



Violent storms hit First Fleet

By LEMA SAMANDAR

TWO hundred and twenty years ago, violent storms battered the First Fleet as it made its way to Australia, according to new information gleaned from ships' log-books and diaries.

It's now hoped the material, written decades before official meteorological stations were established, will provide new insights into weather patterns and give scientists a better understanding of climate change today.

The First Fleet weather data was released on Thursday and comes amid a global push by climate scientists to recover lost weather data from the past to develop a historical database.

"The further back you look, the further forward you can see - that's really true of trying to understand natural climate variability," said Dr Joelle Gergis, climate research fellow and science writer in the School of Earth Sciences at the University of Melbourne.

"To get a better sense of how

human-caused climate change is actually layered on top of natural variability, this is the type of information that will help people in Australia try and understand climate variability," she said.

It has already allowed Australian scientists to reconstruct the weather the First Fleet battled during the voyage to Botany Bay.

The First Fleet sailed from Portsmouth, England, in May 1787 with about 1400 convicts on board and had a good run south down the Atlantic Ocean.

But in crossing the Indian Ocean, it hit the "roaring forties", a band of strong westerly winds.

"They had a really bad storm that hit them on New Year's Day on the first of January, 1788, and they had big swells and waves," Dr Gergis said. "Their blankets were floating away and people were on their knees praying for their lives."

Then, as the ships neared Tasmania it became cold, temperat-

ure records show.

"There were patches of snow in Tasmania at the height of summer, which is a fairly unusual thing to see," Dr Gergis said. "As they started coming up along the east coast of Australia, they were again hammered by severe winds which ripped more sails."

When the fleet finally dropped anchor in Botany Bay and they realised there wasn't a good water supply, they tried to turn about.

"It took them about two days and they had huge headwinds and they were really scared that they were going to be driven on to the rocky coastline and just smashed to pieces," Dr Gergis said.

"Eventually they got out and they did make it to Port Jackson and they settled in Sydney Cove, where the modern day Harbour Bridge and Opera House stand."

Records show there was wet weather at the beginning of the colonial settlement period.