

Norwegian Whaling Station Frenchman Bay

Maritime Heritage Site Inspection Report

Compiler: Dena Garratt
Consulting Maritime Archaeologist
June 1994

**Report - Dept. of Maritime Archaeology
WA Maritime Museum, No 82.**

© W.A. MUSEUM

Contents

Acknowledgments.....	1
Introduction.....	1
Background.....	1
Technical data.....	3
Management considerations.....	4
Description of site.....	5
Site identification comments.....	9
Assessment of site significance.....	12
Discussion.....	12
Recommendations.....	13
Further comments.....	13
References.....	14

Figures

Figure 1. Map: <i>Albany Harbour, c1918</i>	1
Figure 2. Cart Excerpt: AUS 109, <i>Port of Albany</i>	2
Figure 3. Site of the Norwegian Whaling Station, Frenchman Bay.....	4
Figure 4. Slipway stump and stone foundations.....	5
Figure 5. Sketch depicting the possible layout of supports for the flensing deck and slipway. Longitudinal Elevation.....	6
Figure 6. Remains of the flensing deck or slipway.....	7
Figure 7. Remains of a slipway support.....	7
Figure 8. Timbers from the site of the slipway.....	8
Figure 9. Whale bone.....	8
Figure 10. Impression of the Norwegian Whaling Station in 1922.....	10
Figure 11. View of <i>Elvie</i> , July 1991.....	11
Figure 12. SS <i>Fin</i> aground on Fraser Island, c1924.....	11

Acknowledgments

This project was partially funded under the National Estate Program, a Commonwealth-financed grants scheme administered by the Australian Heritage Commission (Federal Government) and the Heritage Council of Western Australia (State Government).

Introduction

The purpose of this site inspection was to make a preliminary assessment of the extent of the submerged remains of the Norwegian Whaling Station in Frenchman Bay and to produce a photographic record of the site and the associated material on land.

Background

Compiled from the records of the Department of Maritime Archaeology, (MA).

Site Name: Norwegian Whaling Station, Frenchman Bay, King George Sound.

