

## Episode 71 Bass & Flinders Part 2.

Today we're going to continue on in our series looking at George Bass & Matthew Flinders and see how their plans to explore "more of the colony than anyone else" played out after they arrived in New South Wales.

In the previous episode, we heard how similar their early lives had been, how they came to meet one another and discover their mutual desire for exploration and the glory of acknowledged discovery, and we heard of the effort they both put in, to learning the appropriate skills and readying themselves for such opportunities. So today we'll see how they got on.

*And just a quick correction for the last episode:* I think when I was discussing Bennelong I mentioned Arabanoo, who had been the first victim of kidnap by the authorities, for the purposes of learning about the Eora people and the areas around Sydney, before Bennelong and Colbee. I think I said Arabanoo escaped some months after capture, but in fact, he died from contracting smallpox. The white community would have been a deadly petri dish of diseases for the aboriginal people, who would have had no immunity to the European diseases.

Lieutenant William Bradley described the months following Arabanoo's capture, saying that he "became 'quite familiarized & very happy; quite one of the governor's family, and had got some of our language, as well as communicat[ing] much of theirs'". But following a smallpox outbreak in May 1789, Arabanoo died, and it's believed he was buried in the governor's garden. (Museums of History NSW 2022)

So despite a bit of a rough sea on the voyage out, both Bass & Flinders had managed to spend their time aboard in a very constructive manner, and the men 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.

Flinders recorded "On arriving at Port Jackson in September ... it appeared that investigation of the coast had not been greatly extended beyond the three Harbours (Botany Bay, Broken Bay and Port Jackson) ; and even in these, some of the rivers were not altogether explored." (Bowden, Keith Macrae 1952, p. 32) "Jervis Bay ... had been entered ... Port Stephens had lately been examined ... But the intermediate portions of the coast, both to the north and south, were little further known than from Captain Cook's general chart". (Estensen, Miriam. 2002, p. 52)

I guess they'd had the small matter of keeping themselves from starving in most of the intervening years, so with the focus elsewhere, the maps still looked tantalisingly blank. No doubt Bass & Flinders would have been beside themselves with excitement, to be able to fill in the detail Cook was unable to see. All that may lay ahead for them, and hopefully they would be raised up as navigators to the ranks of the Cooks of this world, with the information they would supply to the British.

At the time they arrived, the original colonial settlement which began at Sydney Cove, had grown to a population in excess of 3000 people. Most were convicts, and the officials policing and governing them, and *their* families, but there were some free settlers, ex-military personal and ex-convicts, making a place for themselves and their growing businesses, in New South Wales. And there would have been a good number of children born locally since the First Fleet arrived too, though sadly, the actual Muster records undertaken by Hunter after his arrival, appear not to have survived, so we don't have exact numbers. (Museums of History NSW) But provisions, including food supplies, were still limited and the colony remained in somewhat of a precarious state.

The initial settlement had expanded to include Parramatta and the Hawkesbury, and Hunter would need to wrestle management of the colony back from the senior officers of the Rum Corp, as they were colloquially known, who had been acting as the governmental authority since Phillip's departure.

Grose, Paterson, Macarthur and the other senior members of the New South Wales Corp, had governed in a way that was very advantageous to themselves, and again, if you want to hear more about that aspect of the early colony, we looked at the worst of it in the Bligh series, Eps 52-55. But suffice to say, Hunter would have his work cut out for him trying to regain control, and implement any policies that the "Rum Corp", felt might negatively impact on their cosy & lucrative arrangements. And they were soldiers – they did not care to be controlled by 'Navy' men, such as Captain Arthur Phillip and Captain John Hunter, so good luck with that.....

As we mentioned last Episode, Flinders had already managed a glimpse of some the flora & fauna of the antipodes, having seen Van Diemens Land earlier, on his passage through to Tahiti with Bligh. But for Bass, this had been his first foray into the Southern hemisphere, and so their arrival gave him *his* first look at the unfamiliar land down under. For Bass we do not have the equivalent wealth of well structured information that Flinders journals have given us, but we can imagine that Bass was exceedingly excited to finally have arrived in New Holland, given his much anticipated, long wait for the opportunity.

Their Captain on the *Reliance*, and the newly minted Governor of New South Wales, Cptn John Hunter, had previously been in NSW with the First Fleet, and had already published his impressions in a popular book titled '*An Historical Journal of the Transactions at Port Jackson and Norfolk Island*', in 1793. (Hunter, John. 1793) The book contained maps, descriptions and illustrations of the plants & animals he encountered, and proved that Hunter was quite the man of the enlightenment in relation to his interests in zoological and botanical sciences.

Bass would have been confident that Hunter would approve of his desire to expand knowledge of the still largely unexplored, *well, by the white men at least*, land & coasts of New Holland, but the practicalities of managing the still insecure settlement, would not allow for a devoted focus on exploration. Still, surely Bass would not have been disappointed at his arrival, no matter what impression the primitive settlement at Sydney Cove made on him.

His medical training would have been valuable to the authorities, as the burden of illness was beyond the capacity of the existing hospital, such as it was, to cope. There was only one Doctor in Sydney and an assistant Surgeon. Norfolk Island had a Surgeon, and there was one working in Parramatta. Most people had to care for themselves and each other, without qualified medical care.

Sydney's Doctor, William Balmain, was certainly overwhelmed. Malnutrition, dysentery and even scurvy was still being experienced by many, and they were expected to treat those injured by punishment and accidents too. Bowden suggests the conditions experienced by those ailing in Sydney, on land, would have been experiencing similar ailments to those one might expect see on board a crowded and ill provisioned ship, making a lengthy sea journey. Except perhaps exacerbated by the increased violence and illnesses resulting from often excessive levels of alcohol consumption. Consumption stimulated by the policies of the Rum Corp.

And continuing convict ships regularly unloaded even more sorry souls needing to recuperate from the long sea passage. It would be difficult to make headway. In October, Balmain asked the Governor that any Naval medical officers that could be temporarily spared from their duties, might be sent on shore to help in the hospital, and Bass did assist Balmain for a time.

