Flinders circumnavigates Australia

Flinders returned to England in 1800 and was appointed captain of HMS Investigator. He left England on 18 July 1801 and sailed around the Cape of Good Hope and across the Southern Ocean to Cape Leeuwin, which he sighted on 6 December. He sailed eastwards and charted the coast as he went. He explored the land around the Gulfs of St. Vincent and Spencer and discovered Kangaroo Island, where they shot kangaroos for food. On 8 April 1802 he met up with the French scientific expedition of Nicolas Baudin on the South Australian coast. When Flinders went aboard the French ship he found that Baudin was navigating using maps drawn by Flinders in 1800.

Flinders continued along the coast making charts as he went. He sailed into Port Phillip Bay, where Melbourne is now situated. He then travelled up the coast he had previously charted and entered Sydney Harbour on 9 May 1802. He repaired and refitted the Investigator in Sydney Cove. On 22 July he continued his journey north around Australia, taking two Sydney Aboriginal men, Bongaree and Nanbanze. He also took his cat Trim. They sailed along with the ship Lady Nelson. As they travelled north along the coast they negotiated the dangerous reefs of the Great Barrier Reef and Torres Strait. In the north the Lady Nelson became unseaworthy and turned back for Port Jackson with Nanbanze on board. Flinders sailed on around the Gulf of Carpentaria. Here he met the fleet of Macassan praus fishing for trepang.

While in the north Flinders found much of the Investigator’s woodwork had rotted. As he was halfway around the continent he decided to keep going. After landing in Kupang for provisions many of his crew became ill with dysentery and died. With fine weather, superb seamanship and good luck they arrived back in Sydney on 9 June 1803, less than a year after leaving. Flinders was the first European to sail right around the continent and Bongaree was the first Aborigine to circumnavigate Australia.

In July 1803 Flinders left Sydney Cove as a passenger on the ship Porpoise to sail to England. He wanted to take his charts, journals and maps back to the Admiralty to show what great work he was doing. He wanted them to provide him with another ship for exploration. The Porpoise sailed north with two other ships, but it ran aground on a reef about 1200 kilometres north of Sydney. Flinders managed to save his precious charts and journals. After helping survivors onto a large coral sandbank, he took charge of a cutter and sailed back to Sydney to obtain help. He arrived 13 days later and arranged for the rescue of the shipwreck survivors. Flinders then set off in command of the schooner Cumberland for London with his charts and papers. He sailed through Torres Strait and across the Indian Ocean towards the Cape of Good Hope. On the way he discovered his ship was leaking badly and put into Mauritius. Here he found out that war had broken out between France and England. The French Governor, General Decaen, became suspicious, and believing Flinders to be a spy, arrested and jailed him. Flinders’ health began to suffer and Decaen had him moved to the country. In 1807 Decaen received orders from France that should have meant freedom for Flinders. But Flinders was argumentative and turned the Governor against him. The British fleet blocked Mauritius and Flinders was eventually released. He arrived in England on 23 October 1810.

Although his health was failing, Flinders completed the account of his travels and discoveries in two volumes A Voyage to Terra Australis. He died on 19 July 1814, the day after the books were printed. He was 40 years old.

Matthew Flinders was a daring, adventurous man who mapped more of Australia’s coastline than anyone else ever had. He was the first one to consistently call the continent Australia. He was a great seaman who kept going even though his ships were in poor condition. He was driven to discover and map the Great South Land.