

**Voyage of the *Beagle* to Western Australia 1837-43  
and her commanders' knowledge of two VOC wrecks**

**Report to the Western Australian Museum**

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## Introduction

The writer was asked by the Western Australian Museum to advise on an aspect of the survey cruise of the *Beagle* around Australia between 1837 and 1843. The issue concerned was the knowledge and sources of that knowledge held by the commander of His Majesty's Surveying Sloop *Beagle*, John Wickham, and the vessel's senior Lieutenant John Stokes, about two merchant ships of the Verenigde Oost-Indische Compagnie (Dutch East India Company – the VOC) which were wrecked on the Houtman's Abrolhos, a large archipelago of coral islands and reefs off the coast of Western Australia.

The Western Australian Museum requested the writer to consider four questions:

1. When the *Beagle* left England in 1837 to carry out the survey, what information did Wickham and Stokes have about the *Batavia* and the *Zeewijk*?
2. Where did this information come from?
3. Are there any extant logs or journals which could give more information about their findings, particularly any notes about the ship's timbers discovered on 6 April 1840?
4. What did Wickham or Stokes or others with them record about the timbers they saw at Wreck Point?

## Research Methodology

The writer located and studied a number of manuscript and printed primary sources, and consulted secondary text sources, charts of the period, and several specialists in Admiralty and Hydrographer's Office collections, Dutch and British sea-charts of the Pacific area, and the early exploration of the coast of Australia. The sources are listed in detail at the end of this report. The ensuing information was then analysed for corroboration and contradictions and likely accessibility for Wickham and Stokes in 1837.

Among the archives consulted were the Admiralty Library at the Naval Historical Branch, Portsmouth, for charts and published accounts accessible to Wickham in 1837; the Caird Library, National Maritime Museum, Greenwich; the National Archives of England and Wales, Kew, London; the Library of the Royal Geographical Society, London, and the Library of Flinders University, Adelaide.

In order to indicate the vessels of which the people of the *Beagle* discovered wreckage at the Houtman's Abrolhos, an assessment of Dutch VOC charts and sailing instructions was undertaken. VOC ships sailing to the Dutch colony at Batavia after 1617 followed the Brouwer Route, sailing south from the Cape of Good Hope to encounter the prevailing westerly winds at roughly latitude 40 South (the "Roaring Forties") to sail eastwards for about 3800 nautical miles before bearing north by north east, which would bring them to a landfall along the coast of Java from which they could locate the Sunda Strait. Most of their long eastward leg out of sight of land would be estimated by dead reckoning and small mathematical errors put them in danger of being on a lee shore along the western coast of Australia. To judge what Wickham and Stokes may have known about wrecks on the Abrolhos, research was done into the movement of VOC ships including reference to publications, and it was found that there were some inaccuracies in some of these concerning distance run by VOC ships in this period. This arises from either a confusion of the archaic Dutch term "mijlen" or simple mathematical errors in converting mijlen to kilometres.

In discussing this issue below, the current writer has assumed that, unless otherwise stated, the Dutch charts of the Seventeenth and early Eighteenth centuries used "Hollandische" mijlen – the distance covered in "een uur gaans" ("an hour's walk"), about four English or statute miles – not "Duitse" (German) mijlen which were only one quarter of the distance (thus equivalent to one English mile), but which were also often shown on Dutch map scales and which were, and still are often confused with Dutch miles by English writers. This matters when analysing evidence concerning Dutch VOC ships which could have been wrecked on the Houtman's Abrolhos. In

assessing distances run the current writer has used a simple conversion of Dutch miles equivalent to four statute miles, 3.87 nautical miles, or 6.44 kilometres.<sup>2</sup>

**Manuscript Primary Sources consulted:**

TNA ADM 51/3055 Journal of Proceedings on board H.M.'s Sloop Beagle, J C Wickham Commander, volume 8 (1st January to 30th June 1840) ff 50v to 55r, April and May 1840, The National Archives.

John Lort Stokes' Lieutenant's Journal, HM Sloop Beagle, 25 February 1837 to 15 March 1841 (STK/1, 3 and 4), Caird Library.

L R Fitzmaurice's Midshipman's Journal, HM Sloop Beagle, January to June 1838, with coastal maps (STK/2), Caird Library.

The *Beagle's* Journal of Proceedings (the "Captain's Log") in the National Archives does not mention either *Batavia* or *Zeewijk* or the wreckage her officers found, and does not precisely state the locations of her various moorings during April and May 1840, when they were exploring the Houtman's Abrolhos and the adjacent mainland. The personal Journal of Proceedings kept by Stokes (now at the Caird Library) was essentially a copy of the official log, which it is possible he also wrote up from the watch notes (the hands are similar). It is sometimes different from the Captain's log but does not add anything to that log in respect of the *Beagle's* survey along the coast of Western Australia in 1840, and neither does the midshipman's journal kept by the Master's Mate (senior Midshipman) Laurence Fitzmaurice.

