Chapter 2: Recherche Bay

With an easterly breeze facilitating their departure from Brest, the frigates sailed on 21 September 1791. There was immediate excitement aboard *Recherche*, when three stowaways caused d’Entrecasteaux to order a return to shore. They were unlucky. Three further stowaways emerged too late to be offloaded, so they joined the crew.

The vessels reached Cape Town 15 weeks out of Brest. Sailing again from Cape Town on 16 February 1792, they acquired two further stowaways. 66 days later they concluded that Adventure Bay was near. English seafarers including James Cook and William Bligh favoured the shelter of Adventure Bay, on Bruny Island, because of the opportunities there for replenishing water, wood and fish resources. The area was then assumed to form part of Tasmania’s mainland, until d’Entrecasteaux proved that it was an island. Bligh was making use of Adventure Bay’s natural facilities for HMS *Providence* when the French were at Cape Town, during February 1792.

Sailing before the winds in the stormy roaring forties, conditions proved unduly rough on 14 April, when a huge wave washed over *Recherche*. Water poured down onto the orlop deck and the hold. It swamped Labillardi ère’s cabin, while a further wave flung d’Entrecasteaux against the writing desk in his cabin, breaking a rib. Bruised and sore, he was confined to his bunk for several days and was not on deck to contribute his experience and navigational sense when it was needed.

Through a major compass-bearing error the French were about to make their most significant geographical and scientific discovery, the D’Entrecasteaux Channel and Aboriginal Tasmanians. On 21 April, the lookout sighted the two rocky marine navigational guideposts, the pinnacles of the Mewstone and Eddystone, rising above the stormy ocean south of Tasmania. Now almost seven months out of Brest, short of water and wood and beyond the 60-day scurvy threshold, all hands eagerly anticipated landfall. What followed has alternative explanations, though human error played the crucial role.

Willaumez took the *Recherche’s* bearings on 21 April. At 12.29pm, Eddystone bore S41º E, at 12.34pm that pinnacle was S35º E, but at 1pm Willaumez measured S19º W. Such a reading was impossible, but it went unchallenged by Rossel who was on the quarter-deck. This is the version of the mistake mentioned by most diarists. In fairness to Rossel and others concerned, possibly they were preoccupied because coastal conditions were hazy and the British charts available provided minimal detail on this dimly viewed and unknown coast. Assisted by the false compass reading they concluded that what they discerned through the mist was Tasman Head on Bruny Island. Probably they were near South Cape,
followed by South East Cape, on Tasmania’s mainland some 40 kilometres west of Tasman Head. Tolerant and injured d’Entrecasteaux (or possibly as written by Rossel who edited the admiral’s journal), made no reference to this error.\(^2\)

Even the prestige of James Cook helped to mislead them. La Motte du Portail informed Zélée: “We were skirting the coast with Cook’s maps in our hands, all of us more convinced of the exactitude of his work.”\(^3\)

On Espérance meantime, the officers knew that Tasman Head was further east, so they were surprised when Recherche turned northwards and headed into what Tasman, in 1642, had named Storm Bay and which subsequent captains had avoided. In reality they were entering the D’Entrecasteaux Channel, with Espérance obediently following into those uncharted waters. Assuming that they were entering a bay they sailed on seeking a haven. They had to anchor before dusk, in 14 fathoms over a usefully sandy bottom. Two headlands were visible from the anchorage and St Aignan was sent in a ship’s boat to reconnoitre the situation. He returned to confirm that the headlands marked the entrance to a good harbour. Meanwhile, sailors spent their time energetically fishing, hauling in a substantial catch as a welcome dietary change. In this accidental manner Recherche Bay became known to Europeans.

Recherche Bay entrance from Bennetts Point.

Photo: John Mulvaney, 2003
Communication between the two anchored ships was facilitated when du Portail was rowed across from Espérance and spoke with the injured commander in his cabin. Possibly d’Entrecasteaux was relieved to find a suitable harbour, because he was in a generous mood. He informed Portail that he was immediately promoted to lieutenant’s rank, confirmed with ‘a kiss from Mons d’Auribeau’. Portail was not alone in his good fortune, as three others were promoted to ensign rank.4

