Sir Joseph Banks

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Sir Joseph Banks was born into wealth that he would inherit at an early age. This allowed him to pursue his interests in botany and exploration. He was the botanist on Captain James Cook’s first voyage around the world. He became a confidant of George III, served as the unofficial director of the Royal Botanic Gardens at Kew, and was a dominant figure in the scientific establishment of England. He was the President of the Royal Society for many years. He as a skilled diplomat who strengthened the bonds between science, trade, and his government. He was also the target of criticism for his administrative style and his personal habits, including his extravagant dress.

TIMELINE

1743 Born in London to William Banks and Sarah Bate (24 February)
1752 Enters Harrow
1756 Enrolls at Eton
1760 Enrolls as gentleman-commoner at Oxford; hires Cambridge tutor in botany
1761 Father dies, leaving him an enormous estate
1764 Leaves Oxford without a degree
1766 Elected to the Royal Society
1766 Explores Newfoundland and Labrador aboard H. M. S. Niger; collects 340 plants
1768 Begins exploration with Captain Cook on the Endeavour (26 August)
1768 Endeavour crosses the equator (25 October)
1768 Arrives at Rio de Janeiro (13 November)
1768 First port of call at Madeira; collects 700 plants
1769 Arrives in Tahiti (13 April)
1769 Arrives in New Zealand
1769 Endeavour departs Tahiti (9 August)
1769 Endeavour arrives at Tierra del Fuego (11 January)
1769 Banks & Solander go ashore
1770 Landfall on the eastern coast of New Holland (Australia) at a site Cook would name Botany Bay
1771 Sydney Parkinson, artist and friend, die (26 January)
1771 Endeavour returns to London (13 July)
1771 Begins work on his Florilegium by having 738 copper plates made from Parkinson’s watercolors
1771 Banks and the Earl of Sandwich tell James Cook of his promotion to Commander
1772 Explores Iceland and Hebrides, his last botanical exploration
1772 Lampooned as “Botanic Macaroni” in a cartoon by Matthew Darly
1773 Plan to go on Cook’s second voyage rejected by the Admiralty; too grandiose
1773 Elected foreign member of the Royal Swedish Academy of Sciences
1773 Appointed acting unofficial director of the Royal Botanic Gardens at Kew by George III
1774 Presents Omai, a Tahitian man, to George III at Kew
1773 Tours Holland (12 February to 22 March)
1774 Becomes member of the Dilettante Society
1778 Becomes President of the Royal Society and remains in that position until his death
1778 Marries Dorothea Hugesson
1778 Makes an unsuccessful offer to buy the Linnean collection and library from Linnaeus’ widow
1779 Leases Spring Grove, a 34 acre estate that he will convert into a botanical garden
1779 Recommends to the House of Commons that Botany Bay be the site of a penal colony
1780 Oversees the move of the Royal Society’s office to Somerset House on The Strand
1781 Becomes a baronet; still a commoner but allowed to use the prefix “Sir”
1787 Appoints William Bligh to command the Bounty to transplant breadfruit to the Caribbean
1787  Suffers his first disabling attack of gout
1788  Elected Honorary Foreign member of the American Academy of Arts & Sciences
1788  Founding member of the Association for Promoting the Discovery of the Interior Parts of Africa
1794  Becomes High Sheriff of Lincolnshire
1794  Becomes a trustee of the British Museum
1795  Awarded Knight of the Order of the Bath
1795  Publishes "Plants of the coast of Coromandel" (with W. Roxburgh)
1795  Lampooned by James Gillray as "The Great South Sea Caterpillar"
1797  Becomes a Privy Councillor
1790  Meets Baron Alexander von Humboldt
1800  Publishes paper on the effects of horsetails on drains
1803  Proposes a revision of Hortus Kewensis – quite controversial at the time
1804  One of the founders of the Royal Horticultural Society
1805  Publishes paper on the causes of blight in corm
1808  Purchases Spring Grove
1809  Publishes paper on the description of a Roman vault
1810  Final visit to George III at Windsor Castle
1810  Appoints Robert Brown as the Keeper of his herbarium and library
1812  Publishes paper on determining when the potato was introduced into the United Kingdom
1812  Publishes paper on forcing-houses of the Romans
1814  Publishes paper on inuring of tender plants
1814  Dines with Aimé Bonpland at Kew.
1815  Awarded Knight Grand Cross (GCB)
1817  Publishes paper on the apple tree insect
1819  Chairs House of Commons committee on banknote forgery
1819  Chairs House of Commons committee on systems of weights/measures
1820  Dies at Spring Grove (19 June); buried at S. Leonard’s Church in Heston

**PUBLICATIONS**


Banks, J. 1805. Short account on the cause of the disease in corn, called by farmers the blight, the mildew, or the rust. London.

