The convict experience

During the first 80 years of white settlement, from 1788 to 1868, 165,000 convicts were transported from England to Australia.
Transportation wasn’t limited to Australia - it was a method various governments had been using for dealing with convicted criminals. The most common reason for transportation was theft – this included pickpocketing, shoplifting, stealing horses and sheep, highway robbery, housebreaking and receiving stolen goods. In some cases, the theft was associated with violence.

You didn’t have to steal much to be exiled– even pinching a handkerchief was deemed a transportable offence.

Less common reasons for being transported were the crimes of rape, manslaughter, murder, forgery and even bigamy.

**Convict labour**

Governor Phillip often employed convicts according to their skills; they may have been carpenters, servants, cooks, farmers or shepherds before they were transported.

Convicts were a source of labour to build roads, bridges, courthouses, hospitals and other public buildings, or to work on government farms, while educated convicts may have been given jobs such as record-keeping for the government administration. Female convicts, on the other hand, were generally employed as domestic servants to the officers.

Crime and punishment

Convict discipline was invariably harsh and often quite arbitrary. One of the main forms of punishment was a thrashing with the cat o’ nine tails, a multi-tailed whip that often also contained lead weights. Fifty lashes was a standard punishment, which was enough to strip the skin from someone’s back, but this could be increased to more than 100.

Just as dreadful as the cat o’ nine tails was a long stint on a chain gang, where convicts were employed to build roads in the colony. The work was backbreaking, and was made difficult and painful as convicts were shackled together around their ankles with irons or chains weighing 4.5kg or more.

During the day, the prisoners were supervised by a military guard assisted by brutal convict overseers, convicts who were given the task of disciplining their fellows.

At night, they were locked up in small wooden huts behind stockades. Worse than the cat or chain gangs was transportation to harsher and more remote penal settlements in Norfolk Island, Port Macquarie and Moreton Bay.
About this item:
Robert Jones - 'Recollections of 13 years Residence in Norfolk Island and Van Diemans land', dated 1823 [?], and associated papers to 1938

FL3219808 [7]

Robert Jones - 'Recollections of 13 years Residence in Norfolk Island and Van Diemans land

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About this item:
Robert Jones - 'Recollections of 13 years Residence in Norfolk Island and Van Diemans land', dated 1823 [?], and associated papers to 1938

FL3219829 [10]
In the first 50 years of white settlement, society was changing rapidly. Free settlers were moving to Australia, and convicts were increasingly employed to work for them. As convicts either finished their sentence, or were pardoned, they were able to earn a living and sustain themselves through jobs and land grants. By the mid-1830s, most convicts were assigned to private employment.

The easiest way for a convict to reduce their sentence was to work hard and stay out of trouble. They could then be given a ticket-of-leave or pardon.

Ticket-of-leave holders were allowed to work for themselves, and to acquire property, on the condition that they live within a specified district and report regularly to a magistrate. Any misbehaviour at all could result in the ticket being taken away from them.

There were two types of pardon available – a conditional pardon was granted by the governor on the condition that the former convict stayed in the colony. An absolute pardon gave a convict unconditional freedom to travel wherever they liked in the world. Convicts who didn’t qualify for either a ticket-of-leave or pardon were given a certificate of freedom once their sentence had been served.

See more pardons and tickets-of-leave here.
William Anson - ticket of leave, 16 May 1828

IT is His Excellency the Governor's Pleasure to Dispense with the Attendance at Government Work of William Anson, who was tried at Waterford Juinor Assizes 1823 Convict for Seven Years arrived per Ship Castle Forbes Ord. No. 141 Master, in the Year 1822 and to permit him to employ himself (off the Stores) in any lawful Occupation within the District of Parramatta for his own Advantage during good Behaviour; or, until His Excellency's further Pleasure shall be made known.

By His Excellency's Command.

[Signature]

William Anson, ticket of leave, 16 May 1828
DESCRIPTION.

STANDING NUMBER,

NAME, __________ Hannah Dodd alias Foster.

SHIP, __________ South Melville.

MASTER, __________ Wethers.

YEAR, __________ 1817.

NATIVE PLACE, __________ Ceylon.

TRADE or CALLING, __________ Country Service.

OFFENCE, __________

SENTENCE, __________ Fourteen Years.

YEAR OF BIRTH, __________ 1778.

HEIGHT, __________ 5 feet 6 inches.

COMPLEXION, __________ Fair掩盖.

HAIR, __________ Dark brown.

EYES, __________ Hazel.

GENERAL REMARKS, __________ Had a Criminal Sentence to 1817, now commutted out cancelled.

Absolute pardon for Hannah Dodd alias Foster, 1827
Convict clothing

Until 1810, the government handed out civilian clothes or ‘slops’ to convicts – there was no need for a uniform because nearly everyone in the colony was a convict. However, as more free settlers moved to Australia, and convicts finished their sentences, it was necessary to be able to easily distinguish the convicts.

The new uniform consisted of a coarse woollen jacket, a yellow or grey waistcoat, a pair of trousers and long socks, shoes, two cotton or linen shirts, a neckerchief and hat.

About this item:
Dated from the year convict transportation ended on the east coast of Australia.
Convict caps


Convict caps were a distinctive feature of convict dress, serving as both a practical and a symbolic representation of the convict's status and identity.

Convict caps were typically made from heavy fabric and featured a wide brim to protect the wearer from the sun and the elements. The cap was secured under the chin with a string, ensuring it remained in place even during the most rigorous activities.

The cap's design was practical, with a hard, rounded crown to protect the head from falls and the elements. The wide brim provided shade and protection, while the top flap allowed for ventilation and the ability to adjust the cap to fit a variety of head sizes.

Over time, the convict cap evolved, with different styles and materials reflecting changes in the convict system and the needs of the wearer. The cap remained a symbol of the convict's identity and their role in the colonial society.

Explore more images and learn more about convict caps and other aspects of convict life in the State Library of NSW collection.
About this item:
Mounted on card inscribed: "This brass button was found in the ruins of the Australian Agricultural Company's cottages in Pit Row off Darby Street, Newcastle. The A.A.Co. worked their mines from 1830 by convicts assigned to them by the Governor of N.S.W. These convict miners were housed in Pit Row and fed and clothed by the A.A.Co. The buttons were made in England for the Convict Clothes. 1922." In later hand: "Pit Row is now known as Swan Street at bottom end of Anzac Avenue". Dated from the time of transfer of the Newcastle Mine from the Government to the Australian Agricultural Company. Reference: 'The Australian Agricultural Company 1824-1875' / Jesse Gregson. Sydney : Angus & Robertson, 1907.
About this item:
Convict jacket, ca. 1840.

FL3324614 [24]
Leg Irons, before 1849

Dixson, William, Sir, 1870-1952

Call # SAFE / DR 167

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