File Name: Jetties and Port Related Structures

File No: MA 2.93

File Name: Albany Wrecks

File No: MA 195.72

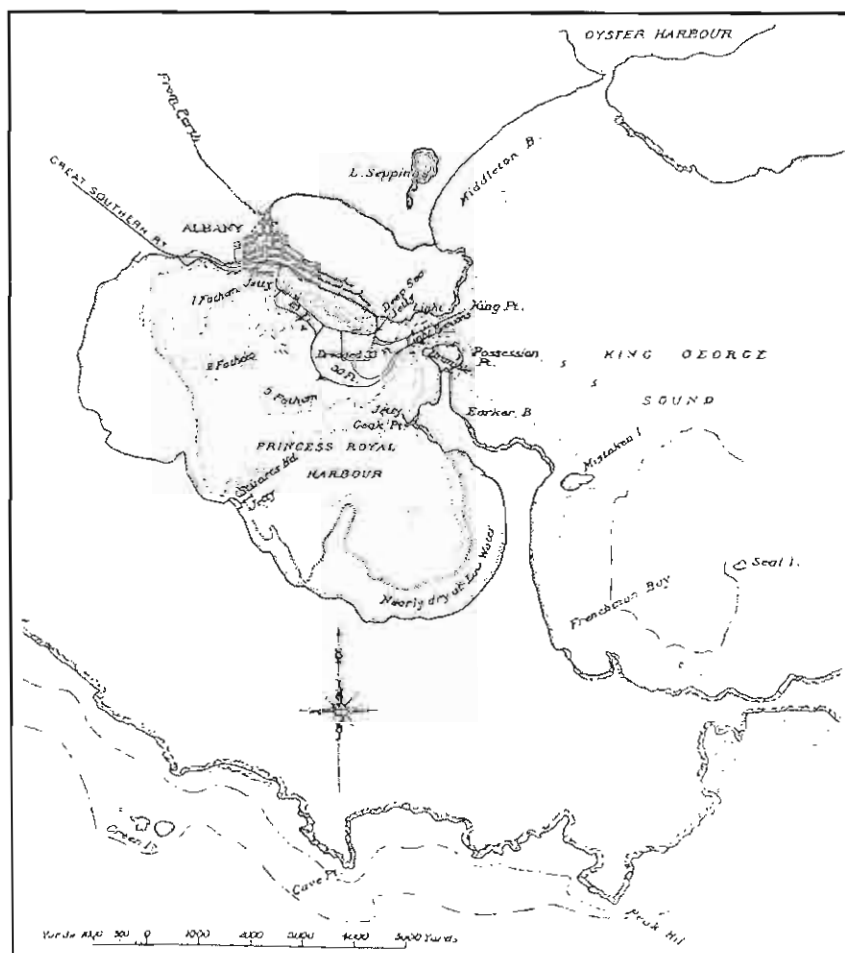


Figure 1. Map: Albany Harbour, c1918, showing the location of Frenchman Bay

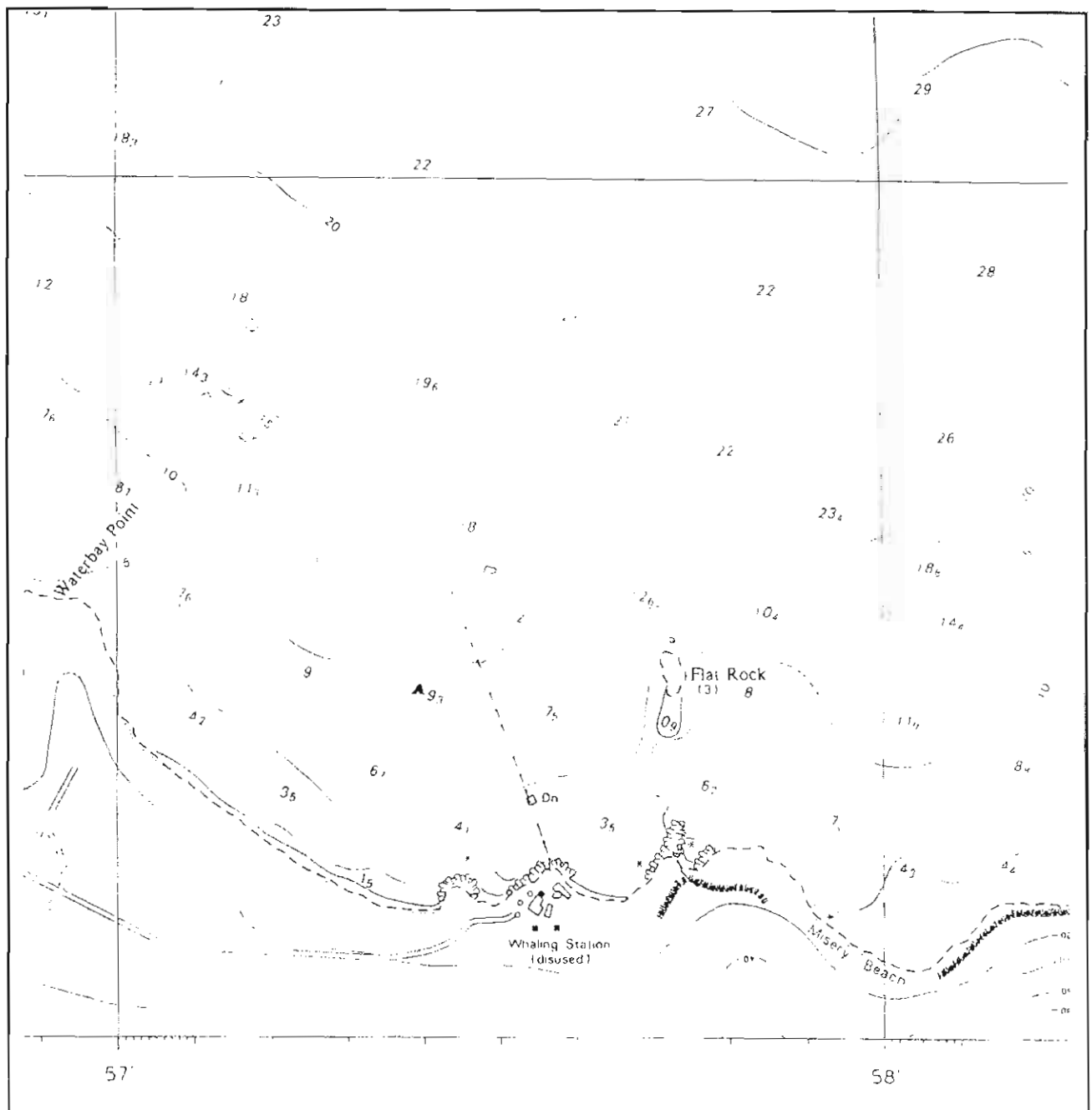


Figure 2. Chart Excerpt: AUS 109, Port of Albany. 1: 12 500, 1982.
 Location of Whaling Station in Frenchman Bay.

Technical Data

Date of Inspection: 5 April 1994

Personnel: Dena Garratt, Bob Richards, Ray Shaw

Approximate Location: The Norwegian Whaling Station is situated in Frenchman Bay, King George Sound.

Charts: BA 1059, *Doubtful Island to the Head of the Great Australian Bight*. 1881, 1: 610 000.
AUS 109, *Port of Albany*, 1: 12 500, 1982.
AUS 118, *Port of Albany*, 1: 50 000, 1973.

Maps: *Albany SI 2427*, 1: 100 000, 1986.
Albany SI 50-15, 1: 250 000, 1977.

Historic Plans: Not available. (See page 10)

Latitude: 35° 05' 00"S **Longitude:** 117° 59' 20"E

Directions: Driving west along Princess Royal Drive, turn left into Frenchman Bay Road. Follow the signs to Frenchman Bay picnic area.

Site Photographs:

B/W: U/W (File No. MA 2.93, Neg Nos. 3-37)

Colour:

Slides: Albany, (File No. MA 2.93, A/ 2&3)
AIR E/3-12. Frenchman Bay, aerial view.

Video: 12 mins 25 secs.

Historic: Film No. 32, Neg. 7 "*Bruce* at Frenchmans Bay" (The Residency Museum, Albany)
Film No. 48, Neg. 8 "*Ruins*, Frenchmans Bay" (The Residency Museum, Albany)

Site Conditions on Inspection:

Swell: Nil

Visibility: 2 m

Current: Nil

Sea-bed coverage: Posidonia seagrass with patches of sand and weed-covered rocks.

Chemical Measurements:

Temperature: No measurements were deemed necessary in this instance, however, all chemical measurements will be recorded if a full archaeological investigation of the site is undertaken.

Salinity: Ditto

pH: Ditto

Dissolved Oz: Ditto

Corrosion Potential: NA

Biological Data:

Colonising fauna and flora: The jetty piles and other artefacts have been predominantly colonised by a moss-like species of seaweed.

Site Condition and Integrity: There is substantial remains of the foundations and supports of the flensing deck structure still in place above and below the water. The general shape and dimensions of the foundations of a brick building is clearly evident above high water level.

