Captain Matthew Flinders (1774~1814)

Captain Matthew Flinders was born 16 March, 1774. He was one of the most successful cartographers and navigators of his time. In a career that only spanned twenty years he circumnavigated Australia, proved Tasmania was an island and was the person responsible for the name “Australia” being adopted.

Born in Lincolnshire, England, Matthew Flinders was introduced to the sea through reading the book Robinson Crusoe. Coming from a family of doctors, Flinders was expected to follow the same profession, but at the age of 15 he joined the Royal Navy. By 1790, Flinders had been made a midshipman and worked transporting breadfruit from Tahiti to Jamaica where he developed his navigation skills under the leadership of Captain Bligh.

Flinders first trip to Port Jackson, New South Wales was in 1795 as a midshipman. On this voyage he quickly proved himself as a fine navigator and cartographer. He also became friends with the ship’s surgeon George Bass. Not long after arriving in Port Jackson, Bass and Flinders made two small expeditions in small open boats, both named Tom Thumb. Their first journey was to Botany Bay and Georges River; the second south from Port Jackson to Lake Illawarra. These journeys allowed Flinders to upgrade the maps of the New South Wales coast.

In 1798 Flinders was given command of the ship, Norfolk and given orders to investigate beyond the Furneaux’s Islands and explore the extent of the strait between the mainland and Van Diemen’s Land (now known as Tasmania). Flinders and Bass journeyed through the strait and circumnavigated Van Diemen’s Land, proving that it was a separate island. The confirmation of a safe passage between the mainland and Tasmania was seen as very important as it saved days on the journey to and from England. Flinders named it Bass Strait, after his close friend. Before returning to England in 1800, Flinders travelled north aboard the Norfolk arriving in Moreton Bay at Pumicestone Passage in July 1799. During this visit he named Redcliffe after the vibrant red cliffs in the area.

After the establishment of the colony of New South Wales in 1788, which covered the eastern part of the mainland, the name New Holland was often used to refer to the western half of the continent. The highly influential scientist Sir Joseph Banks convinced the Admiralty, who were responsible for the command of the Royal Navy at the time, of the importance of an expedition to chart the entire coastline of New Holland. Flinders had come to the attention of the scientists of the time as being a talented navigator with an ability to traverse unknown waters, and Banks highly recommended Flinders for the expedition. In January of 1801, Flinders was given command of a vessel and promoted to Commander. He set sail from England to New Holland in July of 1801. Along for the expedition was the botanist Robert Brown, botanical artist Ferdinand Bauer, and landscape artist William Westall. This expedition was scientific in nature and was seen to be of great benefit to both the British and French governments, therefore Flinders was issued a French passport, even though England and France were at war at the time.

Just prior to leaving on the expedition, Flinders married his long-time friend Ann Chappelle. Flinders had hoped to take her on his journey with him which he had estimated would take approximately four years to complete. However the Admiralty had strict rules against wives travelling with captains and Ann was made to stay in England. The couple would not see each other for nine years.
In December of 1800, Matthew Flinders reached and named Cape Leeuwin, located at the south west point of the mainland. From here he commenced his task of making a survey along the southern coast. In April of 1802, Flinders spotted and met with Nicolas Baudin who was on a similar expedition for the French government. Both being men of science, they met and exchanged information about their findings despite the fact that their countries were at war with each other at the time. The place they met, was named Encounter Bay and is located around 100 kilometres south of where Adelaide exists today.

Continuing the journey, Flinders explored Port Phillip which had only been discovered ten weeks earlier by John Murray. Flinders also climbed to the top of Arthur’s Seat, the highest point near the southernmost part of Phillip Bay. From that point he could see the surrounding land and bays. Flinders reported back to Governor King that the land was pleasing and had a fertile appearance. As supplies were running low, Flinders stopped in Sydney in May of 1802. He once again set sail on July 22 of that year. He headed north and surveyed the coast of Queensland and passed through the Torres Strait. He also explored the Gulf of Carpentaria. During this time Flinders discovered his ship was leaking badly due to rotting timber. Repairs allowed them to keep sailing, however by March 1803 the ship was in such poor condition, and the crew in poor health, that the survey was halted. Flinders visited Timor to restock supplies, and then returned to Port Jackson down the west coast and across the Great Australian Bight. Flinders had completed his circumnavigation of the continent, however he had not surveyed the west coast as he had hoped. By the time he reached Sydney the ship was condemned.