It had been a rough couple of years at the penal settlement. Thomas Arndell, the surgeon and the magistrate of Parramatta, wrote of the colony being in a pretty bad way, recording that after Governor Phillip left, and Major Grose took control, "the wise and useful regulations [Phillip] had so successfully adopted for the security and conservation of good order, and public peace, were in a moment almost

immediately annihilated, and a torrent of licentiousness bore down everything sacred and civil before it. Habitual drunkenness became the fashion of the times; the consequence was that crimes of every sort increased to an alarming degree; rapes and murders were not infrequent.” (Bowden, Keith Macrae 1952, p. 30) So it seems, with the Rum Corp in control, the rum itself even used as currency at the time, things could get pretty wild. But one assumes, those of a certain class were mostly able to avoid the unpleasantness.

Of course as a religious man living through such an uncertain and unstable period, he was bound to be shocked by it all, and he appears to be no fan of the Rum Corp. Estensen though, steadies his concerns by noting that the records for the time paint a picture that’s not *quite so bad*. Theft and not violent crime made up the majority of the offences, and one third of all cases were acquitted. Despite the rum, Estensen claims there was “solid social and economic progress, of agrarian and mercantile activity”, so not quite as dysfunctional as Arndell implied perhaps. (Estensen, Miriam. 2005, p. 42) But it would not have been a cosy & secure place to live on the whole.... Still, Flinders & Bass would probably have found the potential opportunities would outweigh most discomforts they might encounter.

Estensen’s biography of Flinders suggests that he did not seem in any way concerned, or even greatly surprised by the social state of the colony. She suggests he would not have regarded the level of crime and squalor as exceptional, having seen the state of the poorer port areas and districts in England. And reflecting on the social structure and tensions amongst the NSW Corp and the newly arrived Governor, was not something he appears to have got involved with. What was important, was that he maintain good relationships with those who would be able to authorise and facilitate the exploration he and Bass so greatly desired. The men remained focussed on their ambitions – the blanks on the early maps which were calling out for them to fill in.

Just seven weeks after their arrival, they took a few days leave and embarked on their first attempt at exploration. Keen to discover if a river noted by kangaroo hunters was in fact the upper reaches of the Georges River, and to investigate how far up it may be navigable, Bass & Flinders determined to make their way to the river mouth in Botany Bay, and chart upstream, as far inland as they could.

As mentioned in the previous episode, Hunter, while interested in the task itself, had no seaworthy vessels he could spare, and so was happy to help with provisions when Bass & Flinders chose to use the little row boat Bass had brought out with him, for the task. Called *Tom Thumb*, 9 or 10 feet long, with an ‘8ft keel & five feet beam’, it was described as ‘small, but perfectly formed’!

Taking a small rowing boat into the Pacific swells outside the Sydney Heads would be asking for trouble, but the men were undeterred, and they probably fitted the little boat with some kind of primitive lug sail, which they tested inside the Harbour. Filled with confidence they then loaded the *Tom Thumb* with the provisions required for the survey, and taking Loblolly boy Martin with them, they set off on October 26<sup>th</sup> 1795.

Hugging the coast and making their way into Botany Bay, Flinders noted “we were fortunate enough to get in to Botany Bay, a difficult entrance to find”, and they made for the delta of Georges River and navigated up it’s winding course more than 20 miles beyond any previously navigated point, (Flinders, Matthew. 2012, p. 4) continuing on foot when the *Tom Thumb* could travel no further upstream.

Governor Hunter had himself done the charting of Botany Bay, and the lower reaches of the George River in 1788, on his previous tour of duty so his interest in their efforts would have been high. The men explored the surrounding riverbanks and environments, making notes on the terrain, noting the good soils and vegetation, and made sketch maps to accompany their reports. (Flinders, Matthew. 2012, p. 4)

Being men of their time, they also kept an eye out for interesting and new specimens that would be of interest to the natural science fans of the day. Flushed with success, they arrived back in Sydney nine days after departure, with the information they had gathered of great significance to Hunter. Their

favourable reports led afterwards to Hunter opening the area to new settlement, and Banks Town would grow on the east banks of the Georges River within a couple of years.

Hunter would give both men blocks of 100 acres of land in the newly gazetted Banks Town in 1798, but it appears young William Martin missed out on such a bonanza. A bit tough seeing as he would surely have done his fair share in facilitating the 'discoveries' too. Doesn't pay to be young and poor does it! Bass never took up his land at Bankstown and it later reverted to the crown. Flinders apparently claimed his, and afterwards sold the property title to a friend in England.

More important than the advantage their reports facilitated, for Flinders and Bass, it was the boost it gave the Governor in confidence of their abilities, that was most rewarding to them. Perhaps this achievement would help promote better opportunities for exploration? There was urgent work waiting for them at the settlement on their return. Flinders immediately resumed his work on the *Reliance*, unloading remaining provisions and effecting repairs and the like.

In November though, Bass soon afterwards was lucky enough to accompany the Governor and a party, including the colony's chief game keeper, Henry Hacking, on an expedition inland to search for missing cattle. Stock brought out with the First Fleet were few and extremely valuable, but in the early days two bulls and five cows went missing; a great loss to the struggling settlement at the time. Soon after Hunter arrived in New South Wales he was advised that the aboriginal people on the Nepean River, further west, had seen horned cattle in the bush, and so an expedition to confirm their sightings was arranged.

They did indeed find the now quite wild cattle, in a fertile, open grazing area, afterwards named 'Cowpastures'. Macarthur would later establish his Camden property in the area. The herd of five had grown to about 60 in the 7 intervening years, and the Governor Hunter was delighted.

The sources note how hot it was for the travelling party at that time, and also that they witnessed a nearby bush fire. An Australian bushfire would have been quite an experience for those new to the country! Hunter decided to leave the cattle there to continue to increase, as a sort of insurance against famine, should the food supplies remain tentative in the colony. Indeed in the months following the settlement would lose a great deal of their hard worked for, expected grain and vegetable crops, to failure and flood.

Bass was greatly taken by the bucolic scenes they'd witnessed, despite the raging heat, and he returned to the area several times in the future, to collect natural history specimens and view the duck and black swans that abounded.

So Bass had managed a bit of an inland adventure, but in January of 1796 the *Reliance* would be sent on a voyage to Norfolk Island, and along with Midshipman Flinders, Bass would need to do his duty on board. Norfolk Island presented yet another exotic view, unseen by Bass & Flinders, so their curiosity would have been high, particularly because Cook had written about the Island in the books they had read as a youngsters. The Island rose out of the Pacific above tall cliffs, the uncultivated land covered in rainforest and the attractive Norfolk pines.

