

THE BARQUE “LADY JULIANA”

Oils on Pine Panel

British School, c.1801



The “Floating Brothel” That Shaped Australia’s Early Colony

The Lady Juliana was a British convict ship that sailed to Australia in 1789 as part of the Second Fleet, arriving in Sydney in June 1790. It became one of the most infamous ships in early Australian history due to its unusual passengers and the social impact it had on the colony. Unlike other convict transports, the Lady Juliana carried almost entirely women—around 226 female convicts—making it the first all-female transport ship to New South Wales.

The British government had intended the voyage to help balance the gender ratio in the struggling penal colony established after the First Fleet. At the time, there were very few women in Sydney, leading to disorder and low morale among the mostly male settlers and convicts. Officials hoped that sending women would encourage stability, domesticity, and population growth. However, the Lady Juliana soon gained notoriety when reports surfaced that many of the women had formed relationships with the ship's crew, leading to it being mockingly dubbed "the floating brothel."



Portrait / depiction of the Lady Juliana at sea

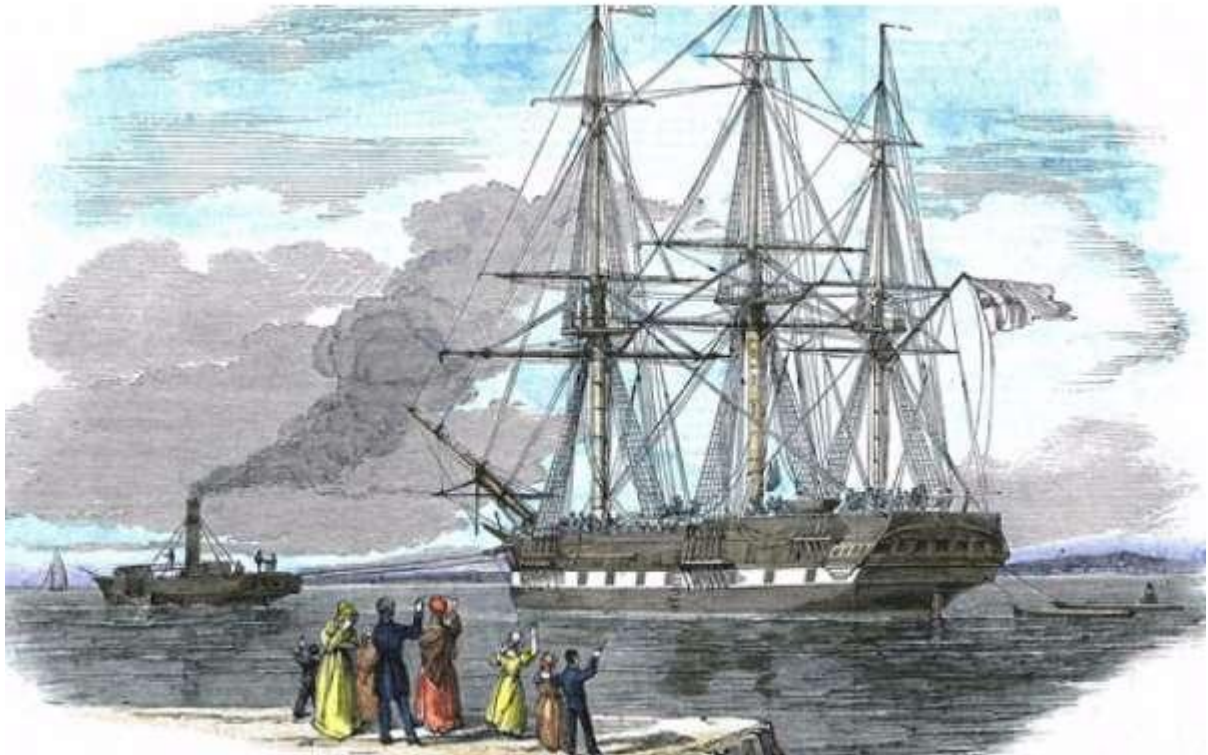
The journey itself was long and relatively humane compared to other convict voyages. Departing from Plymouth in July 1789, the ship took nearly a year to reach Australia, stopping at Tenerife, Rio de Janeiro, and Cape Town.

