At dawn on 19 April 1770, Captain James Cook's ship, the Endeavour, was sailing west from England through uncharted waters. Cook was sailing towards Australia – known then as New Holland. Only the west coast of the country had been discovered, and Australia.
At dawn on 19 April 1770, Captain James Cook’s ship, the Endeavour, was sailing west from New Zealand, through uncharted waters. Cook knew that the land of Australia – known then as New Holland – lay ahead but he didn’t know exactly where. Only the west coast of the country had been explored, and nobody knew where the east coast was. Suddenly, Lieutenant Zachary Hicks shouted ‘Land-ho!’, and the crew came rushing up on deck. It was the east coast of Australia. Cook and his men were the first Europeans ever to see it.

In the weeks that followed, Cook sailed the Endeavour from eastern Victoria to the tip of Queensland. Cook and his team of scientists, led by Joseph Banks, explored the land and mapped every feature of the coastline. When they reached the northernmost point, Cook claimed the east coast of Australia for Britain. Cook did not know it, but his exploration of Australia’s east coast would lead to the European settlement of Australia.

This is the story of the people, the ideas and the events of Captain Cook’s voyage in the Endeavour, and how it changed Australia forever.

On 24 August 1770, Captain Cook landed on Possession Island, off the coast of Queensland. There he claimed the entire east coast of Australia for Britain.

Stories from Australia’s history

The story of modern Australia starts on 26 January 1788. On that day, Captain Arthur Phillip arrived at Sydney Cove from England with the convict ships of the First Fleet. The new settlement brought disaster to Australia’s Indigenous peoples because the newcomers took their land. This event marks the beginning of Australia as we know it today.

Just 18 years before settlement, in 1770, no European had ever seen the east coast of Australia. Englishman Captain James Cook discovered the east coast while on a voyage to explore the South Pacific. Cook mapped the coast from Victoria to Queensland and returned to England with reports of lush, fertile land around Botany Bay. The British government needed a place to send convicts, and decided that the land Cook described would be perfect. They sent the First Fleet, which arrived in 1788, and Australia was born. Captain Cook’s voyage in the Endeavour led to the founding of modern Australia, and is one of the great stories in Australia’s history.

What does it mean?

founding: setting up something new that will last a long time

Cook sailed his ship, the Endeavour, across the world from England to the east coast of Australia.
By the mid-1700s, Portuguese, Spanish and Dutch explorers had mapped the west coast of Australia, but nobody had explored the South Seas on the other side. Some people believed there was a great southern land, Terra Australis, lying to the east of New Holland in the Pacific Ocean. Captain Cook was sent to see if that was true.

The transit of Venus

In 1768, the Royal Society, a group of wealthy scientists in London, England, decided to send a scientific expedition to Tahiti. Their mission was to study an important event in the sky – the transit of Venus across the face of the Sun. They hoped that studying this event would help them to understand the distance between the planets. The British government also had another mission for Cook – to explore the South Seas and solve the mystery of Terra Australis.

Before Cook’s journey in the Endeavour, little was known about what lay in the South Seas to the east of New Holland. This map shows how Europeans believed the land in the south looked before Cook’s discovery.

James Cook

James Cook was asked to lead the expedition because he was already well known for mapping the coast of Canada. Cook was a strong leader. He had the scientific skills to observe the transit of Venus, and he was keen to complete the map of New Holland by exploring its unknown east coast. He also had good ideas about how to prevent scurvy by eating fresh food. Without this knowledge the men could not have survived such a long journey, and the expedition would have failed. Captain James Cook was given command of the ship Endeavour and prepared to sail.

Lord Colville, Cook’s commander in Canada, wrote a letter of recommendation to the Royal Society in London:

“... from my experience of Mr Cook’s genius ... I think him well qualified for the work he has performed and for greater ... [work] of the same kind. These ... [maps and charts] ... may be the means of directing many in the right way, but cannot mislead any.”

Lord Colville, 30 December 1762
At dawn on 19 April 1770, Captain James Cook's ship, the *Endeavour*, was sailing west from through uncharted waters. Cook was sailing towards Australia – known then as New Holland. Only the west coast of the country had been discovered, and Australia.

**Key people**

Two people played key roles in the voyage of the *Endeavour* to the South Seas.

