Cook relics – real and imagined

Abstract

The significance of James Cook’s contribution to 18th century exploration was recognised in his own lifetime and he is rightly considered as one of the great figures in maritime history. His three voyages of discovery produced a wealth of scientific knowledge, which combined with his charts and the work of his voyage artists, revealed enormous new parts of the globe – valuable documents which found their way into libraries and other collections, where they are now duly treasured. But Cook’s appeal is such that it has generated the collecting of other treasures and today even seemingly mundane objects associated with the great explorer are highly prized. This paper looks at the power of objects to inspire strong connections to famous people and events, a power which has uncovered treasures, both real and imagined.

Let me say what a pleasure it is to be here at the National Library – one of Australia’s great cultural institutions holding a rich collection of Cook treasures, as outlined by some of the earlier speakers. Today I’d like to talk a little about my role as a curator and maritime archaeologist at the National Maritime Museum in Sydney, and to share some of my experiences with objects relating to captain Cook.

I think possibly, I have the best job in the world! In broad terms my area of responsibility covers the period from the first documented European landing in Australia in 1606, to Federation in 1901, with a specific focus on European exploration. An important part of my job is to research objects in the collection. The history of an object (its provenance) is enormously important to the value we place on it (significance) and how we relate to it. Objects in my collection area are displayed in the Navigators gallery and, in 2004 when I joined the museum, these included a cannon, several pieces of iron ballast from the Endeavour and a large piece of wood – the history of which serve as an introduction to some of the issues surrounding Cook relics.

Australians feel a special bond with the Endeavour as the ship Cook used to chart the east coast of Australia, and the voyage is intrinsically linked with the foundation of British settlement. But our history could have been very different, when, in June 1770, the Endeavour struck a reef (now known as Endeavour Reef) placing the mission and all aboard in grave danger. Needing to lighten the ship in order to float free, Cook ordered the jettisoning of six cannons, a quantity of ballast and other material. This action proved effective and 24 hours after hitting the reef, the Endeavour was hauled off. The damage to the vessel was subsequently sufficiently repaired in the Endeavour River to allow the voyage to continue, ultimately ensuring the successful completion of the voyage and the continuation of Cook’s career.

Details of the incident were well documented by Cook and others, and in the 19th century there were several attempts to locate the material thrown overboard on Endeavour Reef, but it was not until 1969 that new technology meant the site could be located and the material raised. Part of the breakthrough came as a result of the increasing recreational use of SCUBA (Self Contained Underwater Breathing Apparatus) in Australia, leading to spectacular discoveries such as the remains of the Dutch ships Batavia and Vergulde Draeck, and the realisation that important parts of Australia’s history lay preserved under water.
In the early 1960s, an American, Dr Virgil Kauffman, President of Aero Services Corporation, had visited northern Australia as part of geological surveys carried out by his company, and during a fishing trip south of Cooktown he heard the story of *Endeavour*’s stranding and became interested in the idea of finding the site. As a result of his work Kauffman was familiar with the use of magnetometers – sensitive instruments designed to identify magnetic anomalies in a particular search environment. While it had always been known that Cook’s ship had struck the southern edge of Endeavour Reef, the reef is over seven kilometres long, making the task of locating the stranding site all but impossible. To add to the problem, after 200 years in tropical waters, all the material thrown overboard from the *Endeavour* would be covered in coral. However, by using a magnetometer set to pick up the magnetic signature created by *Endeavour*’s discarded iron cannons and ballast, Kauffman believed he might find the site. Several more years were to pass before he could commit his full energy to the project, but in the interim he collected information including the results of an aerial survey of Endeavour Reef which indicated a likely anomaly on the southern edge of the reef.

In 1968 Kauffman approached the Academy of Natural Sciences in Philadelphia which was planning an expedition to the Great Barrier Reef to study and collect tropical fish. Together with his friend General Alfred Wolf, Kauffman proposed financing the expedition which, in addition to collecting fish for scientific research, would attempt to locate and raise the *Endeavour* guns and other material. The Academy agreed, and an expedition team finally left Cairns in early January 1969.

The team brought a magnetometer and included an experienced operator who quickly drew up a strategy for searching the area where the stranding was believed to have occurred. This involved trailing the magnetometer behind a small boat close to the edge of the reef and within a few days a strong anomaly was located which, when inspected by divers, proved to be one of *Endeavour*’s cannons. Over the course of the following week all six of the *Endeavour*’s guns were located, along with a large number of iron ballast blocks and a small quantity of stone ballast. The news of this spectacular discovery was announced publicly on 13th January 1969 and remains one of the great incidents in Australian maritime archaeology. After conservation by the Defence Standards Laboratories in Melbourne, the six cannons were presented by the (then) Prime Minister John Gorton in March 1970 to representatives of the Commonwealth Government, the governments of Queensland and New South Wales, the government of New Zealand, the National Maritime Museum, London, and the Academy of Natural Sciences, Philadelphia.

