George Bass and Matthew Flinders

Matthew Flinders was born in Lincolnshire, England, on 16 March 1774. His father was a doctor and Matthew was also expected to become one. He studied Greek and Latin at grammar school. When he was 15 he became an apprentice doctor, but didn’t like it. He then studied navigation for a year and in 1789 joined the British navy. In 1791 he sailed with Captain William Bligh on his second voyage to the South Pacific on the Providence. On this journey, 17-year-old Flinders helped to chart the south-east coast of Tasmania and many Pacific islands. He returned to England and in 1795 set sail for Australia again, this time on the Reliance. On board he became friendly with the young naval surgeon, George Bass.

George Bass was born in 1771 at Sleaford, Lincolnshire. He brought a 2.5-metre boat, the Tom Thumb, with him from England. In October 1795, Bass, Flinders and William Martin sailed out of Sydney Heads and down the coast to Botany Bay. It seemed like madness to be out in the open ocean in such a small boat, but luckily they entered the bay safely. They explored and charted Botany Bay and the George’s River for 30 kilometres upstream.

Bass and Flinders then both served in the British navy on Norfolk Island. After their return they obtained another small boat, the Tom Thumb 2. In 1796 they sailed 80 kilometres south from Sydney to Lake Illawarra. Here their boat overturned and all their provisions were wet. While they were drying out on a beach the local Aboriginal people showed resentment at their presence. Flinders saved the situation by cutting the warriors’ hair and beards with scissors. On the return journey they were almost swamped by wild seas in a violent storm. They sought refuge in Wattamolla inlet just south of Botany Bay. They charted the coastline as they sailed and after many exciting and dangerous adventures returned safely to Sydney.

In December 1797 George Bass sailed south from Sydney with six volunteers in a 3-metre six-oared whaleboat. Many people thought that a strait existed between the Australian mainland and Van Diemen’s Land (Tasmania). Bass set out to prove if the strait existed. On this journey they experienced terrible sea conditions and many difficulties. They sailed as far south as Westernport Bay on the coast of Victoria. In his amazing three-month voyage Bass did not prove that Van Diemen’s Land was an island but he concluded that it possibly was through observing tides and currents. He made many discoveries and mapped the coastline.

In 1788 Flinders sailed south along the coast and went around the Kent and Furneaux groups of islands. He returned to Sydney with the same idea as Bass, that Van Diemen’s Land was an island.

In 1798 the Governor of New South Wales, John Hunter, lent Bass and Flinders a small sloop, the Norfolk, to prove their theory. The Norfolk was the first ship built on Norfolk Island and it was not very seaworthy. They planned to sail around Van Diemen’s Land and prove that it was an island. If they could prove this, it would make the sea voyage across southern Australia much shorter. Ships would no longer have to journey south around Van Diemen’s Land.

They left Sydney on 7 October 1798 and sailed south. On reaching the north coast of Van Diemen’s Island they sailed west and made exact observations of all they saw. They discovered the Tamar River, where Launceston now stands. Continuing westwards they were excited to find the coast turning southwards. They followed it south and eventually entered the Derwent River continuing to where Hobart is today. The brave pair sailed back along the east coast to Sydney. Governor Hunter was very pleased and he named the passage Bass Strait after George Bass.

This was Bass and Flinders’ greatest voyage together. Bass and Flinders’ partnership ended soon after this as Bass was sent back to England. He later returned to Australia and in 1803 he set off on a trading voyage from Sydney to Peru in South America. George Bass was never heard from again.