**James Cook**

**Born:** 27 October 1728 at Marton, Yorkshire, England  
**Role:** Captain of the *Endeavour* and leader of the expedition to the South Seas  
**Age at the beginning of the voyage (1768):** 39  
**Died:** 14 February 1779 in Hawaii  
**Appearance:** Tall, strong, sturdy build, brown hair tied back, small piercing brown eyes, thick eyebrows, plainly dressed  
**Character:** Clever, quiet, strong; a plain-speaking, no-nonsense sort of man. Strong-willed and determined, Cook was a strict master but was admired and trusted by his men. Although he was shy, he made many lifelong friends.  
**Comments:** James Cook was a brilliant navigator and explorer whose skills won respect from all who knew him. Although he was uneducated, Cook’s abilities and excellent leadership skills helped him to achieve success. He had a burning desire to discover new lands and understand other cultures.

**Joseph Banks**

**Born:** 13 February 1743 in London, England  
**Role:** Plant and animal scientist for the expedition  
**Age at the beginning of the voyage:** 25  
**Died:** 19 June 1820  
**Appearance:** Tall, solid build, long wavy brown hair tied back, round face, dark brown lively eyes, olive skin, well dressed  
**Character:** Lively, witty, clever, friendly and charming, Banks was a good companion with a strong personality. He was well educated, outgoing and self-confident.  
**Comments:** Joseph Banks had all the advantages in life that Cook lacked: wealth, a noble family, a country estate, a fine education and friends in high places. Banks was a young man when he sailed with Captain Cook in the *Endeavour*, but he was already a well-known botanist. He brought with him a group of fine scientists and artists to record their discoveries. Banks could be difficult, but he respected Cook and they became good friends.
The Royal Society in London, England, planned a scientific voyage of discovery to the southern Pacific Ocean. The expedition would include some of the best scientists in Britain. James Cook, sea captain and navigator, was chosen to lead the expedition.

**5 May 1768**

WE'VE HEARD GREAT THINGS ABOUT YOU, COOK.

THANK YOU, SIR.

**27 May**

London Docks.

Joseph Banks brought his team of scientists on board... including Dr Daniel Solander, a botanist... and Francis Parkinson, an artist.

**26 August**

Plymouth.

Captain Cook set sail from England in Endeavour with 44 men on board. They had to reach Tahiti by 3 June 1769 to record the transit of Venus.

**13 September**

WELCOME ABOARD, MR BANKS.

I'M JOSEPH BANKS.

**13 September**

The Endeavour made good time on her journey from England to Tahiti.

Cook arrived in Tahiti.

**13 November - 7 December**

Cook sailed through the Straits of Magellan safely.

Bay of Success. Banks and his team of scientists got lost in a snowstorm. Two servants died.

**16 January 1769**

Rio de Janeiro. The Governor thought Cook was a spy and tried to arrest his men.

**26 August 1768**

Plymouth.

Funchal, Madeira. Cook took on fresh meat and vegetables to prevent scurvy. He flogged two men who refused to eat them.

One man drowned in a mishap with the anchor.

Anyone who had not crossed the Equator before got dunked on the way over it!

In Tahiti, Cook prepared for the transit of Venus.

**Cook**

The transit of Venus — when Venus crosses in front of the Sun.

Cook and the scientists made a careful record of the event.

Cook prepared to leave.

... and Cook completed his map of the island.

A Tahitian man named Tupia and his servant joined them for the next leg of the expedition.

