

## A Dangerous Point: Fingal Head and Point Danger

In 1766 the Royal Society of London commissioned Lt. (later Captain) James Cook to embark upon a voyage of exploration in the Pacific Ocean. During that voyage, on 19 April 1770, he became, as far as we know, the first European to sight and explore the eastern coastline of Australia. After naming Rame Head, now known as Little Rame Head,<sup>1</sup> Cook sailed north in the *Endeavour*, famously landing at Botany Bay, before continuing up Australia's east coast. On 16 May 1770, after nearly running aground on a reef, he noted a distinctive extinct volcanic massif nearby, which he named Mount Warning,<sup>2</sup> inland of a point in northern New South Wales now known as Fingal Head.<sup>3</sup> A lava flow from Mount Warning had created a five kilometre long series of reefs, extending out from the coast (Danger Reefs), as well as an island 650 metres from the shore (Cook Island). On the day in question Cook recorded in the *Endeavour's* journal:

*We now saw the breakers again within us which we past [sic] at the distance of 1 League, they lay in the Lat<sup>de</sup> 38<sup>o</sup> 8' [sic - 28<sup>o</sup> 8'] & ~~lay~~ stretch off East two Leagues from a point under which is a small ~~low~~ Island, there [sic] situation may always be found by the peaked mountain before mentioned which bears <sup>SW</sup><sub>BW</sub> from them this [sic] ~~mountain or hill~~ and on this account I have named Mount Warning it lies 7 or 8 Leagues inland in the Latitude of 28<sup>o</sup> 22' the land is high and hilly about it but it is conspicuous enough to be distinguished from everything else. The point off which these shoals lay I have named Point Danger to the northward of it the land which is low trends <sup>NW</sup><sub>BN</sub> ....<sup>4</sup>*

This innocent, matter of fact, entry has, however, set in train an enduring controversy, the subject of brief report in *Placenames Australia* in 2002,<sup>5</sup> where exactly was Point Danger as nominated by Cook?

In 1823 the New South Wales Surveyor General John Oxley set out in the *Mermaid* to explore Port Curtis, the site of Gladstone. Oxley also explored Moreton Bay and the Brisbane River, as well as exploring and naming the Tweed River. It was during this voyage that Oxley encountered what is now known as Fingal Head (28<sup>o</sup> 12' S, 153<sup>o</sup> 34' E) and reported it as being Point Danger as named by Captain Cook.<sup>6</sup> Subsequently, in August 1828, the HMS *Rainbow*, under the command of Henry John Rous, charted a river which he initially named the Clarence River, apparently unaware at the time that Oxley had previously charted the same river and named it the Tweed River.<sup>7</sup> A chart of the area, drawn up by William Johns, the Master of HMS *Rainbow*, was published in 1831. It shows Point Danger in its currently designated location (28<sup>o</sup> 10' S, 153<sup>o</sup> 33' E).<sup>8</sup>

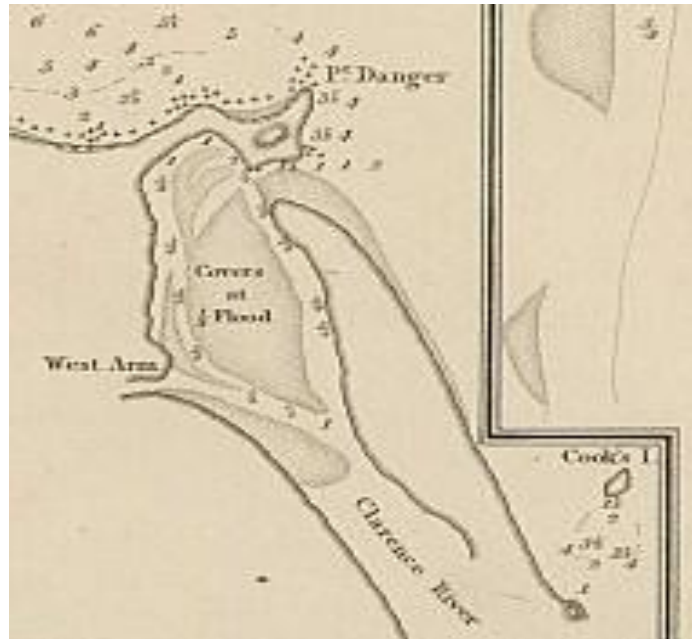


Figure 1: Part of 'Three Plans on the East Coast of Australia'  
(William Johns, 1831)

