

HISTORIC SITES IN SHARK BAY

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1. Introduction

It has been stated that, 'properly undertaken, the study of the past has a vital social role to play in encouraging feelings of community and stability...' (Jack, 1979:7). Furthermore, that '...no individual may act in a manner such that the public right to knowledge of the past is unduly endangered or destroyed' (McGimsey, 1972:5).

Implicit in these statements is the recognition that historic sites and relics, whether on land or underwater, offer the Australian public a tangible experience of the presence of history. At the local or wider community level, this shared experience has the potential for generating a feeling of cohesiveness and national pride. Such feelings are likely to be maintained as long as the social, cultural and/or historical significance attached to a particular site or relic continues to attract the same degree of public recognition. Any action which is seen to endanger or destroy the knowledge of the past inherent in such sites is, therefore, capable of altering the perceived level of public significance and associated community stability.

The aim of this paper is to give a brief outline of the historic sites and relics known, or reported to be, in the Shark Bay area in order to demonstrate the historical significance and potential of these sites as a source of knowledge about the past which may serve to consolidate local and broader community feelings concerning the importance of the region as part of Australia's national heritage.

To date, the Department of Maritime Archaeology (Western Australian Museum), which the author represents, has undertaken only minimal field-work in Shark Bay, mainly in connection with its wreck inspection programme (Sledge, 1979). Information relating to the various sites mentioned has thus been compiled from archival and literary sources, public communication and reports from professional colleagues within the Museum. It is not anticipated, therefore, that this paper presents a conclusive coverage of sites and/or relics in the shark Bay area, nor that any substantial material remains exist to identify all the sites referred to.

Although the Department of Maritime Archaeology is concerned primarily with the archaeological investigation of underwater cultural resources, provisions in the State *Maritime Archaeology Act, 1973* (Section 4.1) allow for the protection of maritime archaeological sites, as defined in the Act, which may not necessarily lie underwater. Such sites may include relics, structures, camp sites or other locations of historic interest that may have been associated with, occupied or used by, persons presumed to have been in a historic ship¹. Given that these provisions exist, this paper discusses a number of sites on land which, while they may not specifically comply with the definitions of the Act, are closely related to major maritime historical events and/or the early development of maritime trade and industry within the Shark Bay region.

2. Historical Significance of Shark Bay

2.1. Early European discovery and exploration

The historical importance of shark bay in scientific, exploratory and cartographic terms has been clearly outlined in the seminar papers by Marchant (1986) and Lambie (1986). It should be emphasised, however, that the principal significance of the area historically is that it is the

¹ Under the terms of the *Maritime Archaeology Act, 1973* (Section 3), 'historic ship' means any ship that before the year nineteen hundred was lost, wrecked or abandoned, or was stranded, on or off the coast of Western Australia

site of the earliest recorded European landfall on the West Australian coast². Shark Bay, therefore, may be said to represent the opening chapter of Western Australian History.

Despite some conjecture as to the earliest discovery of Australia (McIntyre, 1977), the substantive evidence left by Dirk Hartog in commemoration of his landing at Cape Inscription (Dirk Hartog Island) in 1616, remains the most tangible proof of early European presence in Australia to date. To record his visit for posterity, Hartog and the crew from the Dutch ship *Eendracht*, left an engraved pewter plate nailed to a wooden post, erected at the northern end of what is known today as Dirk Hartog Island.

Hartog's landfall heralded the beginning of a series of explorations by Dutch, English and French navigators, many of whom called at Shark Bay and charted its waters. The pewter plate was significant for the voyage of Dutch explorer Willem de Vlamingh in 1697, for it was discovered by a landing party from his vessel the *Geelvinck* (Schilder, 1985: 68; 223 ff). Recognising the historic value of the plate, de Vlamingh sought to preserve its antiquity by delivering it to the Dutch authorities in Batavia (Jakarta), from whence it was sent back to Holland (Halls, 1974)³. Before leaving Shark Bay, de Vlamingh emulated his predecessor and erected another memorial plaque in the same location⁴.

In 1801, the Vlamingh plate was discovered half-buried in the sand by a landing party from the French Corvette *Naturaliste* (Halls, 1974: 23). On the instructions of Captain Emmanuel Hamelin, the plate was re-affixed to a new post in the same vicinity. The commemorate Baudin's expedition of discovery, Hamelin also had a plate erected at this spot (Halls, 1974: 24). Some years later, in 1818, Louis de Freycinet had the Vlamingh plate removed and delivered it to France for safe-keeping. It is thought that Hamelin's plate must have been removed at the same time as a search by Phillip Parker King in 1822 failed to locate it (Halls, 1974: 24).

