

AT SEA EN ROUTE TO AITUTAKI

WHO WAS JAMES COOK?

James Cook (1728 – 1779), was a British explorer and navigator famous for his three great voyages of exploration in the South Pacific Ocean and the North American coastal waters.

Cook, popularly called Captain Cook, was born in Marton, England, the son of a farm laborer. After spending his early years as an apprentice with a firm of ship owners, he enlisted in the British Navy in 1755. Within four years he had become a master, and he spent the years 1756 to 1767 charting the North Atlantic coastal waters off Newfoundland and Nova Scotia and the Saint Lawrence River below Quebec.

In 1766, the Royal Society hired Cook to travel to the Pacific Ocean to observe and record the transit of Venus across the Sun. Cook was commissioned as a Lieutenant and given command of HM Bark Endeavour, a Whitby collier vessel of the type he had begun his career with, and ideal in terms of storage capacity, strength and the shallow draught which were essential for extended voyages in reef-strewn oceans and archipelagos. He sailed from England in 1768, rounded Cape Horn and continued westward across the Pacific to arrive at Tahiti on April 13, 1769, where the observations were to be made. The transit was scheduled to occur on June 3, and in the meantime he commissioned the building of a small fort and observatory. The astronomer appointed to the task was Charles Green, assistant to the recently-appointed Astronomer Royal, Nevil Maskelyne. The primary purpose of the observation was to obtain measurements that could be used to calculate more accurately the distance of Venus from the Sun. If this could be achieved, then the distances of the other planets could be worked out, based on their orbits. The instruments of the time proved to be insufficiently accurate to achieve Cook's first objective and his second objective, to find the great southern continent, *Terra Incognita Australis* was, of course, never found.

Cook filled out the map of the Pacific so comprehensively that future expeditions were reduced to completing the fine details. His detailed observations and sensitive dealings with the people provided the world with an unbiased and astoundingly accurate picture of the islands, returning three times before sadly, Cook was killed during a clash with Hawaiians in early 1779.

