1788
FIRST FLEET ARRIVES

The first expedition that took convicts to New South Wales — ever since its arrival known as the ‘First Fleet’ — was brought into being by a letter from Lord Sydney (then at the home office) to the lords of the treasury, dated 18 August 1786, which set forth the King’s pleasure that ships should be provided for carrying 750 convicts to Botany ‘with such provisions, necessaries, and implements for agriculture as may be necessary for use after their arrival.’

Upon this instruction were set to work the admiralty, which was responsible for the equipment and officering of the ships, and for the marine guard in the transports; the victualling department, for the provisions; the transport department, for the convict transports; the treasury, for the financial arrangements; and a number of sub-departments.

The East India Company also played a part, owing to its monopoly of trade to the East, for three of the transports were under charter to take cargoes of tea from China to London after landing convicts and stores in New South Wales. An enormous amount of correspondence was involved in the preparation which, beginning with the above letter, only ceased on 11 May 1787,

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when Arthur Phillip — who had been appointed to Command the expedition, with the rank of commodore — sent his last despatch on the eve of sailing from Spithead.

In charge of the expedition was HMS *Sirius*, commanded by Phillip in person, with John Hunter as second captain. The *Sirius* was built on the Thames in 1781. The *Supply*, an armed tender, was the other King's ship, a poor sailer and too small for the work. She was a brig-rigged sloop of 170 tons, commanded by Lieutenant Henry Lidgbird Ball. The transports were the *Alexander, Lady Penrhyn, Charlotte, Scarborough, Friendship,* and *Prince of Wales.* The storeships were the *Fishburn, Golden Grove*, and *Borrowdale*.

The owners and masters of the vessels were supplied with warrants to 'secure and keep in safe custody' the prisoners, and entered into bonds to do so. The transports were fitted for convicts as they would have been for troops, with hammocks, mess tables, and stools; but thick bulk-heads three feet high, studded with nails, were run across between decks from side to side abaft the mainmast, with loopholes to fire through in case of mutiny. This also prevented communication between the ship's company and the convicts and their guard.

The hatches were secured with cross-bars, bolts and locks, and railed round from deck to deck with oak stanchions. Sentries were stationed at each, and a guard, always under arms, was kept on the quarter-deck to prevent any sudden outbreak. It was fortunate that nothing of this kind occurred; for among the few things forgotten by the authorities was ammunition for the guard,

whose only supply was obtained from the small arms magazine on board the *Sirius.*

The food and water supply for the long voyage was a serious problem. It concerned about 1480 persons, most of whom were totally unaccustomed to sea life, unhealthy in every sense of the word, and highly receptive of such diseases as scurvy and the disorders that arise from close confinement and poor living.

The voyage, moreover, was to end with their arrival in a country remote from help, affording neither food nor shelter, inhabited, for all they knew to the contrary, by a savage race and infested by wild beasts. The supply of food and water was, fortunately, plentiful, good and (incredible as it may seem) both in quality and quantity superior to that often served to merchant seamen in British sailing-ships down to very recent times.

The official ration of water was three quarts per day per man; the food scale two-thirds, as already mentioned, of that fixed for the naval service and included bread (i.e. biscuit), salt pork, salt beef, peas, oatmeal, butter, cheese, and vinegar. The scale was not adhered to, the whole ration being largely increased, and varied by rice, portable soup, and dried fish. When in port, and as long after as the stock of fresh provisions lasted, fresh meat and vegetables in plenty were supplied.

The women and children were given a special diet, and the sick allowed wine and spirits. The prisoners were supplied with hammocks and blankets, and clothing for the year, consisting of two jackets, four pairs of woollen drawers, one hat, three pairs of worsted socks, three frocks, three pairs of

trousers, and three pairs of shoes; and the women with suitable apparel.

During the voyage the water ration sometimes had to be reduced; but not for long, as the supply was nearly always sufficient to last between ports and was, of course, renewed whenever rain fell.

The ships' decks were crowded with pens containing sheep, hogs, goats, puppies, kids, turkeys, geese, ducks, chickens, pigeons, and cats. More live stock, as well as seeds, were taken on board at the Cape of Good Hope — one bull, one bull-calf, seven cows, one stallion three mares and three colts, 44 sheep, four goats, 28 boars and breeding sows; and the officers bought such private stock as room could be found for in the different ships.

The officers, realizing that for some years their future abode would be almost completely cut off from civilization, brought with them much furniture and clothes and some luxuries: the surgeon of the Sirius for instance, brought out a piano, which he left with the Macarthurs when he returned to England in 1791.

