

The Mutiny on the Bounty

The Ship

The Bounty was built in England, in 1784. In 1787 the ship was redesigned to carry breadfruit plants from the Pacific Islands to the Caribbean. The Bounty had heating and water facilities added to some of the cabins so the small trees would survive in cold weather. The British government was hoping the breadfruit trees growing wild in Tahiti could be grown in Jamaica, a British territory off the coast of central America. In those days the slave trade was in operation. The British government thought that the breadfruit trees would provide cheap food for the slaves working on the sugar farms there. The ship was very small: 90 feet 10 inches (27.7 metres) long and 24 feet 4 inches (7.4 metres) wide. The tallest mast was 53 feet (16.1 metres) high.

The Bounty was captained by Lieutenant William Bligh who took command on 16 August 1787. On 23 December, 1787, the Bounty set off on the long trip to Tahiti. William Bligh decided to go around Cape Horn, (the southern tip of South America), determined to circumnavigate the world. Although this was a shorter and more direct route than going around the Cape of Good Hope, (Africa), it was extremely dangerous. The ship, under direction of Captain Bligh, battled storms, winds and high seas for over a month but the bad weather made it impossible to continue. The crew feared for their lives, and the second-in-command, Fletcher Christian, pleaded with Captain Bligh to turn around. Finally, the Bounty was turned around and went the longer way around the Cape of Good Hope.

Tahiti

The Bounty reached Tahiti on 25 October 1788. She had been at sea for ten months. The crew stayed for five months and lived on the island. They collected 1015 breadfruit plants, which they planted into pots that they had brought with them. The crew members were very happy living in Tahiti, and Fletcher Christian fell in love with a Tahitian girl named Maimiti. Other men also had formed relationships with Tahitian women. When the time came to sail back to England, they were very sad to leave the women they loved.

The Bounty left Tahiti on 4 April 1789, and headed west for Jamaica, via Indonesia. Fletcher Christian became increasingly dissatisfied with Captain Bligh's leadership, believing him to be unnecessarily harsh on the men, giving out floggings for the smallest act of insubordination. On 28 April, near Tonga, (then called the Friendly Islands), Fletcher Christian led the mutiny (a take-over). The crew were divided in their loyalty. Some stayed loyal to Bligh but others, (the mutineers), took sides with Fletcher Christian.

During the night the mutineers captured and bound Bligh while he was sleeping. Fletcher Christian lowered the ship's small life boat, (which had a small sail), and forced Bligh and 18 men into it. They were given food and water rations for 5 weeks. They had no maps or charts,

because Christian needed them to sail the Bounty. Christian and his sailors took the Bounty back to Tahiti.

Arriving in Tahiti, Christian offered whatever gifts that remained in exchange for the women they had formed relationships with. The chief was reluctant but, in the end, allowed the Tahitians to make up their own mind. Eleven Tahitian women, and six Tahitian men joined the ship's crew. Some crew members however decided to stay on Tahiti and the chief gave permission for them to do so. Christian now had to find an uninhabited island upon which he and his crew could live. It had to be a place where British naval ships could not find them, because mutiny was a crime punishable by hanging.

From previous experience they had discovered that the inhabited islands presented great danger because many of the native peoples still practiced cannibalism. Fiji was particularly known to be treacherous. Previously they had stopped off at Tafua, between New Zealand and Fiji, where one of their crew members was captured and was killed.

Christian believed that if they headed directly east, they would come to Pitcairn Island, believed to be uninhabited. After travelling for weeks, the crew had almost given up hope when land was sighted. Yes, it was Pitcairn Island! After they arrived, they took everything they could from the ship. Not wanting the Bounty to be recognized by a passing ship, a sailor called Matthew Quintal was given instructions to burn and destroy the Bounty on 23 January 1790. Now they were completely isolated with no chance of getting off the island.

On 7 November 1790, a ship called the Pandora was sent to Tahiti look for the Bounty and to bring back the mutineers for punishment. The Pandora was able to capture the mutineers who had decided to stay on Tahiti, but could find no sign of the group that was hiding on Pitcairn. The Pandora was wrecked on the way back to England.

William Bligh

Lieutenant William Bligh miraculously sailed the small boat 6500 km back to Batavia, (Indonesia) which was then under Dutch rule. He returned to England and reported the mutiny to the Admiralty on 15 March 1790.

Bligh presented his case in court and it was decided that he was innocent, and had been a good captain. Seventeen years after the Bounty mutiny, on 13 August 1806, Bligh was appointed Governor of New South Wales in Australia, with orders to clean up the corrupt rum trade. His actions in trying to put a stop to the trade resulted in the so-called Rum Rebellion. Bligh was dismissed as Governor and he returned to London. He died on 7 December 1817.

Pitcairn Island

Pitcairn Island is a remote island in the Pacific Ocean. The Polynesians knew about the island and knew that people had once lived there. But there was nobody living on Pitcairn when it was discovered by an English sailor, Philip Carteret on 2 July 1767. The people from the Bounty had

the remote island to themselves. There was a lot of fighting between the new settlers. Fletcher Christian, four other mutineers and all six of the Tahitian men were killed. One of the four surviving mutineers fell off a cliff while drunk. Only two of the mutineers who went to Pitcairn died peacefully.

When the American seal-hunting ship Topaz visited the island in 1808 they found only one mutineer, John Adams, still alive along with nine Tahitian women and their children.

As time went on, it became increasingly difficult for the population of Pitcairn, (the descendants of the original Bounty crew), to support themselves. A succession of harvest failures meant very meagre food rations for them. After several appeals to the British Home Government, it was arranged for their transfer to Norfolk Island.

