

Department of Maritime Archaeology Visit to Middle Island, Recherche Archipelago, Esperance, 29 April–4May 2001

Jeremy Green, Corioli Souter and Patrick Baker



Acknowledgments

This project was made possible with the assistance of the following Esperance residents:

Peter Brown	Skipper
Clive Trevan	Guide
Dot Andre	Esperance Museum
Merve Andre	Esperance Museum
Carole Barrett	Freelance Journalist
John Robertson	Historian
Graham Gath	Surveyor
Nick Brown	Surveying Assistant

Introduction

The purpose of this site inspection was to make a preliminary assessment of the extent of submerged and terrestrial archaeological on Middle Island. These include:

- a) *Investigator* Boatswain Charles Douglas grave (1803)
- b) SS Penguin salvaged cargo burial site (1920)
- c) Sealing/Salt workers camp (1820's)
- d) *Belinda* wreck inspection (1826)
- e) *Mary Ann* wreck inspection (1876)

Project background

Dot Andre, Curator of the Esperance Museum contacted the Museum in June 2000 seeking assistance with Middle Island investigations after the HMS *Investigator* boatswain's grave location was publicised in *The Esperance Express* and *The West Australian* in February 2000. She also requested assistance with the location of salvaged items from the SS *Penguin* shipwreck allegedly buried in the neighbouring dunes on Middle Island.

The Department of Maritime Archaeology carried out site inspections of all five sites from 30 April–3 May 2001 after an earlier inspection in December 2000 was aborted due to bad weather.

HMS Investigator Boatswain Charles Douglas Grave

Site history

This site was first mentioned by Mr Clive Trevan, who made an enquiry to the Museum in 1973, regarding an expedition to locate the memorial plaque marking *HMS Investigator* Boatswain Charles Douglas' grave on Middle Is, as described in Flinders journal. The Museum was then advised more recently of the site after the cross, erected by Mr Trevan to mark the alleged grave, was rediscovered by John Robertson, Ian Tarbotton and David McFall on 31 December 1999. This latest Museum inspection's aims were to relocate the grave and perform a visual and metal detector survey of the site for related surface material.

Mr Trevan also produced for inspection an incomplete demijohn that he recovered from the site in 1973.

Description of site

The site is located on the landward side of a steep dune, approximately 100 m inland, in the north eastern bay of Middle island, next to Flinder's Peak. The site is in a grove of trees, many fallen, with evidence of bush fire activity. The site is marked by a pile of beach worn rocks placed there by Mr Clive Trevan in 1973 in place of the former copper plaque marking the grave. The location of the original copper plaque is not known to the Museum. On top of the stones Mr Trevan erected an Oregon Pine cross, which he recently removed.

Site identification comments

A close plot metal detector survey and visual inspection was carried out in the immediate area of the stone mound in an area approximately 50 m x 50 m. No cultural or metal material was found on the surface and there was no indication of metallic material at depth.

