

# **Captain Matthew Flinders, RN**

**by Antoine De Chazal De Chamerel, 1806-1807**  
**Portrait**

Source: Art Gallery of South Australia

## Matthew Flinders (1774 – 1814)

Matthew Flinders was one of our greatest seafaring explorers, charting much of Australia's coastline despite a series of trials and wild adventures. An outstanding sailor, surveyor, navigator and scientist, he was a considerate and self-sacrificing leader who looked after all under his command.

Born in Donington, Leicestershire in England on 16 March 1774, Matthew Flinders was the son of a surgeon and his wife, Susannah (née Ward). He developed a longing for adventures at sea, partly through reading Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe*. He joined the Royal Navy at 15 years of age, served under William Bligh on a voyage to Tahiti in 1791 and fought against the French in the naval battle of the Glorious First of June 1794.

In 1795 Flinders sailed to Australia, where he carried out vital coastal survey work, including the Port Hacking Estuary with George Bass in the *Tom Thumb* in 1796. In 1798 he and Bass circumnavigated Tasmania (then known as Van Diemen's Land), proving it was separate from mainland Australia.

In 1801 as commander of the 334-tonne HMS *Investigator*, Flinders was instructed to explore the southern coastline of Australia, and chart the coastline. Taking all bearings himself, he returned each day to where he had left off the day before, resulting in precise detailed maps.

In May 1802 after the *Investigator* had been resupplied and refitted in Sydney, Flinders began his circumnavigation of the continent, accompanied by an Aboriginal translator, Bungaree. The vessel leaked badly as they reached the Gulf of Carpentaria, and Flinders was forced to abandon the charting work, limping into Sydney in June 1803.

In that same year, Flinders boarded the HMS *Porpoise* bound for England, intending to obtain another vessel to finish his mapping, but the *Porpoise* struck a reef and sank. He expertly sailed her cutter 1130 kilometres back to Sydney and arranged for the rescue of his wrecked shipmates. He then boarded another leaky boat, the *Cumberland*, and set off for England.

Flinders called in at Mauritius for repairs, but was arrested by the French Governor. Although Britain and France were at war, Flinders thought the scientific nature of his work would ensure safe passage, but he remained under arrest for more than six years. In captivity, he recorded details of his voyages for future publication, and put forward his rationale for naming the new continent 'Australia', as an umbrella term for New Holland and New South Wales – a suggestion taken up later by Governor Macquarie.

Flinders' health had suffered, however, and although he returned to Britain in 1810, he did not live to see the success of his widely praised book and atlas, *A Voyage to Terra Australis*. Flinders died at the age of 40 and was interred at St James's cemetery in 1814.

Due to over-crowding, and eventually the encroachment of London's Euston Railway Station on the cemetery in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century, Flinders' headstone was removed, and it was feared his remains had been lost forever.

The remains of the British explorer were discovered by archaeologists working on HS2, a high-speed rail project linking London and Birmingham in 2019. The discovery of the lead breastplate bearing Flinders' name, attached to his coffin, confirmed that this was his resting place.

At the end of 2019, it was announced that at the request of his descendants, Matthew Flinders' remains would be reinterred in the local parish church of St. Mary and The Holy Rood in his home town of Donington, Leicestershire, England.

Many memorials to Matthew Flinders are found throughout South Australia, New South Wales and Victoria, and coastal features include Flinders Bay (South Australia) and the Flinders Group of Islands in far north Queensland.

#### References:

- <https://australian.museum/about/history/exhibitions/trailblazers/matthew-flinders/>
- <https://www.australiangeographic.com.au/topics/history-culture/2019/10/remains-of-explorer-matthew-flinders-to-return-home/>
- [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Matthew\\_Flinders](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Matthew_Flinders)