A place of encounters
A short history of Botany Bay National Park
(Kurnell Section)

A place of encounters
Like many other locations where sailors from Europe on voyages of “discovery” stopped for a short time to replenish their ships and to “explore” new lands and peoples, Botany Bay was, and continues to be, a place of encounters.

It was here that the men on Captain Cook’s first voyage in the Endeavour first encountered the indigenous people of New Holland. For eight days between late April and early May 1770, Cook’s ship was anchored in the bay. Over the course of their stay, the members of the expedition were variously occupied: some were busy with preparations for the next leg of the journey, collecting water and cutting down trees for timber; others, including Captain Cook, explored and charted the bay; while the celebrated naturalists, Joseph Banks and Daniel Solander, were so captivated by the novelty of the natural landscape that they made a vast collection of botanical specimens.

The indigenous people whose country Cook and his men traversed were the Gweagal. This was probably the first time the Gweagal had encountered visitors from the sea in a vessel larger than a canoe. In their responses to the sailors, they behaved in ways consistent with what is known about the protocols observed by indigenous people in other parts of the continent when strangers entered, without warning, another’s territory. This included shouting at and remonstrating with the strangers as well as displaying signs of strength and weaponry. At times, the locals simply went about their own business, fishing from their canoes, cooking shellfish on the shore, walking along the beach, appearing to ignore the strangers, although no doubt observing them
closely. And on a few occasions, some groups of Gweagal men made an approach towards members of Cook's expedition, before slowly retreating. In all of their responses to the strangers on their shore, the locals sought to deal with them in ways that would allow them “to affirm rights to land and resources” and “to defuse any potential conflict and hostility”.¹

On board the Endeavour was a man from Tahiti called Tupaia. He made this sketch of Gweagal men fishing from their bark canoes. In his journal, Joseph Banks described some local men he saw fishing in their canoes as the Endeavour sailed into the bay. “Under the South head of it were four small canoes; in each of these was one man who held in his hand a long pole with which he struck fish, venturing with his little imbarkation almost into the surf. These people seemd to be totally engag’d in what they were about: the ship passd within a quarter of a mile of them and yet they scarce lifted their eyes from their employment; I was almost inclind to thin that attentive to their business and deafned by the noise of the surf they neither saw nor heard her go past them.” (Joseph Banks, The Endeavour Journal of Joseph Banks: 1768-1771, ed. J. C. Beaglehole, 1962, pp. 53-54)

For the week that the *Endeavour* was anchored in Botany Bay, relations between the voyagers and the Gweagal can be best described as distant. It seems clear that the potential for a close meeting between the two groups was compromised when Captain Cook, with what appears to have been impatience to get ashore, fired some shots as he and his men made their first landing. One shot wounded a local man in the leg. After this, Cook’s hope of making friendly contact with the locals was not realised. When the *Endeavour* eventually sailed, the possibility of such a meeting was lost forever.

Over the time that the *Endeavour* was in Botany Bay, the naturalists on the voyage, Joseph Banks and Daniel Solander, amassed a large collection of specimens of local flora and fauna. Their days were spent venturing inland from the shore to gather plants and to shoot birds and other animals. The collection made was carefully tended and arranged. Joseph Banks describes in his journal an entire day spent drying the specimens in the sun on a sail spread out on the sand.

The collection was taken back to England, and some of it continues to be preserved at Kew Gardens. It was feted among men of science in Europe interested in the “new” lands that had been “discovered” on the other side of the globe. Some of the specimens were so unusual that they defied the categories that had long been used to classify the botanical world. To celebrate the place where the impressive botanical collection was made, Captain Cook eventually named it Botany Bay, and its north head, Cape Banks and its southern, Point Solander.
Joseph Banks and Daniel Solander gathered a huge collection of botanical specimens during their time at Botany Bay, including the Banksia. In his journal, Banks noted that on the fifth day at Botany Bay that “the morn was rainy and we who had got already so many plants were well contented to find an excuse for staying on board to examine them a little”. On the following day he recorded: “Our collection of Plants was now grown so immensly large that it was necessary that some extraordinary care should be taken of them lest they should spoil in the books. I therefore devoted a day to that business and carried all the drying paper, near 200 Quires of which the larger part was full, ashore and spreading them out on a sail in the sun kept them in this manner exposd the whole day, often turning them and sometimes turning the Quires in which the plants were inside out. By this means they came on board at night in very good condition. ... When the damp of the Even made it necessary to send my Plants and books on board I made a small excursion in order to shoot anything I could meet with and found a large quantity of Quails. (Joseph Banks, *The Endeavour Journal of Joseph Banks: 1768-1771*, ed. J. C. Beaglehole, 1962, p. 58).
A place for living and working

After the *Endeavour* sailed, the Gweagal people no doubt mulled over, and perhaps even incorporated into their ceremonies, the unprecedented event of the arrival of the strange ship in their bay. But it would be almost two decades before local indigenous people would begin to feel this encounter’s indirect effects, when the first eleven transports carrying British convicts arrived to establish a penal colony in 1788. The committee in England that selected Botany Bay as the site for a penal colony had drawn on the descriptions provided by Captain Cook in his journals, and the testimony of Joseph Banks and James Matra.

However, Botany Bay was rejected by Captain Phillip, the commander of the First Fleet, as a suitable site for the penal settlement. He chose Sydney Cove instead. As settlement concentrated around Sydney Harbour and radiated westwards, Botany Bay, particularly its southern shore, was only sparsely settled. This remained so for most of the nineteenth century and the early part of the twentieth.

