



about Australia

national icons

- Australia's national icons range from the sublime to the commonplace—from stunning natural and man-made wonders to humble food items like Aussie meat pies and a yeast-based spread called vegemite.

There is no absolute agreement on what constitutes a national icon—that elusive 'thing' or concept that is regarded as quintessentially Australian or instantly recognisable as uniquely Australian.

However, one thing is certain: stocktakes of popular Australiana are not limited to the great or the pompous and, in that sense, they reflect the innate irreverence and individualism of many Australians. What other country, for example, would include in its Olympic Games opening ceremony a sequence that commemorates mountain horsemen, a colonial fugitive and a humble backyard lawnmower, as Sydney did for the 2000 Olympics.

Most Australians would include on their lists of national icons natural wonders such as the Northern Territory's huge monolith, Uluru, man-made architectural marvels like the Sydney Opera House and the country's unique kangaroos and koalas.

But their lists would be just as likely to include a cricketer named Don Bradman, a mighty racehorse called Phar Lap, a bushranger (outlaw) named Ned Kelly and a hat called Akubra, as well as the Aussie meat pie, vegemite, and a sponge cake square dipped in chocolate and coconut called a lamington.

A 2007 survey of 400 Australians (appropriately known as the 'Top Taste Lamington Aussie Poll') found that meat pies were the most popular Australian food,

Some Australian icons...

- Uluru and the Sydney Opera House
- Meat pies, lamingtons and vegemite
- A horse called Phar Lap and a hat called Akubra
- Kangaroos and koalas

And some iconic Australians...

- Don Bradman, cricketer
- Errol Flynn, actor
- Ned Kelly, bushranger
- Dame Nellie Melba, singer
- Banjo Paterson, poet

followed by lamingtons. Swimming champion Ian Thorpe received 33 per cent of the votes for Australia's favourite iconic celebrity, followed by entertainer Kylie Minogue. The 'ute' (utility truck), which started out as a farm vehicle in 1932, was voted Australia's best invention, followed by the Hills Hoist (a clothes-drying line).

The following, in alphabetical order, is a guide to some of Australia's national icons, from the impressive to the ordinary.

Akubra hats have been associated with Australia since they were first made in 1905. They are worn in the Australian bush and

the outback, and increasingly by people from all walks of life. The hats, which are made of treated rabbit fur, have been worn by Australian soldiers, political leaders and sportspeople. Akubra is an Aboriginal word meaning 'head covering'.

The **Australian War Memorial**, which opened in Canberra in 1941, ranks among the world's great national monuments. It tells the story of a young nation's experience in world wars, regional conflicts and international peacekeeping. The memorial forms the core of the nation's tribute to the sacrifice and achievement of the 102 000 Australian men and women who have died serving their country and to those who have served overseas and at home.

Big things are outsized sculptures of everything ranging from giant merino sheep to fruit and various seafood items. These are increasingly dotting the Australian countryside. While not quite having iconic status, they represent a particular aspect, characteristic or industry of a local area. Some of the best-known include the Big Banana, near Coffs Harbour in New South Wales; the Big Pineapple, a 16-metre high sculpture on a working plantation in Queensland; the Big Merino, a 15-metre tall cement sheep, near Goulburn in New South Wales; the Big Prawn, at Ballina in northern New South Wales; and the Big Ned Kelly, a seven-metre high statue of Australia's most famous bushranger, at Glenrowan in Victoria.

Bondi Beach is one of Australia's famous beaches and one of the best known in the world. The beach is located in the eastern suburbs of Sydney, only seven kilometres from the city centre, and is about one kilometre long. Like many Australian beaches it is patrolled by surf lifesavers, who ensure swimmers stay in safer swimming areas

between the ubiquitous yellow and red flags of populated stretches of the Australian coastline.

The **Ghan** is a legendary Australian train and railway journey that traverses the country from north to south—a distance of 2979 kilometres—across some of the harshest terrain in Australia. The first Ghan travelled from Adelaide to Alice Springs (then known as Stuart) in 1929. The line was extended north to Darwin in 2004. The name of the train is derived from the Afghan tribesmen who used to bring supplies to the isolated communities by camel trains before the railway opened.

The **Great Barrier Reef** is the world's largest coral reef, comprising thousands of individual reefs and islands that stretch for 2600 kilometres and cover an area of about 344 400 square kilometres. The reef is located in the Coral Sea, off the coast of Queensland in north-east Australia.