Management Considerations

- (i) Natural Forces: The site is not subjected to the damaging forces of ocean swells, as it is well protected within the confines of Frenchmans Bay.
- (ii) Present and future Human forces: Currently the threat from human forces is minimal. The area is a popular picnic spot and is designated for passive recreational activities only.
- (iii) Projected general site stability: The structural integrity of the remaining structure does not appear to be in any immediate danger from either environmental or human forces. However, in the long term, the timbers will continue to be degraded by biological and environmental agents.

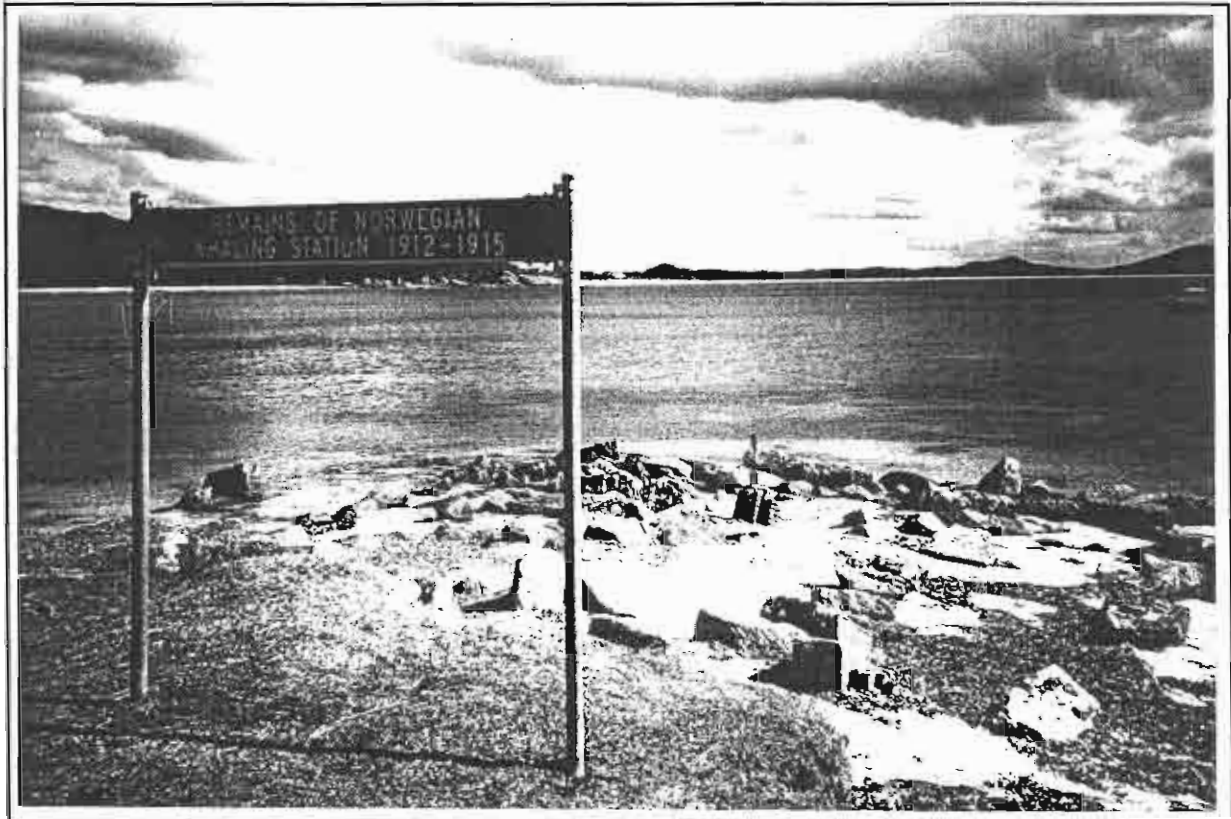


Figure 3. Site of the Norwegian Whaling Station, Frenchman Bay. (WA Maritime Museum)

Description of Site

The extensive remains on the site can be described as those appearing on-shore and above the low water mark and those below the low water mark. The landward remains were examined and described in McIlroy, 1987, p 21. This description is reproduced below.

Frenchmans Bay today is a picnic and barbecue area. Brick and concrete footings are scattered along 120 metres of bush and beach, hemmed in and sheltered by a 40 metre high hill.

The most noticeable structure is at the east end of the site where at least nineteen brick and concrete stanchions 30 to 40 cm high and varying from 35 to 50 cm on edge, lie spread over an area of about 12.5 metres x 7.5 metres. They are bounded to the south by the base of the low hill that shelters the site and to the north by a wall footing of rough granite(?) rock about 15 metres long x 70 cm wide standing to a height of 40 to 50 cm. They may have supported a flensing platform or a digester, used for boiling the blubber or the meat and bones.

Two adjacent courses of circular brickwork about four metres in diameter with a central concrete pad 85 cm on edge undoubtedly supported storage tanks, for fuel or oil is uncertain.

Four cemented rubble footings, topped with brick and concrete, lie on the beach. The largest is 230 cm long x 240 cm wide x 100 cm high. Twenty metres north-west of these on the shoreline, a brick pillar stands 210 cm high on a 90 cm wide concrete base. These latter structures may have been moved from their original positions. Their specific function is undetermined.

There are about fifteen other fragments of small brick and concrete footings scattered along the length of the bay that could be built into a cohesive pattern if subject to future excavation.

Report on the underwater remains of the whaling station flensing deck and slipway.

