

## CABINET OF CURIOSITIES

### POCKET COMPASS SUNDIAL

MAHR1994.292

Precision instrument, for determination of local exact time anywhere around the globe, made by *Peter Dollond*, in London, most probably in late 18<sup>th</sup> century, in a case made of kitefin shark (*Dalatias Licha*) skin.

In the past, of all the mathematical instruments, the sundial was the one most commonly found. The main reason for this was that any mechanical clock required a sundial to check if it was keeping the correct time. In the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries, most probably, the number of sundials matched equal number of the clocks in general use. Most sundials work by casting a shadow on to a marked-out surface; some work by letting the Sun's rays pass through a small hole. Later on, it became more convenient to keep exact local time, at the railways for example, by means of the electric telegraph, first used in 1837. Soon, the *National Telegraph Company* at UK had clocks showing Greenwich time in their offices, everywhere, and from then on, the sundials ceased to be of any practical importance, remaining mostly as decorative objects.

*Peter Dollond* (1731-1820) was a successful British maker of optical instruments, technology and business inherited from his father, *John Dollond*. He successfully designed and manufactured a number of optical instruments, like the triple achromatic lens, telescopes, microscopes and, of course, the compass sundials.

A very similar sundial, made in 1790 was used by the well-known British naval surgeon and Australia explorer, *Gorge Bass* (1771-1803). *Bass* and his crew of six left for an exploring expedition in an unnamed whaleboat, between December 1797 and February 1798. This was the first European voyage to explore the Victorian coastline. The length of the voyage undertaken in an open boat, over 3000 km, made *Bass's* skills in navigation and seafaring highly regarded at the time. The voyage provided the strongest evidence to date that Tasmania was an island, separate from the mainland.

*Bass* was lost at sea in Australian waters in 1803 and his fate remains a mystery. The pocket compass had returned to England with him in 1800. It then came into the possession of *Elizabeth Waterhouse*, who married *Bass* in September 1800, along with a note from *Henry Waterhouse*, captain of the *Reliance* (and *Bass's* brother in law) explaining the significance of the object. The compass was passed on through this family until sold at auction in 1998.