Article

The Mystery of the Deadwater Wreck

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Abstract

Historical research indicates there may be the remains of a 17th century Dutch shipwreck in part of an estuarine system in the south west of Western Australia. A variety of highly credible informants described the wreck in the 19th century, yet is seems to have 'disappeared'. This paper endeavours to explain what happened to the wreck, why it 'disappeared' and where it is now.

Résumé

Les recherches historiques indiquent que les débris d'une épave hollandaise datant du 17e siècle pourraient se trouver dans une partie du système estuarien du sud-ouest de l'Australie occidentale. Une varieté d'informateurs très fiables a décrit l'épave au 19e siècle ; toutefois, celle-ci semble avoir « disparu ». Cet article vise à expliquer ce qu'il est advenu de l'épave, les raisons de sa disparition et l'endroit où elle se trouve actuellement.

Resumen

La investigación histórica indica que podrían existir restos de un naufragio Holandés del siglo XVII en la parte del sistema estuarino en el sur oeste de Oeste Australiano. Una variedad altamente creíble de informantes describen el naufragio en el siglo XIX sin embargo pareciera que ha "desaparecido". Este escrito se aventura a explicar que le paso al naufragio, el porque este "desapareció" y donde se encuentra ahora.

In 1611, as the Dutch were building their trading empire in the East Indies, one of the captains of the Vereenigde Oost-Indische Compagnie (VOC), Hendrik Brouwer, tested out the idea that the Indies could be reached more quickly and easily by sailing due east from the Cape of Good Hope, following the Roaring Forties across the southern Indian Ocean, and then turning north to make for Java. The experiment was a great success, it halved the time such voyages took, and in 1616 the VOC officially adopted the 'Brouwer Route' and instructed their captains to follow it. Unbeknownst to them, the Brouwer Route took them very close to the west coast of Australia. At that time all that was known of Australia was 250 kilometres of the west side of Cape York in northern Australia, charted by Willem Janszoon in the *Duyfken* in 1606. Following the Brouwer Route, Dutch ships soon began encountering the west coast of Australia, the first being Dirk Hartog in the *Eendracht* in 1616. Hartog landed at Point Inscription on 25 October 1616 and left behind an inscribed pewter plate, now held by the Rijksmuseum in the Netherlands, signifying his historic 'discovery'.

Hartog's encounter with Australia's west coast highlighted a problem with the Brouwer Route. Sailors at that time were unable to determine longitude and so couldn't accurately determine their position. The Dutch simply instructed their captains to 'keep in Easterly course for at least a thousand mijlen [7,300km],' (Sigmond and Zuiderban 1995:33) before turning north for Java. But the captains could only judge this distance by dead reckoning, and so if they miscalculated they would then come up against the Western Australian coast. These were dangerous waters, with many inshore reefs and coral islands such as the Abrolhos Islands. This did not present too much of a problem if the encounter occurred in daylight hours, but it was a different story if the approach took place at night. It was in such circumstances that four Dutch ships came to grief between 1629 and 1727, the *Batavia* (1629), the *Vergulde Draeck* (1656), the *Zuytdorp* (1712) and the *Zeewijk* (1727), all with considerable loss of life (Henderson 2007:20-40, 46-53, 63-71).

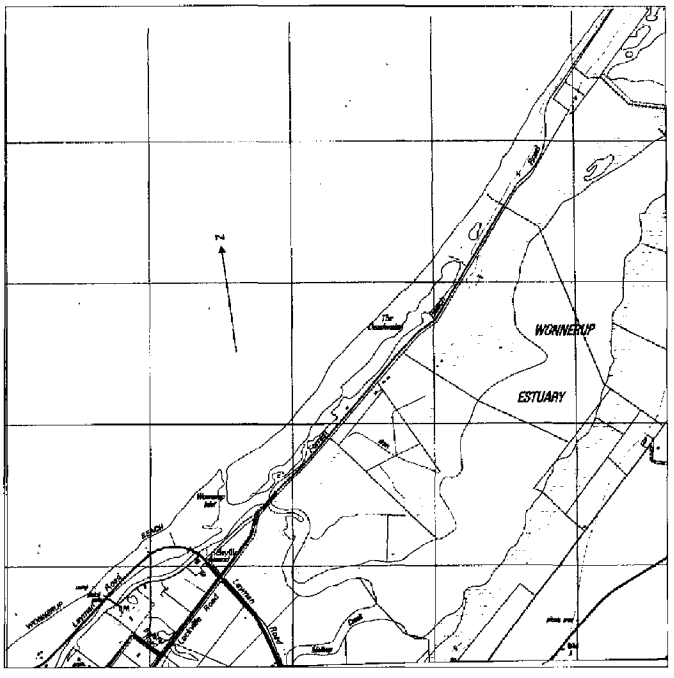
As a result of these disasters at least 73 and perhaps as many as 280 passengers and crew from those ships ended up permanently marooned on the coast of Western Australia. The first of these were soldier Wouter Loos and cabin boy Jan Pelgrom de Bye, the first European residents of Australia. They were deliberately abandoned, probably at Hutt River (450 kilometres north of state capital, Perth), on 16 November 1629 (Gerritsen 2007), for their part in the infamous Batavia Mutiny, following the sinking of the *Batavia*, in which 125 people were murdered by the mutineers (Drake-Brockman 1963; Dash 2002).