**A Tahitian man named Tupia and his servant joined them for the next leg of the expedition.**

**The fence stopped the local people stealing the equipment.**

**Well done, gentlemen. Our work here is done.**

**Cook named the observatory Fort Venus.**

**Cook named the observatory Fort Venus.**

**Endeavour left Tahiti to explore the South Pacific.**

**Endeavour left Tahiti to explore the South Pacific.**

**Make the fence strong, lads.**

**This place will do for our observatory, Mr Banks.**

**In Tahiti, Cook prepared for the transit of Venus.**

**3 June 1769**

**3 June 1769**

**The transit of Venus — when Venus crosses in front of the Sun.**

**The transit of Venus — when Venus crosses in front of the Sun.**

**And Cook completed his map of the island.**

**And Cook completed his map of the island.**

**Cook prepared to leave.**

**Cook prepared to leave.**

**... and Cook completed his map of the island.**

**... and Cook completed his map of the island.**

**In Queen Charlotte Sound, Cook claimed New Zealand for Britain, even though the Maori people lived there.**

**Banks and Solander loaded the plants and animals they had collected onto the Endeavour ...**

**Banks and Solander loaded the plants and animals they had collected onto the Endeavour ...**

**Four Maoris were killed and the rest fled.**

**Cook tried to land at Poverty Bay, but ...**

**Cook tried to land at Poverty Bay, but ...**

**The Maori attack was fierce.**

**Endeavour left Tahiti to explore the South Pacific.**

**Endeavour left Tahiti to explore the South Pacific.**

**Banks was upset, but Cook sailed on around the coast of New Zealand.**

**In Tahiti, Cook prepared for the transit of Venus.**

**9 October 1769**

**9 October 1769**

**... the most disagreeable day my life has yet seen; black be the mark for it ...**

**He'll help us speak to the islanders!**

**Set sail for the south.**

**Aye, aye, sir.**

**Help!**

**I claim this land in the name of King George III.**

**No European had been to New Zealand since Abel Tasman landed there in 1642. Then ...**

**When he was sure no land was there, he turned west towards New Zealand.**

**When he was sure no land was there, he turned west towards New Zealand.**

**Any land, Mr Hicks?**

**No, captain.**

**Look out, captain!**

**No, Captain!**

**5 October**

**5 October**

**Land no!**

**13 July**

**13 July**

**15 October**

**15 October**

**In Queen Charlotte Sound, Cook claimed New Zealand for Britain, even though the Maori people lived there.**

**Banks and Solander loaded the plants and animals they had collected onto the Endeavour ...**

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**When he was sure no land was there, he turned west towards New Zealand.**

**When he was sure no land was there, he turned west towards New Zealand.**

**Any land, Mr Hicks?**

**No, captain.**

**Look out, captain!**

**No, Captain!**

**5 October**

**5 October**

**Land no!**
Cook sailed through the strait between the North and South islands... and around the South Island.

The Endeavour left New Zealand.

Isaac Smith was a young crew member and a relative of Cook’s.

The Endeavour sailed northwards. Cook carefully mapped the coast.

Lieutenant Hicks sighted the east coast of mainland Australia.

They named the tip of the coast Point Hicks.

Isaac Smith was the first European to land in New South Wales.

Upon leaving this coast of New Zealand... to sail... westward until we fall in with the east coast of New Holland, and then to follow... that coast to the northward... until we arrive at its northern extremity (tip).

No one was seriously hurt but the Indigenous people stayed away.
At dawn on 19 April 1770, Captain James Cook's ship, the Endeavour, was sailing west from through uncharted waters. Cook was sailing towards Australia – known then as New Holland. Only the west coast of the country had been discovered, and Australia.

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**James Roberts, servant on the Endeavour**

James Roberts was a 16-year-old servant to Joseph Banks, the botanist on board the Endeavour. While at Botany Bay, he described the Indigenous people in his journal:

"... their houses are several pieces of bark, set up one against the other and open at each end and are the worst I ever saw. The people wear nothing to cover themselves but go quite naked, men and women... In short, [they are] the most wretched set of people I ever beheld (saw) or heard of."

James Roberts, 5 May 1770

James Roberts struggled to understand the way the Indigenous people lived.

---

**James Cook, captain of the Endeavour**

James Cook took a great interest in Australian Indigenous people, though he did not hesitate to fire on them if they threatened him or his men. He saw the Indigenous people as contented and peaceful, as shown in the following letter he wrote to a friend in England:

"[Australian Indigenous people] may appear to some to be the most wretched [people] upon earth, but in reality they are far happier than we Europeans... They live in a tranquility (peacefulness) which is not disturbed by the inequality of condition; the earth and sea... furnish (supply) them with all things necessary to life; they [do not want]... magnificent houses, household stuff, and etc; they sleep as sound in a small hovel (hut) or even in the open as the king in his palace on a bed of down (feathers)."

James Cook, 13 September 1771

Cook ordered his men to treat Australian Indigenous people kindly.
Cook, Banks and Solander were eager to explore the coast of New South Wales. Banks and Solander, the botanists, were delighted with the new plants and animals they found there.

Cook and his team began exploring the area.

