Discoveries in the west

Dirk Hartog was probably the first Dutch sea captain to land on the west coast. In October 1616, his ship, the Eendracht, was sailing to Java.

By the new route when it was blown too far east, Hartog and his crew landed on a small island near Shark Bay, which is now called Dirk Hartog Island. We know about this landing because Hartog recorded his visit by nailing a pewter plate to a tree. On this plate he inscribed a message which recorded his visit. The point where the plate was left is now known as Inscription Point. Hartog named this land Eendrachtland after his ship, but he reported it to be dry and worthless.

Throughout the rest of the 1600s many other Dutch ships arrived at different parts of the continent's west coast, but the Dutch were not interested in settling the country. It was not until 1688 that the first Englishmen landed in Australia.

In that year the Cognet, a pirate ship that had been sailing around the area to the north of Australia attacking and robbing other ships, came ashore on Australia's north-west coast for attention to her repairs. On board was the adventurer William Dampier. When he arrived back in England, Dampier wrote an account of his travels, titled A New Voyage Round the World, which he published in 1697. In his account Dampier depicted Australia, which by that time was generally known as New Holland, as a dry, sandy, waterless land inhabited by what he described as the 'miserablest people in the world'.

In spite of Dampier's poor opinion, the English government was interested in this new, unknown land, and decided to send Dampier back to find out more about it. In 1699 Dampier was given command of an old and leaky ship, the Roebuck, and was told to return and explore the coasts of New Holland and New Guinea. The voyage was a disaster. Dampier sailed up much of the west coast, from Shark Bay to Roebuck Bay, both of which he named, then sailed north to explore the north-west coast of New Guinea. But the Roebuck sank before it got home and Dampier arrived back in England in disgrace as a passenger on another ship.

This map of the world was published in Holland in 1570. It includes the imaginary 'unknown south land'.