

# A Journey to the Dutch East Indies

MARTIN WOODS EXPLAINS THE IMPORTANCE OF RARE EARLY DOCUMENTS, ON LOAN TO THE LIBRARY, RELATING TO THE EXPLORATION OF THE DUTCH EAST INDIES AND AUSTRALIA

BELOW LEFT  
Johan de Baen  
*Six of the Gentlemen  
Governors of the Hoorn  
Chamber* 1682  
oil; 123.0 x 140.0 cm  
Courtesy Westfries Museum,  
Hoorn, the Netherlands

BELOW RIGHT  
Gregory van Raalte  
A replica of the seventeenth-  
century sailing ship  
*Amsterdam* in Amsterdam  
harbour  
Photo: iStockphoto #1573566

IMAGINE BOARDING A SAILING SHIP OF the Dutch East India Company in the 1700s and heading through the English Channel bound for the Indies. Your ship is the *Diemermeer*, a heavily armed cargo vessel that the *Vereenigde Oost-Indische Compagnie* (VOC) built at its shipyards in Amsterdam. At about 40 metres in length, the *Diemermeer* is laden with textiles, wine, stone ballast, cannon, domestic goods and many chests of silver and gold coins, for trade with the principalities and kingdoms of the East. The whole cargo would be worth several million euros in modern money. The ship has already made several voyages to the Indies, though the skipper is a first timer. Your survival, and that of your fellow crew members and passengers, depends on the skill of the skipper and navigator, aided by a few navigational devices and some paper and calfskin (vellum) sea charts. If the destination is reached in the prescribed five to eight months (shipwrecks are not uncommon and mortality from disease is high), the charts will be returned to their pewter canisters and

later used on the return voyage. If not and some mishap were to befall the *Diemermeer*, the VOC would investigate the disaster, one of over 300 losses recorded by the company over its lifetime (1602–1800). As it happened, and it is graphically described on one of these charts, the *Diemermeer* was very nearly another such statistic.

Though there are many printed reproductions of Dutch maps, little remains of the working charts used on board to guide the ships. Hand-drawn charts referred to by the skippers of VOC ships, especially those from sea voyages to the East Indies and Australia, are extremely rare and valuable. None is to be found in Australian museums or libraries—the four navigation charts, which Kerry Stokes AO has loaned to the Library, are unique artefacts of this era of exploration. Drawn on vellum in the 1730s and still in perfect condition, the charts came to light in the 1980s, through the publisher Nico Israel of Amsterdam.

The four vellum navigational charts were issued with other equipment to ships' captains





LEFT  
Unknown cartographer  
*Chart of the Java Sea* c.1700  
(detail)  
Loan courtesy Mr Kerry Stokes AO

BELOW  
Homann Erben  
*Der Hollaendisch-Ostindianischen Compagnie weltberuhmte Haupt-Handels und Niederlags-Stadt Batavia ...* 1762  
coloured map; 45.8 x 54.1 cm  
Maps Collection  
nla.map-rm270

bound for the East Indies. Three of the charts were drawn in 1735 in Amsterdam by Isaac de Graaf (1667–1743), the official cartographer of the VOC, and were used for voyages to the East Indies, and one of these has been associated with a known voyage, thanks to remarkably clear remnant pencil tracks of the voyage drawn by the skipper, losing his bearings on several occasions as he struggled to keep the ship on course in a storm. One of the three is a detailed chart of the Netherlands ports, and the other two are of the Indian Ocean (including western and northern Australia). The fourth chart is of the Dutch bases in Java and Borneo and was drawn about the same time in the cartographic workshops of Batavia (now Jakarta), the centre of Dutch trade and exploration in the East. Together, the charts are an excellent set of discovery documents for Australia and the region. They depict the VOC experience from home country to colony, showing how difficult it was in the period before chronometers to accurately determine position.

