# Script - "A Colonial Night"

## Flash Language of Colonial Times and Common Modern Language not used during British Colonial period of Australia 1787 to 1815

## Convict Flash Language and Convicts of the early colony had their own ‘flash’ language, made up of slang words developed by criminals in London.

### Modern everyday words that did not exist during British Colonial times of Australia from 1787-1815.

1. **Okay** or **ok** (mid 19th century (originally US): probably an abbreviation of orl korrect, humorous form of all correct).
2. **Alright** (was first seen in print in 1884.  The Word All Right first recorded around 1820.
3. **Tell me** (first seen in 1860).  Replace with Please make it be known to me.
4. **Isn't it** (use in Early Middle English, however the more common use of this during the period was Fore it is not so.

### Did You Know

**To show the fore and middle fingers of the right hand pointing upwards.** During the Battle of Agincourt, where 6,000 English soldiers against 25,000 strong French army comprising mainly of the French nobility, the French General Busego ordered that the fore and middle fingers of the right hand of any Englishman captured was to be cut off. This would prevent them at a future time using an arrow from a bow to kill another French soldier. It is reported that as the English soldiers escaped they would turn to the French and stick their fore and middle fingers of the right hand in the air as sign of defiance and to show the French that they have lived to draw and fire another arrow.  There is still literature that tries to eliminate this was ture.

**To freeze the balls off a brass monkey.** The triangular brass construction on the decks of the man-of-war ships on which the cannon balls sat was called a Monkey. The cannon balls were stacked in a pyramid shape and were made of steel. In the heat of the day both steel and brass expand and in the cool of the night contract. The brass contracts at a faster rate than the steel causing the cannon balls to lose their footings and fall rolling all over the decks. Hence the saying it is cold enough to freeze the balls of a brass monkey.

**The Rule of Thumb.** A husband was permitted to beat his wife with a stick as a punishment so long as the stick was no thicker than the husband’s thumb. This was considered to be the law of the land and the husband would not be considered to be brutal.

**Letting the cat out of the bag.** One of the common forms of punishment was to be sentenced to so many lashes with the Cat-o’-Nine Tails commonly referred to as the CAT. The Cat was kept in a hessian bag and prior to the punishment being administered the flogger would remove the Cat from the bag. This is where the saying letting the cat out of the bag.

**Not enough room to swing a cat.** Because of the technique used in using the Cat-O-Nine tails is so far that the flagellator standing in front of the triangle and to one side would using his flogging arm would take the tails back and swing it over his head and down the across the convict’s back. Room was needed for this method.

**Eves dropping.** Colonial buildings did not have overhanging eves, so if you were standing next to a building you were said to be eves dropping.

**Broadcasting.** When the early colonists were sowing seeds they would walk along with bag full of seed and using the arm they would cast a hand full of seeds to arm’s length and continued to repeat the process. This was called broadcasting.

**How the kangaroo got its name.** The Kangaroo - type of representation of unique Botany Bay


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wildlife. Australian native animals became the subject of scientific study and much public fascination in England. The Dutch merchant Pelsaert reported the dama wallaby in 1629 as cats, creatures of miraculous form, as big as a hare. In 1688William Dampier described the banded hare wallaby of Dirk Hartog Island as sort of a raccoon. The name kangaroo was recorded by Sir Joseph Banks at Endeavour River in Northern Queensland. How the kangaroo got its name is shrouded in mystery, but there are three possible explanations –

1. Captain Cook's men asked Queensland Aborigines what the strange creatures were and they answered Kangaroo which meant what are you saying?
2. The Aborigines were trying to repeat the words can you tell me what the animal is? The words can you became kangaroo.
3. When asked what the animal the aborigines answered Kangaroo meaning I don't know.

The truth is we don’t really know now certain and probably never will.. Banks also correctly identified the manual as belonging to the possum family - the largest members of the family Macropodidae Herbivorous marsupials of the Australian region, with powerful hind legs developed for leaping, a sturdy tail serving as support and balance, a small short forehead. There were many different species in habiting the entire continent.