From 1815 until 1899, the southern shore passed through the hands of a series of leaseholders and landowners, including John Connell, James Birnie, the Laycock family and Thomas Holt. They successively used it for various enterprises, such as dairying, market gardening, and running cattle, although none were especially successful.
James Birnie was the first to receive land on the southern shore of Botany Bay, when in 1815 Governor Macquarie granted him 700 acres along with 160 acres of saltwater marshes. A local story has it that Birnie had wanted to name his property Alpha Farm, but that it was mistakenly recorded as Half-a-Farm. Both names are appropriate, but for different reasons. Alpha means first, and Birnie was the first to receive a land grant on the peninsula. It also ties in with the idea that this was where Captain Cook first stepped ashore. Half-a-Farm was also an apt description because Birnie, as well as those who followed him, struggled to turn the area to productive use. The ruins in the photograph are of Alpha House.
Some Aboriginal people lived and worked on Holt’s Estate between the 1860s and 1870s. However, by the end of the nineteenth century, most had moved away, some to the government reserve at La Perouse on the north shore of Botany Bay and others to a “camp” at Saltpan Creek on the Georges River. Many of their descendants still live in the area around Botany Bay today.

Pictured are: Jim Brown (uniform); Joe Brown (back, wearing dark coat); Joey (brother to Biddy Giles); Biddy Giles (widow of ‘King Kooma’ of the Georges River); Jimmy Lowndes. The details about the men and women pictured come from: Daphne Salt, *Kurnell: Birthplace of Modern Australia – A Pictorial History*, Clarion House, Sydney, 2000, p. 29.
During the Depression in the 1930s, many out of work families lived in the bush on the southern shore, or made little houses in the cliffs.

‘Approach to cave dwellers house near Kurnell [ie Kurnell], New South Wales, 1930s’, Part of Collection of photographs of a family living in a cliff side cave during the Great Depression, Kurnell, New South Wales, 1930s (nla.pic-vn3705987, National Library of Australia)

A report in the Sydney Morning Herald in 1969 claimed: “For more than 50 years, little houses cunningly constructed of stone, driftwood, sheetmetal or anything handy have clung to the cliffs overlooking the Pacific at Kurnell, or have nestled in the sandhills behind the cliffs”. (J. A. C. Dunn, ‘Bert and the bureaucrats’, Sydney Morning Herald, 16 August 1969)
A place for remembering the past

Much more than a place of settlement, the southern shore of Botany Bay was a place for remembering the past. From the early part of the nineteenth century onwards, Captain Cook and others on his expedition were commemorated here. The first memorial erected to Captain Cook and Joseph Banks was an inscription plate attached to the cliff face at Point Solander in 1822.

The inscription on the plate reads: Under the Auspices of British Science/These shores were discovered/by/James Cook & Joseph Banks/The Columbus and Maecenas of Their Times./This spot once saw them ardent in the pursuit of knowledge.
A second monument, an obelisk, was built by Thomas Holt, a private landowner, in 1870 on the centenary of Cook’s arrival at Botany Bay. Over time, many more monuments were added to the landscape to commemorate other men on Cook’s expedition, including Joseph Banks, Daniel Solander, Forby Sutherland, who died while the *Endeavour* was in the bay and is buried somewhere on the south shore, and Isaac Smith, who is reputed to be the first one from the expedition to step ashore.


This is the obelisk erected by Thomas Holt to Captain Cook in 1870. The inscription on it reads: ‘Captain Cook landed here on 28th April, A.D. 1770’.
In 1899, a portion of the land on the southern shore passed from private hands into public ownership and was gazetted as Captain Cook’s Landing Place Reserve. For the next seventy years, the public reserve was managed by the Captain Cook Landing Place Trust. It became a hugely popular recreation ground, used for picnics, bushwalking, camping, fishing, cricket games and swimming. It was also a popular tourist site, billed as the “birthplace of the nation”, or the “birthplace of Australian history”. Ferry-loads of tourists made the trip across the bay to see where Captain Cook had come ashore in 1770, and to look at the historical monuments that dotted the landscape. Gaggles of Australian school children were brought on excursions to learn about Captain Cook’s voyage and the role it had played in Australia’s history.

A place for new encounters with history

In more recent times, the version of Australian history that has Captain Cook at its centre has been challenged and revised. During the 1970 bicentenary of Cook’s arrival in Botany Bay, Aboriginal people and their supporters protested against a re-enactment of the landing staged at Kurnell and performed before Queen Elizabeth II. As part of their broader struggle for rights and recognition within Australian society, these Aboriginal activists publicly challenged histories that denied the darker side of the nation’s past and that ignored the dispossession of indigenous people from their land.

By the 1990s, the mood in Australia was shifting towards achieving reconciliation between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people. In this context, the spot where Captain Cook had landed all those years ago is being re-interpreted again. The southern section of Botany Bay National Park is promoted as a place for Australians — both black and white — to reflect on their shared history. The entanglement of the lives and histories of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal Australians can be imagined as having started at Botany Bay in 1770 when Captain Cook and his men came face to face with the Gweagal people.
Yet, in celebrating the place where Captain Cook landed as a significant “meeting place” between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people, it is important not to forget the effects that later British settlement had on Aboriginal people across the country. How to best commemorate the contribution of Captain Cook’s first voyage to the history of Australia, and at the same time be mindful of the impact on Aboriginal people of the colonisation that came in its wake, is the challenge facing the managers of Botany Bay National Park and the many people who visit this historic site today.

AUTHORSHIP
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