The waters in the vicinity of the whaling station extending from the shore to a depth of three metres are extremely rich in artefact material. Unfortunately little detail of the objects can be discerned as almost everything is covered by a luxuriant moss-like seaweed and many areas are masked by dense clumps of *Posidonia* seagrass. In spite of these visual impediments, substantial remains of the footings for the flensing deck and slipway can be discerned. The remains of several brick stanchions lie close to shore, while further out to sea there are wooden pile stumps approximately 12 cm in diameter standing 50 cm above the seabed. A large formation of rocks approximately 10 metres long and 1.5 metres high at the seaward end forms the foundations for the slipway. The line of the slipway can be readily determined from the orientation of the stumps and the rock embankment.

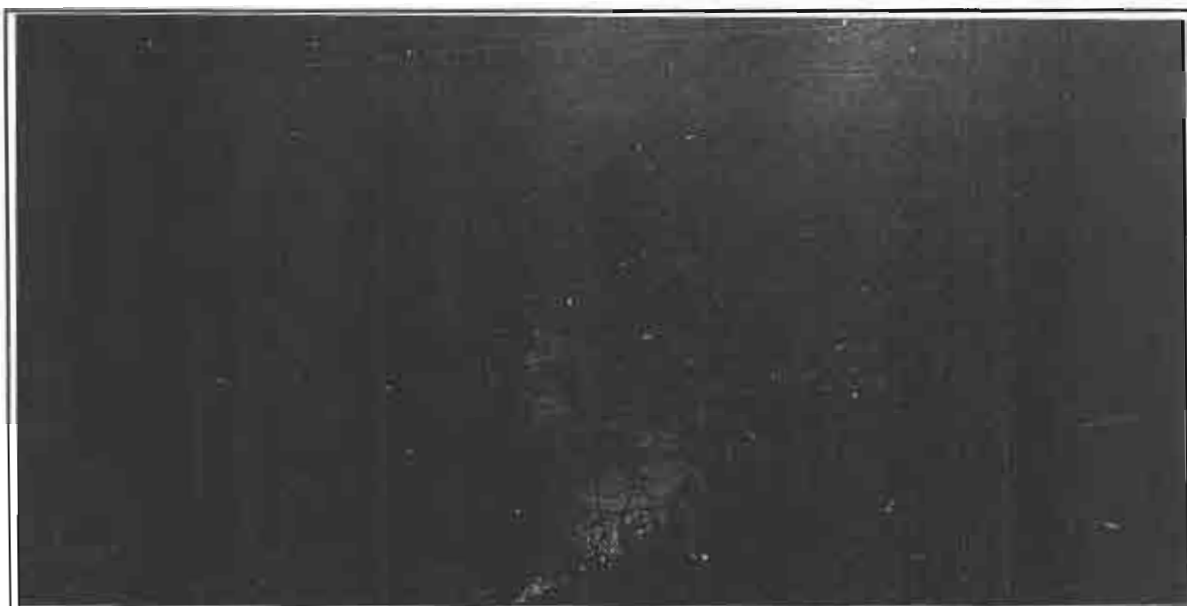


Figure 4. Slipway stump and stone foundations. (WA Maritime Museum)

The slipway is described by Mr Les Douglas, an Albany resident who helped to salvage material from the whaling station in 1922.

There was not much of the Flensing Deck left. It had gone by the time the Douglasses (sic) got there. There was also the remains of a large ramp that went out into about 10 ft of water. It must have been held in position under water with large wooden crates because scattered about the bottom were 8-10 of these about 8 x 8 ft square. They were full of large pieces of granite. The crates were open type. The timbers looked about 6" x 3" spaced 6" apart. They appeared to be constructed in this manner so the underwater surge could pass through. They must have served as some protection for the underwater part of the ramp used to pull the whales up onto the large flensing deck. (Marshall, 1994, p.20).

Underwater observations confirms Mr Douglas' description of the flensing deck and slipway . The inner section of the flensing deck was supported on piers of bricks and concrete, while the outer (seaward) section that sloped down into the water was supported on wooden piles. The stability of the footings was reinforced by the surrounding stone embankment. The use of stone-filled crates, called "*gabions*" is an ancient stabilisation method used first by the Romans in harbour construction, and later adopted by the French (Oleson, 1988, p.149). This construction method is logical when one considers the stress requirements of the deck. The outer end of the slipway was susceptible to wave action and the bumping of whale carcasses, and therefore this section required greater lateral stability rather than compressive strength. Brick piers however, have little lateral strength but possess the considerable compressive strength that would be required to support the immense weight of the whales as they were hauled onto the flensing deck. In addition, the load-bearing capacity of the seaward end would not need to be as substantial as the landward end, because dead whales would be partially buoyant while still immersed in water.