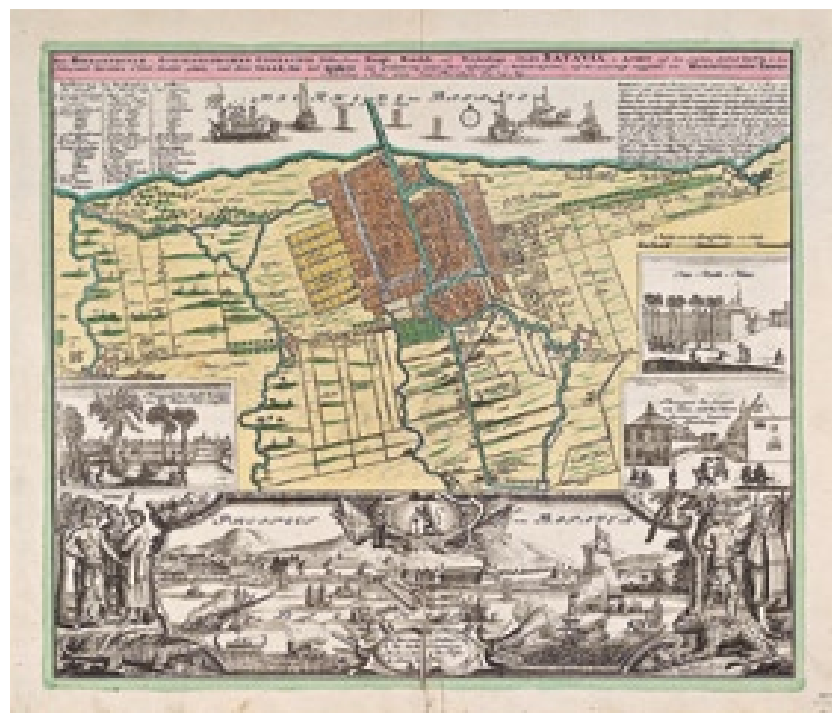
In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the VOC was the largest trading and shipping enterprise in the world, operating in countries from the Netherlands to China and Japan. The history of the 'first multinational' began at the end of the sixteenth century when Dutch merchants were excluded from the lucrative trade in spices. The response by the leaders in the seven Dutch provinces that were not under the sway of Spain was to break the Portuguese monopoly and establish a joint venture of their

own: so in 1602 they formed the VOC, which received a monopoly on all Dutch trade and shipping.

Although a business, the company operated as an arm of government. In the name of the Dutch Estates-General (the Dutch parliament), the VOC could wage war on other nations, enter into treaties with foreign monarchs, build forts and trading posts, appoint administrators and enlist soldiers. Thus, the interests of the VOC were not only those of merchants and

craftsmen and their families, but also of the Dutch nation, which in the mid-1700s was the wealthiest and most urbanised region of Europe. Through Amsterdam, the Dutch dominated world trade, securing a vast colonial empire and operating the largest fleet of merchantmen of all Western nations.

Knowledge is power, and the informational hub of VOC revolved around a single individual, the chief cartographer, who controlled the company's strategic mapping. From 1705 until his death in 1743, the position was held by Isaac de Graaf. The charts were drawn at the height of his





ABOVE  
Isaac de Graaf (1667–1743)  
*From the Netherlands to the  
English Channel* (detail)  
Loan courtesy Mr Kerry Stokes AO

powers, with navigational refinements based on 30 years of voyage accounts and charts. By the time de Graaf assumed the mantle of chief cartographer, VOC navigators had mapped most of the eastern hemisphere, including parts of New Holland (Australia). De Graaf and his team of mapmakers in Amsterdam supplied the outward bound ships with navigational charts, supplemented with the knowledge supplied by returning skippers. They would draw reference charts of all countries, islands, coasts and other areas, providing important knowledge of the ports, towns, islands and hazards essential for a safe journey. The cartographers were sworn to secrecy and forbidden to disclose any information regarding their activities to third parties. The charts, containing the entire geographical knowledge base of the VOC, were returned to East India House in Amsterdam for safe-keeping. There most remained until the disbanding of the VOC in 1800.

In the 1730s, there were over 160 VOC ships in regular use, with nearly 400 voyages to Asia completed each year. The volume and value of freight was immense. Indian textiles, tea and tin in China, copper from Japan, gold from Persia and much more made its way through Asia and between Asia and Europe. The focus to Australia's near north was on

the myriad Indonesian islands, where the most valuable of all cargoes, spices, seemed ever abundant—cloves from the Ambonese islands, mace and nutmeg from Banda and pepper from the gardens of Jambi, Palembang, Bantam and Malabar. It was virtually impossible to move an Indonesian clove without the VOC's permission.

Voyages to the East Indies generally started from Amsterdam's Port Texel and progressed through the English Channel to Madeira. One of the three de Graaf charts on loan to the Library was the official Dutch East Indies Company navigation chart of the North Sea and the Netherlands, providing detailed coastal charting of the Netherlands and England. Exiting the Channel, ships made for Tenerife, off the Moroccan coast, then past the Cape Verde Islands, south-easterly across the equator, eventually arriving at the Cape of Good Hope. Here the small-scale Indian Ocean charts would be taken from their pewter canister. These maps of the open sea indicate the key navigational points to be referenced until the Sunda Strait (between Java and Sumatra) was reached, with careful warnings to avoid the west Australian coast.

