

Joseph Banks (1743 – 1820)

Born in London, the son of Lincolnshire landed gentry, Joseph Banks had no inclination to follow the political paths of his father, grandfather and great-grandfather, who had all been members of parliament. Nor did he show enthusiasm for the classics during his early education at Harrow and Eton. Instead, he developed a passion for the natural world, and studied botany at Oxford, engaging a natural history lecturer at his own expense. In 1761, while he was still at Oxford, his father died, leaving a large estate and considerable wealth, which Joseph Banks inherited when he turned 21.

In 1766 Banks travelled as a naturalist/passenger on HMS *Niger* to Newfoundland and Labrador, and returned with a large collection of biological specimens and information about the indigenous people. He was elected a fellow of the Royal Society the same year. A year later the Royal Society arranged with the Admiralty for him to join Cook's voyage to the South Pacific, again at his own expense. Banks took a staff of eight: Solander (botanist), Parkinson and Buchan (artists), Spöring (clerk/secretary) and four collectors/servants.

The *Endeavour* sailed from Plymouth in August 1768. The naturalists made collections and observations at sea, and at Rio de Janeiro, Tierra del Fuego and Tahiti. After observing the transit of Venus, Cook headed south and spent six months in New Zealand waters, circumnavigating the whole country. Banks, in his journal, left an invaluable description of this exploration, the natural features of the coast and the appearance and customs of the Māori people. And, of course, every opportunity was taken to go ashore with Solander and collect plant specimens, which then had to be drawn, described, classified and prepared for the return voyage. Most of the plants made it back safely – sadly, five of his team did not.

He was appointed special adviser and director of the Royal Gardens at Kew in 1773, and in 1778 was elected president of the Royal Society, holding that office for the remaining 42 years of his life. In 1781 he was awarded a knighthood. Before sailing with Cook, Banks's name had been linked to that of Harriet Blosset, but on 23 March 1779 at Holborn he married Dorothea Hugessen of Provender, Kent. They had no children. Although crippled by gout in his last years, he remained active, even in his wheelchair, until his death on 19 June 1820.

One of his greatest contributions to science was the promotion of scientific research and the encouragement of promising young botanists. He published little, but made his extensive library and collections freely available, and made provision in his will to enable artist Francis (Franz) Bauer to continue drawing new plants at Kew. A land feature (Banks Peninsula) and several plant species commemorate Sir Joseph Banks and the first botanical explorations in New Zealand.



Cordyline banksii

Cordyline are trees or shrubs with long narrow to elliptic leaves in dense tufts, and large terminal panicles of flowers. About 15 species are scattered from India to Australia, the Pacific and South America; four of the five New Zealand species are endemic. *Cordyline*, from the Greek *kordyle* 'a club', refers to the fleshy roots, which in some species were important to Māori as a food source. *Cordyline banksii* (tī ngahere, forest cabbage tree) is a sparingly branched tree up to 4 metres high, with drooping lanceolate leaves, each with a prominent, often brightly coloured midrib. Fragrant white flowers in drooping open panicles are followed in autumn by round white fruit blotched with dark blue. This species is found from North Cape to Marlborough and Westland, in coastal, lowland and montane forest, especially in forest margins. Māori used its leaves for making sandals.