

Podcast 134 – The Wool Industry in Australia – The Australian Merino

Learn English while learning about daily life in Australia,
with Rob McCormack

Podcast Number 134 – The Wool Industry in Australia – The Australian Merino

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(This podcast is 13 minutes and 19 seconds long.)

Hi,

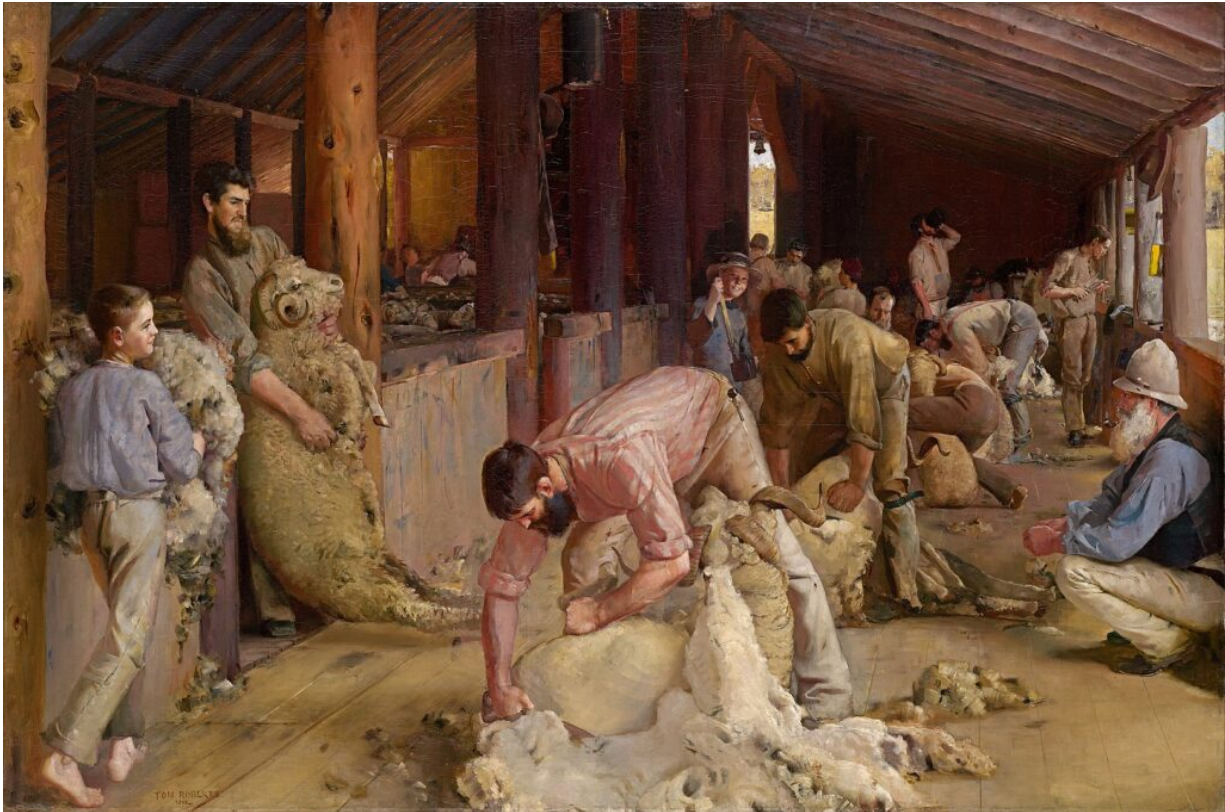
One of the early influences on our way of life and our prosperity here in Australia has been the wool industry. This was the first export industry to be established in Australia and its history and influence is important in understanding how we developed as a country. In this podcast I would like to tell you a little about the wool industry in Australia and its history.