What became of all those unfortunate folk is one of the enduring mysteries of Australian history. Isolated finds of coins and artefacts, as well as some archaeological evidence, pointed to their initial survival, but gave no indication of their ultimate fate. In an attempt to ascertain this, I pioneered an alternative approach, involving an examination of traditional Australian Aboriginal cultures along the west coast of Australia at the commencement of British colonisation of Western Australia in 1829. This research, first published as And Their Ghosts May Be Heard in 1994 (Gerritsen 1994), tried to identify unusual features in those cultures which may have been the result of the impacts and influence of the castaways. Evidence emerged of genetic influences, myths and legends that appeared to have a connection with the presence of foreigners, unusual forms of social organisation, strong indications that a yam plant was introduced, along with technological innovations that appeared to have originated with the Dutch interlopers. One of the more controversial lines of evidence involved linguistics. It was argued that 16% of one particular language, Nhanda, was of Dutch derivation.

To ascertain where the different groups of mariners may have ended up an innovative linguistic methodology, Anomalous Sound Mapping, was employed. This involved searching for and mapping 'alien' phonemes in Aboriginal languages, sounds such as 'kn-' at the beginning of words, and the occurrence of 'f', 's', 'z', and 'sh', sounds that are not a normal part of the phonology of Aboriginal languages in the western part of Australia (Gerritsen 1994:211-20). Unexpectedly this pointed to an anomaly in the south west of Western Australia, in the region around Busselton and Bunbury, far from any known pre-colonial shipwreck. However, when limited historical research was carried out it became evident that there were a number of credible 19th century accounts of a wreck to the north of Busselton, in an area known as the Deadwater (Gerritsen 1994:260-62).

Following publication of And Their Ghosts May Be

Heard, further historical research into this wreck was carried out, and continues as new evidence comes to light. This research has revealed a body of information about the wreck, but as yet the actual wreck-site has not been located. This may seem surprising as all the other known Dutch wrecks in Western Australian water have been found, despite being in highly inaccessible locations in most instances. The *Batavia*, for example, was found on Morning Reef in the Wallabi Group of the Abrolhos Islands on 4 June 1963. The *Vergulde Draeck* was found 5.6 kilometres off the coast, 90 kilometres north of Perth on 14 April 1963. Wreckage from the *Zuytdorp* was first noted in 1927 on cliffs 570 kilometres north of Perth, although the vessel was not identified until 1959. Captain Stokes of the famous *Beagle* first reported wreckage from the *Zeewijk* in the Pelsaert Group of the Abrolhos Islands in 1840, although the wreck-site itself was not located until 1968. Even the remnants of Australia's first shipwreck, the Tryall, were found 100 kilometres off the north west coast in 1969 (Henderson 2007:13-15,25,36-37,47-48,65-68). So why hasn't the Deadwater Wreck been found? A number of unusual circumstances have contributed to the inability to locate the Deadwater Wreck. To understand why, it is necessary to consider the history of the wreck, some related events and the coastal geomorphology of the area.



Map: The Vasse and Wonnerup Estuaries and the Deadwater (adapted from Busselton 1930 – 1NE 1:25,000).

