

## Australian Histories Podcast: Episode 70. Bass & Flinders part

*\*Note: citations included in this transcript are used more as memory prompts for me in writing the episode than for academic purposes.*

Today we're going to begin a short series looking at two very interesting men we can describe as explorers and navigators. Men who made some important discoveries for the colonial authorities, and literally changed the way we pictured, and referred to, the continent and islands of Australia.

George Bass & Matthew Flinders are names many of us heard in Primary School. Soon after arriving in the new colony they explored areas of the coast around Port Jackson that few white men had yet seen. They were instrumental in confirming the suspected existence of what would afterwards become known as Bass Strait, the channel of water separating mainland Australia from the island of Van Diemens Land, later known as Tasmania, and were the first to circumnavigate it.

Flinders would later circumnavigate the entire mainland of Australia, the eastern NSW side of which was generally still called New Holland then, or with the sections of west coast already charted, Terra Australis, as there was conjecture there may have been a sea between the two scantily known sections of the coasts east and west. Indeed it was Flinders who actually proved that the Terra Australis mainland was all one landmass and he led the charge for naming the continent Australia, so we have him to thank for that.

Meeting on the voyage out to Port Jackson on *HMS Reliance*, the two men, having a similar desire & enthusiasm for adventure and exploration, offering themselves to the Navy for just such opportunities, they seem to have formed a close bond. Working together at the edges of the known world seemed right up their alley. So we'll explore a little of the background of each man, what drew them to exploration and navigation, and what they achieved for the colonial and British governments, and for the sailing fraternity beyond.

For this first episode we'll begin by focussing our attention on George Bass, and then reflect on the parallels in the men's lives once we turn our attention to Matthew Flinders. Though the two men grew up in reasonably close proximity, with only a very few years between them in age, they only made one another's acquaintance once aboard the ship that brought them both, in service, to the shores of Botany Bay. Actually the penal colony had moved to Port Jackson, a much more favourable harbour, the expanding development there soon becoming well known as Sydney.

In February in 1795, Captain Hunter, soon to relieve the men of the Rum Corp of their temporary stewardship of New South Wales, set sail in the *HMS Reliance*, in company with *HMS Supply*, to take up his position as the new *Governor* Hunter of New South Wales. His positive & enthusiastic expectations were to be worn down by troubles he would later encounter with the said Rum Corp Officers, and you might return to the Episodes on the Rum Corp and the Macarthur's Episodes 52-55 and 57, for a refresher on how the early Governors fared, up against those men. But at least the journey out was full of enthusiasm & positivity for Hunter, and his accompanying men. One of the many eager and ambitious midshipmen sailing with him, was the 20 year old Matthew Flinders. Also on board was the 25 year old ships doctor, George Bass. Both men were enormously excited by the prospects Naval service in the new colony might offer them, particularly in relation to exploration, both being great fans of Cook and Banks. Bass in particular formed a very happy and positive relationship with Hunter, which would serve him well in his ambitions.

For the first part of the voyage at least, Bass & Flinders would not have had much opportunity to get to know one another, given their differing ranks and roles aboard. Flinders would have been bunking and socialising largely with the other midshipmen. As ships doctor Bass would have had his own cabin and surgery area, generally mixing with the more senior ranked Officers on board. But after the ship stopped for supplies in Tenerife, Flinders appears to have been afflicted by kidney stones, or inflammation of the bladder

& kidneys, some kind of very painful related condition anyway, which then brought him into the care and to attention of Bass.

During this time together they learned they had both grown up in Lincolnshire, their villages only a few miles apart, (Bastian, Josephine 2016, p. 7) During their conversations they also discovered the great similarities in their backgrounds, their interests in the explorers of the Age of Enlightenment, and their immense desire to be part of it. A firm friendship was in the making.

Bass had been born in January 1771 in Aswarby [*pronounced locally as "as-r-bee"*] [<https://www.pronouncenames.com/Aswarby>] in Lincolnshire. (Bowden, Keith Macrae 1952, p. 3) When he was only six his father died. His mother appears to have initially tried to keep the family farm running, but within the year moved to the nearby town of Boston, to be closer to her brother, and later sent George to the Boston Grammar School there.

He was clearly a smart lad and the school was strong in Languages, including Latin, and he did seem to be skilled in languages throughout his life, also learning Italian and Spanish and later some indigenous languages of the Eora Nation of NSW. And of course mathematics and sciences would have been amongst other school subjects that would prove useful in his future career. (Estensen, Miriam. 2005, pp. 2–3) (Bowden, Keith Macrae 1952, p. 3) He even appears to have learned somehow, to swim, indeed he was a very strong swimmer, which was not a common talent at the time, even for those intending to embark on a life on the water.

