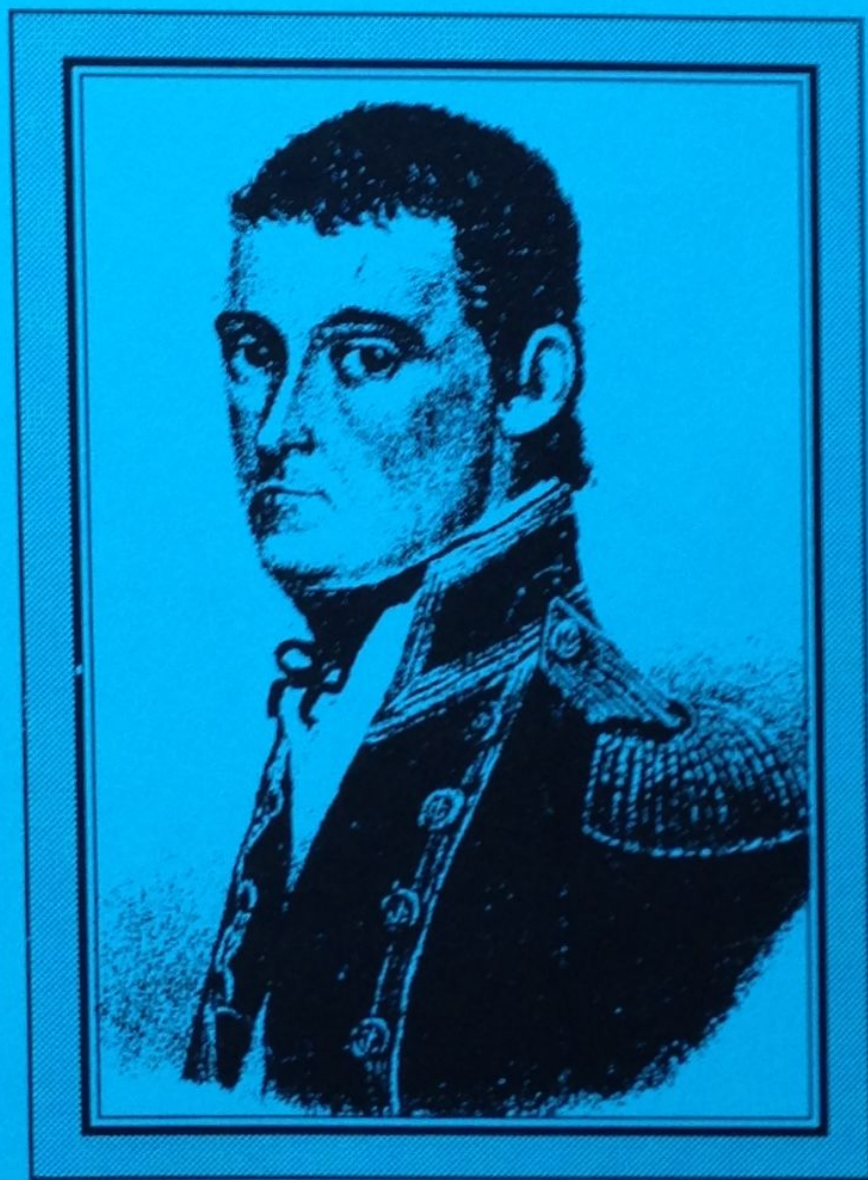


Matthew Flinders: His Life and Voyages



Matthew Flinders: his Life and Voyages

Introduction

Matthew Flinders was one of the most remarkable navigators of the 19th century and has the distinction of being the first commander to circumnavigate Australia. Born in Donington South Lincolnshire, on 16th March 1774, Flinders was the eldest son by the first wife of a respected country surgeon and apothecary of Flemish origin. He was educated at the Thomas Cowley Grammar School, Donington, and Horbling Grammar School. At the age of fifteen he had already expressed an interest in going to sea; encouraged by his Uncle John, who was in the Navy, he sought an interview with Captain Pasley, commander *H.M.S. Scipio*. Captain Pasley employed a cousin of Matthew's as governess; a successful interview led to Matthew Flinders starting his naval career as a 'Lieutenant's Servant' on *H.M.S. Alert* on 23rd October 1789. He spent six months on the *Alert* until Captain Pasley took him into the *Bellerophon* which Captain Pasley commanded at that time.



View of Otahiti - Circa 1790

Sailing with Captain Bligh

On May 8th 1791 Matthew Flinders transferred to the *Providence* which was preparing to set sail for a voyage to the South Seas. This move by Flinders was to determine his future career at sea. When Matthew Flinders joined his new ship it was commanded by Captain William Bligh, reinstated after the mutiny on the *Bounty* in 1789. Once again, at the instigation of Sir Joseph Banks, the *Providence* had orders to transfer a quantity of breadfruit from Tahiti to Jamaica. On her return journey the *Providence* was to investigate the best route through Torres Strait which separated New Holland from New Guinea. On the 3rd August 1791 in company with the *Assistant*, commanded by Captain Nathaniel Portlock the *Providence* set sail. Also on board were the naturalists Christopher Smith and James Wiles. After two months at the Cape of Good Hope the *Providence* sailed for Tasmania, then known as Van Diemen's Land where wood and water were taken on and Flinders drew some charts based on Captain Bligh's surveying. A six weeks voyage brought the *Providence* to Matavai Bay where the naturalists gathered their breadfruit plants. They departed three months later for the Torres Strait which they reached in August 1792 and the journey "*from the Pacific or Great Ocean to the Indian Sea*" was accomplished in 19 days. Flinders described it:

"perhaps no space of three and a half degrees in length presents more dangers than Torres Strait but with caution and perseverance the Captains Bligh and Portlock proved them to be surmountable and with a reasonable time."