Up until fairly recently, the cannon presented to the Commonwealth was displayed at the National Maritime Museum in the *Navigators* gallery but it is now held here in Canberra at the National Museum of Australia. The iron and stone ballast from the *Endeavour*, as well as an assortment of fragments from the ironwork on the gun carriages and concretions removed from the cannons during conservation, form part of the National Maritime Collection. In 1971 an anchor lost during the *Endeavour* stranding was recovered by Melbourne businessman David Hume and is now displayed at the James Cook Museum in Cooktown.

As a curator and maritime archaeologist I had always wanted to dive on Endeavour Reef to see the site for myself, and in January 2009 I was finally able to do this as part of a National Maritime Museum project (in collaboration with the Silentworld Foundation) to the Great Barrier Reef. The primary goal of the expedition was to locate the remains of the colonial vessel *Mermaid* wrecked on a reef south of Cairns in 1829, with a second goal of inspecting Endeavour Reef if time permitted. As luck would have it, we located the remains of the *Mermaid* within the first few days and had completed much of the site survey when bad weather caused a halt to the work. The break allowed us to motor north to Endeavour Reef where, despite the worrying course of a tropical low in the vicinity, we were able to dive on the site of the stranding.
Diving on Endeavour Reef was both an extraordinary experience as well as something of a surprise. Space and weight were always important issues for Cook as he attempted to strike a compromise between the necessity of carrying sufficient supplies for long voyages and maintaining the good sailing qualities of his ships. On the *Endeavour* voyage Cook reduced the amount of iron ballast carried in the bottom of the ship, arguing that the weight of stores more than compensated for the reduction. As the stores diminished during the voyage, the *Endeavour*’s stability was maintained by bringing aboard stone ballast. The pieces of stone ballast recovered in 1969 consist almost entirely of a greenish sedimentary stone known as Marlborough schist and originates from Ship Cove in Queen Charlotte Sound, New Zealand - the anchorage which Cook utilised throughout his Pacific voyages. The only other type of stone ballast identified is an igneous stone which almost certainly comes from Raiatea in the Society Islands.

The first surprise revealed by visiting the stranding site is that Cook was extremely lucky not to have wrecked the *Endeavour* completely. For whereas much of the southern edge of Endeavour Reef is marked by a sudden transition from deep water to shallow reef flats, the reef which the vessel struck is actually a small isolated reef separated by deeper water from the main edge of Endeavour Reef. Had Cook’s vessel struck the main reef edge it would almost certainly have broken up. Visiting the stranding site allowed me to appreciate how differently the *Endeavour* voyage might have ended.

The second surprise was how vibrantly beautiful the underwater reef was, where the vessel struck! It was known that the 1969 expedition that raised the *Endeavour*’s guns had used explosives to break up the concreted mass of iron ballast and we expected to find the reef in poor condition. By contrast however, we found beautiful coral formations teeming with brightly coloured fish – a strong indication that the reef had survived and rebuilt.

The final surprise was to find that not all the material thrown overboard in 1770 had been raised by the 1969 expedition. In the two dives we made on the site we were able to identify several large ballast stones which appeared to be like the stone from Raiatea, as well as a large piece of lead sheeting. Looking at the *Endeavour* stone ballast raised in 1969 I had always thought the pieces were rather small. Diving the site and finding considerably larger ballast stones suggest that the 1969 team were focused on recovering the cannons and may have raised only conveniently sized ballast stones.

As an archaeologist I have often experienced excitement when discovering and excavating some fragment of history. For me, as the soil is brushed away and the object revealed, it is as if the centuries between the object’s first usage and the present, disappear, and I am transported through time. For me, and I think for many people, looking at the objects recovered from Endeavour Reef has the same dramatic impact. But why is this? What is about an old iron gun which fascinates and strikes a chord that reverberates with meaning for visitors to the museum?

In a journal article entitled *Artefacts and Active Voices* the archaeologist Mary Beaudry describes the way in which an object may function as a symbol and ‘...is a linkage in the process of communicating about the unknown by means of the known’. The anthropologist Nicholas Thomas has also recognised the power of an object to prompt emotion or to recall a narrative, and it is precisely this phenomenon which lies behind the collection and display of objects in museums. At the heart of all museum collections is the recognition that objects have an inherent power to link us to past events, and it is exactly that aspect which transforms an *Endeavour* cannon into an object which links museum visitors to the drama enacted on Endeavour Reef in 1770.