Under calm conditions the following morning both vessels were safely towed by invigorated oarsmen into the bay. They anchored in the northern sector, later termed the Port du Nord, or ‘little bay’, today the unimaginative Pig Sties Bay. They moored over 100 metres from the beach north of Bennetts Point; Recherche lay some 70 metres north of Espérance. Gazing at this pristine landscape, Labillardièrè voiced the ethos of noble nature: ‘We were filled with admiration at the sight of these ancient forests, in which the sound of the axe had never been heard.’5 Turning his eyes towards the harbour, he exclaimed with exaggerated praise that ‘more than 100 vessels of the line might ride here with safety’. D’Entrecasteaux felt equally emotional: ‘With every step, one encounters the beauties of unspoilt nature … trees reaching a very great height … are devoid of branches along the trunk, but crowned with an everlasting green foliage. Some of these trees seem as ancient as the world’. Little wonder that in this peaceful Eden, d’Entrecasteaux rapidly improved in health and was reported completely restored within a few days.6 Matthew Flinders paid him an unreserved compliment, when he praised the discovery of this harbour as ‘the most important discovery which has been made in [Tasmania] from the time of Tasman’.7

During the 24 days spent moored in the harbour, 200 men were set to work as ships and shore became a hive of activity. It was a welcome break from shipboard routine, although a busy one as most of the crews worked ashore. Before describing the scientific research, it is appropriate to note these various activities, many of which must have left archaeological traces on land or seabed. The example of the preservation of the James Craig over a century later, is a reminder that archaeological evidence of this visit may be preserved in the mud and sand. D’Entrecasteaux provided testimony to the constitution of the seabed when they had difficulty in raising an anchor which was ‘too deeply buried in the mire’. ‘With this type of seafloor,’ he concluded, ‘where the anchors sink to the point of disappearing, it is necessary to raise the anchor frequently.’8
Looking towards Mt La Perouse from the 1792 beach.

View west from the 1792 beach towards Mt La Perouse. John Mulvaney, 2003

The harbour swarmed with fish and seamen commenced an active harvest, catching so many fish by line and net that a prime task was to dry the surplus which was not immediately cooked and eaten. As they departed the harbour, the log of Espérence wryly reported ‘there was so much fish hanging out to dry that we presented a truly magnificent sight sailing off … decked out with garlands of fish!’

Officers under d’Auribeau’s direction selected the sandy beach and the area behind Bennetts Point for erecting tents and for industrial activities, which went on alongside the tents erected for astronomical observations. For efficient control, all activities were set close together. There were two forges for metal working. One of the urgent tasks was to reforge a broken link in an anchor chain. Charcoal was essential for cooking in the galleys, so kilns were constructed for wood burning to produce charcoal. An area was delimited for washing linen. The personal washing needs of the crews were encouraged by each person receiving a ration of one and a half pounds of soap; every fourth day, time was allowed for personal clothes washing. Sailors also bathed in the sea for their own cleanliness. As it was well into autumn, and Labillardiére reported that snow increased on the mountains, the cool water was unlikely to have attracted all crew members. However, Labillardiére reported that sailors ‘bathed here very frequently’ and he expressed relief that nobody was taken by a shark.
With so many men ashore pursuing different tasks, it was necessary to recall them in an organised manner. Each day at 6.30pm a red flag was hoisted on the mainmast of each ship and oared boats were sent to collect the men.

A repair yard was constructed for the ship’s oared boats, which had proved unsuitable. They had so little freeboard that their load capacity was small and cargo was in danger of being swamped. One boat from Recherche capsized at the harbour entrance. It proved necessary to add height to the gunwales through the addition of washboards to both the 12-ton dinghy and to the smaller boats. D’Auribeau referred to ‘very extensive repairs, especially to the oared boats which had to be pulled up on the shore so as to raise their sides, a long and delicate operation in a place where the timber was of very bad quality for this purpose’. Lieutenant Trobriand was so dismissive of the boats that he said that they were more suited to be ‘hung in churches’. Searching amongst these unknown tree species, the carpenters cut down various trees in hope some would provide useful timber. They were frustrated because so much timber proved rotten inside the trunk. According to Labillardière, blue gum, the newly discovered species, which he named *Eucalyptus globulus*, answered best to their requirements.\(^{11}\)

Today there is a large dry-stone structure with a straight side located behind Bennetts Point that requires archaeological investigation. It is constructed from carefully laid rocks some 20 metres long and one metre high. Some claim that it represents the base structure of the observatory. But this is unlikely, as discussed later. It may have served for the repair of the boats. A surveyed plan dated 1863 indicates that at this date there were three huts situated at this location, together with a ‘craft’ in full sail, but firmly placed on land.\(^{12}\) It may indicate boat repair being carried out which utilised the stone structure. It surely required many hands to carry and lay so many rocks. Until excavations establish the origin of this considerable platform, it is presumed that the French sailors constructed it and that it was expanded and utilised for boat repairs then, and half a century later, when whaling boats were based in the harbour. Two boats were built here during the late 1850s. It may be relevant that the crew came mainly from Brittany, a centre of dry-stone walling.