Naval and marine officers, naval surgeons, and four civilians constituted the governor's staff. As most of them are referred to under other headings, and many under their proper names, it is only necessary here to give a list of the establishment: governor-in-chief, Arthur Phillip; lieutenant-governor, Robert Ross (also major commanding marines); chaplain, Richard Johnson; judge-advocate, David Collins (a captain of marines); surveyor-general, Augustus Alt; commissary of stores, Andrew Miller; assistant commissary, Zachariah Clarke; provost-marshal, Henry Brewer; peace officer and bailiff of the government, James Smith.

There were 28 wives and 17 children belonging to the men of the detachment.

A transportation office return, dated 13 June 1794, gives the number of convicts as 778; this agrees with a return of the house of commons select committee on finance, dated 26 July 1798, and approximates to the figures given in the appendix to Phillip's *Voyage,* which supplies a list of names, places of conviction and sentences, making a total of 780, and to a return sent from Santa Cruz by Phillip, dated 10 June 1787. This gives a total of 789 convicts and their children embarked, of whom 2 were pardoned; the fleet therefore sailed with 771 prisoners and 16 children of convicts. Add to this 252 guards and officials, 210 seamen of the navy, and 233 merchant seamen, and we reach a grand total in the fleet of 1482 persons.

Two private references to the sailing have been found. The minister of a church in the Isle of Wight recorded in his diary that, as the convoy left Spithead, he prayed for its safety and for the souls of the prisoners. And an anonymous officer, writing in the *United Services Journal* for December 1846, described the embarkation of 'convicts at Portsmouth:

I recollect perfectly all the shop-windows and doors of Portsmouth being closed on this occasion, and the streets lined with troops while the wagons — I think 30 in number — passed to Point Beach, where the boats were ready to receive them. As soon as they were embarked, they gave three tremendous cheers and were rowed off to the transport ready for their reception at Spithead.

At daybreak on the morning of 13 May the fleet passed through the Nee-

dles. The ships were three days clearing the English Channel.

On 3 June the fleet arrived off Teneriffe, anchoring in Santa Cruz roads, about a mile from the town. By this time warm weather and tropical rains necessitated strict enforcement of health regulations. The passengers were not allowed to get wet; explosions of gunpowder between decks, and a liberal use of oil of tar and lime, sweetened the ships.

The problem of ventilation was doubly difficult in the female convict transports, as it was found absolutely necessary to keep the women locked up below at night. Although windsails were rigged, the heat below was so great that women were continually fainting.

On 6 July it became necessary to put everyone, without exception, on three pints of water per day, exclusive of cooking, for which one quart per man was allowed; this shortage of water soon brought on symptoms of illness, although the diet had been improved by catching a great number of fish.

The equator was crossed on the evening of 14 July, but no ceremony of any kind was observed. So far the fleet had had moderate to fine weather; but on 23 July the wind increased, and during the ensuing three days some of the ships lost a few light spars in heavy squalls.

On 4 August the fleet anchored in the harbour of Rio de Janeiro, and on the following day, at the invitation of the viceroy, came farther up the bay and anchored a mile and a half from the landing-place.

During the month the ships spent in port they were supplied at reasonable charges with everything needed. On 4 September the fleet got under way

again, and on 13 October, at seven in the evening, reached Table Bay and anchored a mile and a half from the shore. The Dutch governor, was polite but unhelpful, explaining that the colony was short of provisions, and was not in a position to sell all that would be required, except at high prices.

However, negotiations resulted in Phillip's obtaining sufficient fresh meat and soft bread per day to serve out to everyone in the fleet during its stay. Live stock was also obtained.

On 13 November the ships were under way again. On 25 November Phillip, taking with him P. G. King and Dawes, changed his pennant to the *Supply,* and with the three best sailers (the A*lexander, Scarborough,* and *Friendship)* went on ahead to make preparations for the landing, and sighted the New South Wales coast on 3 January.

At early morning on 7 January 1788 the *Lady Penrhyn* signalled land in sight, and at 4 p.m. that day they sighted the Mewstone, near the South Cape of Tasmania — at that time believed to be the southernmost point of the Australian continent.

Hunter, whom Phillip had left in charge of the second division, did not make the land until he sighted Red Point (so called by Cook — really one of the five Islands near Wollongong) on 19 January. Next day they entered Botany Bay, and were at anchor at 8 a.m. The *Supply* was only 40 hours ahead of them, and the three transports that had been detached with her only 20.

The voyage had taken eight months and one week. The ships had not, except by design, lost sight of each other for an hour although nine of them

were small merchantmen, and the greater part of the sailing was in unknown waters.

Add to this that the death-rate was very low, although the ships were crowded to an extent incredible in the present day, and the people on board belonged to the most difficult and unhealthy class of passengers, many of them having left England in a very sickly state—and the success of this remarkable voyage can be appreciated.

(by Walter James Jeffery)