Norfolk Island operated as a supplementary penal settlement for the more difficult convicts, and as an alternative source of timber and agriculture for the colony. From an initial settlement in 1788, with a population of 22 arriving on the uninhabited island, by the time Bass & Flinders arrived in New South Wales, Norfolk Island had grown to accommodate about 887 men, women & children. Convicts were in the majority, and the officials and military personal and *their families*, along with a number of settlers whose terms had expired and a small number of free settlers as well. The *Reliance* was bringing much needed supplies and replacement staff to Norfolk Island.

While there Bass met Thomas Jamison, the Norfolk medical officer. Jamison by all accounts had been very conscientious and had managed to get disease under control on the island, and indeed under took the colonies first major public health measure, inoculating the children there against smallpox. But Jamison

had also branched out into a successful business in trade, particularly dealing in wheat, pork and sandalwood apparently, and his success inspired Bass to consider future business ventures. There were clearly opportunities in these colonies that might never present themselves to men such as George in England. Anyone of any class might get an economic foothold in places like this. Jamison, being relieved of his duties on Norfolk, travelled back to Sydney Cove on the *Reliance*, arriving early March, where he continued his business ventures.

When Cook had cruised by and charted much of the East coast in 1770, the vast distances and the lack of time, meant many interesting and attractive points of interest, including potential ports along the coast that might prove to be excellent harbours, with access to a rich and fertile inland, were simply passed by, with only minor notes made by Cook. Indeed, Cook & Banks had entered Botany Bay and reported in optimistic tones on the conditions they found there, but they completely missed exploring the next inlet, just to the north. High stone headlands there opened up into a vast harbour, an area of which would later become Port Jackson. It would prove to be a massive, highly useful and impressively beautiful, deep water port, and Sydney would later develop around it. It was quite the oversight really, considering how limited Botany Bay proved to be, but many such attractive discoveries were left unknown to the British, and so many other tantalising prospects remained for Bass & Flinders to explore, and for the colonial authorities to exploit. There was much to do and much to learn.

After returning from duty at Norfolk Island, Bass & Flinders' next expedition, later in March of 1796, was to scout & chart a potential harbour further south of Port Jackson, which had been noted, but not yet charted. The little *Tom Thumb* would not be suitable for the distance required on open water this time, but it seems likely they had the help of a shipbuilder Bass had befriended on their voyage out to NSW, to acquire a newly built, more hardy whaleboat. Paine later noted in his journal that the vessel was only 12 feet long, so not much bigger than the original *Tom Thumb*, but it was sturdy, and fitted with a mast and sail, and a large stone for an anchor.

Though they had taken some risks in the *Tom Thumb 1* on the early outing, this time they would come perilously close to losing the boat and all aboard, more than once on this upcoming journey. Sometimes known as *Tom Thumb 2*, this vessel was to take them past Botany Bay, further south along the coast, in the hope of identifying the mouth of a river that Henry Hacking (the government's game hunter) had seen inland.

They set off on the 24<sup>th</sup> of March. Estensen notes that amongst their supplies, they carried "food for ten days, two muskets with ammunition, two pocket compasses, a watch and a pair of scissors." (Estensen, Miriam. 2005, p. 50) No doubt there was bedding and cooking items, as well as water, and the usual additional provisions one might need for such an outing. Martin once again crewed as well.

Conditions on the open water were very difficult, but they following the charts and noted the landmarks recorded by Cook in the 1770s, and by the *Reliance* just the year before, to determine their position. The weather was hot and they soon found the water they had taken on board was contaminated and was pretty much undrinkable. Fortunately they had a number of watermelons aboard and they consumed one to keep hydrated. But after some time matching the landmarks to the existing charts, they realised that the ocean current had brought them much further south than they intended.

They found themselves about 20 miles past their intended destination, where they'd hoped to find the suspected inlet to another harbour, and they worked hard to try to get themselves back northward. But heavy seas made the going uncomfortable and dangerous. They had assumed they would make landfall each night and cook a meal on shore, but they were struggling to find anywhere they might safely make it to the beach. As they got closer to shore great breakers would stop them making landfall, and so they had to drop anchor outside of the breaking waves, and hunker down to a cramped night curled up in the bottom of the boat. So not ideal. Of that first day Flinders wrote "After making a miserable supper and drinking a

melon, we passed the night as well as three people may be supposed to do in so small a space as the bottom of the *Tom Thumb*". (Bastian, Josephine 2016, p. 14)

The following morning, with conditions still not allowing movement north, they travelled further south instead, looking for an opportunity to make it in to shore and take on some much needed water. Flinders recorded "being in want of water, and seeing a place ... where, though the boat could not land, a cask [of water] might be obtained by swimming [it to shore]" Bass jumped into the water with the cask to do just that, while Flinders stayed behind the breakers at anchor. (Flinders, Matthew. 2012, p. 7) Bass being able to swim through surf too rough for the boats, was quite an amazing feat in an era when most sailors could not swim at all. Estensen also noted that Martin could swim too, so again, this was impressive.

Anchored just outside the surf in calmer waters Flinders waited for Bass in *Tom Thumb 2*, but soon a large wave lifted the rock anchor and forced the small boat into the waves, where they very nearly capsized. The boat made it into shore upright, but it was almost full of water and everything on board had been drenched. Now on the beach, they laid all their belongings out on the sands to dry, while they bailed out the boat. When they deemed conditions calm enough to attempt exiting back through the waves, Martin & Flinders rowed like mad to get it out past the breakers, while Bass once again swam backwards and forwards to bring their remaining gear into the boat once the risk of capsizing was reduced.

They had lost a lot of their food, the weapons and other gear was still pretty wet and sandy, and poor old Bass, having been naked in the glaring Aussie sun for much of the day, was painfully sun burnt, which would blister severely over the coming days. The adventure must have begun looking a little less attractive by now surely.

By the afternoon they were in the vicinity of Islands, east of Port Kembla, (one of which Flinders named Martin Isles after Bass' loblolly boy William Martin). They were initially hopeful of being able to make landfall there for the night, but once again, heavy waves on all sides of the islands made a landing impossible, and they dropped anchor off the mainland and spent yet another uncomfortable night bobbing in the water on the boat.