Flinders could not find another vessel suitable to continue the coastal survey, so he attempted to return to England as a passenger aboard a small sloop named Porpoise. Sadly, the ship ran aground on a reef off the Queensland coast. Flinders navigated the ship’s cutter across the open sea back to Sydney and arranged for the rescue of the marooned passengers and crew. Flinders then took command of a schooner, The Cumberland, and once again set sail for England. However he was forced to go in for repairs in French controlled Mauritius.

War had once again broken out between England and France, but Flinders hoped his French passport and scientific expedition would allow him the access he needed. Unfortunately this was not so, and he was imprisoned on the island for over six years.

During his captivity, Flinders was able to mail out a detailed map which he had created based on his circumnavigation. In his notes he stated that a term was needed which included both New South Wales and New Holland as one continent. He suggested the name Terra Australis – which was later simplified to Australia. This was the first time the term Australia had been used. Flinders finally returned to England, and his wife Ann, in 1810. Suffering from poor health, he spent the next four years writing his book. On July 18, 1814, Flinder’s book ‘A voyage to Terra Australis’ was published. Sadly Flinders died the next day at age 40.
Captain Matthew Flinders

Map

Glossary

Cartographer: one who creates maps and charts by studying the geography of an area

Navigator: one who helps guide a ship or aircraft by reading maps, stars and other tools

Midshipman: a youngster aboard a British Navy vessel who is in training to become naval officer

Circumnavigation: to travel completely around an object or area

Schooner: a type of sailing ship with two or more masts

Questions

Use the information from the article to answer these questions about Matthew Flinders.

1. How did Matthew Flinders first become interested in the sea and exploring?

2. How did proving himself as a cartographer and navigator help Flinders when he arrived in Port Jackson?

3. Flinders was given orders to investigate beyond the Furneaux’s Islands and explore the strait between the mainland and Van Diemen’s Land. Why was this seen as an important task?
4. Why did Sir Joseph Banks recommend Flinders be given charge of the expedition to circumnavigate New Holland?
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5. Why did a botanist, botanical artist and a landscape artist travel with Flinder’s when he set sail in January in 1801?
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6. In your opinion why would the Admiralty have strict rules regarding captains wives travelling with their husbands?
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7. How did Encounter Bay get its name? What was unusual about Flinders and Baudin exchanging information at the time?
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8. Why was Flinders survey of the New Holland coastline halted?
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9. Why did Flinders risk landing in Mauritius when it was under French rule?
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10. Name three major events in Australia’s history that Flinders is credited with?
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Circle the letter which shows the correct answer to each question below:

1) A cartographer is someone who...
   a) Creates cartoons
   b) Creates maps and charts
   c) Makes cartons
   d) Builds ships

2) Matthew Flinders held which of the following positions?
   a) Midshipman
   b) Navigator
   c) Cartographer
   d) All of the above

3) Who accompanied Flinders on his journey beyond the Furneaux’s Islands?
   a) George Bass
   b) Ann Chappelle
   c) Nicolas Baudin
   d) Joseph Banks

4) When did Flinders marry?
   a) In 1798
   b) After he returned from Mauritius
   c) Before he circumnavigated Van Diemen’s Land
   d) Before he circumnavigated New Holland

5) Encounter Bay is located in which state of Australia?
   a) South Australia
   b) New South Wales
   c) Tasmania
   d) Western Australia

6) Which of the following areas did Flinders explore?
   a) Port Phillip
   b) Moreton Bay
   c) Arthur’s Seat
   d) All of the above

7) In which country was Flinders imprisoned?
   a) Timor
   b) Mauritius
   c) France
   d) Britain

8) How long was Flinders held captive?
   a) Over 6 months
   b) Over 3 years
   c) Over 6 years
   d) Over 9 years

9) Why did Flinders die at such a young age?
   a) He ship was shipwrecked
   b) He was in poor health
   c) He died while in prison
   d) He was lost at sea

10) Captain Matthew Flinders is remembered for ...
    a) Circumnavigating the continent
    b) Proving Van Diemen’s land is an island
    c) Being the first person to use the name ‘Australia’
    d) All of the above