National Library of Australia, British Admiralty Special Map Col./99

A survey was later carried out in the area in July 1840 under the direction of Senior Assistant Surveyor Robert Dixon. Dixon acknowledged in his report on the survey's progress at that time, that they were "unacquainted with the coast."<sup>9</sup> Point Danger is mentioned several times, however, in terms of its position in relation to the local geography and distances from other landmarks. On each occasion it clearly pointed to Point Danger as being located at the mouth of the Tweed River, the currently designated site of Point Danger. A plan, prepared by Assistant Surveyor James Warner on 5 November 1840, also showing Point Danger in the currently designated location, was then passed on to the Surveyor General on 15 December.<sup>10</sup>

In 1970, as a result of attempts to re-enact Cook's voyage, the location of Point Danger came into question. Consequently a committee, the Counsellors' Committee, was established by the New South Wales Geographical Names Board to investigate and report on the matter. The Counsellors' Committee duly reported on 3 February 1971, concluding that, "it is the opinion of the Counsellors that the name Point Danger was intended by Captain Cook to be applied to that point now designated Fingal Head".<sup>11</sup>

The Geographical Names Board considered this report and declared:

*little doubt exists that the feature named Point Danger by Captain Cook was in actual fact the feature now known as Fingal Head. However, as the name has been known in its present position for over 130 years and having in mind the wording of the Letters Patent of 6 June, 1859, in which the position of the QLD-New South Wales border is linked with the position of Point Danger, the Board is not prepared to assign the name to any feature or position other than that to which it is currently located.*<sup>12</sup>

Despite this pronouncement, the question of Point Danger continued to be raised. In November 1989 the Geographical Names Board approved a historical re-enactment of Cook's voyage. After undertaking further research, Acting Chief Surveyor Ron Benjamin found that:

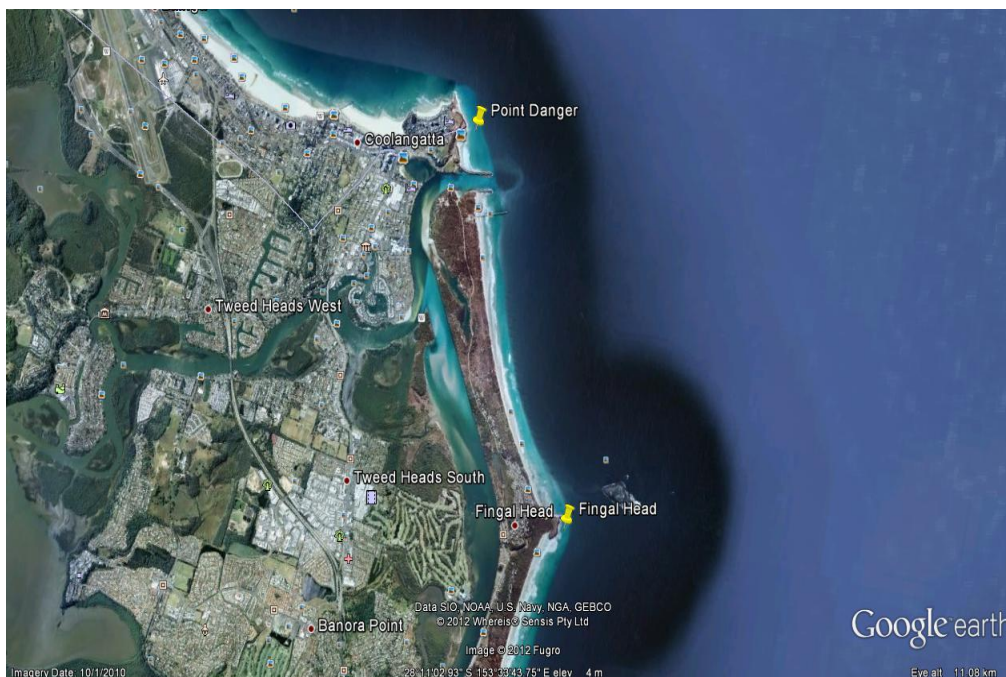
*From the re-enactment voyage, I now have no doubt that Captain Cook's, 'point of land under which lies a small island', was intended to be today's Fingal Head.<sup>13</sup>*

However, in 1998, following another review, the Geographical Names Board, concluded, in part:

*From an analysis of Cook's Private Log, the Official Log of the 'Endeavour', Cook's Journal and the journals of Cook's Officers, and relating the analysis to modern nautical charts and maps of the area, it is suggested that the following conclusions be drawn:*

*Pt. 4 However, even if the wider interpretation of Cook's Point Danger ... .. is accepted, it still comes down to the fact that the present Point Danger is only part of Cook's Point Danger on the coastline.*

*Pt. 5. It is the opinion of the Geographical Names Board Committee therefore that the present Point Danger is correctly designated.<sup>14</sup>*



*Figure 2: Google Earth - Point Danger and Fingal Head*

In effect this report was arguing that Captain Cook may have not been able to distinguish Fingal Head from the current Point Danger and may have seen that part of the coast as a single headland, and that Point Danger was therefore correctly designated. This is a dubious proposition.