Although later navigators sought to record their visits in similar ways,⁵ Cape Inscription must remain the site of prime significance, being the provenance of the oldest European monument recovered from Australian soil. Evidence of the finding of the plate is reflected in a watercolour shore profile by Victor Victorszoon, a member of the *Geelvinck's* crew, and in his great outline chart showing the entire coast from the Swan River to North-West Cape (Schilder, 1985: 223-224). The locality is thus an important point of reference to the history of the discovery of Australia and the early cartography of its western coast.

As other navigators and explorers visited Shark Bay in the period following the early Dutch discoveries, knowledge of the area began to grow. William Dampier, the English navigator who named the area *Shark's Bay* in 1699 (Dampier, 1939:83), made detailed observations of the physical environment including the fauna and flora. The availability of fresh food resources and, above all fresh water, were prime concerns for seafarers. Along with the recognition of natural resources that might be commercially exploited, these factors helped to determine the suitability of places for permanent settlement or regular ports of call for voyaging ships.

² the first recorded European landfall on the Australian continent was by Willem Jansz in 1605 on western Cape York Peninsula.

³ A replica of the Dirk Hartog plate is housed in the Western Australian Maritime Museum, the original being in the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam.

⁴ The Vlamingh plate was removed from Dirk Hartog island by the French navigator de Freycinet in 1818 and taken to France. In 1947 the French Government presented the plate to the people of Australia as a gesture of goodwill and it is now held in the Western Australian Maritime Museum.

⁵ An inscription is located at Eagle Bluff near Denham, bearing the words 'Denham-Herald'. It is thought that it may have been carved into the sandstone rock by Captain Henry Mangles Denham (or his crew) while surveying aboard HMS *Denham* in 1858, but Denham's log does not mention the carving: Sledge, 1982 (WAM File).

While Shark Bay was not lacking in fresh seafood, the region's lack of fresh water did little to promote it as a place for permanent habitation. When Louis de Freycinet arrived in Shark Bay at the end of 1818 in the *Uranie*, members of this French scientific expedition established a temporary camp at Cape 'Le Sueur' on the shores of the Period Peninsula (Arago, 1823: 166). Faring no better than Dampier in their search for fresh water, they successfully distilled sea water into fresh (Appleyard & Manford, 1979: 28-29). Before leaving their 'death-like abode' (Arago, 1823: 181), they deposited a number of gifts on the shore in the hope that they would be discovered and be of use to the Aborigines. The items left included looking-glasses, scissors, iron hoops and knives (Arago, 1823: 182).

Other explorers and early visitors to Shark Bay may likewise have established shore camps from which to carry out their research and investigations. The archaeological identification of such sites through material evidence, such as that left by de Freycinet's team, would significantly reaffirm the value of the scientific, biological and environmental information recorded by these early investigators and add a tangible cultural dimension to these historic events.

2.2. Shipwreck survivors and early European contact with Aborigines

If Shark Bay offered little in the way of amenities it was nevertheless regarded as a relatively safe anchorage on a coast beset with numerous navigational hazards (Baudin, 1803: 512). As sailing vessels became familiar with the new charts of the west coast of Australia, many ships would have called at Shark Bay out of curiosity, the need to provision their ships with fresh seafood, or shelter from adverse weather conditions. The bay was thus an important anchorage and refuge for early sailing vessels visiting Western Australia.

Not all vessels reached the safety of Shark Bay on their journey up the coast, the Dutch East Indiaman, *Zuytdorp*, being an example. Wrecked off the Zuytdorp Cliffs in 1712, there is material evidence to suggest that survivors from this vessel managed to clamber ashore (Playford, 1976: 23). Their fate, however, has always been a mystery and given rise to speculative theories.

The idea exists that the *Zuytdorp* survivors may have tried to reach Shark Bay, some 64 km to the north of the wreck site, searching for water on the way. So far, the only evidence in support of this notion is a report of 1869 which tells of an Aborigine having found a silver coin of the Spanish Netherlands at a well about 20 miles (32 km) south of Shark Bay (Playford, 1976: 33). Given that other aborigines could have dropped the coin at the well, it is still not improbable that archaeological sites may be found in the Shark Bay area to testify the presence of some of the earliest Europeans in Australia. Furthermore, such sites may be culturally significant in terms of the early contacts between Europeans and aborigines.

