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Davis Land



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First published as part of **About The North: Places: Historic Locations** in April 2023.

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aboutthenorth.au

Version history:

1.0 April 2023. Basic text and references.

Hyperlinks to **About The North** pages for William Dampier, John Byron, Samuel Wallis, Philip Carteret, Bougainville, La Perouse,

Hyperlinks to **Wikipedia** and similar sources for Edward Davis, Easter Island, Sala y Gomez, Desventuradas Islands, the *Roebuck* voyage, Herman Moll, *A New Voyage Round the World*, Galápagos Islands, Tierra del Fuego, Jacob Roggeveen, Felipe González de Ahedo,

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Cover: South America, based on the most recent Memoirs, and subject to astronomical observations, by Sr. Robert De Vaugondy son of Mr. Robert De Vaugondy Royal Geographer. With Privilege. 1750.) ([British Library](#); Public domain; [Wikimedia Commons](#))

Davis Land is the fragment of coastline near the left hand border; closer to the Chilean coast (top to bottom: Easter Island; San Ambrose and San Felix; Juan Fernández.

Davis Land

A phantom island, Davis Land, was believed to be located in the South Pacific west of South America. Buccaneer Edward Davis and the *Bachelor's Delight* were homeward-bound after raiding Spanish settlements along the Pacific coast of Mexico, Peru, and Chile when

our Ship and Bark felt a terrible Earthquake Shock; which put our Men into such a Confternation, that they could hardly tell where they were, or what to think; but every one began to prepare for Death. And indeed, the Shock was so sudden and violent that we took it for granted the Ship had struck upon a Rock: But when the Amazement was a little over, we cast the Lead, and sounded but found no Ground; so that after Consultation, we concluded it must certainly be some Earthquake. The suddenness of this Shock made the Guns of the Ship leap in their Carriages, and several of the Men were shaken out of their Hammocks. Captain Davis, who lay with his Head over a Gun, was thrown out of his Cabbin. ¹

It seems Davis and his crew had encountered the seismic side-effects of the earthquake and tsunami that struck Callao and Lima in Peru on 20 October 1687, when

the Sea ebbed so far from the Shore, that on a sudden there was no Water to be seen: And that after it had been away a considerable time, it return'd in rowling Mountains of Water, which carried the Ships in the Road of Callao a League up into the Country, overflowed the City of Callao, though it stood upon a Hill, together with the Fort, and drowned Man and Beast for 50 Leagues along Shore; doing Mischief even at Lima, though six Miles within Land from the Town of Callao. ²

After the shock, they

sleer'd South and by East, half Easterly, until we came to the Latitude of 27 Deg. 20 Min. S. when about two Hours before Day, we fell in with a small, low, sandy Island, and heard a great roaring Noise, like that of the Sea beating upon the Shore, right a Head of the Ship. Whereupon the Sailors, fearing to fall foul upon the Shore before Day, desired the Captain to put the Ship about, and to stand off till Day appeared; to which the Captain gave his consent. So we plied off till Day and then stood in again with the Land which proved to be a small flat Island, without the guard of any Rocks. We stood in within a quarter of a Mile of the Shore, and could see it plainly; for 'twas a clear Morning, not foggy nor hazy. To the Weflward, about 12 Leagues by Judgment, we saw a range of high Land, which we took to be Islands, for there were several Partitions in the Prospect. This Land seem'd to reach about 14 or 16 Leagues in a Range, and there came thence great Flocks of Fowls. I, and many more of our Men, would have made this Land, and have gone ashore at it, but the Captain would not permit us. The small Island bears from Copayapo almost due E. 500 Leagues, and from the Gallapago's, under the Line, 600 Leagues. ³

¹ Lionel Wafer, **A new voyage and description of the isthmus of America**, p. 189.

² Lionel Wafer, **A new voyage and description of the isthmus of America**, p. 190.)

³ Lionel Wafer, **A new voyage and description of the isthmus of America**, pp. 190-1, cited in James William Kelly, *Edward Davis (fl. 1682-1693)*; 'possibly the first European sighting of Easter Island' Kris E. Lane, **Pillaging the Empire: Piracy in the Americas 1500-1750**, p. 154).

