

Phillip Parker King

Master mariner of the
Australian coast



By Kevin Kenneally and Cathie Clement

In 1820, Lieutenant Phillip Parker King's survey vessel, His Majesty's cutter *Mermaid*, careened in a sheltered bay on the north-west Kimberley coast and the ship's carpenter inscribed 'HMC MERMAID 1820' on a large boab tree. Two hundred years later, the significance of Careening Bay to Western Australia's science and conservation history and the role of Indigenous crew members, is being recognised and honoured.



In today's modern world, it is difficult to appreciate the courage, skill and ingenuity of maritime survey work in remote parts of the world. For some, the contribution to science and the significance of the charts achieved by these journeys have often been somewhat overlooked but today their discoveries are being recognised.

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Main A boab tree at Careening Bay inscribed 'HMC Mermaid 1820'.

Photo – C. Done

Inset top right Phillip Parker King's Chart of Camden Bay to Vansittart Bay.

Image – Courtesy United Kingdom Hydrographic Office

Inset right A sketch of HMC *Mermaid* under repair at Careening Bay by Phillip Parker King.
Image – Courtesy Mitchell Library, State Library of New South Wales

Above A sketch of HMC *Mermaid* by Phillip Parker King.

Image – Courtesy Mitchell Library, State Library of New South Wales

Above top Boongaree Island, Prince Frederick Harbour.

Photo – Robert Wyatt/Alamy

Above centre Portrait of Boongaree by Phillip Parker King.

Image – Courtesy Mitchell Library, State Library of New South Wales

Phillip Parker King, at the age of 25, was appointed to complete the exploration of the 'Coast of New Holland' started by the famed Captain Matthew Flinders and create accurate charts to guide ships safely through the dangerous waters.

Flinders had returned to London in 1810, having circumnavigated New Holland (Australia) on HMS *Investigator*, without fully exploring and surveying its coastline, in 1801–1803. Botanist Robert Brown had accompanied Flinders on that voyage and made extensive plant collections, most of which were new to science.

It was considered desirable for the continent to be circumnavigated by someone competent to complete the task and there was some urgency in getting King's expedition underway since France was showing renewed interest in the southern hemisphere.

King was a Lieutenant in England's Royal Navy and was well connected as the son of Philip Gidley King, third Governor of New South Wales, and the godson of Arthur Phillip, the first Governor.

HISTORIC VOYAGES

The 84-ton cutter *Mermaid* was purchased for £2000. The vessel was small, built of teak, 56 feet (18 metres)

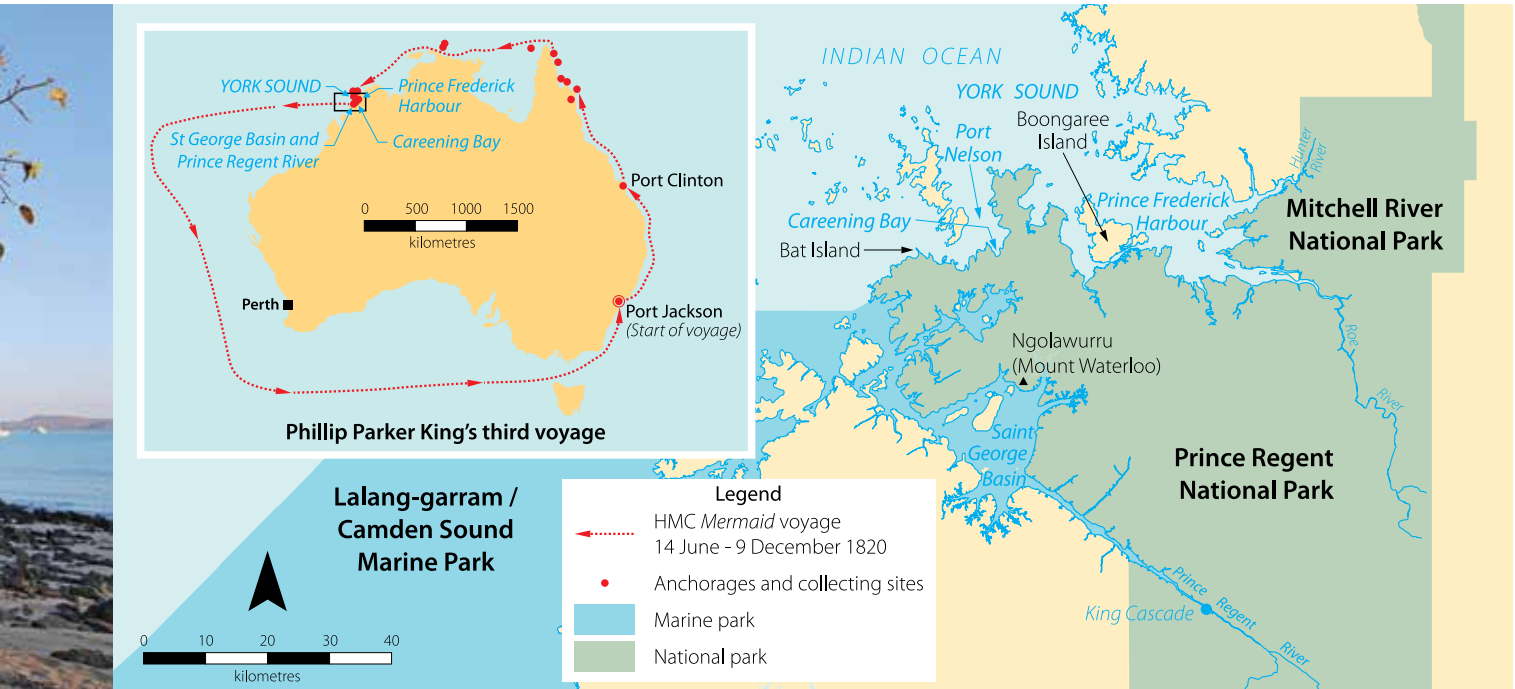
from stem to stern and a draught of 9 feet (3 metres). She had a large hold and King was confident that the vessel could carry stores for 20 men over a lengthy voyage. He remarked ruefully that there was barely room for the mess table in the only day cabin.