Even in the nineteenth century, the prospect of being shipwrecked and of having to survive on the natural resources in Shark Bay would not have been a welcome thought. Greater navigational ability, better knowledge of the area and more regular maritime traffic, however, would have helped to increase chances of survival. Of the vessels believed to have foundered in Shark Bay, the crew of at least one – the French whaler *Perseverant* (1841) – is reported to have spent 10 weeks on an island during which time 5 men died of scurvy (Henderson, 1980: 185). Archaeological material recovered near Cape Levillian at the northern end of Dirk Hartog Island may well have come from the survivors' camp and reflect the hardships endured by early mariners in the remote north-west regions.

2.3. Whaling

As Dampier and subsequent explorers noted, whales were abundant in the seas around Shark Bay (Dampier, 1939: 90-91). Indeed, it was the presence of this valuable marine resource that led the French navigator Nicolas Baudin to speculate in 1803 that this was probably the only part of the Western Australian coast that the Dutch might have considered economically viable for settlement (Baudin, 1803: 513). As early as 1792, two American

whalers from Nantucket (*Asia* and *Alliance*) visited Shark bay (Heppingstone, 1969: 37; Wave & Lovett, 1973: 2), followed closely by French and British whale ships. Even after Western Australia was founded as a British colony in 1829, foreign whalers continued their exploits on the west coast of Australia. To as late as the 1870s, they fished in open competition with colonial bay whalers.

Shark Bay was among the early centres of colonial bay-whaling (Wace & Lovett, 1973: 17), which focussed on the catching of right whales (*Eubalaena australis*) and humpback whales (*Megaptera novaeangliae*). American whalers too, regarded it as the second 'centre' for whaling after Geographe Bay (Spooner, 1981). Although no bay-whaling sites have been located in the area to date, records and material evidence suggest that possibly three foreign whale ships were wrecked in Shark bay between 1841 and 1900. Whether these vessels were actively involved in the catching and processing of whales within Shark bay, or had merely retired there for shelter, discovery of their remains could provide significant information with regard to the types of vessels employed in the whaling industry in the nineteenth century and the progressive development of whaling technology.

In 1949, the Commonwealth Government decided to establish a modern shore whaling station at Babbage Island, Carnarvon, in an attempt to develop secondary industries in Western Australia (WT, 1949 & 1950). Along with the shore station at Norwegian Bay (Stanbury, 1985), Babbage Island was one of the most modern whaling stations in the southern hemisphere. In 1955 it was taken over by the Nor'-West Whaling Company who subsequently closed their station at Norwegian Bay. Whaling operations continued at Babbage Island until August 1963 when the International Whaling Commission prevented further hunting of humpback whales (WA Yearbook, 1965: 297). The site at Babbage Island, together with the evidence of earlier whaling activities in Shark Bay, emphasises the significance of the region as a major centre of one of Western Australia's most important maritime industries.

2.4. Guano mining

The natural maritime resources of Shark Bay provided the colony of Western Australia with some of its earliest commercial exports. In 1850, news of the discovery of guano⁶ on islands in Shark Bay was enthusiastically received both in the Colony and in Britain: new export commodities and new avenues of industry were urgently needed to boost Colonial revenue, while British farmers were demanding cheaper supplies of guano to counteract the Peruvian monopoly of the trade (Stanbury, 1982).

Anxious to prevent the illegal removal of guano by foreign vessels and protect other economic interests in the area (i.e. pearl shell and sandalwood resources), the Government stationed a protective military force of 15 on Dirk Hartog Island (PG 4/10/1850). Remains of this military encampment may be identifiable at Quoin Bluff and represent the protective measures instigated by the Colonial Government in order to promote the Colony's commercial development.

In the short term of its operation, the guano industry at Shark Bay denuded many of the islands of their guano deposits. Material recently recovered from Egg Island indicates the potential for archaeological evidence to exist on islands such as Egg and Sunday Islands which may be related to guano mining activities. As such, it has the potential for revealing knowledge about the social organization, technology and cultural aspects of early colonial industries in remote places. The physical effects of mining may well be a significant factor in studies related to the current environmental status of the islands in the Shark Bay area.⁷

⁶ Guano is a natural manure derived from the droppings of seabirds.

⁷ The mining of guano and rock phosphate on islands in the Houtman Abrolhos had significant effects on island topography; gave rise to the introduction of new species of flora; and, led to adaptive patterns of behaviour among migratory birds: Stanbury & Brown, 1979, unpublished research report.