Back on board Endeavour, Banks was delighted. Cook named the place Botany Bay because of the many plants found there.

Banks’ greyhound could not catch the strange animal.

Meanwhile, Banks’ team studied the plants they had collected.

Cook was happy with their discoveries, but disappointed that he could not befriend the Indigenous people.

Cook carefully mapped the coastline...

... later that night...

Endeavour was stuck fast on a reef 30 kilometres from shore.

Parkinson, the artist, drew the plants and animals.

They sailed on until they reached tropical waters.

Cook named the place Bustard Bay, after the bird.

Cook named the calm waters Whitsunday Passage.

Meanwhile, Banks’ team studied the plants they had collected.

Cook had sailed safely through many reefs and islands, but...
Cook did everything he could to save the ship.

Forty-five tonnes of cannons and stores were thrown overboard.

Cook looked for a safe place on shore to repair the ship.

While Endeavour was being repaired, the scientists studied the wildlife.

The Indigenous people tried to set fire to the tents …

... but Cook persuaded them to make peace.

Cook named it Endeavour River. He beached the ship there.

No one panicked and the crew worked brilliantly.

As the tide rose, the leaks got worse.

Then, Midshipman Monkhouse had an idea.

Within 15 minutes, the leaks had slowed and the ship was safe.

But the ship was still leaking badly.

Cook and Banks climbed Lizard Island.

Next day, Endeavour sailed safely out of the Great Barrier Reef.

The Indigenous people were friendly …

... but when Cook's men began to hunt turtles, they became angry.

This animal went only upon two legs, making vast bounds (leaps) …

The Indigenous people were friendly …

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This animal went only upon two legs, making vast bounds (leaps) …

The Indigenous people were friendly …

... but when Cook's men began to hunt turtles, they became angry.

This animal went only upon two legs, making vast bounds (leaps) …

The Indigenous people were friendly …

... but when Cook's men began to hunt turtles, they became angry.
Everyone was relieved to be free of the reef that had trapped them for so long.

... but they were too far from the coast now.

Cook wanted to find out whether New Guinea was joined to Australia. Cook called close to the shore, mapping it carefully. Then...

It was the northern tip of Australia. Cook named it Cape York.

Cook sailed close to the shore, mapping it carefully. Then...

There’s a channel, sir.

Cook claimed the land even though he knew it was already occupied.

The Indigenous people living in Australia had their land stolen from them.

Cook claimed the land even though he knew it was already occupied.

Cook claimed the land even though he knew it was already occupied.

Cook had explored the South Pacific, mapped New Zealand and Australia’s east coast and found the Torres Strait. He had opened up new worlds to Britain.

Cook sailed through the channel and landed on Possession Island.

Cook sailed through the channel and landed on Possession Island.

Cook sailed through the channel and landed on Possession Island.

England

There’s sea beyond, captain!

There’s sea beyond, captain!

There’s sea beyond, captain!

Torres was right. New Guinea is separate.

Torres was right. New Guinea is separate.

Torres was right. New Guinea is separate.

Hooray! Hooray!

Hooray! Hooray!

Hooray! Hooray!

Cook claimed the land even though he knew it was already occupied.

The Indigenous people living in Australia had their land stolen from them.

It was the northern tip of Australia. Cook named it Cape York.

Cook sailed close to the shore, mapping it carefully. Then...

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The Indigenous people living in Australia had their land stolen from them.
At dawn on 19 April 1770, Captain James Cook's ship, the Endeavour, was sailing west from through uncharted waters. Cook was sailing towards Australia – known then as New Holland. Only the west coast of the country had been discovered, and Australia.

**What happened next?**

On his return to England in July 1771, Captain Cook became a hero. He was recognised as the world's leading navigator and explorer. The British government was delighted that Cook had claimed the east coast of Australia for Britain and began planning settlements there.

**Scientific discoveries**

The scientists of the Royal Society were unhappy with Cook’s observations of the transit of Venus. They did not believe the observations were accurate. However, they were pleased with the 1300 new plant and animal specimens that Banks and Dr Solander brought back, which caused a sensation in London. The Banksia plant was named in Banks' honour.

George Stubbs used a kangaroo skin brought back by Banks as a reference when painting this picture in 1773.