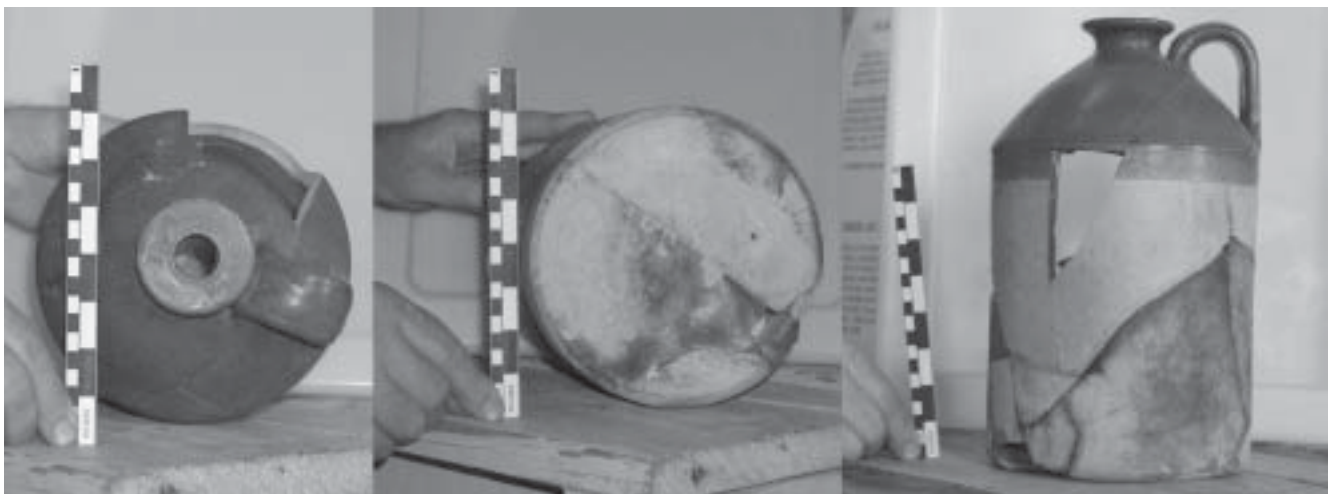
Assessment of site significance and management proposals



Mr Clive Trevan seated next to grave site cairn of stones.

The only evidence of a grave site per se are the stones and cross placed on site in more recent times by Mr Trevan. The ceramic demijohn is the only cultural material found on site relevant to the period in question and it is important to note that the vessel type is ubiquitous, being used throughout the nineteenth century. Further surface survey in the area is suggested only if more evidence defining the site as a grave, is found.

GPS Position: 34° 05.674 S 123° 11.467 E (WGS84).



Stoneware jar said to have come from the grave site area.

SS *Penguin* wreck site

The site of the SS *Penguin* was not inspected, however its GPS co-ordinates were taken and photographs of the site made. It is interesting to note how little the site has deteriorated since the early inspection of the site in 1977 (see photographs).

GPS position 34° 05.463 S 123° 12.436 E (WGS 84).



The *Penguin* in 1977.



The *Penguin* in 1989.



The *Penguin* in 1991.



The *Penguin* in 2001.

SS *Penguin* salvaged cargo burial site

Site history

The SS *Penguin* was built in 1897 by Palmers Co. Ltd. In Newcastle, UK. The SS *Penguin* registered 208 tons gross and was 120 ft in length, a beam of 24 ft 1 inch with a draught of 11 ft 4 inches. The vessel was purchased by the WA Government, Harbour and Lights Department and used for survey work, rescue and salvage operations. The SS *Penguin* was refitted in 1920 and refrigeration equipment installed before being sent to survey the Esperance archipelago and Bight. The vessel was wrecked off Middle Island 27 June 1920 while trying to shelter from a gale.

Salvage rights were obtained by Messrs Richards and Mackenzie in 1921, with salvage beginning in October that year. The salvors were picked up from Middle Island in January 1922 and the salvaged material removed soon after.

The wreck now consists of portions of the iron hull and engine machinery.

Mr Clive Trevan reported to the Museum that he knew the location of cargo from the wreck that had been buried in the neighbouring sand dunes. He reported seeing six cases of cargo including “(graphite) mixing vessels, size approx. 6” x 4.5” inches, a large heap of glass boiler tubes neatly stacked, ...spanners and various other tools” (letter to Mr Graeme Henderson 23/6/73) after bush fires had cleared the area, during his visit in 1973.

Site identification comments

A close plot metal detector, probe and visual survey were carried out on the slope, for 200 m east along the land ward side of the dune in the vicinity where Mr Trevan recalled seeing the cases. Glass sherds were observed in the area and the metal detector located parts of condenser piping in one area. An iron furniture (?) hook, rectangular ferrous object, and ferrous heavy duty hook were also discovered at the bottom of the slope. There were no indications of cases of cargo in the area searched.