The loading of guano onto merchant vessels was often a hazardous and time consuming job. Weather conditions were frequently unfavourable and unsure anchorages made it difficult for large vessels to anchor close to the smaller islands. It was not unusual, therefore, to learn that vessels loading guano had been damaged or totally lost on uncharted reefs or shoals. In 1850, the *Prince Charlie* struck Cape Levillain after loading guano (Henderson, 1980: 235-36) and in 1878 the brigantine *Macquarie* also fell foul of Levillain shoal in hazy weather (WAM file). The discovery of anchors, ballast and other wreckage which might be associated with such vessels would serve as a tangible reminder of this once profitable industry.

2.5 Pearling and Pastoralism

Along with the commencement of guano mining, Shark Bay became a centre for pearling. This industry had long term ramifications for the area, providing a livelihood for local Aborigines, Chinese, Malays and other Asians as well as people of European origin (Lefroy, 1978: 9-11). Equipment associated with early pearling activities and the location of pearling camp sites have been reported from a number of localities in the Shark Bay area (WAM file). Likewise, ships wrecked in the bay, such as the pearling lugger *Brothers* (1925), may also contribute to the knowledge of this early maritime activity.

Pearling and pastoralism were closely related, many colonial entrepreneurs indulging in both activities. In Shark Bay, the pioneer pastoralists were heavily dependent on the pearling luggers for the shipment of woolclip to colonial ports. In the absence of motorised transport, the woolclip was transported by camel or horse-drawn wagon to a convenient beach where it was transferred by lighters to waiting ships (Lefroy, 1978: 15). The various remains of station landings, including marks left by the iron-tired wagon wheels, along the shores of Shark Bay are a significant reminder that without maritime transport, the early rural industries in Western Australia, (indeed in Australia generally), would have had little chance of economic survival.

2.5 Other trade commodities

Sandalwood was another commodity which provided Shark Bay with a regular trade from an early date (Lefroy, 1978: 16). Supplies of the timber were found along the Wooramel River area and later in the vicinity of Woodleigh Station (Lefroy, 1978: 15). The maritime connection with this trade is represented by the cutter *Two Sons* which sank on a voyage from Flint Cliff to Denham in 1902 with a cargo of sandalwood (WAM file).

Other vessels reported to have been lost in Shark Bay represent the fishing industry and general coastal trade. Both were important to the domestic and export economy of Shark Bay, particularly in the nineteenth and early twentieth century when land communication links between Perth and the north-west regions of the State were poorly developed.

3. Underwater sites in Shark Bay

Under the terms of the Commonwealth *Historic Shipwrecks Act, 1976*, and the State *Maritime Archaeology Act, 1973*, vessels wrecked in Federal or State waters may be protected as historic shipwrecks. Based on reports of finding, sites may be recommended for protection based on criteria such as the vessel's significance in the discovery, exploration, settlement and development of Australia; its archaeological and historical significance; its importance as a particular form of technological development; and, its educational and/or recreational value.

Over a period of time, a number of reports have been filed of wreckage located in Shark Bay. While parts of the bay seem to be a regular catchment for ocean-going flotsam, several ships are known from documentary sources to have been damaged or totally wrecked in the area. Many of these have yet to be located, identified and assessed in terms of the legislative criteria.

Vessels believed to have been lost and/or damaged in Shark Bay include the following:

3.1. Vessels associated with whaling

Name	Date	Description
<i>Persévérant</i>	1841	French whaler, ship-rigged, 269 tons. Built in 1837 of oak, bolted and sheathed with copper. Slipped her cable and ran ashore on the 'island'. Five men died of scurvy and the remaining crew sailed away in four boats after ten weeks.
<i>North Star</i>	1856	American whaler, ship-rigged, 339 tons, 36 crew. Crew and cargo taken aboard the sister ship <i>Vesper</i> to Mauritius.
<i>Gudrun</i>	1900	Norwegian whaler, barque-rigged, 950 tons. Wrecked off the North-West. Figure-head found on Peron flats, now on display at Fremantle Museum.

3.2. Vessels associated with the guano trade

Name	Date	Description
<i>Prince Charlie</i>	1850	443-ton barque, built in Sunderland in 1848. Cargo of guano loaded at Shark bay. Struck Cape Levillain, off-loaded cargo to inspect damage. Repaired in 1851.
<i>Macquarie</i>	1878	Brigantine, 125 tons. Struck Levillain Shoal due to hazy weather. Captain held not to be at fault for loss. All hands saved.