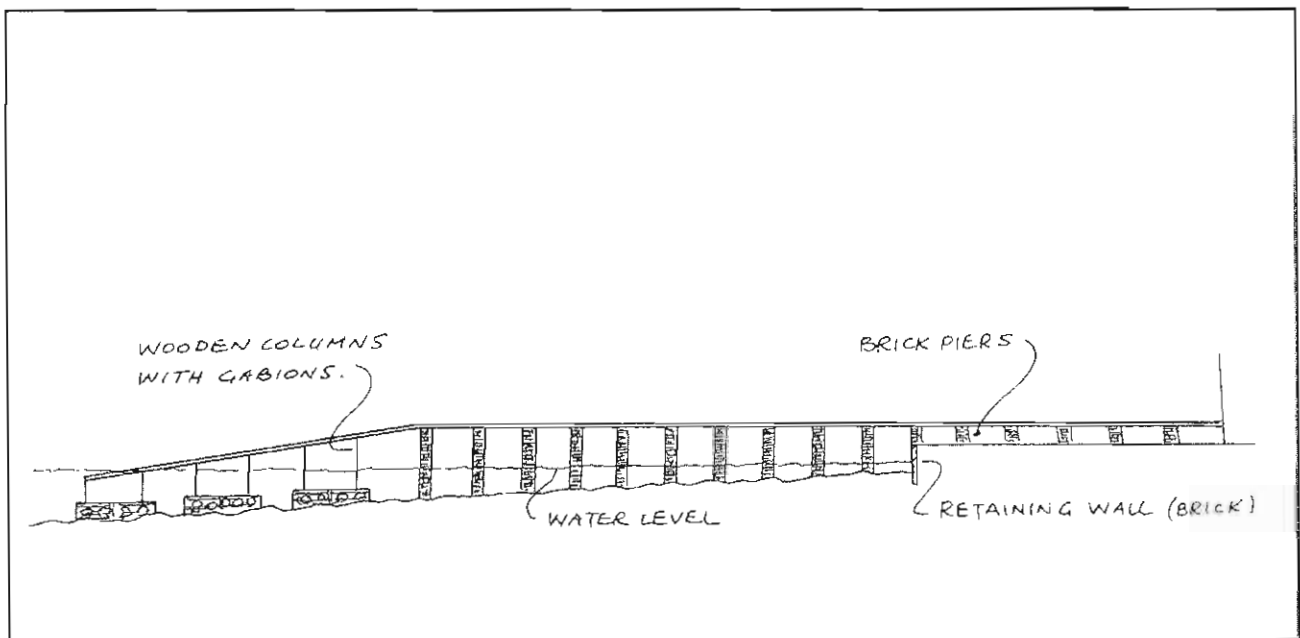


Figure 5 Sketch depicting the possible layout of supports for the flensing deck and slipway. Longitudinal Elevation (R. Shaw)

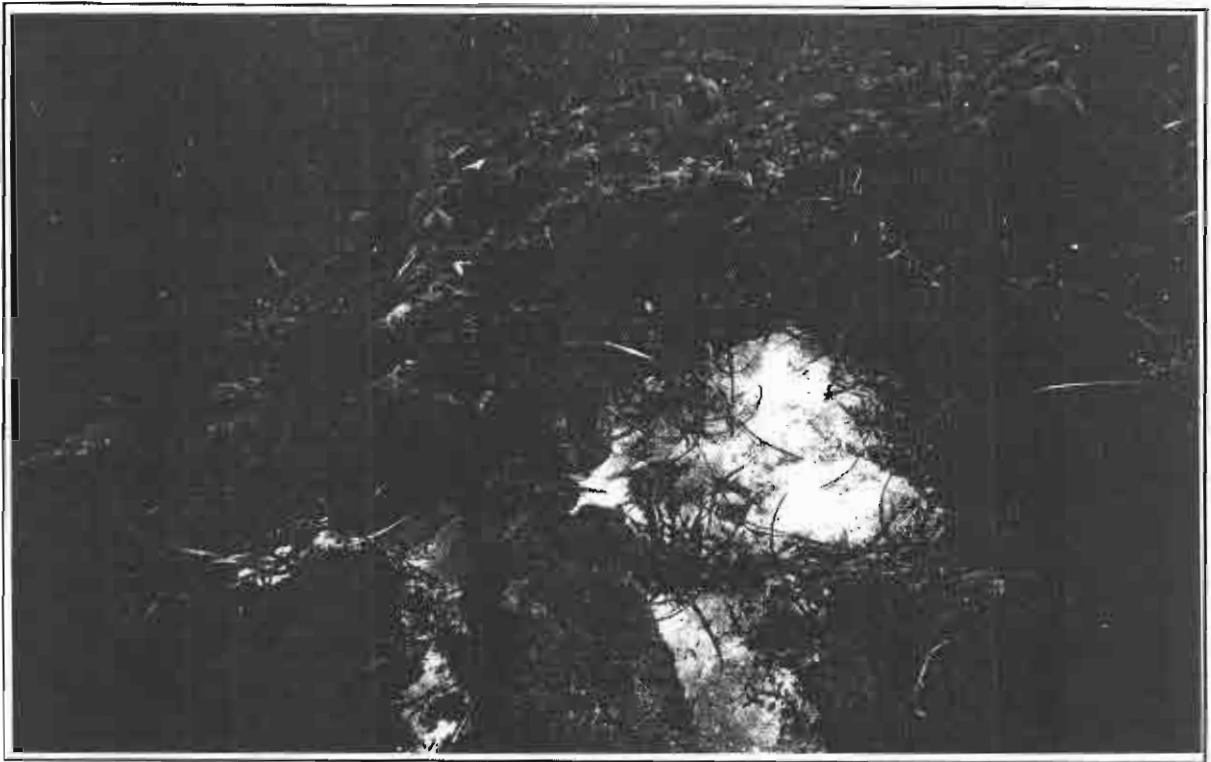


Figure 6. Remains of the flensing deck or slipway. (WA Maritime Museum)