These entries are typical of both official logs for this period:

Monday April 6<sup>th</sup> [1840]

Noon Bearings and Distance:

AM South End of Houtman's Abrolhos N by 6°W 22 miles

5pm at Single Anchor under the South End of Houtman's Abrolhos

Sent boats sounding

Tuesday April 7<sup>th</sup> Boats employed sounding and surveying

Wednesday April 8<sup>th</sup> ↓

PM weighed and made plain sail to Eastward

Thursday April 9<sup>th</sup>

AM east running to north

Standing for Anchorage

↓ under Mount Fairfax

[the Captain's Journal has 'at Single Anchor under Point Moore, Champion Bay']

Friday 10<sup>th</sup> April

PM at Single Anchor off the North End of Houtman's Abrolhos

Thursday May 7<sup>th</sup> at Anchor among Houtman's Abrolhos

**Printed Primary Text Sources:**

Francis Pelsaert's account of the wreck of the *Batavia* was first published in 1629, in defence of his actions dealing with the notorious mutiny; this was republished in Dutch at Amsterdam 1647 and excerpts were given in English in John Harris, *Navigantium atque itinerantium bibliotheca, or A complete collection of voyages and travels* (1748 edition), and in John Pinkerton, *General Collection of the best and most interesting Voyages and Travels of the World*, 17 vols 1808-1814, both in the Admiralty Library by 1837; Pinkerton included Jan Steijns' account of the loss of the *Zeewijk*. These would have been available to Wickham and Stokes.

In the *Beagle* with Wickham and Stokes was a midshipman, Crawford Pasco, who published a collection of naval memoirs in 1897, *A Roving Commission: Naval Reminiscences*.<sup>3</sup> This

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<sup>2</sup> SI (système international d'unités) units have been used to convert nautical miles to kilometres (1NM = 1852metres), based on the tables of the Bureau International de Poids et Mesures.

included a detailed account of the discovery of ship's timbers on the southern Abrolhos. Although the book is now very rare in the United Kingdom, copies were consulted at the Caird Library, Greenwich and the Admiralty Library Royal Navy, at the Naval Historical Branch, Portsmouth.

#### **Manuscript and Printed Charts:**

The key charts consulted were:

- Admiralty Chart 1723 "The Houtman Rocks" (from the *Beagle*'s 1840 survey, published London 1845)
- Anonymous *Chart of the Houtman's Abrolhos with the location of the shipwreck of the Zeewijk* [two charts engraved under the separate direction of Jan Steijns and Adriaan de Graaff by anonymous cartographers in 1728]
- Emmanuel Bowen *A complete map of the Southern Continent... by order of the East India Company in Holland* (London 1744)
- Gerrard van Keulen *Hierdoor zijn wij Zee geraakt* (Amsterdam 1753)
- John Lort Stokes Survey map of the Pelsaert Group (1840)
- Melchisadech Thévenot *Hollandia Nova* (1663)

The availability of these charts to Wickham and Stokes and their relevance to the identity of the timbers found on the southern Abrolhos are discussed in more detail below.

#### **Exegesis : the wrecks of the *Batavia* and the *Zeewijk***

The two Dutch vessels concerned in this research were the *Batavia*, the flagship of the fleet commanded by the VOC merchant Francis Pelsaert, lost in 1629 on the northern Houtman's Abrolhos, and the *Zeewijk*, captain Jan Steijns, lost in 1727 on the southern Houtman's Abrolhos, known since the *Beagle*'s visit in 1840 as the Pelsaert Group. The Abrolhos, being very low in height above sea level and with substantial underwater coral reefs extending along their westward edges, constitute a significant hazard to shipping passing along the coast of western Australia.

The so-called Brouwer Route from the Cape of Good Hope to the Sunda Strait leading to Batavia, the capital of the Dutch East Indies colonies, took VOC ships close to western Australia, then almost unknown. The route was favoured for its advantages of a significantly shorter voyage, benefiting from strong prevailing westerlies in open waters, and more time in cooler climes enabling food and water to keep fresh for longer. The instructions for this route (the "Seynbrief", introduced in 1617) were simple – from their revictualling station at the Cape of Good Hope 'set due south to the regions with continuous blowing westerly winds', then 'after the west winds have been found the ships should sail eastwards for at least a thousand mijlen before turning and laying their course for the north'.<sup>4</sup> In practical terms this can be roughly understood as: 'sail due south to latitude 40° South, bear east and sail 3870 nautical miles, turn onto a heading NNE for Sunda Strait approximately 1750 nautical miles'. The turning point north was roughly at longitude 102° East, which would give a clear run to Sunda Strait.

The apparent simplicity of these instructions was potentially deadly as location in that period was largely determined by dead reckoning, notoriously inaccurate before the age of accurate charts and reliable marine chronometers. A small error in the arithmetical calculation, or in handling the

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<sup>3</sup> Crawford Pasco, *A Roving Commission: naval reminiscences* (Melbourne 1897) pages 116-117; Commander Crawford Aitchison Denman Pasco, FRGS, born Plymouth, Cornwall, England 1818, died 1898 at St Kilda, Melbourne, Victoria, Australia; he was the son of Lieutenant (later Rear-Admiral) John Pasco, Nelson's signals officer at Trafalgar

<sup>4</sup> The Brouwer Route is summarised briefly by Günter Schilder (*Indische Zee* undated), Rupert Gerritsen (2008) page 8, and by Nonja Peters (2011); Dr Peters converts 1000 Dutch miles to 7300kms, making one Dutch mile nearly five statute miles, rather brisk walking for one hour! 1000 Dutch miles are approximately 4000 statute miles, equivalent to 6440 kms or 3870 nautical miles

distance-run logline, or in reading off the latitude at the daily noon observations would accumulate over the 40 days or so of the run east along the Brouwer Route. An error of a little less than 400 nautical miles in the distance run eastwards – just 10 miles a day – would bring a northbound ship on a course very close to the mainland of western Australia and its offshore islands and reefs.<sup>5</sup> By the end of the Seventeenth century several ships had been lost on the Abrolhos archipelago or the mainland shore, and VOC merchant commanders and ship skippers were instructed to head north by east earlier – after reaching the westerlies ‘sail 850 mijlen to the east and then steer the bow north towards Sunda Strait’.<sup>6</sup> This avoided crossing the latitudes between 29° and 28° South, where the Abrolhos lay, too far eastwards but it appears that this standing instruction was ignored by several commanders and sailing masters, including Jan Steijns, the skipper of the *Zeewijk*, and his stuurman (second navigating officer) Adriaan de Graaff.<sup>7</sup>

