WRECKS IN THE ABROLHOS ISLANDS

Introduction
The Houtman Abrolhos is a group of islands and reefs situated about 80 km west off the Western Australian coast. These islands were named after Fredrick de Houtman, who discovered and charted them in 1619. The word Abrolhos is Portuguese for ‘keep your eye open’ or ‘look out’. The Houtman Abrolhos comprises three main island groups: the Pelsaert Group, sometimes known as the Southern Group, the Easter Group, the Wallabi Group and North Island. From 1844 to 1945 the islands were mined for their guano, the result of many years of numerous sea birds living and breeding there. The waters surrounding the islands now support a thriving rock lobster industry.

Batavia
This was the flagship of the Dutch United East India Company fleet that left Holland in 1628 en route to the East Indies. On board were 316 people including the President of the Fleet and Commander, Francisco Pelsaert; skipper, Adriaen Jacobsz; supercargo, Jeronimus Cornelisz and a number of passengers. Batavia also carried cargo of cloth, lead, cochineal as well as valuable jewellery and 12 chests of silver coins. In 2006 the Batavia site was added to the National Heritage List.

Ben Ledi
Ben Ledi, bound for Calcutta from Sydney, was 105km south of the Abrolhos on 16 December, 1879. The captain went aloft the mainmast with his telescope and estimated the mainland to be 68 km away. Expecting to clear the Abrolhos, he sailed north-west by west. At 11 pm Ben Ledi struck a reef near the south end of Pelsaert Island. The 1107-tonne iron sailing ship could not be reflotted and five crew arrived in Geraldton in a rescue boat on 19 December. The captain was not charged as the loss was attributed to the currents circulating around the Abrolhos. It is a good dive.

Jon Jim
Jon Jim, a 36.6-tonne freezer boat was wrecked on the southern end of Pelsaert Island on 17 July, 1961. The wreck lies between a small islet now named Jon Jim Island and Wreck Point on the main island itself. The skipper had set a course for Wreck Point, expecting to miss it due to bad weather conditions. However, the weather didn’t blow the ship off course as much as he had calculated. This led to it running hard aground against the cliff where it now lies.

An aerial view of the Abrolhos

For further information on historic shipwrecks contact the WA Museum Shipwreck Galleries or the WA Heritage Council:
http://tourism.heritage.wa.gov.au

Written by Niomi Whyte and Lisa Ralph Geraldton Senior High School Work Experience WA Museum Funded by the Department of the Arts and Administrative Services 1993. Updated by Jessica Berry, Tracey Miller and Jessica Reynolds WAM 2008.

Diving notes
Wrecks are often hazardous. Access to the wrecks requires a boat. Divers need to be fit and qualified. A diver’s flag must be displayed. Never dive alone or leave boat unattended. Persons diving on these wrecks do so at their own risk. These wrecks are part of Western Australia’s heritage. They are protected under legislation. Please enjoy them but do not disturb them.
the rest of the fleet by a storm. Cornelisz and some of the other officers had conspired to seize the ship and engage in piracy. Mutiny was close at hand on the night of 4 June, 1629 when Batavia crashed into the coral reef surrounding the Wallabi Group of the Houtman Abrolhos. The majority aboard landed on some small, waterless islands. Pelsaert and 46 of his crew sailed to Batavia for help in one of the ship’s boats. After their departure, Cornelisz planned to capture the rescue vessel on its return, killing all who disagreed. There was a huge massacre in which 125 people were murdered. Evidence of this massacre was revealed with the discovery of graves found on the islands. When Pelsaert returned, the mutineers, including Cornelisz, were rounded up and some were executed for their crimes. Currently on display at the WA Museum Shipwreck Galleries in Fremantle and the Geraldton Museum are artefacts from the wreck, including the stern section from the hull of Batavia and the stone portico destined for Batavia. Also on display is the skeleton of a victim of Batavia massacre, which has chipped skull, most likely caused by a blow from a sword. The wreck site is an excellent dive in the right conditions.

Zeewijk
The retourship Zeewijk departed Vlissingen, Holland, on 7 November, 1726, bound for Batavia with a crew of 212 men and a rich cargo, including 315,836 guilders carried in 10 chests. After successfully reaching the Cape of Good Hope in March 1727, it set off on 21 April for a voyage across the Indian Ocean. At 7 pm on 9 June, Zeewijk unexpectedly struck Half Moon Reef on the western side of the Pelsaert Group. The look-out had seen breakers half an hour earlier, but had thought it was a reflection of the moonlight. The crew blamed the skipper for running too near the coast. He was later prosecuted for his carelessness.

A camp was established on Gun Island and articles were salvaged from the wreck. Eleven of the best seamen, along with the first officer, set sail for Batavia but were never heard of again. Using remnants of Zeewijk, the stranded seamen built a small sailing vessel which they called Sloepie. In late March 1728, the remaining 82 survivors left for Batavia, arriving at Sunda Straits on 21 April with all the treasure. The wreck is now broken up.

Ocean Queen
On the night of 13 September, 1842, the 268-tonne barque Ocean Queen struck the Pelsaert Group of the Abrolhos. The 18 crew members, including the captain, landed on Pelsaert Island where they stayed for 10 days. They then set out for Fremantle in the ship’s boats, but due to strong winds, they landed 70 nautical miles north of the Fremantle settlement and walked the remaining distance. All that remains of the wreck is a pile of ballast stones.

Venus
On 10 April, 1851, en route to Fremantle from Batavia and Singapore, this 28-tonne schooner struck one of the reefs surrounding the Pelsaert Group. The crew survived on an island until 15 October when three of the crew rowed to the mainland. The others were rescued a week later by Evergreen, but the cook died two weeks after the wrecking. The wreck has not been found.

Preston
The 19-tonne schooner, Preston, ran ashore on Pelsaert Island on the morning of 20 September, 1855. Anchors were used to try to drag the vessel off the shore, but this failed. Its cargo was unloaded and the vessel was abandoned on 2 October by the crew. They then left for Port Gregory in the ship’s boats. Later that summer, after a few salvage attempts, Preston was finally departed and continued trading until it was wrecked in July 1861.

Flying Foam
Before heading for Champion Bay, this 33-tonne schooner, hit the jetty at Fremantle and had its stern patched with canvas. It then went missing during a gale on 10 March, 1812 and was most likely sank in deep water south of the Abrolhos.

Cleopatra
At 4 am on 20 November, 1874, this three-masted schooner became stranded on the east side of Pelsaert Island. One passenger said that he was awoken by the whistling of birds and went on deck to find an island only 70–90 metres away. At high tide it was warped free. The captain was later censured in court for failing to ensure a satisfactory look-out.

Hadda
Bound for Fremantle from the Lacepedes, the 334-tonne barque Hadda struck a reef in the Wallabi group at 10 pm on 30 April, 1877. The 11 crew members saw, and probably explored Beacon Island, but slept on the water-logged ship until 7 May. The crew arrived in two of the ship’s boats.