

The Charlotte Medal



The museum was the successful bidder for this important piece of our history, acclaimed as Australia's first colonial work of art and providing a unique record of the arrival of the First Fleet. Curator **Kieran Hosty** takes us back to the colony's turbulent birth to tell the story of *The Charlotte Medal*.



OPPOSITE: *The Charlotte Medal*, obverse and reverse, shown at 120% of actual size. Photographer A Frolows/ANMM

LEFT: First Fleet storeship *Borrowdale*, by Francis Holman, UK c. 1786. Oil on canvas, ANMM collection. This formal ship portrait shows the ship from three different angles, and is the only such record of a First Fleet vessel known to exist.

IN EARLY July 2008 the Australian National Maritime Museum became aware of the imminent auction of one of the rarest, and at the same time one of the least-known, items of Australiana, *The Charlotte Medal*. This 74-millimetre-wide silver medallion depicting the First Fleet convict transport *Charlotte* at anchor in Botany Bay on the day of her arrival, 20 January 1788, is believed to have been

appears to have been sold only four times during its 220-year existence – was a figure that would normally have been out of our reach. However concerns about such a rare item associated with the First Fleet being sold and then sent overseas spurred the museum to dig deep. Topping up our budget with a generous contribution from the National Cultural Heritage Account, we acquired the medal

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engraved there sometime between 20–26 January by one of the ship's convicts, the thief, mutineer and forger Thomas Barrett. It's thought that it was made for John White, the Surgeon-General of the First Fleet, who also sailed on *Charlotte*.

The medal was being auctioned by Noble Numismatics for its owner, the Melbourne dentist Dr John Chapman, along with 700 other rare and important Australian, New Zealand and British coins and medals from his collection. The estimate provided by the auction house – in reality a guesstimate because *The Charlotte Medal* was a one-off and

after some tension-filled bidding by our assistant director (collections and exhibitions), Michael Crayford. The winning bid was \$750,000.

The Charlotte Medal is an immensely exciting acquisition. Material of any sort from the First Fleet is extremely rare and this piece is a graphic record of the fleet's arrival, providing us with a unique portrait of one of the First Fleet vessels. It may be the first art work made in the Australian colony. It is associated with important historical figures, both the principal surgeon of the First Fleet and colony, and the convict who – as we shall

soon see – made a sorrowful mark on Australian history just a few weeks later. As well as that, the story of *The Charlotte Medal* unfolds as part of a larger historical saga as British power, influence and systems of justice were played out on a global stage.

Since the early 1600s European societies had used the overseas transportation of criminals as a form of punishment. When in 18th-century Britain the death penalty came to be regarded as too severe for crimes such as robbery and larceny, which were previously capital offences, transportation to North America became a common sentence. The American War of Independence (1776–1781) put an end to this mass export of convicts to America, and many of the convicts in Britain's jails were instead housed in the hulks of decommissioned naval vessels on the River Thames and at Portsmouth, Plymouth, Cork and Dublin.

Convicts were first transported to New South Wales under the *Transportation Act* of 1784. Between 1788 and 1868 over 162,000 men, women and children were sent to Australia as convicts on board more than 1,000 modified merchant ships that had been converted into convict transports. The first such fleet of convict transports bound for the east coast of Australia set sail from Spithead on 13 May 1787 and comprised two Royal Navy ships, HMS *Sirius* and HMS *Supply*, three store ships, *Borrowdale*, *Fishburn* and *Golden Grove* and six convict transports, *Alexander*, *Friendship*, *Lady Penrhyn*, *Scarborough*, *Prince of Wales* and *Charlotte*.

For the First Fleet and for all subsequent convict voyages to the Australian colonies the British Government did not build specialised convict transports, instead chartering suitable ships from private ship owners. The three-masted, two-decked, wooden ship *Charlotte* was built on the Thames in 1784. It's recorded as 105 feet long (32 metres), with a breadth of 28 feet 2½ inches (8.59 metres) and a registered tonnage of 338 tons.

Charlotte, along with the other eight privately-owned ships destined to become First Fleet transports, was chartered by the Admiralty late in 1786 from its owner, Mr Matthews, and was fitted out at Deptford, one of the royal dockyards established to build, repair and victual ships of the Royal Navy. After sailing to Plymouth in January 1787, *Charlotte* embarked its complement of crew, marines (one captain, two lieutenants, two sergeants, three corporals, one drummer and 35 privates) and convicts (89 male and 20 female).

Among those who set sail on 13 May 1787 was John White, the Surgeon-General of the First Fleet, and the convicted thief and mutineer Thomas Barrett.