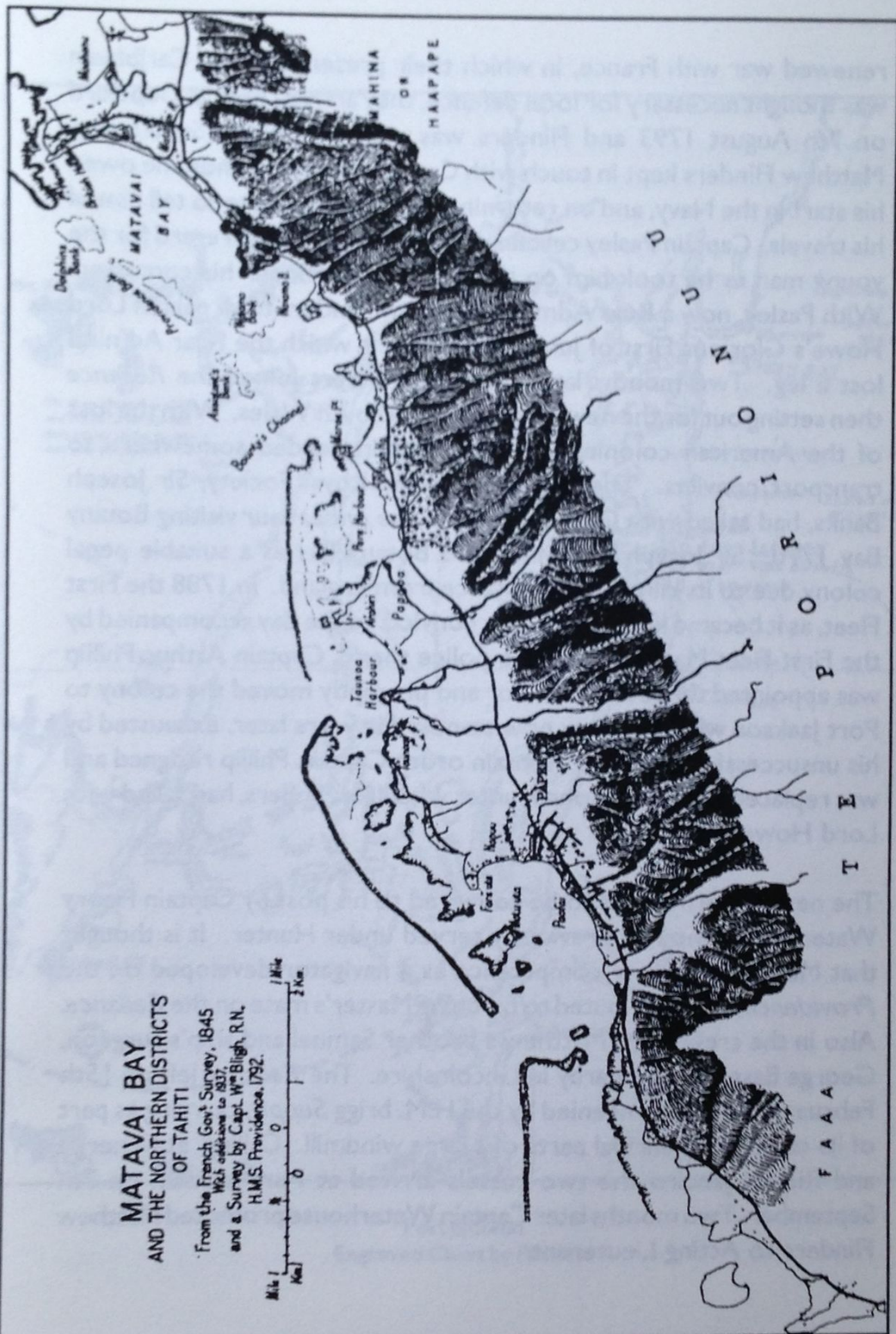
The Reliance Voyage

The *Providence* and the *Assistant* successfully delivered the young breadfruit plants; ironically this proved a pointless exercise as the native population refused to eat breadfruit. After a delay due to the

MATAVAI BAY AND THE NORTHERN DISTRICTS OF TAHITI

From the French Govt Survey, 1845
With additions to 1837
and a Survey by Capt. Wm Bligh, R.N.
H.M.S. Providence, 1792.

Mile 1 2 Km 0 1 2
1 Mile 2 Km



renewed war with France, in which their presence in the Caribbean was thought necessary for local defence, they arrived back at Deptford on 7th August 1793 and Flinders was paid off on 6th September. Matthew Flinders kept in touch with Captain Pasley to whom he owed his start in the Navy, and on returning from Tahiti, wrote to tell him of his travels. Captain Pasley certainly must have had a high regard for the young man as he took him on the *Bellerophon* under his command. With Pasley, now a Rear Admiral, Matthew Flinders took part in Lord Howe's Glorious First of June action, during which the Rear Admiral lost a leg. Two months later Matthew Flinders joined the *Reliance* then setting out for the new colony of New South Wales. With the loss of the American colonies imminent Britain needed somewhere to transport convicts. The President of the Royal Society, Sir Joseph Banks, had sailed with Captain Cook in the *Endeavour* visiting Botany Bay 1770. Sir Joseph recommended Botany Bay as a suitable penal colony due to its climate and distance from England. In 1788 the First Fleet, as it became known, brought convicts to the Bay accompanied by the First Fleet Marines Corps to police them. Captain Arthur Phillip was appointed the first Governor and promptly moved the colony to Port Jackson where Sydney now stands. Six years later, exhausted by his unsuccessful efforts to maintain order Captain Phillip resigned and was replaced by Captain John Hunter who, like Flinders, had sailed with Lord Howe.