Davis may have been illiterate; ⁴ if he was not, he left no written record of his 'discovery'. However, he did mention it to William Dampier:

Captain Davis told me lately that ... he went, after several traverses, to the Gallapagos, and that, standing thence southward for wind to bring him about Tierra del Fuego in the latitude of 27 south, about 500 leagues from Copayapo on the coast of Chile, he saw a small sandy island just by him; and that they saw to the westward of it a long tract of pretty high land tending away toward the north-west out of sight. This might probably be the coast of Terra Australis Incognita. ⁵

Both reports agree about the details,

- a location around 27°S and 500 leagues west of Copiapo,
- a small low sandy island with 'a long Tract of pretty high land.' about twelve leagues west of it.'

However, there is no combination to match that description around that latitude. Easter Island is around the correct latitude and is reasonably high but lacks the island to the east; Sala y Gomez, 320 kilometres east of Easter Island, is possibly low enough but lacks visible land to the west; the Desventuradas Islands are too high and too close to Chile. Davis may have sighted Sala y Gomez with high banks of cumulus clouds to the west. ⁶

Dampier used the possibility that Davis Land might be *Terra Australis Incognita's* east coast as part of his case for what became the Roebuck voyage. ⁷ Herman Moll showed 'Davis's Land' on the world map used as the frontispiece to Dampier's **A New Voyage Round the World** (1697) and, for the next hundred years, navigators sought the elusive location.

It was one of the locations on John Byron's itinerary on the first circumnavigation completed in less than two years. Samuel Wallis looked out for it ⁸ after parting from the *Dolphin's* companion vessel as he cleared the Straits of Magellan and went on to discover the previously unknown Tahiti. Philip Carteret had to deal with multiple issues in the slower, less seaworthy *Swallow*. After he reached Juan Fernández on 10 May 1767,

⁴ Davis encountered legal troubles when he returned to the Caribbean in early 1688. While he eventually received a pardon under the [1687/8 Act of Grace](#), the authorities impounded most of his possessions. A royal order of March 1692 returned most of his fortune. However, the Crown retained £300, which may have contributed to the construction of William and Mary College in Virginia. Davis signed paperwork associated with the matter with a cross. ([Wikipedia](#).)

⁵ William Dampier, ***A new voyage round the world***, Chapter XIII: *Of the best way to Mindanao by the South-Sea and Terra Australis; and of an accidental Discovery there by Captain Davis, and a Probability of a greater.* (Source [here](#))

⁶ O.H.K. Spate, ***The Pacific Since Magellan, Volume II: Monopolists and Freebooters***, p. 131.

⁷ Dampier convinced the Admiralty that New Holland's uncharted east coast could be approached via Cape Horn. He proposed to survey it after making landfall between 35 and 40° S, then move on to New Guinea's eastern coast and examine the partly known islands between New Holland and the East Indies before returning via the Cape of Good Hope. Delays in providing him with a ship made his departure too late in the season to risk a journey around Cape Horn; Dampier was forced to approach his objective from the Cape of Good Hope and landed on the Western Australian coast around Roebuck Bay.

⁸ Between 4 and 14 May 1767.

looking to rest, refresh and replenish his wood and water, he found the Spanish had fortified Mas A Tierra; he managed to refill his casks at Mas A Fuera.

Since Juan Fernández was no longer an option, Carteret thought the uninhabited Desventuradas Islands might serve as an alternative port of call to Juan Fernandez. While he failed to find them where they were supposed to be,⁹ the search took him across the supposed location of Davis Land.

Since Davis Land appeared on the charts at the same latitude but 16 degrees to their west (in 99° - 102° W), Carteret concluded that Davis Land was probably nothing more than the islands he sought. Davis made his discovery *en route* from the Galapagos Islands to Tierra del Fuego "on a course south and then south and by east half easterly". That course would have taken Davis east of the Galapagos Islands, not to their west. Carteret suggested that when Davis reached 27° 20' S, he would have been much closer to the coast,¹⁰ more or less where the islands he had been looking for were supposed to be. While Carteret was the first to suggest this solution, Bougainville reached the same conclusion in February 1768. La Pérouse subsequently agreed.