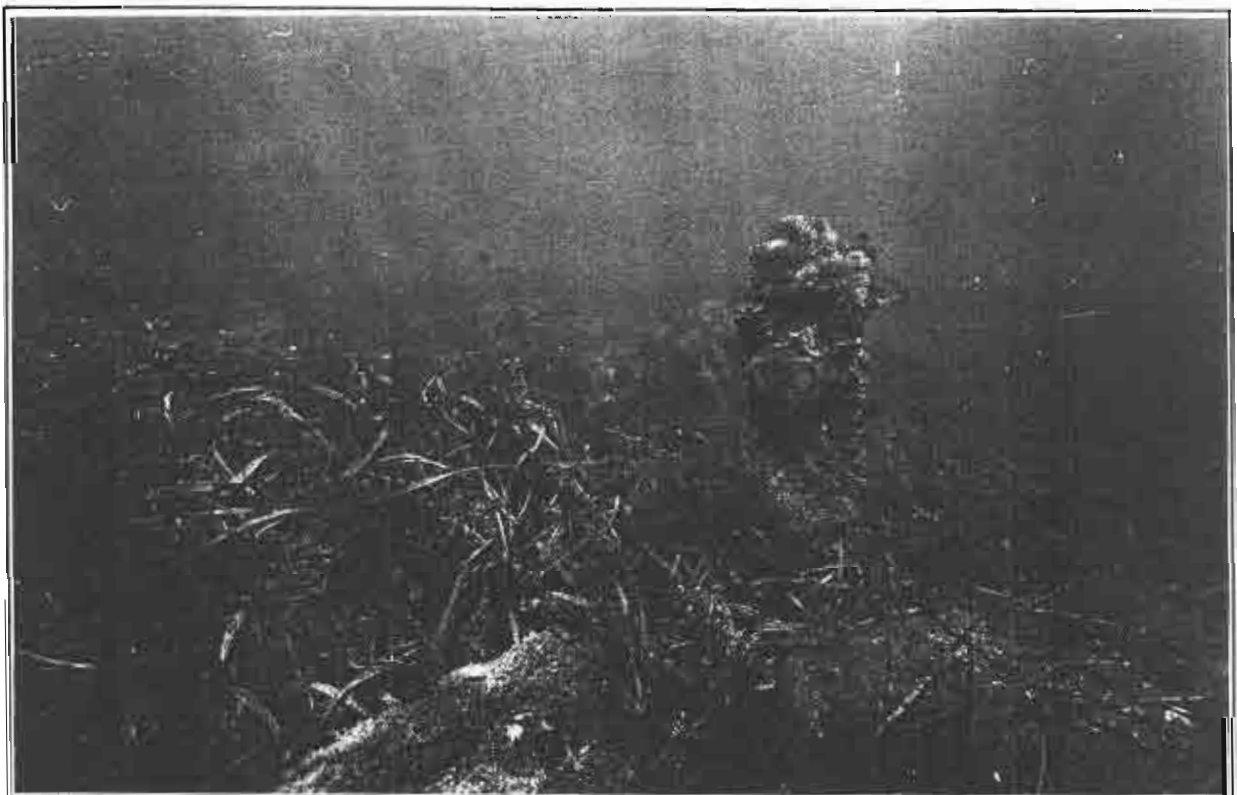


Figure 7. Remains of a slipway support. (WA Maritime Museum)

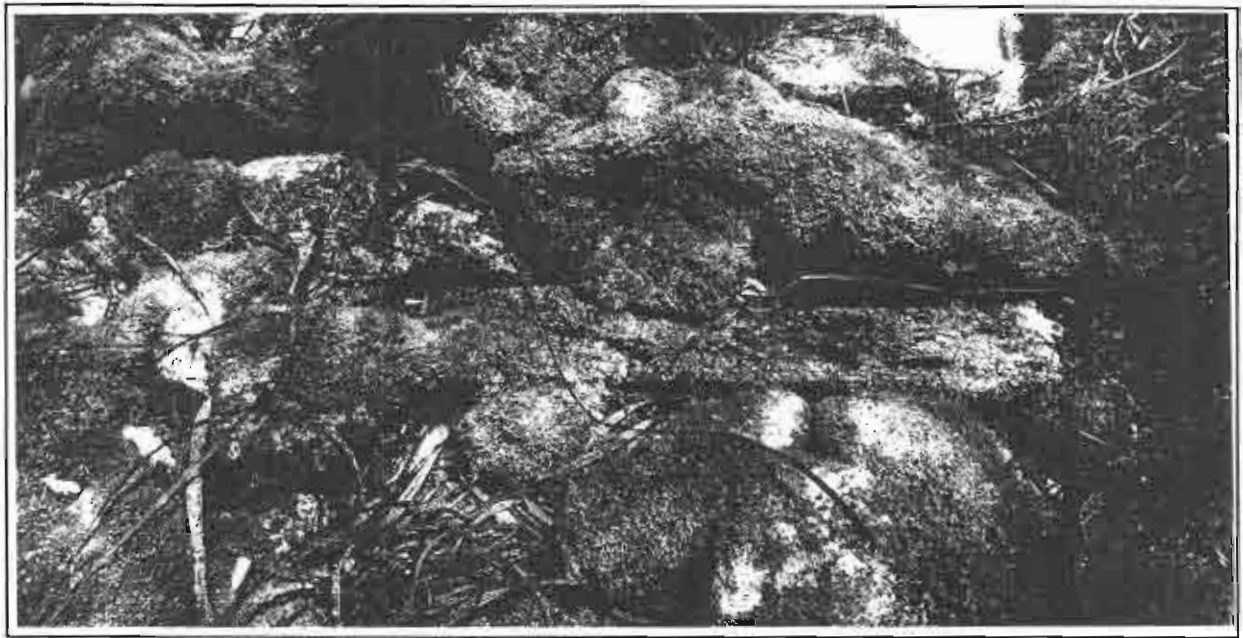


Figure 8. Timbers from the site of the slipway. (WA Maritime Museum)

Other archaeological material was found on the seabed, including whale bones, (see *Figure 9*) and several metal objects of unidentified origins. It is probable that further artefacts will be buried beneath the sand and only a full archaeological investigation will reveal the full extent of material remaining on the site.