The new Governor was to be conveyed to his post by Captain Henry Waterhouse who had previously served under Hunter. It is thought that Matthew Flinders' competence as a navigator developed on the *Providence* and contributed to his being Master's mate on the *Reliance*. Also in the crew were Matthew's brother Samuel and ship's surgeon, George Bass from Aswarby in Lincolnshire. The *Reliance* left on 15th February 1795, accompanied by the H.M. brig *Supply*, carrying as part of its cargo the principal parts of a large windmill. Calling at Tenerife and Rio de Janeiro the two vessels arrived at Port Jackson on 7th September. Two months later Captain Waterhouse promoted Matthew Flinders to Acting Lieutenant.

The Discovery of Bass Strait

When the *Reliance* arrived in New South Wales only about 100 miles of coast line had been explored. This exploratory challenge was taken up by George Bass and Matthew Flinders who began a preliminary investigation of the nearby shores and rivers. They made several journeys in a tiny boat called *Tom Thumb* brought out from England by George Bass; the first journey being from 26th October to 3rd November 1795. The Governor supported their ventures releasing Flinders from his duties on the *Reliance* whenever possible.

The explorations of Bass and Flinders were interrupted by Captain Hunter's decision to send the *Reliance* and the *Supply* to Cape Town to obtain a breeding stock of cattle and sheep. It was now obvious that the new colony was not self-sufficient. The two ships left Port Jackson in September 1796, and sailed by way of Cape Horn stopping first at Norfolk Island. Three months later the fully stocked ships left for home but encountered terrible storms during the journey. As a result the *Reliance* was seriously damaged and most of her stock was lost.

On arrival in Cape Town Matthew Flinders had been promoted to Lieutenant, receiving his certificate on 16th January 1796; on his return he found the Governor anxious to solve the problem of whether Van Diemen's Land was an island or not. Captain Cook had thought it might be, as did Hunter himself, and the Governor's interest was aroused when George Bass came back in December 1797 with convincing evidence of a strait. Matthew Flinders subsequently described his friend's voyage as one "*expressly undertaken for discovery in an open boat and in which six hundred miles of coast, mostly in a boisterous climate was explored has not perhaps its equal in the annals of maritime history.*" Although Matthew Flinders was tied to his duties on the *Reliance* he did get the opportunity to draw some charts of the coastline which the Governor reported to Sir Joseph Banks in London. With Matthew Flinders in command of the 25 ton sloop *Norfolk* the enterprise finally got under way in September 1798. With a crew of eight, chosen

from the *Reliance* and *Supply*, they left in October and after successfully charting much of the coast, realised that they had found "*the long wished for discovery of a passage to the Indian Ocean*" and that Van Dieman's Land was indeed an island. This discovery meant that passages from Port Jackson would be shortened by at least a week. Working on his charts on his return, Flinders requested Governor Hunter to call the new discovery Bass Strait which the governor was happy to do.



George Bass

George Bass returned to England on 29th May 1799, leaving Matthew Flinders to carry on his explorations in the *Norfolk*. Governor Hunter continued to be interested in charting more of the coastline and assigned the *Norfolk* to Matthew Flinders for a journey up the northern coast. Now a midshipman, Matthew's brother was included in the crew and the main objective of the Flinders brothers was to examine Moreton Bay (at the head of which the city of Brisbane now stands) and Hervey Bay, both of which had been noted by Captain Cook.

They left Port Jackson on 8th July, had an unfortunate encounter with some of the native inhabitants in which an aborigine was wounded, and sailed as far north as planned. Matthew Flinders missed two important rivers, the Clarence and the Brisbane but the survey was otherwise successful and it was to be the last before he returned in the *Investigator*.

After a brief stay at St. Helena, the *Reliance* returned to England on 26th August 1800, having been away for five and a half years. Within a few days of his arrival, Matthew Flinders wrote to Sir Joseph Banks giving a short account of his work along the coasts of Australia. The objective of this manoeuvre was to win Sir Joseph's support for a new voyage of exploration: to circumnavigate Australia. After a visit to his family and friends in Lincolnshire, Matthew returned to London to find a letter awaiting him from Sir Joseph and inviting him to call at his house in Soho Square. Flinders later wrote that his plan for completing the investigations of Terra Australia was approved by "*that distinguished patron of science and useful enterprise*" and finally received Royal sanction.

Within a few days the Admiralty took action directing the Navy Board to hand over a three-masted vessel named The *Zenophon* with instructions to provision her for six months foreign service. Sir Joseph Banks took great interest in the preparation for the voyage and the Admiralty accepted his help in planning a programme for the voyage; this included certain modifications to the ship as Banks hoped that plants could be brought back. Sir Joseph also undertook the recruitment

of scientists who were to go, including the naturalist, Robert Brown, whose work on Scottish flora he knew. He wrote to Brown saying that *"A ship is this day ordered to be fitted out for the purpose of exploring the natural history (among other things) of New Holland and it is resolved that a naturalist and a botanic painter shall be sent in her."* Brown accepted the appointment with a salary of £400 a year and Sir Joseph turned his attention to finding a botanic artist, a landscape artist, a miner and a gardener. Ferdinand Bauer accepted the post of painter and William Westall that of the landscape artist.



Government House, Port Jackson
by William Westall

The Voyage of the Investigator

On 19th January 1801 the Secretary to the Admiralty signed Flinders' commission as *'Lieutenant of His Majesty's sloop the Investigator, willing and requiring you forthwith to go on board and take upon you the charge and command of Lieutenant accordingly.'* Flinders went to

Sheerness on 24th January and wrote to Sir Joseph that the ship was "*comfortable with rather too much room for the commander*". Provisioning the ship and the search for a suitable crew took many months and Flinders wrote that "*I fear that we shall scarcely be able to find a good master to go on the voyage, the pay being so small*".

