

Rame Head - A Remarkably Overlooked Point



Rame Head, Cornwall from below the coastguard station



Rame Head, Cornwall from the west

On the morning of 20 April 1770 James Cook and the company of *Endeavour* became the first Europeans to sight the east coast of the Australian continent. Sailing northeastwards along the relatively featureless eastern coast of today's Victoria, Cook's attention was drawn by a distinctive headland. It was strangely familiar:

At Noon... a remarkable Point bore N 20° East distant 4 Leagues. This point rises to a round hillock, very much like the *Ram head* going into Plymouth Sound on which account I called it by the same name. Lat^d 37° 39', Longitude 210° 22 W.¹

Endeavour's voyage had started at Plymouth on 26 August 1768, and Cook would have seen Rame Head (misspelt by Cook as Ram) on the starboard side as the ship sailed out of Plymouth Sound. Cornwall's Rame Head is a very distinctive feature. Green downland dips towards the coast before rising to a pointed hillock 97m above sea level, capped by a ruined chapel.

Imagine Cook's surprise at finding a similar coastal formation (minus the ruined chapel) so far from home, on the south east corner of the Australian mainland. As the result of this remarkable topographical coincidence, Cook's place of departure from England was neatly linked with his place of arrival in Australia. However, as a result of confusion about Cook's first landfall in Australia, Australia's Rame Head has not received the attention that it merits.

Today, Rame Head's primary significance as the first feature on Australia's coast to be named by Cook is virtually ignored. It is also the first place in Australia to be named after a place in Britain, and the first feature named by Europeans on the

mainland coast of Australia between the eastern end of the Great Australian Bight and Cape York, the north easterly tip of Australia, a huge length of coastline which at the time of Cook's arrival still remained unexplored by Europeans.

Most people know that Cook's first landing on the Australian continent was made at Botany Bay, but fewer are aware of the site of his first landfall. Most who are aware will, correctly, tell you that it was near today's Point Hicks (40km south of the township of Cann River, Victoria). It is still widely, but incorrectly, accepted that today's Point Hicks was also the first point on the coast that Cook named.

Two hundred years after Cook, Captain Brett Hilder, an experienced Pacific navigator, plotted data from Cook's logs and journal onto modern charts and finally revealed *Endeavour's* movements on 20 April 1770.²

Hilder shows conclusively that Cook's Point Hicks was about 40km WSW of its present position, a point well out to sea in Bass Strait and about 22km from the nearest shore. What Cook saw and named was a cloudbank, remarkably easy to mistake for land in this area. Cook's Point Hicks simply does not exist as a geographic feature. It seems amazing that the relatively simple plotting which Hilder carried out had not been done previously, and that so many eminent historians had fallen into error on this point.

It is not surprising that Point Hicks proved elusive to later mariners. Cook's chart shows it as a point along the coast of Victoria. So George Bass

looked for it along this coast on his epic 1798 whaleboat journey from Sydney to Westernport (near Melbourne) and recorded passing "Point Hicks, a point we could not at all distinguish from the rest of the beach".

It does not appear on Matthew Flinders' chart, and when John Lort Stokes surveyed the area in 1843, well aware of its associations with Cook, he is said to have given today's Point Hicks the name Cape Everard, a name that stuck.³ In 1970, to commemorate the bicentenary of Cook's voyage, the Government of Victoria unhelpfully renamed it Point Hicks. Cook's first landfall on the coast of Australia was near present day Point Hicks, but this Point Hicks is a long way from the one that Cook thought he saw.

Once the story of the non-existent Point Hicks is understood, Rame Head assumes a new importance as the first named point on the eastern coasts of Australia. However, as with Point Hicks, some confusion has arisen about the exact whereabouts of Cook's Ram Head. Following Cook's example, the name "Ram Head" appeared on maps of Victoria until it was finally gazetted by the Government of Victoria as Rame Head in 1971. Unfortunately, this Rame Head was not what Cook saw!

Today's maps show Rame Head about 35km SW of the town of Mallacoota, but this is not the Rame Head that Cook named. The reason is that George Bass visited this feature in 1798 and assumed it was what Cook had seen. Flinders, using Bass's data, perpetuated his error on his chart in *A Voyage to Terra Australis*⁴ and the name has stuck. Bass's error is certainly excusable.

By a remarkable coincidence, 20km further east along the coast lies a similar point, which today bears the name Little Rame Head. Both are distinctive points rising to a round hillock, Rame Head rising to 110m and Little Rame Head to 56m. As Hilder demonstrates from Cook's data, it was today's Little Rame Head that Cook named as Ram Head.⁵

Given this convoluted story it is perhaps not surprising that more than 240 years after Cook's visit, the historical significance and heritage importance of Victoria's misnamed Little Rame Head goes largely unrecognised. This relatively remote point is now home to a solar powered navigation light and a portion of the "round hillock" has been chopped away to provide a helipad so that the light can be maintained. Still an isolated place

in a designated wilderness area, very few people visit it. Surely it deserves to be better known and enjoy more visitors?

How many people have visited both Rame Head, Cornwall, UK and (Little) Rame Head, Victoria, Australia? Very few besides myself I suspect.

Rame Head, Cornwall, is an easy drive from Plymouth via the Torpoint Ferry across the River Tamar into Cornwall and the village of Rame. Then the narrow Ramehead Lane climbs up to a small car park at the end of the road next to the Coastguard Station. From here the tiny derelict chapel which Cook would have seen on the top of Rame Head is visible, and a few hundred metres of walking downhill and then uphill onto the "round hillock" will bring you to it, 97m above the sea. To the east is the entrance to Plymouth Sound, and there are splendid views in every direction in fine weather.

Getting to Little Rame Head, Victoria, is more of an adventure requiring a return walk of some 15km into the Sandpatch Wilderness Area (no signposts here!) and, depending on the tide, the fording of two tidal inlets. The walk starts 15km from Mallacoota at Shipwreck Creek.⁶ From Cook's Ram Head (today's Little Rame Head) you can see Bass's Ram Head to the west along this wonderfully wild coast. You will find it a very rewarding walk to a remarkably overlooked point!

Trevor Lipscombe

References

1. *Cook's Log*, page 1156, vol. 18, no. 2 (1995).
2. Hilder, Captain Brett. "Point Hicks: land or illusion of land?" in *Victorian Historical Magazine*. May 1970. Vol. 41, no. 2. Pages 285-297.
3. *Cook's Log*, page 385, vol. 8, no. 4 (1985).
4. Flinders, Matthew. *A Voyage to Terra Australis undertaken for the purpose of completing the discovery of that vast country and prosecuted in the years 1801, 1802, and 1803 in His Majesty's Ship Investigator...* G. and W. Nicol. 1814.
5. Lipscombe, T.J. *On Austral Shores – a modern traveller's guide to the European exploration of the coasts of Victoria and New South Wales*. Envirobook, Sydney, Australia. 2005. See pages 49-53 for a fuller discussion and a map of the whereabouts of Cook's Point Hicks and Ram Head.
6. *ibid.* See pages 108-9 for a full description of the walk, though conditions may have changed since my visit in 2003, so make enquiries locally.