Australia: The first two years

Before 1788, Australia was populated by about 300,000 aborigines. Their country was the world's oldest continent for more than 10,000 years. They had encountered few visitors from other counties. Their way of life changed in the late 1770s.

1. Britain needs new overseas colonies: Three hundred years ago Australia was called New Holland by the European countries. Parts of the west coast had been visited by ships from Holland but a settlement had not been made. Captain James Cook, from Great Britain, sailed along the east coast of New Holland in 1770 and explored and mapped it. He named this land New South Wales. He told the British government that he thought it be a good place to settle.

Why did the British government need new places to settle? In Britain many people were moving from the country areas to the cities. Factories and other places of work were developing. As well, there was an increase in crime. Britain’s jails were overcrowded, and needed to send its convicts somewhere. It couldn’t send them to America. The government decided to set up a prison or penal colony in the land explored by Cook. The convicts would be taken there and never return.

2. The First Fleet sets out: On 13th May 1787, nine ships escorted by two naval vessels left Portsmouth for New Holland. They carried 759 convicts, their Marine guards, some with families, and a few civil officers. This was the First Fleet. It was led by Captain Arthur Philip. Conditions for the convicts were poor. They were crammed into a small space below decks and were allowed on deck for short periods on some days. Surprisingly, few died over the eight month trip.

The Fleet stopped at Tenerife, Rio de Janeiro and Cape Town to stock up on food. It reached Botany Bay on the East coast of Australian between 18th and 20th January 1788.

4. First days in the new settlement: The settlement from the start had many problems. Few of the convicts knew how to farm and the soil around Sydney Cove was poor. The country was hot, dry and unfertile, unsuitable for the small farming necessary to make the settlement self-sufficient. Everyone, including the Colony's first Governor, Captain Arthur Phillip, was on rationed food.
The aborigines who lived near the early settlement were wary of the settlers. Their lives were a mystery to the visitors, who could communicate with them only in a rudimentary way and who had little understanding of how the aborigines organized their cultures or their lives. Unlike the newcomers, the aborigines did not find the environment harsh or difficult. They lived very well in this environment; it had been their home for a long time. They knew very well which local plants were nutritious, where they grew and when to eat them. They fished and trapped animals with ease.

The settlers found the local plants hard to eat. As well, they were generally poor fishermen. As a result, most of their food had to be brought to the new colony by ship. Animals such as rats, dogs, crows, an occasional kangaroo or emu supplemented the food.

Shelter was also a problem. The new arrivals had few building materials and tools, which were of a bad quality. The local trees were large hardwoods and the tools were soon blunt or broken. As a result, building construction was slow.

5. **Early struggles in the new colony:** Over the next six months, the settlement was isolated from the rest of the world. All the ships except the naval vessels "Syrius" and "Supply" had left. These two vessels were sent out to try to deal with the food shortage. In early October the "Syrius" was sent to Cape Town to buy food. Until she returned six months later, the supply of food was reduced further. This led to work on farming and building also being reduced.