

MOMENTOUS DECISIONS

**Rabbits and Australia**

Rabbits, hares, partridges, blackbirds. sparrows,  
starlings, thrushes, the hawthorn bush and a  
hospital.

- Who?
- Thomas Austin.
- Where?
- Winchelsea and Melbourne.
- What decision?
- “To civilize the Australian bush”.
- When?
- 1859.

# Domesticated rabbits?

- Rabbits were first introduced into Australia by the First Fleet in 1788.
- They were bred as food animals, probably in cages.



# Tasmania overrun by feral domestic rabbits.

- By 1827 in Tasmania, a newspaper article noted "...the common rabbit is becoming so numerous throughout the colony, that they are running about on some large estates by thousands.
- We understand, that there are no rabbits whatever in the elder colony" i.e., New South Wales.



In the early C19, in the colony of NSW.

An article states "... rabbits are bred around houses, but we have yet no wild ones in enclosures..."

It was also noted the scrubby, sandy soil between Sydney and Botany Bay would be ideal for farming rabbits.



# Elizabeth Bay House (known as 'the finest house in the colony').

- Enclosures appear to mean more extensive rabbit-farming warrens, rather than cages.
- The first of these, in Sydney at least, was one built by Alexander Macleay at Elizabeth Bay House, "a preserve or rabbit-warren, surrounded by a substantial stone wall, and well stocked with that choice game."
- Elizabeth Bay House was built for Colonial Secretary Alexander Macleay between 1835 and 1839 on land granted in 1826 by Governor Ralph Darling.



Rabbits bred for food. During the Depression they were an important source for those out of work.

- In the 1840s, rabbit-keeping became even more common, with examples of the theft of rabbits from ordinary peoples' houses appearing in court records and rabbits entering the diets of ordinary people.



# The first wild rabbits?

- The wild rabbit infestation appears to have originated with the release of 24 wild rabbits by Thomas Austin for hunting purposes in October 1859, on his property, Barwon Park, near Winchelsea, Victoria.





# Killing as a hobby.

- While living in England, Austin had been an avid hunter, regularly dedicating his weekends to rabbit shooting.
- Upon arriving in Australia, which had no native rabbit population, Austin asked his nephew William Austin in England to send him twelve grey rabbits, five hares, seventy-two partridges and some sparrows so he could continue his hobby in Australia by creating a local population of the species.



# Huge miscalculation.

- William could not source enough grey rabbits to meet his uncle's order, so he topped it up by buying domestic rabbits
- At the time Austin had stated, "The introduction of a few rabbits could do little harm and might provide a touch of home, in addition to a spot of hunting."
- The Duke of Edinburgh rabbit shooting at Barwon Park, Victoria in the 1860s.



# Positive legacy.

- Thomas Austin died not long after the mansion was completed. Elizabeth (Harding) Austin, after twenty-six years as wife, lived at Barwon Park for nearly forty years as determined widow.
- She founded the Austin Hospital, Melbourne, and the Austin Homes, Geelong.
- Now the Austin & Mercy hospital.

