The First Fleet and the Gold Rushes

After thousands of years of Aboriginal possession, people from Europe have occupied Australia since a little more than 200 years ago. While the first recorded visit to Australia by a European occurred in 1606, when Dutch sailor Willem Jansz landed on the west coast of Cape York Peninsula, it was not until 1788 that Europeans finally arrived in Australia to stay.
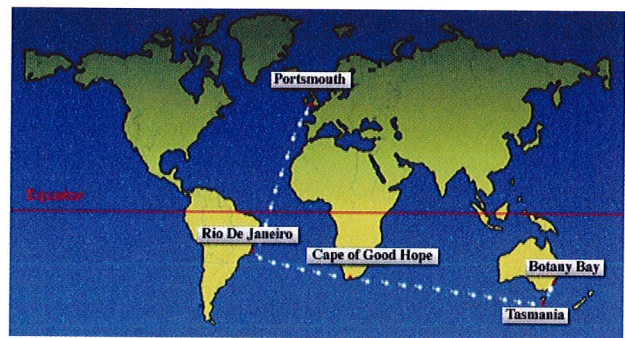
The First British Immigrants
Most of the first British immigrants did not want to travel to Australia. They were either convicts, sent away from home as a punishment, or soldiers sent to guard them.

Images of the First Fleet

The early days of Sydney Town as shown in a painting by artist William Bradley.

The First Fleet visited both South America and South Africa on its journey to New South Wales.
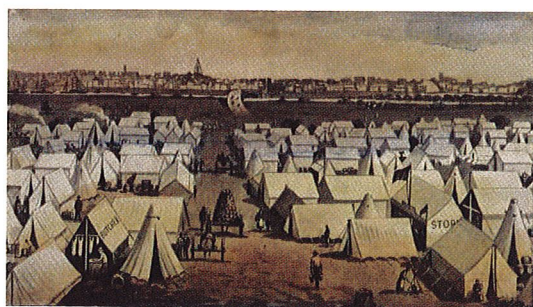
The Rush for Riches
During the first half of the 1800s the flow of free settlers gradually increased. These people mainly came from England, hoping to make a new life in Australia. They were trying to escape poverty in Britain. However, the trickle of immigrants was about to turn into a flood.
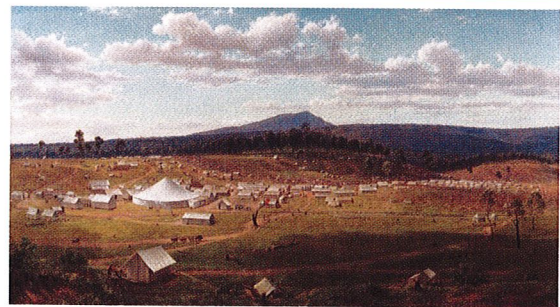
In 1851, news spread through the Australian colonies and around the world that large amounts of gold were to be found in New South Wales and Victoria. Ships full of gold-seeking immigrants from Britain, Ireland, USA, Canada, Germany, Italy, Spain, Austria, New Zealand and China arrived in Melbourne and Sydney. Even the ships' crews joined the excitement, with many deserting to join the rush and leaving their ships stuck in port without enough crew to sail home. Local businesses also struggled as their workers rushed to the goldfields to make their fortune.

Between 1851 and 1861, Australia's population soared from 437 000 to 1 168 000. When most of the easily recovered gold had been dug and sold, and the gold rushes subsided, many of the immigrants who came to Australia to seek a quick fortune stayed. As a result, Australia became a richer, more stable society no longer dependent on convict labour.

Images of the Gold Rushes

New arrivals camped in a tent city in South Melbourne before travelling overland to the Victorian goldfields.

Conditions were little better when the diggers arrived at Ballarat, where another tent city awaited them.
This painting is by Eugene von Guérard