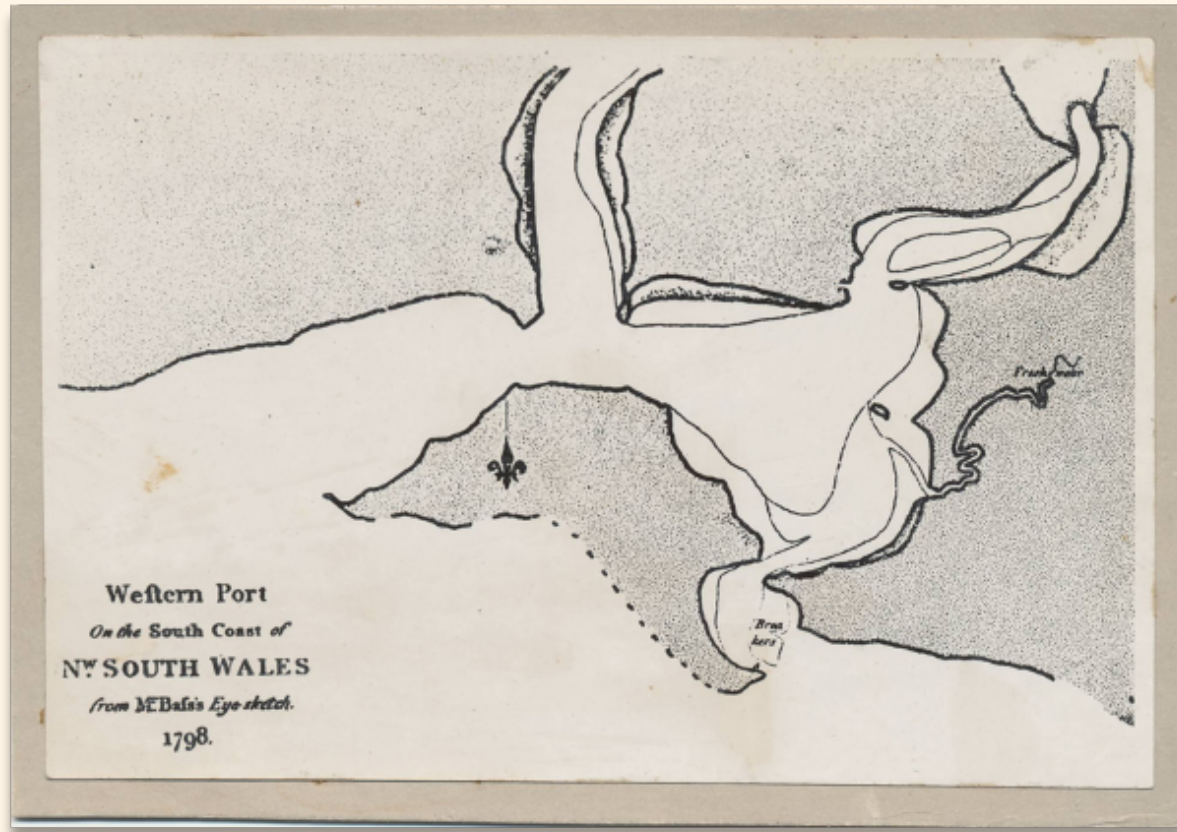


George Bass

Entered Westernport 1798



“Sinking of Sydney Cove was catalyst for Bass’s journey”

Naval surgeon and explorer, George Bass, had long harboured the idea that there might be a waterway linking the waters of the Indian and Pacific Oceans in the southern regions of Australia, north of Van Diemen's Land.

But it was the dramatic sinking of the 250-ton Sydney Cove just off the north coast of Van Diemen's land in February 1897 which was the catalyst for his remarkable journey of discovery to that region.

The story begins in Calcutta, when on November 10, 1796, the ship was en route to its namesake destination, Sydney Cove.

However, as December rolled in, heavy seas caused the vessel to spring a leak, and January's relentless bad weather only exacerbated the situation, requiring continuous efforts to man the pumps.

By February, off the north-east coast of Tasmania, the leak was winning the battle against their bailing efforts. With water up to the lower-deck hatches, Captain Hamilton made a fateful decision to ground the ship on a small island, now known as Preservation Island, part of the Furneaux Group north of Tasmania. Thankfully, this sheltered location allowed everyone to reach shore safely, and most of the cargo was salvaged, including the rum, which was securely stored, out of the way of the crew, on nearby Rum Island.

