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# BOUNTY

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THE HISTORY OF THE BOUNTY



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# THE HISTORY

The *Bounty* is likely to be the most renowned vessel in history. Originally called *Bethia*, it was a merchant vessel built for the transport of coal. In 1787, it was assigned to the Royal Navy, changed its name and was sent for a very strategic mission within the policy of colonial expansion.

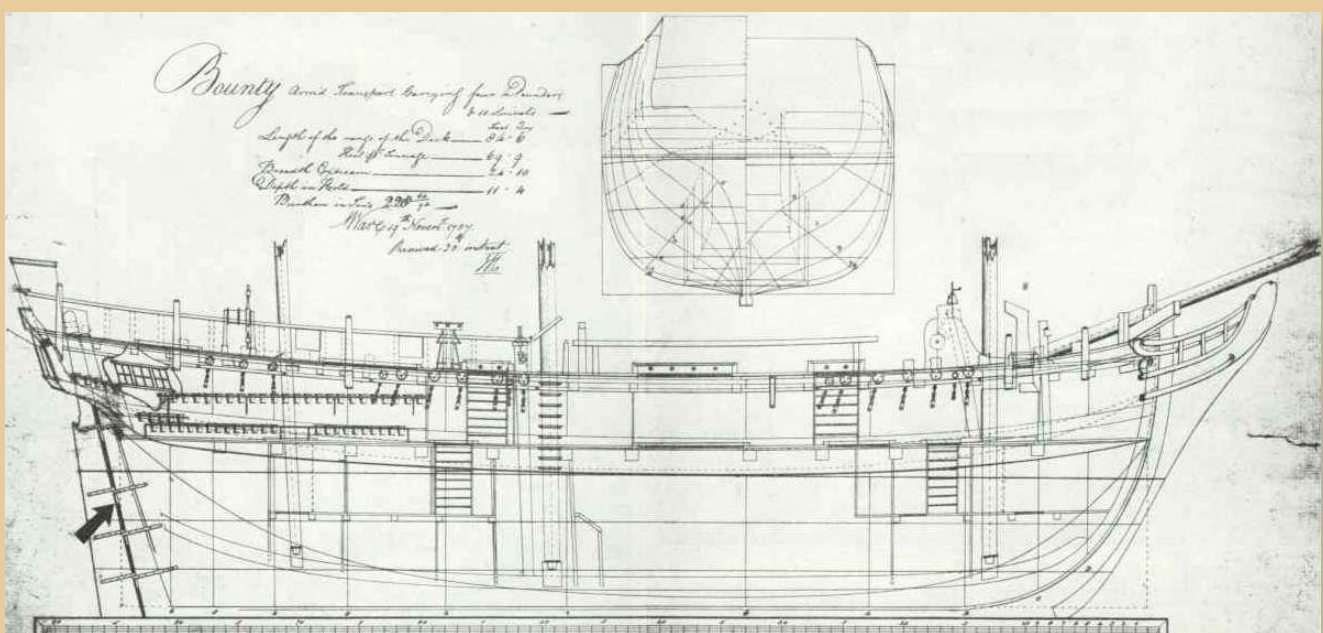
The *Bethia* had been built for mercantile purposes and weighted 230 tons. Later on, after having been purchased by the Royal Navy, it was considerably changed in terms of structure and hold furnishings.

Such changes were undertaken to make the *Bounty* suitable for a very special mission: the transport of approximately 300 breadfruit seedlings from Polynesia to the British colonies in the Caribbean. We will tell you the mission of the *Bounty* and of its crew, the protagonist of one among the most famous mutinies throughout time: one of the most gripping pages in history, narrated by well-known writers, and the subject of three films.

## *The Birth of the Project*

James Cook (1728-1779) was a renowned British explorer, navigator and cartographer. He had undertaken three voyages in the Pacific Ocean, exploring the coasts of Australia and of the Hawaiian Islands, as well as circumnavigating New Zealand. His logbooks, his records and his collaborators' scientific studies would tell about huge wealth and an abundance of natural resources in the Pacific islands (especially in Polynesia). Surprisingly, such records would also describe friendly native inhabitants willing to cooperate with the so-called "white men."

No wonder that the oversea travellers' reports on the new lands made British aristocracy want to fund further expeditions. Among many scientific discoveries, Cook and his biologists came across breadfruit in Polynesia; a plant easy to grow and yielding a very nourishing fruit, as big as a melon.



A table of the *Bounty* construction drawing.

The West India Company planned an enterprise to export breadfruit plants from Polynesia to Jamaica. The new plantations would have yielded cheap food to feed the British slaves of those lands.

The *Bounty* voyage would have lasted many months and it would have been difficult to keep the breadfruit seedlings until their transplanting in Jamaica.

The lower deck (originally meant for transport of coal) was adapted to favour the ventilation and the sun light required for the survival of the plants during the voyage, under the supervision of a biologist purposely on board the *Bounty*.

When the adjustment procedures were over, the vessel was renamed *Bounty* and provided with defensive weapons.

### *The Bounty Expedition*

The vessel set sail from Spithead on December 23rd, 1787. William Bligh was appointed Commander of the expedition. He was an expert navigator and on very good terms with the King of Otaheite (name of the Island of Tahiti, by then). The Captain was firmly convinced that the voyage could have taken less than expected and he could have delivered a large shipment of plants, ready to be transplanted in Jamaica. One of the main problems connected to the length of the voyage was, indeed, to reach destination before breadfruit plants hibernated; it was believed that hibernation might last four months, but nobody knew when the period would start!

