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Archaeology unearths people without history: Aboriginals, women and children at South Australian shore-based whaling stations.

Mark Staniforth, Susan Briggs and Chris Lewczak

The first major commercial industries to operate in what would later become the colony of South Australia were the closely inter-related sealing and whaling industries.¹ Although official European settlement of South Australia only started in 1836, small numbers of Europeans are known to have frequented, and lived on, the coastline, and particularly the offshore islands of South Australia for many years before this date. Most of these white men were involved in sealing activities but there are some tantalizing references that indicate that shore-based whaling operations may also have been conducted before 1836. This account of Spalding Cove near Port Lincoln, for example, was given by a Mr Homburg, who visited it in May, 1832:

The object of his visit to Port Lincoln was to carry thither a party of thirty persons, with five boats and the necessary implements for catching whales ...The natives he saw were numerous and peaceful. They assisted him in carrying water to the ship, and in other matters. For a little tobacco, and with kind treatment, he is convinced they would work well.²

Archaeological fieldwork in South Australia (the Archaeology of Whaling in South Australia or AWSA project) under the direction of Mark Staniforth commenced in April 1997 involving the recording and subsequently the excavation of whaling station sites on the Eyre Peninsula,

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¹ This is similar to the situation that existed in most of the early Australian colonies (as well as New Zealand). See Susan Lawrence and Mark Staniforth, eds., *The Archaeology of Whaling in Southern Australia and New Zealand*, (Canberra: Australasian Society for Historical Archaeology and the Australian Institute for Maritime Archaeology, Special Publication No.10, 1998); Granville Allen Mawer, *Ahab's Trade: The Saga of South Seas Whaling*, (Allen & Unwin, St.Leonard's, NSW, 1999)

² H.P. Moore, "Notes on the Early Settlers in South Australia prior to 1836," *Proceedings of the Society of the Royal Geographical Society of Australasia- SA Branch* vol. XXV (1923), 93.

Kangaroo Island and at Cape Jervis. The aim of this research is to investigate the activities of whalers in South Australia, especially those involved in whaling activity who have been previously neglected, namely women, children and Indigenous peoples. Funding of more than \$40,000 for this project and the development of a website has come from a Flinders University URB establishment grant, the Ian Potter Foundation, the Australian National Center for Excellence in Maritime Archaeology (WA Maritime Museum) and a Small ARC grant.

One issue is the need to think about whaling from the perspective of not only the land but also the sea - these were maritime people who came and went by the sea and spent much of their time on the coast margin - the beach.³ They were dependent on shipping for the majority of their material culture needs and wants not to mention the necessity of watercraft for the pursuit of whales. This dependence on shipping for material culture would undoubtedly shape the artifacts found on whaling stations. With limited supply it is interesting to investigate what material culture is actually found.

The arrival of the whalers also represented first contact between the invading Europeans and the Indigenous people - their interactions and exchanges made the beach a dangerous and contested ground - of beginnings and endings, of comings and goings. Indigenous people wanted to be involved in whaling. This, in part, may have been due to their marginalisation from their traditional lands and food sources by farming. The interactions between the two cultures exposed Indigenous Australians into contact with new materials, such as glass, ceramics and metal. Whaling stations are ideal areas to study how these new materials were utilized. Stations were almost exclusively established in remote areas. Subsequently the material culture produced by this interaction remains relatively undisturbed by development giving archaeologists the opportunity to learn more about this interaction.

Whaling on the coast of South Australia before 1850

At least 17 shore-based whaling stations are known to have existed on the coastline of South Australia before 1850. Though some of the sites associated with the shore-based whaling industry are well documented, some of the more isolated sites remain either lost to us or

remembered only by vague reflections in the memoirs of people who took part in the industry. Relocation of sites is frequently made difficult due to the ephemeral nature of the evidence left by the whalers as well as the isolation of the sites.