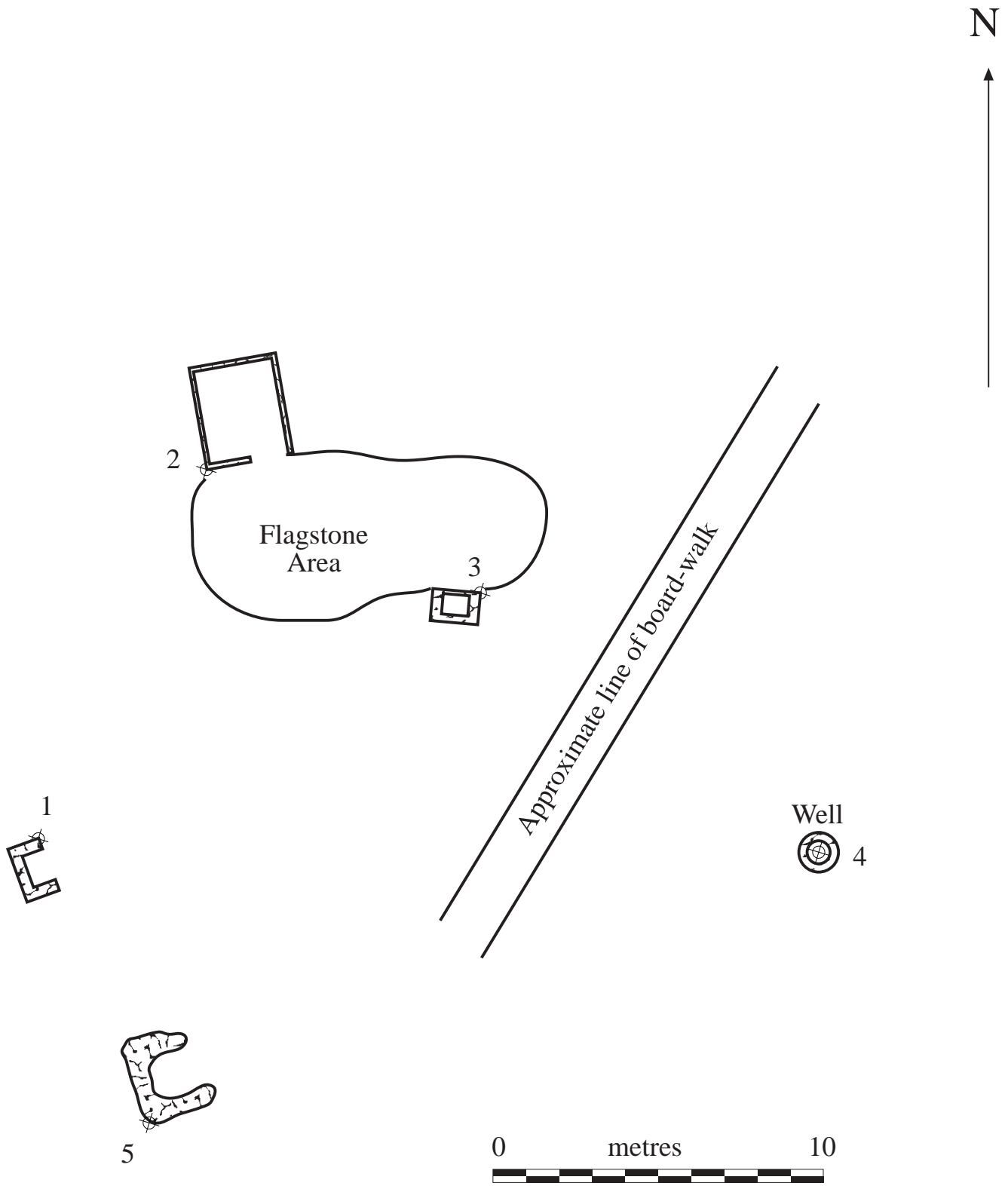
Assessment of site significance and management proposals

The topography in the area delineated by Mr Trevan had greatly changed since his visit of 1973, now being heavily forested. It is feasible that we were perhaps not in the correct area, bearing in mind, these visual changes in landscape. It is also possible that the cases have since been removed. If they were visible on the surface at the time of Mr Trevan’s visit it is possible that someone else has removed them. There is no evidence to suggest that the cases are in the area 200 m east of the SS *Penguin* wreck. The small metallic finds may be relevant to the wreck site, perhaps evidence of salvage operations in the area. It is also possible, however that these finds are not related to the site. Further surface survey may be carried out the area providing that it is non-disturbance.



