

AUSTRALIA'S FIRST FLEET – A ST HELENA SEQUEL

by Trevor W. Hearl

Though St Helena had an occasional role in assisting the colonisation of Australia - the hapless *SS Papanni* was taking 364 emigrants to Fremantle when it arrived on fire on 11 September 1911 - it played no part in the historic voyage of the celebrated 'First Fleet' in 1787. Yet it earned a footnote in the finale of that epic expedition when, in February 1792, the crew of the ill-fated HMS *Sirius* called briefly home-ward bound aboard the chartered Dutch brig *Waakzaamheid*. Their visit was recorded by Lieut. William Bradley RN in the journal he had kept for five fraught years 'down under' which, since its publication in facsimile in 1969, has added "a great mass of reliable historical fact" to 'First Fleet' research. Unfortunately a sketch he made at the time of "James Valley, St Helena 1792", showing the Dutch-flagged brig at anchor, is not so helpful, not least for bestowing a spire on St James' Church fifty years ahead of its time! But Bradley, the navigating officer of HMS *Sirius*, clearly hoped to give others confidence to approach the Island, as he said, "without fear".

HMS *Sirius* (Capt. John Hunter RN) had left Portsmouth on 13 May 1787, escorting ten storeships and transports carrying 756 convicts, their Royal Marine guards, doctors and mechanics, seeds and livestock, to establish a self-supporting colony in New South Wales. Taking the usual route to the East via the Brazil coast and Cape Town, despite occasional convict attempts to seize control of one or other of the transports, they reached Botany Bay on 20 January 1788. But the Commander, Capt. Arthur Philip RN, preferred to site the settlement at Port Jackson, which he named after the Home Secretary, Viscount Sydney, and there attempted to weld his unpromising band of reluctant colonists into a productive and peaceful community.

But provisions soon ran short, and HMS *Sirius* was sent to the Cape, sailing eastwards via Cape Horn, circumnavigating the southern oceans to return to Sydney in May 1789 with what supplies it could muster. Its next task, to reconnoitre Norfolk Island with a party of convicts, ended in disaster. Wrecked on a coral reef, there they remained stranded for a year until a ship, the *Waakzaamheid*, could be hired to bring them back to Sydney and thence to England. It left in March 1791, with 125 of the *Sirius*' crew aboard. Their trials were by no means over; the ship was such a slow sailor that provisions failed before they reached Batavia and re-victualling at Mindanao involved them in a "serious affray". Eventually, sick and storm-battered, they reached the Cape to be nearly wrecked in the Bay, but for prompt action by Captain Bligh's ships, *Providence* and *Assistance*, outward bound on their breadfruit voyage. Encouraged by getting news from England from the *Pitt Indianian* they made ready to 'roll down to St Helena'.

Lieut. Bradley's Journal for 1792

At Cape Town: January 12th, 1792

After having refitted the ship & waited several days for the recovery of the Sick, we were under the necessity of leaving 5 of them at the Hospital; the others were taken on board but by no means perfectly recovered. The wind being unfavourable it was the 18th before we could get to sea. [...] We had the wind from the So to the SW till in the Lat of 23° when we got the SE Trade which in general was moderate & fair weather. Made the Island of St Helena the 4th of February & anchored off James's Valley at Noon the same day.

In standing towards St Helena it is best to keep to the SE of the Island before you get close in with it. It may be approached without fear. The only Landing places are on the NW side of the island & the anchoring ground off the Town being not more than one mile & the outer edge of the Coast not more than two miles, it is necessary to have the shore close aboard as you haul around the NE end of the Island (Barn In which you may know coming from the SE by a very ragged hill on the E side & about a mile to the S'ward of it, with a small Sugar Loaf top & a Look out house on it, where they hoist Signal flags & shew balls; before you get the length of that Hill you will see the top of Sugar Loaf Hill with a Flag S'Post on it shewing over the land between this look out & Barn Pt. When you pass Barn Pt, which you may do at a Cable length distance, haul close up for Sugar Loaf Pt which runs steep down to the Sea from the Post beforementioned & is about 2 miles to the N'ward of Barn Point. It is necessary to keep close in with Sugar Loaf Pt if the Trade wind is fresh, otherwise I think not nearer than $\frac{1}{2}$ a mile as the wind baffles very much when the Trade is not brisk.

As you approach Sugar Loaf Pt, you open the road which bears from it about SW&W pr Compass: between 2 & 3 miles. A small distance to the S'ward of Sugar Loaf Pt is Rupert's Valley (or rather gulley) off which you have Anchorage if pressed to it. The hill forming this Valley to the SW also forms James's Valley to the NE. It has a square Fort near the water & another Fort or Battery on the top & is called Munden's Pt. The anchoring ground is off James's Valley. 12 or 15 f^{ms} is a very good birth [sic], you will then be rather more than $\frac{1}{4}$ of a mile from the beach.

We found watering very convenient, there being a wharf & crane built farther out than that one formerly used for the purpose, & proper moorings laid down off it for a Boat to go & lay with stoppers to veer in & haul out occasionally by stern & head ropes. The Boat lays in deep water & the Crane projecting well over the Boat the Empty Casks are got up, & full ones struck over, with great ease & expedition. It very seldom happens that the Surf is so great as to prevent watering, but that may always be seen.

On coming in with Sugar Loaf Pt it is necessary to send a Boat a head & inform the Fort which is near the water on the pt what Ship it is, & they convey that in-

formation as to the Nation, Force &c by signals to James Valley. Capt Hunter was saluted with 11 guns on his going on shore & on embarking to go to Sea.

We found every thing very scarce & dear except Fish, occasioned by their having had two very dry seasons following. Variation Obs in the road 15.30 W.

Monday 13th [February]

At 3pm sailed from St Helena & passed to the W^{ward} of Ascension the 20th. We saw a Ship in there but did not speak with her. We crossed the Line the 27th of Febr'y in 22.18W Longitude & kept the Trade fresh till the 1st March when it became light & variable & sometimes squally before we got into the NE Trade which we did on the 5th of March in Latde 5.09N & 25°Wt Longitude. We were carried to the westward to 46 degrees of Longitude & in the parallel of 28½°N Latitude when on the 30th of March the wind backed round to the E^{ward} & SE & soon became variable as generally found in the Western Ocean.

April 8th

Passed the Meridian of Corvo 31 Leagues to the Northward of it: spoke an American ship from Bristol by whom we heard all was peace in England.

Sunday 22nd [April]

At 4am saw the Lizard [.] last Lunar Observation [.] At 9am saw Portland.

Acknowledgement:

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