

HISTORY IN THE SHADOW OF THE MOUNTAINS

A journey through the history of the Sapphire Coast

Part 1 – Introduction



Introduction

Overview of settlement in Australia

The dispersal of people to other lands is usually a consequence of events in their place of origin – competition for resources, conflict and wars.

The first migration of people to the Australian continent was around 50,000 years ago, at the peak of the last ice age, as part of the great migration of modern humans out Africa. This region of the Australian southeast coast was occupied early in this migration, as evidenced by the ritual burial sites in southern New South Wales dated at 42,000 years ago. It was another 25,000 years or so before their cousins arrived in what is now Britain, which was finally free of ice.

The next migration to this continent was tens of thousands of years later. In the 16th and 17th centuries there were several sightings and landings by European explorers sailing the globe but no settlements until the British arrived in the late 18th century. Britain established a settlement at Sydney Cove for strategic military reasons and as a penal colony.

The 18th century in Europe was a period of conflict, with the great powers jockeying for trade, empire and resources. The projection of power was naval, and success depended on well-equipped fleets and strategically located support bases around the globe.

This power balance was between Britain on one side and France and the Netherlands on the other, with Imperial Russia an ever-present complication. The rivalry was played out in the American War of Independence and related naval wars between the parties.

The conflicts spilled over into the Indian Ocean where Dutch control of strategic ports at Capetown in South Africa and Batavia (Indonesia), and the French base at Ile de France (Mauritius), threatened British trade interests in India. Britain did not have a safe naval base in the region and suffered heavily in a series of naval battles. This, coupled with the loss of the American colonies for transport of convicts, set the scene for the establishment of a strategic naval presence in the southern hemisphere. Captain Cook's 1771 reports on his discovery of New Holland (Australia) led to the settlement of Sydney Cove, Norfolk Island (1000 km off the east coast of Australia) and Hobart Town in Van Diemen's Land (Tasmania).

The history of settlement in the Sapphire Coast region is reflected in these global events. Coastal exploration by Bass and Flinders in 1797 led to the discovery of Bass Strait, the separation between the Australian mainland and Van Diemen's Land, which meant that ships could bypass Hobart Town. The existence of a safe haven for ships at Twofold Bay on this coast elevated the importance of this region for coastal shipping.

The contact between the Indigenous people of Australia and the newcomers is a significant part of the history of this country and this region. The interaction between the Indigenous people and the settlers, despite good intentions, was often marred by mutual ignorance and by the devastating impact of diseases brought by the newcomers from the northern hemisphere. These diseases almost obliterated Indigenous populations. The ongoing conflict for land and resources often led to

violent and tragic outcomes. The Indigenous survivors ultimately fulfilled a valuable role in the emerging regional economy, contributing their skills to the new pastoral and whaling industries.

The change in status of the settlements in Australia from penal colonies and naval bases to emerging agricultural economies was, once again, a consequence of global politics. The British established their naval dominance after the Battle of Trafalgar in 1805, and any threats from the French diminished after the Battle of Waterloo in 1815.



Battle of Trafalgar (Turner)



The Duke of Wellington at Waterloo

In 1822-23 a British Government enquiry into the administration of NSW saw the end of the penal colony status and the emergence of a healthy agricultural export economy based on land grants and wool from the merino sheep bred for Australian conditions. This new agricultural economy, coupled with a huge increase in the demand for fine wool and manufacturing in Britain, set off a rush for grazing land in the colony. The era of the 'squatters' had arrived in NSW and in what was to become Victoria. The first squatter came to Bega Valley region in 1829, soon followed by others.

The acceleration of the industrial revolution in Britain established a huge demand for whale oil for lubrication of machinery. The Eden whale industry was born and this, along with squatter occupation of grazing runs, established the pattern of settlement in the region.

The next phase of settlement occurred with freehold land selection in 1860s. Short-lived economic booms occurred when gold was discovered and local ports became even more important.

The Indigenous people of the region, the European settlers, their towns, their stories and the heritage they have left behind are described in this series:

- Part 2 The Indigenous People
- Part 3 The early years – exploration and whaling
- Part 4 Squatters and selectors
- Part 5 The town of Eden
- Part 6 The town of Pambula
- Part 7 The town of Bega
- Part 8 The towns of Merimbula and Tathra
- Part 9 The towns of Bermagui and Cobargo

There is a general map of the region at the end of this Introduction. The description of each town also includes a map that indicates the heritage sites mentioned in the text.

This series

This series had been assembled as part of the Sapphire Coast Heritage Tourism Strategy and is one of a collection that also includes the, natural marine heritage and geoheritage (a journey through the earth history of the region).

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