Matthew Flinders: Around Australia

On his return to England, Matthew Flinders was given permission by the Admiralty and King George III to explore the Australian coastline and find out whether New Holland and New South Wales were part of the one continent. He was also to look for an inland sea or strait. By June 1803, after a journey of two years, Flinders completed the first-ever circumnavigation of Australia, and charted parts of the coastline that were unknown.

Along the southern coast

In July 1801, Flinders left England on board HMS Investigator. Five months later, land was sighted at Cape Leeuwin on the south-western tip of Australia. Flinders thought the country near King George Sound looked bare and uninviting. He noticed too that the natives living on the south-western coast of New Holland looked similar to those living in New South Wales.

Along the Great Australian Bight, Flinders sailed close to the shore searching for an inland sea. He also surveyed and charted the coast. About this time, he found an island which he named Kangaroo Island because of its large kangaroo population. He also discovered two gulfs on the mainland, and named the first Spencer Gulf and the second Gulf St Vincent. Then he encountered a French sailing ship on a voyage. Flinders spoke with the ship's commander, and called the place where they met Encounter Bay. He sailed through Bass Strait, and entered Port Phillip. In May 1802, he reached Port Jackson where he decided to rest.

Completion of the journey

In July 1802, the Investigator set off again, and headed north to complete Captain James Cook's charts of the east coast. Flinders sailed through Torres Strait, down the west coast of Cape York Peninsula and into the Gulf of Carpentaria. By now, the ship was unseaworthy and Flinders thought of returning to Port Jackson. However, he decided to sail to Timor. From there he sailed south-west into the Indian Ocean, east across the Southern Ocean, through Bass Strait and up the east coast to Port Jackson. It was now June 1803. Because of the poor condition of the Investigator and illness among the crew, Flinders had not been able to explore the west coast of the continent.

Why 'Australia'?

Flinders wrote about his journeys in a book entitled A Voyage to Terra Australis in which he referred to the newly discovered continent as Australia. The name 'Terra australis' is Latin for 'South land'. Gradually, the continent became known as Australia, rather than New Holland, and New South Wales was the name of the colonial settlement at Port Jackson.