In early April 1840, while exploring ashore at the south-eastern end of the southern group of the Houtman’s Abrolhos, Commander Wickham and Lieutenant Stokes of the *Beagle* found large timbers and other maritime artefacts, apparently from a wrecked European ship. They named this place Wreck Point, and assuming the timbers came from the *Batavia*, they named the archipelago for Pelsaert, and their current anchorage Batavia Roads. This mistake indicates that in 1840 the location of the *Batavia* shipwreck was not known, at least not by Stokes, Wickham and their advisors, Lieutenant John Roe, Surveyor-General of Western Australia, Captain Philip Parker King then living at Sydney, and Captain, later Rear-Admiral, Francis Beaufort, Hydrographer of the Royal Navy from 1829 to 1855. The wreck of the *Batavia* would not be located until the 1960s.

In fact, the *Batavia* was wrecked on Morning Reef, on the south-eastern edge of the northern islands of the Abrolhos known as the Wallabi Group. What Wickham and Stokes saw at Wreck Point is as yet unidentified; of the 11 vessels known to have been lost on the coast of Western Australia before 1840, only *Zeewijk* is known with certainty to have been wrecked in the southern Abrolhos. It is possible that the large timbers they recorded seeing came from the *Zeewijk*, having been swept down the coast by the Leeuwin Current along the western reefs. The timbers may have come from the *Sardam*, the longboat of the *Batavia* sent out to retrieve specie and other lost items from the *Batavia* and not seen again, which may have been swept down from the eastern reefs of the Wallabi Group to the southern Abrolhos. Much more likely is that it was wreckage from one of the lost VOC ships whose locations have not been confirmed, such as the small “huiker” *Zeelt* (1672), or the large “spiegelretourschips” *Ridderschap van Holland* lost in 1694, the *Fortuyn* (1724) or the *Aagtekerke* (1726). The annotations on van Keulen’s “secret” VOC chart of 1753, and Pasco’s letter and memoirs indicate that the wreckage was from a large ship, so if they were not from one of the VOC retourschips they will be from an unrecorded shipwreck, possibly (somewhat fancifully) even a Portuguese vessel from an earlier century.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>5</sup> Based on a reasonable average speed of four knots for an uncareened sailing ship of this waterline length at this date, an approximate daily distance of just under 100 nautical miles would take a large VOC ship about 40 days for the eastward run; a putative error of 400 miles may seem large but navigating officers in Sir Cloudesley Shovell’s fleet sailing in well-charted waters made average errors of 40 miles each day over 22 days of dead reckoning leading to the loss of four ships in 1707 – see Justin Reay, ‘The Brave Rough English Admiral’ in *The Trafalgar Chronicle* (October 2009), and Commander W E May, ‘The Last Voyage of Sir Cloudesley Shovel’ in *Journal of Navigation* (July 1960) pages 324-332

<sup>6</sup> Günter Schilder, “*Indische Zee – Gelygradige Paskaart*” : *A Cartographical Rarissima of the Dutch East India Company* (Leen Helmink, undated); the vellum chart of 1730 by Abraham Anais which Professor Schilder discusses indicates that the Brouwer Route was also followed for voyages to Ceylon (Sri Lanka) with a 700 mijlen run to the east before turning due north

<sup>7</sup> The standing instruction to VOC voyage commanders and ship skippers regarding avoiding the west coast of Australia is mentioned in several accounts, notably P A Leupe, *De Houtman’s Abrolhos* (1857), quoted in extenso in R H Major, *Early Voyages to Australia* (1859)

<sup>8</sup> Consideration of the locations of the VOC ships mentioned here lie outside the current research and has been extensively discussed, by Jeremy Green of the WAM among others; they are named here to indicate

jeremy green 17/12/2012 12:41 PM

**Comment [1]:** The writer is confused here. The longboat was probably from the *Sardam*

A letter from the Governor of Batavia to the Gentlemen Seventeen (the senior council) of the VOC in 1728 posits that timbers seen by the crew of the *Zeewijk* in the southern Abrolhos after their own shipwreck may have been from the *Fortuyn* or the *Aagtekerke*.<sup>9</sup> However, given the apparent age of the timbers recorded by the *Zeewijk*'s skipper, the *Ridderschap van Holland* appears to be the most likely candidate.<sup>10</sup> Why the Governor does not mention the *Ridderschap* as a possibility is strange; it may be that the very recent losses of the other ships was to the front of his mind.

A few weeks after their survey of the south-eastern islands and reefs of the Pelsaert Group, Wickham and Stokes correctly identified the site of the encampment of the surviving ship's company from the *Zeewijk*, items from which were found on an islet inside the western reef of the southern Abrolhos which they named Gun Island, having found a 4-pounder brass gun there, one of the *Zeewijk*'s six rail-mounted swivel guns, with its muzzle still showing signs of decorative gilding.