A crucial element in this power of the Endeavour Reef objects lies in their unbroken history. All aspects of the initial loss and later recovery are well documented and essentially the
In the Dominion Museum, Wellington, is what purports to be the ‘figure-head’ of the *Resolution*, bought from the effects of Admiral Isaac Smith, after his death in 1831, by the 5th Viscount Galway, and presented to the Museum by his great-grandson, the 8th Viscount, Governor-General of New Zealand, in 1941. It is a carved wooden head, cut off at the neck, of a particularly savage animal (a wolf?), which may correspond with the forepart of the figure described as a sea-horse by W Laird Clowes in his discussion of Holman’s painting [*Geographical Journal*, LXIX (1927), p.230]. If this is authentic, then there is something at least still left of the great ship.

Intrigued by this information, I contacted the museum in New Zealand for pictures of the carving and duly received photographs of an elaborately carved hound’s head with streaming ears, gaping jaws and bared teeth. At the same time I requested a digital image of the painting referred to, which now hangs in the Dixson Galleries in the State Library of New South Wales.

Zooming in on the high resolution image, the figurehead of the *Resolution* is clearly a horse but bears no resemblance to the carved hound’s head – thereby apparently undermining Beaglehole’s hope that something of the ship survived. And there the matter may have ended had I not also contacted the National Maritime Museum in London to order copies of all plans of the *Resolution*. There are two sets – the first showing the vessel in November 1771 when it was still named the *Marquis of Granby* and the second dated March 1772 showing alterations made to the newly named *Resolution*. What stood out immediately when looking at the first plan was the carving of a hound’s head on the tiller of the *Marquis of Granby*. Surely this was a drawing of the carving in the Te Papa Museum - but how to prove it?

Based on the two plans it appears that the hound’s head carving originally decorated the *Marquis of Granby*’s tiller and that the tiller was mounted on the quarterdeck. However, as part of the alterations to transform the ship for its new role, the position of the tiller was changed and it was fitted below deck.

Museum documentation for the carved head states ‘...the *Resolution* was wrecked in 1792 and the salvage sent to England where it came into the possession of Admiral Isaac Smith’. Based on this information it would appear that while its position changed, the original carved tiller was retained. Cook’s cousin Isaac Smith joined the ship in December 1771, serving as one of the Master’s mates and actually lived in the space where the tiller was mounted. Could this explain why he might want to acquire the carving?

Unfortunately there are just too many uncertainties and the Te Papa carving is an example of an object whose link to the past is a matter of conjecture. While the Te Papa museum’s note regarding the wrecking of the *Resolution* in 1792 echoes the story of a ship once used by Cook and condemned at Newport (Rhode Island) in that year – the facts of the matter remain unproven, leaving a tantalising question over the carving. The examples of the objects from Endeavour reef and the carved hound’s head are instances where a link to Cook exists, at least to some degree; however, in the case of some ‘Cook relics’, the object serves as a substitute or assumes a relationship on the basis of little evidence. The most obvious example of a substitution is the modern full-scale replication of the *Endeavour* which, in the absence of the real ship, provides an opportunity for people living today, to experience some of the elements of Cook’s world.
Regarding the matter of assumed relationship, let me briefly refer to my archaeological experiences at Pitcairn island – home of the *Bounty* mutineers. Geographically the island is quite remote and, prior to going there, I thought it likely that strong archaeological evidence of the recycling of *Bounty* material would be present in the landscape. However, what I discovered was quite the opposite! The *Bounty* mutiny has been a perennial source of public fascination generating numerous books (and later films) over two centuries which in effect created a currency in *Bounty* artefacts.

The first visitors to the island in the early 19th century were given *Bounty* objects such as the Kendall II chronometer and Bligh’s copy of Hawkesworth’s *Voyages* as gifts, but with the expansion of whaling in the Pacific and corresponding increasing contact between the Pitcairners and visiting crews, objects from the *Bounty* became an important currency of trade – causing Lieutenant Lowry of HMS *Sparrowhawk* to note in 1839 …’Little is now left of the *Bounty*, as everyone that touches here tries to get a part of her.’ The trade quickly depleted the island of *Bounty* objects to the point that by the 1950s, the Pitcairners were manufacturing tokens stamped BOUNTY – 1790 out of copper sheathing from the vessel. Almost inevitably, whether by mistake or design, the demand for *Bounty* artefacts also led to instances where objects with absolutely no connection with the famous vessel were sold as *Bounty* objects – assuming a mantle of legitimacy over time.

The same process applies to some objects associated with Cook and in a world of rapid internet search, some Cook treasures simply do not stand scrutiny. As I mentioned earlier, as an archaeologist I have sometimes felt transported through time during moments of excavation, but I should just say that there are also many moments of frustration when parts of the jigsaw puzzle are missing or refuse to fit! This is an occupational hazard for all of us who care about the past and seek meaning in objects, and it is the price we pay for those rare Eureka moments when all the fragments are finally assembled, and we are privileged to see the past clearly.

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