Having almost run aground on the Danger Reefs, it is evident from the entry in Cook's journal that he was concerned about providing clear markers of their presence to any mariners who might follow. Hence he identifies Mount Warning and the "point under which there is a small island" as signs of the presence of Danger Reefs.

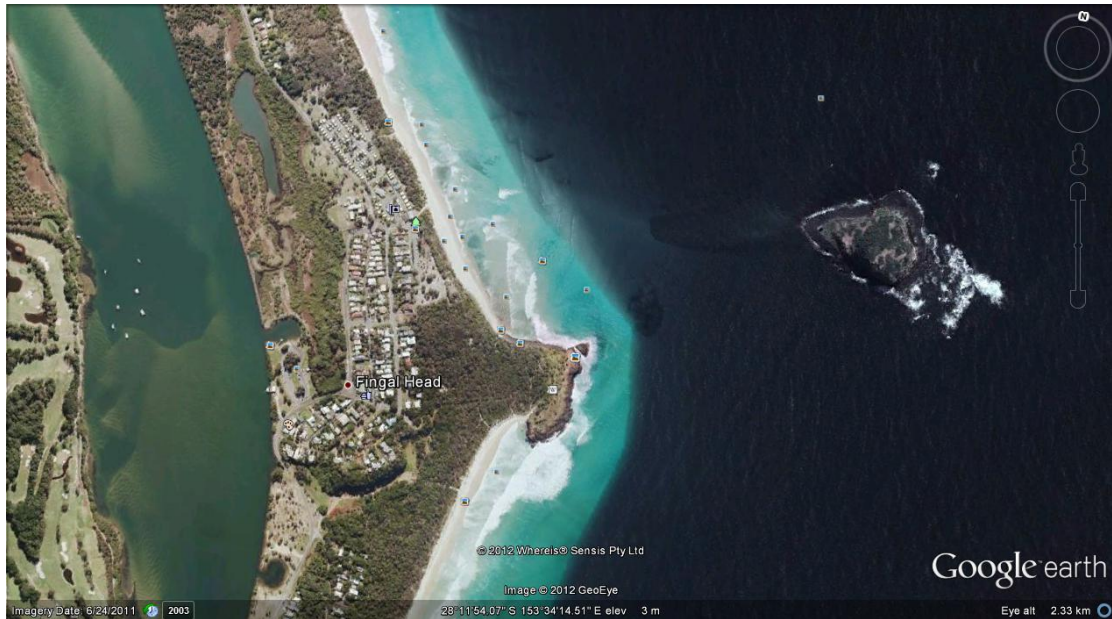
The island in question, Cook Island, is quite conspicuous and the only island of any significance along this part of the coast. Cook's description is therefore highly consistent with Fingal Head, but not so in regard to the present Point Danger. His chart of that part of the coast would appear to confirm that.



*Figure 3: Part of 'A Chart of New South Wales, or the east coast of New Holland'*  
(James Cook, 1773)

National Library of Australia, Map T 325

Because the resolution on Cook's chart is not high, it is not absolutely clear from this chart whether he considered the current Point Danger and Fingal Head to be forming a single headland. However, the point depicted is only as wide as the island lying off it, and Cook did not indicate any awareness of any other distinct landmark other than the "point under which is a small island." In passing within four nautical miles [7.4 km], Cook appears to have easily identified this island, presumably by observation, relying upon the masthead lookout and with the aid of a telescope.<sup>15</sup> The island is quite conspicuous and very close to Fingal Head, as can be seen in the images below.