The *Beagle* later surveyed the Wallabi Group of islands, the northern Abrolhos, and the men spent some time ashore; they did not find any remains of the *Batavia*, which was wrecked on a reef in this archipelago, her ship's company and supernumeraries spending several months on its small islands before most of them were rescued.

#### **Information available to Wickham and Stokes in 1837**

John Clements Wickham and John Lort Stokes were experienced marine surveyors. Wickham had sailed as second Lieutenant to Captain Fitzroy during the celebrated second ("Darwin") voyage of the *Beagle*, and Stokes would spend nearly 18 years of his life in the small survey sloop, first as a Midshipman, then Master's Mate, second Lieutenant, senior Lieutenant and lastly from 1841 as commander when Wickham had to return to England due to ill-health. Wickham retired early from the Service to take an important political post in the nascent Australian colonial service, while Stokes would rise to be a Rear-Admiral after a long career in the hydrographic service. During the period of the *Beagle*'s third voyage neither held the naval rank of Captain but by long tradition were referred to as such when they were successively in command of the vessel. In addition to his competence as a cartographer Stokes was an accomplished topographical artist and several of his sketches from the voyage survive, none of which cast light on the current issue.

It is clear that Wickham, and probably also Stokes, had been well briefed during the three months in 1837 it took to prepare *Beagle* for the ensuing survey voyage. The vessel was being extensively refitted and provisioned at Woolwich, just a few miles downriver from the Admiralty complex in Westminster, and although their presence in the dockyard would be important and almost constantly required, it would be common practice for her commander and his senior Lieutenant to attend meetings with the Lords Commissioners, the Secretary to the Board and – perhaps most frequently and importantly for a voyage intended to extend the survey of Australia and its environs – with Captain, later Rear-Admiral, Francis Beaufort, the Hydrographer of the Navy from 1829 to 1855.

Prior to sailing from Woolwich, Wickham was given detailed Orders from the Admiralty Board and a set of instructions by Beaufort. In his account published in 1848, Stokes reprints the Orders

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the breadth of candidates for the timbers found by the *Beagle* in 1840; the Netherlands-based DeVOCSite website lists the *Ridderschap van Holland* (listed under 'H') as being lost on the Abrolhos

<sup>9</sup> Leupe in Major (1859), page 182

<sup>10</sup> It has been asserted that this ship was lost to pirate action off the coast of Madagascar; this is unlikely – given that her skipper, Dirk van Lange, would have made a course from the Cape of Good Hope along the Brouwer Route well south of the east coast pirates, and at 580 lasten (1100 tons) and well-armed as all Amsterdam VOC ships were, she would have been a formidable opponent for any pirate ship

from the Admiralty, signed by two Lords Commissioners and the Admiralty Secretary John Barrow on 8 June 1837, and Beaufort's Instructions, amongst which are these notes:

'At Swan River [the Swan River Settlement, founded in 1829] you will have *previously* [my italics] learnt from Lieutenant Roe, the Surveyor-General, whether the above-mentioned rocks off Kangaroo Island, have been again seen, or their position altered, since Captain Brockman's first description, so as to save your time in the search.

...

'You will no doubt obtain from that intelligent officer, Lieutenant Roe, much important information respecting the north-west coast, as well as all the detached intelligence, which during his long residence there he must have collected, relating to every part of the shores of New Holland.'

Lieutenant John Septimus Roe would have known about the Dutch shipwrecks but was unlikely to have known the location of the *Batavia*. Roe was not in England when the *Beagle* was preparing for this voyage so the note in Beaufort's instructions is intriguing. How, when and to what degree Roe communicated with Wickham is still unknown, but it is likely to have been at the Swan River colony, which the *Beagle* visited in 1838 and again in 1840. The word "previously" might have indicated that Wickham consulted Roe before the date of Beaufort's note of 1837, but careful reading of the section prior to this extract (and experience of late Georgian official syntax!) seems to indicate that Beaufort means to say that they will have information from Roe concerning the rocks off Kangaroo Island (which he had instructed Wickham to survey) before they went there – that is, when they would see him at Swan River. Beaufort recommends Wickham not to approach Kangaroo Island until he had spoken with Roe. This still tells us nothing about what Roe knew about the two VOC ships and what he imparted to Wickham and Stokes about them prior to their discovery of the timbers at Wreck Point.

Beaufort continues in his instructions:

'At Sydney you will have the advantage of seeing Captain P.P. King, whose long experience of all those coasts, as well as of the seasons, and of the manner of dealing with the inhabitants, will be of the utmost use to you...'

Philip Parker King, an experienced surveyor and an old shipmate, may also have given the *Beagle*'s officers information about the wrecks on the Houtman's Abrolhos. There are two letters from King to Stokes in the Caird Library collection. One, written in September 1839, deals with soundings in the Sydney Bay area and indicates that King's own soundings may differ from those to be taken by Stokes and that in such a case Stokes should ignore King's earlier work. Unfortunately the other letter, dated August 1839, is not currently available for research as it is undergoing long-term conservation.

#### ***Access to charts***

In the introduction to his published narrative of the voyage, Stokes provides a clue as to the source of much of their information:

'I cannot allow these volumes to go before the public, without expressing my thanks to the following gentlemen for assistance, afforded to me in the course of the composition of this work: To Captain Beaufort, R.N., F.R.S., Hydrographer to the Admiralty, for his kindness in furnishing me with some of the accompanying charts...'