Figure 9. Whale bone. (WA Maritime Museum)

Site Identification Comments:

In 1911 the Spermacet Company of Larvik, Norway was granted a licence to catch and process whales in the region between Esperance and Cape Leeuwin. The company chose the protected waters of Frenchman Bay as the site for their operations. The Norwegian Whaling Company established a whaling station near Vancouver Spring in 1913, and built a slipway and village in 1914. The station was manned almost entirely by Scandinavians, recruited by the parent company in Norway. With no road to link Frenchman Bay with the town of Albany, these men had little contact with the local inhabitants and most of the money they earned went with them back to Norway. The Company however, did make a substantial contribution to the Western Australian economy. In 1915 alone, around £80,000 was spent on provisions, coal and general supplies.

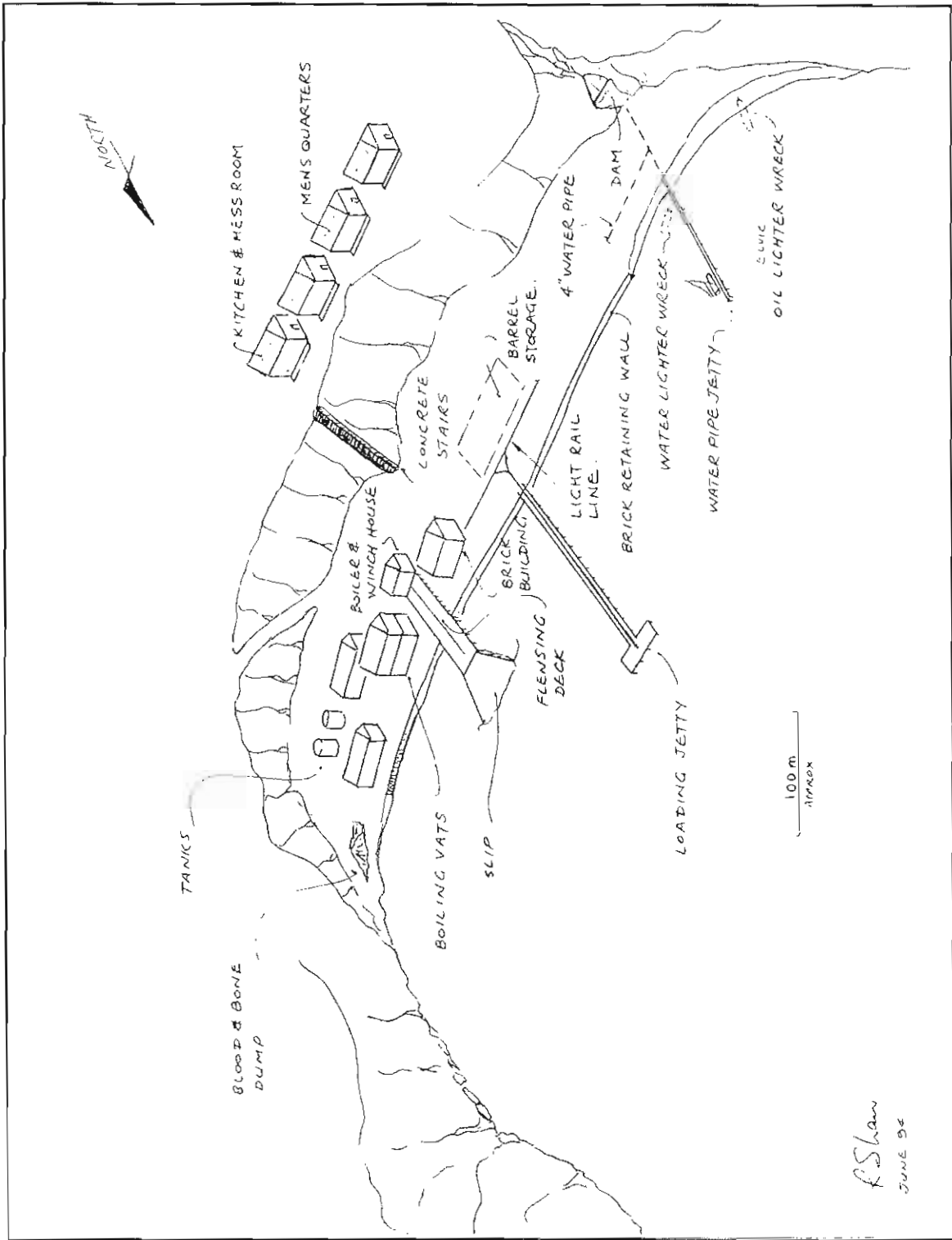
About 10,000 barrels of oil were obtained in 1916, but problems with union activities and fears of German sympathisers among the Norwegian whalers during the First World War, caused operations to cease soon afterwards. After the war, much of the machinery and plant was removed by the Company and taken to the new whaling station at Point Cloates.

Other operators attempted to re-open the station but were unsuccessful. A severe storm in 1921 caused extensive damage to what remained of the station and it was eventually sold for salvage. Some of the timber was used to build a lighter, (a small, shallow-draft vessel designed to ferry cargo from ship to shore and vice versa).

Given below is a wonderfully accurate description of the whaling station by William Dakin in his book published in 1938 entitled *Whalemen adventures*.

Frenchman(s) Bay soon changed in appearance. A great wooden platform was built on the beach; it stood on piles and projected over the water as a wide and low pier or wharf. At the seaward extremity this platform sloped down to the water, and extended a little below the surface at low tide, forming a slipway up which whales could be easily hauled. One side at the shore end of this flensing platform, a high two-storey building of wood contained the boilers in which bones and meat could be digested under steam pressure. At the other side another shed contained open boilers for the blubber. There were unglazed windows to the top floor of the big boiler house and up to these openings wooden shores acted as rails on which great metal buckets filled with chunks of whale-meat were hoisted. The contents were tipped through the windows in a manner most convenient for filling the boilers.