The **Hills Hoist**, a rotary clothes-drying line that can be raised and lowered by hand, was invented by Lance Hill in his backyard in Adelaide soon after World War II. It quickly became a familiar sight in Australian suburban backyards, and continues to be used today. Hills Industries celebrated the sale of its five millionth hoist in 1994.

Kakadu National Park, located in the Northern Territory 120 kilometres east of Darwin, covers an area of more than 19 000 square kilometres. It was inscribed on the World Heritage List in three stages between 1981 and 1992 for outstanding cultural and natural universal values.

Kangaroos are marsupials unique to Australia. They fascinated Australia's early settlers, who had never before seen animals like them. Although not officially proclaimed, the kangaroo is popularly regarded as Australia's

animal emblem. The kangaroo appears on the coat of arms of New South Wales (1906) and the Commonwealth coat of arms (1908).

Koalas are a favourite animal symbol of Australia for millions of people around the world. Like kangaroos, koalas are marsupials and are unique to Australia.

'**The Man from Snowy River**' is one of Australia's most famous poems. Written by AB (Banjo) Paterson, it celebrates the riding skills and courage of the horsemen of Australia's Snowy Mountains high country. It has been the subject of two films and a television series.

Meat pies are not a uniquely Australian food. However, a long-standing love affair between ordinary Australians and the humble meat pie has transformed it into culinary icon. Australians eat an estimated 260 million meat pies a year. They are often sold at sporting events, music festivals and other events where large crowds congregate. The traditional Aussie meat pie is around 15 centimetres in diameter and made with a short-crust pastry filled with meat and gravy. It is usually served with tomato sauce (ketchup).

New Parliament House, which opened in May 1988 (Australia's bicentenary year), is the home of Australia's federal parliament. It is located on a 32-hectare site on Capital Hill and is the focal point of Canberra. The unique blend of impressive architecture, a stunning art collection and beautiful landscaping make the building one of Australia's most significant and popular cultural attractions.

Old Parliament House, a heritage building in Canberra, was home to Australia's federal parliament from 1927 to 1988. Today, it offers visitors a unique glimpse of Australia's fascinating political past. It also houses the National Portrait Gallery.

Phar Lap was a racehorse that won Australian hearts during the Great Depression and gave rise to an Australian saying—'a heart as big as Phar Lap's'. He conquered the local racing scene with 36 wins from his last 41 starts and then won America's richest race, the Aqua Caliente Handicap, in 1932. Two weeks later, Phar Lap died after being struck down by a mystery illness that some attributed to foul play. His abnormally large heart, which weighed 6.2 kilograms (compared to 4 kilograms for an average horse's heart), was preserved and is on display in the National Museum of Australia in Canberra.

The **Sydney Harbour Bridge**, affectionately known by some as the 'coat hanger' because of its shape, is one of Australia's best known landmarks. The bridge, which opened in March 1932, is the largest (but not the longest) steel arch bridge in the world, with the top of the bridge standing 134 metres above the harbour.

The **Sydney Opera House**, which opened in 1973, is one of the most distinctive and famous 20th century buildings. It is a major venue for the performing arts, including music, dance and theatre. With its harbourside setting and soaring sail-like roof, it is one of the most photographed buildings in Australia.

The **Twelve Apostles**, along Victoria's Great Ocean Road in the Port Campbell National Park, are spectacular giant rock stacks rising from the waters of the Southern Ocean. The highest of the outcrops is around 45 metres tall. The apostles had their beginnings up to 20 million years ago when the 70-metre high limestone cliffs along the shore were gradually eroded by pounding wind and water, creating the stacks and separating them from the shoreline.

Uluru in the Northern Territory is one of Australia's most recognisable natural icons—a huge, rounded sandstone monolith, 9.4 kilometres in circumference, rising to a height of more than 340 metres above the plain. Uluru is a unique and beautiful place that has spiritual and cultural significance to the traditional Indigenous landowners of the area, the Anangu people. One of its most striking features is its apparent ability to 'change colour' as the light plays across it during the course of a day. The Uluru–Kata Tjuta National Park is on the World Heritage List for its natural and cultural values.

The '**ute**' was developed at Ford Australia's Geelong, Victoria, plant in 1934 as a combination passenger and load-carrying vehicle, variously known as a utility vehicle or coupe utility. Originally regarded as a luxury, the ute was quickly accepted as an ideal working vehicle for farmers and tradespeople. Ford is said to have developed the ute after receiving a letter from a farmer's wife in Gippsland in Victoria asking why it was not possible to build a vehicle that could be used to go to church on Sunday and to take the pigs to market on Monday.