Boston was a port town in the mid-east coast of England, sighted a navigable distance in, from what they call 'the wash'. With all the ships around him, Bass seems to have taken an interest in the sea at an early age, much to his mother's concern. Seafaring was not the safest of occupations in the day, and she seems to have firmly directed him into a career in medicine instead.

Various biographers describe the young George as "very bright, curious, [and] fond of reading", (Estensen, Miriam. 2005, p. 4) and that he was a "studious youth", in the habit of copying verses that appealed to him in his books. (Bowden, Keith Macrae 1952, p. 4)

His reading tastes seemed to largely revolve around the adventures and stories of the intrepid, and he had copies of *Cook's Voyage around the World*, *Don Quixote*, *Sinbad the Sailor*, and various books on marine disasters and sundry dangers at sea, many of which he annotated with his own observations and thoughts.

In one shipwreck book he made copious notes about the hardships and sufferings that might be experienced at sea. (Estensen, Miriam. 2005, p. 6) (Bowden, Keith Macrae 1952, p. 4) But despite all the potential horror, he was apparently still drawn to such a life. However, his musings written in the book showed he was aware of the distress a seafaring career would bring his widowed mother, and in his notes he vowed not to do so "while my dear mother lives". (Bowden, Keith Macrae 1952, p. 4) Ha ha.

Lincolnshire produced its great share of Pacific and other explorers over the years, perhaps the most well known being Joseph Banks, who continued to champion the exploration and indeed colonisation of New South Wales. And Matthew Flinders kinsman, John Franklin, would undertake expeditions in the Arctic, fight in naval battles and go on to become an accomplished Navy man, and later Governor of Tasmania for several years. Afterwards he would lead another Arctic expedition, hoping to chart the North West passage, though he died in that unsuccessful attempt. And I did do an episode on Lady Franklin, Episode 37, which mentioned John's last voyage in its epilogue. As Bass approached adulthood the pull of opportunities for exploration and discovery became very strong.

In an effort to provide her son with a safer career option at home, his mother had apprenticed him to a local surgeon & apothecary when he was 16, where he would be exposed to and learn the medical profession, such as it was then. It was perhaps an interesting time to go in to medicine, on the cusp of so

much new knowledge, as the field of medicine was, in the Age of Enlightenment, to making some interesting and perhaps merciful leaps forward in the understanding of crucial areas of practice. It was a time of advances in physics, chemistry & biology, and in particular anatomy & pathology, all impacting on the understanding & implementation of treatments in the century to come.

In times past there was quite a divide between the Doctors, or the Physicians, and the Surgeons, or sometimes Barber/Surgeons. <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC1139479/pdf/medhist00076-0005.pdf> The professions divided along the lines sometimes described as wet and dry. Physicians did not care to deal with blood & guts in the main, but rather focussed on symptoms & diseases, and undertook their learning at the universities, to become Doctors. Operations and bloody, messy procedures were undertaken by the Barber/Surgeons, and their training was more akin to an apprenticeship, learning by assisting with procedures before undertaking the task themselves. (Estensen, Miriam. 2005, p. 8)

Sounds a little dodgy, but with hindsight, pretty much no one really knew what they were doing or why, and what harm their treatments & procedures were actually causing. Particularly with blood loss, infection and poisonings going on all over the shop. With little reliable pain relief it's no wonder that many suffering opted to forgo treatment of any kind! But then some conditions, like the kidney or bladder stone that 'ye olde Samuel Pepys' suffered from in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, became so painful that he would willingly endure an anaesthetic free operation that might withdraw the stone in minutes of agony, rather than endure the persistent, ongoing pain, and so he did! Anyway, better not head off down that rabbit hole! Back to Bass.

So Bass was apprenticed to Boston surgeon & apothecary Patrick Francis. By that time men like him were generally more well-rounded in their knowledge and qualifications. Francis certainly operated as more of a *general practitioner*, working as physician, obstetrician and surgeon for his community, as well as mixing and selling the medicines his clients required, (Bowden, Keith Macrae 1952, p. 6) and this broad practice suited Bass pretty well.

Bass worked under Francis for two years, learning all he could, and his interest was particularly drawn to the surgery, and so he decided to undertake further training to achieve a surgical qualification, which was by then an available option. A diploma from the *Company of Surgeons in London* required him to study further in anatomy, surgery, physiology, chemistry and so on, and he needed to become a pupil at one of the London hospitals, to observe treatments there for a period before sitting an exam, set by the Company of Surgeons.

