



Birth of Newcastle

The discovery by Lt. Shortland in September 1797 of the site of what would become Newcastle was largely accidental. Shortland had been sent in search of a number of convicts who had seized the *Cumberland* as she was sailing from Sydney Cove.

The convicts put the ship's officers ashore at Broken Bay and sailed on. Lt Shortland was charged with the task of apprehending the miscreants and he set off in Governor Hunter's whaleboat. Lieutenant Shortland made for Port Stephens, where he thought the errant convicts may take shelter, but after unsuccessfully searching the bays and inlets, he sailed for home. On his way back down the coast, he entered what he later described as "a very fine river" which he named after Governor Hunter.

Lieutenant Shortland was the first white man to explore and name the place, and it is his original landing at Signal Hill and Stockton on September 9, 1797, which is used to mark as the founding of the city.

The Hunter region was already well known to local Kooris who had lived here for thousands of years prior to Lt. Shortland's visit.

Captain Cook had earlier marked on a map the rocky islet of Nobbys Head at its mouth as he sailed north on May 10, 1770. History also shows that in 1791, William Bryant and seven other escaped convicts ran their six-oared cutter into "a small creek" which has never been definitely identified, but which must have been very close to the present city. The Hunter River was also visited in 1796 by a party of fishermen, who brought samples of coal back to Sydney.

Over the next two years several ships sailed to the Hunter for coal and, and by 1799 sufficient quantities had been brought back to make up a shipment for export. This shipment went to Bengal.

By the turn of the century the mouth of the Hunter River was being visited by diverse groups of men, including coal hewers, timber-cutters, and other escaped convicts. Governor King, who took office in 1800, decided on a more positive approach to exploit the now obvious natural resources of the Hunter Valley.

Besides coal, vast cedar forests covered a huge tract along the shores of the Hunter, providing a source of urgently needed building timber for the infant Sydney colony.

Governor King sent an expedition in HMS Lady Nelson, commanded by Lieutenant James Grant to survey these resources and explore the Hunter. On board were Lieutenant Col. Paterson (who was later to order Governor Bligh back to England during the Rum Rebellion), Ensign Barallier, J.W. Lewin, a mining expert, five sawyers, and a crew of nearly 60.

Accompanied by the schooner Francis, the Lady Nelson arrived at the mouth of the Hunter River on June 14, 1801, and Col. Paterson named the island at the river mouth Coal Island. It is now known as Nobbys.



In addition to locating most of the important coal seams on the site now occupied by Newcastle, the expedition explored the river by boat as far as the present town of Singleton.

King decided to establish a small post at the river mouth, however this first settlement was short lived. Its population included a Corporal Wixtead who was suddenly replaced by Surgeon Martin Mason. Surgeon Mason's rule ended in a mutiny, and Governor King closed the settlement early in 1802.

The name, Newcastle, first appeared in the commission issued by Governor King on March 15, 1804, to Lieut. Charles Menzies of the Royal Marines, appointing him superintendent of the new settlement. As the area around Sydney was known as the County of Cumberland, King decided to give the area around the new settlement the name of another northern English county, Northumberland. And as Newcastle-on-Tyne was the most prominent town in that county, he gave the settlement the name Newcastle.

The new settlement comprising convicts and a military guard, arrived at the Hunter River on March 27, 1804, in three ships, the Lady Nelson, the Resource and the James.

Newcastle remained a penal settlement for nearly 20 years, and despite the natural beauty of the surroundings and the mild climate, it was a nasty place. The military rule was harsh, often barbarous, and there was no more notorious place of punishment in the whole of Australia than Limeburners Bay, on the inner side of Stockton peninsula, where incorrigibles were sent to burn oyster shells to produce lime.

Under Captain James Wallis, commandant from 1815 to 1818, the convicts' conditions improved and a building boom began. Capt. Wallis laid out the streets of the town, built the first church on the site of the present Anglican Cathedral, erected the old gaol on the seashore, and began work on the breakwater which now joins Nobbys to the mainland. The quality of these buildings was poor and only (a much reinforced) breakwater survives.

For these works, and for his humane rule of the convict colony, Capt. Wallis earned the personal commendation of Governor Macquarie. In Governor Macquarie's opinion the prison colony was too close to Sydney and the proper exploitation of the land was not practicable with prison labor.

So, in 1823, military rule in Newcastle ended. The number of prisoners was reduced to 100 (most of these were employed on the building of the breakwater), and the remaining 900 were sent to Port Macquarie.

Freed for the first time from the infamous influence of penal law, the town began to acquire the aspect of a typical Australian pioneer settlement and a steady flow of free settlers poured into the hinterland.

More information on the history and development of Newcastle and its local council is available from www.ncc.nsw.gov.au/discover_newcastle/local_history