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From the First Fleet to the Harbour Bridge: Sydney's Astronomical Beginnings

Abstract

Join us as historical detectives on the trail of William Dawes, astronomer, engineer, surveyor and ordnance officer, from his arrival in 1788 up to his connection with the 1932 construction of the Sydney Harbour Bridge.

Most Sydneysiders will have heard of Dawes (1762–1836); Dawes Point, the promontory supporting the southern pillars of the Sydney Harbour Bridge, is named after him, as are Dawes Creek and Dawes Ridge in the Blue Mountains National Park. Dawes was a second lieutenant on HMS *Sirius*'s voyage as flagship of the First Fleet from England to Botany Bay. As shipboard astronomer, he was tasked with geographic position determination at sea and instructed to establish a permanent astronomical observatory on arrival in New South Wales.

In fact, Dawes established not one but two observatories within a kilometre of Sydney's present-day city centre, a full seven decades before the construction of Sydney's historical Observatory at Dawes' Point, today a stone's throw from the Sydney Harbour Bridge. Dawes led an eventful life, frequently almost reaching his full potential before plummeting to new depths in the social order of the day.

Biography



Richard de Grijs is a prolific public speaker on topics ranging from astronomy and astrophysics to maritime history. Richard holds professional appointments as professor of astrophysics at Macquarie University and as Executive Director of the International Space Science Institute--Beijing.

He spends most Sundays as volunteer guide and deck hand on the historic vessels of the Australian National Maritime Museum. Richard recently published the first detailed biography of William Dawes, the astronomer assigned to the "First Fleet" from England to Australia (1787–1788).

His academic accolades include the 2012 Selby Award from the Australian Academy of Science, a 2017 Erskine Award from the University of Canterbury (New Zealand) and the 2023 Excellence in Research Integrity award from Macquarie University's Faculty of Science and Engineering. He also received the 2022 Blacktown Mayoral History Prize and the 2022 Hella Mannheimer Award (Hektoen International Journal of Medical Humanities).