An Admiralty requirement was that King ascertain whether any river was 'likely to lead to an interior navigation into this great continent'. In addition, the Colonial Office had instructed him to collect information about climate, mountains, flora, fauna, timbers, minerals, the 'natives' and possible articles of trade.

King and his crew were to complete four voyages around Australia and one to Tasmania in HMC *Mermaid* and His Majesty's brig *Bathurst* between December 1817 and April 1822. These voyages were extremely hazardous with numerous groundings, near shipwrecks on reefs, raging tides, legendary whirlpools, a strange flora, encounters with wildlife, and numerous contacts with the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders.

INDIGENOUS KNOWLEDGE

In December 1817 King accepted the services offered by Boongaree, a member of the Eora tribe, whose territory surrounded Sydney Harbour. Boongaree was good company and,



having sailed with Flinders, he understood naval life. Flinders said he was a ‘worthy and brave fellow’ and extremely useful when making contact with other tribes. Boongaree’s knowledge of natural history and understanding of native foods, herbs, poisonous plants and other strange things likely to be encountered on a voyage also helped to ensure the survival of the ship’s crew.

In recognition of such services, King named Boongaree Island in his honour. The island is located in Prince Frederick Harbour on the Kimberley coast. Boongaree returned to his people at the conclusion of the second expedition.

A MERMAID ASHORE

The officers and crew aboard the *Mermaid* for the third voyage (14 June to 9 December 1820) comprised King as captain, John Septimus Roe and Frederick

Above left Careening Bay.
Photo – Carolyn Thomson-Dans/DBCA

Above right Portrait of Phillip Parker King.
Image – Courtesy Mitchell Library, State Library of New South Wales

Phillip Parker King (1791–1856)

King was born on Norfolk Island, educated privately in England and, in 1802, went to the Royal Naval Academy at Portsmouth. He was involved in the Napoleonic war against the French and was mentioned in dispatches for his navigation and hydrographic skills.

After his 1817–1822 exploration and surveys along the Australian coast, he returned to England and was employed on full pay at the Admiralty. King and John Septimus Roe completed a series of high-quality navigation charts of the Australian coast. King’s surveying and scientific contributions were recognised by his election to prestigious organisations. In London, he was made a Fellow of both the Royal Society and the Linnean Society.

Between 1826 and 1830 he took overall command of an expedition in *HMS Adventure*, sailing with *HMS Beagle* (whose company later included Charles Darwin) to chart the coasts of Patagonia, Chile and Peru. The Chilean Navy recognised King’s work, in 2008, with the erection of a memorial cairn. His work was said to be ‘worthy of the highest praise’ and his achievements were compared to navigators such as Ferdinand Magellan.