Artefacts from the site of the cargo burial.

GPS position 34° 05.483 S 123° 12.498 E (WGS 84).



Plan of the building structures on Middle Island, note this does not include the Structure No. 6.



Structure No. 1, north side.



Structure No. 2 looking to north.



Structure No. 1, west side.



Structure No. 1, east side.

Possible sealing, whaling or salt-workers camp

Site history

American and French Whalers were known to be operating off the coast of Western Australia as early as 1803. Sealing was often carried out in conjunction with whaling and sealers had been collecting skins from the islands of the Recherche Archipelago as early as the 1820s. The notorious sealer "Black Jack" Anderson arrived during this period and established a camp on Middle Island. Sealing continued sporadically throughout the rest of the nineteenth century. It is possible that some of the hut remains on Middle Island were built and/or used by sealers in the nineteenth century, but there is not clear evidence to support this. Similarly, the camp may have been established and/or used by shore based whalers in the region.

The pink salt lake on Middle Island, called Hillier Lake in 1803, after a deceased seaman from the *Investigator*, was also exploited in the late nineteenth century. The salt collection activity was documented by TC Andrews, who was thirteen when he, his younger brother and his father, went to Middle Island to test the prospects of a salt industry. Andrews and his brother were left on the island for five months while their father returned to the mainland with a shipment of salt. The area where the Andrews' set up camp is understood to be where the stone structural remains are found today. The industry failed due to a variety of reasons including the toxicity of the salt collected for consumption. There are very few archaeological remains from the failed salt venture aside from the camp. Two areas of corroded tram tracks have been previously observed (Pearson 1988), one pile in a sand dune west of Belinda Beach, the other on the western shore of Pink Lake, where there was also remains of tram wheels and other iron fittings. It is assumed that a tramway was either intended or actually constructed to link the lake with the



Structure No. 3, north side.



Structure No. 4, well.



Structure No. 3, west side.

beach for the export of salt, although no documentary sources refer to this transport system.

Site identification comments

The structural remains surveyed on Middle Island consist of:

1. A stone 3 walled structure
2. A rectangular hut base with reconstructed stone walls and flagstone floor
3. Hearth
4. A stone lined circular well
5. Foundations of a stone 3 walled structure
6. Large two compartment hearth/oven

The site exhibits indications of excavation and 'beautification' with the reconstruction of structure walls, felling of trees in the flagstone area and excavation of the hearth.

Assessment of site significance and management proposals

The site is considered of high archaeological importance, considering that only minimal exploratory work has been carried out to date. (Smith Doctoral thesis, 1993), (Pearson, 1988), and (Bindoon, 1996). CALM are presently establishing board-walks to the site and it is considered timely to combine this work with a full survey and possible partial excavation to better define the archaeological resource before it is formally opened for tourism. Results of such a project would assist CALM with appropriate identification and signage associated with the site.



Structure No. 5, looking south.



Structure No. 6, looking north.



Interior of structure No. 6.

Site No	Lat	Long
No. 1	34° 05.555	123° 11.873
No. 2	34° 05.553	123° 11.872
No. 3	34° 05.555	123° 11.877
No. 4	34° 05.554	123° 11.885
No. 5	34° 05.567	123° 11.871
No. 6	34° 05.622	123° 11.845

