

Australian Archaeology



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MARINE ARCHAEOLOGY AT THE WESTERN

AUSTRALIAN MUSEUM

The Museum Act (1969) gives legal protection to vessels wrecked or stranded before 1900. The Marine Archaeology Department has divided the wrecks into two historical groupings, the pre-settlement wrecks (1622 to 1829) and the colonial wrecks (1829 to 1900).

A. The pre-settlement wrecks.

There are five such wrecks known off the West Australian coast. The *Trial* (1622) is the oldest known wreck in Australian waters. She was an English East Indiaman, bound for Batavia when lost on the Trial Rocks, an isolated reef north of the Monte Bello group of islands. The Museum has carried out a survey of this site.

The *Batavia* (1629) was the flagship of a fleet of Dutch East Indiamen sailing to Batavia. She was lost on the Abrolhos group of islands in June, 1629. The story of the mutiny and massacre subsequent to the wreck make this one of the most ghastly chapters in the history of the Dutch trading empire in the East.

The Museum carried out over last summer a five month excavation of this wreck. This first season of major excavation has shown the site to be very rich archaeologically, and, so far, the most important wreck on the coast of Western Australia.

Before excavation started a photogrammetric survey was made of the site. All subsequent excavation plans were based on this. A trial excavation was commenced at the stern of the vessel, primarily to recover a group of building blocks but also to determine whether any of the ship's timbers had survived in the deeper levels of the site. A total of 120 building blocks were recovered, weighing about 27 tons. These appear to be part of the facade of a building, possibly a portico.

Timber was located in one area and was uncovered. It soon became obvious that we were dealing with an extensive intact section of the ship's hull, as there were thick frames and planking. The exposed timber was cleared of coral and floating weed debris, and each plank individually tagged. A photomosaic was made of the timber as each piece was removed.

Excavation was interrupted before all the timber was recovered, and it is hoped to raise the remainder next season. The timber raised, measuring 8 metres by 5 metres, was re-photographed on land, and matched with the 1 : 10 photomosaics. The initial results indicate that we will be able to re-construct over 90% of the timber so far recovered.

Among the many thousands of individual artifacts recovered were ceramic material, coins, navigational instruments, ordnance, shot, ship's fittings and cargo items. Detailed descriptions of the material cannot be given here, but we already have one of the largest and most significant collections of material from an early seventeenth century wreck in the world.

It became increasingly obvious when working in this field that it is a matter of archaeology and history working together. The archaeology of the wreck site can provide information that is not normally available to the historian. The historical and archival background can bring the archaeological work into a much clearer perspective.

The *Vergulde Draeck* (1656) was a yacht of the Dutch East India Company, lost about 110 kilometres north of Perth. In 1972 the Museum completed a major excavation season on this site. A preliminary report has been published (J. Nautical Archaeology No.2) and an article on the ceramic material is in publication. Four more major articles are planned, covering the organic material, the historical background, the metal artifacts, the armament, and the ship and its fittings.

The *Zuytdorp* (1712), lies at the base of a cliff, and is both difficult and dangerous to dive on. So far only two brief recovery expeditions have been made to this site.

The *Zeevyck* (1727), was lost in the Southern Group of the Abrolhos Islands, and much of the wreck was salvaged by the survivors. Because of the difficulties involved in working the site only reconnaissance expeditions have been undertaken.

B. The Colonial Wrecks.

Numerically the pre-settlement wrecks make up less than one percent of the wrecks on the W.A. coast. Over 1000 vessels are recorded as having been wrecked between 1829 and 1900, the limit of the legislation.

This circumstance dictates the nature of the work being done on the Colonial wrecks. Much of the work has taken the nature of an archaeological field survey. A card catalogue lists the details of all vessels reported to have been wrecked off Western Australia. Only a small proportion of these wrecks have been found.

The legislation requires a person finding a wreck to report it to the Museum. Museum staff then inspect the wreck site to record its position, take samples for identification, and evaluate the site's potential for future excavation. Where it is decided that a wreck is of historical importance it is vested under the Act to give it greater protection.

Whereas the Dutch Wrecks Programme is intensive: one major excavation per year with research associated with that excavation, the Colonial Wrecks Programme is extensive, and so far no wreck has been fully excavated.

Interesting results have been achieved during the process of identifying several of the earlier Colonial wrecks. The wreck at Cottesloe beach, long thought to have been evidence of pre-Dutch discovery of Australia by the Portuguese, has been identified as a small Australian owned barque, the *Elizabeth*, wrecked in 1839. The Australian Society for Historical Archaeology is at present publishing a monograph on this wreck. The analysis of wreckage found at Carnac Island has also been productive. Previously thought to have been from a sealing vessel, these artifacts have now been shown to have come from the stranding of the H.M.S. *Success* in November, 1829, thus being the earliest Colonial wreckage yet found in Western Australia. Captain James Stirling used the *Success* for his survey of the Swan River in 1827, which led to the settlement being made in 1829. An article on the identification has recently been submitted to the *Mariners Mirror*.

Excavation is in progress on the wreck of the *Eglinton*, a British barque wrecked in 1852 with a general cargo for the merchants of Fremantle. Very little remains of the ship itself but a large quantity of ceramic material, glassware and metal items from the cargo have been airlifted from potholes in the limestone reef. Extracts from the manifest show that a large proportion of the merchants of the colony had consignments on board, so the material gives a cross section of some of the sorts of goods used in the infant colony.

Another wreck recently found is the *James Mathews*, a brig wrecked in 1841 with a cargo of slates and general supplies. The site was found by members of the Underwater Explorers Club, who had been searching for the wreck for a number of years. At present a survey of the site is being carried out by members of the club under the supervision of Marine Archaeology staff. Following this a metal detector survey will be carried out and club members will assist in a limited excavation of the site.

The Colonial Wreck Programme relies upon the cooperation of the diving public of Western Australia. With so many sites scattered over such a long coastline Museum staff look to divers to report sites and to show Museum divers how to get there. Several groups of divers are at present being trained in survey techniques in a programme aimed at active involvement.

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