### *An Impossible Route*

The original route envisaged rounding Cape Horn, South of South America: Bligh's ambitious dream of saving almost five months of sailing faded after thirty days of useless attempts, especially because of winter bad weather conditions.

Many members of the crew had unsuccessfully attempted the route before, under the command of other captains. Thus they were discouraged about the possibility to succeed in the endeavour. The conditions on board were



*A portrait of Captain William Bligh at the time of the Bounty expedition.*

impossible and the crew's discontent would grow day by day. The Captain would impose strict discipline and exemplary punishment. James Valentine, a member of the crew, died for the inadequacy of on-board doctor Huggan's treatments.

Bligh adjusted the route and headed for the Cape of Good Hope, South of Africa. After few weeks, the *Bounty* finally reached Tahiti. The crew, worn-out after the long and extremely hard voyage, found comfort and amusement on the island. The peaceful and generous native inhabitants of the island were very welcoming to the European seamen.

Captain Bligh, disagreeing with other ship's officers, was very keen on discipline and imposed strict rules on his crew: for example, he forbade to "acquaint" with the native women of Tahiti.



### *The Beginning of the Rebellion*

Still today, many theories on the mutiny on the *Bounty* exist.

The triggering events were many, no doubt: among them, the harsh discipline imposed by the Captain, who established strict rules of conduct and harsh punishment. Besides, many historians agree that Tahitian women's freedom and the inhabitants' life style made the crew want to settle on the beloved island.

### *The Mutiny*

The mutiny on the *Bounty* is among the most sensational ones in naval history.

On April 28th, 1789, Master's mate Fletcher Christian and Honorary midshipman Peter Heywood persuaded the majority of the crew to rise up against Captain Bligh. At night, the Captain was picked up from his cabin by a bunch of rebellious seamen, threatened with a bayonet, and led to the deck, by force. The crew split in three groups.

Together with Christian and Heywood, seventeen sailors rose up against the Captain, two did not take a position and twenty-four remained faithful to Bligh. The Captain and his followers were left on a small boat – an approximately 7 metre long and 2 metre wide launch – with a small amount of provisions

and of water, four knives, a compass and a pocket watch. Because of the launch small sizes, four seamen who had declared fidelity to Bligh were held on board with the mutineers, also since they were considered to be essential for the crew's survival. Firstly, the mutineers on board the *Bounty* headed for the island of Tubuai, South of French Polynesia, where they established a colony. Then they set sail to Tahiti where they decided to help the native inhabitants build a fort which they called Fort George, in honour of King George III.

### *Bligh's "Spectacular" Enterprise*

Still today, Bligh and his followers' fate is considered to be miraculous, a unique enterprise in history.

Despite the lack of provisions and the tiny boat on which they had been abandoned, after forty-seven days of tough sailing and just one attempt to land, the Captain reached the Dutch colony of Timor, an island of the Lesser Sunda Islands archipelago, in Indonesia.

Many men died because of tropical disease, there. But Bligh gained control of the situation and, determined to return to homeland, decided to leave the command to Sailing master Fryer, to go back to Europe and to bring news of the mutiny. Bligh reached the United



*The island of Tahiti at the time of the Bounty expedition.*

Kingdom. During an inquiry into the mutiny on the *Bounty*, he was acquitted by the military court and continued his naval career until he was appointed Governor of New South Wales, in 1805.

## *The Destiny of the Mutineers*

And what was the destiny of the mutineers and of the *Bounty*?

They were definitively not as lucky as Captain Bligh. After deciding to return to Tahiti, sixteen mutineers chose to remain on the island, whereas the other eight seamen, led by Christian, decided to reach the newly discovered island of Pitcairn, together with some native inhabitants of Tahiti. They meant to establish a new community over there. The *Bounty* was set on fire, instead. However, the relationship between the British and the Polynesians ended up in a proper rebellion by the latter, as they had been reduced to slavery.

In 1793, during the revolt, many mutineers died. Among them, Fletcher Christian. Later on, thanks to John Adams, a truce was established. A few years later, in 1808, the island was discovered and the survivors were led toward Eastern Australia.



Top right: a portrait of William Bligh, the *Bounty* renowned Captain.

Centre and bottom: portraits of Fletcher Christian and Peter Heywood.





In 1960, an exact replica of renowned HMS Bounty was built. In the picture, the vessel during the naval parade which took place in Halifax, Canada, on July 23rd, 2012.



**Original name:** *Bethia*  
**Original owner:** private merchant service  
**Shipyard:** Blaydes, Kingston-upon-Hull, England  
**Launched:** 1784  
**In service:** 1784-87  
**Fate:** sold to the Royal Navy, May 23rd, 1787

**Name:** *Bounty*  
**Purchased:** May 23rd, 1787  
**In service:** 1787-90  
**Fate:** burnt (23 January 1790)  
**Length:** 27.7 metres  
**Width:** 7.40 metres  
**Crew:** 44 seamen including officers  
**Armament:** 4 × 4-pounder (1.8 kg) cannons and 10 × swivel guns



The Bounty replica bow. The vessel sank during the 2012 Hurricane Sandy.