On 17th April 1801 Matthew Flinders married Ann Chappelle of Partney in Lincolnshire, a friend of the family he had grown to love. He intended to take her to New South Wales but this proved impossible and the marriage, which he had kept secret, displeased both Sir Joseph and the Admiralty. Ann was left behind, returning to Lincolnshire to live with her parents.

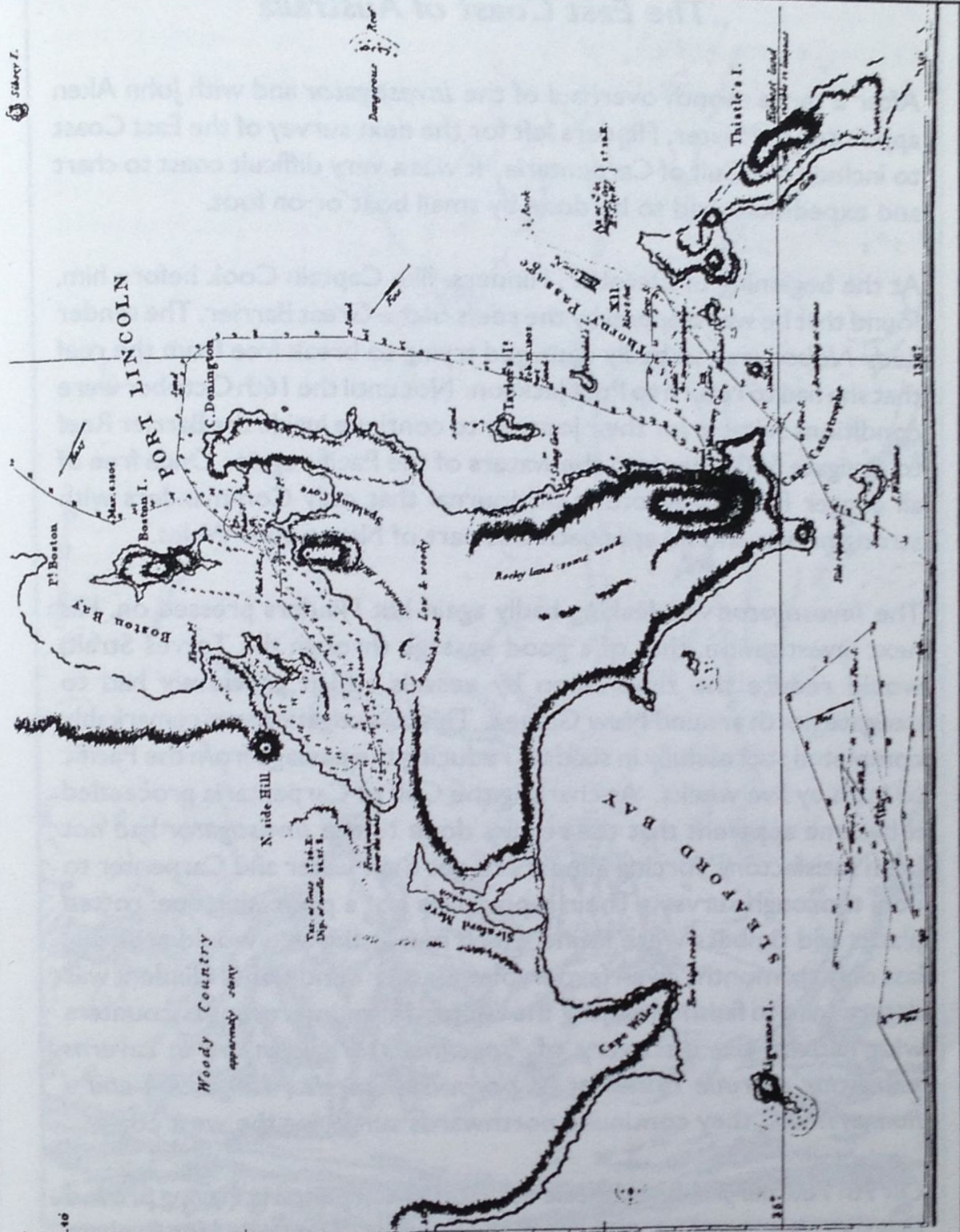
By July the preparations were finally complete and a Master employed, Mr. Thistle formerly of *The Buffalo*. On 17th July instructions from the Admiralty arrived for the voyage plus a French passport and instructions on proper conduct towards enemy ships. The following day, at ten, they left from the Spithead anchorage and the voyage began.

On the 3rd August the *Investigator* entered Funchal Road in Madeira. Flinders visited the Governor to arrange for the scientists to explore the islands. They also took on stores, and caulking leaky seams as the *Investigator* had rather alarmingly begun to leak. After complaining about the cost of good madeira they sailed on the 7th August for the Cape which they reached after an uneventful voyage on the 17th October. The scientists took advantage of this visit and Flinders described how they were "*delighted to find the richest treasures of the English hothouse scattered upon the sides of the summits and sides of these barren lands*." John Crossley, the astronomer, had been unwell during most of the voyage and decided whilst at the Cape he was not able to proceed any further. As a result Flinders would not only have to command the vessel but also take all the numerous observations that the Admiralty expected.

On the 4th November, with stores loaded and repairs completed, the *Investigator* sailed for New Holland five thousand miles away. They arrived at Cape Leeuwin after a passage of thirty two days on 6th December. Flinders was the fourth navigator to visit this part of New Holland coast; the first had been Pieter Nuyts. Ten years before, Captain George Vancouver had made landfall at the point he named Cape Chatham and in 1792 the coast had been visited by the French Admiral Bruni D'Entrecasteaux.