In the morning they were woken by two indigenous men calling to them from the beach. Bastian was to describe this following encounter as "full of the ambiguity that characterised race relations in early Australia". (Bastian, Josephine 2016, p. 15) Flinders & Bass were wary, but rowed to shore and traded some handkerchiefs and potatoes for the fish and water the men offered.

Fortunately these men knew some of the language they had learned from Bennelong and the aboriginal people of the Sydney area, and some limited communication was achieved. But when a number of other aboriginal men arrived, they thought it best to depart, and made their way further south until they had found somewhere suitable to come ashore and prepare a meal.

They would of course now have been pretty constantly monitored by those local indigenous men, while they remained on their country, so it's not surprising that sometime later, the same two aboriginal men appeared again at their new camp site. Relations with these two men were once again friendly, and somehow their jovial communication led to Flinders getting out the scissors and cutting the hair & beards of the two men, before they once again packed up their gear, readying to travel.

The sequence and timing of the following, differs a little in different sources, but the gist remains the same. Flinders wrote "learning from the two Indians that no water could be procured [there] we accepted their offer of piloting us to a river which they said lay some miles further southward, and where not only fresh water was abundant, but also fish and wild ducks. These men were natives of Botany Bay, whence it was that we understood a little of their language, whilst that of some of the others was altogether unintelligible." (Flinders, Matthew. 2012, p. 5) So it seemed the two aboriginal men were also visitors to the area, but having already made the appropriate protocol gestures for coming onto the country of another clan, they were welcome on country and confident in proceeding.

With expert guidance across the bar at the river's entrance, they began rowing their way upstream. About a mile in the boat began dragging on the riverbed in places, and soon more aboriginal men from the local clan arrived. They surrounded the boat and helped drag it further, but by now Flinders & Bass were becoming a bit nervous about the swelling numbers of warriors. "We began to entertain doubts of securing retreat from these people, should they be hostilely inclined", worrying they could not make it down stream again in a hurry should they need to make a quick getaway.

When the numbers increased to twenty or so men, they decided they must stop and gather their water there, dry their gunpowder and clean the sand out of their guns, as well as dry the other provision, if they were to have any chance to escape should the situation turn ugly. So despite the aboriginal men urging them on to what they described as a large lagoon, with abundant bird & fish supplies, Bass & Flinders insisted on stopping where they were. While Bass spread the materials out to dry and gathered the water they would need for their return journey to Port Jackson, Flinders amused the newer arrivals by again cutting their hair and beards with the intriguing scissors.

They seemed unconcerned about the gunpowder and ammunition drying in the sun, along with the other damp items, but when Bass & Flinders began cleaning the guns, it caused great alarm and they had to stop to calm the situation. Instead, they asked the aboriginal men to assist in repairing a damaged oar. When their provisions were ready to repack, the aboriginal men again firmly insisted they continue on upstream. Bass & Flinders were becoming very suspicious of their motives. Bastian reminds us that at this time the "Aboriginal tribes south of Sydney, ..had a *reputation* of luring white men away by trickery, then killing and eating them," Or as Flinders wrote, "being exceedingly ferocious". (Bastian, Josephine 2016, p. 14)

But clearly the native men were not the only ones with a ferocious reputation. When Flinders & Bass began cleaning their muskets "it excited so much alarm that it was necessary to desist." (Flinders, Matthew. 2012, p. 5) While they understood little of what the local men were saying, they often heard the word "Soja", which meant soldier – these men were familiar with the marines and their guns and were wise enough to want to avoid confrontation of that kind. As true or false as the reputations of the south coast tribes may have been, it would no doubt have been at front of mind as the Europeans felt ever more outnumbered, especially knowing their generally unreliable muskets might be even less help, having recently been being dunked in seawater.

They were now quite desperate to retreat and extract themselves from the seemingly friendly but firm coercion, and so they told their companions they would return the boat closer to the beach for the night. They would need to be in position there to navigate the bar when the tide was high, in order to get back out to sea. So, it was not quite a firm *no* to the lagoon adventure then, but a withdrawal from their hospitality for the night.

The aboriginal men seemed frustrated, but did yield, letting them cast off, though four of them jumped into the small boat to accompany their new visitors back downstream. When they reached the point they indicated they would stop, the men got out, but they continued to hold on to the boat in the water. Bass & Flinders were now suspecting they would be detained against their will and worried about the intentions of the aboriginal men. Indeed Flinders notes they were pretty concerned that they were soon going to be attacked.

Now very anxious for their safety, they began to get angry and soon the men did finally let the boat go, allowing them to continue on downstream as quickly as they could. When they reached the beach the water was too rough to attempt getting the boat across the waves & out to sea, so they had to anchor only about 15 metres off shore on a calm stretch of water.

The warriors up and down the coasts would by now have been familiar with the lethal shot the soldiers had access to, and so there would be a wise calculation about whether any confrontation was worth it, and no doubt that word *Soja* was coming up in those discussions. When things had become really tense,

they considered it was only Bass' old red waistcoat, made from cloth of the same shade as the Marine's uniform, which may have stayed the expected attack. Flinders wrote, "We were perhaps considerably indebted, for the fear the natives entertained of us, to an old red jacket which Mr Bass wore, and from which they took us to be soldiers, of whom they were particularly afraid." (Bowden, Keith Macrae 1952, p. 40)

When the crowd once again appeared on the shore to call them back, Flinders fired a shot. A risky manoeuvre on a number of fronts. Had the shot failed they may have lost any advantage the red coat had so far provided them. But it did stop the men's approach, most giving up on them and wandering away towards the lagoon themselves. A few stayed watching for a little longer, before also finally leaving the beach.

Whether Bass & Flinders were in fact in any danger, is completely unknown to us, but you can imagine, knowing they were so substantially outnumbered, quite ignorant of their surroundings and feeling great pressure from the clearly increasing numbers of men appearing, their nerves were clearly beginning to fray.

Later in the night, as the wind dropped, they were able to row out into open water and they had to once again spend the night in the boat on the water. Flinders later recorded the river they had been led to as 'Canoe Rivulet', and the Lagoon as 'Tom Thumbs Lagoon'. The lagoon though, would have opened up into a large body of water that we call Lake Illawarra today.