His apprenticeship with Francis had served him well, and his intelligence and studious approach saw him pass the exam in April of 1789, at only 18 years of age. This gave him the highest accreditation available and permitted him a licence to practice anywhere in England, and bestowed the prestigious moniker of surgical distinction, having "Mr" displayed before his name. (Bowden, Keith Macrae 1952, p. 9)

But rather than set up his own lucrative private practice, he wished then to use his qualification to advance his other longstanding desire, and though his dear mother did still live, he persuaded her to give her blessing, so he could take to the sea as surgeon in the British Navy. In June of 1789 he again took an exam, this time before the "Court of Examiners for sea-surgeons", which he passed with flying colours, and was given the highest ranking for a "Surgeons Mate" on a 'First Rate Vessel'. Positions though were limited to those ships that *required* a surgeon's mate, rather than just by class or rating, so he would need to work on any class ship that needed him, in the short term.

His navel career began on *HMS Flirt*, where he served from June to November. He then moved to *HMS Gorgon* from November till July the following year. The Gorgon was to sail for Botany Bay, which pleased Bass greatly, but in the end, various delays with the ship preparations saw another vessel undertake that voyage. (Bowden, Keith Macrae 1952, pp. 10–13) Bass used his time, while patrolling the English coasts

instead, to study additional sailing skills and prepare for promotion. In the following few years Bass served on a number of ships.

When he joined the Navy at 18 he was described as 6 foot tall, dark complexioned, handsome, physically strong and possessing a 'fine' sense of humour. Indeed it was recorded "his very appearance bespoke commanding energy". (Bowden, Keith Macrae 1952, p. 13) He was said to be strong minded, and he loathed inactivity. Indeed a stimulating career working in a risky environment was his dream job, if only he could get away from the English Channel into far flung environs!

He would spend any spare time studying either medical tracts or learning the skills most useful to sailing, navigation and seamanship. Everything from learning a myriad of knots and splicing rope, to understanding tides and water movement, and he was reported to have become most adept at handling the small boats too. (Bowden, Keith Macrae 1952, p. 20) Certainly he was well-liked by those recording his life!

He came to the attention of Hunter on the voyage out to NSW, who was greatly impressed by his "well-informed mind", and that impression would bode well for him, in being able to pursue his desire for exploration once in NSW. Bastian described him physically, as an adult, as "a tall, dark and handsome man ... [with] a certain haughtiness in his bearing, and his preference for wearing his hair powdered made him look older [than his 25 years]". (Bastian, Josephine 2016, p. 6)

As well as caring for sick & injured crewmen, a ship's surgeon was also responsible for the general health & hygiene of the ship. He might instigate beneficial cleaning, eating, and exercise regimes. The larger war ships might carry up to 800 men, and hygiene aboard was a constant and very necessary challenge, to stave off dysentery and other illnesses! Accidents were common, as well as injury from fighting or punishment. The common practice of flogging as a disciplinary measure could tear the flesh from a sailor's back, sometimes doing enough damage to expose the spine or rib bones, and healing from such extreme injury was difficult. A ship's surgeon would have to manage the consequences of outbreaks of lice, through to treating a crew riddled with venereal disease, all with the rather limited medical kit they had in the day. (Bowden, Keith Macrae 1952, p. 14) I think the men who had the conscientious and skilled Bass aboard as their Ship's Surgeon, may have been luckier than most in the Navy.

Just as the French declared war again on Britain, Bass sailed to Newfoundland, the British wanting to protect their valuable fisheries there, and he was away for 6 months. Soon after his return he learned that *HMS Supply & Reliance* were to embark on a journey to Terra Australis on the far side of the globe, to the colony of NSW, and recognising a renewed opportunity to visit the antipodes, he successfully lobbied for a position on the *Reliance*. (Bowden, Keith Macrae 1952, p. 23) He was beyond delighted! What a great opportunity!

Indeed in a letter Bass wrote to Joseph Banks a number of years later, he explained his desire to join the *Reliance* for its potential, and that once he arrived in NSW it was his intention to "explore *more of the country than any of my predecessors in the colony and to procure new or rare specimens of subjects in natural history.*" (Bowden, Keith Macrae 1952, p. 23) (Bastian, Josephine 2016, pp. 6–7) It was the *Reliance* that would finally allow him to fulfil his desire and take him to New South Wales. (Bowden, Keith Macrae 1952, p. 19)