Meantime, the shallow sandy tidal stretch allowed the safe beaching of the frigates, so that they tilted on their sides, or careened, to allow cleaning and caulking of their hulls. Another major task was required to fill the many casks with fresh water. Water was abundantly available in streams around the bay, but some proved brackish, while others could not be approached by the long boat that ferried the heavy casks to the ships. Consequently, attempts to utilise some sources were abandoned and the main water supply was established on the western shore. This situation necessitated men to stand in the water while a cask filled, then manhandle it out to the longboat and lift it aboard. Prudently,
given the surplus of good drinking water, any empty wine casks also were filled.\textsuperscript{13}

Axes were certainly now heard in the forests, as axemen collected wood for charcoal production and dry wood for future use in the galley fires. A large quantity of wood was stowed in the hold. All needs were met, although the charcoal burners produced only 15 sacks of charcoal, less than anticipated from the quantity of wood burned.\textsuperscript{14}

\textbf{The enigmatic stone structure at Bennetts Point.}

The enigmatic stone structure at Bennetts Point, approximately 20m x 1m high. Was it constructed in 1792 upon which to repair the rowing boats, or was it made by boat builders during the 1850s? Photograph by John Mulvaney, 2004.

Upon their arrival in the harbour, a boat was provided for Beautemps-Beaupré and Crestin, with orders to map the harbour and sound its depths. A precise and accurate chart resulted from their effort. Revised during the 1793 visit, it was reproduced in Labillardière’s book published in 1800. Less productivity resulted from the misguided enthusiasm of Lieutenant Le Grand, a keen fisherman. He convinced Kermadec that he could put to good use the whaleboat purchased in Cape Town. He advocated that it be rowed out of the harbour and a few hundred metres north. There it should be manhandled across a sandspit of some 120 metres to launch on Blackswan Lagoon, where an abundant catch of fish would result. The lagoon was surrounded by marshy vegetation, which rendered net fishing impossible, so two days were wasted and the boat put at risk of damage.\textsuperscript{15}
During their entire stay, the French noticed smoke from Aboriginal fires and, in local travels through the forest, brush shelters and hearths and food remains were observed, but the people evaded them, although they must have watched them keenly. Prejudices died hard for seaman Ladroux. Even though they encountered no Aborigines, hostile or friendly, during the first visit, he complained: ‘you don’t know whether these savages eat each other and it is possible that they want to crunch us up because instead of coming near us they stay out of the way’. On one occasion, men under Le Danseur, pilot on Espérance, came upon a recently abandoned campfire, which they soon rekindled. Le Danseur left his knife in reciprocity for the fire’s use. The ship’s log wryly recorded: ‘he knew [the knife] not much good, but if he did, after all he would get a better one’.16

That same log entry included a reference of modern relevance. Noting that strong wind agitated the trees, but that they sheltered the moorings, the sage advice was as follows: ‘If Europeans come out here, they would be well advised not to cut any trees, which are great protection against the wind.’17

Recherche Bay, revisited summer 1793

Having traversed the South Pacific in a vain search for La Pérouse, the ships sailed west through Indonesia and down the Australian west coast. There they surveyed the Recherche Archipelago and Esperance harbour, a seemingly barren area. Espérance was down to its last 10 barrels of water, so the frigates used the westerly wind to return to the familiar and welcome facilities of Recherche Bay.

Espérance, now desperately short of water, sailed ahead of Recherche. On 21 January 1793 they entered the Bay, but unfavourable winds made entry impossible into their former northern anchorage. Kermadec headed for the southern arm, their Bay du Sud, or Bay of Rocks, today’s Rocky Bay. He found suitable moorings without any difficulty, although he had no chart of this area. The Recherche officers, particularly d’Auribeau, favoured returning to their original anchorage, but Kermadec gave confident assurances that conditions were good in this southern harbour. When Recherche headed towards the southern area (equipped with Beautemps-Beaupré’s chart) they grounded. Even with the pulling power of oared boats from both vessels, they remained firmly stuck for three hours. To add insult to the indignant d’Auribeau, it was found that the gushing streams of last year were dry. Fortunately for calm on the quarter deck, a boat party soon located an abundant and accessible water source on the western shore at Waterhole Cove. Even so, d’Entracasteaux, probably prompted by the doubting d’Auribeau, insisted that the latter and the chief surgeon first inspect the water supply before they made the final decision to anchor. The water proved of good quality, although the last word was with d’Auribeau, who declared that its taste was reedy.18
Upon reflection, when writing at the conclusion of their three weeks sojourn, d’Auribeau relented. He observed that:

The Bay of Rocks offers an extremely good anchorage where one finds great depth in several places. Moreover, the holding there is very good and one can be at ease in regard to the safety of the ship. Entrance and exit are easy when both are made with a suitable wind. The stream that we found there is all that one could wish for; water can be taken easily and is of good quality.\(^{19}\)

