

The Founding of Australia



Today, Australia is considered to be a paradise with people from all over the world wanting to come and live here. However, it was not always so. Portuguese, Dutch and English sailors, and it is even believed the ancient Phoenicians had, for centuries, been visiting the north and western coastal areas, but no one at the time knew how big the land was or whether it was one area or composed of many islands.

The land, for thousands of years had been inhabited by the ancestors of present day Aborigines. Whilst they lacked the readily available resources to improve their lot as occurred in other parts of the world, they did adapt to the harsh environment and survived. However, they were not builders of cities but were a nomadic tribe hunting and surviving from what they could gather from the wild land.

The sighting of a strange object floating in the water and the spectacle of strange white creatures walking on the sand would therefore have both frightened and excited the local inhabitants, for as far as we are aware, Captain James Cook was the first European to locate, to land on and to map the east coast of Australia.

He had been charting the coastline of New Zealand and then set sail to try to locate Australia. His ship, the Endeavour, was blown off course – a terrifying time for the entire crew – but land was eventually sighted by a Lieutenant Hicks. That land, halfway between present day Melbourne and Sydney, is now called Point Hicks.

The Endeavour sailed on and anchored at Botany Bay and Captain Cook claimed the country in the name of the King of Great Britain who was at the time King George III. In 1770, there were two main European powers which were extending their territory. One was Great Britain and the other was France and there was great competition amongst the two to gain territories which would both protect and expand their empires. However, once it was determined that the land known as Terra Australis was not a threat to the British or French possessions in India and elsewhere, there was no further interest in what was to Europe an isolated and somewhat hostile land.

The situation changed when in 1783, the American Colonies won independence. For many years Britain had transported its unwanted convicts to the Americas as there was no room in the British gaols to hold the huge numbers sentenced to imprisonment, many for stealing small items like a loaf of bread to feed themselves! British cities, and especially London, were becoming far too overcrowded, even when old rotting wooden ships, called hulks, were used as makeshift prisons.

The British Government therefore decided that a new penal colony would be established in Australia, even though it was a long way away, and commissioned Captain Arthur Phillip to be its first Governor.

A few months later, in May 1787, Governor Phillip sailed from Portsmouth with six convict ships, three store ships and two man-o-war ships and arrived at Botany Bay in January 1788. However, it was clearly seen that the surrounding land would not be suitable for a settlement and Captain Phillip explored a little further and established a colony at Port Jackson, which is now the site of the present day Sydney. The east coast of Australia, including the island of Tasmania, was named ‘New South Wales’.

Interestingly, a French fleet commanded by the Comte de La Pérouse arrived at Botany Bay just after the British fleet had moved to Port Jackson.

However, lacking food and water, which the British were also short of, the French left soon afterwards and unfortunately were wrecked on the reefs of the Vanikoro Islands which are within the Solomon Islands.

Before Governor Phillip set sail from Portsmouth, he had been given instructions from King George III who, as a staunch Christian, was very concerned that the Aborigines should be treated well and protected, particularly from the convict settlers. In his *Instructions* to Phillip, which were dated the 25th day of April 1787, the King insisted that he was: “to endeavour by every possible means to open an Intercourse with the Natives and to conciliate their affections, enjoining all Our Subjects to live in amity and kindness with them. And if any of Our Subjects shall wantonly destroy them, or give them any unnecessary Interruption in the exercise of their several occupations. It is our Will and Pleasure that you do cause such offenders to be brought to punishment according to the degree of the Offence.”

It was therefore always the intention of the British administration to treat kindly with the Aborigines, although some officers and many settlers did not do so.

It is true that the British came to these lands and displaced those that were here before, but it is also true that, had it not been them, it would have been the French and later almost certainly the Germans. Australia would never have known British Law and the Westminster system of government, which in spite of any deficiencies are certainly far superior to any other system. Furthermore, there would certainly have been no Australia as we know it today.

QUESTIONS:

Who, amongst Captain Cook's crew was the first to sight the coastline of Australia?

What was the name of Captain Cook's ship?

Where in Australia did Captain Cook eventually anchor and explore the surrounding land?

Which were the two main European powers at the time?

For what reason did the British government decide to establish a colony in Australia?

When did Captain Arthur Phillip and his fleet land in Australia?

What was the name to the land claimed by Britain?

Where was the new colony eventually established?

Who was its first Governor?

Who was the King of Great Britain at the time?

In a few words describe the instructions given by the King regarding dealings with the natives in Australia?