Flinders was anxious to start his survey of the southern coast line of New Holland but rigging and sails had to be repaired so he continued on to King George's Sound where the necessary work was done. The survey of the coastline and the search for rivers then began. At a point subsequently called Cape Catastrophe, the Master John Thistle, a midshipman and six of the crew were drowned whilst looking for water; wreckage was found and at Memory Cove Flinders erected a memorial to the drowned men. They arrived in Port Lincoln on the 25th February 1802 and the finest harbour in South Australia was then surveyed. Spencer Gulf and the Gulf of St. Vincent were charted and they discovered Kangaroo Island where they stocked up on fresh meat, which must have been welcome after the shipboard fare.

On the 8th of April the *Investigator* encountered the French vessel *Le Geographe* commanded by Captain Baudin also on a voyage of exploration. The captains had two meetings and discussed their findings. The *Investigator* reached Port Phillip, Flinders unaware that he had missed the entrance to the river Murray. Impressed by the beauty of the surrounding countryside they continued on the last leg of the outward voyage arriving at Sydney heads on 9th May 1802. They had travelled twenty thousand miles since leaving England and arrived with the remaining crew fit.



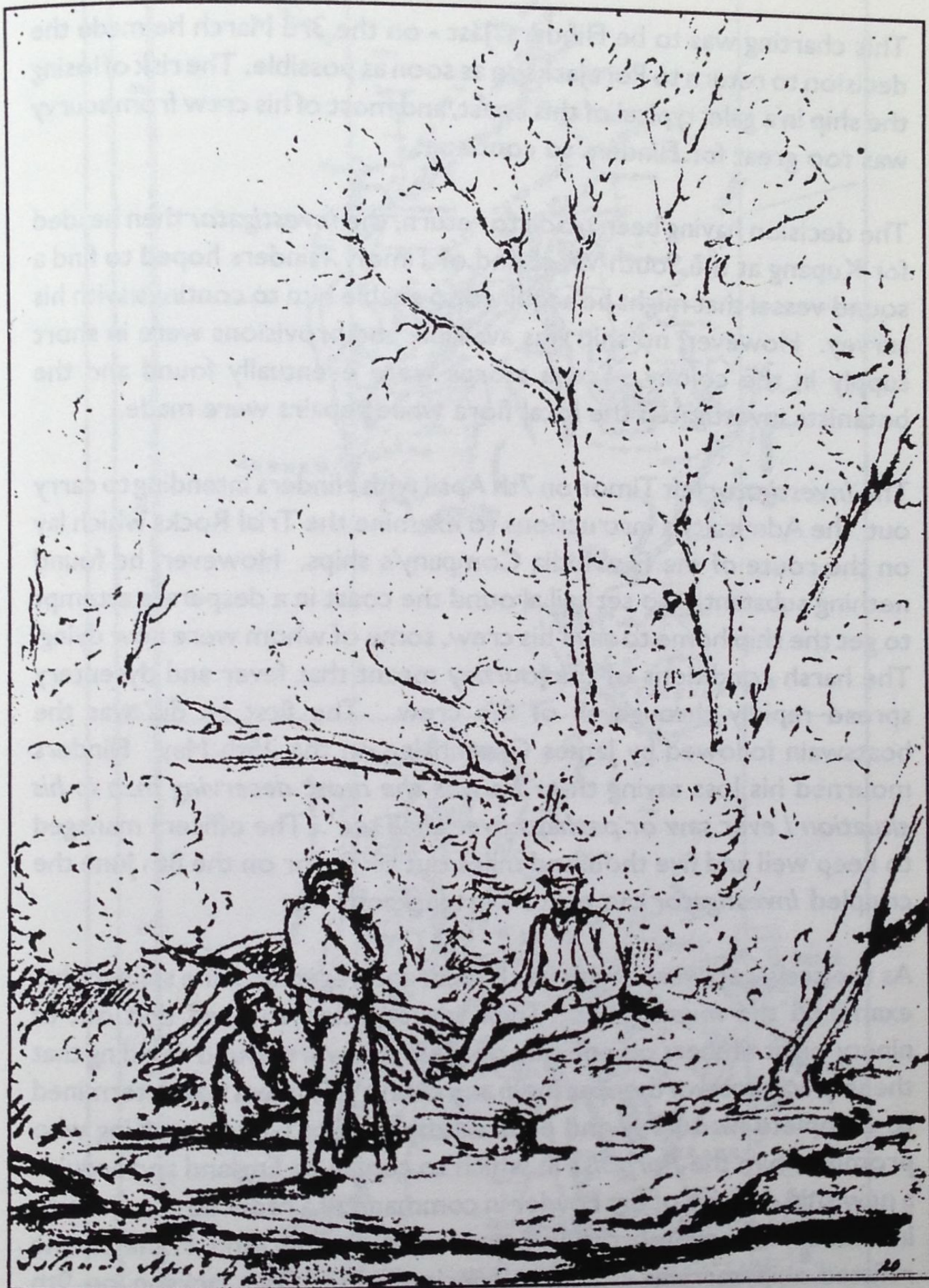
The East Coast of Australia

After a three month overhaul of the *Investigator* and with John Aken appointed as Master, Flinders left for the next survey of the East Coast to include the Gulf of Carpentaria. It was a very difficult coast to chart and expeditions had to be done by small boat or on foot.

At the beginning of October, Flinders, like Captain Cook before him, found that he was trapped by the reefs of the Great Barrier. The tender *Lady Nelson* was so badly damaged trying to break free from the reef that she had to return to Port Jackson. Not until the 16th October were conditions suitable for their journey to continue inside the Barrier Reef to navigate 500 miles into the waters of the Pacific again. Once free of all danger Flinders wrote in his journal that only Commanders with strong nerves should approach this part of New South Wales.

