Captain James Cook:  
The ‘Great South Land’

When Captain James Cook left England on board the bark *Endeavour* in August 1768, the purpose of his expedition was twofold. He was to lead an expedition to Tahiti to observe the transit of Venus across the sun, which was to occur on 3 June 1769. This observation would help astronomers calculate more accurately the Earth’s distance from the sun. It was hoped, too, that Cook’s journey would settle the question whether there was a South Land to balance the land masses of the Northern Hemisphere. When he set out, Cook little realised how significant his discoveries were to be.

The *Endeavour* had a crew of 72, plus 12 marines who acted as the ship’s police. There were also 11 passengers, including Joseph Banks who was a botanist.

New Zealand

After Cook successfully observed the transit of Venus, the *Endeavour* sailed out of Tahiti on 13 July and headed south into the Pacific Ocean. New Zealand was sighted on 7 October 1769, more than 100 years after Abel Tasman had first seen it. Cook established that New Zealand had two islands, and he named the strait separating the islands after himself. Five months later, in March 1770, as Cook was certain New Zealand wasn’t part of the Great South Land, he decided to return to England.

East coast of New Holland

On the journey home, the *Endeavour* would sail west until it reached the east coast of New Holland. It seemed logical to assume that if New Holland had a west coast it must also have an east one. After exploring the east coast, the *Endeavour* would head north to the Dutch port of Batavia, where it would be refitted. In March 1770, the *Endeavour* headed for Van Diemen’s Land, which Cook thought might be part of the east coast of New Holland. However, a southerly gale (a strong wind) forced the ship north, and it missed Van Diemen’s Land. On 20 April, land was sighted by Zachary Hicks, First Lieutenant on the *Endeavour*.

Fact File: James Cook  
1728–1779

- Discovered that New Zealand consists of two separate islands
- Discovered the east coast of New Holland and proved that part from New Holland no other land existed
- His discoveries made possible the eventual settlement of the east coast of Australia.

How we remember him:
- Cook Strait, New Zealand
- Cooktown, Queensland

What became of the Endeavour?

In 1790, the *Endeavour* was bought by a French company to carry whale oil. She made two trips to Newpoo, Rhode Island, on the east coast of America. Here, she ran aground, and because she was now an old ship she wasn’t refloated. As the ship lay falling apart, her sternpost was taken as a souvenir, then it found its way into the care of a man called Joshua Sayer. In January 1968, a piece of the sternpost was taken aboard the American spaceship ‘Endeavour I’. After travelling into space, it was presented to the Australian Government and put into a museum at Botany Bay.
Charting the east coast

The *Endeavour* continued north, and Cook mapped the east coast. They stopped at a good site, and on 29 April Isaac Smith, Cook’s wife’s cousin, became the first European to set foot on the east coast of Australia. Cook later named this spot Botany Bay because of the plants and birds discovered there by Joseph Banks. Years later, Banks recommended Botany Bay as a suitable site for a penal colony.

The *Endeavour* then headed north, and many sites were seen and named, including Moreton Bay, the future site of Brisbane. Observations were made that enabled accurate charts of the east coast to be drawn.

Disaster!

Supplies on board the *Endeavour* were low, and the ship was in danger from storms and dangerous reefs. Disaster struck on 11 June 1770 when the *Endeavour* hit a coral reef, now called Endeavour Reef. To lighten the ship’s load, fresh water, guns, provisions and ballast were thrown overboard. The ship wasn’t freed for hours, and was leaking. A sail was wrapped around the keel, a process called fothering, which enabled the *Endeavour* to be moved to a safe site for repairs. The ship was beached at the mouth of a river Cook named the Endeavour, and Cooktown now stands on this site. While the repairs were carried out, Cook befriended some local Aborigines and saw a kangaroo for the first time. He also made notes about the land, its inhabitants and natural resources.

New South Wales

After the repairs, the *Endeavour* resumed her journey, and continued north. On 21 August, the ship rounded Cape York, the northernmost point of Australia. On Possession Island, an island at the tip of Cape York, the English flag was raised and Cook claimed the eastern coast for Britain. It was to be called New South Wales. The *Endeavour* returned to England in July 1771. The expedition was hailed as a success, but Cook remained unconvinced of the success of his journey because he hadn’t found the Great South Land.

From Cook’s journal

On Sunday, 6 May 1770, Cook wrote in his journal: ‘In the evening the Yazoo returned from fishing, having caught 1 sting rays weighing near 600 pounds. The great quantity of plants Mr. Banks and Dr Solander found in this place occasioned my giving it the name of Botany Bay.’

On Possession Island, the English flag was raised, and Captain Cook (centre) claimed the east coast of New Holland for Britain.