At the landward end of the flensing platform, and facing the sea, there stood a very well equipped engineer's "shop". All sorts repairs had to be carried out there; but two regular jobs were the fitting of new heads to the explosive harpoons, and making new parts for the engine of a launch which as regularly consumed them. In front of the engineer's "shop" were steam winches for hauling the heavy whale carcasses up the oily slipway from the sea. As for the rest, there were wooden houses on the bushy slopes above the boiler houses for the shore gangs and for the crews when not on board the "chasers". By 1915, £28,000 had been spent on machinery, and much more on coal and stores... (Dakin, 1938, p 186).



R. Shaw
JUNE 94

Figure 10. Impression of the Norwegian Whaling Station in 1922. From a sketch by Mr Les Douglas in Marshall, 1994, p.19. (R. Shaw)

Associated shipwrecks:

Elvie 1921

The *Elvie* was a wooden lighter which was used to carry barrels of oil out to the whaling vessels anchored in Frenchman Bay. After the closure of the whaling station the vessel was anchored in the bay. She dragged her moorings and was driven ashore during the violent gale in 1921 that destroyed part of the whaling station. The remains of the *Elvie* lie partially buried in the sand within the tidal zone on the western end of Vancouver Beach. (Boocock, Bower, et al, 1990, pp. 41-58)



Figure 11. View of *Elvie*, July 1991. (WA Maritime Museum)

SS Finn 1923

The *SS Finn* was one of two small Norwegian Whalers, originally operating from Frenchman Bay. After the closure of the southern station, the *Finn* was engaged in the northern whale fishery at Point Cloates. It is shown here on Fraser Island, where it was blown ashore during a cyclone in 1923. (Source: WA Maritime Museum, File Name: *Fin*; File No: MA 22.80)



Figure 12. *SS Finn* aground on Fraser Island, c 1924. (WA Maritime Museum)

Assessment of Site Significance

(i) Historical: The remains of the Norwegian Whaling Station in Frenchman Bay is representative of a significant era in the whaling industry. The operation of the station had a significant, albeit short economic impact on the Western Australian economy and Albany in particular.

(ii) Technological: The site demonstrates a particular level of technological sophistication in the whaling industry. It is the first modern whaling station on the Western Australian coast, using steam-driven machinery.

(iii) Scientific:

(iv) Educational: All heritage remains have the potential of being a focus for educational activity if properly marked and documented. In particular, this site should be interpreted in relation to the other whaling sites in Albany, so that the over-all context of whaling history on the Western Australian coast can be appreciated.

(v) Recreational: The area is ideal for snorkelling, due to the ease of access and the clarity and depth of the water on the site.

(vi) Cultural: There is undoubted cultural significance in the remains of the whaling station.

(vii) Archaeological: The site has the potential to be included in a comparative study of whaling sites within Australia.

(viii) Rarity: The Norwegian Whaling Station is the most authentic example of a whaling station from the early 20th century in the Western Australia (and possibly in Australia).

(iv) Representativeness: The site and its associated machinery is representative of the level of the technological sophistication and efficiency developed by the Norwegian whaling industry in the early 20th century. This whaling stations served as a benchmark for the development of the Australian whaling industry in the 1950's and 1960's.

Discussion

The Norwegian Whaling Station is one of four 20th century whaling sites in Western Australia with substantial archaeological remains. The other sites are; Norwegian Bay Whaling Station at Point Cloates, Babbage Island, Carnarvon and the Albany Whaling Company, which was later taken over by Cheynes Beach Whaling Company. These sites should not be considered in isolation, but rather as a thematic archaeological resource that will enable researchers to document the evolution of whaling technology in Australia.

Recommendations

The options are:

- (i) Recommend that the site of the Norwegian Whaling Station, including the underwater remains, be gazetted as an Historic Site.
- (ii) Erect a marker at the site that will include suitable interpretive material.
- (iii) Initiate an archaeological survey, with provision for the rehabilitation of the excavated areas and the treatment, conservation and display of any artefacts recovered from the site.

Further Comments

Regardless of the outcome of the above, it is recommended that the site be more widely publicised as a reminder of an important era in the development of WA's regional centres. Further to this, the significance of the Norwegian Whaling Station in relation to the history of the whaling industry in general and Albany in particular should be highlighted in the displays at the Residency Museum in Albany.

Dena Garratt
Consulting Maritime Archaeologist
Maritime Archaeology Department
WA Maritime Museum

References

- Boocock, A., Bower, R., Coroneos, C., McKinnon, R., Marshall, G., 1990, *Survey of wrecks , Frenchman Bay, Albany*. Report - Department of Maritime Archaeology, Western Australian Museum, No. 50.
- Dakin, W., 1938, *Whalemen adventures*. Angus & Robertson, Sydney.
- Garden, D. S., 1977, *Albany: a panorama of the South from 1827*. Nelson, Melbourne.
- Johnson, G. L., 1979, *Albany and the whalers*. Albany Travel Centre, Albany.
- Le Page, J., 1986, *Building a state: The story of the Public Works Department*. Water Authority, Perth.
- Marshall, G. de L., 1994, *Maritime Albany remembered*. Albany Maritime Heritage Association.
- McIlroy, J., 1987, *Whaling stations survey 1987: sites south of Perth*. Unpublished Report, Western Australian Museum.
- Oleson, J. P., 1988, Technology of Roman harbours. *International Journal of Nautical Archaeology*, 17.2.
- Stanbury, M., 1984, *Norwegian Bay Whaling Station: an archaeological report*. Report, Department of Maritime Archaeology, Maritime Museum, No. 21.
- Western Australian Maritime Museum, File No. MA 22.80.
- Western Mail* 7/8/1952, p 4.