**Where did Australia come from.** Australia. The word Australia applied to a large, hypothetical land-mass in the southern hemisphere crept into use from about 1600 onwards. It originates, of course, from the Latin word for south, or the south. In the eighteenth century, however, the continent of Australia, as it became increasingly known to Europeans, was commonly referred to as New Holland or Terra Australis, the `Southern Land'. The first reference to Australia, meaning the continent of Australia, in a printed book appeared in Sir George Shaw's Zoology of New Holland in 1794. By 1814 Matthew Flinders was writing that in his opinion the word Australia was "more agreeable to the ear" than the term Terra Australis, though the word was not yet in use, although the word appeared on his charts. The first official use of the word Australia appears to have been in the journal of Governor Lachlan Macquarie for 30th September 1816. From this time Australia rapidly replaced New Holland as the accepted name, though until Federation in 1901. There was a view often ststed that the word did not include Tasmania.

**Botany Bay.** When Governor Arthur Phillip sailed for New Holland with the First Fleet in 1787, he expected to establish the convict settlement at Botany Bay, south of Sydney. Captain James Cook had found Botany Bay in 1770 and surveyed it, and it was recommended for settlement by Sir Joseph Banks, who had been with Cook. At the time of the arrival of the First Fleet in Botany Bay in 1788 the existence of Port Jackson was not known to the Europeans, but Phillip soon located it and, as every schoolchild knows, landed his expedition at Sydney Cove. Port Jackson was a harbor greatly superior to Botany Bay.  Botany Bay, however, remained the general term in use by outsiders for the settlement for many years, even being extended generally to cover all subsequent European settlements in Australia. It was still being used as a misnomer filly years and more after 1788, and gave rise to many expressions such as Botany Bay Swell and (of the emancipist Samuel Terry) Botany Bay Rothschild. In England it even acquired metaphorical meaning, remote fields on English firms being named "Botany Bay".  Although what is called a catachresis (which means an incorrect use of words) Botany Bay is still sometimes used lightly or jocularly to refer to the European settlement of Australia in the early days, and there is no objection to this.

**The Cat-o’-nine Tails.** Commonly referred to as The Lash or The Cat. The lash was the primary form of punishment for the first fifty years of transportation – it was, above all, quick and cheap. In the barracks and the road gangs, visitors were often shocked to see that so many men had been flogged. He cat frequently left welts on the skin. Most convicts bore it with fortitude though now and then one or more of the youthful ones cried out. The older men usually submitted with sullen silence, occasionally even with apparent indifference.

## Expressions soon developed relating to floggings to convicts

- a red shirt - for a back scared by the lash
- Botany Bay Dozen - 25 lashes
- a bob – 50 lashes



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- a bull – 75 lashes
- a canary – 100 lashes
- the domino – the last lash in a flogging
- three sisters – flogging triangle

## 'Flash' language’

Convicts of the early colony had their own ‘flash’ language, made up of slang words developed by criminals in London. Outsiders couldn’t understand the language, so convicts were able to undermine the authorities with their words. As many of the convicts had spent a considerable time in goal before being transported, they would have arrived in the colony proficient in the use of prison cant. This became the Flash Language of the convicts. Words and expressions that were common at the time are:

- a flash-bag or a swish: a shirt
- a hog: one shilling
- two hogs: two shillings
- bang up: well dressed or well equipped
- duds: female clothing
- slops: clothing
- a sock: a pocket
- a chum:a likeable person, a friend
- to split: to betray somebody
- a mill: a fight
- to mill a person: to fight someone and beat him
- a milling cove: a pugilist
- a lark: fun or sport of any kind
- knocking up a lark: planning fun or sport:
- legspins or gams:
- queer gams: legs of a peculiar shape
- queer lamps: sore or weak eyes
- mitts: gloves
- a stake: any booty obtained by robbery or gambling
- his nabs: himself
- a lushy cove: a drunken person
- a lush: a drunk
- to wack the blunt: to share the money
- to wack the grub: to share the food
- to grub well:to eat well
- a galloot or swaddy:a soldier
- a nib: a gentleman
- traps: constables of any description
- to beef: a constable of any description
- to bounce: to bully or threaten
- to crab someone: to put someone in a bad mood
- to try it on: to attempt a doubtful activity
- a buffer: a dog
- a jigger: a low window
- sticks: household furniture
- a dollop: a large quantity of anything'
- to fox someone: to trick
- a cockatooa convict lookout
- a bolter a runaway convict

To this was added convict slang; for example, soon after the First Fleet dropped anchor in Sydney Cove, the settlement became known as The Camp, Norfolk Island as Ocean Hell. Aborigines as Crows, and the Goal as Logs, it being of log construction. Convict slang for various characters in the Colony:


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- Clishmaclaver: Noises made by people that are loud and sound important, but are virtually meaningless.
- Jackanapes: Fool, clown, self-important clot.
- Misbegotten: Ill-conceived, stupid, illegitimate.
- Miscreant: Criminal, disobedient, a breaker of rules.
- Rapscallion: Rascal, scamp, wild in behavior.
-

## Derogatory terms that were used in the Colony:

- Nodcock
- Niddy-hoddy
- Tom's fool
- Old Lag
- Addle-brained
- Graloot
- Lobster back
- Scum

Convict James Hardy Vaux documented these words in 1812 in his A vocabulary of the Flash Language, published in 1819. The following is a selection of words from Vaux's dictionary, and other words in use in the early colony, that relate to the lives of the 50 Hyde Park Barracks convicts in the 'Lags & Swells'.