The Deadwater is a long shallow channel three kilometres long but only about 100 metres wide at its widest, which branches off the combined outlet of the Vasse and Wonnerup Estuaries (Wonnerup Inlet), about 10 kilometres east north east of the resort town of Busselton, in a locality known as Wonnerup. It runs for almost its entire length behind a low coastal barrier dune fringing Geographe Bay and is very shallow, normally only a metre or so deep at its deepest point.

Perhaps this is not the location where one might expect to find a shipwreck. Yet rumours of a wreck in the Deadwater began to circulate not long after Busselton was founded in 1834. The first public reference to the wreck appeared in a Perth newspaper, the Inquirer and Commercial News, in 1856:

'For years past it has been reported that the remains of a Dutch vessel were to be seen in a portion of the Wonnerup Inlet termed the Dead Water, and some persons stated they saw the wreck' (Anon. 1856:3)

Apparently a search for the wreck triggered the newspaper report, which added that 'the party returned unsuccessful'. Five years later, a paper, 'On the geology of a part of Western Australia.' published in London by the Geological Society of London, revealed further information about the wreck:

'remains of a vessel of considerable tonnage have been discovered in a shallow estuary near the Vasse Inlet, now quite shut out from the sea, which, from its appearance I should judge to have been wrecked more than two hundred years ago, during which time the land appears to have risen two or three feet [60-90 cm]' (Gregory 1861:482)

Apart from its apparent age, the situation of the wreck, 'shut out from the sea' where the land had 'risen two or three feet', was indeed a rather curious aspect to the account. The informant Frank Gregory's credentials are well-accepted however, he

was a surveyor who became an explorer of some renown, receiving the Royal Geographical Society's Founder's Medal in 1863, later becoming a member of the Legislative Council in Queensland (Erickson 1987:2:1271).

Further incidental information was recorded in 1869 in the diary of local settler, Henry Prinsep, who wrote, 'saw Reynolds who told me he had found the old ship in the dead water at Wonnerup' (Prinsep: 1 May 1869). Then in 1876 the local timber company foreman, Thomas Bindloss, applied to the Colonial Secretary's Office for the salvage rights to the Deadwater Wreck (Bindloss 1876). This triggered further revelations about the wreck. It would appear a party had visited the wreck around 1846. This included Worsley Clifton who was in fact now the Receiver of Wrecks. As a 16 year-old it seems he had visited the wreck in the company of his brother-in-law George Eliot, the Resident Magistrate of Bunbury at that time (Clifton 1876). While there is no definite link, that visit may have been promoted by Gregory, who was surveying in the area early in 1847 (WAS 32a), and mentions in his paper of 1861 that he had seen the wreck about 15 years previously.

In his reports to the Colonial Secretary, Clifton stated that the wreck was, 'situated in ... the Dead Water ... to the North of its present mouth about 40 yards [36m] from the beach and 2¼ miles [3.6km] from the Jetty of the West Australian Timber Company,' and that there was a 'sand hill of low height between her and the Sea.' He went on to say that it was 'covered in Water, Sand and Seaweed to a depth of about fourteen feet [4.2m],' and that it 'is evidently ancient'.

In describing the remains of the vessel *Clifton* observed that, 'from the crutch of her Boom, rings of the mast, and large grappling Iron found many years ago, near the wreck which I have seen, it must have been a very large ship.' He also noted that 'Two ancient coins, I was informed by the late J. G. Bussell JP were found on the sand beach a few years ago ... – also about 70lbs [32kg] of quicksilver was found in the sand, loose ...'

It would appear Bindloss's salvage claim also led to further investigations of the wreck being carried out. Captain W. E. Archdeacon, leader of an Admiralty hydrographic survey being conducted in that part of Western Australia (Anon. 1876:3), and Alfred Burt, one of the surveyors, reportedly visited the wreck-site around this time. Burt, who became the Registrar of Titles and Deeds, recalled years later that one of the early settlers in the district, John McGibbon, had informed him that 'some old timbers still standing in the middle of deep water about half a mile [800m] from shore had, when the settlers first arrived in the Vasse, formed part of the hulk of an old ship' (DCC 1910). McGibbon led Captain Archdeacon and Burt to the 'mysterious old ship', and informed them that 'according to rumour, it was the remains of an old Dutch man o'war' (Cowan 1929). According to Burt it 'was embedded in sand and water of a land-locked pool not far from the sea', it 'stood two or three feet [60-90cm] above the water', had 'a high stern', and was 'built in the olden style' (Cowan 1929).