Surgeon John White had joined the Navy in 1780 and in 1786 was surgeon on board HMS *Irresistible*, one of the many commands of the influential and well-connected Sir Andrew Snape Hamond. Hamond had been Lieutenant Governor of Nova Scotia for three years, was a friend of William Pitt and Horatio Nelson and had won the king's favour on account of his 'many creditable exploits' in the American War of Independence. It is believed to have been Hamond's influence that saw White appointed as Surgeon-General to the First Fleet.

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Upon White's arrival in Botany Bay Governor Phillip appointed him first Surgeon-General of New South Wales. He accompanied Phillip on several journeys of exploration during which he collected scores of specimens of the colony's unique flora and fauna. He sent some of these specimens, along with notes, drawings and the manuscript of his journal, back to England on one of the returning First Fleet ships, addressed to his friend Thomas Wilson who edited

it into White's *Journal of a Voyage to New South Wales*, published in London in 1790.

Containing 65 very fine engravings of plants, birds and animals by the artist T Debrett, based on White's specimens and drawings, this volume is considered the earliest book of Australian natural history and one of the first detailed accounts of the voyage of the First Fleet. It reveals White as intelligent, humane and diligent in his work of caring for the convicts, soldiers and sailors of the First Fleet and the colony – not to mention extremely well-organised, since getting this work into publication so soon after

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the First Fleet's arrival, and while he remained in the colony, was an extraordinary achievement.

From a totally different social setting came the convict Thomas Barrett. He had been tried by the second Middlesex Jury before Mr Justice Ashhurst at Justice Hall in the Old Bailey on 11 September 1782 for stealing one silver watch (value three pounds), a steel chain, one watch key, one hook, two shirts and one shift from Ann Milton on 20 July 1782, and was subsequently found guilty of theft and sentenced to death. Shortly afterwards Barrett's sentence was commuted to transportation for life.

Although the former American colonies had firmly opposed receiving further convicts, in January 1783 the Lordships of the Treasury declared that transportation overseas to the Americas

would re-commence, after an eight-year interlude caused by the American War of Independence. So in March 1784 Thomas Barrett, along with 142 other convicts, found himself on board the convict transport *Mercury* bound for North America where they could expect to be assigned to planters to labour alongside slaves. Off the Devon coast some of the convicts including Thomas Barrett mutinied, overpowered the crew and fled after putting the ship in at Torbay.

Barrett, said to be a ringleader of the mutiny, was quickly recaptured with his fellow mutineers and again appeared before the Old Bailey on the charge of being criminally at large in England. Again he was sentenced to death, and again he was reprieved, this time because his intervention had saved the life of the *Mercury's* steward, and he had prevented another mutineer from cutting off the captain's ear with scissors. He was held in the hulk *Dunkirk* where he was reported to be 'tolerably well behaved but troublesome at times'. In March 1887 he was sent on board *Charlotte* for transport to Botany Bay.

During his time imprisoned on hulks, Thomas Barrett would no doubt have observed, and possibly taken part in, the manufacture of a category of convict mementos that have come to be known as 'love tokens'. These were metal discs or medals, usually made out of salvaged copper alloy or low-denomination copper coins that were sanded down and then inscribed with poems and statements of affection by convict forgers or metal workers. Such love tokens, examples of which appear in the museum's collection, were sold to fellow convicts who gave them to loved ones, families or friends as a memento of the soon-to-be transported convict.

Although Thomas Barrett was sentenced for theft and does not appear to have been trained as a metal worker or jeweller, Surgeon White's journal records that he was in fact a gifted and talented forger. In Rio de Janeiro Barrett had been caught trying to pass some counterfeit quarter dollars that he had managed to forge out of pewter spoons, old buttons and brass buckles obtained from the marines. With a couple of accomplices, he achieved this at sea between Teneriffe and Rio, without access to tools, a forge or dies and under the constant surveillance of the guards. White was clearly impressed, and wrote:

The impression, milling, character, in a word, the whole was so inimitably executed that had their metal been a little better the fraud, I am convinced, would have passed undetected ... The adroitness, therefore, with which they must have managed, in order to complete a business that required so complicated



a process, gave me a high opinion of their ingenuity, cunning, caution, and address; and I could not help wishing that these qualities had been employed to more laudable purposes.