The first sheep were brought to Australia with the first fleet of Europeans in 1788. They were brought as a source of food and did not produce wool of good quality. In 1797, Captain Henry Waterhouse and Lieutenant William Kent were sent by the governor of New South Wales on a ship from Sydney to South Africa in search of more supplies. They were able to purchase 26 merino sheep there from a widow whose family had first received this breed of sheep from Spain. The key point about these sheep was their finer and softer wool compared to other breeds. Once back in Sydney, these sheep were used for further breeding and their numbers grew. Eventually they were purchased by Captain John Macarthur, a farmer. He saw the

potential for wool production from this particular breed of sheep with their fine, high quality wool. Macarthur is considered to be the father of the wool industry in Australia. His farming homestead still exists today as a museum and is a popular tourist site in Sydney, in New South Wales. (<https://sydneylivingmuseums.com.au/elizabeth-farm>)

By 1803 Macarthur and his family had bred a flock of around 4000 merinos. In 1813, a large number of bales of wool from these sheep were exported to London and the wool industry in Australia was underway. Macarthur and subsequently his children continued to breed their merinos and improved the quality of the wool. Other Australian farmers also began breeding and improving these Australian merinos. The result was that the Australian merino became larger, produced 10 times as much wool as the first merinos from Spain and could adapt well to Australian conditions.

By the 1840s, wool growing was happening in every colony of Australia. Being a shearer became an important job in Australia. All shearing was done with handheld clippers called blade shears which work a bit like scissors, except the blades are connected at one end by a spring. Wool bales from each colony were transported by bullock dray, by riverboat steamers and lastly by fast sailing ships called wool clippers, which transported the fine quality wool to other parts of the world.



Shearing the Rams, by Tom Roberts, 1890.

It was also in the 1880s and 1890s that shearers first formed unions in order to improve their pay and working conditions. This resulted in a series of strikes and the creation of the Australian Workers Union, which still exists today.

Despite droughts and changes in demand for wool, the Australian wool industry continued to grow. By the 1930s, over 60% of the value of all Australia's agricultural products was from wool. It was said that Australia was 'riding on the sheep's back'. In a real sense this was true.

Today, wool production represents only 5% by value of Australia's agricultural production, so times have changed and we can no longer be said to be 'riding on the sheep's back'. However, Australian merino wool is still considered to be amongst the finest available and an excellent material for fine clothes and high fashion around the world. In my opinion, there is nothing better than a fine merino wool jumper or Australian made socks made from merino wool. I wear merino wool socks made by Lindner Socks, a small Australian company

based in Crookwell in country NSW, not far from Canberra. No matter the weather, these socks are always comfortable and very hard wearing.

<https://www.lindnersocks.com.au/>

Actually, I had some experience of life on a sheep farm when I was a teenager. My aunty and uncle had a sheep farm for the production of wool in the south west of Western Australia. In my late teens I spent several school holidays there and once worked along with my cousins in the wool shed. Our job was to pick up the wool (called the fleece) from the floor as soon as the shearer had clipped it off the sheep. I can remember that the wool was slightly greasy and held together a bit like a blanket. We then had to throw the fleece over a flat table, trying to keep it together like a blanket, so that we could then remove any pieces of the fleece around the edges which were matted or dirty. After that, the wool was graded by a wool classer, so that similar quality wools can be packed together in a bale. It was hot and dusty work, but it was nothing compared to the back-breaking work of the shearers who really know how to work hard.

I can only imagine how tough they must have been in the 1800s in outback Australia, working in a hot shearing shed, bent over each sheep while they clipped the blade shears through the thick wool of the sheep. The harder they worked, the more they got paid. The fastest shearer in the shed was called the ringer. Today, with machine powered shears, shearers can shear a sheep very quickly, although it is still hard, back-breaking work. The world record for the highest number of merino sheep shorn in 9 hours is 530.

In the late 1800s, the words to a traditional Australian folksong were written which captures well the operation and feeling of a shearing shed back then. It is called 'Click Go the Shears'. When I was primary school teaching in the 1970s and 1980s with classes of children aged from 8 to 11 years

old, this song was always one that I taught them. It is one of my favourites and is well known by most Australians today. Here's how the song goes.

Out on the board the old shearer stands,
Grasping his shears in his thin, boney hands,
Fixed is his gaze on a blue-bellied "Joe,"
Glory if he gets her, won't he make the "ringer" go.

Chorus: Click go the shears boys, click, click, click,
Wide is his blow and his hands move quick,
The ringer looks around and is beaten by a blow,
And curses the old snagger with the blue-bellied "Joe."

In the middle of the floor, in the cane-bottomed chair
Is the boss of the board, with his eyes everywhere;
Notes well each fleece as it comes to the screen
Paying strict attention if it's taken off clean.

Repeat Chorus

The tar-boy is there, awaiting in demand,
With his blackened tar-pot, and his tarry hand;
Sees one old sheep with a cut upon its back,
Here's what he's waiting for, "Tar here, Jack!"

