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# Captain Cook in Hawaii

What happened on his final voyage

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## Introduction

In 1776 James Cook was renowned for his seamanship, surveying and exploring. He had commanded two great voyages of discovery around the world and become the first European to visit many parts of the Pacific. Now promoted to captain, he set out on his third and final voyage of exploration with two ships, the Resolution and Discovery.

With so many years spent exploring, Cook was a confident commander and experienced in meeting with people of different cultures. Yet there is evidence in some of his officers' journals of Cook showing violent behaviour and poor judgement during this third voyage, both towards his own men and towards the people they met. He burned towns and sank canoes in reprisal for minor thefts by the islanders during his visit to Tahiti in 1777. In 1778 Cook and his crew became the first Europeans to visit Hawaii, however he risked wrecking his ship while navigating unexplored territory in thick fog in his search for a northern passage between the Pacific and Atlantic Oceans. Was Cook tired or ill after all his years of voyaging? Did this affect his judgement? We don't know for sure

## Tasks

Look at Source 1

1. This drawing shows the two ships Resolution and Discovery at anchor with the cutter (a ship's boat for carrying stores or passengers) alongside and a village in the background.
  - a) Spot the ship's cutter.
  - b) Find the ship missing its foremast.
  - c) Look at the buildings in the village. How many people might be living there?

Look at Source 2

2. You are going to research a radio programme that tries to explain why Captain Cook was killed
  - a) Firstly, record your evidence of the following:
    - i. The poor condition of Cook's two ships
    - ii. That the islanders were no longer very friendly
    - iii. The actions of Cook that angered the islanders
    - iv. The actions of the islanders
    - v. What happened when Cook tried to return to his boats?
  - b) Use your evidence to write your radio programme script. You might like to use this framework to help you to get started:
    - In 1779 Captain Cook returned to Kealakekua Bay in the Hawaiian Islands. He had only left a week before when relations between him and the islanders had become unfriendly. Cook was forced to return because...
    - ( Insert your evidence from point 1 here )

- On his return the islanders were no longer very friendly as Lieutenant John Rickman wrote...
- ( Insert your evidence from point 2 here )
- There is evidence in the journals of some of his men of Cook showing unstable and violent behaviour during this voyage. When the Resolution's large cutter was stolen he...
- ( Insert your evidence from point 3 here )
- Cook's actions angered the islanders. They...
- ( Insert your evidence from point 4 here )
- When Cook tried to return to his boats...
- ( Insert your evidence from point 5 here )
- Cook was killed on Sunday 14th February 1779 because...
- ( Look back over the evidence. Who or what do you think was most responsible for Cook's death? Was it those who sent him to the Pacific with ships in a poor condition, the islanders, Cook's officers and marines who failed to rescue him, or Cook himself? Now write your conclusion. )

## Background

James Cook was born in Marton, Yorkshire on 27 October 1728. In 1746 he moved to Whitby, went to sea on a collier (a ship for carrying coal), and in time qualified as a master's mate. He joined the Royal Navy as an ordinary seaman in 1756 and his abilities meant that he rapidly rose in rank. He came to the notice of his superior officers in 1759 when he surveyed the St Lawrence River in Canada (during the Seven Years War).

Cook's first voyage around the world in the ship Endeavour lasted from 1768-71. After observing the transit of Venus from Tahiti, he went on to explore and map the Society Islands, New Zealand, the east coast of Australia and part of New Guinea. During 1772-75 Cook made a second voyage round the world in the ships Resolution and Adventure, visiting many Pacific islands and sailing around the southern oceans to disprove the existence of a huge southern continent. These expeditions found out lots of information about Pacific islands and peoples, and the artists on the voyages recorded the places and animals they saw.

In January 1778 Cook and his crew became the first Europeans to visit Hawaii (which they called the Sandwich Islands). They returned to Hawaii the following November and spent the next weeks sailing around the islands, making scientific observations and getting supplies, finally anchoring in Kealakekua Bay. Cook's arrival coincided with a big festival and it is possible that he, without realising, was acting out a Hawaiian legend - the return from the sea of the "god" Lono. Maybe this was a reason why the islanders welcomed him with great friendliness.

However, friction soon developed between the crew and the islanders. It was hard on the locals to feed the crew of two ships. There was a misunderstanding when the crew took wooden images from a sacred area. After the crew had been there a while, the islanders may have become more used to the men, less in awe and more suspicious. The festival was ending, quarrels became frequent and Cook decided to leave. Unfortunately, the poor condition of his two ships had caused problems throughout the

voyage. Within a week the foremast of the Resolution was sprung and Cook was forced to return to Kealakekua Bay to repair it. After Cook's death parts of his body were returned by the islanders and buried at sea, and his crew completed their journey back to England.

James Cook left Britain a great legacy of knowledge about foreign lands, solved the question of the southern continent and provided a map of much of the Pacific for those that followed him. His exploration of places that were formerly unknown in Britain, and his territorial claims, made a major contribution to the growth of the British empire. In doing these things he showed his ability in managing three key tasks:

- Navigation and seamanship;
- Leading his men through sometimes difficult conditions;
- Meeting with the indigenous peoples of the Pacific;

but with tragic results on his third voyage.

## Teachers Notes

There exist several accounts of the last hours of Cook's life - the theft of the cutter, the attempt to kidnap the chief, the murder. These reports, such as Rickman's, come from officers who were in the bay, but were not actually on the shore with Cook at the time.