During these stops, the women were allowed better food and care than most convicts, and the death rate on board was notably low—only a handful died on the voyage. This was in stark contrast to the other ships of the Second Fleet, where hundreds perished due to starvation and disease.

N. B. This expence has been incurred upon the first expedition, and is all paid.		Total, £. 81,899
Charge of cloathing, victualling, and transporting female convicts in the Lady Juliana, in Dec. 1788, viz.		£. 4,269 18 9
Paid already on account,		3,454 3 3
Estimate of what more may be due, supposing the ship discharged at Port Jackson, at the end of August last,		
Charge of the Justinian, hired in Nov. 1782 for a store-ship to Port Jackson, and from thence to proceed to China, to bring home teas for the East India Company.		
Freight for two years, 7389l. from which deduct 5000l. expected from the Company for freight of the teas she may bring home, which leaves a balance of		2,389 0 0
Pay, &c. for the two agents in the Lady Juliana and Justinian		1,500 0 0
Charge of victualling, cloathing, and transporting convicts, per agreements with Mr Whitlock in Aug. 1789, and with Messrs. Camden, Calvert, and King, in Nov. 1790, viz.		17,463 3 0
Paid on account of Mr Whitlock,		30,100 0 0
Ditto, to Mess. Calvert, Camden, and King,		
The exact total cannot be known till the service is over, and the accounts are settled; but it is still estimated, that what will remain due on the above two agreements, will not probably be less than		20,000 0 0
Total, £. 161,075 17 9		
Estimate of the expence incurred on his Majesty's ships, sent on service to New South Wales, viz.		
On the Sirius,	£. 45,183 0 0	
Supply tender,	17,283 0 0	
Guardian,	22,924 0 0	
Gorgon,	10,211 0 0	
	95,601 0 0	
Grand Total,	£. 256,676 17 9	

Excerpt from the Scots Magazine, March 1791, detailing expenses incurred on the Lady Juliana first and second fleet

When the Lady Juliana arrived in Sydney Cove, Governor Arthur Phillip was initially disappointed. The colony had been expecting essential supplies, not hundreds of women, and the ship's arrival strained the already limited resources. However, over time, many of the women married or formed partnerships, contributing to the growth and social structure of the early settlement. Their presence helped stabilize the colony and laid the foundation for family life in Australia.



Sailing ship Lady Juliana leaving Plymouth, 1789 (woodcut)

In retrospect, the *Lady Juliana*'s voyage symbolizes both the harshness and humanity of Britain's convict transportation system. Though the *Lady Juliana* was ridiculed in the press as a "floating brothel," historians now view the humane treatment of the female passengers as a significant factor in the success of the voyage.

Captain William Chapman was a British sea captain and merchant, born in Whitby, England, who served as the master of the *Lady Juliana* from June 1795 to November 1802, during which time the ship made several voyages between England and Australia. Under his leadership, the ship safely transported convicts, continuing the work of earlier voyages that helped populate the Australian penal colony. After retiring from seafaring, Chapman settled in New South Wales, becoming a successful merchant, landowner, and active member of the colonial community. His maritime career and

contributions to the early colony's development make him a notable figure in Australia's colonial history.

His maritime career and contributions to the early colony's development make him a notable figure in Australia's colonial history.

Notable passengers on the Lady Juliana:

Mary Wade (1775–1859)

Age when transported: 14 years old

Crime: Stealing another child's clothes in London

Sentence: Originally death, later commuted to transportation for life

Why she's notable:

Mary Wade went on to become one of the most famous convicts in Australian history. She eventually married a former marine, had 21 children, and became the ancestor of thousands of Australians, including former Prime Minister Kevin Rudd.

Her story is often cited as a symbol of redemption and resilience among convict women.

Sarah Bird / Byrd

Crime: Theft

Why she's notable:

Sarah Bird is one of the few Lady Juliana women whose descendants carefully traced her lineage and preserved her story. She became one of the earliest free settlers after serving her sentence.

Elizabeth Parry

Why she's notable:

Elizabeth Parry's detailed records help historians understand the experiences of women aboard the Lady Juliana. She later married and lived as a free woman in the colony, leaving descendants in New South Wales.

Sarah Whitlam

Why she's notable:

She gave birth during the voyage — one of a few women to do so — which highlighted the more relaxed and humane conditions aboard the Lady Juliana compared to other convict ships.