The familiar routine of the previous visit was followed through the following 21 days. Land base was established at the head of Rocky Bay, adjacent to Cockle Creek and the Espérance observatory on the shore further to the east. The flat land around this ‘good sized stream’, allowed for compact arrangement and supervision of shore installations. Its water, nowhere near the drinking water source, therefore provided fine opportunities for washing clothes. Hay was collected to feed the shipboard goats. All empty barrels were filled and the cooper prudently repaired a number, ensuring the maximum supply aboard. Firewood was readily collected nearby to store on board. There was urgent work for the blacksmith, so wood was required for his smithy in addition to the needs of the charcoal burners.\(^{20}\)

The rudder of Espérance was found to have its iron fittings worn, so they were dismantled to allow the blacksmith to repair it. The iron tiller rod was bent and anchor chains needed attention. Within eight days these essential repairs were completed. Lieutenant Denis de Trobriand was pleased to note in the ship’s log ‘that the repairs were perfect’ and he paid credit to ‘the skill of our carpenters and blacksmith’.\(^{21}\) Their forge and the Recherche observatory were situated on the modern Motts Beach.

On 3 February 1793, gunner Boucher was buried ashore. He died a lingering death from tuberculosis and many of his shipmates attended the service, presumably in the Cockle Creek area.\(^{22}\) A cemetery there today, however, is a relic of the post-nineteenth century establishment of the abortive Ramsgate settlement. This unknown grave presumably was the first European interment in Tasmania, just as Louise Gerardin was the first European woman to visit that island.

Some animals were probably consigned to a rapid death by spearing. A male and female goat were released on the bay’s southern shore by d’Entrecasteaux. ‘It is to be hoped,’ d’Auribeau reported, ‘that for the sake of visiting seamen the two animals will be very successful and become a useful resource at this port.’ Plans to release a doe and a stag deer there were thwarted when the stag died at sea.\(^{23}\)
Beaupré’s chart of the northern harbour.

Beaupré’s chart of northern harbour (Pigsties Bay), indicating 1792 anchorage, Observatory Point and the garden square (jardin) middle right. Published in *Atlas du voyage de Bruny-Dentrecasteaux...*, Depot general des cartes et plans de la marine et des colonies, Paris, 1807. National Library of Australia [map ra82-s7]
Marine resources again were a prime objective for food and must have bolstered health and stamina, as they were eaten in abundance. D’Auribeau complained that sailors on Recherche were slack fishermen when compared with the rival crew. In addition to ample quantities of various fish species, shellfish, especially mussels and oysters, were plentiful. Oysters were particularly accessible on rocks near Observatory Point. Crayfish were another welcome resource. Some inventive sailor constructed a trap from netting ‘made up of three circles and some rods’ resembling a barrel open at both ends. About 100 crayfish were harvested at one place. Apart from those fish eaten by the crew, there was a considerable industry in salting and drying the fish. Towards the end of their stay, Kermadec remarked, with appreciation, that ‘they hung up as decorations all round the rigging’.

At the conclusion to their Tasmanian experiences, when D’Entrecasteaux Channel had been surveyed, the captains reflected upon the geographic situation. Kermadec recognised the great advantages it posed as a major shipping lane, because it was sheltered. It later provided a shorter route to Hobart. Recherche Bay was suitable for ship repairs, while water and wood were readily available. He then conjectured about the future, where hillsides ‘appear suitable for plantations of vines’. ‘If ever this country becomes inhabited by Europeans,’ he thought, ‘it is possible that the strait will become the place recommended.’ D’Entrecasteaux felt enraptured with the advantages of the sheltered and relatively reef-free Channel and its many harbours. ‘None of the expedition’s navigators had ever seen such vast and safe anchorages in their travels; all the fleets of the world could be assembled there, and there would still be ample space left.’

Because of the surveying by this expedition and the quality of its charting, followed shortly by Baudin’s presence nine years later, British interests became alarmed that France might annex areas. It was no coincidence, therefore, that in 1803 a settlement occurred at Risdon Cove, adjacent to the future Hobart. It might be inferred that both Kermadec and d’Entrecasteaux voiced strategic aims, and that Recherche Bay could become a way-station to the French Pacific. Yet nothing in the expedition’s instructions or comments in their journals suggest political objectives. It is best to conclude that these were disinterested but enthusiastic impressions intended to benefit any vessels from all nations sailing those waters.
ENDNOTES

1 Labillardière, *Voyage in search of La Pérouse*, 1800: 19-20, 82.
5 Labillardière, *Voyage in search of La Pérouse*, 1800: 94, 32.
12 County of Kent, Parish of Purves, survey by district surveyor George Innes, November 1863, number 046646.
17 Ibid.: 69.
21 Ibid.: 156.