On February 28, 1797, with approximately 30 survivors left amidst the wreckage, a group of 17 men, led by First Mate Hugh

Thompson and including William Clark (a part owner of the vessel), three European seamen, and twelve Indian sailors, set off in the ship's longboat on a perilous journey to seek help in Port Jackson, a daunting 740 kms away. Misfortune struck again when a storm tore their longboat apart, forcing them to swim ashore, reaching the northern end of Ninety Mile Beach on the mainland continent.

Their only option was to walk towards Sydney, a small town of just 1,500 people, more than 700 kms to the north, keeping the shore in sight as much as possible. Their goal was to rescue their fellow survivors stranded on a tiny island in the Bass Strait.

“In an 8m open whaleboat, they rowed and sailed almost 2,000kms”

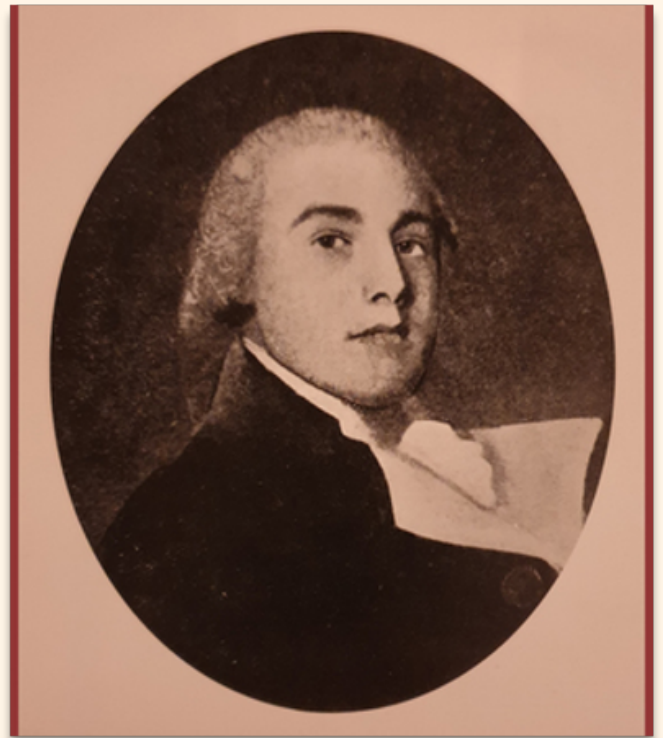
Of the 17, only three would ultimately reach Sydney after the arduous trek. Among them was William Clark, a 27-year-old Scottish merchant, who diligently documented their harrowing journey.

This remarkable tale stands as one of Australia's greatest survival stories. During the first weeks of their journey, the sailors managed to cover approximately 20 kms per day. After more than two months of relentless walking, on May 15, 1797, a fisherman spotted the three remaining sailors crawling along Wattamolla Beach, just 50kms south of Sydney.

Their epic journey had reached its conclusion, causing quite a stir upon their arrival in Sydney. Not only Governor John Hunter but the entire colony wanted to hear their incredible tale. Hunter despatched the schooner Francis and the sloop Eliza to Preservation Island to rescue the remaining survivors and salvage the ship's cargo. During the three months, while awaiting rescue, the survivors had subsisted on local short-tailed shearwaters, also known as Mutton birds, and constructed rudimentary shelters for themselves.

When the men reached Sydney, they reported that the strong south-westerly swell, tides, and currents suggested the existence of a channel connecting the Pacific and southern Indian Ocean, rekindling discussions about the possibility of a strait between New South Wales and Van Diemen's Land.

This report ignited George Bass's passion, prompting him to request permission to explore the southern Australian coast. His request was granted, and he was provided with a well-equipped open whaleboat measuring 28 feet 7 inches (8.7 meters), constructed from native banksia timber in Sydney. With six volunteers and six weeks' worth of provisions, Bass departed Port Jackson on December 3, 1797.



Over the next eleven weeks, despite challenging weather conditions, the small party rowed and sailed the whaleboat for approximately 1,931 kms. They passed Wilson's Promontory and ventured into Western Port. It was during this voyage that Bass confirmed his belief of the existence of a strait that separated the mainland from Van Diemen's Land, which would later be named Bass Strait.

On the evening of January 4, 1798, George Bass (aged 27) and his party entered Western Port through the eastern channel between Cape Woolamai and the mainland. They stayed in Western Port for twelve days, conducting repairs and re-equipping their boat. During this time, they explored and sketched the area, with Bass taking particular note of the abundant seal population on the western side of Phillip Island.