In 1832, after an absence of eight years, King returned to Australia. The King family owned New South Wales properties managed by his wife Harriett. Between 1839 and 1849, King was Commissioner of the Australian Agricultural Company. In 1850, he retired to Sydney, winning, for the second time, a seat in the Legislative Council. By 1854 he was in failing health. Still on the Royal Navy’s retired list, he was promoted in 1855 to the rank of Rear Admiral, the first Australian-born to achieve this rank.

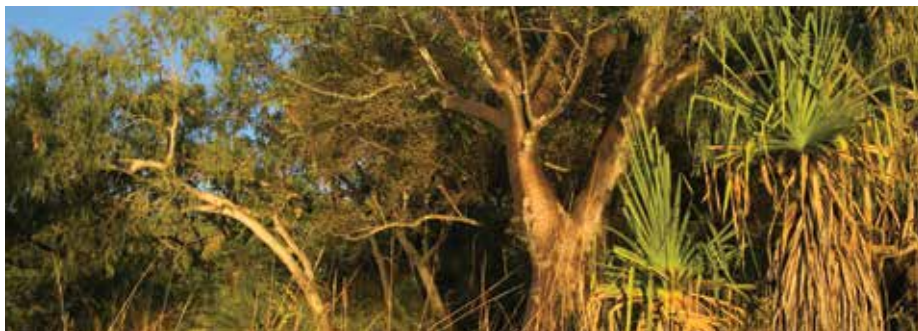
King died suddenly on 25 February 1856. He was given a State funeral on Sydney Harbour and buried in the family vault in the grounds of St Mary Magdalene church near his former home of Dunheved. He was survived by his wife and eight children whose descendants are now dispersed across Australia.



Careening Bay is in Wunambal country

There is a growing body of information on the extensive interactions between Aboriginal people and Macassan fishermen. The Aboriginal Traditional Owners call Careening Bay 'Wunbung-gu'.

Below Sketch of Aboriginal huts at Careening Bay in 1820 from P.P. King's published account of the voyage.



John Septimus Roe (1797-1878)

Roe was born in England and educated at Christ's Hospital School, London. He was appointed as a Midshipman in the Royal Navy in 1813 and, for the next four years, was seldom ashore. He joined HMC *Mermaid* as Master's Mate in 1817 under Phillip Parker King's command, and then HMB *Bathurst* in 1821, to conduct surveying expeditions of the Australian coast.

On his return to England in 1823 he was promoted to Lieutenant. Five years later, he was recuperating from a severe illness when offered the post of Surveyor General at the settlement to be established at Swan River (Western Australia). In

February 1829, newly married, he sailed from Portsmouth on the *Parmelia*.

In Western Australia, Roe was to serve the Crown with great distinction for 42 years. He served as Surveyor General until 1870, undertaking surveys and exploration, drawing up land regulations, and overseeing the management of the colony's Crown lands. In time, the navy promoted him to Commander, and he was made a Fellow of the Linnean Society of London.

While outliving King and Cunningham, Roe was dogged by ill health in his declining years. He died on 28 May 1878, aged 81, and was given a public funeral with full military honours. The citizens of Perth erected a monument in his honour in Kings Park in 1956 and, in 1991, a statue of him was unveiled on the corner of Adelaide Terrace and Victoria Avenue in the Perth CBD.



Bedwell as master's mates, James Hunter as ship's surgeon, Allan Cunningham as botanist, fourteen sailors and two boys. The men were young: King was 28 years old, and both Bedwell and Roe just 23; Cunningham was 28.

The *Mermaid*, having left Port Jackson on 14 June 1820, suffered storm damage, and returned to port. On 13 July they sailed again, heading north, but after a week ran aground on a sand bank at Port Clinton (north of Rockhampton). King heard a loud crash and suspected the stern post of the vessel had been damaged, but an inspection revealed nothing. He decided to sail on, unaware of serious damage that would eventually require the vessel to be repaired at Careening Bay.

After three months at sea, the *Mermaid* was leaking at an alarming rate. Crew had to leave other duties and man the pumps. As the ship sailed from Prince Frederick Harbour on the north Kimberley coast, King decided that urgent repairs were required. By noon, the *Mermaid* anchored in a sheltered embayment off a sandy beach and the crew unloaded the stores and equipment.

The ship's guns were set up on shore to provide a defence. More than fearing attacks by 'natives', King knew he must be wary of Macassan fishing fleets. Flinders had judged them 'piratical', and King was taking no chances.

GOING ASHORE

On the afternoon of 21 September, as the crew unloaded the *Mermaid*, King and Cunningham went ashore and saw that the hills behind the beach had been 'recently fired by the natives, whose old, temporary huts were standing on the sands'.

