



James Cook – a Brief Biography

Quick facts

Born 1728 in Marton-in-Cleveland (Yorkshire, England) the second of seven children.

Died 1779 in Hawaii. He served in the Royal Navy before undertaking three voyages:

HMB *Endeavour* (1768 – 1771)

HMS *Resolution* and HMS *Adventure* (1772 – 1775)

HMS *Resolution* and HMS *Discovery* (1776 – 1780)

During his life and after death, Cook has been viewed as a thorough, systematic, professional seaman, greatly respected by his crew and historians. Many of his navigation charts were used well into the 1800s due to his great skill and accuracy in cartography.

James Cook came from a poor background, his parents working as farmers and builders. As a young boy, Cook worked for two different farmers and was educated by the farmer's wives and in a small school. At the age of 17, Cook began work in a grocer shop (which is now underwater) in the fishing port of Staithes. He had an apprenticeship with colliers in Whitby, carrying coal in ships. During the voyages, Cook learnt sea exploration, ship handling and cartography, while studying mathematics between journeys. This laid a strong foundation for his great skill as a navigator in upcoming voyages. Cook was offered command of his own vessel in 1755, but he decided to enlist as an ordinary seaman in the Royal Navy and serve in the Seven Years War with France and Spain. He was promoted over time on various ships to become Master and had earned a reputation for excellent service.

He married Elizabeth Batts at the age of 34. Although married for 17 years, they spent little more than 4 years together due to Cook's extensive travelling. They managed to have 6 children, 3 of whom died in infancy.

Between 1763 to 1767, Cook conducted surveys in Newfoundland and Labrador. During this time he maimed a hand on an exploding powder horn, but continued to work industriously. Then in 1766, he observed an eclipse of the sun, passing his findings onto the Royal Society. He became a prime candidate to lead HMB *Endeavour's* journey to observe the transit of Venus across the Sun (see HMB *Endeavour's* journey support notes for more information). The Navy purchased the Whitby collier *Earl of Pembroke* – similar to the coal carrying ships first sailed by Cook. It was refitted and renamed *Endeavour* Bark to distinguish it from an existing HMB *Endeavour*, although over time it came to be known as HMB *Endeavour* anyway! The choice of a collier allowed for less damage to occur to the hull when sailing in shallow waters.

Cook had developed a reputation for treating his crew firmly, but fairly. He was concerned for his crew's welfare, making them clean and air their living areas regularly and eating certain foods to prevent the development of scurvy. When negotiating with Pacific Islanders, Cook adopted a paternalistic approach. He tried to establish superiority by demonstrating the power of firearms, but tried to be honest and gentle in his dealings with native peoples. Cook punished members of his crew if they stole from the people they visited or treated them poorly. Similarly, he asked chiefs to return any items stolen from his ship, but did not seek 'natural justice' if any of his crew or any native people were killed during violent skirmishes. This approach was upheld for most of his three exploratory voyages, although his death during the third voyage (HMS *Resolution* II) is believed to have resulted from faulty diplomatic dealings. Cook felt that European contact was not beneficial to the Pacific Islanders, with crews bringing disease and immorality (from a European perspective) to indigenous people. When 'taking possession' and naming various places during his voyages, Cook did not seek the consent of indigenous people.