While this clearly relates to the reproduction of charts in Stokes' publication, it also indicates that the Hydrographer had ready access to them and was prepared to make them available. Beaufort knew how important such information would have been for the voyage itself.

There were several British charts showing the Houtman's Abrolhos but not the wreck sites of the *Batavia* or the *Zeewijk*, notably Aaron Arrowsmith's map of Australasia published in 1812. In 1744 Emanuel Bowen published a re-engraving of Melchisadech Thévenot's map of "Hollandia

Nova” including the earlier cartographer’s annotations and inaccuracies; Thévenot made his map from Joan Blaeu’s *Archipelagus Orientalis sive Asiaticus* published in 1659, although he claimed to have copied it from the map inlaid in the floor of the Amsterdam Town Hall, itself based on Blaeu’s simpler map of 1648.<sup>11</sup> Neither Blaeu nor Thévenot indicate the location of the wreck of the *Batavia* or even note Pelsaert’s loss. In a long note on the top right corner of his engraving of the map, Bowen makes this interesting claim:

‘This Map is very exactly Copied from the Original and therefore the Dutch Names have been preserved that if hereafter any Discoveries should ever be Attempted all the places mentioned may be readily found in the Dutch Charts which must be procured for such a Voyage. The Reader is desired to observe that nothing is marked here but what been Actually discovered ...’<sup>12</sup>

By the Houtman’s Abrolhos (mis-spelt in all versions of this chart ‘Abrolhols’ or ‘Abrolkols’) in Bowen’s version this note appears: ‘Here Capt. Pelsart was wrecked’ which may indicate that Bowen had seen other charts apart from Thévenot’s, or at least had read an account, but there is no mention of the *Zeewijk*. Several Dutch and French maps of the area after 1728 did show the *Zeewijk* site quite accurately and sometimes noted the loss of the *Batavia* without indicating a position.

Amongst these was Gerard van Keulen’s so-called “secret” VOC chart of 1753, *Hierdoor zijn wij Zee geraakt* which includes a detailed, annotated chart of the southern Houtman Abrolhos showing the wreck of the *Zeewijk* and annotations by several places of interest mentioning timbers (“balken” and “planken”) from at least one other ship at various points inside the reef and also, tellingly, at the southernmost point which Wickham named Wreck Point in 1840; these other wreckage sites probably derive from Jan Steijns’ account of the *Zeewijk*’s loss and discoveries from the time his people spent foraging on the archipelago.

Van Keulen’s very important chart offers clues as to the wreckage found by the *Beagle*’s people and confirms its age which Pasco notes in his memoirs. However, this chart is not recorded as being in the Admiralty’s collections in 1837 according to the Admiralty Library’s first catalogue of 1859 (although it may have been in Beaufort’s or Barrow’s personal collections), so it is possible that Wickham and Stokes were referred to other Dutch charts, especially as their discovery of the timbers at Wreck Point seems to have a surprise to them, which it would not have been if they had seen van Keulen’s annotations. These other charts might have included any of four charts which mark the wreck of the *Zeewijk*, the two created for Steijns and by her second navigating officer Adriaan de Graaff and engraved under their separate direction by two anonymous cartographers in 1728, and and two later charts based on those, by Andries Anais in 1730 and Gerrit de Haan in 1761.<sup>13</sup>

On the island by which the *Beagle* anchored between 6 and 9 April 1840, annotations by van Keulen indicate wreckage from a large ship, including part of a deck crane, the wooden shoe of a pump and a wheel on an axle – depending in its size this could have been part of a windlass or from the truck of a cannon. Further south, close to the place Wickham later named Wreck Point, van Keulen records:

‘Balken van een Schip gevonden met bouten daar in.’

‘The beams of a ship were found here with bolts in them’

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<sup>11</sup> From ‘Bowen, Thomas’, *Dictionary of National Biography* (1885–1900)

<sup>12</sup> Emanuel Bowen, *A complete map of the Southern Continent... by order of the East India Company in Holland* (London 1744)

<sup>13</sup> In Schilder *Grote Atlas* volume III, pp402-3



This annotation is taken from the map produced in 1728 from Jan Steijn's draft, which had the note "Dit is opgraaf van de Schipper Jan Steijns syn observatie". This earlier map has the annotation:

'Hier balken gevonden en stuccke van planken v. een Schip.'  
'Here beams were found attached to planks from a ship.'

The word "ship" is used for a large vessel, and the wreckage so noted implies part of a ship's deck broken apart in a collision nearby rather than debris swept from a distance.

Jennifer Wraight, the Admiralty Librarian Royal Navy, confirms that in 1837 the Admiralty did have charts – or to be accurate, small reproductions of charts – showing *Zeewijk*'s position in the Abrolhos, and various published accounts of the loss of the *Batavia* including Pelsaert's own account. These were in these volumes, which Wickham and Stokes had the opportunity to access at the Admiralty:

Melchisedech Thévenot, *Relations de divers voyages curieux* (1663);  
John Harris, *Voyages and Travels* (originally published in 1705) - the later editions of 1748 and 1764 contain charts showing the *Zeewijk*'s last position;  
John Pinkerton, *Early Australian voyages* (1808-18).

Thévenot republished, in French, Pelsaert's original account in Dutch of the loss of the *Batavia*; his accompanying chart of Hollandia Nova in the Admiralty's copy is annotated in French manuscript, with a translation by Alexander Dalrymple, the first Hydrographer of the Navy from 1795 to 1808; as noted above, this map is based on Blaeu's map of 1653 and does not include a reference to Pelsaert.

