

Australia's Camel Story

Ideas for exploring the environment, in the 2024 International Year of Camelids by Jeanie Clark

What do your learners know about camels in Australia? How long have they been here? Did they come alone or with handlers? Why were they brought here? How did they contribute to the developing economy of Australia? This third article for the *International Year of Camelids* (IYC2024) will focus on the history of camels and cameleers in Australia, suggesting online resources listed at the end.

History can be discovered in many formats. Timelines are one format in which events are listed in order, making them very useful as a reference or summary. This article will follow a timeline format of key advances in the contribution of camels to Australia. For older learners, two resources covering this history are: Browne's 1950 article in the *Cairns Post*; and Cook's very detailed 2022 "Timeline of Camels and Cameleers in Australia" [2, 3].



1822 - We may need camels!

The first recorded suggestion of camels being needed in Australia was by a Danish-French geographer [4]. Surprised by that? Consider how much of Australia was colonised by 1822 and if exploration had reached any desert land? If your learners are unsure, then search for 'Towns of Australia in 1822' to see which colonies were established—e.g. *Wikipedia* has an easy-to-use list [5].

Colonised Australia had spread out by 1839. If your learners don't know how far settlement had spread, the *Wikipedia* list of towns can again be used to find out. So which state would your learners expect to first call for camels? In 1839, it was the South Australian Governor Gawler, to which a year later the Phillips brothers responded with the first shipment of camels to Australia, from the Canary Islands, off Africa, to Adelaide [6].



1846 - First camel trial

What culture do your learners think the first cameleers in Australia would have been: Afghan, English, Irish? (If unsure of what a cameleer does, check a dictionary.) John Horrocks was the first recorded cameleer in Australia—an Englishman who had a passion for exploration—with his camel Harry, the only camel survivor of that first 1840 shipment [7].

Looking at original materials, like maps and diaries, helps to bring history to life. Many such fascinating resources can be found on the web, e.g. for Horrocks' expeditions. The South Australian State Library's website has a detailed map for Horrocks' August 1846 expedition in search of agricultural land—from the Clare Valley, over the Flinders Ranges and near Lake Torrens [8]. The artist Gill recorded the expedition in drawings (e.g. the one above) and his diary [9]. These give much detail about the journey: landscapes; outposts; relations with the indigenous people who helped them, e.g. with water sources; roles of their stock, including Harry the camel; the mechanical and medical trials interrupting their progress; and the sad, unanticipated ending to this expedition [9,10]. The *Generalist Academy* has a brief version of this history, with few journey details, suited for younger learners [11]. Four pages of Harrocks' journal, reproduced on the *Mt Harrocks Historical Society* website, are more suitable for advanced learners [12].

Do your learners enjoy stories from the point of view of animal characters? Harry was the first of his kind in Australia and spent his next five years with no other camel company. What kind of things might your learners expect in a story centred on him? Graham Smith's *Who was South Australia's First Camel?* is a kindle primary level book about Harry (in the drawing above) [14]. David Thomas Henry Wright's *Camel F* is a powerful short story from Harry's point of view, from his loading onto the ship to his death, providing a lot of food for thought or discussion about the treatment of stock, and so suited for older learners [13].



1860 + - Helping explorers

Do your learners know of the Burke and Wills expedition in 1860? If not, this could be a time to explore their journey. By 1860, lessons had been learnt: deserts were expected; camels would be needed for transport; and expert handlers would be needed for them. This expedition brought 26 camels and the first Muslim cameleers to Australia. The *Burke & Wills Website* has incredible resources and clear indexing to make it easy to find things about each cameleer and the camels [15].

Camels and their cameleers became the backbone for explorations. The cameleers, coming from the Middle East to India, typically Muslims, became known as 'Afghans' [16].



1870s + - Helping inland businesses

From the 1860s, the Australian sheep population boomed, including across much of drier, inland Australia, creating a need for wool to be reliably sent to markets. (Sheep populations from *The Australian Bureau of Statistics* show their speedy growth in the second half of the 19th century [17].) Camels, as a beast of burden, became the inland solution. Which state would your learners expect to be first to adopt camels for this and why there?

In 1866, (Sir) Thomas Elder brought the first camels to Australia for general transport –124 with 11 cameleers from India—taking supplies to his stations in inland South Australia and bringing wool back to the port for export to London [18]. Elder set up the first breeding program of camels, also increasing their quality [19]. Was he a successful? (Hint, 'Elder's!')

A boom followed, in exploration and businesses [20]. From the 1880s -1910s, about 20,000 camels were imported here [21]. They carried many different loads, e.g. as shown in images at the *Camel Trek Australia* website [22]. In 1872, they carried materials to build the Adelaide-Darwin Overland Telegraph and pipes to Kalgoorlie for its water pipeline [23]. In the drought of 1882, they got the stores to the Corner Country of New South Wales [24]. A *Backroads* video about the origins of the name 'Ghan', which came to name the Maree to Alice Springs rail line [25].



1920s + - replaced by new technology

Through the 1920s and '30s, motor and rail transport replaced camel transport, creating a surplus of camel stock. Some were shot, some sold for breeding and some 5,000-10,000 were 'set free'[26]. These camels thrived and multiplied in the wild to an estimated million 'pests' in 2021 [27].

The *National Feral Camel Action Plan* gives three groups of negative impacts from these wild camels today: environmental, economic, and social [28]. Could your learners think of things that might come under each of these groups, applying knowledge of other pests introduced by the colonisation of Australia? When finished, they could see if they covered what the *Plan* describes.



1988 + - exports, lean meat, milk

Can camels still provide a positive economic contribution to Australia today? Healthy and strong, some are caught and exported back to camel-using countries[29]. An abattoir in Alice Springs was the first to start processing camels for their lean meat in 1988 [30]. The first business based on processed camel milk started in 2014 in Victoria, sourcing milk from camel farms around Australia and selling to the world, not just fresh and powdered milk, but camel milk-based skin care products [31]. There are outback tourism businesses based on camel rides and trekking [32]. Adventurers write about their journeys, for example, Davidson's *Tracks* book and movie, providing camel-inspired relaxation [33].

The basic aim of the IYC2024 is to "learn more about and better understand camelids and their cultural, social and economic importance" [34]. Australia's camel history covers quite a range. Can your learners summarize the economic ones under the periods above? Do they further recognise any social and cultural values from our camels, past and present?

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