- bad = a convict who cooperates with police and officials
- bellowser = a man transported for the term of his natural life
- bit-faker = a coiner, maker of counterfeit money
- bolter = one who runs away or leaves a place suddenly
- boned = taken into custody
- breech'd = flush with money, 'in town'
- brisket-beater = a Roman Catholic
- bug = nickname given to Englishmen by the Irish
- bush'd = poor, without money
- buz cove = a pickpocket
- buz coves = a female pickpocket
- charley = a watchman
- cly-faker = a pickpocket
- cockatoo = a convict who served a sentence on Cockatoo Island
- cracksman = a house-breaker
- crap'd = hanged
- croppy = a convict (originally an Irish convict)
- darbie'd = fettered (wearing chains or irons)
- done = convicted
- file = a person who has had a long course of experience in the arts of fraud
- floor'd = so drunk as to be incapable of standing
- fly = vigilant, cunning, not easily duped
- galloot = a soldier
- grab'd = taken, apprehended
- horney = a constable
- in town = flush with money, 'breech'd'
- kid = a child, but particularly a boy who begins thieving at an early age
- kinchen = a young lad
- knuckler = a pickpocket
- lifer = someone transported with a life sentence
- lag = a convict under sentence of transportation
- lagger = a sailor
- lushy cove = a drunken man
- lushy = drunk, intoxicated
- mollisher = a woman


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- nibb'd = taken into custody
- nibbler = a pilferer or petty thief
- pall = a partner, companion, associate or accomplice
- pebble = a convict whose behaviour is incorrigible
- prig = a thief
- pulled up = taken into custody, in confinement
- queer gam'd = bandy legged, or having otherwise deformed legs
- queer = bad, counterfeit, false, unwell in health
- qock'd = forgetful, absent in mind
- rump'd = flogged or scourged
- sevener = a convict sentenced to a term of seven years' transportation
- scamp = a highwayman, man who commits robbery on the highway
- scrag'd = hanged
- scurf'd = taken into custody
- shook = synonymous with 'rock'd'
- slang'd = fettered (wearing chains or irons)
- sneaksman = a man or boy who 'goes upon the sneak' (robs houses or shops)
- sharp = a gambler, cheat or swindler
- swell = a gentleman or any well-dressed person
- swish'd = married
- swoddy = a soldier
- tobyman = a highwayman
- toddler = an infirm elderly person
- top'd = hanged
- ticketer = man or woman holding a ticket of leave
- up in the stirrups = a man who is 'in Swell Street', that is, having plenty of money
- vardo-gill = wagoner

## Greeting of the Convict Flash Language

- Isn't it a grand day
- How do 'ee do?
- Good day to you!
- Good morning good sir/mistress
- May the saints be praised, 'tis y'self!
- Hullo, how be you?
- Welcome to the colony
- Top O' mornin' to yer!
- Is'nt it a cruel day?

## Farewells

- Fare thee well
- God Speed
- Haste thee back
- Fare well t'yer
- God bless and keep you

## General Terms

- Sir
- ma'am
- miss
- lass
- master
- lad young 'um
- zur
- mum


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- missy
- lassie
- esquire
- laddie
- bogtrotter
- guv
- mistress
- maid
- girlie
- young man
- m‘boy
- pup

## Questions and their Answer

- Good morning Ar reckon ‘tis!
- That’s the truth1
- There’s many who’d say so!
- Aye, that be so
- Aye; and how be you this fine/wet day
- How are you?  I be well thank ye
- I be feeling poorly t’day
- Fine; and y’self
- Where are you from?  ‘tis from Ireland I am
    - I be Scottish
    - I be from Devon
    - The old country
    - Country Cork
    - The old dart
- Where do you live?
    - In the barracks
    - I be rom the Green Hill (Windsor)
    - I’m visiting from Parramatta
    - Government Farm at Castle Hill

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