

Arthur Phillip: Uncovering the history of the man who helped build the foundations of modern Australia

By [Scott Bevan](#)

Updated 1 Jul 2015, 3:03am

Wed 1 Jul 2015, 3:03am



PHOTO: Most Australians know very little about Arthur Phillip, who helped lay the foundations of a country. (Supplied)

While most Australians recognise Arthur Phillip's name, few seem to know much about him. The ABC's Scott Bevan delves into the story behind the man who became the first governor of New South Wales.

Long before he set sail from Portsmouth in May 1787, in command of 11 ships filled with about 1,400 souls bound for Botany Bay and posterity, Arthur Phillip had led an adventurous life.

Phillip was born in Bread Street in London in 1738, amid the city's bakers and within earshot of the bells of St Mary-le-Bow church.

As the reverend George Bush told me, while guiding me through the historic church towards a commemorative bust of Phillip, hearing those bells marked young Arthur as not just a Londoner, but a Cockney.

[He had that salt water feeling in his veins.](#)

Sir Christopher Benson

Yet the call of the sea would soon drown out the peal

of those bells in Phillip's life. It is believed his father was probably pressed into the Royal Navy and died when Phillip was a small boy.

From tragedy came opportunity for Arthur Phillip. His formal education for a nautical career began when he was 12.

He entered the Charity School of the Royal Hospital for Seamen, down the Thames from London at Greenwich. Boys were allowed to enrol if their fathers had been killed or injured in the Navy.

At the school, their education centred around subjects such as mathematics and navigation. So, Phillip attained the skills that would transport him far from London.

For my own education on the ways of life on and by the River Thames, I had a wonderful teacher: Sir Christopher Benson.

Just as it did with Phillip, the Thames flows through Sir Christopher's life.

As well as being a former mariner, he had been the chairman of the London Docklands Development Corporation.

He explained how this city and river helped shape the young Arthur Phillip for a life on ships.

"He was clearly destined for the sea," Sir Christopher said.

"Somehow or another he had that salt water feeling in his veins, which I can understand."

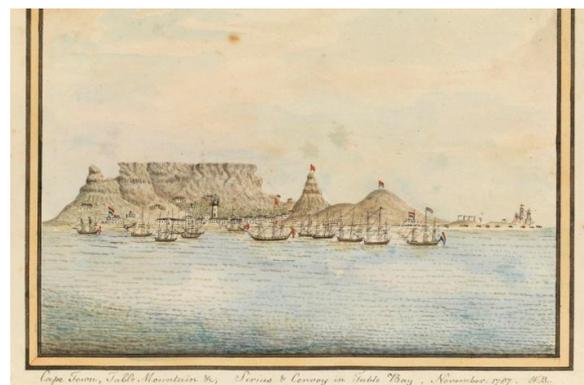


PHOTO: The First Fleet moored in Table Bay in Cape Town, South Africa before reaching Australia.

(Supplied)

Phillip sows seeds of agricultural knowledge

After leaving school, Phillip spent a short time on a whaling ship in the Arctic, before enlisting in the Royal Navy and staring at the terror of conflict during the Seven Years' War.

When the war ended, so did Phillip's time at sea — at least, for a while. The mariner became a farmer. He married and moved to a property near the village of Lyndhurst in Hampshire.

Angela Trend, a local councillor and historian, showed me Phillip's farm, where he grew crops and grazed cattle.

And, she added, it was there Phillip sowed the seeds of agricultural knowledge that he could call on many years later in New South Wales.

Surprising facts about Arthur Phillip



For such an influential person, so little is widely known about Arthur Phillip. Here are five things you may not know about the commander of the First Fleet.

"I don't think he could have done what he did in Australia without what he learnt here," Ms Trend said. In following Phillip's footsteps, you not only meet extraordinary people who believe he deserves greater recognition, but the memory of the man himself takes you on a twisting, often surprising journey. For that was how his life was.

Phillip's marriage ended and he left the farm. It is believed he served his country by spying in France, observing the French naval build-up in the ports and dockyards. Then, with the backing of the British, he joined the Portuguese Navy.

The Portuguese treat their maritime history with reverence. The national maritime museum is even housed in the wing of a magnificent monastery in Lisbon.

Phillip may well have seen part of that building when he arrived there sometime in late 1774 or early 1775. Inside this building, Portuguese Navy officer and historian Lieutenant Bruno Goncalves Neves showed me original letters and maps detailing Phillip's service, how the British sailor commanded Portuguese ships, and patrolled and fought against the Spanish in South America.

It was during this time, Lt Neves believes, Phillip would have had his first contact with convicts, transporting Portuguese prisoners in South America. When their ship was damaged in a storm, the convicts helped repair the damage.

"He saw there was use for these men for something positive, for rehabilitation, and probably this was the first experience he'd had with that, and he learnt a lesson from that and saw the opportunity to do the same thing in Australia," Lt Neves explained.

Phillip would have also seen slavery in South America.



PHOTO: The First Fleet in Botany Bay. In a letter, Arthur Phillip praised Sydney Harbour as a vital strategic point for the British Empire. (Supplied)

Phillip 'ahead of his time'

Michael Pembroke, a judge and the author of a recent biography, Arthur Phillip: Sailor, Mercenary, Governor, Spy, believes the British mariner would have been appalled by slavery, and that experience helped shape the future governor.

Justice Pembroke explained that when planning for the colony in New South Wales, Phillip declared "there shall be no slavery in a free land".

To the renowned lawyer and author, Geoffrey Robertson, that declaration showed how ahead of his time Phillip was.

"Australia had abolished slavery in governor Phillip's first law, 20 years before Britain," Mr Robertson said. By the time the British government had resolved to establish a colony in New South Wales, Phillip was in his late 40s.

