New Holland, as it was then known, has appeared on maps since 1606. The land was not seen as being valuable to the Europeans so it was mostly left alone.

The first voyage of Captain James Cook from 1768-1771, plus another factor, would change this. Cook was sent to Tahiti to observe the transit of the planet Venus. It was thought that the distance from the Earth to the sun could be calculated if the transit was watched from different places around the world.

A second mission was to claim the great southern landmass for Britain. After leaving Tahiti, Cook mapped the entire coast of New Zealand. Next he headed west and charted the east coast of what he named New South Wales.

Sir Joseph Banks, a scientist aboard the ship, was impressed with all the plant species in a bay they explored. Cook named it Botany Bay for this reason.

On 22 August 1770 Cook claimed New South Wales for Britain on what is now called Possession Island, north of Cape York in Queensland.

Cook and his crew returned to England with maps, plant and animal specimens and many drawings of what they had seen on the three-year voyage. Cook and Banks said the land in ‘New South Wales’ looked good for farming. Because he saw no buildings, Cook described the land as ‘terra nullius’, Latin for ‘land belonging to no one’.

A short time after Cook’s first voyage, the British Colonies in North America were becoming tired of the taxes they had to pay the British government. On 4 July 1776 America declared its independence and was no longer a British colony. This put a stop to transportation of convicts from England to America.

Crime rates were high in England at this time because many people were very poor and were forced to steal to stay alive. Conditions were bad in the cities and many were desperate. The punishments were very harsh and people could be sent to jail for stealing a handkerchief or a loaf of bread or just for being homeless.

After American independence, ships called prison hulks were used as floating jails, but the British Government needed another solution. In 1779, Banks suggested New South Wales as a place to set up a colony. The British government decided they would transport convicts there and set up a penal colony.

Preparations were made for the First Fleet to set sail for Botany Bay. The 11 ships in the Fleet departed on 13 May 1787 with around 1500 passengers, including convicts, and marines and their families.

The fleet arrived at Botany Bay between 18 and 20 January 1788, but soon moved to Port Jackson (now Sydney Harbour) on 26 January 1788. Australia Day is celebrated on this date each year.