Above left Boab tree and pandanus at Careening Bay.

Photo – Denis Crawford/Alamy

Left Portrait of John Septimus Roe.

Image – Courtesy State Library of Western Australia



“Hunter recorded that near the tents he tried to measure the temperature with his pocket thermometer, but when it reached 130 degrees, he abandoned the test for fear of bursting the tube.”

A search was made for what Cunningham described as ‘that most important article, water’. They were fortunate to discover a continuous supply of excellent fresh water at the base of one of the gullies. This was critical as they had discarded fresh water on board the *Mermaid* in order to lighten the vessel.

Tents were made using the ship’s sails. Hunter recorded that near the tents he tried to measure the temperature with his pocket thermometer, but when it reached 130 degrees, he abandoned the test for fear of bursting the tube.

Cunningham described the annoyance from sandflies ‘which crowded into the tents at dusk’ only to be replaced during

daylight by flies that ‘entered their eyes, nose and mouth!’ Next morning, with a flood tide, the vessel was careened as far up the beach as the water would allow.

When the tide receded, an inspection of the hull revealed the extent of the damage. King wrote that it was ‘greater even than our fears had anticipated’ and that, at first impression, ‘there was every reason to fear we could not remedy the defects sufficiently to ensure even an immediate return to Port Jackson’.

The hull was patched by the 30th but it was not until 5 October that the tide rose enough to float the cutter.

TAKING NOTES

Their stay at Careening Bay provided ample opportunity to make observations and conduct scientific studies of the surrounding countryside. Cunningham collected and made notes on plants and natural history specimens. He preferred to botanise alone, avoiding the distractions of having to assist King or Roe with surveying requirements.

He recorded clumps of *Cycas*, or what he referred to as ‘Sago Palm’ (*Cycas*

basaltica), and noted that the fire-places near the ‘native’ huts were ‘strewed with the nuts of the sago palm, the fruit of which appears to be generally eaten by the natives of the north and north-west coasts’. The old people of the Traditional Owners’ Wunbung-gu and Gural families lived near the grove of Gun.gurru (cycads) at the south end of the beach.

King and his crew spent 18 days (21 September to 9 October 1820) at the site he named Careening Bay, now located within the Prince Regent National Park. One day was spent investigating nearby Cliff Island (now Bat Island) where Cunningham collected many new plant specimens and entered a cave full of bats.

He also ‘secured a curious lizard, of extraordinary appearance which had perched itself on the stem of a decayed tree’. This was something of a major coup for the voyage’s natural history collections. He described it as having a ‘curious crenated membrane, like a ruff or tipper around its neck and covering its shoulders’. This was the first collection of the frill-necked lizard. In 1825, Edward Gray, keeper of zoology at the British Museum,

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Above *Cycas basaltica* referred to by Cunningham as ‘Sago Palm’, although this is a misnomer as cycads are not palms. The seeds are highly toxic unless treated.
 Photo – Kevin Kenneally

Above right Frill-necked lizard.
 Photo – K. Coate

Allan Cunningham (1791-1839)

In 1814, at the urging of William Aiton, the Superintendent of the Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew in London, Sir Joseph Banks advocated the appointment of two botanical collectors to work in the southern hemisphere. At his recommendation, Allan Cunningham received one of those appointments. Despite his fragile appearance, Cunningham was both energetic and assiduous. He left England in 1814 and spent two years collecting plants in Brazil.

By 1817, he was in New South Wales collecting seeds and other propagating material of Australian plants for Kew Gardens — His Majesty the King of England's private garden. Soon after that, in London, Lord Bathurst advised Phillip Parker King that Banks had ordered Cunningham to join the expedition and be given 'every facility to botanise'. After the cycle of maritime surveys was completed in April 1822, Cunningham embarked on nine gruelling years of both botanical and geographic discovery. In July 1831, exhausted and ill, he returned to England.

When his brother Richard, the New South Wales Colonial Botanist, was murdered in 1835 on Major Mitchell's exploring expedition, Cunningham agreed to return to Australia as his replacement. An 1838 New Zealand collecting trip, conducted in heavy rain and cold, finally destroyed his health. He returned to Australia and nine months later was moved from his lodgings to his old official cottage in the Sydney Botanic Gardens for a change of air. He died there a few days later.