After an arduous voyage of between 250 and 252 days, 68 days of which were spent at Tenerife, Rio de Janeiro and Cape Town resupplying the fleet and resting the crew, HMS *Supply* arrived at Botany Bay on 18 January 1788 and Captain Arthur Phillip and some of his men came ashore at Yarra Bay at 3.00 pm that afternoon. The other ships arrived over the following two days, with the *Charlotte* arriving on the 20th. Most of the First Fleet remained in Botany Bay until 26 January when Phillip, unimpressed with the location's suitability for a settlement, moved the Fleet to Sydney Cove in Port Jackson to establish the first European settlement on the Australian continent.

Knowing very well the extent of Barrett's skill with metal, it is highly likely that Surgeon White commissioned Barrett to make him a memento of the arrival of the First Fleet at Botany Bay, and that this would have taken place during the six days that *Charlotte* remained in Botany Bay. White would have provided Barrett

with the necessary silver (the medal appears to be made out of a piece of a surgeon's silver kidney dish) and tools. He would also have provided the details and statistics of the voyage that are engraved on the medal's reverse:

Sailed the Charlotte of London from Spit Head the 13 of May 1787. Bound for Botany Bay in the Island of New Holland arriv'd at Teneriff the 4th June in Lat 28.13N Long 42.38 W depart'd it 10 arriv'd at Rio Janeiro 6 of Aug in Lat 22.54 S Long 42.38 W depart'd it the 5 Sept arriv'd at the Cape of Good Hope the 14 Octr in Lat 34.29 Lon S 18.29 E depart'd it th 13 of Novr and made the South Cape of New Holland the 8 of Jany 1788 in Lat 43.32 S Long 146.56E arrived Botany Bay the 20 of Jany the Charlotte in Co in Lat 34.00 South Long 151.00 East distance from Great Britain miles 13106.

On the obverse side is engraved a fully-rigged ship at anchor. The sun is near the horizon line on the lower left while the moon and some stars are inscribed above the ship. Above the sun in the upper left field are inscribed the words:

The CHARLOTTE at anchor in Botany Bay Jany. th 20, 1788.

Captains Hunter, Collins and Johnston, with Governor Phillip, Surgeon White ect. visiting a distressed female native of New South Wales, at a hut near Port Jackson. Copper engraving by Alexr Hogg after J Hunter, published London 1793. This art work was an early addition to the ANMM collection.

The ship is a fair representation of its type, although several details suggest a landsman's and not a sailor's eye. It's unlikely, for example, that a sailor would depict the anchor line defying gravity by arching upward. With similar artistic licence the line attaching the anchor to the anchor buoy is shown arching out of the water. The ship rides to a considerable swell, which is also a little surprising for



LEFT: Sketch of Sydney Cove, Port Jackson, in the County of Cumberland, New South Wales July 1788. Coastline by W Dawes; soundings by Capt Hunter. Published by I Stockdale, London 1789. ANMM collection

RIGHT: View of the settlement on Sydney Cove, Port Jackson 20th August, 1788, engraving by E Dayes from a sketch by T Hunter, published by I Stockdale, London 1792. ANMM collection

BELOW: Arthur Phillip Esq. Captain General and Commander-in-Chief in and over the Territory of New South Wales. Stipple engraving by W Sherwin engraver, after F Wheatley Engraving, 1789. Publisher I Stockdale, London. ANMM collection



so well-sheltered an anchorage as Botany Bay. In a simplified composition of the sky, no constellation is identifiable.

The depiction of both sun and moon together is intriguing. If we interpret the moon as a waxing new crescent moon high in the western sky as the sun sets, we are looking at the sky as it would have appeared at sunset about 12 January, a good week before the voyage's end. Alternatively, if we interpret the dark crescent that the artist depicts as representing the occulted portion of the moon, then we have the waxing gibbous moon that occurred on 20 January 1788 – although its position in the sky and its orientation are inaccurate. Not that one would expect that degree of accuracy in such a depiction, worked, perhaps, from memory on the following days.

Whether Thomas Barrett was that artist we can probably never be entirely sure. A leading authority on Australian medals – Leslie J Carlisle of the Australiana Society, author of *Australian Historical Medals 1788–1988* and *Australian Commemorative Medals and Medalets from 1788* – has attributed the medal to Barrett since he was the only known forger on *Charlotte*, with the skills to produce such a beautiful work of art using the minimal resources available.

Unfortunately for everyone, circumstances at Sydney Cove when the First Fleet relocated there were far from desirable. They had arrived during the

heat of summer after a lengthy voyage and food, along with all other supplies, was scarce and rationed from the start. The threats of starvation, illness, rebellion or attack, in an unknown and unfamiliar environment, created a situation that called on all of Governor Arthur Phillip's



considerable abilities as an administrator. To meet these challenges he had been delegated powers that were close to absolute, with complete authority over all in his charge.