Repeat Chorus

Shearing is all over and we've all got our cheques,
Roll up your swag for we're off on the tracks;
The first pub we come to, it's there we'll have a spree,
And everyone that comes along it's "Come and drink with me!"

Repeat Chorus

If you have a question or a comment to make, please leave it in the comments box at the bottom of this page. Or, you can send me an email at rob@slowenglish.info. I would love to hear from you. Tell me where you live, a little bit about yourself

and what you think of my Slow English podcast. I will write back to you, in English of course. If you would like to take a short quiz to see if you have understood this podcast, you will also find it on my website. Goodbye until next time.

Rob

Podcast 134 Quiz - Did you understand the podcast?

You can take the quiz as many times as you like.

Start quiz

Vocabulary

- Play adapt = to change in order to stay alive and live well
- Play agricultural = to do with farming of animals and plants as a business
- Play back-breaking = very, very hard work
- Play bale = a tightly packed bundle or package for sending somewhere
- Play blanket = put over your bed to keep you warm as you sleep
- Play blow = (here) when the shearer moves his clippers once across the sheep to cut the wool
- Play blue-bellied "Joe" = a sheep with no wool on its belly or stomach
- Play board = (here) the floor where people stand
- Play breed = as a noun – a type of animal,
- Play breed= as a verb – to reproduce, have babies (usually used to describe animals)
- Play breeding = to breed
- Play bullock dray = a type of transport where large animals pull a cart loaded with things
- Play cane-bottomed = (here) a chair where the seat is made

out of cane

- Play captures = (here) to represent something
- Play cheque = like money, can be changed for money at a bank
- Play clipped = cut off
- Play clippers = a tool with two blades (like scissors) for cutting wool
- Play colony = an area that is controlled by a foreign country (in this case, Great Britain) e.g. NSW
- Play considered = thought to be
- Play cousin = the child of your uncle/aunty
- Play creation = when something is first made
- Play developed = improved, become better
- Play droughts = when it doesn't rain for a long time or rains very little
- Play established = started
- Play eventually = finally, at some later time
- Play excellent = when something is very, very good
- Play exists = to be
- Play export = to send overseas to another country
- Play fleet = a group of ships
- Play flock = a group of sheep
- Play gaze = when you look hard at something
- Play governor = a ruler, a person who is the head of government
- Play greasy = has oil or grease on it
- Play hard wearing = when something doesn't easily wear out
- Play homestead = a house on a farm
- Play influences = when one thing is affected or changed by something else
- Play jumper = a pullover, a piece of clothing worn over a shirt to keep you warm
- Play machine powered shears = a cutting tool which is powered by motor (for shearing sheep)
- Play material = what something is made of
- Play matted = joined together
- Play no matter = it doesn't matter
- Play old = (here) a shearer who is not very fast at his work

- Play operation = how something works, a process
- Play potential = something which could happen in the future,
- Play prosperity = success, good luck, when you have a good life
- Play pub = a business where you can buy alcohol and drink with your friends, also called hotel
- Play purchase = to buy
- Play scissors = a tool with two blades used for cutting hair
- Play shed = a large building where work is done or things are stored
- Play socks = clothing worn over your feet (inside your shoes)
- [responsivevoice]source = the place where something comes from
- Play spree = a party where you drink alcohol with your friends
- Play strikes = when the workers stop working because they are unhappy with pay or conditions
- Play subsequently = some time later, afterward
- Play supplies = things you need to live (e.g. food, clothes, fuel, etc)
- Play swag = all your things wrapped up in a blanket and carried over your shoulder
- Play tar = a black, thick liquid which comes from petroleum, mixed with rock to make roads
- Play tar boy = a young boy who puts tar on the cut of any sheep which get cut during shearing, to help it heal quickly
- Play tar-pot = a pot which holds liquid black tar
- Play tarry = covered in black tar
- Play teens = people aged between 13 and 19
- Play tough = able to work hard for a long time in bad conditions
- Play tracks = (here) a rough road, not properly made, where people can walk
- Play traditional = when something has been done for a long time
- Play transported = carried on a ship, a cart, a truck, an airplane, a car

- Play unions = organisations of workers who try to get better pay and working conditions
- Play widow = a women whose husband has died
- Play wool classer = a person who decides what quality a piece of wool is
- Play working conditions = good things about a job e.g. lunch break, holidays, sick pay etc