*Figure 4: Google Earth - Fingal Head*



*Figure 5: Photo taken from Danger Reefs off Cook Island, with Fingal Head behind and Mt Warning in the distance (Photo: Ken Gold)*

Captain William Edwardson visited the locality in the HMCC *Snapper* in 1822, and stated in a letter to Governor Brisbane that, "Off Point Danger lies a small Island."<sup>16</sup> As mentioned earlier, Oxley identified Fingal Head as Point Danger in 1823, and Phillip Parker King, in his *Narrative of a Survey of the Intertropical and Western Coasts of Australia*, published in 1827, clearly took what we now know as Fingal Head to be Cook's Point Danger.<sup>17</sup> From this one can conclude that there is a very clear association by other mariners between a point, not a headland, and an island.

With Cook's observations focussed on a point and island, because they were distinctive markers for a dangerous set of reefs, one can only conclude that Fingal Head was the feature he was referring to as Point Danger, certainly not the current Point Danger. Therefore, if one accepts that Fingal Head was the landmark to which Cook was applying the appellation "Point Danger", this would suggest that an error in naming has occurred, probably originating with Johns' chart of 1831.

In spite of the Geographical Names Board's pronouncement in 1998, the debate has nevertheless persisted. Trevor Lipscombe, in closely tracking Cook's voyage and ground-truthing the places he had named, concluded in *On Austral Shores* in 2005, "There can be little doubt that Fingal Head *is* [Original Emphasis] Cook's Point Danger."<sup>18</sup> Following representations made by Ken Gold in 2007, which included the presentation of expert opinion from Dr Nigel Erskine of the Australian National Maritime Museum,<sup>19</sup> the Geographical Names Board considered the matter yet again and informed him that:

*The Board advised that the records for Point Danger and Fingal Head be changed to reflect both the historical versions of the naming of Cooks [sic] Point Danger. The Board stated that no change will be made to the legal status of either of these names nor the plaques at either headland.*<sup>20</sup>

Shortly after, Mr Chris Hartcher rose and informed the Parliament of New South Wales of this, on 9 April 2009.<sup>21</sup>

The New South Wales Geographical Names Register entry for Point Danger currently states:

*Description: A rocky point of land extending into the Coral Sea, on the border between New South Wales and Queensland.*

*Origin: Named by Lt. James Cook - who charted Point Danger on 16.5.1770. The Board acknowledges strong evidence & support for interpretation of Cook's Point Danger being applied to Point Danger or Fingal Head. The passage of time since Cook's voyage and differing opinions precludes a definitive view.*

*History: Whilst acknowledging 2 accepted origins the Board has resolved that the two landmark names should remain as they are currently named.*

The reason the designation of Point Danger has posed such a problem and prompted such an enduring, and at times heated, debate is its position on the border of New South Wales and Queensland. As alluded to earlier, it was named as one of the border's defining features in the Letters Patent issued by Queen Victoria in establishing the colony of Queensland in 1859. Consequently, an error in its locational designation is not just a question of an amendment to the names register, it has significant implications, constitutionally and administratively. In view of this it was recently proposed, as a compromise, that Fingal Head be renamed instead, to "Fingal Head (Cook's Point Danger)".<sup>22</sup> This proposal could resolve the matter and perhaps finally end the debate.

**Rupert Gerritsen**

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<sup>1</sup> See Lipscombe 2011.

<sup>2</sup> Called Wollumbin by the Bundjalung people.

<sup>3</sup> Called Minjungbal by the Bundjalung people.

<sup>4</sup> Cook, '16 May 1770'.

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- <sup>5</sup> Windsor 2002,
- <sup>6</sup> Oxley, 'Friday, 31 October, 1823'.
- <sup>7</sup> Anon. 1828:352.
- <sup>8</sup> Johns 1831.
- <sup>9</sup> Dixon 3 August 1840.
- <sup>10</sup> Plan Catalogue No. M.2.1151; New South Wales Geographical Names Board, Counsellors' Committee 1971, p.3
- <sup>11</sup> NSW Geographical Names Board, Counsellors' Committee 1971, p5.
- <sup>12</sup> Hansard.
- <sup>13</sup> Hansard.
- <sup>14</sup> Geographic Names Board of New South Wales 2000: Section 7.
- <sup>15</sup> GNBNSW 1998 suggested Cook did not have a clear view, assuming that Cook's observations were based on an elevation of only 5 m above sea level, and that a telescope was not employed.
- <sup>16</sup> Edmonson, 1822.
- <sup>17</sup> King 1827, vol. 1, pp.178-79, vol. 2, p.257.
- <sup>18</sup> Lipscombe 2005, p.227.
- <sup>19</sup> Erskine 2007.
- <sup>20</sup> Windsor 2007.
- <sup>21</sup> Hansard.
- <sup>22</sup> Gerritsen 2012.