Bindloss's salvage claim was immediately contested by farmer Joseph Reynolds, the same individual Prinsep had mentioned in his diary. It appears Reynold's case rested on the fact that he had leasehold on that portion of the Deadwater where the wreck was located (Clifton 1876). Reynolds had purchased the land in 1860 from the estate of John Hurford who had been murdered by his wife Bridget and her lover in 1855. But Reynolds' appeal was rejected and Bindloss was awarded the salvage rights.

There the matter rested for 26 years, apart from some commentary provided by Augustus Gregory. Augustus Gregory, also a surveyor in Western Australia at the same time as his brother Frank, had carried out surveying work in the area in 1854 (WAS 32b). He was to become even more renowned as an explorer than Frank and went on to become the Surveyor-General in Queensland, and a member of the Queensland Legislative Council as well (Erickson 1987:2:1271). In the 'Inaugural Address' he gave to the first meeting of the Queensland Branch of the Geographical Society of Australasia in 1885 he referred to the Deadwater Wreck, noting that it was a vessel, 'the construction of which indicated a very early date in naval architecture' (Gregory 1886:24). Some years later he added to this, indicating:

'This wreck is wholly covered by the tide, and was found by a bather, who, resting on what he took for the stump of a tree, found that it was the mast of a vessel. Several articles were recovered from the wreck, and their patterns are similar to Dutch ships of that period [late 17th century]' (Gregory 1902-3:131)

By 1902 Bindloss had either died or disappeared because Reynolds applied for, and was granted, the salvage rights to the Deadwater Wreck in that year. He stated that his intention was 'to get up the wreck that is on my land' as he put it (Reynolds 1902). Reynolds may have actually already removed material from the wreck in the 1860s. As mentioned, he had told Prinsep in 1869 that he had found the wreck, and in his letter to the Colonial Secretary's Office in 1902 he admitted that, 'In 1860 I sent up all the ironwork belonging to the wreck' (Reynolds 1902). Julius Brockman, a teenager working in the area at the time, also claimed that, 'When I was a boy, I remember Mr Reynolds got relics from the wreck, knives, forks and other things' (Halls 1981:18, Brockman 1987:23,26).

Figure 1: Probable Location of the Deadwater Wreck.

After Reynolds was granted the salvage rights the wreck seemingly disappeared, despite E. L. Grant Watson's (Watson 1968:74-5) claim to have visited the wreck-site in 1910. Watson came to Western Australia in that year with A. R. Brown (later Professor Radcliffe Brown) as part of a Cambridge University anthropological expedition to Western Australia. Before departing Western Australia, Watson asserts he travelled to the Busselton area and saw the wreck. Watson's account appears to be a case of plagiarism and fabrication however. There are gross factual errors and inconsistencies contained in the narrative of his visit to the area and some of its tourist attractions. His description and discussion of the wreck, furthermore, mirrors the content of an article published in a Perth newspaper, the Western Mail, at the time (DCC 1910), including misconceptions contained in that article (Gerritsen 1995:11-12). In 1914 journalist Dirksey Cowan, the author of the newspaper article, specifically searched for the wreck, without success.

Based on the various scanty reports of the wreck it is estimated to have been about 30 metres long and dating from the period 1650 – 1750 (Gerritsen 1995:14-16). Regarding the location of the wreck, informants appear to consistently indicate that it was in the Deadwater, and that there was a low dunal ridge between it and the sea. Clifton's account provides a fairly specific location, '2¼ miles [3.6km] from the Jetty of the Western Australian Timber Company at Wonnerup' [where 'ramp' is located on the beach in south west corner of Map 1], and '40 yards from the beach [36.6m].' Reynolds claim that it was on his land, Sussex Location 11, which encompassed all of the Deadwater, is consistent with this.