The Admiralty's copies of Harris' *Voyages and Travels* (the expanded editions 1748 and 1764 which translated into English Thévenot's version of Pelsaert's account of the wreck of the *Batavia*, but makes no mention of the later loss of the *Zeewijk*), were held in the First Lord's Library at Admiralty House. R H Major in *Early Voyages to Australia* (Hakluyt Society 1859), states that the account of the loss of the *Batavia* in Harris was 'loosely and incorrectly translated', a judgment with which the current writer concurs; Major gives a complete and correct translation. On reading Thévenot it is clear that a reader in 1837 with access to that volume and conversant with French would have gained a fairly clearly idea of the situation, and competent mariners familiar with the Houtman's Abrolhos – as Wickham and Stokes would become by 1840 – could even have hazarded a guess as to the correct location of the *Batavia* shipwreck. This is an extract from Major's accurate translation of Thévenot's version of Pelsaert's account:

'In Thévenot's *Recueil de divers Voyages curieux*, 1663, is given an account, translated from the Dutch, of the shipwreck of the *Batavia*, Captain Francis Pelsart, in the night of June 4, 1629, on the reef still known as Houtman's Abrolhos, lying between 28° and 29° S. lat., on the west coast of Australia... At daylight, the shipwrecked sailors saw an island at about three leagues distance, and still nearer, two islets, to which the passengers with some of the crew were sent. As no fresh water was found on these islets, Pelsart put to sea on the 8th of June, in one of the boats which he had had covered with a deck, and sailed to the main land for the purpose of seeking water. He found his latitude at noon to be 28° 13' south.'<sup>14</sup>

It is not clear from Admiralty Library records where their copy of Thévenot was kept but it would have been made available to any officer requiring it. While the First Lord's copies of Harris would also have been made available to Royal Navy commanders commissioned to a voyage in distant waters, Wickham and Stokes had easier access to John Pinkerton's more accurate 17-volume *General Collection of the Best and Most Interesting Voyages* (first edition

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<sup>14</sup> Major (1859), pages lxxxix and xc

1808-1814). This was held in the Hydrographer's Room in the (Old) Admiralty Office (now known as the Ripley Building, 27 Whitehall), and was therefore to hand for Beaufort's planning meetings with Wickham.<sup>15</sup> In *Early Australian Voyages*, the eleventh volume of Pinkerton's work, there is a reference to the *Batavia* 'being driven on to the Abrolhos or shoals being in the latitude of 28 degrees'.<sup>16</sup> In the account of Péron's voyage on page 785 there is corroboration: 'after making the isle of Rottneest we bore away north west by north to avoid the Abrolhos of Houttman fearfully famous for the shipwreck of Pelsart'. There is no reference to the *Zeewijk* in that or any of the other chapters in Pinkerton.

Another line of enquiry was the possibility of mention of the wrecks on the Abrolhos in Matthew Flinders' account of his voyage to Australia, or in John Barrow's notes for his introduction to that narrative. Advice from the various experts at Flinders University contacted by the writer indicate that Flinders did not mention any VOC ships in his published or manuscript accounts, and of course he was not himself concerned with the coast of Western Australia in his post-voyage account.

### **The discovery of timbers on the Southern Abrolhos:**

#### ***Stokes' account:***

When on 6 April 1840 Wickham and Stokes discovered timbers from a ship when they landed on the south-easternmost point of the southern Abrolhos, they assumed they came from the *Batavia*, a VOC ship which was lost on her maiden voyage in 1629. The assumption was made at the point of discovery as they already knew about the loss of the *Batavia* on the reefs of this archipelago from the charts they had seen in London prior to sailing, and they also knew that the loss of the *Batavia* had been mentioned by the crew of the *Zeewijk*, which was herself wrecked on the reefs of the southern Abrolhos group in 1727. In his narrative of the *Beagle*'s voyage Stokes records:

'On the south west point of the island the beams of a large vessel were discovered, and as the crew of the *Zeewyk*, lost in 1728 [sic], reported having seen the wreck of a ship on this part, there is little doubt that the remains were those of the *Batavia*, Commodore Pelsart, lost in 1627 [sic]. We in consequence named our temporary anchorage *Batavia Road*, and the whole group *Pelsart Group*. It was the wreck of this Dutch ship that led to the discovery of this part of the continent of Australia, Commodore Pelsart himself having crossed over to it in a boat in search of water.'

This mis-identification of the wreck based on the account of the crew of the *Zeewijk* shows that Wickham and Stokes knew that the remains could not be of the *Zeewijk* herself, indicating that they knew where the wreck of that ship should be found, probably from the earlier charts of which almost certainly they had tracings from the Admiralty's Hydrographer's Office. On 24 April they correctly identified items from the survivors of the *Zeewijk* wreck on what they then named Gun Island, and they named the adjacent channel between the Pelsart and Easter groups of the Abrolhos for the *Zeewijk* (usually spelt 'Zeewyk' in English-language accounts). This seems to indicate that Wickham and Stokes had seen at least one of the several Dutch charts showing the correct location of the wreck of the *Zeewijk*.