Yet as those who have studied his life argue, he had the sum of experience and the temperament to lead a perilous voyage into the virtual unknown and establish a colony, populated by mostly convicts, on the other side of the globe.

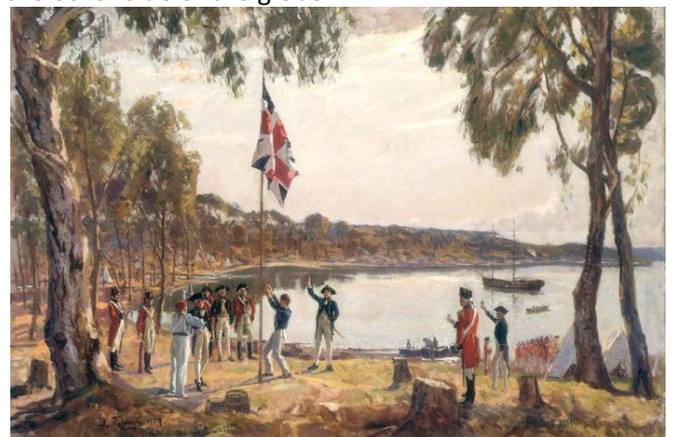


PHOTO: Arthur Phillip became the founding governor of the colony of New South Wales following the arrival of the First Fleet. (Supplied)

Still, to stand on the shore at Portsmouth and look out across the expanse of water, you can only imagine

how daunting the challenge must have seen to Phillip as he set sail, and how terrifying it must have been for all those below decks.

"It's like sending today a group of citizens against their will to establish a colony on the moon," Pembroke said.

Phillip saw this colony as more than a dumping ground for the wretched and unwanted of Britain. In Sydney's Mitchell Library, senior curator Louise Anemaat brought us face-to-face with history, retrieving from the archives one of the first letters Phillip wrote back to Britain.

In it, he praised Sydney Harbour's ability to cradle a thousand ships, revealing why he moved the colony from Botany Bay to Port Jackson, and that from the outset, this place was viewed as a vital strategic point for the British Empire.

Phillip an 'invader' to Indigenous Australians
For all the hopes Phillip held for the colony and those who had been sent to New South Wales, there were major challenges, including marines unhappy about the comparative freedom the governor extended to the convicts and the wilful moods of Mother Nature, including severe drought.

And there was the major issue of the upheaval and tensions the new arrivals had brought to the lives and traditions of the land's original inhabitants.

Phillip wanted good relations with the Aboriginal people, but as Indigenous leader Warren Mundine told me, "it was like people from Mars meeting people from Earth".



PHOTO: Aboriginals attack a First Fleet settler.
(Supplied)

He pointed out that the social experiment of turning around convicts' lives by giving them land may have been successful, but it was at the expense of the lives of those already on that land.

"There's no doubt in regard to ... Indigenous history, he was an invader," Mr Mundine said.

"He was a man who genuinely wanted to reach out to the Aboriginal people, but he was also a man trapped of his times.

"He was here as a military officer to build a colony and

make it successful."

After almost five years, the colony was growing healthier while Phillip himself was waning. The demands were taking a dreadful physical toll. Phillip resigned his commission and sailed for London at the end of 1792.

Sir Roger Carrick, a former UK High Commissioner to Australia and another admirer of Phillip, believes the founding governor wanted to return to New South Wales, to continue what he had started, once his health returned. To his disappointment, Phillip never did.

Phillip lived his final years in Bath and died in 1814.

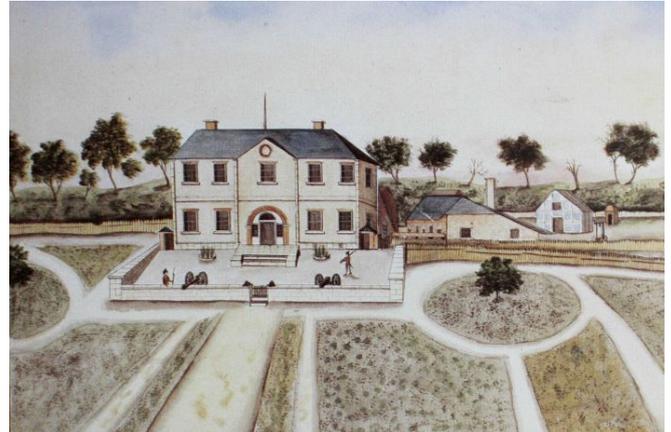


PHOTO: Governor Phillip's house in Sydney Cove. He sailed for London at the end of 1792, citing ill health. He never returned. (Supplied)

Modern Australia Phillip's 'greatest monument'
There was some debate about his death. Some believed he killed himself, a claim dismissed by others, including Sir Roger Carrick, as gossipy rumour. Phillip was buried in a church in the nearby village of Bathampton.

Mr Robertson believed Phillip deserved better recognition and that his remains should have been exhumed and buried in Sydney's Royal Botanic Garden, overlooking the harbour and what he helped create.

Mr Robertson looked into turning that dream into reality. The plan did not come off; rather, it deepened debate about Phillip and where he belonged.

Both Sir Roger and Justice Pembroke argue Phillip, as an Englishman, is buried where he wanted to be. More than 200 years on from his death, Phillip is remembered in Australia and Britain, everywhere from place names and statues to a plaque unveiled in Westminster Abbey last year.

As we stood in the space of that stunning building in the heart of London, looking at the memorial, Sir Christopher quietly said: "He was a great mariner, he was the person who really established modern Australia."

And that is perhaps the greatest monument to Phillip: modern Australia.

Yet it is up to all of us to ensure we inscribe that monument by replacing blank looks with greater knowledge about Arthur Phillip and what he achieved.