Map showing the location of South Australian whaling stations mentioned in this article (Fowlers Bay, Point Collinson, Flinders Island, Thistle Island, Cape Jervis)

Map by Chris Lewczak; courtesy of the AWSA project

Shore-based whaling in South Australia in the early phase (before 1850) consisted of two quite distinct kinds of operation. First there were those based in, and associated with, the official settlement of South Australia (after 1836) such as the whaling activities of the South Australian Company and Hagan & Hart; documentary records for these whaling stations are relatively plentiful and easily accessible in Adelaide.⁴ Thistle Island is one example of a South Australian Company established whaling station. Established in early 1838, the station operated with four boat crews and produced between 60 and 65 tuns of oil. Thistle Island was, however, abandoned in 1839 after a poor season, the station being plagued by complaints about the provisioning of food and the subsequent desertions of men.⁵

One of the house sites at Whalers Bay on Thistle Island in 1907.

Courtesy Mortlock Library, Adelaide.

The second, and far less well known or documented, type were the activities of some apparently mainly Hobart based whalers in a number of whaling stations on the far west coast of South Australia. Hobart based whalers were active in at least three whaling stations on the west coast of South Australia at Fowlers Bay, St Peter's Island and Streaky Bay.⁶

⁴ W.J. Hosking, "Whaling in South Australia: 1837-1872," (Honours thesis, School of Social Sciences, Flinders University, 1973); Kostaglou, P. and McCarthy, J. 1991. "Whaling and Sealing sites in South Australia". *Australian Institute for Maritime Archaeology Special publication No. 6.*

⁵ Austral Archaeology, 1993, Thistle Island Whaling Station Excavation Report, prepared for State Heritage Branch, Dept. of Environment & Land Management, Adelaide, p.10-13

⁶ Michael D. Jones. and Mark Staniforth, "Fowlers Bay Whaling Site Archaeological program." (Adelaide: Report for the South Australian Museum and the Australian and New Zealand Scientific Exploration Society, 1996) and Mark Staniforth "Three whaling station sites on the west coast of South Australia - Fowlers Bay, Sleaford Bay and

Whaling lookout at Point Fowler near the Fowlers Bay whaling station

Photo by Mark Staniforth; courtesy of the AWSA project

One example of the limited historical evidence of whaling activities is of an account by explorer Edward John Eyre in 1841. In his failed attempt to travel from Adelaide to Perth, and cross the Great Australian Bight, he was rescued by a passing French whaling ship and its “shore gang”.⁷ His short stay with the whalers before heading back to Adelaide is one of the limited accounts of whalers in this section of South Australia. Given the lack of historical documentation regarding these whalers archaeological investigation is the only way to learn about their operations.

Women and children at shore-based whaling stations

One of the common stereotypes of whaling has been that it was a ‘male’ activity, which it quite clearly was, but occasionally we find evidence of the presence of women and children on shore-based whaling station sites.⁸ The AWSA project is interested in examining how women and children lived in whaling stations and whether their presence can be indicated by the material culture. Historical documentation has been reasonably silent regarding their involvement and it is hoped that archaeology will be able to fill this gap.

In his unpublished reminiscences whaler Captain James William Robinson made the following comments about Streaky Bay on the South Australian coast which he visited in the 98 ton brigantine *Abeona* during 1844: “I landed Hungerford, Luttrell, who had charge with his two

Streaky Bay” in Susan Lawrence and Mark Staniforth, eds., *The Archaeology of Whaling in Southern Australia and New Zealand*, (Canberra: Australasian Society for Historical Archaeology and the Australian Institute for Maritime Archaeology, Special Publication No.10, 1998)

⁷ William John Dakin, 1934, *Whalemen Adventures in Southern Waters*, Angus and Robertson, Sydney, p.57

⁸ Gibbs, thesis and Martin Gibbs “Colonial Boats and Foreign Ships: The History and Archaeology of Nineteenth Century Whaling in Western Australia” in Susan Lawrence and Mark Staniforth, eds., *The Archaeology of Whaling in Southern Australia and New Zealand*, (Canberra: Australasian Society for Historical Archaeology and the Australian Institute for Maritime Archaeology, Special Publication No.10, 1998)

boat's crews. Mr E. Kreemer was at the fishery, and two others. I also landed in good health Mrs Lutrell, and her little girl, with all their stores.”⁹