The *Investigator* was leaking badly again but Flinders pressed on. His next investigation, that of a good passage through the Torres Strait, would reduce the time taken by vessels which previously had to navigate north around New Guinea. This investigation was remarkably completed successfully in six days reducing the passage from the Pacific to India by five weeks. As charting the Gulf of Carpentaria proceeded it became apparent that the repairs done to the *Investigator* had not been satisfactory, forcing Flinders to get the Master and Carpenter to do a thorough survey. Their report was not a promising one: rotten planks and timbers were found which meant the ship would probably last only six months given favourable weather conditions. Flinders was determined to finish surveying the Gulf and after interesting encounters with natives, the discovery of "specimens of Indian art in caverns consisting of rude drawings of porpoises, turtles, kangaroos and a human head", they continued northwards surveying the west coast.

On 9th February 1803 they left the Gulf of Carpentaria, having proved that there was no channel through the country. They sailed for Arnhem Land to survey the English Company's Islands and the main coast itself.



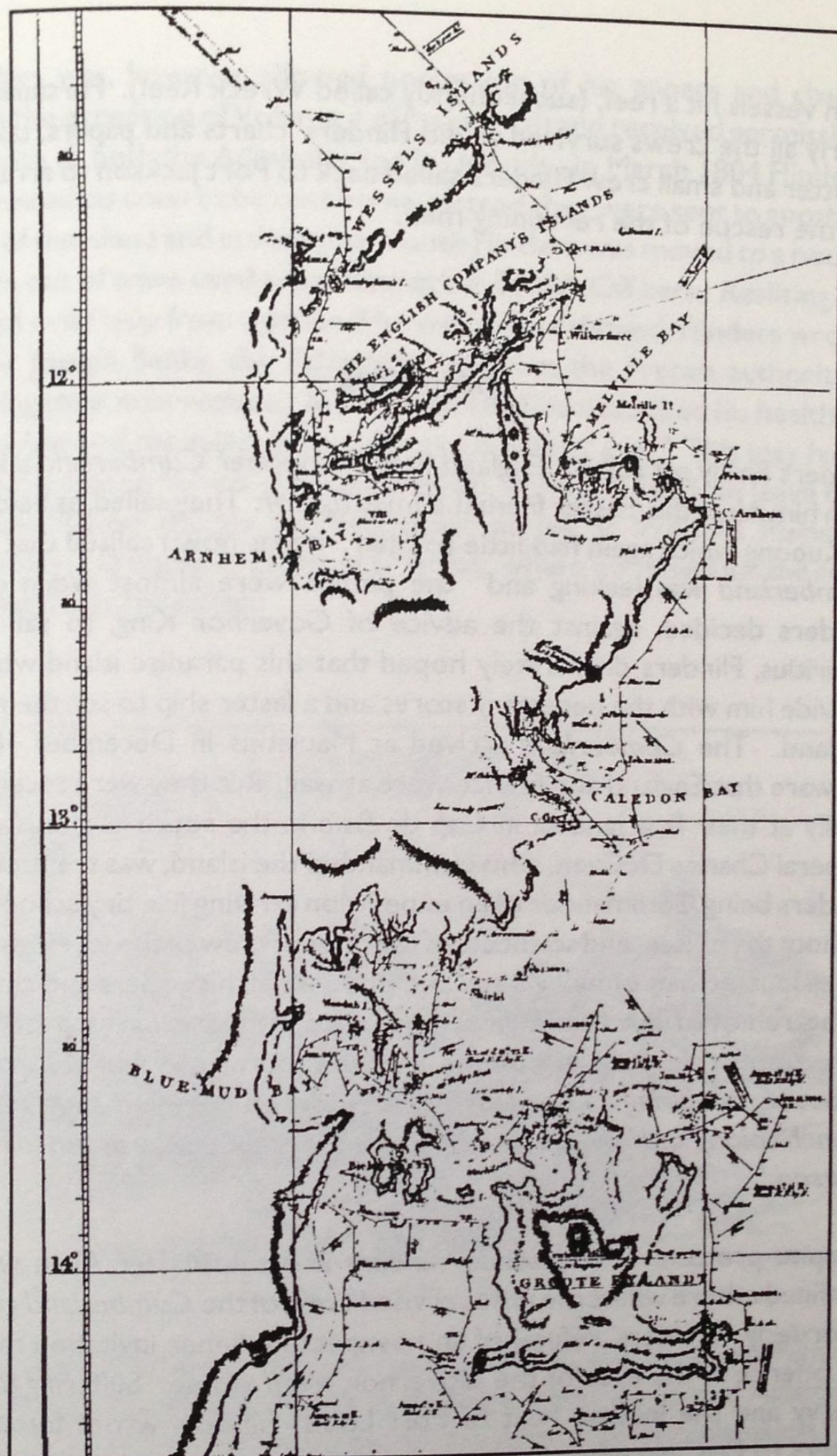
Kangaroo Island by William Westall - 1802

This charting was to be Flinders' last - on the 3rd March he made the decision to return to Port Jackson as soon as possible. The risk of losing the ship in a gale, typical of this coast, and most of his crew from scurvy was too great for Flinders to continue.

The decision having been made to return, the *Investigator* then headed for Kupang at the South West end of Timor. Flinders hoped to find a sound vessel that might be acquired to enable him to continue with his survey. However, no ship was available and provisions were in short supply in the colony. Some stores were eventually found and the botanists investigated the local flora while repairs were made.

The *Investigator* left Timor on 7th April with Flinders intending to carry out the Admiralty's instructions to examine the Trial Rocks which lay on the route of the East India Company's ships. However, he found nothing substantial so set sail around the coast in a desperate attempt to get the ship home to save his crew, some of whom were now dying. The harsh conditions of the journey meant that fever and dysentery spread rapidly through all of the crew. The first to die was the boatswain followed by James Greenhalge on the 25th May. Flinders mourned his loss saying that "*he was the most deserving man in his situation I ever saw or perhaps ever shall see*". The officers managed to keep well and five thousand miles out of Timor on the 8th June the crippled *Investigator* came into Port Jackson.