**Joseph Banks**

Banks wanted to join Cook’s next voyage of discovery, to Antarctica, but Banks’ plans fell through. In London, Banks hired Dr Solander to look after his large plant collection. Banks was elected president of the Royal Society from 1778 to 1820, and was knighted Sir Joseph Banks in 1781. He became the leading expert on all things Australian. It was on his suggestion that the British government sent the First Fleet of convict ships to Botany Bay to begin a settlement there in 1788.

In 1779, Joseph Banks recommended to the British government that unwanted convicts should be sent to Botany Bay. He said:

“... the place which appeared best ... for such a purpose was Botany Bay ... the weather was mild and moderate ... the ... [amount] of rich soil was small in comparison to the barren (unfertile) but ... [enough] to support a large number of people ... The country was well supplied with water. There was ... [plenty] of timber and fuel ...

Joseph Banks, 1779

Cook's carefully drawn maps, such as this one, along with Banks' recommendation, helped the British government to plan a settlement at Botany Bay.

**Eyewitness words**

On his return to England in July 1771, Captain Cook became a hero. He was recognised as the world's leading navigator and explorer. The British government was delighted that Cook had claimed the east coast of Australia for Britain and began planning settlements there.
At dawn on 19 April 1770, Captain James Cook’s ship, the Endeavour, was sailing west from through uncharted waters. Cook was sailing towards Australia – known then as New Holland. Only the west coast of the country had been discovered, and Australia.

Captain Cook’s voyage in the Endeavour had important and long-lasting effects in Australia.

Cook was the first European to explore and map New Zealand and Australia’s east coast. When the British government needed a place to send unwanted convicts, it chose New South Wales because Cook and Banks had reported lush, fertile land there. Although Indigenous Australians had been living there for thousands of years, the British declared the land to be terra nullius, meaning ‘land belonging to no one’. Within 20 years, convicts were being sent to Australia and free settlers were making their homes there. Without Cook’s voyage in the Endeavour, there would have been no First Fleet and Australia as we know it would not exist.

Mapping the Southern Hemisphere

The maps Cook made were so accurate that they were used right up to the 1900s. Cook discovered that there was no great southern land east of New Holland. He also proved Luis Vaez de Torres’ claim that there was a channel or strait between New Guinea and Australia, cutting down travel times between Europe and the East.

Indigenous people

Cook’s voyage was a disaster for Australia’s Indigenous peoples. It led to British settlement of Australia and the loss of the Indigenous peoples’ lands, which meant the end of life as they knew it. Today, Indigenous stories describe the terrible things that happened after Captain Cook came long ago and destroyed their old way of life.

What ever happened to …

Captain James Cook?

Within a year of returning from the voyage on the Endeavour, Cook was promoted to Commander and sent on an expedition to sail around Antarctica. In 1776, aged 46, Cook went on a third voyage of discovery, travelling north to the Arctic Circle. On the way, he stopped at Hawaii where, on 14 February 1779, he was killed in a fight with local people. He was buried at sea.
At dawn on 19 April 1770, Captain James Cook’s ship, the Endeavour, was sailing west from through uncharted waters. Cook was sailing towards Australia – known then as New Holland. Only the west coast of the country had been discovered, and Australia.

Captain Cook’s voyage to eastern Australia raises important questions about the impact of European exploration on Indigenous peoples. Try the following activities to test your own ideas about this important subject.

Who is right?
Captain James Cook is seen as a hero by many people, but others, including many of Australia’s Indigenous peoples, disagree. Read the following opinions and have a discussion about who you think is right.

European settlers
Under the laws of his time, Cook had a right to claim Australia for Britain. He opened up the land for European settlers who built the country into the modern nation of Australia. We should all celebrate Captain Cook.

Indigenous Australians
Indigenous people had lived in Australia for thousands of years before Cook came. He had no right to claim land that was already occupied. The European settlers were invaders who stole land from the Indigenous people. There is no reason to celebrate Captain Cook.

What would you do?
The following events actually occurred around the time of Captain Cook’s voyage in the Endeavour. Read each scene, then choose what you would do.

Scene 1
You are Captain Cook exploring the coast of New Zealand. During a stop, three of your crewmen steal sweet potatoes from a Maori farm. Would you …
A praise the crewmen for finding fresh vegetables
B ignore the theft, pretending it never happened
C flog the crewmen for stealing from the Maoris?

