



Convict Life in New South Wales - Work Conditions

Assignment of Convicts

Most convicts were not sent to work on Government projects such as roads but were assigned to private masters, whether Army officers or settlers, as servants or labourers.

To have convicts assigned to them, free settlers had to prove that they were rich enough to provide them with clothing and food and that they had enough work for them to do. Usually a settler could have a certain number of convicts assigned, according to the size of their property and the work that had to be done.

Settlers close to Sydney (or friendly with the Governor) usually got first pick of the convicts and there were many complaints, from those living further out in the bush, that they were assigned the ones that were too old, lazy or sick to work properly.

Where possible, an attempt was made to assign convicts work that was as close as practicable to the work they had been doing before conviction in Britain. This meant that builders and farm workers were in short supply, as there was plenty of this type of work. People with important skills became highly sought-after and could often bargain for better conditions. Some people had skills which could easily be adapted to new situations, e.g. shoe-makers often went to work making saddles or harness.

But many had skills which were only of limited use. There were lots of weavers and tailors who were not needed in the small cloth factories in the new colony. These people had to learn to do something else and were usually assigned as unskilled labourers or domestic servants.



The Great North Road is recognised as a key historic treasure from the beginnings of the colony of New South Wales.

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