Sources

Illustration: Portrait of Captain James Cook by John Webber, 1776 (National Portrait Gallery, London: NPG 26; [picturelibrary@npg.org.uk](mailto:picturelibrary@npg.org.uk))

Source 1: Drawing of Kealakekua Bay, 1779 (ref: MFQ 1/566)

Source 2: An account by John Rickman, Lieutenant on Resolution, of the murder of Captain Cook on 14 February 1779 (ref: ADM 51/4529)

## Schemes of Work

**The role of the individual for good or ill?**

Key Stage 3, Unit 22

**The British Empire how was it that, by 1900, Britain controlled nearly a quarter of the world?**

Key Stage 3, Unit 14

## Source 1 : Drawing of Kealakekua Bay, 1779 (MFQ 1/566)



## Source 2 : An account by John Rickman, Lieutenant on Resolution, of the murder of Captain Cook on 14 February 1779 (ADM 51/4529)

*Remarks Made in Cannauloa Bay Owyhee.* 271

Matters had appeared by a different appearance at our return to our old Station. We were very little visited & Provisions did not flow upon us as before, & the People were shy & reserved from reasons no doubt variously assigned by us. The Resolution in view our departure from this place found the head of her Fore Mast so much damaged as to take it out & send it on Shore to be repaired which was accordingly done & had our Carpenters to assist them with a Mask & a Guard of Marines from the *Proctor* too. On the 11<sup>th</sup> our large Cutter moved at our 5<sup>th</sup> 1/2 Buoy was missing. Boats were manned & armed from both Ships with Orders from Cap<sup>t</sup> Cook to lay at the mouth of the Bay & keep the Passage, that nothing should enter or go out while he himself with three of his own Boats manned & armed went to the Town on the NW side of the Harbour to secure the Chief of all the Islands at his residence there; Cap<sup>t</sup> Cook landed with the Marine officer & a party of Marines visited the Chief's house, but was opposed in his Demands upon Tirooboo the Chief & was returning to the Shore where the Boats lay surrounded both him & his Guard with a vast crowd who were alarmed at his boldness & perhaps at a loss to assent for his return to the Boats - or from whatever motives it was soon perceived that many of them were armed - tho at the same time others were crowding round upon him, which with much danger he threw from him - some Insolence was afterwards shewn him & he fired some small Shot at the Offender without doing any damage, this is perhaps pretty nearly the situation of matters when a Skirmish ensued & the fire became general from the Boats & then from the Marines, but without any Orders from any quarter as I can understand

Understand, for the Cap<sup>t</sup>. Cook turned to the Boats enquired  
the Reason of it & was ordering them to cease Firing  
when a Chief came behind & stabd him between the Shoulders  
with an Iron instrument like a Disk of which they had  
many made by Cap<sup>t</sup>. Cook by their own directions. He  
fell immediately at the receipt of the Blow with his  
face in the Water but did not expire till he had  
rec<sup>d</sup>. several other Wounds in different parts of his  
Body — every thing was in confusion now, the In  
dians were elevated at their Success & a Corporal  
& three Marines shared the Fate of their Commander  
before the others got on board the Boats, the Lieut<sup>nt</sup> of Ma  
rines was staid in the shoulder & other badly wounded  
with stones which came like hail from such a  
multitude.

## Source 2 : Transcript of an account by John Rickman, Lieutenant on Resolution, of the murder of Captain Cook on 14 February 1779 (ADM 51/4529)

Remarks Moored in Carracuoa Bay, Owyhee

Matters had apparently a different appearance at our return to our old Station. We were very little visited and Provisions did not flow upon us as before, and the People were shy and reserved from reasons no doubt variously assigned by us. The Resolution since our departure from this place found the head of her Foremast so much damaged as to take it out and send it on shore to be repaired which was accordingly done and had our Carpenters to assist them with a marker and a Guard of Marines from the Resolution. On the 14th our large Cutter moored at our Sml Br. Buoy was missing. Boats were manned and armed from both ships with orders from Capt. Cook to lay at the mouth of the Bay and keep the Passage, that nothing should enter or go out while he himself with three of his own Boats manned and armed went to the town on the NW side of the Harbour to secure the Chief of all the Islands at his residence there. Capt. Cook landed with the Marine officer and party of marines and visited the Chiefs house, but was opposed in his Demands upon Tireoboo the Chief and was returning to the shore where the Boats lay surrounded both him and his Guard with a vast crowd who were alarmed at his boldness and perhaps at a loss to account for his return to the Boats - or from whatever motives it was soon perceived that many of them were Armed - tho at the same time others were crowding presents upon him, which with much Anger he threw from him - some insolence was afterwards shown him and he fired some small shot at the Offender without doing any damage, this is perhaps partly nearly the situation of matters when a Skirmish ensued and the fire became general from the Boats and then from the Marines, but without any Orders from any quarter as I can

understand, for Capt. Cook turned to the boats enquired the Reason of it and was ordering them to cease firing when a Chief came behind and stabd him between the

shoulders with an Iron instrument like a Dirk (a type of knife) of which they had many made by Capt. Cook by their own directions. He fell immediately at the receipt of the Blow with his face in the water but did not expire till he had recd. several other wounds in different parts of his Body - every thing was in confusion now, the Indians were elevated at their success and a Corporal and three Marines shared the Fate of their Commander before the others got on board the Boats, the Lieut. of Marines was stabd in the shoulder and others badly wounded with stones which came like hail from such a multitude.