Banks, J. 1809. A description of a Roman vault, discovered in the suburbs of the City of York. Archaeologia or Miscellaneous Tracts Relating to Antiquities 16(1).

Banks, J. 1812. An attempt to ascertain the time when the potatoe [sic] (*Solanum tuberosum*) was first introduced into the United Kingdom. Transactions 1: 147-156.

Banks, J. 1812. On the forcing-houses of the Romans, with a list of fruits cultivated by them, now in our gardens. Repertory of Arts, Manufactures, and Agriculture.

Banks, J. 1814. Hints respecting the proper mode of inuring tender plants to our climate. Repertory of Arts, Manufactures, and Agriculture.

Banks, J. 1817. Notes relative to the first appearance of the *Aphis Lanigera*, or the apple tree insect, in this country. Transactions 2: 162-169.


**BIBLIOGRAPHY**


Joseph Banks Research Project. It is an independent effort to survey, catalogue, transcribe and publish the scattered correspondence of Sir Joseph Banks. discovery.nationalarchives.gov.uk


Paget, H. 1970. To the south there is a great land: Captain Cook, Sir Joseph Banks and Australia. The Australian. 48 pp.


Sir Joseph Banks Society. www.joseph-banks.org


**HIS TITLES**

Bart. • 1st Baronet
G. C. B. • Order of the Bath
P. C. • Privy Councillor
F. R. S. • Fellow of the Royal Society
P. R. S. • President of the Royal Society
K. C. B. • Knight Commander of the Bath

**PORTRAITS & CARTOONS**

John Mortimer (1771) – Banks with Cook, Solander, Hawkesworth, and the Earl of Sandwich
Matthew Darly (1772) – cartoon of Banks as "Botanic Macaroni"
Matthew & Mary Darly — cartoon of Banks as "The Simpling Macaroni"
Sir Joshua Reynolds (1773) – Banks as a young man
Benjamin West (1773) – Banks in a Maori cloak
William Parry (ca. 1775) – Banks with Omai and Solander
James Gillray (1795) – Cartoon of Banks as a caterpillar
Rembrandt Peale (1802) – Formal portrait
Thomas Phillips (1808) – Banks as President of the Royal Society
Francis Chantrey (1818) – Bust of Banks
Thomas Phillips (1820-1821) – Banks in his full presidential attire
SOME MISCELLANY

- Sir Joseph Banks was, perhaps above all else, was a man of varied interests, activities, and influence. He was a patron of the natural sciences on an international scale. He was a commanding figure in Georgian England who knew or corresponded with everyone of importance and they knew him.

- Banksia, a genus of about 170 species in Proteaceae, is named after Sir Joseph. So are about 80 plant species, such as the red spider flower (Grevillea banksii) and a seaweed called Neptune’s necklace (Hormosira banksii). Linnaeus suggested that what we now call Australia be called Banksia.

- Banks was especially interested in economic botany. He introduced eucalyptus, acacia, and Banksia to western world, along with the mangosteen and many fruits from Ceylon and Persia.

- His publications have been described as “comparatively trifling.” He never finished his proposed book on the voyage of the Endeavour.

- On the other hand, he was a prolific letter writer. About half of his estimated 100,000 scientific letters survive in various collections.

- His productive period of plant exploration was 1766 to 1772.

- On his Endeavour voyage, Banks collected about 3000 plants; 110 of them new genera and about 1300 new species.

- He was famous for the detailed instructions that he gave to his world-wide network of plant collectors.

- About 7000 plant species were introduced into cultivation during the reign of George III, primarily from Bank’s collectors.

- Banks was not without his critics. In at least two cartoons, Matthew Darly pictured him as a Macaroni – young, effete gentlemen who adopted ridiculous styles of clothing, including swords, but whose mannerisms suggested they would not know how to use them. Samuel Johnson wrote of him as “… an elephant, quite placid and gentle, allowing you to get on his back and play with his proboscis.”

- One of the members of the Royal Society said that he was sick with “the lust of domination;” others that he could be extremely autocratic, even despotic. Another noted that “His knowledge and attention is very much confined to one study, botany: and his manners are rather coarse and heavy.” He was accused of being secretive about the plants at Kew.

- Banks was also involved with the British Museum, the Royal Observatory, and the Board of Longitude.

- Perhaps based on his own discovery that the botany professor at Oxford hadn’t delivered a lecture or published in many years, Banks was also committed to improving teaching at English universities.

- When he died in 1820, Banks left behind a well organized, comprehensive archive. His library, herbarium, other specimens, drawings, paintings, and manuscripts were donated to the Natural History Museum in London. The Sutro Library in San Francisco is the home of the Sir Joseph Banks Collection, which contains about 10,000 documents. Another important collection is in the State Library of New South Wales, the Sterling Memorial Library of Yale University, and the National Library of Australia.