for some native people who weren't considered to be a problem.

Criminal justice at the time was severe, any prisoners were sentenced to death for relatively minor offences. However, the rule of law enabled judges at the time to

overrule such harsh sentences, and many punishments resulted in transportation to the new colonies in Australia. Sentences to be served ranged from 7 to 14 years, or for life. Some crimes included: stealing clothes from washing lines, food, horses and sheep, and petty theft (larceny). Crimes of assault was not considered for transportation, as this would have made the development of any new colony very dangerous. Therefore, the number of convicts transported for crimes of violence was fewer than 5%.

In total, 166 000 convicts were transported to penal colonies across Australia.

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Describe what life was like for the people of England during the 1700s. What challenges did they face?

What was a penal colony?

Explain how the hulks solved a dilemma for the prison system in England during the 1770s

Explain what challenges would have been created in the new colony if violent criminals were included in transportation to Australia.

Draw a picture of a 1778 prison hulk

Suggested texts for further information:

<https://sydneylivingmuseums.com.au/stories/why-were-convicts-transported-australia>

<https://sydneylivingmuseums.com.au/stories/convict-hulks>

Stories of Life at Sydney Cove by Susan E Boyer

(A young reader edition of 'Across the Divides')