

'IN ITS RIGHTFUL PLACE'

THE NATIONAL MUSEUM'S CAPTAIN COOK CUP AND SAUCER



Captain Cook cup and saucer, donated to the people of Australia by Mr Frank Thompson in 1975. Red-orange design applied by transfer with green and magenta design hand painted. No markings or inscriptions.
Photo: George Serras

On 1 July 1981, in accordance with sub-section 8(2) of the Museum of Australia Act, the material held by the Department for Home Affairs and Environment and known as 'the National Historical Collection' was transferred to the Museum of Australia. It included a broad range of eighty historical collections, three of which related to the great explorer and eighteenth-century navigator, Captain James Cook.

Two of these highly significant objects, the *Endeavour* cannon and the *Endeavour* anchor, are well-known icons of the National Collection. Currently they are on loan to the Australian National Maritime Museum, Sydney and the James Cook Historical Museum, Cooktown respectively, where they are on permanent display.

The other, less well-known Cook relic is of an entirely different and personal nature. It is a hand-painted cup and saucer that are claimed to have been owned and used by Captain Cook and his family. As with many other historical objects, tracing the provenance of the cup and saucer has been a complex procedure.



The cup and saucer were gifted to the Museum in 1975 by Mr Frank Thompson. In a letter from Thompson dated June 1975 which reached the Secretary of the Committee of Inquiry into Museums and National Collections, he described his childhood in Middlesbrough, Yorkshire, near where Cook was born. He mentioned that his family traced their relationship to Cook through Ann Carter, who was the daughter of Grace Fleck, herself the daughter of Margaret Fleck (née Cook), James Cook's sister. He spoke about how the cup and saucer had been 'part of a set which has been handed down for generations' and had been 'given to my father by his mother and kept on top of our piano' until he migrated to America in 1950, taking the cup and saucer with him. He also mentioned that his two sisters, who still lived in Middlesbrough, owned the rest of the set of china which had belonged to Cook.

Mr Thompson felt that the association of the cup and saucer with Captain Cook made them significant objects for all Australians. He went to considerable trouble to make his offer of the cup and saucer to a Museum in Australia, as he said, 'I will be 70 next year and I would like to see (the cup and saucer) in its rightful place'.

One year later, an inward telegram from the Department of Foreign Affairs reported that the 'Cup and saucer were being forwarded in safe hand consignment number 148, Bag 2 leaving Washington 18 June 1976'. A month later a thank you letter was sent to Mr Thompson acknowledging that 'the cup and saucer have arrived in perfect condition'; and that Dr David Ride, the former Director of the Western Australian Museum, had described the 'Cook cup and saucer as very fine examples of hand-painted china ware of the period.'

After the arrival of the cup and saucer, staff of the interim Council of the Museum of Australia attempted to document its provenance more closely. As well as the confirmation by Dr Ride that the cup and saucer were stylistically consistent with eighteenth-century manufacture, the National Library of Australia assisted by investigating the genealogical information.


Captain James Cook's parents, James and Grace Cook, had a family of five children, but only two of these, James and his sister Margaret, produced families of their own. Tragically, even though James and Elizabeth Batts, whom he married in 1762, produced six children, they had no grandchildren, and descendants of the Cook family trace their relationship through Cook's sister, Margaret. Margaret married James Fleck in 1764 and there are several branches of her family through which the Thompson link might be established. However, despite staff of the Museum re-contacting Frank Thompson to discover more details of his connection with Cook, no firmer information was forthcoming. Mr Thompson simply said that he had traced his family through the records of marriages at the Parish Church in Marton and that 'it is generally known that we are descendants of the Cook family and that we have a set of China which was used by him'.

One important piece of information that Mr Thompson was able to provide to strengthen his assertion of the authenticity of the cup and saucer was its display, by his father, John F Thompson, in

an exhibition held in Marton in 1928 as part of the celebrations of the bicentenary of Captain Cook's birth. These celebrations included an 'Exhibition of Relics of Captain Cook' which were 'loaned from all parts of the country' which was held in the Hall at Stewart Park, Marton for a week between 8 to 15 September. A list of these objects held by the Mitchell Library confirms that the cup and saucer were part of the 1928 Exhibition.

The 1928 bicentennial exhibition was an important event for the history of Cook relics as it brought together, and now helps to securely provenance, a range of Cook memorabilia including many objects such as 'his set of chessmen, silver candlesticks, dice boxes, snuff box, and cribbage board' acquired by the Admiralty from a grand-nephew of Cook for the National Maritime Museum, Greenwich. Some Cook relics now in the State Library of New South Wales might also have been displayed in the 1928 exhibition. Other objects remain in private hands, and it is of interest here that Cook's steel pocket hammer which was recently auctioned at Christie's of London (where it fetched a record sale price of nearly 72 thousand pounds), was also listed and displayed at the 1928 exhibition in Marton.

In 1988 Frank Thompson sent the Museum a photocopy of a booklet produced for the bicentenary celebrations in Marton. Included in this gift was a photograph of his sister, Miss Camilla Thompson, presenting an identical cup and saucer (to the one at the National Museum) to the Lieutenant-General of Yorkshire on 27 October 1978. This day marked the 250th anniversary of Cook's birth, and was also the day that the Captain Cook Birthplace Museum, Stewart Park, Marton-in-Cleveland, was officially opened.

Recent contact with the Curator at the Marton-in-Cleveland Museum has confirmed that they do indeed hold a cup and saucer donated by the Thompson family, and believed to have been owned by Captain Cook, at the occasion of the opening of the Museum in 1978. Further collaboration between the National Museum and the Captain Cook Birthplace Museum has been planned to investigate more fully the provenance of the Captain Cook cups and saucers and the link with the Thompson family. 

Carol Cooper, Manager Registration

Captain Cook's Cottage in Fitzroy Gardens, Melbourne. The cottage was originally built in the village of Great Ayton by James and Grace Cook in 1755. Mr Thompson, who was born in Middlesbrough in 1906, wrote how he played many times around the Cottage. It was purchased by Sir Russell Grimwade in 1927 for 800 pounds, dismantled, numbered, wrapped and shipped to Victoria, where it was reassembled in Fitzroy Gardens and presented in 1934 to commemorate the centenary of European settlement in Victoria.
Photo: Carol Cooper

