



Captain James Cook

James Cook was born in 1728, the son of a Scottish farm labourer in Yorkshire, England. After basic education and work in a shop he went to sea at the late age of 18 as an apprentice on coal ships out of the port of Whitby. He became a skilled navigator and seamen and quickly progressed to becoming a ship's mate. At the age of 27 he gave up this career to join the navy as an able seaman.

In the Royal Navy his ability was soon recognised and within two years he was promoted to the position of ship's master, responsible for the navigation and pilotage of a vessel, including the surveying of uncharted waters. He used this skill in the war against the French in Canada.

In 1768 Cook was chosen by the British Admiralty to command a Royal Society sponsored expedition to the South Seas and the recently discovered island of Tahiti. He then was instructed to proceed south from Tahiti in search of Terra Australis Incognita in the south.

The *Earl of Pembroke* was recollected as His Majesty's Bark *Endeavour* and fitted out for a voyage expected to last two years. Cook was promoted to Lieutenant and sailed in August 1768 with a number of civilian passengers including amateur botanist Joseph Banks, Swedish botanist Dr Daniel Solander, artist Sydney Parkinson and astronomer Charles Green.

After arriving in Tahiti in April 1769, Cook sailed the *Endeavour* south in increasingly bad weather. By 40 degrees south he had not sighted any land and he turned the vessel towards the land that Abel Tasman had discovered and briefly chartered in 1642.

Cook reached New Zealand on 7 October 1769 and spent the next six months charting over 2,500 miles of the coastline of the North and South Island and repairing his ship in the Marlborough Sounds. He discovered the strait that now bears his name, but the weather caused him to miss the entrance to Wellington Harbour (he saw it in 1773 on his second voyage but was not able to enter) and conditions stopped him seeing the strait between the South Island and Stewart Island.

To begin the voyage home the *Endeavour* sailed across the Tasman to reach New Holland(Australia) on 20 April 1770. Over the next four months Cook sailed his ship around the unknown eastern shores of Australia, charting the coast up and along Great Barrier Reef. On the night of 11 June the ship struck the reef. A large piece of coral became wedged in the hole the reef had made in the *Endeavour* and long with pumps, this kept the ship afloat. They then beached themselves for temporary repairs at the site now known as *Cooktown* in Queensland.

From there they sailed to the tip of Australia and on through Torres Straits to the Dutch settlement of Batavia in Java. They properly repaired the ship in a dockyard for the long voyage back to England. But many of the crew became sick with malaria and dysentery and died on the two and half month journey home. They arrived back in England in mid July 1771.

Now promoted to the rank of Commander, Cook sailed (exactly one year after his return from the first voyage) with two new Whitby merchant ships converted for the purpose, *Resolution* and *Adventure*, the second being under the command of Lieutenant Tobias Furneaux.

On the second voyage, Cook sailed his ships south to cross the Antarctic Circle until progress was blocked by field ice. Sometime was spent wintering further north in New Zealand, where the two ships met up in Queen Charlotte Sound after being separated in a storm. After a return visit to Tahiti, then on to the Society Islands (now part of French Polynesia) and Tonga (which Cook called the Friendly Islands) the ships turned south and were again separated in bad weather. Failing by a few days to meet up with Cook for a second time at the agreed meeting point in New Zealand, Furneaux set sail home to England via Cape Horn and the Cape of Good Hope.

Cook arrived back in England one year after the *Adventure*, having taken *Resolution* thousands of miles through uncharted and dangerous southern waters. He had sailed his ship far south before thick ice blocked his way, and then turned north to Tahiti again, then west to the islands he named Norfolk Island, New Caledonia and the New Hebrides (now Vanuatu). During the long voyage, in three separate sailings into Antarctic water, he had finally established that a great southern continent, occupied and productive, did not exist. Just as important, not a man had been lost from scurvy in a voyage lasting three whole years, which was an outstanding achievement for that time.

Upon his return Cook was finally promoted to Captain and honoured by vote as a Fellow of the Royal Society. Although his health had been affected on the second voyage, he volunteered for yet another voyage in *Resolution*, this time accompanied by another Whitby vessel *Discovery*, under the command of Charles Clerke, who had been on both the previous voyages. In July 1776, Cook set out on a voyage back to Australia (Tasmania), New Zealand and Tahiti. He then sailed into the Northern Pacific and discovered the Hawaiian Islands (which he named the Sandwich Islands) and charted the North American coast from present day Oregon north through the Bering Strait far north before the ice stopped their passage. The ships then returned to Hawaii for the winter.

Although Cook was initially treated as a God-like figure by the Hawaiians, relationships became strained over petty thieving by the natives (a problem throughout the islands, but one Cook had successfully handled before) and, on the Hawaiian's side, the burden of hospitality to the strangers who stayed several weeks. This increased when the ships returned in February 1779 to Kealahou Bay on the island of Hawaii after *Resolution* struck trouble with her foremast. When one of the ship's boats was stolen and Cook took a Hawaiian chief hostage to obtain its return, a battle broke out on the foreshore and Cook and several of his marine guard were killed. Captain Clerke took over command of the expedition, which spent a second session exploring the waters of the Bering Sea before turning south in July. Clerke died of consumption and Lieutenant Gore took command to bring the ships home via the Cape of Good Hope, reaching England in October 1780.

On three great voyages circling the world over ten years Cook charted far more of the Pacific than more than twenty predecessors had done in the previous 250 years. Today his name ranks with Magellan and Columbus as one of the greatest navigator/explorers of all time.

Further reading: *Captain Cook's World*, John Robson; *Farther than any Man*, Martin Dugard; *Journals of Captain Cook*, Philip Edwards; *Trial of the Cannibal Dog*, Anne Salmond; *Captain Cook, Betrayal and Obsession in the New World*, Vanessa Collingridge.

(All available in the Museum of Wellington City & Sea Shop).