Cunningham and King had remained life-long friends and King wrote 'Alas, poor Allan he was a rare specimen ... an enthusiast of Australian geography; devoted to his own science.' Cunningham was buried in the Devonshire Street Cemetery. In 1901 his remains were removed and placed within an obelisk in a pond in the Royal Botanic Gardens, Sydney and his tombstone mounted on the wall of the National Herbarium of New South Wales. Botanist and author Dr Tony Orchard described him as 'one of the most important and prolific collectors of Australian plants in the late 18th and early 19th century, although until now he has been somewhat overlooked, overshadowed by Joseph Banks and Robert Brown.' 'However', he continued, 'his collections are better documented than either of these two famous botanists, and form the basis for many hundreds of Australian species.'



Left Portrait of Allan Cunningham by Phillip Parker King.

Image – Courtesy Mitchell Library, State Library of New South Wales

Below left *Bauhinia cunninghamii* pressed specimens collected at Careening Bay by Cunningham and described by botanist George Bentham as a new species.

Image – Reproduced with the consent of the Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew

Below Seed pods of the Kimberley Bauhinia (*Bauhinia cunninghamii*).

Photo – Kevin Kenneally

named it *Chlamydosaurus kingii* in tribute to King.

Cunningham was the first European to collect botanical specimens of the Kimberley boab, although he had observed 'several large gouty-trees' on King's second voyage in 1819. Cunningham noted the tree's resemblance to the baobabs of West Africa but believed, in the absence of flowers and based on the structure of the fruit, that it was a member of the caper family and applied the name *Capparis gibbosa* in his journal.

MAKING BOTANIC HISTORY

On 7 October, Cunningham packed up his plant collections. At the end of the voyage, his dried and pressed plants would be sent back to William Aiton and Sir Joseph Banks at the Royal Botanic Gardens. His herbarium specimens, numbering several thousand, became the vouchers for the naming of hundreds of new plants. Many of these were published by George Bentham, one of Britain's most influential botanists, in his classic seven volume work *Flora Australiensis: a description of the plants of the Australian Territory*, between 1863 and 1878.

In shady spots near the fresh water, Cunningham had planted seeds of lemons, oranges, Indian corn and some eyes of potatoes that he hoped would become established – for the benefit of future Europeans or even the Australian 'natives'. Admiralty instructions stipulated



Botanising the boab

Botanist Allan Cunningham did not include a description of the boab tree in King's published account of the voyages, *Narrative of a survey of the intertropical and western coasts of Australia performed between the years 1818 and 1822*. Cunningham clearly believed that his name *Capparis gibbosa* should be published, however, his premature death in 1839 resulted in his discovery going unacknowledged. Subsequently, Victorian Government botanist Ferdinand Mueller described the Australian boab in 1857 as *Adansonia gregorii* and this became the accepted name for the species.

that such things must be 'within the observation and reach of succeeding navigators'.

THE MERMAID TREE

Cunningham also wrote: 'The name of His Majesty's Cutter was deeply carved upon the stem of the largest tree on the shores of Careening Bay, Port Nelson, with certain initials and the date of the year of our visitation'. This was no random act of vandalism by the crew. King was following Colonial Office instructions to 'take care to leave some evidence which cannot be mistaken of your having landed'.

In addition, the name of the vessel was punched on a sheet of copper and fastened to the stem of a *Hibiscus tiliaceus* growing on the beach. When King returned to Careening Bay ten months later in the *Bathurst*, the copper sheet was missing but he remarked that the boab lettering was likely to last 'longer than any other memento we had left'. In 1893, Aeneas Gunn, the cousin of pioneer pastoralist Joseph Bradshaw, sketched the

'Mermaid Tree' when visiting Careening Bay from their pastoral lease 'Marigui' on the lower slopes of Mount Waterloo on the Prince Regent River.

SETTING SAIL

By 8 October, King had prepared to depart Careening Bay. After leaving, he wrote: 'Our people were now all laid up with sores upon their feet and legs, from cuts and bruises received in scrambling over the rocks; and several were affected by ophthalmia'. He then made the decision that, as the wet season was rapidly approaching and the *Mermaid* was still leaking badly, it was time to quit the Kimberley coast and return to Port Jackson.

As the sun set on 9 December 1820 the *Mermaid* entered the Heads of Port Jackson, and King secured his vessel at the King's moorings in Sydney Cove, having successfully completed his third surveying expedition. He wrote that the voyage from Careening Bay had been undertaken within the 'pale of danger', for death had been their constant companion.

Above Mermaid Tree.
Photo – C. Done

Below Aeneas Gunn's 1893 sketch of the Mermaid Tree.
Image – Courtesy Mitchell Library, State Library of New South Wales

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