While a considerable body of evidence, from credible sources, point to an historic wreck of some size having been found in the Deadwater in the 19th century, unfortunately there are also significant inconsistencies, contradictions and complications. McGibbon, who led Burt to the wreck, is reputed to have claimed it was in 'deep water about half a mile [800m] from shore,' whereas Burt later indicated that it was in 'a land-locked pool not far from the sea.' When measured in 1994, the middle of the Deadwater lay only 185 metres from the shore of the adjacent Geographe Bay (Gerritsen 1995:18). Geographe Bay has a dynamic shoreline that advances and then retreats, as a result of storm surges, by up to 200 metres in a cycle that has a period of about 60 years (Gerritsen 1995:18-19). But even allowing for this there is a clear inconsistency. Furthermore, the son of one of the earliest British settlers in the district, George Layman II, recalled that 'as a boy he used to fish from the wreck and when he jumped about on it, it moved up and down' (Halls 1981:20). Not what one would expect of a large deeply-embedded vessel. A Mrs H. M. Maguire, in her reminiscences recorded in 1936, referred to a wreck she had seen in the 1871, in which 'only the deal planking' was visible at that

time (Halls 1981:17). She thought the wreck had a 'length of about fifteen feet' (Halls 1981:19). Both these sources are seemingly at odds with accounts of a vessel with a 'high stern', of 'considerable tonnage' and buried to a 'depth of fourteen feet' and 'two or three feet above the water'.

Another area of inconsistency relates to the location of the wreck. An account by another local, Frank Ryall, refers to a vessel also '15 feet long' with decking, from which he had fished as a boy in 1928. This wreck was located at the entrance of the Deadwater, just over one kilometre from the site where the Timber Company's jetty had been (Ryall 1994; Personal Communication – F. Ryall, 21 February 1995). Another elderly resident, John Bax, when interviewed in the 1990s, indicated that he had known 'for years' about the 'ribs of a long-boat' in the same location as identified by Ryall (Cullity 1992).

Perhaps the simplest explanation for these contradictions is that there is more than one wreck in the area. There is certainly historical evidence that there was another vessel wrecked in the area prior to colonisation. In late May 1801 the French Baudin Expedition commenced its scientific exploration of Australia, with high hopes that they could emulate the success of Captain Cook's voyages along Australia's east coast and in Pacific. On 30 May, the Geographe and Naturaliste entered Geographe Bay and in the following days the scientists enthusiastically reconnoitred the countryside. By 4 June the expedition had moved to the eastern side of the bay and continued their investigations, even managing to make contact with some of the local Indigenous population, the Wardandi. In the early hours of 5 June Baudin sent the Geographe's 'chaloupe', its longboat, under the command of his 'flag-captain' Citizen Le Bas to explore the Wonnerup-Vasse Estuary (Baudin 1974:176). Early in the evening, with an 'on-shore gale', the 'chaloupe' became trapped on the lee shore and was carried 'on to the beach' by large waves, which then swamped it. By the next morning it had already become partially filled with sand (Peron 2006:76-77). This appears to have been in the vicinity of the mouth of the Estuary.

Because of the stormy weather it was a day before Baudin could be informed. The following day, 7 June, equipment was sent ashore, 'cables, casks, pulley-blocks, purchase-tackle' (Peron 2006:81), and for a day and half they tried to refloat the longboat. But, with a deep low pressure system approaching it was decided to abandon it, the salvage equipment and the scientific specimens, and retrieve all the crew and scientists still on shore. By the early evening, with an intense cold front almost upon them, the last of the crew were retrieved. In the darkness, with wind approaching gale force and two metres waves crashing over the boat, they dragged the last six men from the shore to the boat with ropes. Alas one of the crew, Timothee Vasse from the Naturaliste, was lost in the darkness, swept away on his third attempt to clamber on to the boat. The ships then immediately sailed out of the bay and made for deeper water.

It has been cogently argued that rather than there being two wrecks, the chaloupe is in fact the Deadwater Wreck. The main proponent of this view, Henderson, is a highly respected maritime historian and maritime archaeologist, and former Director of the Western Australian Maritime Museum. In his view longshore drift caused 'a build-up of sand on the seaward side of the chaloupe', thus bringing it into the estuary (Henderson 1980:57-63; 2007:85-87). He ascribes all the reports about the Deadwater Wreck, of the distances involved, descriptions of the vessel, the salvage claims, and the materials recovered, to the French longboat.

Certainly there appears to have been changes to estuarine outlet. The first British explorers in the area, Collie and Preston in 1829, and later Lt. Bunbury in 1836, indicate that the Vasse and Wonnerup Estuaries had a dual outlet (Collie and Preston 1829:102-3; Bunbury 1930:99-100). The first survey by H. M. Ommanney in 1838 (WAS 32c), as well as the earliest maps of the area (e.g. Landgate:1850), also show separate outlets, about 1.5 kilometres apart. But the separate outlets appear to have disappeared by 1870, and the original Wonnerup Estuary outlet is now the approximate location for the current joint outlet (Wonnerup Inlet), with the more southerly outlet blocked. And, as would be expected, sediment accumulation at the current joint outlet seems to have led to a progradation of the coast there.