Scene 2
You are Captain Cook at Botany Bay, eager to see Indigenous people. You come across a bark hut with small children inside. Would you …
A capture them and take them on board the Endeavour
B leave beads in the hut as gifts and quietly go away
C leave bullets behind as a warning to their parents not to attack you and your men?

Scene 3
You are Julien-Marie Crozet, a French navigator who sailed around New Zealand with Captain Marion de Fresne in 1771, a year after Cook left. When you arrive back in Europe you find that Cook’s maps are much better than the ones you made. Would you …
A praise Cook’s maps and declare they are much better than anything you could do
B copy Cook’s maps and pretend you made them
C claim Cook’s maps are full of mistakes?

Once you have chosen what you would do in each scene, find out what actually happened on page 31.
At dawn on 19 April 1770, Captain James Cook’s ship, the, was through uncharted waters. Cook was sailing towards Australia – known then as New Holland. Only the west coast of the country had been discovered, and Australia.

Find out more

Website


This site from the State Library of New South Wales includes original journal and ship’s log extracts, maps and artwork from members of the Endeavour expedition. It also has information and documents covering the exploration of Australia before Cook’s voyage.

CD-ROM

Endeavour: Captain Cook’s Journal 1768–1771

This CD ROM from the National Library of Australia reproduces the full text of Cook’s original hand-written journal from his voyage in the Endeavour. Specifically designed for students and teachers, it includes sections on Cook’s discoveries, Indigenous peoples, historical and political contexts and a virtual tour of the Endeavour.

DVD

Captain Cook: Obsession and Discovery

Directed by Wain Fimeri, Paul Rudd and Matthew Thomason, 2007

This four-part dramatised documentary tells the story of Cook’s life and voyages, presenting the views of both Europeans and Indigenous peoples.

Place to visit

Captain Cook’s Cottage, Fitzroy Gardens, Melbourne, Victoria

This cottage was transported from Yorkshire, England, in 1933. It was the home of Cook’s parents, although Cook himself probably never lived there. The building includes a discovery centre and offers school tours and interactive programs.
At dawn on 19 April 1770, Captain James Cook's ship, the Endeavour, was sailing west from Europe through uncharted waters. Cook was sailing towards Australia – known then as New Holland. Only the west coast of the country had been discovered, and Australia.

What actually happened in the ‘What would you do?’ scenes described on page 29:

Scene 1: C. Cook was furious that his crew stole food from the Maoris and had his crewmen flogged.

Scene 2: B. Cook left simple gifts for the children in the bark hut to show their parents he would not harm them.

Scene 3: A. Crozet praised Cook's maps saying they astonished him by their accuracy. He used Cook's maps and drew his own route on them, explaining 'I think … that I cannot do better than to lay down our track … on the chart prepared by the celebrated English navigator (Cook)'.

Glossary

- **botanist**: plant expert
- **convict**: someone serving a sentence in jail for committing a crime
- **expedition**: a journey of discovery
- **explorers**: people who travel into little-known regions
- **fothering**: a method of plugging a hole in a ship’s hull
- **Indigenous peoples**: the original peoples of Australia
- **Maori**: the term used to describe the indigenous people of New Zealand
- **mapped**: studied and made a map of
- **navigator**: a person who explores by ship
- **observatory**: a place for making scientific studies of the skies
- **route**: a way to a place
- **scurvy**: a disease that many sailors used to die from, caused by a lack of vitamins
- **settlement**: a place where people live
- **strait**: a channel between two points of land
- **Terra Australis**: a continent believed to exist in the southern Pacific Ocean
- **transit**: passing across or through a place

At dawn on 19 April 1770, Captain James Cook's ship, the Endeavour, was through uncharted waters. Cook was sailing towards Australia – known then as New Holland. Only the west coast of New South Wales was claimed by the British government, and they sent out the First Fleet of convicts in 1788. Cook’s observations of the Great Barrier Reef, New Guinea, and New Zealand were instrumental in the British government’s decision to establish a colony in Sydney Harbour in 1788. The journey was fraught with danger, with ships like the Endeavour, Cape Town, and Philip’s Passage succumbing to scurvy and mutiny. Despite these challenges, Cook’s voyage provided valuable scientific data and a new understanding of the South Pacific. The wreck of the Endeavour was the first of the First Fleet's ships to be lost, and its location was not discovered until 1934.