



# THE HMS *SIRIUS*

The shipwreck of the HMS *Sirius* is one our most significant links to a vessel of the First Fleet. Located in Commonwealth waters, south east of Kingston Pier in Slaughter Bay, Norfolk Island, the archaeological remains of the HMS *Sirius* are the only known in-situ remains of a vessel of the First Fleet.

The HMS *Sirius* was inscribed on the National Heritage List on 25 October 2011, the 225th anniversary of the commissioning of the HMS *Sirius* and the appointment of Arthur Philip as Captain and commander of the First Fleet.

The shipwreck of the HMS *Sirius* is of outstanding heritage value to the nation as evidence of one of the most defining moments of Australia's history.

The shipwreck of the HMS *Sirius* is the 97th place to be included in the National Heritage List.

## Guardian and lifeline of early colonial Australia

The HMS *Sirius* was the guardian or Flag Ship of the First Fleet during its 15 000 mile, six month journey from England to Australia in 1787-1788. The arrival of the HMS *Sirius* and the first fleet at Port Jackson on 26 January 1788 is one of the most important moments in Australia's history and is celebrated each year as Australia Day.

Following its First Fleet voyage the *Sirius* became the main defence for the colony of New South Wales and its primary supply line and communication link with Great Britain.

By September 1788 the shortage of food and supplies at Sydney Cove was so great that the *Sirius* was dispatched to Cape Town, South Africa to purchase additional supplies, especially flour and medicines.

Under the command of John Hunter, the *Sirius* survived a treacherous nine month round trip to bring much needed supplies to the colony. On its return the ship was closely examined and spent the following four months undergoing much needed repairs from storm damage and other defects.

During this time the situation for the colony became critical as the settlement failed in its early attempts at self-sufficiency. The HMS *Guardian* was dispatched from England in September in 1789 to re-supply the colony but it failed to reach Australia. By February 1790 the shortage of supplies at Port Jackson was acute and the settlement was in danger of starvation and abandonment.

To avert disaster, Governor Philip dispatched the *Sirius* and the HMS *Supply* to Norfolk Island with convicts and Royal Marines in the hope that the conditions on the island would be more conducive to self sufficiency and relieve pressure on the remaining government supplies. The *Sirius* was then to proceed to China to purchase desperately needed supplies for the colony.



## Loss of the *Sirius*

The HMS *Sirius* sank on 19 March 1790.

Norfolk Island is an isolated volcanic outcrop lying 1500 kms north-east of Port Jackson. The island's coastline consists of sheer surf lashed cliffs up to 90 metres high and water depths drop off dramatically to more than 2000 metres.

This geography proved a daunting experience for early European navigators. After a stormy passage, the *Supply* and *Sirius* arrived at Norfolk Island on 13 March 1790 and managed to send the marines and most of the convicts ashore at Cascade Bay before being forced out to sea by bad weather.

Both vessels moved to the other side of the Island opposite the main settlement at Kingston, hoping to find a more sheltered anchorage, but strong winds again threatened them after they entered the bay. The *Supply* managed to turn around and headed out to safety but the *Sirius* was stranded in the bay, with onshore winds and currents making it impossible for the ship to avoid a reef lying 200 metres from shore. Unable to tack against the prevailing wind, the *Sirius* was thrown backwards on to the reef and its hull was damaged beyond repair.

The loss of the *Sirius* left the early settlers at Norfolk Island and Sydney Cove feeling utterly devastated. Early settlers considered the ship their insurance against starvation and adversity. The colony in Sydney was left with barely three months worth of supplies and was in danger of collapse and abandonment. In spite of the loss of the *Sirius* the decision by Governor Phillip to move soldiers and convicts to Norfolk Island proved correct and ensured the colony's survival until further supplies arrived from England.

## A link to early colonial government and leadership

The careers of the first three governors of the colony of New South Wales are closely associated with the *Sirius*. Governors Phillip (1788-1792), Hunter (1795-1800) and King (1800-1806) all sailed as senior officers on the *Sirius*.

## A remarkable “time capsule”

The shipwreck of the HMS *Sirius* has outstanding heritage value to the nation because of its potential to yield information that could contribute to a greater understanding of Australia's history of early European settlement. As the shipwreck is relatively free from the effects of human disturbance after salvage ended in 1792 the remaining fabric of the *Sirius* and associated artefact assemblages represent a “time capsule” of cultural life from the period leading up to 1790.

In an international context the HMS *Sirius* also represents one of the few located examples of an 18th century British warship. Exhibiting the use of experimental construction techniques in the period following the American war of independence. Along with HMS *Pandora* it is one of only two British naval ships from this period located in Australian waters.

The shipwreck and its associated relics have been protected from damage or disturbance under the *Commonwealth Historic Shipwrecks Act 1976* since 1984.

## Revealing new information about early colonial history

Ongoing analysis, research of the shipwreck, relics and naval records have revealed new information on the construction of the vessel and provided information relevant to the debate as to why Botany Bay was chosen as a penal colony. Convict ships are depicted as being rotten old tubs and contemporary reports' criticisms of the *Sirius*, by some of the officers and crew, have led historians to assume the ship was unsuited to the voyage to New South Wales. This had led some to argue that the settlement was merely a temporary measure to relieve England's overcrowded gaols.

Naval records indicate that by the time the *Sirius* was ready for its journey with the First Fleet the cost for refit and supplies came to £7000 which was expensive for the time and indicative of a thoroughness of preparations for the naval contingent of the expedition.