

Matthew Flinders' Cat:

Trim (2006)

(page checked February 2026)

This famous historical cat lived at the end of the eighteenth century and the start of the nineteenth and was renowned for having sailed around the globe, as well as circumnavigating Australia during the voyages of exploration of his master, Captain Matthew Flinders, RN.

Flinders had already made one voyage in 1790 to the southern continent, which he hoped to prove was in fact a continent and not a group of islands — the prevailing view at the time. On board the ship he captained on his next voyage, the *Roundabout* (actually *Reliance*— for some reason Flinders liked to refer to his ships by different names), was a pregnant female cat from Stepney, in London; and somewhere in the southern Indian Ocean, between the Cape of Good Hope and Australia's Botany Bay, she gave birth to kittens. That was in 1797. Being born at sea meant that the youngsters very soon became used to the motion of a ship, developing an impressive sense of balance and, unlike most cats, becoming indifferent to water and getting wet.



A remarkable kitten

One kitten stood out from the rest by reason of his energy, agility and daring. He was jet black but with a white 'star' on his chest, a white underlip and feet that 'seemed to have been dipped in snow'. Flinders took to him straight away and named him **Trim**. (The name derives from Laurence Sterne's novel *Tristram Shandy* in which Uncle Toby's manservant James Butler, who attended to his master 'with great fidelity and affection', went by the name of Trim.) Flinders later wrote a little essay about his cat, *A Biographical Tribute to the Memory of Trim*; it lay hidden for many years in the archives of the National Maritime Museum, Greenwich, England, until published for the first time in 1973. It is from that essay that we've learned much about Trim, and Flinders' feelings for and admiration of him.

He observes that, as a kitten, Trim's energetic activities sometimes led to his falling overboard while the ship was in harbour, but he was unfazed, had no fear of water and seemed to be naturally able to swim. When a rope was thrown for him he 'took hold of it like a man and ran up it like a cat', wrote Flinders. He was soon able to mount the gangway steps quicker than any member of the ship's crew. 'He grew up to be one of the finest animals I ever saw,' observed his master. 'His tail was long, large and bushy . . . his head was small and round — his physiognomy bespoke intelligence and confidence — his whiskers were long and graceful and his ears were cropped in a beautiful curve.' Trim normally weighed between 10 and 12 pounds (4½ to 5½ kilos).

Vanity

This paradigm of grace and beauty did have one flaw, according to Flinders: 'He was, I am sorry to say, excessively vain of his person, particularly of his snow-white feet. He would frequently place himself on the quarterdeck before the officers, in the middle of their walk, and spreading out his two white hands in the posture of the *lion couchant*, would oblige them to stop and admire him.' Despite this perceived character flaw, though, Trim became a firm favourite on board *Reliance*. He soon learned to jump over a seaman's clasped hands; everyone enjoyed instructing him in this art, so that he reached 'a pitch of perfection'. As he learned so quickly, the sailors taught him various tricks; one favourite was to have him lie flat out on his back on the deck, with his four feet stretched out, and he would remain in this rather uncomfortable position until given a signal to rise. However, if left there too long, 'A slight motion of the end of his tail denoted the onset of impatience,' and his friends would bring the

lesson to a close. The cat had 'an habitual passion for everything that was in motion', be it a musket ball tied with twine and twirled around, or a ball trundled back and forth along the deck.

According to Flinders, Trim took an interest in many aspects of the running of the ship, from hoisting the sails (he would run aloft faster than any of the men when — but not until — the order was given) to astronomical observations, when he studied the motion of the timepiece and its ticking 'with much earnest attention'. If there was a lot of fuss and haste going on for some reason and he became confused, he mewed and rubbed against people's legs until someone's attention was gained - which it always was, 'yet he never lost his dignity'. Indeed, he liked to maintain it whenever possible by sitting in an officer's cap!



Dining-table tricks

But it was at the dining table that Trim came into his own. He was always first to be waiting for dinner in the gunroom — not at the table, but on it; however, he had good manners and would make no sound until everyone else had been served. Then he would politely, with a gentle paw, request his allowance; that, he considered, should be a morsel from the plate of each person. He would go round the table in this fashion and almost everyone would oblige him; he had his own way of dealing with anyone who was not forthcoming. Waiting for a suitable moment, perhaps when conversation was being enjoyed, he would simply whip a piece of meat off the fork of an unsuspecting crewman with amazing dexterity; it was done so cleverly that it usually brought admiration rather than anger. The cat would quietly eat his prize, and then move on to the next person.