*Supply & Reliance* were to take supplies and livestock to the still struggling outpost at Port Jackson. Bass was given permission to recruit and bring with him, a personal servant to assist in his work, particularly as there was not going to be spare labour available to him in the new colony. Bass recruited a London boy named William Martin. In Naval language Martin would be termed Bass's "loblolly-boy". Now, you know how I enjoy learning a new word in an episode, but really – naval terminology is just too weird isn't it? Loblolly-boy is completely unfathomable, surely, maybe even a bit dodgy? But as my new word for the episode I did look it up, and I am assured 'Loblolly-boy' is the informal name given to the assistant to a ship's

surgeon in that era. The name derives from the porridge traditionally served to sick or injured crew members. (Wikipedia: LoblollyBoy 2023) Actually the term is somehow related to the act or implement used to bang on the porridge pot and stir the porridge? No less weird? Actually, in another contender for weird words, I had understood that such an implement was named by the Scots and was labelled a 'spurtle'! Not sure what's wrong with calling stuff a spoon, but there you go. Isn't language wonderful?

Anyway, loblolly-boy Martin would attend Bass during the voyage, as his general dog's body, and assisting in the medical work he undertook. Martin remained in his employment over the next five years, proving to be a most resourceful & valuable companion, and perhaps should get equal billing for some of Bass & Flinders' explorations & discoveries too, seeing as he was an active crewman for many of Bass' outings?

Bass also took the opportunity, to make known to the soon to be NSW Governor Hunter, his great desire to explore the colony once they arrived. He was reminded that boats free & available for such duty would be rare, and in high demand in Port Jackson. Wisely, Bass had got permission to bring a small boat along with him too. And he would find the little vessel a very helpful item to help facilitate his exploration plans.

Matthew Flinders had a similar trajectory to Bass, in making *his* way onto the *Reliance*. Like Bass, his great aspiration was to undertake, hopefully, the most exciting of adventures, fulfilling his desire to explore, map & record new lands.

Flinders had been born in March of 1774, at Donnington, only 8 miles from Bass' village, and only 3 years later. (Bowden, Keith Macrae 1952, p. 5) Donnington also had it's ties to the sea, manufacturing rope for the British Navy. (Estensen, Miriam. 2002, p. 2)

The oldest of 5 surviving children, Matthew was a responsible and caring brother to his siblings, their mother dying when Matthew was only nine. (Bastian, Josephine 2016, p. 7) As a youngster he was enrolled in the local Free School, also learning Latin, and evidently proving to be a good student. At 12 he was sent off to board at a Grammar School in a nearby village, and though no records appear to survive, the writings of his father noted that he performed very well, being "first boy except one". (Estensen, Miriam. 2002, p. 4)

Being a well-respected family they had an active social life and Flinders would maintain fond communications with many family & friends, begging them to keep up return correspondence once he joined the Navy so he would not become lonely, well into the future. One of the many he wrote to was Anne Chappelle, a friend of his cousins, and a fondness was developing between them even as his new career would take him away for long stretches. (Bastian, Josephine 2016, p. 7)

His father, like his grandfather before, was the local Doctor in Donnington, running the town surgery & apothecary. Flinders' father expected that *he* would likewise follow in *his* footsteps. In a less formal arrangement than Bass', Flinders did work with his father after turning 14, but again, like Bass, his real interest lay elsewhere. Britain's off and on again wars with France would have been an exciting draw for a young boy, and there would have been plenty of sensational stories from cousins and acquaintances who had been involved, particularly those serving in the Navy.

But of even greater interest to Flinders, again as they had been for Bass, were the stories of Captain Cook's voyages; a thrill to Flinders. But he later wrote that what really "induced [him] to go to sea against the wishes of his friends [was] reading Robinson Crusoe." (Estensen, Miriam. 2002, p. 5) And so, again like Bass, Flinders undertook his own study in trigonometry, geometry & navigation so he might become a valuable recruit.

His father though continued to coerce him into medicine, arranging a position for him with Lincoln surgeon & apothecary named Joseph Bell. But he stayed only 2 weeks there, before returning home, his father finally relenting, and Flinders signed up as a 16 year old midshipmen in the Navy. The prospect of

both his career decision, and his physical departure, was a grief for his father, but it was clear he was quite set on it, and the family just had to adjust.

It seems his first ship was the *Scipio*, operating around the coast, and then afterwards the *Bellerophon*. A Midshipman, or Master's Mate, is an Officer in the Navy, but is the lowest rank. Wiki notes Midshipmen were expected to work on the ship, while learning navigation and seamanship. They were expected to rig sails, keep watch, relay messages between decks, supervise gun batteries, command small boats, and take command of a sub-division of the ship's company, under the supervision of one of the lieutenants. On smaller ships, midshipmen were instructed by a senior master's mate, who taught them mathematics, navigation, and sailing lore. Flinders would be keen to advance, onwards to lieutenant, and so enthusiastically absorbed the knowledge and skills that would be attractive to the Navy, and help him in his explorations.

