



## William Bligh – a Brief Biography

### Quick facts

Born in Plymouth, England 1754. Died in London 1817.

Married to Elizabeth Betham, who bore him four daughters.

Sailed as Master on HMS *Resolution* II (1776 – 1780) with James Cook and captained HMS *Bounty* (1787 – 1789). He also sailed on HMS *Pandora*; HMS *Providence*, HMS *Assistant*.

Bligh was appointed Master on HMS *Resolution* II with James Cook at the age of 22. While he kept a journal of the voyage (complete with maps) James King wrote up the journal for publication and took credit for Bligh's work. His other famous voyage was on HMS *Bounty*, which was commissioned to collect breadfruit from Tahiti (see HMS *Bounty's* journey support notes for more information).

Bligh first went to sea as a cabin boy or captain's servant at the age of seven or eight on HMS *Monmouth*. Seven years later, he enlisted as a midshipman on HMS *Hunter*. He entered the Royal Navy at the age of 16 as an able seaman, studying navigation and hydrography to become an accomplished seaman. His apprenticeships at sea laid the foundation for his exceptional navigational skills, which helped him to find his way across 5 800 km of sea in an open boat after the mutiny.

As well as having a reputation as an exceptional navigator, he was reputedly a harsh disciplinarian. It is popularly believed that his strict approach was the cause of the mutiny on HMS *Bounty*, although there are differing accounts of how Bligh behaved. Certainly, he was a dedicated and determined leader.

When the mutiny occurred, Bligh and eighteen of his supporters were forced into the ship's launch (an open boat just over 7 m long). Using only a quadrant and ship's papers, he showed incredible navigational skill in steering and rowing the small boat over 5 800km to Batavia, Jakarta where he purchased a ship and returned to England. During this voyage, they survived by rationing pork, bread and water salvaged from HMS *Bounty*, catching oysters and birds and collecting vegetation along the way. Some crewmembers became ill from eating poisonous berries, but they recovered well enough to continue travelling. Bligh was so exact in his rationing that a small amount of food was left over when they landed in Batavia and Bligh returned to England. Bligh wrote his memoir (which was published in 1792) and returned to Tahiti to collect more breadfruit trees between 1791 and 1793.

After fighting in the Napoleonic war (at the Battle of Camperdown in 1797 and Copenhagen in 1805), Sir Joseph Banks recommended Bligh for Governor of New South Wales. He was ordered to disempower the military in the Australian colony. Ironically, Bligh was arrested in 1808 during the Rum Rebellion – the second mutiny of his career. After being held in custody for 12 months, he returned to London in 1810. He died in London in 1817.