Vegemite is a dark spread, made by blending brewers' yeasts, that is used on sandwiches, toast or biscuits. It was invented by food technologists in the Fred Walker Company in 1923 and the secret recipe is still used to this day. Many international visitors find the unusual, salty taste not always to their liking. Australians, however, are often passionately attached to it.

The **Victa** lawnmower is the Australian machine that inspired the lawnmower sequence in the Sydney Olympic Games opening ceremony. Invented in the 1950s as a lightweight, two-stroke machine with blades mounted on a disc, the 'Victa' was—and

is—a familiar sight and sound in Australian suburban backyards.

Some iconic Australians

Sir Donald Bradman (1908–2001) is arguably the greatest cricketer of all time. During a period spanning 21 years (1928–48) Sir Donald represented Australia, playing 52 Test matches and scoring a total of 6996 runs—with a batting average of 99.94. This was almost double that of his nearest rivals. Sir Donald, who was born in Cootamundra in New South Wales, rose to acclaim during a period of hardship, depression and recovery, and his heroic exploits on the cricket pitch raised the spirits of many Australians during the tough years of the Great Depression. Sir Donald was knighted on his retirement and was appointed a Companion of the Order of Australia in 1976. In 2000, he was named as one of Wisden's Five Cricketers of the 20th Century.

Errol Flynn (1909–59) is one of Australia's best-known actors, with his off-screen adventures attracting at least as much attention as his film career. After a rebellious childhood and somewhat fragmented schooling, he moved to Papua New Guinea, where he trained as a district officer and also tried his hand as the overseer of a copra plantation, partner in a charter schooner business, gold prospector, sailor and manager of a tobacco plantation. Flynn was chosen by Australian film maker Charles Chauvel to play Fletcher Christian in the 1933 film *In the Wake of the Bounty*. He then worked as an actor in London before relocating to Hollywood, where he made an immediate impact as the swashbuckling *Captain Blood* (1935). Flynn appeared in some of the biggest action and adventure movies of his day.

Ned Kelly (1855–80) is Australia's most famous bushranger. He is regarded by many Australians as a folk hero for his rebellious defiance of colonial authorities. Kelly, in his home-made metal armour and helmet, has been memorialised in paintings, books, music and films. He was born in 1855 near Melbourne to an Irish-Catholic couple (his father was an ex-convict). As a young man, Kelly clashed with police. He was declared an outlaw and was captured after a violent confrontation with police at Glenrowan. He was executed by hanging at Melbourne Gaol in 1880.

Dame Nellie Melba (1861–1931) achieved international recognition in her lifetime as a 'super star' soprano and enjoyed an unrivalled popularity and status in Australia. She made her operatic debut in Brussels in 1887 as Gilda in Verdi's *Rigoletto* and went on to sing to great acclaim in London, Paris, Milan, New York and other major cities. She later became *prima donna* at London's Covent Garden. In 1902, Melba had a triumphant home coming, giving concerts in all Australian states. During World War I, she worked tirelessly to raise funds for war charities and gave wartime concerts in North America. She was made a Dame Commander of the Order of the British Empire in 1918 and her portrait appears on the Australian \$100 note.

AB 'Banjo' Paterson (1864–1941) was a poet and journalist who produced perhaps two of the best known pieces of Australian writing—the ballad *Waltzing Matilda* (which many Australians still regard as an unofficial Australian anthem) and the poem *The Man from Snowy River*. Paterson was a partner in a Sydney firm of solicitors when he started publishing verse in the *Bulletin* and the *Sydney Mail* under the pseudonyms

'B' and 'The Banjo'. His first book, *The Man from Snowy River and other verses*, was published in 1895 and sold out within a week. Four editions were published in six months. By 1902, Paterson had left the legal profession to become a full-time journalist and writer. He was made a Commander of the Order of the British Empire in 1939. His portrait appears on the Australian \$10 note.

Further information

Australian Government culture and recreation portal
www.cultureandrecreation.gov.au

Department of the Environment and Water Resources
www.environment.gov.au

National Museum of Australia
www.nma.gov.au

Prime Minister of Australia
www.pm.gov.au/australia/symbols/icons.cfm

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Western Australian coastline.