To Flinders delight, a great opportunity arose that would give him his first extended sailing & exploring opportunity. The Admiralty was readying to send Captain Bligh back to Tahiti, on the *Providence*, to collect the breadfruit he'd failed to bring home on his first disastrous voyage. For more background on Bligh and that first voyage on the *Bounty*, I did include some information in the Bligh & Rum Rebellion episodes numbers 52 -55. A trip to & sojourn on Tahiti, in the Pacific, could hardly have come closer to the Robinson Crusoe induced fantasy Flinders had entertained from boyhood, and he applied to join the *Providence* crew at the earliest. (Estensen, Miriam. 2002, p. 10)

His colleague wrote, on hearing of his impending voyage, "I am pleased to hear you are so well satisfied with your situation on board the *Providence*. I have little doubt of your gaining the good opinion of Capt. Bligh if you are equally attentive to your duty there as you were in the *Bellerophon*." (Estensen, Miriam. 2002, p. 11) As they set off, Flinders would soon have the chance to test all his skills in the untamed environment of the open oceans.

At the end of his teens, as a midshipman, he was already displaying a strong sense of duty and honour in his role, but he was still looking to how he could also achieve his personal goals of exploration while in service. At 5 foot seven inches in height, slim & wiry, Estensen in her biography of Matthew Flinders, described reports of him having 'an alertness about him, and possessing deep springs of energy'. (Estensen, Miriam. 2002, p. 29) His countenance, dedication and enthusiasm to his goals certainly seemed to parallel Bass'. So we can see the similarities in personality or at least interests, well before they met.

He seems to have done well under Bligh, at least in the early days. He got his first view of Australia in February 1792, when the *Providence* stopped at Adventure Bay on the east coast of Bruny Island, Tasmania, where they collected water, wood and rested, before making their way onwards, into the Pacific.

Estensen writes that as they approached Tahiti, the crew readied themselves by doing some drills & target practice, but also in cleaning themselves up in preparation for socialising with the Tahitians. Their hammocks & clothes were repaired and cleaned, their bodies too one hopes, but most importantly, the surgeon checked all the men for signs of venereal disease, as Bligh did not want to be responsible for bringing an outbreak onshore. But of course it was already rife on the island from all the previous contact with outsiders. When they departed, many of the crew had subsequently *acquired* errmm.. 'warm tokens of their affection', as one wag from a separate visit apparently called it. (Estensen, Miriam. 2002, p. 17) One source suggested Flinders himself may have lost his virginity there, but gained a troublesome STD instead, the record showing him being treated on two occasions, with the marginally effective Mercury, that was the usual treatment at that time. (Estensen, Miriam. 2002, p. 19)

So while there didn't seem to be too many prohibitions about 'fraternising' while on shore, Flinders did record a number of other rules Bligh insisted on, including regulating any trading that occurred, that the islanders were to be treated well and shown no violence, and so on. (Estensen, Miriam. 2002, p. 17) Relations remained cordial for most of their stay, wearing thin only as the final weeks approached, and this

is not surprising, as the striking and preparing of cuttings took 3 long months, and may have meant Bligh's crew were becoming a burden on the community. What's the rule about house guests staying only three days for a harmonious experience?

Their return journey was a little less pleasant, with much space & water being used for the precious plants, and Bligh, his health having deteriorated somewhat, becoming more prickly. By the *end* of the voyage Flinders was convinced that Bligh had taken a serious dislike to him. Still, there was a history of changeable impressions of Bligh and his behaviour, and feeling unloved was not really an unusual experience amongst those who sailed with Bligh. Just ask Fletcher Christian.

It's interesting that Flinders felt like that though, as after they had returned, and he was applying for promotion, he produced a very favourable reference written by Bligh, which described Flinders as "[diligent, sober and obedient to command]" and noting he possessed all the necessary skills required by an officer. (Estensen, Miriam. 2002, p. 24) Well, like him or not, Bligh doesn't appear to wish Flinders any impediment to career advancement anyway. Maybe Flinders was a sensitive chap, just offended by the rough old Captain's behaviour. He wouldn't be the first.

On the whole Flinders had enjoyed the Tahitian service immensely, and he was even more hopeful of continuing opportunities to explore and get involved in natural history expeditions.

On the voyage home they had been able to chart the islands they visited, and returned west via the Torres Strait, which Bligh had navigated a few years earlier in his open boat, after the Bounty mutiny. It had the potential to be quite the dangerous route, but they travelled carefully and charted as they went, and made it safely to the western end. During that section they had some contact with indigenous people from the areas they sailed through, some aggressive and other encounters more inquisitive and friendly.

