

The First Fleet and the first ferals

Dutch, English, French and Portuguese ships had landed on Australian shores for nearly 200 years before the First Fleet in 1788.



HMS Sirius - First Fleet flagship
by John Allcott

And it is reasonable to think that they may have left behind rats and mice and even cats - plus bugs and plant seeds.

After a 8 month sea voyage from England, the 11 ships of the First Fleet arrived in Botany Bay in January 1788.

Of the 1,500 people on board, more than half were convicts. The rest were crew, marines and their families.

Also on board were a menagerie of animals. David Collins' stock take in May 1788 -

1 Stallion 2 Bulls 19 Goats 5 Rabbits
35 Ducks 3 Mares 5 Cows 49 Hogs
18 Turkeys 122 Fowls 3 Colts 29 Sheep
25 Pigs 29 Geese 87 Chickens.

Plus pet dogs, cats and birds.

Seeds and plants brought on the First Fleet included wheat, barley, corn, cotton, coffee, banana, cocoa, sugarcane, apple, pear, orange, lemon and tamarind.

It is reasonable to assume that the bags of seed would also contain weed seeds.



Goat (Greg McCroary)

The bulls and cows were acquired in Cape Town, South Africa. They were Black Cape cattle - now known as Drakensberger.



a Drakensberger bull (Louis Willemse)

In June 1788 - less than six months after the First Fleet landed in Australia - the cattle went missing.

7 years later several herds of over 100 head were found near the Nepean River in an area that became known as *The Cowpastures*.

If cattle can leave without a trace, it is reasonable to assume that rabbits, pigs, goats, pigeons and cats also "went bush".

This was a clear indication that escaped animals could and did thrive in this new land.

Until the introduction of a synthetic red dye in the mid 1850s, crushed cochineal (*coach-a-neel*) insects were used.



Prickly Pear, Sofala, NSW

Cochineal insects and the **prickly pear cactus** on which it fed, were on the First Fleet with the intention of creating a red dye industry.

The British Army wore and were known as redcoats.

The cochineal insects soon died off but the prickly pear thrived and spread, and by 1920 had infested 24 million hectares in NSW and Queensland.

It was eventually controlled by the introduction of a natural predator - a cactus moth from South America.