As the crew recovered with fresh meat and vegetables the shipwrights examined the *Investigator*. Their investigation showed that out of ninety-eight timbers on one side only **eleven** were sound deciding that the ship was not worth repairing in **any** country. Flinders was determined to complete his survey and enlisted the help of Governor King who promised him the *Porpoise* in which to return to England and acquire a new ship. With Robert Fowler in command of a reduced crew, which included Matthew's brother Samuel and cousin John Franklin, the refitted ship carrying botanical specimens left Port Jackson on 9th August, accompanied by the *Cato*. Eight days out disaster struck and



West Coast of Gulf of Carpentaria
Engraved Chart by Flinders

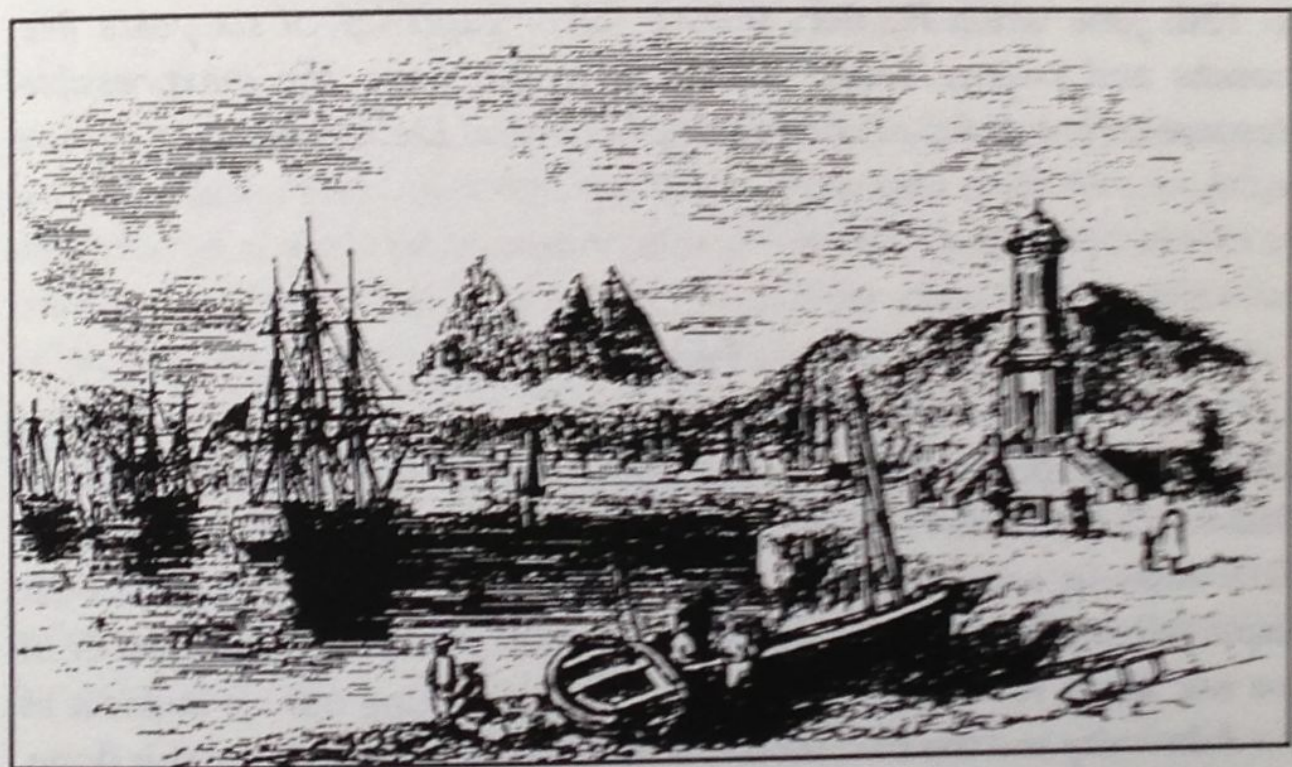
both vessels hit a reef, (subsequently called Wreck Reef). Fortunately nearly all the crews survived as did Flinders' charts and papers; taking a cutter and small crew Flinders sailed back to Port Jackson to arrange for the rescue of the remaining men.

Mauritius

Flinders finally set sail for England in the schooner *Cumberland* taking with him Aken the master from the *Investigator*. They sailed, as before, to Kupong which again had little to offer. It was now realised that the *Cumberland* was leaking and the pumps were almost worn out. Flinders decided, against the advice of Governor King, to sail for Mauritius, Flinders desperately hoped that this paradise island would provide him with the necessary stores and a faster ship to see them to England. The *Cumberland* arrived at Mauritius in December 1803 unaware that England and France were at war. But they were received kindly at their first landfall in Cap de Baie in the south of the island. General Charles DeCaen, who commanded the island, was sceptical of Flinders being Commander of an expedition arriving in a tiny schooner without the officers and scientists of the original crew of the *Investigator*. He suspected him of being a spy and ordered all his papers and charts to be removed but found what he considered convincing proof; in particular a reference in Volume 3 of the Journals in which Flinders wrote of "*acquiring a knowledge of the port and present state of the French colony and how far it and its dependencies may be useful to Port Jackson.*"

Despite protests of innocence Flinders and the Master Aken were confined ashore whilst the unsupervised crew of the *Cumberland* grew disorderly. Flinders' refusal of an unexpected dinner invitation made his offence in the eyes of the Governor, even worse. Suffering from scurvy and the intense heat of Port Louis, Flinders wrote frequent letters to DeCaen who chose to ignore them.