And they finally made it back to England in once piece, and with order and the Naval command structure intact, in August of 1793. The crewmen arrived just in time to visit their families briefly, then join the newly declared war with France. I'll bet their memories of Tahiti were all the more sweet.

By October Flinders was once again serving on the *Bellerophon*, where he was involved in a fierce & famous naval battle with the French, and lived triumphant, to tell the tale. By December Flinders had heard of the impending supply mission to New South Wales. With great luck, he *was* appointed to the *Reliance* as a senior Master's Mate, on a ship captained by the respected and well liked Hunter. It was a mission that might keep him away for 4 or 5 years, and much to his father's disappointment, he took his youngest brother Samuel on-board with him, leaving England in February, 1795.

Training under his Captain he would improve his skills in hydrography, using the sextant & timekeeper to calculate various locations, along with practicing other observations required of a navigator. (Estensen, Miriam. 2002, p. 42) When *Reliance's* second Lieutenant became ill, and had to leave the ship at Rio de Janeiro, Flinders had the great fortune to be temporarily promoted to Acting Second Lieutenant, though there were other men more senior to him. The position came with the privilege of his own small cabin and he was able to spend his spare time with the more senior Officers, so quite the step up, if only temporary. (Bastian, Josephine 2016, p. 9) Once again, like Bass, he had come to the attention of Hunter and was clearly being favoured.

And of course now Flinders was on the same ship as Bass, and in time, as Flinders' medical issues brought him under Bass' care, they would have an opportunity to get to know one another, despite their differences in rank on the ship. Flinders was to later record "In Mr George Bass, surgeon of the *Reliance*, I had the happiness to find a man whose ardour for discovery was not to be repressed by any obstacles, nor deterred by any danger; and with this friend a determination was formed of completing the examination of the east coast of New South Wales, by all such opportunities as the duty of the ships, and procurable means, could admit." (Estensen, Miriam. 2002, pp. 46-7) They had the same objective, the same attitude, and

considering their options and possible opportunities once they reached New South Wales, would have spent much time discussing their hopeful plans, no doubt.

One other exceptionally interesting person sailing on the *Reliance* with Bass & Flinders was Bennelong, finally making his way back to NSW after his extended period visiting England. Port Jackson Indigenous man Bennelong was finally returning home.

Woollarawarre Bennelong, was born into the Wangal clan on the south bank of the Parramatta River, around the mid 1760s. (Biography - Bennelong - People Australia) He and the other Eora Nations peoples of the Port Jackson area, had been immediately disturbed by the arrival of the British with their convicts in 1788, but he later became a very important conduit of communication between the two cultures.

Governor Phillip had instructions to form friendly relations with the indigenous populations there, but the Eora people had been largely ignoring and avoiding the white men whenever they could. So they had decided to forcefully hold an indigenous man, Arabanoo, in the hope of learning something of their language and culture. But Arabanoo was not at all cooperative, and he escaped at the earliest opportunity.

In November of 1789 it was Bennelong, and his clansman Colebee, who were forcefully abducted and brought to the settlement at Sydney Cove. William Bradley, who painted a watercolour of the scene, which I will put on the Australian Histories Podcast website, described their capture as the "most unpleasant service" he was ever ordered to undertake. (Wikipedia: Bennelong 2024) (Smith, Keith V. 2020) Well perhaps he wasn't in service long then. Sadly there were worse actions undertaken in the future. But back to Bennelong.

Both men were clearly outraged, but Bennelong did show some interest in learning what he could, of the men holding him. Colebee escaped soon afterwards, but Bennelong stayed in the settlement for several months, before returning to his people.

Bennelong's biographical entry by Eleanor Dark described him as "an initiated man, about 170 centimetres (five feet six inches) tall, who had survived smallpox. Captain Watkin Tench said he was about 26 years old, 'of good stature, and stoutly made, with a bold intrepid countenance, which bespoke defiance and revenge ... He acquired knowledge both of our manners and language, faster than his predecessor [Arabanoo] had done.' " (Dark, Eleanor. 1966) He became an important mediator, informant and cultural broker, between the British, and his people."

Within 10 weeks Phillip had finally learned the names and locations of the local people, and the principal Sydney 'tribes' or clans, such as "The south side of the harbor, from Sydney Cove to Rose Hill, [...] the natives call Parramatta, the District is called Wann, & the Tribe Wangal". It was recorded that "Bennelong 'lives with the Governor, & is a very intelligent Man, much information can be got from him when he can be better understood', and Watkin Tench wrote that "Bennelong called Phillip affectionately 'Been-èn-a' (father), while Phillip called him 'Doorow' (son)". (Dark, Eleanor. 1966) But after a couple more weeks Bennelong did make his way back to his own people, much to the disappointment of Phillip no doubt.