He wasn't averse to a further meal with the servants after he had dined with his masters. The gunroom steward, in particular, a large and burly man called William, was completely besotted by Trim and would talk to him as though to a human child. Flinders noted the following 'conversation' between the pair one day over dinner, after the cat had been especially bold in claiming his piece of meat from one officer.

'Do you know, master Trim, that you have behaved very ill?'

'Me-ow!'

'It is very well to play your tricks with them that know you, but you should be more modest with strangers.'

'Mew!'

'How dare you say that I gave you no breakfast? Did I not give you all the milk that was left, and some bread soaked in it?'

'Mou-wow!'

'No meat! What! — you grow insolent?'

'Me-ew.'

'Well, if you'll promise to behave better, you shall have a nice piece off the cold shank of mutton for your supper, you shall.'

'Mew-wew'

'Gently, master Trim; I'll give it you now, but first promise me on your honour.'

'We-we.'

'Come then, my good boy; come up and kiss me.'

Trim jumped on William's shoulder, rubbed against his cheek and took the meat piece by piece from his mouth.

The cat made another friend during an expedition to explore the coast of New South Wales, when he and an Aborigine called Bongaree became well acquainted and very fond of each other. Bongaree would supply water from the cask 'on demand' when Trim mewed to request a drink.

Adventures in England

In 1800 the *Reliance* sailed back to England via Cape Horn and St Helena, thus enabling Trim to complete his circumnavigation of the globe. 'Many and curious were the observations he made in various branches of science, particularly the natural history of small mammals, birds, and flying fish, for which he had much taste,' wrote Flinders. But Trim was unfamiliar with England, and was not used to a home built on solid ground; so when he was placed in the care of a woman in London while Flinders prepared for his own wedding to his fiancée Anne, there were problems! The cat's 'minder', who was supposed to tutor him in the arts of living on dry land, didn't know what she had taken on.

Rather than using the door, Trim preferred to use a sash window on an upper floor as his exit from the house, so he could 'spy out' the land first as though on a ship. When it was raining one day and the window was closed, he simply bolted through it! When the startled woman entered the room, as she later told Flinders, she exclaimed, 'Good God, Trim! Is it thee? They said thou wast a strange, outlandish cat, and verily I think thou art



the devil . . .' She knew Trim's master would pay for the damage; but he must have had a shock when he also had to replace her best china! Trim spotted a mouse and managed to charge into the cupboard after it, scattering cups and saucers in all directions to smash on the floor. When she opened the door to let him out, he nearly frightened her to death by jumping on her shoulder, and she was of a mind to beat him for his misdemeanours; but when he rubbed his whiskers against her chin and began to purr, she relented.

Obviously alternative accommodation had to be found, so Trim travelled to London by stage coach to stay with one of Flinders' friends, impressing his fellow passengers with his good behaviour on the journey and earning their admiration. But his stay there was short, too; the friend couldn't cope with the cat's ways, telling his owner: 'I never saw such a strange animal. I am afraid of losing him; he goes out in the streets in the middle of the day . . . I fear someone will carry him off.'

Return to the South

The next voyage to the South Seas was on the *Investigator* (named the *Spyall* by Flinders). Trim was back in his element, being made a fuss of by the men and establishing himself as undisputed master over all the several dogs that were also on board. Flinders made circumnavigations of Australia in each of 1801, 1802 and 1803, accompanied throughout by his cat. 'Trim had frequent opportunities of repeating his observations and experiments in his favourite science, natural history, and exerting his undiminished activity and zeal for the public good,' wrote his master. On one occasion, in the Gulf of Carpentaria, the climate was so humid and fresh food so short that Trim seemed to be becoming prematurely old: he lost weight and his fur began to go grey. However, his many friends were delighted to find that when the climate improved, so did his health, and by the time they next reached port he had regained his ample figure and his jet-black fur.

Ultimately *Spyall* became completely unseaworthy, so Trim and Flinders boarded the *Janty* (real name *Porpoise*) for the return to England. Unfortunately it struck a coral reef on 17 August 1803 and was wrecked. The survivors, including Flinders and his cat, swam ashore to Wreck Reef Bank, in the Coral Sea, where they had to survive two long and difficult months. Lively as ever, Trim helped to entertain the men and keep up their spirits until rescue arrived in the shape of a schooner Flinders called *Minikin* (actually HMS *Cumberland*) and another larger, more comfortable vessel that would be returning to England via China. Trim could have gone on that, but preferred to stay with Flinders on the schooner — which proved to be leaky.