Captain of Marines P.A. Leupe, in his small book *De Houtman's Abrolhos*, gives a useful excerpt from the formal notification to the VOC of the wreck of the *Zeewijk* by its commander, Jan Steijns:

'I have had the good fortune to find among the papers of the late East India Company, what was written by the Government of Batavia about the loss of the ship *Zeewijk* to the directors at home, together with a map made by the skipper Jan Steyns, while on these shoals.

<sup>15</sup> Jennifer Wraight, Admiralty Librarian Royal Navy, in discussion with the writer, October 2012

<sup>16</sup> Pinkerton 1808-1814 volume XI page 428

*“To the Directors of the Assembly of the Seventeen, etc.*

*“On the 26th of April a letter unexpectedly came to hand by the patchialang De Veerman, from the late skipper and under-merchant of the Zeeland ship Zeewijk, Jan Steijns and Jan Nibbens, written from the Straits of Sunda, but without date communicating the fact that this vessel, after leaving the Cape of Good Hope on the 21st. of April, had been wrecked, on the 9th of June, on the reef lying before the islands Frederick Houtman's Abrolhos, situated near the Southland, in S. lat. 29°, and otherwise called the Tortelduyff's Islands.”*<sup>17</sup>

Steijns' report includes an intriguing note by the Governor, which shows not only that there were remains of a ship on the southern Abrolhos before the loss of the *Zeewijk*, but that there was common awareness amongst the Dutch that it would not be of the *Batavia*:

‘The position of the islands against the most outlying reef of which the *Zeewyk* was wrecked, is shown by the accompanying maps. They lie out of sight of the Southland, and are partly overgrown with some edible wild plants. On them were found not only some excavated wells, but also some signs of a Dutch ship, probably wrecked against the above-mentioned reef, which might have been the *Fortuyn* or *Aagtekerke*, whose crew may have died or perished at sea on their way hither. This also seems to have been the fate of the boat of the *Zeewyk*, which, under the command of the upper-steersman Pieter Langeweg, with eleven common sailors and the papers of the Company, had set out for this port shortly after the wreck of the ship, in order to give information of the mishap and to ask for assistance. Up to this time nothing has been heard of it.’<sup>18</sup>

The Admiralty chart published in 1845 from the *Beagle*'s surveys shows the position of the *Zeewyk* almost exactly where the original Dutch charts based on the maps produced by Steijns and de Graaff indicate the wreck on the Half Moon Reef, which again may indicate that Wickham and Stokes had copies of the Dutch charts while they were surveying, as by 1840 there were no remains of the ship at the wreck site when they surveyed the archipelago. Stokes' original chart from his survey of 1840, from which the Admiralty chart of 1845 was produced, has this note by Wreck Point: “Probably on this part of the reef Commodore Pelsart was wreck'd in the *Batavia* (1629)”. This slight hedging may indicate that Stokes was not convinced that the timbers at Wreck Point were from Pelsaert's ship, although he and Wickham had been happy to name this part of the island for that commander and his ship.

Close reading of Stokes' 1848 account casts a small level of doubt on the view that he had copies of Dutch charts:

‘In the morning the boats were despatched on their ordinary work, and Captain Wickham and myself landed on the largest island, a quarter of a mile long, forming the north-western extreme of Pelsart Group, and which we named Gun Island, from our finding on it a small brass four-pounder of singular construction... and two Dutch doits, bearing date 1707 and 1720. This was a very interesting discovery, and left no doubt that we had found the island on which the crew of the *Zeewyk* were wrecked, in 1727, and where they remained so long, whilst building, from the fragments of their vessel, a sloop, in which they got to sea by the passage between Easter and Pelsart Groups, which has consequently been called *Zeewyk Passage*. The scene of their disaster must have been on the outer reef, a mile and three-quarters south-west from Gun Island, along which ran a white ridge of high breakers.’

<sup>17</sup> Leupe in Major (1859) pp180-182; the Tortelduyff's Islands are not in the Abrolhos archipelago and Stokes' journal records searching for these islands on their way to survey the Abrolhos; in his published account of the voyage he states that they did not find them where they were recorded as being – 22 miles south-west of the southern Abrolhos – another indication that the *Beagle*'s officers had access to Dutch accounts and charts

<sup>18</sup> Leupe in Major (1859) p 182

The phrase “The scene of their disaster *must have been* on the outer reef...” might imply that Stokes was not sure where it was and thus may not have seen the Dutch charts. However, this could as easily be the experienced maritime surveyor’s wariness of early charts, relying instead on his own observation and experience.

In his narrative of the *Beagle*’s third voyage Stokes incorrectly states that the Dutch had not landed on the Wallabi group, despite Pelsaert himself recording in his account *Ongeluckige voyage van ’t schip Batavia* (*The Unlucky Voyage of the Vessel Batavia*) – written in 1629, published at Amsterdam in 1647 and reprinted or quoted several times during the 17th and 18th centuries – the first known description of marsupials, which he had encountered during his time in those islands. Stokes himself shot several wallabies in these islands, on one of which he named Slaughter Point.

#### **Pasco’s account**

The reminiscences of his long naval career published by Crawford Pasco in 1897 carried more information on the discovery of the timbers at Wreck Point than in Stokes’ account of the voyage, and also indicated that knowledge of the *Batavia* and *Zeewijk* shipwrecks was common in the *Beagle* and that the finds were considered noteworthy. Long before he published his reminiscences Pasco wrote to a Dutch naval officer, Captain Wipff:<sup>19</sup>

‘Finding anchorage for our ship at the S.E. part of the southern group, near to a narrow strip of sand on the edge of the reef, which was scarcely large enough to be called an island, we found on it some remains of large timber, evidently a beam of a ship, through it an iron bolt of considerable dimensions; but corrosion had gone on so steadily so many years, that the slightest touch reduced it to the size of small wire. Near this were found various other fragments, which most probably had been part of the same vessel; but the most remarkable item was a copper coin of the East India N. Company, a doit bearing the date 1620 (I think), which was good evidence that these were some of the remains of commodore Pelsart, in the ship *Batavia*. ‘So the anchorage which we occupied was named by us Batavia Roads, and that particular group Pelsart’s Group.

