

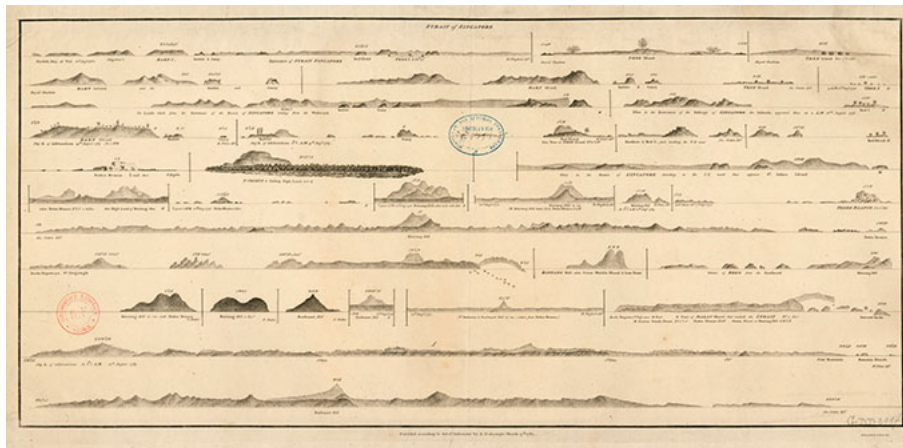
Specimens for Banks: Christopher Smith and Singapore's Earliest Natural History Material

"Smith planned to rendezvous with the squadron at Prince of Wales Island (Pulau Pinang, also Penang) but quite literally missed the boat by six days. Finding himself without his ride, Smith spent the next six months exploring and botanising around the Straits of Malacca. It was during this period that he collected several plants from 'Barn Island ... Straits of Sincapore' in June and July 1796."¹

Straits of Sincapore

Singapore's Outlying Islands

Some of the earliest detailed views made in Singapore waters appear in a chart entitled the *Straits of Sincapore* published in 1780 by British Admiralty hydrographer, Alexander Dalrymple (1737–1808).

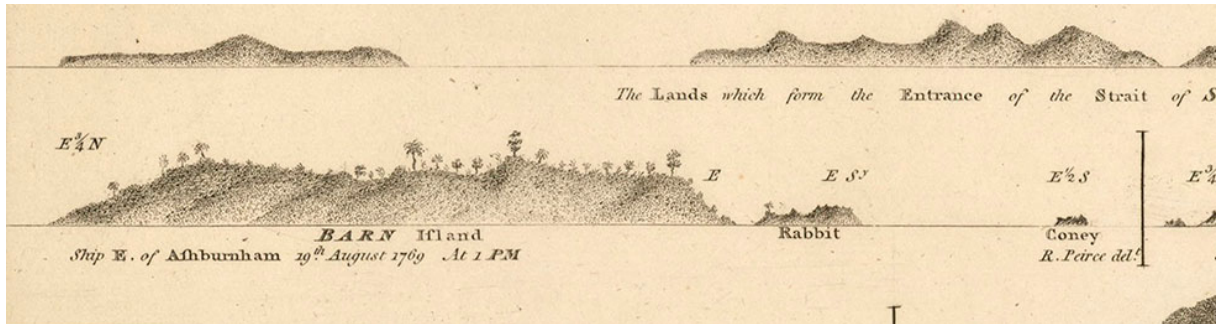


The chart *Straits of Sincapore* published in 1780 depicts many of the offshore islands around Singapore as viewed from passing ships beginning as early as 1748. Source: Gallica²

One particularly detailed view is that of Barn Island as depicted by someone aboard the ship *Ashburnham* at one o'clock in the afternoon on Saturday, 19 August 1769.

¹ <https://catalogue.nlb.gov.sg/cgi-bin/spyodus.exe/ENQ/WPAC/BIBENQ?SETLVL=1&BRN=205657269>

² <https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/btv1b5962986j.r=dalrymple%20sincapore?rk=21459;2#>



A close-up of Barn Island as depicted during the voyage of the ship *Ashburnham* on 19 August 1769.

Source: Gallica³

It is depicted as being covered in fair-sized trees and other vegetation. This island, with its trees and other plants is the setting for the collection of the earliest natural history specimens from Singapore known to be in existence.

³ <https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/btv1b5962986j.r=dalrymple%20sincapore?rk=21459;2#>

Breadfruit

Tahiti to Calcutta

Very little is known of Christopher Smith⁴ (died 1806?) and no known portrait exists. We do know that he was an Irish botanist who trained at Kew Gardens, and that Joseph Banks (1743–1820) appointed him assistant to the botanist aboard the *Providence* during the second voyage to transplant breadfruit from Tahiti to the West Indies, which – unlike the first that ended in mutinous failure – was successful. The breadfruit business concluded, Banks arranged for Smith's appointment as superintendent of the Botanic Gardens at Calcutta (today Kolkata). Delays in his arrival meant that this appointment was usurped and Smith was instead appointed nurseryman.