They made some hard-earned progress to the north during the following day and were able to safely beach, find water, cook a meal, and sleep for the first time in days, on the sand instead of in the cramped boat. Poor old sunburnt Bass was probably the most relieved to have a place to stretch out. "This night for the first time, we slept on shore; and perhaps the softest bed of down was never more enjoyed, than was the fine sand of the beach... The liberty of lying in any posture, and stretching out our limbs, was an indulgence, which our little bark, with all her good qualities, could not afford." (Bastian, Josephine 2016, p. 16)

They vaguely noted the black lumps in the cliff faces around them too, and happily made preparations for continuing north, back to their original intended inlet for exploration, before heading onwards back to Sydney. Those black lumps would later prove to be coal.

But the following day would prove to be a great challenge, having to travel through gale force winds & high seas. "We were running in the dark, with the sail flying away before the mast like a flag, (Bastian, Josephine 2016, p. 17) Mr Bass kept the sheet of the sail in his hand, drawing in a few inches occasionally, when he saw a particularly heavy sea following. I was steering with an oar, and it required the utmost exertion and care to prevent broaching to; a single wrong movement or moments inattention, would have sent us to the bottom. The task of the boy was to bale out the water which, in spite of every care, the sea threw in upon us." (Flinders, Matthew. 2012, p. 7) Their return journey included several more close calls, storms, and near capsizings, but they found some respite at a place they named Providential Cove, near Wattamolla.

A few miles further north they finally made it to their original point of interest, the entrance to Port Hacking, where they spent two days exploring, though it proved not to be much of a helpful 'port'. They took soundings and discovered, though large and sheltered, it was only deep enough for shipping in a few areas, and they noted the place seemed to be swarming with sharks! Hmm, so not an ideal place for a paddle then. Though it seems it was the mosquitoes that made their evening a misery there. On a positive note, they recorded a friendly encounter with two aboriginal men there, so all in all they were happy.

They took their soundings, unsuccessfully attempted catching some fish, and Bastian notes, celebrated Martins 15<sup>th</sup> birthday there. Flinders had also clocked over to 24 years old during their outing too. So cake all round, had it been available at the time I'm sure! When they made their way back to



Sydney Cove on April 1st, they would have been feeling achieved and relieved. And all that adventure & discovery in just one week!

Governor Hunter was once again impressed by the information they had gathered and presented, Bastian suggesting it convinced him of their “professional skills and their cool nerve.” (Bastian, Josephine 2016, p. 18). Flinders settled in to draw up his charts and rewrite his notes and journal. Maps of the previously uncharted areas were produced, increasing general knowledge of the conditions in the area and making movement up and down the coast just that little bit safer for the ships coming & going along the coast. Some of his earlier work was being sent off to Britain to be published there; an excellent start for a man who wished to become known as an intrepid navigator and map maker. So further exploration for Flinders, was on hold for a little while.

Though Bass’ medical skills could have been usefully and fully employed by the people of the new colony, and he might have been completely absorbed in such work if he chose, Bass was instead keen to take test his mettle and attempt crossing the Blue Mountains, the natural barrier blocking potential expansion to the west.

Only 50 miles or so from Sydney, and visible on a clear day, the Blue Mountains must have presented a daily taunt to the would-be explorer. The British still had no idea what kind of land, or water, might lay beyond, and Bass was keen to be the first to facilitate that discovery.

The aboriginal people of the Sydney area seemed to leave the Blue Mountains alone, providing no assistance or clues to the colonists in penetrating the terrain. Several colonial parties had already failed in their attempts to cross, the first lead by Governor Phillip himself in 1789, attempting access via the Hawkesbury River, but making it no further than Richmond.

Lieutenant Dawes tried again in 1789, Captain Tench in 1790, recording and naming the Nepean River. Colonel Patterson tried in 1793, recording and naming the Grose River further north, and the game hunter Henry Hacking made another attempt in 1794. On getting close to the area, vast chains of perpendicular rock rise up, presenting a seemingly impassable barrier, so until someone had found a path through, there was little hope of any potential expansion westward.

But in June of 1796 the optimistic Bass though he might have a go, and he set off with two men to make an attempt, carrying two weeks’ worth of provisions. Having visited the foothills previously, searching for natural history specimens, he knew how rugged the terrain was going to be. He would have consulted Paterson & Hacking, who had already made attempts, and knowing about the chasms and steep rock walls at every turn, he prepared by having his own grappling equipment made. Estensen noted he’d made “scaling irons for his feet, and hooks for his hands, and assembled great lengths of rope”, to allow him access through the labyrinth. I guess he may have had some opportunity to climb tall rigging on board his ships, but I cannot imagine that he’d had much experience of mountaineering, still, he’s intrepid and would give it a go! Onward and upward if that’s what it takes!

It’s possible Bass and his two companions may have headed up the Hawkesbury River, then the Grose, in canoes that could get quite a way up into the headwaters. Estensen notes that documentation that might identify the route Bass took is confusing and contradictory, indeed we cannot actually be certain of his actual path, because some records are clearly incorrect, but suffice to say, it was a difficult and ultimately unsuccessful attempt.

Once they reached the uplifted rock of the high plateau, and needing then to carry all the equipment & supplies on their backs, and looking for a route through, up and over the rugged landscape was exhausting. It would have been exceptionally cold at night, even freezing perhaps, given it was early winter by then, though paradoxically, winter or not, finding enough water to keep themselves from dehydrating would become one of their biggest problems.

The terrain seemed “a confused and barren assemblage of mountains with impassable chasms between”. Bowden wrote “The difficulty was due to the chaotic formation. There were impenetrable rocky gorges, sheer precipices, and line upon line of ridges. If a ridge was followed, it usually ended in a precipitous drop into a ravine; if a valley followed it lead to an unscaleable craggy wall of rock.” (Bowden, Keith Macrae 1952, p. 43) Again, possibly made more difficult by the British newcomers not knowing what to be looking for in the alien Australian bush, but either way, such terrain was a deal breaker for the early explorers.

There is no doubt the Blue Mountains form a formidable barrier. There are a few well worn roads and paths available to us today, but there remain many places still entirely inaccessible or rarely explored. It was this area, only a few years back, in 1994, that a small isolated stand of Woolamai pines, belonging to a 200 million year-old plant family, was discovered by David Noble, a NSW National Parks and Wildlife Services Officer.