The voyagers had to put in for repairs at the then French island of Mauritius; but unbeknownst to them England and France were at war, and the travellers were accused of spying and taken prisoner. Trim, Flinders and another officer were shut in a room, although the cat did sometimes manage to evade the sentry on the door to go and explore — until his wanderings became too frequent and he was shut in after supper.

Imprisoned

The prisoners were moved to be with others in La Maison Despeaux, where a French lady took a fancy to Trim and offered to take him in as a companion for her little daughter. Suspecting that some trickery was going on involving the guards, Flinders agreed with great reluctance; but after only a fortnight the island gazette carried the news that poor Trim was nowhere to be found and a reward of 10 Spanish dollars was offered for his safe return. Flinders was heartbroken; he said he would willingly have given 50 dollars for the cat's return, but ' . . . all research and offers of recompense were in vain; poor Trim was effectually lost and it is but too probable that this excellent unsuspecting animal was stewed and eaten by some hungry black slave . . .

'Thus perished my faithful intelligent Trim! The sporting, affectionate and useful companion of my voyages during four years. Never, my Trim, "to take thee all in all, shall I see thy like again"; but never wilt thou cease to be regretted by all who had the pleasure of knowing thee. And for thy affectionate master and friend, he promises thee, if ever he shall have the happiness to enjoy repose in his native country, under a thatched cottage surrounded by half an acre of land, to erect in the most retired corner a monument to perpetuate thy memory and record thy uncommon merits.'

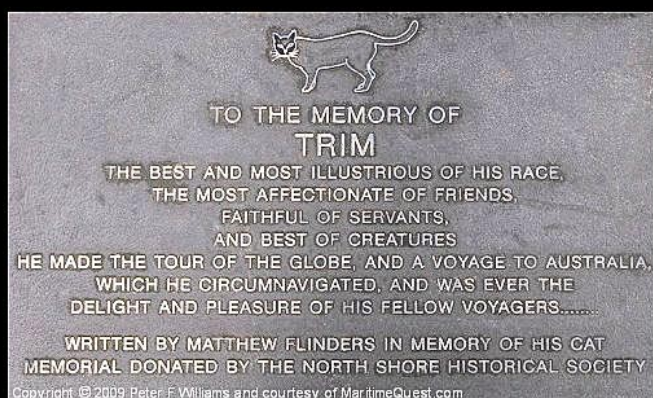
Flinders was held for seven years, being permitted to return to England and his wife — who had hardly seen him since their marriage — in 1810, at the age of 36. His captivity had been harsh and had aged him beyond his years;

with rapidly deteriorating health he survived only four more years and died in 1814. It's unlikely that he was ever able to erect the memorial he had promised for his cat.

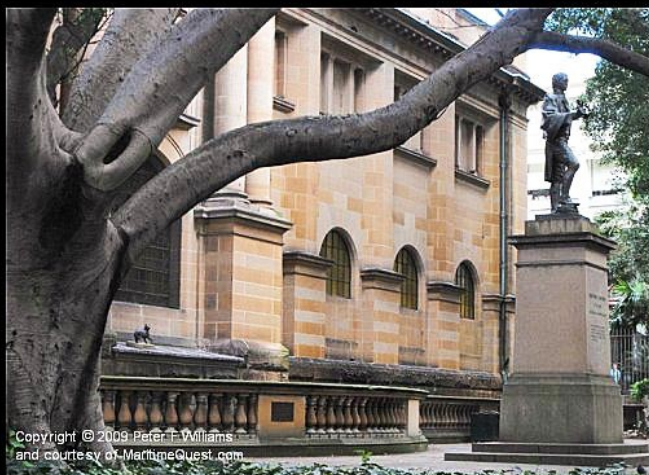
The Flinders quotations are taken from his original biography of Trim, reprinted by Nauticalia in 2005. The illustrations are by Annette Macarthur-Onslow. A text-only version of Flinders' account is available at the [Internet Archive](http://www.internetarchive.org).

Tributes to Trim and his master

Some 200 years later neither Matthew Flinders nor his faithful companion Trim is forgotten. A bronze statue of Trim by sculptor John Cornwell stands on a window ledge of the Mitchell Library in Macquarie Street, Sydney, Australia; it's directly behind the statue of his master that was erected in 1925 when his grandson donated Flinders' papers to the library. The cat statue, commissioned by the North Shore Historical Society and unveiled in March 1996 by Rear-Admiral David Campbell, is very popular, and the library café is named after Trim. A montage of four photos by Peter F Williams is seen below at the left, and our thanks go to Peter and MaritimeQuest.com for their permission to use them.