Norfolk Island

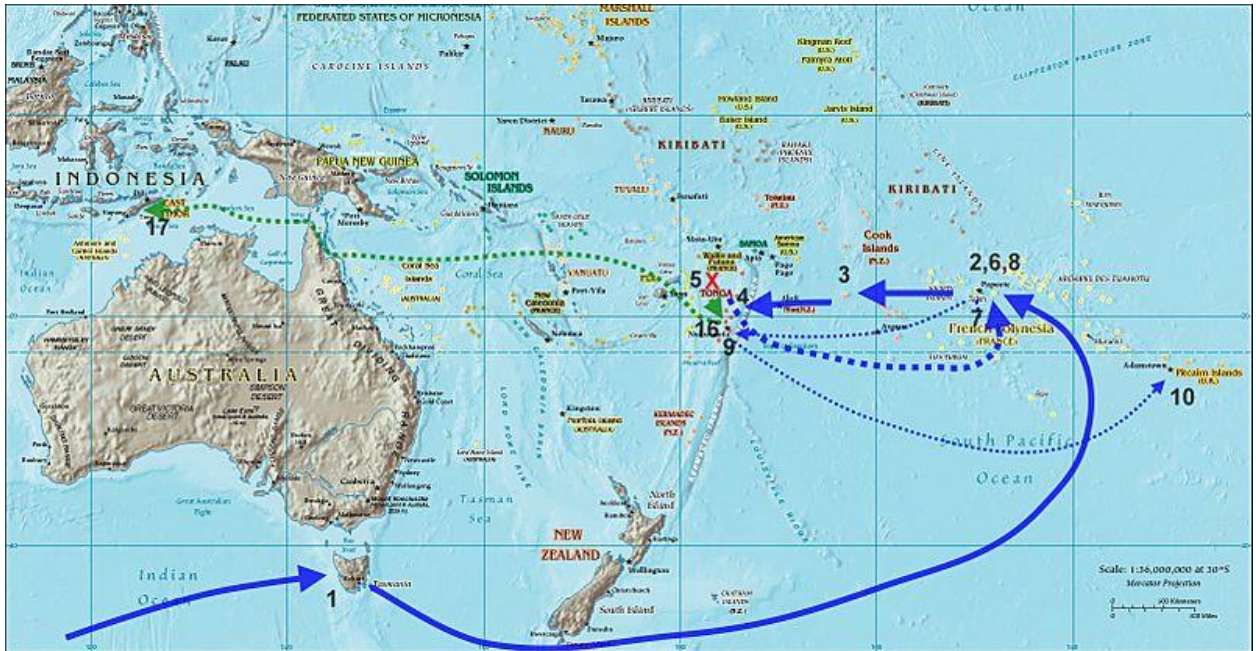
In 1856, the ship Moray arrived to transfer the Pitcairn people to their new home, Norfolk Island, more than 3,000 miles away, but still in the Pacific Ocean. They numbered 196 men, women and children and the surnames were as follows: Christian, Young, Adams, McCoy, Quintal (original mutineers' names) and Buffett, Evans and Nobbs.

After a very long journey they arrived at their new home, and a real home it proved to be. Compared to the difficult living conditions of the last few years of Pitcairn, they found substantial buildings, good roads, semi-tropical fruit trees, cultivated land, food ready for harvesting, horses and wheeled vehicles. These were things they had not known on Pitcairn. There were also cattle, pigs and poultry there. The buildings and roads were all a legacy from the earlier convict regime. (The British government had previously sent prisoners to Norfolk Island, as they did to Tasmania and other places in Australia because the British prisons were overcrowded.) When the new arrivals were firmly settled, the Government of the day insisted that Norfolk Island was solely the home of the ex-Pitcairners.

A few years later, some of them becoming homesick for storm-tossed Pitcairn, went back. This was in 1858 and 1863 and they consisted mainly of the Christian, Young and Buffett families who thus were the members of the present-day Pitcairners.

Pitcairn in later years

Pitcairn island continued to be governed by the United Kingdom. It has the smallest number of people of any country in the world. In 2007, 48 people were recorded as living there. The surnames of many of the islanders shows the history of the inhabitants. There are only four family names (as of 2010): Christian, Warren, Young and Brown. Christian and Young are descendants of the mutineers. Young and Brown are names of people who came later to the island.



This map shows the journey of HMS Bounty.

1. The Bounty arrives at Adventure Bay, Bruny Island, Tasmania after a long sea journey, 21 August 1788
2. The Bounty arrives at Tahiti 26 October 26, 1788. The Bounty leaves Tahiti on 4 April 1789
3. Visits the island of Palmerston.
4. Visits the island of Tofua.
5. The mutiny, 28 April 1789. Christian's travels with Bounty. Bligh travels in the small boat.
6. Tubai, then back to Tahiti 7 July 1789.
7. Back to Tubai, 16 July 1789.
8. Return to Tahiti 22 September 1789, and leave the next day.
9. Visit the island of Tongatabu, 15 November 1789.
10. Arrive Pitcairn Island 15 January 1790. The Bounty burned 23 January 1790
16. Tonga
17. Bligh arrives in Batavia (Indonesia)

Questions

1. Why did Fletcher Christian challenge William Bligh's leadership?
2. Do you think the mutiny was justified? Why or why not?
3. What risks did Christian take in carrying out the mutiny?
4. Could we excuse Bligh's harsh leadership, because he was just following the standard disciplinary action of all sea captains of the day? What is your opinion and why?
5. How do we know that Bligh had exceptional navigation skills?
6. How did Christian show wisdom and bravery after the mutiny?