CONVICT CLOTHING IN 1804 SYDNEY

Compiled by Dr Stephen Gapps

The following information is designed to assist people to create an impression of a Rebel convict at the Castle Hill Uprising and Battle of Vinegar Hill 200th Anniversary reenactment in March 2004.

There is little pictorial evidence of the range of convict dress for the period 1800 to 1804. The contemporary image of the Battle of Vinegar Hill by an unknown artist is limited in accurate detail, though gives a general sense of convict appearance at the time – which is generally poor quality civilian clothing of the period. Convicts at Sydney and outlying settlements and government farms such as Castle Hill wore a variety of low class civilian clothing and government issued readymade wear.

The common image of a Convict with Broad Arrow Markings is incorrect for 1804 Sydney. Due to problems of supply there was little standardization of convict clothing and no widespread uniform until around 1820.

The early 1800's saw the beginning of a gradual transformation in general clothing styles in Europe from the Regency styles to more Victorian, uniform and rigid styles. Prominent was the influence of French changes to fashion after the 1789 Revolution. Simpler, less adorned styles were in vogue based on the English Country styles for men and the elegant modes of antiquity for women. At Port Jackson at this time those who could afford fine clothes did so and many contemporary reports suggest the Colony avidly devoured the latest fashions from Europe[1].

A range of clothing was speculatively imported to the colony from Britain and India. From 1802 – 3 prices were recorded as reasonable compared with 1807, indicating 1804 as a period of comparatively well-clothed settlers and convicts. The 'Classical' style of fashion continued in the Colony in the first few years from 1800. The image of Governor King's wife from 1805 is a good indicator of the (desired) woman's fashion from around 1804. Also known as the 'Drab-style', the colours pale brown, olive and yellow predominated[2].

From 1800 to 1810 the 'suit' of fashionable and well-made clothes for a gentleman consisted of a coat, a waistcoat and breeches or pantaloons. The coat was usually single-breasted with a high collar, the skirts cut away at the front and a tail at the back with a deep 'v'. Trousers or pantaloons and breeches were skin-tight. Waistcoats were decorative – often striped, and very short. The shirt collar was stiffened and the swathed neckcloth kept the gentleman's head upright. The 'top hat', black or drab coloured – was made from beaver or silk. The face was kept clean-shaven (with whiskers) and the hair short.

Convicts were generally dressed very differently to gentlemen. From the 1790's to

1810's Convict clothing was tied more to social and financial status than anything else. A 'Gentleman convict' with money could purchase gentleman's clothing and many bought their clothes with them from England. The supply of clothes to the early Australian colony was haphazard, and all classes suffered from shortages and inadequacies of dress – even up to the 1820's. Local industry was irregular and unsupported and in a colony with no real currency until 1813, clothes often became part of the barter network. Still, during this period the government technically supplied and administered the dress of not only convicts, but the military, civil officials and many settlers. In fact in 1802 Governor King urgently requested convict clothing as the stores were so few it would supposedly add to the convict desire to revolt. Although some Convicts had the means to purchase or supply their own clothing, it was often difficult to distinguish convicts from settlers (of whom many were ex-convicts) and there was little variation in costume between poor settlers, convicts and tradespeople – though a noticeable difference between these people and the elite officials and free settlers.[3]

Convicts were issued 'slops' – basic, ready-made clothing that was similar to standard working class clothes from 1790's – 1810's. The most detailed image of Convicts around this period is from the Spanish artist who visited Port Jackson in 1793. Juan Ravenet's Convicts of New Holland conforms with written accounts of convict men issued with 'short jackets, check frocks, trousers, check shirts and tall crowned hats' and women with 'jackets, petticoats (skirts), kerchiefs, caps and hats'.[4] Male convict issue clothing looked similar to naval ratings or Marines' undress 'uniform' of leather caps, white or check shirts and thread hose trousers. On some occaissions when supplies ran low, convicts were actually issued hastily dyed military uniforms. Grey and Blue were the most common colour of convict issue material up to the 1810's. Blue was traditionally a working class colour as woad or logwood dyes were cheap, but was used by all classes.