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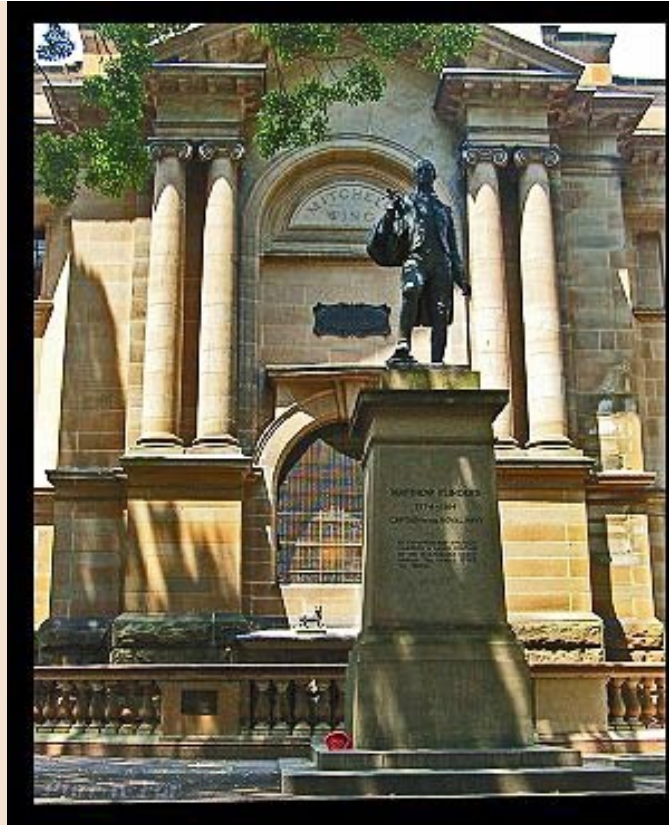


Trim

MATTHEW FLINDERS' INTREPID CAT
WHO CIRCUMNAVIGATED AUSTRALIA WITH HIS MASTER 1801 - 1803
AND THEREAFTER SHARED HIS EXILE ON THE ISLAND OF MAURITIUS
WHERE HE MET HIS UNTIMELY DEATH

ERECTED BY PUBLIC SUBSCRIPTION BY TRIM'S ADMIRERS
AND
UNVEILED BY REAR-ADMIRAL DAVID CAMPBELL AM, RAN
ON 28 MARCH 1996

Sculptor John Cornwell
State Librarian Dagmar Schmidmaier State Library of New South Wales
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In March 2006 a statue of Flinders was placed in the marketplace of his home town of Donington, Lincolnshire in eastern England; his beloved cat is at his feet (*below*). There is also a memorial window to Flinders (but without Trim) at the Church of St Mary and the Holy Rood in Donington: an image can be seen at [Flickr](#).