“Transplanting of the breadfruit trees from Otaheite” (1796) by Thomas Gosse. One of the two men indicated by the arrows may be Christopher Smith. No other portrait of Smith is known to exist.

Source: National Gallery of Victoria⁵

⁴ <https://catalogue.nlb.gov.sg/cgi-bin/spydux.exe/ENQ/WPAC/BIBENQ?SETLVL=1&BRN=205657269>

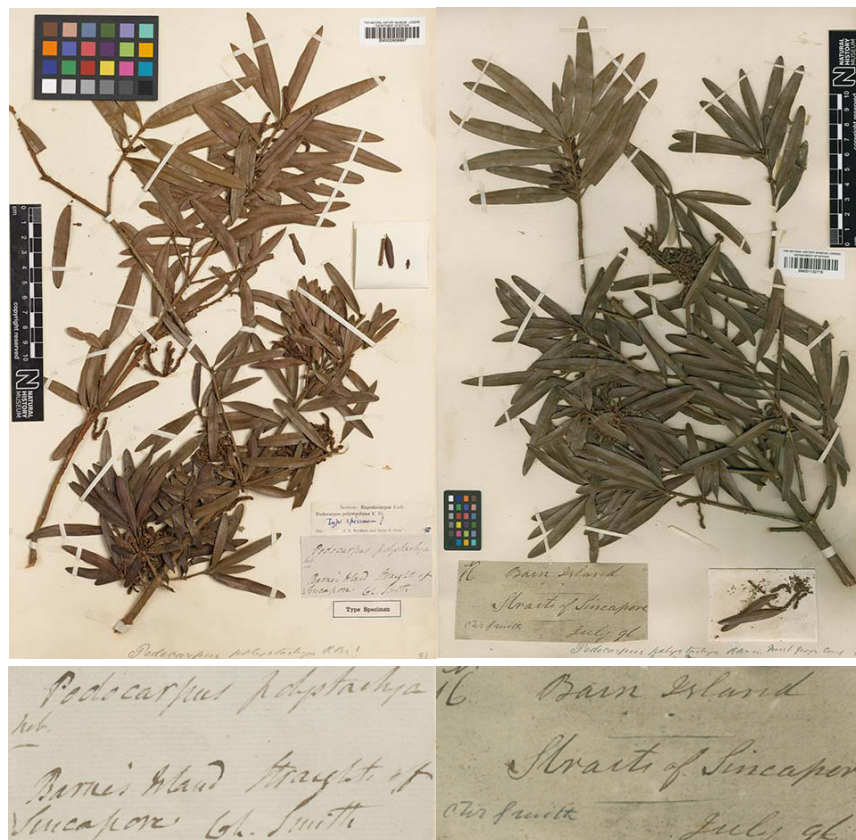
⁵ <https://www.ngv.vic.gov.au/explore/collection/work/40774/>

Missing the Boat

Penang to Barn Island

In 1795, Smith was informed of a naval squadron sailing to the Spice Islands (now Maluku Islands) and planned to rendezvous with the ships in Penang. He intended to make collections of plants there for Banks. Unfortunately, Smith literally missed the boat by six days. He made the most of this mishap by finding his own conveyance down the Straits of Malacca, travelling as far south as Barn Island (now Pulau Senang).

At Barn Island, Smith collected several specimens of plants. Two of these are now at the Natural History Museum in London. Today, these are the oldest natural history specimens from Singapore known to be in existence.



Two plant specimens collected from Barn Island (now Pulau Senang) by Christopher Smith in 1796 and now at the Natural History Museum in London. These are the oldest natural history specimens from Singapore known to be in existence. The insets show the labels with the locality data.

Source: SIGNIFY Specimen [left]⁶ and SIGNIFY Specimen [right]⁷

⁶ SIGNIFY species page.

⁷ SIGNIFY species page.

When Sketch Meets Specimen

Singapore's Biodiversity Before 1819

The specimens collected by Smith tell us what that 1769 sketch of Barn Island cannot. We now know what plants inhabited this island just off Singapore's mainland almost 230 years ago. For such early specimens, the locality data associated with the specimens are also remarkably exact. The vast majority of specimens for over a century to come would simply have "Singapore" written on the labels.

These sketches and specimens – bits of data on bits of paper – are almost like postcards sent to us by acquaintances from over two centuries ago telling us what Singapore's historical biodiversity was like. They are all the more valuable in that such materials are exceedingly rare in the decades before more familiar naturalists would begin collecting in Singapore in 1819⁸, which would mark the beginning of over a century and a half of intensive natural history collecting in, and exploration of, the island.

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⁸ <https://signifynaturalhistory.sg/stories/singapores-first-animals>