3.3. Vessels associated with pearling and fishing

Name	Date	Description
<i>Genesta</i>	1909	fisheries vessel. Total wreck off Dorre Island.
<i>Brothers</i>	1925	Lugger

3.4. Vessels associated with the sandalwood trade

Name	Date	Description
<i>Two sons</i>	1902	Cutter, 16 tons. Sank while on voyage from Flint Cliff (Hamelin Pool) to Denham with cargo of sandalwood.

3.5. Others

Name	Date	Description
<i>Airlie</i>		1889 Schooner
<i>Secret</i>	1904	total wreck near Faure Island. 18.81 tons.
<i>Olive</i>	1916	Schooner, 43 tons, general cargo. Cable parted while anchored off Dorre Island.
<i>Edith</i>	1907	Schooner, 67 tons.
<i>Two Friends</i>	1925	Fishing boat lost with all hands. 15 tons.
<i>Era</i>	1958	60-ton, ex-racing yacht, built 1887. Lost in South Passage.
<i>Britisher</i>	N.D.	Half of bell found on Dirk Hartog Island.

Dorre Island N.D. Unidentified.

4. Land sites in Shark Bay

4.1. Sites associated with early European navigators and explorers

(i) Monument sites.

- Cape Inscription, Dirk Hartog Island. Wooden posts commemorating the visits of Dirk Hartog (1616), Willem de Vlamingh (1697) and Nicolas Baudin and Emmanuel Hamelin (1801).
- Eagle Bluff, Peron Peninsula. Inscription commemorating the visit of Henry Mangles Denham (1858) – possibly not genuine.

(ii) Camp sites.

- Cape Lesueur, Peron Peninsula. Louis de Freycinet expedition (1818).

4.2 Shipwreck survivors' camps

(i) 18th century sites

- *Zuytdorp* survivors' camps (1712), possibly in vicinity of Womerangee Hill and northwards to Freycinet Estuary. Silver coin of the Spanish Netherlands found by an Aborigine at a well 20 miles (32 km) south of Shark Bay.

(ii) Possible 19th century sites

- *Perseverant* survivors' camp, possibly Cape Levillain, Dirk Hartog Island. Artefacts including brass buttons marked 'EQUIPAGE DE LIGNE', ceramics, clay pipes and glass have been recovered from a site in this area.
 - *North Star* (1856)
- *Gudrun* (1900), figure-head found at Cape Peron Flats
 - *Britisher* (N.D.), bell found on beach at Herald Bay, Dirk Hartog Island.
 - *Macquarie* (1878), possibly Cape Levillain.

4.3. Sites associated with maritime trade and industry

(i) Guano mining and associated camps

- Egg Island, Asian and European ceramics and glassware recovered.
- Sunday Island
- Military encampment, Quoin Bluff, Dirk Hartog Island.

(ii) Pearling camps

- Tetradon Loop and others, Dirk Hartog Island.
- Middle Camp, near Denham, Peron Peninsula, coins dated 1884-86 found in this vicinity.
- Freshwater camp (Denham)
- Herrison Prong, *Useless Inlet), pearling equipment, clay pipes and buttons found.

(iii) Whaling

- Babbage Island.

4.4. Station landings

- Flagpole landing, Hamelin Pool, remains of jetty and iron-tyred wagon wheel marks.
- Carrarang Land, Carrarang Peninsula.
- Bibra landing (Wooramel River).

4.5. Others

- unidentified stone structure, False Entrance, Crayfish Bay.

5. Conclusions

The coverage of sites presented in this paper is necessarily brief and is intended to give some idea of the general context and nature of historical sites expected to be found in Shark Bay, both underwater and on land. In the main, the land sites referred to are those which are closely associated with the activities of ships reported or documented as having been damaged or wrecked in Shark Bay.

While the full historical, archaeological and cultural potential of such sites will not be realised until comprehensive exploratory field surveys and research have been undertaken, present evidence suggests that a variety of sites exist which are capable of yielding tangible information about the past. Shark Bay was an important site of contact with early European navigators and explorers and a centre for pioneer industries during colonial infancy. With the establishment of maritime industries such as guano mining, pearling and fishing, Shark bay played a significant role in the social and economic development of the remoter regions of Western Australia. Together with the pastoral industry, these events helped to shape the historic nature of Shark bay and therefore deserve due public recognition.

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Abbreviations

PG	<i>Perth Gazette</i>
WAM	Western Australian Museum
WT	<i>The Western Third</i>