The argument that the chaloupe and the Deadwater wreck are the same vessel may not be sustainable however. The confluence of the Vasse-Wonnerup outlet and the mouth of the Deadwater is only about 1.2 kilometres from the site where the Timber Company's jetty had been, whereas the early reports of

the Deadwater Wreck describe it as 'quite shut out from the sea' and being 3.6 kilometres from the jetty. Nineteenth century observers also describe it as being a 'ship', 'ancient', or of an 'early date in naval architecture,' descriptions that do not appear to be consistent with the longboat. Materiel, such as mast rings, the 32 kilograms of 'quicksilver' [*mercury*] and the two 'ancient coins' would not appear to be consistent either with the remnants of the longboat, equipment brought ashore in the salvage attempt on 7-8 June 1801 or the abandoned possessions of the French scientists. Furthermore, it has been reported that on Sunday, 15 February, 1959, 'in a quiet backwater of the Vasse Estuary at Wonnerup,' sand miners 'found a 14-feet [4.3m] section of what appears to have been a ship's boat,' which they removed, placing on the back of a utility vehicle and taking it away (JR 1959). Alas this action probably resulted in its rapid disintegration. Consequently, it can be inferred from these lines of evidence that there were two distinct wrecks, the Deadwater Wreck at the northern end of the Deadwater, and the chaloupe at the mouth of the Deadwater, with the latter having been destroyed in recent times.

There have been a number of proposed attempts to search for the Deadwater Wreck in the last century or so. Many have come to nothing. Nevertheless, several attempts have been undertaken, stimulated in most instances by particular finds. An array of items have turned up which initially were claimed to have a possible association with the Deadwater Wreck. These include a cannon, at least one pistol, at least two anchors, a large rudder and a ship's 'knee' or 'stanchion'.

The cannon appears to have been retrieved from a foundry in the early 1960s, before it could be smelted. But when its provenance was investigated it was ascertained that it probably came from the Grace Darling, a ship that ran aground in Geographe Bay near the estuary outlet in 1874 (Henderson and Henderson 1988:134; Gerritsen 1995:34; McRae n.d.:1-2,13-15). The pistol, donated to the Western Australian Museum by J. G. Reynolds early in the 20th century, was found upon examination to be an American 'Bootleg' pistol, manufactured in the period from 1830 – 1860. As American whalers called in and operated around Geographe Bay in the 1840s, it is thought to have come from one of these vessels. Two distinct finds of anchors have also been reported. One was found somewhere near the Deadwater during sand (ilmenite) mining operations but 'disintegrated after being left out' (Wells n.d.). The rusty fluke of another anchor was found by Gary Dillon 'years ago' in the middle portion of the Deadwater (O'Brien n.d.). A magnetometer search in 1990 at the location where it had been found yielded nothing

Figure 2: Location where the longboat had been.

further (Coroneos et al. 1990). In the 1960s a large rudder was located at the southern end of Rabbit Island in the lower Vasse Estuary. Ilmenite miner Len Brennan and school headmaster Ted Sommerville attempted to extricate the rudder, which was buried in a bank, using a bulldozer. Unfortunately the rudder, reportedly '8-10 feet high [2.4-3.0m]' fell to pieces and the remnants were left in situ (Reynolds 1992; Personal Communication - A. J. Reynolds, 11 May 1995). Early in 1995 some 'planks and ironwork' from the rudder were salvaged and sent to the Western Australian Maritime Museum (WAMM) for testing. Analysis showed the rudder to be made of some variety of local eucalypt, indicating it derived from the Colonial Period or later. It too may have come from the Grace Darling. (O'Brien 1995:24 April 1995; Personal Communication – D. Garratt, 26 April 1995). Lastly, the ship's knee, with some iron straps attached, was discovered in the upper portion of the Deadwater by Brian McRae in 1989. The knee was made out of a mahogany, Swietenia macrophylla, found in the Honduras and Central and South America (McRae n.d.:6-7,16-17). An investigation on behalf of WAMM concluded, however, that it dated from the mid-19th century or later because the straps were 'cast, rather than wrought iron' (Coroneos et al. 1990:22). A magnetometer search at the site revealed nothing further (Coroneos et al. 1990).