While hiking and abseiling with friends in the wilderness, he noticed the unusual nature of the stand of odd trees, and took a small fallen branch home for identification. It was identified - from fossil records, and being abundant when dinosaurs roamed the earth, had been presumed long extinct. The Woolamai pines have since been propagated outside of the mountains and many were gifted to botanic conservation gardens around the world. Specialist nurseries can now also sell them, hopefully safeguarding a widespread population, which should ensure the species, that had been restricted to a population of less than 50 mature trees in a small ravine in the Blue Mountains, might survive into the future. (NSW National Parks and Wildlife Service) (WollempiPine.com) So the Blue Mountains, if not able to block the horde of land hungry colonial settlers crossing into the west, still manages to holds on to many of it's secrets.

We don't have Bass' own records of that attempt, or at least I didn't have access to them, but Francois Peron from Nicholas Baudin's Terra Australis Expedition, later recorded the story told to him by Bass while they were in Port Jackson together. “[Bass] scaled the sheer cliff faces of terrifying mountains. His path being blocked numerous times by a precipice, he would have himself lowered with ropes to the very bottom of the abyss. Such dedication was in vain; and after a fortnight of toil and unprecedented peril, Mr Bass returned to Sydney to confirm, by his own failure, what everyone already knew about the impossibility of crossing those extraordinary ramparts. Bass discovered before him, at a distance of between 40 and 50 miles, a second chain of mountains whose elevation was greater than those he had crossed...” (Estensen, Miriam. 2005, pp. 56–7) (See Voyage De Decouvertes Aux Terres Australes, Peron et Ircynet.)

Unable to make out any ridge or valley system that might give them a way through, Bass and his companions returned to Sydney after 15 gruelling days trying. A successful attempt would not be achieved until 1813, the achievement slated to Blaxland, Lawson & Wentworth, though many efforts were made in the interim, and indeed that successful crossing was Blaxland's third attempt himself. The Blue Mountains remain a truly stunning range and a national treasure.

After their first year in the colony, with food supplies still precarious, Flinders & Bass were required to undertake their Navy work again, as the *Reliance* and *Supply* were required to head to Cape Town to acquire more livestock and provisions, to bolster the development & self-sufficiency prospects of New South Wales. Hunter was concerned that if Napoleon was to win the War still being fought in the northern hemisphere, NSW might be placed in a very dangerous situation, unable to even receive the meagre supplies being sent from England. Already the British focus on the war was resulting in a greater level of neglect of the colony's needs, and with the French still able to undertake their explorations in the region, there must have been some anxiety about the French even getting a foothold in, or near, New South Wales. And so in September 1796, the ships sailed, via Norfolk Island, to the Cape. Heading east they would make an around the world circuit, returning via the west coast again, the following year.

Along with the much desired cattle the government required, the officers aboard would also bring back horses, Merino sheep & some other stock that could prove profitable back in NSW, many giving up

their own cabins to house the newly purchased animals. Certainly the *Reliance* was cram-packed, and unfortunately it proved to be a terrible voyage back, all aboard lucky to survive. The return trip was expected to take less than 40 days, but appalling weather meant the journey was stretched to 78 gruelling days on the difficult seas, the *Reliance* meeting one gale after another.

Just as a brief aside, we'll note that they were not the only Ship to be experiencing these awful conditions on a run to Port Jackson at that time. Indeed we told the sad tale of the wreck of the *Sydney Cove*, amongst the Furneaux group of islands, North Eastern Van Diemens Land, in Episode 43: Shipwreck and first contact. There's an interesting link to Bass and Flinders related to that story, which we'll come to in time. Have a listen to that one if you have not already.

The manifest of the *Reliance* noted that Mr Bass had taken on board "1 cow and 19 sheep", though it's not known if any were Merino. Seems that Flinders did not participate in the purchase of stock though. But for Bass this would be his first foray into the world of speculation and trading, selling his stock on his return to NSW.

The conditions at sea were so fierce that they lost a fifth of the cattle taken on board, and a third of the sheep, though my source simply says most lost stock belonged to the government, so I guess it still proved to be very lucrative for some. The cows placed for sale brought in 80 pounds, the horses 90 pounds, the standard sheep breeds 7pounds 10shillings, so all pretty amazing prices. We've talked about how these Spanish Merino sheep influenced the development of Australian sheep breeds in the Macarthur episode too, Ep 57. As Estensen put it "[these] merinos, a little flock of storm-battered animals .., became the foundation of an industry of incalculable wealth for the emerging nation." (Estensen, Miriam. 2002, p. 65)

Flinders was able to sit his Lieutenant's exam while they were at Cape Town, making his promotion official once the Admiralty in Britain was advised and processed the documentation. The other momentous thing that occurred for Flinders on the voyage back to New South Wales, was that the shipboard cat had kittens. Flinders later witnessed one little kitten fall overboard, but to his delight, it swam over to a rope and hauled itself back on board. He adopted that tenacious little black cat with white paws. (Monument Australia) Trim, supposedly named after a character in Laurence Sterne's novel *Tristram Shandy*, was to accompany Flinders on his adventures for years to come.

They experienced very rough conditions on their voyage back and the two ships only barely survived the journey. The *Reliance* arrived towards the end of June, 1797, weeks later than expected due to the appalling conditions. The *Supply* was retired immediately, it was in such bad condition, and ended it's days as a hulk in Sydney Harbour. *Reliance* spent the following year being totally refitted before she was fit to sail again.

To touch on another thread in the story, in May, before the *Reliance* & *Supply* had arrived, a fishing party working in Providential Cove, named earlier by Bass & Flinders, saw three men waving frantically from the shore. These three men were the survivors from the wreck of the *Sydney Cove* from Calcutta. As mentioned earlier we told of their amazing story in Episode 43. Having been wrecked on the Furneaux Islands at the NE corner of Van Diemens Land, a number of the survivors were sent in a small boat to make their way to the 600 or so miles to Port Jackson, and arrange a rescue for the rest. But the men in the small boat were again wrecked on the shores of what we today call *90 mile Beach* in Victoria, and they set about walking along the coast all the way to Sydney. The three men waving from the shore, included William Clarke, of Campbell, Clarke and Co., Trading company, and were on their last legs, as the only survivors that we know of, from that group walking north.

