

20 YEARS IN THE KIMBERLEY: THE WA MARITIME MUSEUM 1974-1994

The sixth meeting of the Kimberley Society was held on 16 November 1994 and Mike McCarthy showed many interesting slides to illustrate his talk. Mike has been the Curator of Marine Archaeology at the Fremantle Maritime Museum for 15 years. He would rather that it be called the Museum of Marine Archaeology and Conservation.

His talk about the maritime museum covered more than the last 20 years because it all started with Ian Crawford (a Kimberley Society member) who got his Ph.D from London University. This concerned the early Macassan and Indonesian visits to our northern shores and was completed in 1969. Ian also founded the shipwreck legislation under which they all work and he insisted that they work with Aboriginal people.

After Ian came Scott Sledge, who did a tour of all known sites in a pearling lugger and published his findings in a paper entitled "Wreck Inspection of the North Coast". Mike travelled with Scott and visited places like Llangi, an Aboriginal spiritual site. They had Aboriginal guides with them who explained things like sitting boats in mud at low tide.

Camden Harbour was the most important place they visited. This was settled in 1864/65 with three ships and the Aboriginals welcomed them. One ship, the *Calliance* ran aground and was abandoned. Her ballast is still there. Mud helps to preserve structures as it is anaerobic. Scott and Co. recorded all the existing remains. It was terrible country and the early explorers had given the people wrong impressions of its potential. Robert Sholl and others kept diaries of this period and place. The settlement was abandoned in a couple of years and, in the meantime, the shipwrecks provided a source of timber for building etc.

The Wreck Inspection party visited the Prince Regent River then Careening Bay and the famous *Mermaid* Boab of 1820 commemorating Phillip Parker King and Alan Cunningham's visit during one of their hydrographic surveys of the Kimberley coast. This area is of definite heritage value and should be carefully preserved. Next they landed on Bigge Island to examine excellent Aboriginal cave paintings close to the beach. These have deteriorated over the years unfortunately.

The Rowley Shoals were visited. They are 150 miles west of Broome and are the remains of three volcanoes rising out of the ocean. Their tops became colonised by coral to form an atoll. These cays are much used by the Indonesians for collection of trochus shells and trepang or beche-de-mer, an Asian delicacy. These Indonesian sailors could find these tiny islets with no navigational skills or aids. The ship *Lively* was lost here and Peter Sartori found two of her anchors dated

1800. The Macassans had denuded the wrecks. They are allowed to fish by traditional means and they use wooden goggles and an unusual egg-beater kick when diving.

The SS *Koombana* was lost between Port Hedland and Broome off the Eighty Mile Beach. Mike also told us about the clipper steamship *Sunbeam* wrecked on Osborne Island. She was run aground after wearing out and is visible at low water spring tides. This wreck has now become part of Aboriginal folk lore and was an example of frontier ship ownership. The guano trade resulted in many ship wrecks being left behind; at Cassini Island, Browse Island and the Lacepedes, the latter being used as a USA gaol during World War II. The film "Flight into Hell" publicised the plight of two German fliers and their brave efforts to save themselves after they crashed their plane in the Kimberley.

Sally May is the curator of the museum and is writing the history of shipbuilding, 1829-1979. She has acquired two pearling luggers built by Kimberley residents D'Antoine and Hunter and has them displayed in the museum grounds. Since 1980 the staff have been mapping the wreck sites, excavating a wreck on the Rowley Shoals, aircraft wrecks in Broome waters and war graves and measuring and documenting Indonesian vessels which come here with refugees. The Heritage Council is coming into the picture to protect things other than wrecks, like lighthouses and harbours. Mike suggested that we need to have a stronger museum in the Kimberley and take the luggers back to where they belong.

Other people working on Museum projects include Rodney Dixon who has studied shipbuilding and use of WA timbers such as cadjeputs. Myra Stanbury, ex-midwife and BOAC hostess, is now an historical archaeologist and began her studies in 1978. Archaeology tells us what people did in the past and allows us to transfer culture from one generation to another.

It seems the Aboriginal people did not use canoes until they were introduced here by the Macassans. So concluded Mike's talk, an outline of work in the Kimberley and an interesting insight into the fascinating life of a marine archaeologist.

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