Searches for Deadwater Wreck have faced a number of confounding factors. Clearly the wreck has been significantly degraded by pilfering and salvage. Consequently it is conjectured that all that is likely to remain is the bottom, some cannons and an amount of non-structural debris. The wreck may have been further disturbed by small-scale ilmenite mining operations in the 1960s. The extent of this is uncertain, with some informants saying the Deadwater was dredged for its entire length, others that only 1% was mined, or that it was mostly just the lower portion of the Deadwater. There is still disagreement about this, but in my view the last option is probably correct (Gerritsen 1995:77-80; Henderson 2007:88).

The third confounding factor is the presence of ilmenite in the area. Ilmenite, a crystalline form of iron titanium oxide ($FeTiO_3$), is weakly magnetic. Consequently it gives rise to false magnetometer readings, so that searchers trying to relocate the chaloupe using this technology, for example, excavated several small areas where an anomaly was detected, only to find it was just a patch of ilmenite. (O'Brien n.d.; O'Brien, Harewood and Rooney 1994). This problem could of course be overcome by employing other remote sensing technologies.

Two questions remain regarding the Deadwater Wreck. What ship was it and how did it get there? McRae has suggested it may have been a Portuguese caravel, based on the wood from the knee he found (McRae n.d.). This raises the spectre of the notorious 'Mahogany Wreck', supposed by some to exist on the western coast of Victoria in south eastern Australia (Potter 1987; Powling 2001). It also would give some support to highly contentious claims that the Portuguese preceded the Dutch to Australia. However, the assertion by A. C. Gregory that Dutch artefacts had been retrieved, rumours from an early stage that it was a Dutch vessel, and the frequency of Dutch ships being wrecked in Western Australian waters, strongly suggest that it was a Dutch vessel. There are four Dutch ships from the 17th and 18th centuries of which we are aware that are unaccounted for, that is, they sailed from Cape Town into the Indian Ocean and were never heard from again. These are the *Zeelt* (1672), the *Ridderschap van Holland* (1694), *Fortuyn* (1724) and *Aagtekerke* (1726). The *Fortuyn* may have been destroyed by a cyclone south of Java, while the *Ridderschap van Holland* is suspected to have been taken by pirates off Madagascar and ultimately wrecked (Henderson 2007:41-45,53-57). Of the remaining two, the *Zeelt* is favoured. Although nothing is known of their fate, the size of *Zeelt*, a 90-ton hooker, seems more consistent with the hypothetical size of the Deadwater Wreck than the 850-ton, 43.5 metre, *Aagtekerke* (Henderson 2007:57-58,69). The earlier date for the Zeelt may also be in its favour as some of the terminology used in reference to the Deadwater Wreck seems to suggest a vessel from the earlier part of the putative date range, 1650 – 1750.

The second question, as to how it found its way into the part of the Deadwater where it finally came to rest, is an interesting one. I contend it came through a now defunct northern outlet, formerly the main outlet for the estuarine system. This feature can be seen in the Google Earth image below.

There are several grounds for this contention. A bank, about two metres high, forming the Deadwater's inland side, curves round to the beach at its north-

