THE BRITISH MOVE IN

On 20 January 1788 Captain Arthur Phillip of the British Navy stepped ashore at Botany Bay after an eight-month voyage by the eleven ships of the First Fleet. On board the ships were about 770 convicts and some soldiers and they were there to start a new British colony called New South Wales. They had chosen Botany Bay at Joseph Banks’ suggestion but later they moved a few kilometres up the coast to Port Jackson and made a settlement on a bay called Sydney Cove.

Over the next 100 years the British explored Australia from one end to the other as they rapidly invaded and took control of it.

Flinders read Robinson Crusoe as a child, and immediately set his heart on a career at sea. He joined the Navy and sailed under the infamous Captain Bligh, learning much about how (and how not) to treat sailors.

He was like Cook in many ways: brave, cool, intelligent, hard-working, stern about discipline, but careful also about the welfare of his sailors.

He joined the crew of the Reliance which was about to leave for New South Wales carrying the colony’s second Governor, John Hunter. He was then 21. Flinders’ best friend on the Reliance was the ship’s surgeon, 24-year-old George Bass. Bass wanted to do a bit of exploring when he got to Sydney, and he’d brought a boat along to do it in: the Tom Thumb, 2.4 metres long!

On 3 December 1797 Bass left Sydney in a nine-metre government whaleboat with a crew of six volunteer seamen from the Reliance. Flinders was too busy with his other work to go. In three months Bass sailed all the way to Western Port, mapping Bateman’s Bay and Jervis Bay and discovering Wilsons Promontory. Along the way he came upon seven escaped convicts. They had been left to starve while their mates made off with their boat. Bass gave them a little food but hadn’t room on his boat to bring them back to Sydney.

There was now little doubt that Van Diemen’s Land was an island, but in September 1798 Flinders was instructed to prove it once and for all. He was given command of a small, leaky, locally built sloop, the Norfolk, with a crew of eight sailors and the unstoppable Bass. By 12 January 1799 they were back in Sydney, having sailed through Bass Strait, charted the Furneaux group of islands, discovered the Tamar River and then sailed round Van Diemen’s Land, charting the coastline in detail as they went.

MATTHEW FLINDERS PUTS AUSTRALIA ON THE MAP

Flinders now had a grand plan to map in detail the whole of the Australian coastline.

Back in England in 1800, he took his idea to Joseph Banks, the botanist who had gone with Cook’s expedition. Banks, now 57, was a great supporter of exploration and he had many influential friends. He was keen about the idea and Flinders sailed for Australia in command of the 350-tonne sloop Investigator. He had only recently married, but his wife was not allowed to voyage with him. It was nine years before they saw each other again.

On 6 December they sighted Cape Leeuwin, on Australia’s south-west coast, dropping anchor four days later in King
George Sound. They stayed there for a month, collecting plants and animals and making contact with the Aborigines. The Aborigines showed no interest in the goods which Flinders tried to trade with them for food.

They moved on along the coast again, meticulously charting the bays and headlands. On 20 February 1802, near Spencer Gulf, Flinders sent a boat ashore for water. In rough seas the boat capsized and all on board were drowned. Flinders was deeply upset by this and he called the place Cape Catastrophe.

On they sailed, past Gulf St Vincent, Mount Lofty, and Kangaroo Island.

On 18 April another ship came into view — the first they had seen in four months. It was a French ship, the Géographe, commanded by Nicholas Baudin. Flinders went aboard the French vessel and had two short, friendly meetings with Baudin.

The Investigator reached Sydney on 9 May and then sailed up the coast. Flinders studied the Great Barrier Reef, and learned much about the way coral reefs are formed. He also discovered and mapped 70 islands. Rounding Cape York, he entered the Gulf of Carpentaria. Many people believed that the gulf opened into a vast inland sea, or even a passage through to Spencer Gulf or the Great Australian Bight. Flinders had shown that no such opening existed in the south coast and he now proved beyond doubt that there was no break in New Holland’s northern coastline.

The Investigator was careened (hauled out of the water for repairs) at Sweers Island. Ever since they left England she had been leaking badly, and further damage on coral reefs had badly split her hull. Now she was all but finished. She limped to Timor and then all the way back to Sydney the long way — along the west and south coasts. Flinders and his men had been around New Holland 1 1/4 times.

For Matthew Flinders, things now started to go awfully wrong. He embarked as a passenger on the Porpoise, one of three ships sailing together to England. The Porpoise and one of the other ships ran aground and sank. The third ship sailed on, leaving them behind. Flinders went back to Sydney in a small boat for help.

His second attempt to go home also failed. When he put in at the French island of Mauritius, Flinders was immediately arrested. It was another 6 1/2 years before he was finally released.

While under arrest he was given a pet cat, which he called Trim. Trim kept Flinders’ spirits up during this depressing time, and when she died he wrote a long and sad essay called ‘A Biographical Tribute to the Memory of Trim’.

When he finally arrived home he was in poor health, and he died on 19 July 1814.

Flinders’ achievements were many. As well as making excellent maps, he added greatly to people’s knowledge of weather patterns and improved navigational techniques. He argued strongly for the name ‘Australia’ to be used instead of ‘Terra Australis’, the ‘Great South Land’ or ‘New Holland’.

**HOW THE COAST WAS MAPPED**

1 The ship’s exact position was found by observing the sun, moon and stars, knowing the exact time, and using a lot of arithmetic.

2 Using a compass, lines were drawn on a map showing the direction of various landmarks on the coast.

3 The ship then moved along to a new position where steps 1 and 2 were repeated.

Land surveyors used a roughly similar method.