There are many slightly differing stories about the next incident, but it seem that several months later, Bennelong was amongst a large gathering of clans who had come together to feast on a whale that had beached at Manly Cove. Bennelong sent some blubber to Phillip at South Head, inviting him to join them. Phillip was very keen to re-establish relations with the Eora there, and Bennelong in particular, and so he made his way there to meet him. (Smith, Keith Vincent 2019) (Smith, Keith V. 2020)

Smith's retelling of what happened there stated "After shaking hands and talking with Bennelong, Phillip saw him place a long timber spear 'barbed and pointed with hardwood' on the ground. As Phillip was about to leave, a sturdy older man snatched the same spear from the ground and hurled it, striking Phillip's right shoulder and protruding through his back. In pain, Philip shouted to his aide Henry Waterhouse 'For God's sake haul out the spear'. Waterhouse broke the shaft and Phillip reached the boat and was rowed to



Sydney Cove, where Surgeon William Balmain extracted the point.” (Smith, Keith Vincent 2019) But to his great credit Phillip did not order any retribution, and no further violence took place in relation to the spearing. They were all able to retreat with no further aggression.

Some sources suggest Bennelong had arranged this, allowing the deliberately inflicted non-fatal injury to serve as payback, for his & Colebee’s kidnapping, thus, in the protocols of his people, it allowed an avenue for future communications & meetings. (Smith, Keith Vincent 2019) (Wikipedia: Bennelong 2024)

Others seem to think it was a genuine misunderstanding, and that Bennelong’s friend had rather overreacted. Certainly Bennelong *may* have prearranged it, and given his friend the signal to act, but he certainly seemed very concerned that Phillip had been injured and was attentive to his recovery, visiting him often afterwards at Government House. (Dark, Eleanor. 1966) (Heiss, Anita. 2013) It is felt that what ever the motive, the intention was never to kill Phillip, as at such close quarters any warrior could have ensured a fatal blow if desired, so more likely this was deliberately inflicted to punish him. Physical punishment of a similar kind was a common part of Eora lore & justice.

The outcome was that Bennelong’s relationship with Phillip was renewed, this time entirely by choice. (Bennelong 2024) (George Bass – Eora•People 2020) Bennelong in the end had quite a friendly and productive relationship with Phillip, on his own terms, and was greatly interested in learning more about these Europeans who had come into his country. Dark suggested “Bennelong took readily to life among the white men, relished their food, acquired a taste for liquor, learned to speak English and became particularly attached to the governor, in whose house he lodged.” (Dark, Eleanor [no date]) Phillip gave Bennelong a much admired red jacket, knives, metal hatchets, and a tin shield, and later Bennelong asked the governor to build him his own brick hut. It would be 12 feet (3.5 metres) square, with a tiled roof, built at Tubowgulle, now Bennelong Point, where the Sydney Opera House stands today. (Heiss, Anita) (Smith, Keith Vincent 2019)

He served the colonisers by teaching them about Aboriginal customs and language, and this was intended to mediate relations between the two groups, hopefully to reduce conflict and damage. He maintained good relations with the colony, and became particularly close to Phillip, as I mention earlier. But there always remained a level of ambivalence about the white settlement, and his arrangements were not always approved of by his clansmen and the wider Eora community. (Heiss, Anita) (Smith, Keith Vincent 2019)

However, his interest in the world of the whites was obvious. A brave and intrepid man Bennelong, and another Aboriginal man, named Yemmerrawanne, chose to sail with the departing Governor Phillip, *‘voluntarily and cheerfully’, as one observer recorded ‘not withstanding ‘the united distress of their wives and the dismal lamentations of their friends, to accompany [Phillip] to England, a place they knew was a great distance from them’,* in December of 1792. (Smith, Keith Vincent 2019)

What a huge and potentially terrifying experience for these two men, totally unaccustomed to the European sailing ships, the vast ocean and the cramped conditions, and the weird food they would endure on-board. Bennelong’s experiences deserve an episode of it’s own really! It was May 1793 before they made landfall in England.

They were the first Australian Aboriginals to visit England, and of course were at first a huge curiosity there. One article stated “two sooty natives of New South Wales, brought over by Governor Phillips’ [sic] caused a stir when they visited the Houses of Parliament at Westminster.” It was also said they were outfitted for a meeting with King George III, and these events would have held some interest, for Bennelong at least, but as time wore on, interest in the men ebbed and amusing opportunities would have lessened, and of course they were experiencing more homesickness and culture displacement as time went on.