Anyway, the three were ferried back to Sydney where they told their tale, and plans were made for sending some vessels to collect the stranded men, and to recover the useful goods that could be salvaged for the wrecked ship. Clarke would return down the coast with Bass in a crewed whale boat, to undertake a

search for 2 other men the survivors had had to leave behind just days before they were rescued, but according to Estensen, they found only the evidence of their violent deaths.

Clarke had also told Hunter he had found coal in the cliffs where they had rested, just 20 miles south of Port Jackson, and this may have been the outcrop that Bass & Flinders had seen earlier, but not investigated more thoroughly. So Bass & Clarke also identified that place, and gathered samples. It was recorded "This vein of coal, or at least the Northernmost end of it that we could see, commences about 20 miles to the southward of Botany Bay. .... About twenty feet above the surface of the sea, and within reach of your hand as you pass along, is a vein of coal about six or seven feet in thickness"... (Estensen, Miriam. 2005, pp. 72–3) Today the area is marked as Coalscliff.

The governor was very pleased, but soon better quality and more easily accessible coal would also be found north, around the Hunter River, and the Hunter Valley is still a huge coal mining area today.

In September of 1797 Bass again got to visit Cowpastures and check on the state of the cattle there. This time they noted the mob seemed separated into two distinct groups, one consisting of 67 in number and a larger group of 170. Once again, this was excellent news for Hunter. Rather than returning on the route they came in on, Bass and James Williamson arranged for a little more exploring, aiming to walk in a direct a line as possible, towards the coast, recording what they saw, before meeting a waiting whaleboat there about 10 miles south of Port Hacking.

So little by little the blanks were being coloured in. These journeys were of interest, but too few and far between, and Bass seemed to be becoming quite restless and frustrated, according to the odd letter that survives. Soon though a more demanding opportunity would come his way.

He'd urged Hunter to allow him to explore the possibility of a strait between VDL and what we now know is the mainland. Was it just a deep bay to the NW of the Furneaux group or was it an entire strait? Hunter already has his suspicions, and many others had an opinion also. Should there be a passage through, it might shave valuable time off any voyage to New South Wales in the future, so it was an important thing to know. But again, Hunter was limited by more pressing needs to spare a suitable ship. The *Reliance* was still in no state to take to the water, and Flinders was still absorbed in supervising the refit, but Bass lobbied to be allowed to undertake some exploration with a smaller boat in good condition, and a suitably kitted whaleboat, about 28ft long, became available.

Cook had marked the east coast as far south as Port Hicks in 1770, afterwards just marking the map with a dotted line to the known coast of Van Diemens Land, and noting "I cannot determine whether it joins Van Diemens Land or not." (Bowden, Keith Macrae 1952, p. 57) On Cook's second expedition Captain Furneaux, on one of his sister ships, the *Adventure*, took another look, but again recorded "there is no strait between New Holland and Van Diemens Land, but a very deep bay."

However, the astronomer on board recorded a different conclusion in his diary, after making his observations, stating "It seems very evident that this is the mouth of a strait which separates New Holland from Van Diemens Land." (Bowden, Keith Macrae 1952, p. 57)

Others, including Governor Hunter himself on an earlier passage, were also fairly convinced a strait could be the thing. The currents just seemed so strong.... If such a thing existed it could cut weeks off the journey to Port Jackson.

Though Flinders must have been disappointed to miss the opportunity, he was pleased that his friend would at last be charged to more thoroughly "investigate the southward coast as far as he could with safety and convenience..." . With a volunteer crew of six, four from the *Reliance* crew, and provisions allowing for a 6 week outing, Bass departed Port Jackson to the south, on December 3<sup>rd</sup>, 1797.

As before, sailing south proved to be a challenge, but where they had to pull in to shore Bass would take the opportunity of exploring the surrounds and noting all the relevant data, geological, botanical and geographical. Shoal Haven and Jervis Bay areas were of particular interest. But navigation was done with his hand held compass, so not precise at all. Still, the information gathered was of great value, particularly when added to the earlier charts available, further refining their knowledge. And while many sites now well known to us, were briefly noted, from Batemans Bay to Bega, Twofold Bay and Cape Howe, most serious discovery began in areas south of the known coast, south of Cape Howe. Bass felt places of interest north of that point may get another look on the return trip, should time and provisions allow.

He charted from the boat and made landfall to explore where possible, noting conditions, geology, topography and so on, aware they would be charting areas not viewed by Cook. Sailing westward along the southern coast, noting the long sandy 90 mile beach, they recorded signs of smoke further inland, so they knew aboriginal people were living in the area, but none had so far made themselves visible.

Bass encountered what we today know as Wilson's Promontory on January second. Rounding the southernmost tip of Victoria, rough weather prevented any landing, though they did anchor offshore in the shelter provided by the headland. The following day Bass decided to head south to see if they might find the Furneaux Islands, but nothing was sighted. He did not yet know he was now sailing across the notoriously rough Bass Strait! But their little boat was suffering. Planks loosened and began leaking, and repairs would be needed if they were to survive, let alone continue, so Bass made north again, returning to the Promontory area he had seen in the days before.

After a very rough night at sea in a leaky boat, they made for the coast and noticed smoke from an island near the promontory. Imagining it to be the fires of the local indigenous people, and hopeful of gaining some local information, they made their way to the small island in the Glennie group to see if they could communicate. But when they finally got there, they found instead a small party of escaped convicts!

It seems a party of 14 men had escaped from Port Jackson in a small boat four months earlier. With the ever the crazy optimism of these convicts, they imagined they would head for the wreck of the *Sydney Cove* they had recently heard about, achieve the magic feat of plundering or repairing it, and then sail off free, into the sunset. But didn't make it to Preservation Island, where the completely unsalvageable *Sydney Cove* now lay under water, instead being cast upon the shores of the southern tip of what we today call Victoria. With the predictable honour amongst thieves, 7 of the men sneaked off in the boat during the night, five weeks earlier, leaving the rest to almost certain death by starvation, now they were stranded on the small island. Subsisting on sea birds and seal, they were very sorry for themselves and quite willing now to return to the convict settlement and take their punishment.

Urgent repairs were required on the whaleboat, but even once achieved, Bass of course could not take these additional seven men on board on the small vessel, but he did share some of their provisions, and told them he would stop again on their return journey.