On 27 February 1788, only one month after arriving at Port Jackson, Thomas Barrett was arrested, charged, tried and convicted on the clearest evidence of

stealing pease and beef from the public store. With two accomplices, Henry Lovell (or Lavell) and Joseph Hall, he was sentenced to death – for the third time in his life. But for Thomas Barrett, there would be no new reprieve. As Surgeon White relates:

They were, about six o'clock the same evening, taken to the fatal tree, where Barrett was launched into eternity, after having confessed to the Rev. Mr. Johnson, who attended him, that he was guilty of the crime, and had long merited the ignominious death which he was about to suffer, and to which he said he had been brought by bad company and evil example. Lovel and Hall were respited until six o'clock the next evening. When that awful hour arrived, they were led to the place of execution, and, just as they were on the point of ascending the ladder, the judge advocate arrived with the governor's pardon, on condition of their being banished to some uninhabited place.

Barrett had the dubious honour of being the first person in the colony to be executed, and indeed was the first European hung on Australia's east coast (the Dutch having executed some of the *Batavia* mutineers on the Abroholos Islands off Western Australia in 1629). The execution took place in front of all 750 convicts, attended by the entire garrison with bayonets fixed. Without doubt Governor Phillip intended to send

the strongest message – and, having made an example of Barrett, was then able to exercise his humanity and spare the other accomplices the noose.

There seems little doubt that Barrett was singled out as a persistent troublemaker. We can only speculate what kind of colonist such an independent and proactive spirit would have made had he survived. A plaque commemorating his execution stands on the north-eastern corner of the junction of Harrington and

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Essex Streets in Sydney. Now, if we're right to ascribe *The Charlotte Medal* to Thomas Barrett, he has a far more original and interesting memorial to his troubled life and times, which will go on display shortly here at the Australian National Maritime Museum.

Surgeon John White remained in New South Wales until 1794, attending to the health of the convicts, guards and government establishment, when he received permission to return home temporarily to England on account of his ill health. White's publication *Journal of a Voyage to New South Wales* had become a noted success and copies were presented to Sir Joseph Banks, The Earl of Donegal, the Earl of Inchiquin,

Viscount Lewisham, the Lord Bishop of London, the Earl of Oxford, Sir William Molesworth, Sir Mathew White Ridley and the Second Earl Spencer – The First Lord of the Admiralty, later Home Secretary – along with notable academics, botanical collectors, members of parliament, the Royal Society and aristocracy.

White also sent additional specimens, drawings and field notes to prominent botanists including Thomas Wilson,

James Edward Smith and Aylmer Bourke Lambert. His extensive collection of New South Wales plant specimens eventually found their way into various institutions around the world including the Academy of Natural Sciences in Philadelphia, the Gray Herbarium at Harvard University, J E Smith Herbarium of the Linnean Society of London, and the DelSSERT Herbarium, Conservatoire et Jardin Botaniques in Geneva, Switzerland.

It is not known if White presented his medal, along with his specimens and notes, to one of these individuals or societies, or if the medal remained in his family's possession until after his death in 1832. What is known is that some time prior to 1919 *The Charlotte Medal* came

into the collection of Princess Victoria (daughter of Queen Victoria) and her husband Prince Louis of Battenberg, later Admiral Louis Alexander Mountbatten, Marquess of Milford Haven and First Sea Lord of the Admiralty.

The Charlotte Medal was sold by Sotheby, Wilkinson & Hodge in 1919, on behalf of the Marquess, to Albert Henry Baldwin, a well-known British numismatist who operated the firm Baldwin and Sons in London up until 1967. It was later sold to John J Ford, one of America's best-known coin and numismatic dealers, before being sold in turn to Dr John Chapman in 1981.

Dr Chapman's research, published as 'The solution of the *Charlotte* enigma' in the *Journal of the Numismatic Association of Australia*, Vol 9, pages 28–33, has thrown further light on Surgeon-General John White's connection with *The Charlotte Medal*. In part this comes through the existence of a smaller copper medallion, held in a private collection, that also commemorates *Charlotte's* arrival in Botany Bay. Evidently based on *The Charlotte Medal*, it includes an abridged inscription, sun, moon and stars, but no ship. It bears the stamped initials WB and was found at the site of the homestead of William Broughton, storekeeper, magistrate and former servant to John White while on board the convict transport *Charlotte* in January 1788. ■