Flinders was, however allowed possession of his papers and charts (with the exception of Volume 3 of his journal) and received permission to write to both the Admiralty and his friends. In March 1804 Flinders requested his crew to be sent home; instead they were sent to another part of the island and in the same month Flinders was moved to a house a mile out of town used to confine other British Officers. Realising he would need help from outside if he was to be released, Flinders wrote to Sir Joseph Banks, the Admiralty and even the French authorities seeking their intervention. In October 1804 he described his health as *"very bad and the sight of my right eye is almost lost."* This may have been the reason he was given permission, in August 1805, to leave the Garden Prison and go and live under parole at Wilhelm Plains, a plantation belonging to Madame D'Arifat; where he stayed for the rest of his time in Mauritius.



Port Louis, Mauritius

In May 1805 the Master Aken had been released and took with him to England some of Flinders' work including a *"general chart of Australia showing the whole of my discoveries"* together with an explanation for

not completing the survey. Reluctantly resigned to his continued imprisonment Flinders began a narrative of his voyages since leaving Port Jackson on the *Porpoise*. He also recorded his observations "*concerning the differences in the Magnetic Needle on board the Investigator.*"

Pressure from friends and colleagues led to Napoleon approving, but not ordering, Flinders to be released. Although the document arrived in Mauritius in July 1807, DeCaen chose to ignore it. It is possible that he still felt Flinders was a spy; in July 1806 the Cape had been captured by the British and Mauritius was the only French naval base in the east. By now famine loomed and the British blockade was now a reality. The British mounted a commando-type raid on the neighbouring island of Bourbon in 1809. In March 1810 DeCaen finally agreed to release Flinders. A further raid by the British convinced the Governor General that the remaining British prisoners should also be released and they left on 13th June when Flinders wrote "*after captivity of six years five months and twenty seven days I at length have the inexpressible pleasure of being out of the reach of General De Caen*".

Home

Delayed at Cape Town by Vice Admiral Bertie who wanted details of Mauritius, Matthew Flinders finally reached England on October 24th 1810 and was reunited with his wife in London. Promoted to Post Captain from the date of his release he was appointed Commander of the war sloop *Ramillies*. He then turned to sorting out his finances as the Admiralty and the East India Company owed him money; this done, he was able to pay the botanists and the artists. Work then began on the exacting task of publishing the account of the voyage of the *Investigator*. This was, naturally, of great interest to Sir Joseph Banks who had pressed for Flinders' release from Mauritius and was relieved and pleased to have him home.

Whilst preparing the volumes and charts of the voyage records of observed differences in compass bearings, a series of experiments with ships in home waters followed. Flinders recorded his findings for the Lords Commissioners of the Navy who after some doubts accepted his short memorandum on the magnetism of ships. On the recommendation of the Admiralty Hydrographer Flinders' work was sent to the Navy and Flinders' magnetic field became standard equipment throughout the world. During this time Flinders was able to repay a little of the kindness he had received from his Mauritian hosts by arranging for repatriation of some of their relatives.

On 12th April 1812 Ann Flinders gave birth to a daughter Anne, shortly afterwards Matthew wrote his last will and testament which he signed on 6th July, 1812.

A Voyage to Terra Australis

In 1801 the Admiralty Commissioners had stated that if the voyage of the *Investigator* was "*deemed of sufficient importance it is their lordships intention to cause it to be published in the form of a narrative drawn by the commander.*" With Sir Joseph Banks offering to supervise publication as he "*had the honour to execute in the third voyage of Captain Cook*" work began in January 1811. The first two journals, the log and bearings books as well as the botanical matter of Robert Brown and the drawings of William Westall and Frederick Bauer were used. The writing of the voyage was to be Flinders' responsibility and would own all copies subject to booksellers commission and therefore became responsible for profits or losses.

An historical introduction was followed by the two volumes dealing with the voyages to Cape Leewin and the South Coast; and the East Coast and North Coast of New South Wales; the third dealt with Mauritius. Appendices would include Flinders' final statement on compass deviation and a study of Robert Brown on the taxonomy and

distribution of plants collected during the voyage. Brown described in detail forty of the one hundred and twenty orders known to exist there. Ten of Bauer's sketches from his portfolio of one thousand five hundred were selected by Sir Joseph for the "Voyage" and nine of Westall's illustrations. In addition there would be an atlas of 16 charts and two pages of coastal profiles. Once the charts and illustrations were engraved, the "Voyage" was printed by W. Bulmer and Co. who were printers to the Royal Society of which Sir Joseph Banks was still President. It was sold by G. and W. Nicol (Booksellers to His Majesty).

At the end of December 1813 Flinders was suffering severely from the renal colic which had first troubled him at Port Jackson in 1795; by March he was too ill to work. He died on 19th July 1814 aged 40 knowing that "A Voyage to Terra Australis" was published but it is not known if he actually saw a copy.

Unfortunately, the book did not sell as well as expected and in 1837, twenty three years after Flinders' death Ann Flinders was presented with a bill of fifty one pounds thirty three shillings for unsold copies.

Matthew Flinders has been justly compared with Captain James Cook; Robert Brown the Naturalist on the *Investigator* said that "*the amount of discovery and remarkable accuracy of survey has placed him next to Cook amongst modern navigators.*" He also has the distinction of naming Australia and establishing it as the sixth continent. Matthew Flinders was a professional seaman of the highest courage and integrity.



George Bass and Matthew Flinders. Stained glass window in
Lincoln Cathedral, by Christopher Webb

In the preparation of this small booklet
James D. Mack's "Matthew Flinders 1774 - 1814"
was of great assistance.

Further suggested reading:-

"Captain Matthew Flinders, R. N. -
His life and place in the exploration of Australia"
by Sir John Dudding.

"Matthew Flinders - Explorer"
by Hugh D. Martineau
Lincolnshire Life Magazine
October 1968.

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and produced by:
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September 1993