Bass then continued along the coast, entering an interesting area on January 5<sup>th</sup>, which he would name Western Port. The Port wrapped itself around Phillip Island, which Bass described as stony and barren save for some starved shrubs. They explored the coast but had little luck finding a good supply of fresh water anywhere around the bay shores. They spent 12 days in relative shelter there, charting and recording their observations, before weather permitted them to re-enter the strait and head home, their provisions now dangerously low.

What a life a sailor had before we had even a hint of weather forecasting. While things looked calm for a while, and they took the gap in the weather to head back out into the strait, soon after they were underway the weather once again turned bad and they had a very hard time of it, the sea apparently being "very troublesome"! (Bowden, Keith Macrae 1952, p. 63)

When they finally made it back to the stranded men, they were only able to squeeze two of the most desperate onto the whaleboat, one elderly and one exceedingly weak. The other five they ferried to the mainland, supplying them with a musket and what provisions they could spare, including a compass, fishing gear and a cooking kettle, and wished them the best for a walk of more than 500 miles back to Port Jackson. Sadly, they were never heard of again.

The return journey continued to be plagued with appalling weather, and they were frequently delayed in making any progress, taking shelter in Sealers Cove and Corner Inlet on the eastern side of the promontory. They finally arrived at Port Jackson exhausted and hungry, on February 25<sup>th</sup>, 1798.

Though he had not made it as far west as he had hoped, Bass felt sure he had confirmed the body of water they travelled in *was* a strait. Flinders explained “The south westerly swell which rolled in upon the shores of Western Port and it’s neighbourhood, sufficiently indicated to the penetrating Bass, that he was exposed to the Southern Indian Ocean”. (Bowden, Keith Macrae 1952, p. 66) Hunter also noted “[Bass] found an open ocean westward, and by the mountainous sea which rolled from that quarter, and no land discoverable in that direction, we have much reason to believe there is an open strait through.” (Bowden, Keith Macrae 1952, p. 67) So I think the prize does go to Bass, even after this brief outing, though doubters still remained. He would have liked to have actually circumnavigated Van Diemens Land to confirm. Such an opportunity would come his way in time.

Of course he might later have kicked himself for naming the bay he found Western Port Bay. Only a short way further West along the coast, the massive Port Phillip Bay would soon afterwards be “discovered”, and this would prove to be the premier Bay for the southern coast, Westernport being a bit too shallow in places. Still, quite the impressive trip in a whaleboat. His charts and reports were extremely valuable.

In praising the discovery Flinders would add “It should be remembered that Mr Bass sailed with only 6 weeks provisions, but with the assistance of supplies of petrels, fish, seals flesh and a few geese and black swans, and by abstinence, he had been enabled to prolong his voyage beyond eleven weeks. His ardour and perseverance were crowned, in despite of the foul winds which opposed him, with a degree of success not to have been anticipated.... A voyage expressly undertaken for discovery in an open boat, and in which 600 miles of coast, mostly in a boistress climate, was explored, has not perhaps, it’s equal in the annals of maritime history.” (Bowden, Keith Macrae 1952, p. 67)

Far from being jealous of Bass’ opportunities, Flinders seems genuinely delighted for him and appreciative of his success and findings. And here’s an interesting thing. The whaleboat used was beached in Sydney, and became quite the object of interest. Bowden writes that the timber from the whaleboat Bass used was preserved, and snuff boxes and the like were made from it, to commemorate the exploration feat, and a piece of wood marked with a silver plaque detailing the discovery was later given as a gift from Governor King to Nicolas Baudin.

Three weeks before Bass had arrived back, the *Francis* had been sent to the Furneaux group to salvage more of the useful cargo still left at the Preservation Island “Sydney Cove’ wreck site, and retrieve the last of the men who had stayed behind to guard the goods. With *Reliance* repairs well under way, Flinders was granted leave to go with the *Francis* for the purpose of “making much observations, serviceable to geography and navigation, as circumstances might permit.” (Estensen, Miriam. 2002, p. 70)

Not yet knowing what Bass had found of course, Flinders carried out valuable survey work among the Furneaux Islands and in a sweet gesture, named a couple of the features there after one of his correspondents from England, Ann Chappelle. But in his very limited time to observe the tides and currents, and draw his charts, though he suspected it was a strait that terminated above the Furneaux Islands, he concluded “I was obliged, to my great regret, to leave this important geographical question undecided.” (Bowden, Keith Macrae 1952, p. 58) The question of course was whether the waters meeting there consisted

of a bay or a strait. But on his return, hearing about Bass' journey and discussing and comparing observations, Flinders was extremely supportive of Bass' conclusions, as we noted earlier.

When the *Reliance* was finally fit for travel, Flinders was to join her on a run to Norfolk Island again. The ship would be loaded with soldiers, and officers to relieve those already on the island, and more convicts to be settled there. Wheat & salt meat was also sent, departing Port Jackson in May of 1798. When they returned from Norfolk Island, they also brought back with them, a locally built sloop named '*Norfolk*' and it was just what Governor Hunter needed.

While Bass, Flinders, Hunter and a great many others were convinced the Bass Strait had been correctly anticipated, nothing but a complete sail through would put the question entirely beyond doubt. The 25 ton vessel built from Norfolk pine would be the ideal craft to sail through the strait and circumnavigate Van Diemens Land. Updating the charts with solid confirmation would allow returning ships to use the new passage and hasten communication and travel for all coming to New South Wales. Hunter was determined to get the mission underway, and now with the sloop *the Norfolk* at his disposal, he knew just the men for the task.

It was time to get the band back together!

Okay, so next episode we'll follow Bass Flinders and Trim as they become the first to circumnavigate Van Diemens Land and see where to from there.

#### Podcast Recommendation

This episode I'm going to recommend a bit of armchair travel & history listening. From the History Extra suite is the series called **History's Greatest Cities**. "Travel journalist and history fan Paul Bloomfield virtually roams the streets and sites of great European metropolises in the company of a series of expert historian guides. Together they delve into each city's origin myths and uncover stories of shifting populations, conflict, culture, turbulence and triumph. And along the way, they'll highlight some top tourist tips for history-loving globetrotters." As always I will place a link to the series details on my webpage at AHP.

<https://www.historyextra.com/podcast-series/historys-greatest-cities-podcast-series/>

Thanks so much for listening. Catch you soon for the next instalment. Cheers.

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