Although sailing over Davis Land was not conclusive proof that it did not exist, Carteret had cut it off from *Terra Australis Incognita*. Carteret continued westward, passing south of the position Jacob Roggeveen gave for Easter Island in 1721, proving Roggeveen's discovery was not part of the southern continent.¹¹ He discovered a small island 'scarce better than a large rock' that he named Pitcairn Island after the midshipman who sighted it¹² and three barren atolls on the Tuamotu Archipelago's southern fringes. Carteret also encountered, but failed to identify the Solomon Islands, last sighted by Mendaña in 1568, Jean-François de Surville set out from Pondicherry in French India in 1767, looking to set up a trading post on Davis Land after rumours that Wallis had discovered a rich island, supposedly populated by Jewish traders somewhere west of Peru or Chile. That was Tahiti, though the 'Jewish traders' must have maritime scuttlebutt.¹³ However, Surville rediscovered the Solomon Islands, just missed encountering James Cook off New Zealand's North Island and crossed the Pacific.

⁹ Due to an "error in their longitude both on John Green's chart of the Pacific (1753) and in John Robertson's **The Elements of Navigation** (1764)" (Helen Wallis (ed.) **Carteret's Voyage Round the World 1766-69**, p. 50.

¹⁰ Two hundred rather than five hundred leagues west of Copiapo. (Helen Wallis (ed.) **Carteret's Voyage Round the World 1766-69**, p. 51)

¹¹ "... although Roggeveen had been quite clear that Easter Island was an Island and distinct from Davis Land, the fact that the discovery lay approximately 500 leagues from Chile, exactly where Davis Land was supposed to lie, had been sufficient to persuade the armchair geographer that Easter Island was Davis Land and part of the continent." (Helen Wallis (ed.) **Carteret's Voyage Round the World 1766-69**, pp. 51-2.

¹² Robert Tiley, **Australian Navigators: Picking Up Shells and Catching Butterflies in an Age of Revolution**, p. 12,

¹³ The rumours supposedly emanated from Cape Town's taverns.

He drowned off the Peruvian coast while seeking help for his scurvy-ridden crew.

After Surville's *Saint Jean Baptiste* arrived at Callao, a Spanish expedition headed by Felipe Gonzalez de Haedo set out to locate and occupy Surville's destination, but, like all their predecessors, they failed to find it. Instead, they encountered Easter Island, previously discovered by the Dutchman Jacob Roggeveen in 1722 ¹⁴ and labelled it *Isla de San Carlos or de David* ("Davis's Island")

Roggeveen's conclusion after a week's search where Davis Land was supposed to be that Davis, Wafer and Dampier "were as much robbers of the truth as of the goods of the Spaniards." ¹⁵

By the end of the 1770s, after James Cook's three voyages established no sizeable undiscovered land mass in the South Pacific, cartographers began removing Davis Land from their maps.

In **Chasing a Dream: The Exploration of the Imaginary Pacific**, John Dunmore notes that Davis may have sighted San Ambrosio and San Felix in the Desventuradas Islands. While Davis Land's identity remains unresolved, and it may have been Easter Island, it is equally possible that, like many others before and since, Davis and his crew were deceived by a bank of clouds.

¹⁴ "Admiral Roggeveen, a Dutchman ... after leaving Juan Fernandes, went in search of Davis's Island; but not finding it, he ran 12 degrees more to the West, and in the Latitude of 28 1/2 degrees discover'd Easter Island." (W.J.L. Wharton, (ed), **Captain Cook's Journal During His First Voyage Round The World**, Chapter 6: *Speculations on a Southern Continent*.)

¹⁵ Jacob Roggeveen, *The Journal of Jacob Roggeveen*. p. 108, cited Avan Judd Stallard, *Antipodes: In Search of the Southern Continent*, p. 193.

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