‘On another island at the west side of the same group we found many other relics of more recent date, among which another doit, which was dated 1700, which we concluded marked the position of the loss of the *Zeewijk* in 1720. On this island we found a large number of small glass bottles, about the size and form of a Dutch cheese, very orderly arranged in rows on the ground; a few very large glass bottles of similar form; some large brass buckles which had been gilded, and much of the gilt still existed. Numerous small clay pipes, which served to solace our crew with the help of tobacco, as doubtless they had done long ago for former owners. And one brass gun, about three pounds calibre, with a iron swivel, the iron, however, was diminished by corrosion to nearly nothing; it had a moveable chamber for loading it, which was fitted for a square hole, on the upper part of the gun near the breech. But what was most remarkable about it was that vermilion paint was still on the muzzle. The island on which this was found we called Gun Island, and the passage between the Pelsart Group and the middle one was called Zeewyk Channel.’<sup>20</sup>

Pasco probably recorded the finds at the time, perhaps in his Midshipman’s journal, as his recall in this letter is good and his reminiscences many years later are still quite detailed, although he gets a few facts wrong (‘Captain Pelsart, when seeking the “Great South Land” in the ship *Batavia*...’); unfortunately Pasco’s personal log is not recorded in any British archive.

<sup>19</sup> Letter from “Crawford Pako” to Captain Wipff, August 1853, reprinted in Leupe’s pamphlet in Major (1859), pp178-179

<sup>20</sup> Crawford Pasco, *A Roving Commission*, 1897, pp116-117

## Conclusion:

In respect of the knowledge held by Commander Wickham and Lieutenant Stokes before they embarked from Woolwich in 1837, amongst the diverse plethora of information they would have needed for this complex voyage in distant waters, it is highly probable they had accessed Pelsaert's account of the *Batavia* as it was published in English in volume XI of John Pinkerton's *Voyages and Travels* (1818). It is probable that Beaufort would also have made Thévenot's accurate translation into French of Pelsaert's original account available and that at least one of the three would have had a good enough command of French to be able to read it; Wickham retired to France towards the end of his life.

Their more detailed knowledge of the *Zeewijk* including an accurate awareness of the position of her wreck-site, probably came from at least one of the Dutch charts of the Western Australian coast made in the middle of the Eighteenth century, originally kept closely guarded by the VOC and the Dutch navy but by the third decade of the Nineteenth century – when the VOC itself was defunct – more freely available. As Captain Mike Barritt puts it, by the 1830s there was considerable sharing of maritime information between allied nations after the Napoleonic Wars.<sup>21</sup> However, there was still a degree of commercial rivalry, as this sentence in the Admiralty's Orders to Wickham indicates, in relation to his intended exploration of the northern edge of the Torres Strait and the islands of New Guinea:

‘The nature of the country, as well as of its products, will also be inquiries of considerable interest; and you will, perhaps, be able to learn whether the Dutch have made any progress in forming settlements along its shores; and if so, you will take especial care not to come into collision with any of their authorities.’

Even given this, it is probable that traced copies of the earlier Dutch charts of the waters in which she would sail, including at least one chart of the dangerous Houtman's Abrolhos, was given to the *Beagle*'s officers from the Admiralty's collection. This was probably at the instigation of Francis Beaufort, who gave Wickham detailed instructions at the outset of the *Beagle*'s voyage and who had given much time and thought to the purpose and preparation of Wickham's commission. As van Keulen's chart clearly shows the location of large wreckage on the south-eastern end of the southern Abrolhos, and the timbers appear to have been something of a surprise to the men of the *Beagle*, it is unlikely that this Dutch chart – the most accurate of this archipelago before Stokes' survey chart of 1840 – was seen by Wickham and Stokes in 1837. It is likely therefore that it was one of the two anonymous charts printed in 1728 from the direction of Steijns or de Graaff.

None of the extant manuscript journals consulted for this research gave more information about the findings of the *Beagle*'s officers on the southern Abrolhos, and there are no extant notes about the ship's timbers found by Stokes at Wreck Point on 6 April 1840 other than those he published in his narrative in 1848, and Pasco's more detailed notes in the letter to Captain Wipff of the Dutch navy in 1853 and in the later memoirs Pasco published in 1897 quoted above.

The information given by Pasco about the timbers is interesting. Specifically it indicates that the timbers with the iron bolt were of some age when they were seen: ‘corrosion had gone on so steadily so many years, that the slightest touch reduced it to the size of small wire’. The account by Jan Steijns recording old timbers on the southern Abrolhos indicate that there was at least one wreck prior to that of the *Zeewijk*, as van Keulen also notes, and no other wreck is recorded on this group between 1727 and 1840, so it may be assumed that the timbers found at Wreck Point were from the wreckage found by the crew of the *Zeewijk*; given their stated antiquity and their reported European design and scale, it is probable they came from the *Ridderschap van Holland*.

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