Both were badly affected by the English weather and the illness they were being exposed to. Yemmerrawanne succumbed to a lung ailment, dying on 18<sup>th</sup> of May 1794, aged only 19. He was buried

there in St John's churchyard, Eltham, where a granite headstone was erected for him. (Smith, Keith Vincent 2019).

When repatriation of his remains was considered in more recent times, it was learned that the headstone was no longer located anywhere near where he may have been buried, and after an investigation, multiple disturbances of the grave yard over the years meant that ever locating and identifying his remains seems unlikely. (Smith, Keith Vincent 2015)

It was observed at the time that Yemmerrawanne's death severely impacted on Bennelong's mental and even physical health, and it was soon realised that they needed to get him back home at the earliest if he was to survive. Fortunately the *Reliance & Supply* were expected to be making such a trip to NSW before too long, though the usual delays meant they finally departed many months later than hoped, the following year.

Smith wrote that "in January 1795, after six months of confinement on the ship, Captain John Hunter noted Bennelong's 'precarious state of health' and 'broken spirit'. He wrote "the cold weather had frequently laid him up and there was apprehension about the state of his lungs. I am doubtful of his living." (Bowden, Keith Macrae 1952, p. 28)

Bass took a great interest in Bennelong's health, working hard to ensure his recovery, and used their time together to learn some of his language and culture, (Smith, Keith Vincent 2019) which of course might be helpful when Bass would later encounter people of the Eora Nation while exploring NSW. Perhaps Bass' attention and friendship, and interest in his culture & language revived Bennelong's spirits as much as any medicine? Either way he seems to have been in pretty good shape by the time they all reached Sydney in September.

There seemed no further record of his association with Bass after their arrival, but Dark wrote of Bennelong's future; "He reached Sydney in September, and thereafter references to him are scanty, though it is clear that he could no longer find contentment or full acceptance either among his countrymen or the white men. Two years later he had become 'so fond of drinking that he lost no opportunity of being intoxicated, and in that state was so savage and violent as to be capable of any mischief'. In 1798 he was twice dangerously wounded in tribal battles. A censorious paragraph in the Sydney Gazette records his death at Kissing Point on 3 January 1813. At the time of his capture, his age was estimated at 25, and he was described as being 'of good stature, stoutly made', with a 'bold, intrepid countenance'. His appetite was such that 'the ration of a week was insufficient to have kept him for a day', and 'love and war seemed his favourite pursuits'. Contemporary accounts reveal him as courageous, intelligent, vain, quick-tempered, 'tender with children' and something of a comedian." (Dark, Eleanor. 1966) But there was to be no happy ending for Bennelong.

So despite a bit of a rough sea on the way out, both Bass & Flinders had managed to spend their time aboard in a very constructive manner, and reached Port Jackson with a great many ambitions to look forward to. Their relationship with the new Governor was happy and plenty of opportunity lay ahead. They passed through the Sydney Heads on the 7th of September 1795 and anchored in the Sydney Cove Harbour later that evening. (Estensen, Miriam 2002, p. 47) No doubt Bass & Flinders would have been beside themselves with excitement about all that may lay ahead.

So that's how Bass & Flinders made their way to New South Wales. Next episode we'll talk about how they got on in the colony.

## Podcast Recommendation

Today I'm going to recommend ABC's Conversations podcast, with Richard Fidler and Sarah Kanowski. <https://www.abc.net.au/listen/programs/conversations>

They describe their show as 'spending an hour in someone else's life'. Conversations draws you deeper into the life story of someone you may have heard about, but never met.

Have a look at their topics & guests, to see if anything takes your fancy. As always I'll provide a link on my web pages. <https://www.abc.net.au/listen/programs/conversations/episodes>

Thanks so much for listening. I'll continue working on Bass & Flinders after they arrive in NSW, and get the next pod out to you as soon as it's done.

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## MUSIC:

- Intro/Exit music modified from: 'Grand Canyon' by Löhstana, DAVID [CCFM Music]
- Sound snippet: <https://freesound.org/people/Supertyv2/sounds/166753/>
- Background: <https://freesound.org/people/Supertyv2/sounds/166753/>

## IMAGE DATA:

- Flinders birthplace pic: <https://blogs.nottingham.ac.uk/weatherextremes/2014/09/05/getting-into-the-archive-lincolnshire-and-matthew-flinders-diaries/>
- Bass memorial: <https://www.heritagelincnshire.org/event/hod-2024-george-bass-an-australian-adventure>
- Reliance & Sirius: <https://hmssirius.com.au/tag/hms-reliance-1795/>

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