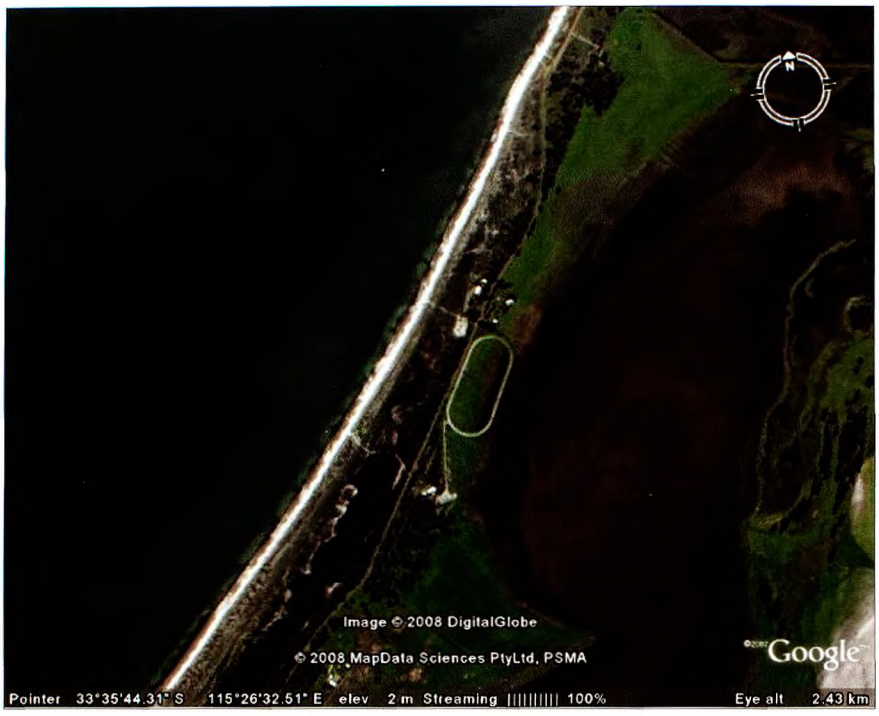


Figure 3: Northern Outlet of Deadwater (Google Earth™ mapping services).

ern end. This curve can be seen in Map 1 and the Google Earth image if one follows the line of Forrest Beach Road. At the northern outlet the dunal ridge on the seaward side of the Deadwater is much lower than further south. Historical, geomorphological and cartographic evidence also indicates the water in the Deadwater was much deeper and extended further north in the past. Surveyor Ommanney reported in 1838 that the Deadwater had 'very deep water' (WAS 32c Letters:75) and the 1850 map (Landgate 1850) shows the water extending almost as far as the northern end of the Deadwater. The inland ridge, made of an admixture of limestone, sand and loam shows undercutting at levels a metre or two above the present water level. The resultant scenario suggests the northern outlet formed the main outlet for at least the Wonnerup Estuary in the past, that the ship sailed into the Deadwater through this outlet, and then grounded in the area the wreck has been reported, where it was abandoned.

With the blocking of the northern outlet, the Deadwater slowly began to silt up. But the water level was still high, as attested by Ommanney. This is probably what made the wreck difficult to find in earlier days, as indicated by A. C. Gregory's account of how it was first found. It may have only been visible when water levels were low, and this only occurred when a lengthy dry spell and low tides combined. A series of drainage and flood control measures undertaken since the 1920s appear to have also significantly affected the Deadwater, and this is what has primarily led to water levels falling and retreating to their present configuration, leading to increased siltation (Gerritsen 1995:40).

The 'northern outlet' scenario and the photo of the probable wreck site may also resolve a couple of the apparent contradictions noted earlier. McGibbon's reputed comments, that the wreck was in 'deep water half a mile from the shore' takes on new meaning when it is realised that he lived north of the northern outlet, with his house almost the only private residence shown on the 1876 Admiralty survey chart in which Burt was involved in preparing (WASA: CONS 3847). Thus McGibbon may have been using the northern outlet as his reference point, as a measurement of 800 metres from the northern outlet comes to the same location identified as the wreck-site based on the distance provided by Clifton. Finally, it will be noted in Figure 1 there is a narrow sandy strip running around the northern side of the water. This sandy strip, usually wider when the tide is lower (Personal Observation), is the type of feature I believe was being referred to regarding the coins found on the 'sand beach' and the wreck being '40 yards from the beach'. Given the changes in water and silt levels, the beach in Figure 1 is not the same beach as the one originally referred to, but most likely a similar beach formed at the northern edge of where the water extended to formerly.

So what is the future of the Deadwater Wreck? The Australia on the Map Division of the Australasian Hy-

drographic Society last year adopted the search for the Deadwater Wreck as one of its projects. They are endeavouring to arrange for a systematic professional archaeological search for the wreck. Hopefully this will take place in the not too distant future and the mystery of the Deadwater Wreck will finally be laid to rest.

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(WAS[A] refers to Western Australian State Archives)

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Rupert Gerritsen is an independent scholar based at the National Library of Australia. His best known work is And Their Ghosts May Be Heard, a detailed exploration of the fate of the Dutch mariners marooned on the Western Australian coast in the 1600s and early 1700s. He has published extensively in historical ethnography, archaeology, maritime archaeology and historical linguistics. He was co-founder of "Australia on the Map: 1606 – 2006", and is currently Chair of the "Australia on the Map Division of the Australasian Hydrographic Society."
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