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Acknowledgements

Find Out More

Glossary

Index

Find Out More

Contents

The First Fleet ............................................. 4
George Raper ........................................... 6
George Johnston and Esther Abrahams ............. 8
John Palmer ............................................ 10
Henry Kale ............................................ 12
Joseph Tuso ............................................ 14
Edward Whitton ....................................... 16
Edward Miles ........................................... 18
Jane and Henrietta Langley ......................... 20
Olivia Gascoigne ..................................... 22
Edward Parkinson .................................... 24
James Bloodsworth .................................. 26
Elizabeth Hayward .................................. 28
Timeline ................................................. 30
Glossary .................................................. 31
Index ...................................................... 32

Words that are printed in bold, like this, are explained in the Glossary on page 31.
The First Fleet

More than 200 years ago, in 1787, about 1500 people set sail on the First Fleet to set up a new penal colony. It was a long and sometimes terrifying voyage from England to a country they knew nothing about – New Holland.

The Voyage

The voyage was filled with danger and hardship. Amazingly, most people survived the voyage, and the 11 ships that made up the First Fleet arrived safely on the shores of New South Wales.

About half of the people on the First Fleet were convicts. They were separated from family, friends and their homeland. Most would never return to England. The rest of the fleet was made up of officers, marines, seamen, wives and children.

All of these people needed to be brave and tough for the voyage and the settling of the new colony.

A New Life

Even when things went against them, many of the colonists worked hard to make a new life for themselves in very difficult conditions. Their perseverance helped to shape the nation of Australia. This book looks at some of their stories.

The Naming of a Country

A Dutch explorer, Abel Tasman, named Australia 'New Holland' in 1644, after his home country of Holland.

English explorer Captain James Cook claimed the east coast of Australia in 1770 and named it 'New South Wales'.

In 1805, Matthew Flinders, an English navigator, suggested the name 'Australia', which came from the Latin term 'Terra Australis', which means 'southern land'.

Australia Now

Thousands of descendants of the First Fleet live in Australia today.

Historical Records

Very few convicts could read or write in the 18th century. Most of the records of the First Fleet come from letters and journals written by the officers.
George Raper

George Raper was a midshipman on the flagship Sirius. He joined the navy as a captain’s servant when he was 13 years old.

George, the Artist

George had always been a talented artist with a good eye for detail and colour. Before setting off on the voyage to New Holland, he stocked up on painting supplies. He used his watercolour paints immediately, painting scenes of what he saw throughout the voyage. He also drew charts and maps along the way.

He painted exotic birds, animals and plants that he saw at Tenerife, Rio de Janeiro and the Cape of Good Hope, where the fleet stopped to get supplies.

John Hunter was the captain of the Sirius, and he admired George’s painting skills. Hunter gave George time to paint, and also copied many of his paintings.

An Important Record

There were no professional artists on the fleet, so George’s paintings are an important record of 18th century animals and plants.

Many of George’s paintings ended up with collectors or his family. One collection lay forgotten until 1991 when 56 unsigned watercolours were discovered in a storage shed. It took another ten years for the paintings to be carefully examined, to make sure they were George’s work. Eventually, it was confirmed that they were painted by George, and they were in nearly perfect condition.

George’s Work

Some of the birds and animals George painted are now extinct.

This picture of the Sirius in a storm off the coast of Australia was painted by George Raper in 1791.

This kookaburra was painted by George Raper. The settlers had never seen such a bird.
George Johnston and Esther Abrahams

Lieutenant Colonel George Johnston was a marine who fell in love with Esther Abrahams, a convict.

The Voyage
George served on the ship the Lady Penrhyn, which carried female convicts and some children. There, he met and fell in love with Esther Abrahams. Esther and her baby came from Newgate Prison in England.

In 1788, Phillip sent George to set up a new settlement at Rose Hill where the soil was better than in Sydney. Food grown at Rose Hill helped save the colony, which had quickly run out of food.

By 1801, George and Esther had established a successful farm at Annandale House and owned 7 horses, 27 horned cattle, 136 sheep, 85 goats and 29 hogs. George and Esther were married in 1814 and had seven children.

Esther’s Crime
Esther Abrahams was convicted in 1786 at the Old Bailey, London’s criminal court, for stealing some black lace from a shop. Even though no one actually saw Esther take the lace, she was sentenced to seven years transportation.

Life in the Colony
After arriving in Sydney, George was made aide de camp to Captain Arthur Phillip, the first governor of New South Wales.

Rose Hill
Rose Hill was renamed Parramatta after the Indigenous name ‘Baramada’ or ‘Burramatta’.

Many criminals received sentences of transportation at the Old Bailey, London’s main criminal court.
John Palmer

John Palmer joined the Navy as a captain’s servant when he was only eight years old.

The Voyage

John worked his way up through the navy ranks. At 21, he served on the ship the *Richmond* against America in the *War of Independence*. John was captured with the rest of the crew and made a prisoner of war.

In America, John met and married Susan Stilwell. They moved to England after the war.

John was ordered to work as a purser on the *Sirius* in 1787. His job involved dealing with the ship’s money and documents.

Life in the Colony

John became very well known in the new colony. He was made Commissary General of the Colony in 1791. This job was important, as he was responsible for buying and handing out government stores, such as food, tools and clothing.

In 1793, he received a large *land grant*. His property became known as Woolloomooloo.

John joined a group who tried to find a way over the Blue Mountains, but the massive mountains were too difficult to pass. John decided to stay in Sydney. He became richer and more successful as he was given more land grants and went into business. He owned four ships for trading, windmills and a bakery.

A Long Life

John was the last surviving First Fleet officer in Australia. He died in 1833.

This painting shows John Palmer’s property at Woolloomooloo.

John Palmer tried to cross the Blue Mountains in 1793. However, the European settlers did not find a way across the mountains until 1813.