***Belinda* wreck inspection**

Site history

The *Belinda* was built and registered at Yarmouth, UK in 1819. She was copper sheathed, had one deck, was built with iron knees and had a draught of 13 feet when fully loaded. She arrived in Hobart from Britain on 12 November 1832 and then after a 3 month stay continued to Sydney, to sell the remainder of her British cargo. On 17 May 1824, the *Belinda* sailed to the sealing grounds off the south coast of Western Australia. On her arrival a month later, she was wrecked near Middle Island in the Recherche Archipelago. The crew were saved, together with a small supply of provisions and two of the boats. After proceeding almost 200 miles towards Sydney one of these boats swamped near the shore. The crew of the swamped boat then began to trudge back again to Middle Island, attended offshore by the remaining boat. Fortunately, the brig *Nereus*, which had been sealing in the same area, came upon the survivors and returned them to Sydney in March 1825, after collecting 3500 seal skins from around Kangaroo Island. The schooner *Liberty* partially salvaged the *Belinda* a year later recovering a quantity of copper and iron and two anchors.

Site identification comments

Inspection of the site showed no indication of timber structure, although two concretions were noticed at the junction of the sand and the flat limestone-sandstone feature on the foreshore. It is possible that the site has been covered by sand.

Site conditions on Inspection:

Swell: nil
Visibility: good 3–8 m
Current: nil

Site Condition and Integrity:

The wreck lies at the eastern end of a sandy beach in 3-4 metres of water on a sand bottom. GPS 34° 05.405 S 123° 12.619 E (WGS84).

Assessment of site significance and management proposals

Signage in keeping with that designed for the CALM board-walk and settlement ruins.

***Mary Ann* wreck inspection**

Site history

The 104-ton topsail schooner *Mary Ann* was built at North West Bay in Tasmania in 1849, and was owned in Hobart during the early 1850s. She had one deck, two masts, and the dimensions 24.7 m x 5.9 m x 2.8 m. The mariner and grazier Captain James Dempster bought the schooner in 1868 and had her fitted out in Melbourne for the North West pearl fishery.

Mary Ann changed owners several times trading at ports between Fremantle and Singapore as well as having a short stint in the whaling industry before being purchased by Messrs Pearse and Owston in 1875. The vessel began conveying telegraph poles to the head of the Great Australian Bight for use in the construction of the Eucla telegraph line. In May 1876, the *Mary Ann* was engaged to take some officials and plant to Eucla. That task completed, the vessel left Israelite Bay on 12 July for Middle Island with the Captain deciding to anchor in the evening under the lee of Bellinger Island. The wind direction changed overnight, putting the *Mary Ann* on a lee shore. In attempt to set sail the following day the vessel would not cant and began to drag anchor close to shore. The sails were furled and extra cable let out to stop the vessel, but attempts to warp her further out to sea were unsuccessful. In the evening, a fresh north-easterly wind combined with a heavy swell to push the vessel ashore, dragging her anchor behind. The six crew and six passengers got to shore safely with their personal effects but the *Mary Ann* became a total wreck.

The site was previously inspected in 1993 (see Green 1993) following a report by Peter Miles. The present inspection again followed further information provided by Peter Miles (see file MA 9/96).

Site identification comments

Site conditions on Inspection:

Swell: moderate
Visibility: moderate
Current: nil

Site condition and Integrity:

not located

Conclusions and recommendations

This inspection has highlighted the rich maritime terrestrial archaeological resource that is related and complementary to the existing shipwrecks at Middle Island. Unfortunately there is no direct evidence for the terrestrial sites relating to the *HMS Investigator* and *SS Penguin* in the areas described by Mr Trevan.

The terrestrial site of primary interest to the Museum, is the sealers/whalers/salt workers camp especially in view that it exhibits evidence of interference by visitors. It had been previously noted that these sites could not readily withstand increased visitor pressure although this was unlikely to occur anyway given the isolation of the islands (Pearson 1988). This inspection indicates that the island does have a substantial visitation rate that should be managed accordingly. After discussions with CALM in Esperance during this expedition, it was suggested that the Museum, with the assistance of a terrestrial historical archaeologist would launch a survey project in association with CALM in April/May 2002. The objectives of such a combined project are to identify, describe and protect these sites as well as provide appropriate, uniform signage for all historical sites, including shipwrecks at Middle Island.

Bibliography

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