2014 Bicentenary

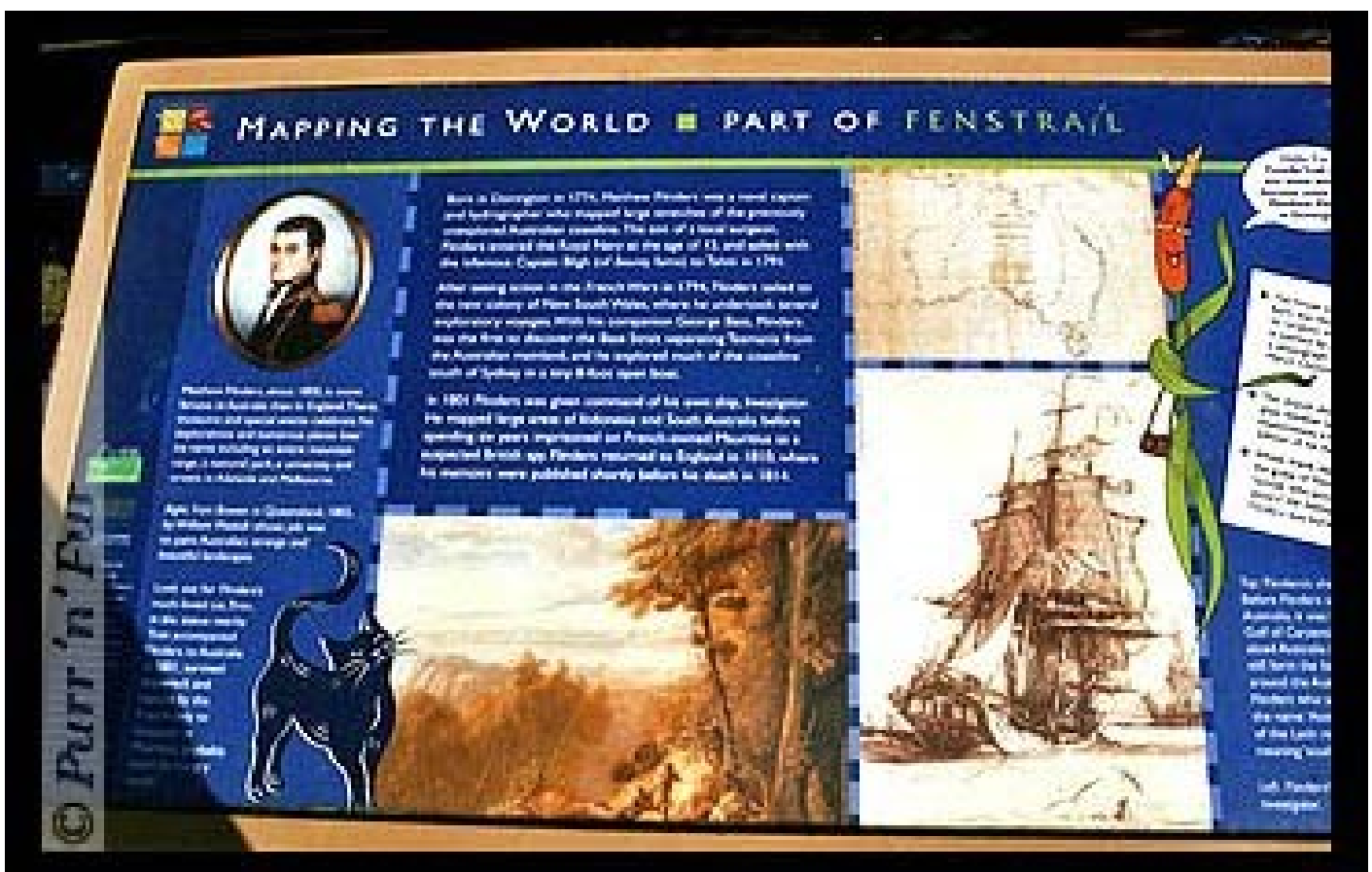
July 2014 saw the bicentenary of Matthew Flinders' death, and to mark this anniversary a life-sized statue of him, accompanied of course by Trim, was commissioned. Fashioned by sculptor Mark Richards, the work was unveiled at Australia House in London on 18 July by HRH Prince William; then it was transported overnight to its final destination, the main concourse of Euston Station (*photos below*). Why there? Flinders was buried in 1814 at St James, Hampstead, but that was demolished in the 1950s and it's thought that the grave lies beneath what is now the station. The sculpture shows Flinders in appropriate early-eighteenth-century dress, with dividers in hand, half kneeling over a chart — of Australia, of course! Trim is sitting beside him. In 2016 a full-sized replica of the statue was unveiled at Flinders University in Adelaide, South Australia.

In 2019 it was announced that Flinders' grave had been discovered during excavations for the HS2 rail line. See [this link](#) (Jan. 2019).



Links and further reading

- ❖ National Maritime Museum: [The Flinders Papers](#), letters and documents about the explorer Matthew Flinders
- ❖ Australian Dictionary of Biography: [Matthew Flinders](#) ([archived copy](#))
- ❖ State Library of New South Wales: [From Terra Australis to Australia](#)
- ❖ Flinders Memorial: [Memorial Statue](#) ([archived copy](#))
- ❖ *Guardian*, Jul 2014: [Matthew Flinders bicentenary: statue unveiled to the most famous navigator you've probably never heard of](#)
- ❖ Mark Richards (sculptor): [The Matthew Flinders Memorial Statue](#) ([archived copy](#))
- ❖ [Flinders Statue](#) blog
- ❖ The bronze statue of Flinders with Trim at Euston station was cast at the Castle Fine Arts Foundry in the small mid-Wales village of Llanrhaedr ym Mochnant, a fact that was [proudly announced](#) after its unveiling on the village community's Facebook page in July 2014
- ❖ Your Sculpture, Mar 2015: [Matthew Flinders and Trim the cat at Euston Station](#)



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