

# Joseph Banks

February 1743 – June 1820

Joseph Banks was born in London, the son of a wealthy landowner. From boyhood, he showed an intensive interest in exploring the Lincolnshire countryside. He was educated at private schools but at 17 was inoculated with smallpox and became ill. Although he eventually studied at Oxford University, his studies were largely focused on natural history rather than the classics. He was very influenced by the lectures of a Swedish botanist Dr Daniel Solander who became his friend as well as teacher. They met at the newly established British Museum where Solander was classifying the collection using the new system developed by the Swedish botanist Carl Linnaeus.



Mr Banks, painted by Benjamin West (1738-1820)  
Engraved by J R Smith  
Courtesy National Library of Australia

At 21, Banks inherited the impressive estate of Revesby Abbey in Lincolnshire, becoming the local squire and magistrate. He was then one of England's wealthiest men – living on an inheritance of £6000 per annum. He undertook an expedition to Newfoundland and by 1770 was a confidant of King George III and a member of the Royal Society. On Banks's behalf, they encouraged the Admiralty to accept him and his retinue as passengers on the new expedition to the Pacific on the HMB *Endeavour*. His influence and a contribution of £10,000 led to an extensive re-organizing of the ship – he took a vast amount of equipment, a comprehensive library of over 150 books, special equipment for dissecting and preserving, microscopes, a new sea telescope, paper for drying plants, tin and wooden trunks for storage, beads and mirrors. It was commented at the time that he took over the Great Cabin and the captain's quarters but not the command of the ship itself!



Banks had an eight man team: he hired Dr Solander to accompany him for £440; the two artists Sydney Parkinson and Alexander Buchan; four servants trained in collecting specimens and his secretary Herman Spöring, a competent draughtsman who assisted Parkinson after Buchan's death. During the *Endeavour* journey, Banks was described as being intensely interested in everything and writing about it in great detail in his journals. He, Solander and Spöring made the first major collection of Australian flora – many new to science. The natural scientists worked in the Great Cabin from early morning until late at night, stopping only for meals and rough weather

Left: Mr Banks' cabin on HMB *Endeavour* Replica  
Australian National Maritime Museum

While sailing they fished by line and net and when there was no wind, Banks took his skiff and rowed around the ship collecting specimens to examine and to eat. He also showed great interest in the clothes, buildings, customs and languages of the native peoples they met during the voyage. The voyage took three years. Banks, Solander and his two servants were the only survivors from the original nine men.

Parkinson finished 955 drawings of flora and 377 of fauna before he died of dysentery. After the voyage, Banks spent £7,000 on the production of 734 copperplate engravings of the art made on the *Endeavour* but never published the collection in full. It was not until the 1980s that Alecto Historical Editions, in association with the British Museum, published the first complete colour edition of *Banks' Florilegium* from the original engravings.

[http://www.anmm.gov.au/webdata/resources/pdfs/schools/Joseph\\_Banks\\_teacher\\_resources.pdf](http://www.anmm.gov.au/webdata/resources/pdfs/schools/Joseph_Banks_teacher_resources.pdf)

Banks arrived back in England on 12 July 1771 and immediately became a celebrity. He and Solander had intended to go with Cook on his second expedition in 1772 and Banks had ordered changes to the *Resolution* for a party of twelve but the changes rendered the ship unseaworthy. When the Navy ordered it restored to its original state, Banks withdrew. Despite this, he became a leading light in natural history, advising on the development of the Royal Botanic Gardens at Kew. He was elected president of the Royal Society – a position held until his death – and created a baronet in 1781. His influence over science, natural history and even politics – it was his advice to create the settlement of NSW in 1788 – was enormous and lasted until the end of his life.



The Great Cabin on HMB *Endeavour* Replica  
Australian National Maritime Museum

