

# Captain James Cook

James Cook grew up in a great age of sail. Although Europeans had sailed all the way around the world in the 1500s, much of what lay in the Southern Hemisphere remained a mystery. British seaman and commander James Cook changed all that. He was born in a Yorkshire village on 27 October 1728, and worked for a coal-shipping company at Whitby, on the Yorkshire coast.

James Cook was unusual in that he started out as a low-ranking seaman, but worked his way up to become a respected commander through his brilliance and skill as a sailor and navigator. In 1759, charts that he had made helped the British Army capture Quebec in Canada. A little later, Cook made accurate observations during an eclipse of the Sun.

All this made Cook the perfect commander of a planned expedition to the Southern Hemisphere. The British Admiralty said the expedition's purpose was to observe the planet Venus crossing in front of the Sun. But the expedition also aimed to explore lands that had not yet been claimed by Europeans.

On August 26, 1768, Cook's expedition set out from Whitby in the ship Endeavour. He took with him an astronomer and botanist, so they could record their discoveries and observations. In April 1769, the party reached the island of Tahiti in the Pacific. They observed the crossing of Venus as planned, and then carried on sailing across the Pacific.

Cook and his men then reached New Zealand and the eastern coast of Australia. These were new lands to Europeans, and Cook claimed part of Australia, New South Wales, for Britain. He also produced the first maps of these areas. The Endeavour struck the Great Barrier Reef off the coast of Australia, and nearly sank. But Cook led repairs of the ship, so it could return home.

In 1772, Cook set off on another voyage to the Southern Hemisphere. He took two ships this time, and sailed south towards Antarctica. But he never quite reached it because it was too cold for the crew to survive, and they had to head north again. Throughout this, and all his voyages, Cook showed great leadership. He had been a seaman himself, and therefore respected all his crew regardless of rank. He also prevented them becoming ill through scurvy by making sure the crew ate vegetables whenever they could.

Later on, in 1776, Cook made another voyage of discovery. This time, he was aiming to find the North-West Passage, which people thought connected the Atlantic and Pacific Ocean. Cook did not succeed in this, but he did explore the coasts of Washington and Alaska, and the islands of Hawaii. At first, Cook and his men were revered by the islanders. But then they stole one of Cook's small boats, and Cook tried to take an islander hostage. In the end, fighting broke out between the islanders and Cook's men, and Cook was killed on February 14th, 1779.

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## Understanding words:

- a Write the sentence in which you found the word 'observe'.
- b From that sentence, suggest what 'observe' means.
- c Write a new sentence using the word 'observe'.
- d Use a dictionary to find words with a similar meaning (synonyms) to 'observe'.
- e Draw a small picture showing what you think 'observe' means.

## Sequencing: Write these sentences in the correct order, so they make sense:

Cook started out as a seaman, and worked his way up to become a commander.

Although he did not find it, Cook did explore Hawaii, where he was killed in 1779.

Cook's third major voyage was to find the North-West Passage.

James Cook was born in Yorkshire, England, in 1728.

In 1768, Cook set out on a voyage of discovery to observe a transit of Venus in the Pacific.

Cook's second major voyage took him closer to Antarctica.

On the voyage, Cook also mapped New Zealand and some of Australia.

## Finding key words:

Read the story and underline the key words. Write the most important of these key words in a list. Write next to it a word that means a similar thing (a synonym). For example: Key word – revered  
Synonym – respected

## Get to the facts:

- 1 Where was James Cook born?
- 2 Which planet did Cook observe crossing the Sun?
- 3 Where did the Endeavour nearly sink?
- 4 What was Cook trying to find on his third voyage?
- 5 Where was Cook killed?

## Make a story...

Sinking ship

We had left the Australian coast and were heading north. I stood on deck, admiring the view. Just then, I felt the ship beneath me shudder. I heard a cracking noise. We had struck something underwater... (now complete the story)