One of the two Indian Ocean charts is clean, as if unused. The other was drawn and signed by de Graaf in 1735 and was used in 1745 and 1746 on the *Diemermeer*, skippered by Christiaan Boord, when it sailed for the Malabar Coast and Ceylon (now Sri Lanka), before reloading and continuing to Batavia. This chart bears De Graaf's inked instructions, which are clear in their intent: proceed to the south of the Cape of Good Hope until the trade winds are encountered, sail east to the islands of St Paul and Amsterdam (roughly equidistant from Africa, India and Australia), sail north-east towards the Sunda Strait or, in this case, north to Ceylon first. However, as many had found previously, adhering to these instructions was easier said than done. The ship's progress during the two journeys is told through the pencil tracks faithfully recorded by Boord and includes the most hazardous part of the journey, from the Cape across the Indian Ocean.

It can be seen from the chart that this skipper, like others before him, took great care to record his progress, including observations on the weather, the dates and daily position of the ship. What emerges clearly in these on-board recordings are clues to the difficulties the Dutch faced in estimating longitude.

The chief problem facing Boord on the leg from the Cape to Amsterdam and St Paul Islands, in the middle of the southern Indian Ocean and traditionally the northward turning point, was not the weather but lack of knowledge. Although latitude could be calculated quite accurately, the measurement of distances east–west was an inexact science and was one of the reasons why Dutch ships occasionally ran aground on the reefs and shoals of Australia’s west coast.

In the eighteenth century, East Indiamen sailed virtually all year round, such was the volume of cargo. The *Diemermeer* was one of several that departed the Cape in February 1745. Having made good time with the prevailing winds, it is clear from this chart that Boord, on his first voyage as skipper to the Indies, fell well short of these tiny islands. This was always a challenge for a first-time skipper, who could not rely on past observation of prevailing winds and currents. The chart tracks reveal that the ship then spent several days circling to the east before finally arriving at Amsterdam Island on 10 April. The delay was compounded as the ship turned north and caught a southerly storm. The chart shows that the ship, identified as the *Diemermeer* from the dates on the chart, encountered the storm in the mid-Indian Ocean, causing it to turn and run, resulting in a further, more significant delay.

The tracks show that, having paused on Amsterdam Island for a day or so to search for food and water, Boord made fair progress northward, but at about 29 degrees south the *Diemermeer* apparently encountered the last of the strong winds that blow south of the equator from October until April. For nearly a week, the ship sped southward. The abating winds finally allowed Boord a gradual tack to the north-east, before resuming the northerly route to Ceylon. He must have been greatly relieved when the winds died down; the skipper’s punishment for loss of ship or cargo, presuming he survived, would be dismissal and prosecution.

In all, Boord had lost nearly a month. When he eventually arrived at the Malabar coast, where there was a Dutch base at Cape Cormorin (Tamil Nadu), the longitude he recorded placed Boord far to the west of his actual position. There is no record of the ship’s voyage other than this chart, but it may be

assumed that any delay was costly, both in terms of the health of the crew and trading arrangements at port.

A second sequence of daily positions from Ceylon, starting the following May, is also present on the chart. We do not know if Boord was the skipper, but the same hand is evident on the chart. It took the *Diemermeer*, now presumably laden with textiles from Coromandel and pepper from Ceylon, past Sumatra and through the Sunda Strait safely to Bantam, about 80 kilometres west of the administrative capital of Batavia on Java, and where its cargo was traded on, before returning to the Dutch Republic with spices.

According to printed information, we know that the *Diemermeer* was wrecked on its homeward voyage off New Guinea. The chart was most likely handed in at Batavia, where there was a cartographic workshop. The survival of Boord’s tracks remains as mysterious as the man, for whom there is no record after the loss of the *Diemermeer*. It was customary to transfer the skipper’s track information at Batavia onto paper charts, while the vellum chart was cleaned for re-use. The survival of these tracks, such a rare occurrence, helps us gain insight into the difficulties of navigation, and the early charting of our region.

DR MARTIN WOODS is President of the Australian and New Zealand Map Society, and Curator of Maps at the National Library

BELOW  
Isaac de Graaf (1667–1743)  
*From the Cape to Sunda Straits*  
c.1735 (detail)  
Loan courtesy Mr Kerry Stokes AO

