

The British Say 'Yes'

No-one knows for sure all the reasons for the British government deciding to establish a penal colony in New South Wales in 1788. Here are some of the ideas that have been put forward by historians.

Overcrowded Prisons

The most common explanation is that after the North American colonies gained independence from Britain, a new place had to be found to send convicts. British prisons were overcrowded, and the British legal system of the time severely punished what we would today look at as minor crimes, such as theft of food, with long prison sentences. It made sense to the British government of the time to send some of these prisoners to faraway colonies where they could grow crops and fend for themselves.



Prisons in England in the 1700s were so crowded that many prisoners were kept on old ships called hulks.

While it seems likely that this was one of the reasons, other historians point out that Botany Bay is a very long way from England. The British government controlled colonies in Africa, the West Indies, South America and India, which were all closer to England, and already established. Why did the British decide to set up a new colony so much further away? This was much more expensive, and the chances of it failing were greater.

Trade

Another idea is that the British wanted to establish a port near Asia to make it easier to trade with countries such as China and Japan. Indonesia, once referred to as the Spice Islands, was controlled by the Dutch, and other Asian countries were colonised by other European nations. Some Asian countries such as China had large populations and well-organised armies who would defend their land against invasion. While Australia was further away, it had the advantage of apparently being inhabited by fewer people, who would probably be easily overcome by the British army. There is some evidence to support this idea.

British Interests

Governor Phillip was instructed in April 1787 to send a party to Norfolk Island as soon as practical after arriving in New South Wales. A group of soldiers and convicts landed there on the 5th of March 1788, hoisting the British flag on the 6th of March 1788. The island's tall pines seemed perfect for making masts. Flax also was found there, which it was thought could be used to make sails. With Norfolk Island supplying masts and sails, Sydney could become a powerful naval base to protect British interests in Asia. Unfortunately the Norfolk Island pines and flax did not prove very good for masts and sail making.

The French had also been exploring in the area. Indeed, two French ships arrived in Botany Bay just days after the First Fleet. The British government may have wanted to establish a presence in the area to stop the French from colonising the continent.

- 1 List the three subheadings in the text.

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- 2 Trace the line that shows the place which gained independence from Britain in the 1700s.

• North America

• India

• Africa

• Norfolk Island



- 3 What was Indonesia once referred to as?

- a Spice Islands
b West Indies
c North America

- 4 Why did Botany Bay seem a strange choice for a colony?

- a It was a long way from England.
b It was close to Norfolk Island.
c It was close to China and Japan.

- 5 Which country had a large population and well-organised army?

- a Indonesia
b New Holland
c China

- 6 When did the party land on Norfolk Island?

- 7 What arrived in Botany Bay just days after the First Fleet?

Inference questions

- 8 Why do you think British prisons were overcrowded?

- 9 Explain in your own words why Norfolk Island was colonised so soon after the First Fleet's arrival in New South Wales.

Challenge Option

Research to find a picture of an English convict from the late 1700s.