The period 1800 to 1810 saw a government desire to distinguish convicts from the rest of the society, as well as between recalcitrants and well behaved convicts, but the means to do so was often not available. A key indicator of status in this period was close fitting trousers or pantaloons. Looser cut trousers and drop fronts were the sign of a labourer. In 1801 convict overseers (rewarded these positions for good behaviour) were issued with coatees of blue cloth and pantaloons of grey to separate them from the other convicts who were in blue jackets and trousers of 'duck' cotton (an untwilled cotton). In general though, distinctions between convicts were made more in the cut of the clothes, than later vivid yellow or parti-coloured uniforms branded with the Broad Arrow or Board of Ordnance symbol that may be more familiar.[5]

A Government Order of 1800 expected settlers to clothe their own assigned convicts. However clothes were often bartered away in a Colony with no proper currency. From 1800 – 1810 there are many contemporary reports of convicts generally in a state of raggedness – though some of the Irish political prisoners who led the rising in 1804 were 'gentlemen' and would have been relatively well dressed.[6]

Compare the images of the two Irish political prisoners and rebel leaders Johnson and Cunningham with that of the convict in what appears to be striped Naval trousers. A close analysis of the 1804 painting of the battle reveals a surprising amount of detail of period costume.

TROUSERS AND BREECHES

Although trousers were common, breeches were worn – in this period extending over the knee. The 1804 Rebellion painting shows a mixture of breeches and trousers among the convicts. In this image, some convicts are portrayed with striped pants – possibly the sailors common red and white striped pants of the period. Knitted or yarn stockings were worn with breeches, and sometimes gaiters were added. Trousers were loose, often drop fronted made of 'duck' cotton

JACKETS

A key indicator of the convict was the short jacket and of the wealthier person, a longer frockcoat. Most commonly, the jackets were made of kersey – a coarse ribbed wool cloth. A waistcoat, cut straight across at the waist, could be worn.

SHIRTS

Shirts were coarse linen, often similar to sailor's shirts of the period with loose sleeves.

SHOES

Convicts often wanted for shoes – which wore out rapidly in the harsh Australian environment. Shoes were made by convicts in the colony from imported leather. They were simple stitched designs with leather laces through 4 or 6 holes, rather than buckles – which may have been worn by gentleman and Military.

HATS

The colony had at least one working Hatter in 1804 – who reportedly cleaned and scoured beaver hats. The Cabbage tree hat (made of finely woven strips of palm) was

Compare the images of the two Irish political prisoners and rebel leaders Johnson and Cunningham with that of the convict in what appears to be striped Naval trousers (opposite). A close analysis of the 1804 painting of the battle reveals a surprising amount of detail of period costume.

not common yet, though first appearing around 1799. The most common 1790's hat, a 'top hat' that was fairly tall with a tapering crown (often black or brown felted wool) with a brim slightly curling up at the sides was also common in 1804. The 1804 painting shows all convicts with short black 'Carriage' hats.

WEAPONS AND ACCOUTREMENTS

The Convicts captured weapons from the Government Farm and surrounding settlers. The majority of muskets would have been the common 'Brown Bess', also used by the military. Some 'fowling pieces' were captured from settlers.

It appears that pikes were not manufactured for the rebellion of 1804.

The initial 'Return of Arms' taken straight after the rebellion reports:

- 26 muskets
- 1 Fowling Piece
- 4 Bayonets on poles
- 1 Pitch Fork
- 1 Pistol
- 8 Reaping Hooks
- 2 swords

Obviously those Rebels without muskets either picked up agricultural implements or made a hasty form of pike from bayonets on poles.

FURTHER READING:

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NOTES

1. **Aileen Ribeiro,** *The Art of Dress: Fashion in England and France 1750 to 1820,* p29; **Margaret Maynard,** *Fashioned From Penury: Dress as Cultural Practice in Colonial Australia,* CUP, Cambridge 1994, p41.
2. **Maynard** p39; **Marion Fletcher** *Costume in Australia 1788 – 1901,* Oxford University Press, Melbourne 1984 p34; **Jane Tozer and Sarah Levitt** *Fabric of Society: A Century of People and their Clothes 1770 – 1870,* p25. For sketches see **Nancy Bradfield** *Costume in Detail: Women's Dress 1730 – 1930,* Harap, London 1968.
3. **Margaret Maynard** *Fashioned From Penury,* pp9-11.
4. **Maynard** p11.
5. **Maynard** p14.
6. See **Cedric Flower** *Breeches and Bustles: An Illustrated History of Clothes Worn in Australia 1788 – 1914* Pioneer Design Studios, Lilydale Victoria 1978.

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