Most convicts were put to work building the new colony. Women usually worked for long hours in factories, making fabric for clothes and other things. Men often worked outdoors, building roads and towns. Most convicts endured harsh conditions and brutal treatment.

Some convicts wrote songs about their experiences. The most popular songs were ballads, which were sung to tell a story. Some early ballads told stories about the long and terrible trip by boat to the colony. Others grieved for the home left behind.

In a sad song called "The Girls of the Shamrock Shore", a convict told the story of leaving his home in Ireland (where the shamrocks grew). For five long months, the ship sailed across rough seas, until:

On the fifteenth of September, boys,
We soon did make the land.
We went on shore at Sydney Cove,
All chained hand to hand.
My sentence is for fourteen years;
Farewell to the shamrock shore.

Some convicts wrote songs as a protest against the way they were treated. When forced to watch the hanging of a fellow convict, convicts would sometimes start singing these songs. This was a way to defy their captors, and it also helped to ease the condemned convict's final, fearful moments.

Another kind of protest song that became popular with convicts was the bushranger ballad. These ballads told of the adventures of people, often escaped convicts, who lived off the land and stole what they needed. One ballad, "The Wild Colonial Boy", described how the bushranger Jack Donohoe started out as a convict, in iron shackles:

They put him in the iron gang,
In the government employ.
But never an iron on earth could hold
The Wild Colonial Boy.

In Britain, meanwhile, ballads about convicts were composed for a different reason. These ballads were meant to entertain, but they were probably also intended to frighten people into obeying the law. They told fearful stories of the misery of convict life. One of these ballads was "The Convict Maid".

Convict ballads were written at a time when people could be sent to the Australian penal colonies for even minor crimes. Ballads about defiant convicts allowed convicts to protest their treatment, and ballads about miserable convicts warned others against committing crimes. Most importantly, these ballads were a way to tell the stories of convicts' lives before and after coming to Australia.