Some time later Robinson returned to Streaky Bay where he reported:

found Mr Luttrell and Freeman had got a lot of oil, more than I could carry, so I commenced taking in all the whalebone, and as much oil as I could store. I soon got all the oil on board, and my lady passenger and her child and got all hands on board except three. My instructions from Mr Young was to leave two or three men with the cooper in charge of the oil and fishery, if I could not carry all the oil.¹⁰

Another source of information about women at whaling stations comes from a travelling journalist who visited the Cape Jervis whaling station in 1851 His writings provide some insights into the activities of women at whaling stations, a subject that was rarely written about. He noted that:

Mrs. Clark had attempted a little garden north of the house, a little above it, which she said her husband laughed at but we told her that it might prove no joke. She was ambitious of growing melons, which were thriving, and coveted cucumbers, but had no seed.¹¹

The journalist did not record whether Mrs. Clark was involved in the whaling operations in any direct way but did mention that she visited the Hog Bay whaling station on Kangaroo Island with her husband. Whether *or not* there was direct involvement by females and children on the whaling station, it does highlight the fact there were women, mainly wives, present at these stations. Therefore there is the possibility that a further understanding of their participation in whaling could be gained through archaeological excavation.

⁹ Capt. J.W. Robinson, *Reminiscences of Captain James William Robinson (1824-1906)* (Hobart: Archives Office of Tasmania Ref NS 222, 1906), 54.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ *South Australian Register* 25 April 1851, p.3

Other accounts of women being present at whaling stations comes from several eyewitness accounts by passing ships of Indigenous women being present. A few accounts exist regarding the abduction of Indigenous women and their children as a source of extra labor on the whaling stations, and as wives.¹² In such cases, women were taken from the mainland and Tasmania to some of the most isolated whaling stations in South Australia, such as Flinders Island and Kangaroo Island.

Indigenous people at shore-based whaling stations

Despite 20th century propaganda by the whaling industry about making use of the entire whale, in the 19th century there was a limit to how much of the whale the whalers could actually use. The bits that the whalers were most interested in were the blubber, which they rendered down into whaleoil, and the whalebone (baleen) but what about the rest?

Having removed the blubber they were left with a large amount (literally tons) of meat and bone. The meat could be eaten (as the Japanese do today and whalers did in the past), fed to dogs at the whaling station, traded with the Indigenous inhabitants or it could be left to simply rot. While this would undoubtedly take some time and smelled very bad, it would eventually disappear. Unlike the bone which, being durable, can remain as archaeological or material culture evidence down to the present day. Whales were a major source of food for Indigenous people.

“... During the season the blacks came to the station in great numbers, and they and a lot of huge pigs would live on the ‘crang,’ or flesh after the blubber had been taken off for oil.”¹³

Relations with the Indigenous people at shore based whaling stations in South Australia were variable. It was reported in *The Southern Australian* newspaper in 1839 that at Encounter Bay: “It appears that a boat is employed in the fishery which is entirely manned with natives. They

¹² Cherrie De Leiuen, 1998, “The Power of Gender”, unpublished honours thesis, Flinders University, SA, p.37

¹³ *South Australian Register* 6 September 1879.

take their part in the occupation equally with the white men, and are found to be not less expert than they.”¹⁴

On the other hand, Captain Robinson recalled that at the Streaky Bay whaling station in 1844: “The country near the beach is skirted by low sand ridges, about from thirty to forty feet high. The natives were not allowed to come down off the ridges to the fishery without permission.”¹⁵

It is clear from this evidence that the Indigenous Aboriginal people were involved and interested in whaling activity: “The blacks gave the whalers much help as watchers. It was in their interest to do so, for, as I showed you at the beginning of this article, the capture of the big “fish” meant a royal feast for them. Incidentally, one of the best harpoonists at the station was an aboriginal – Black Dick.”¹⁶

Archaeological evidence for Indigenous people at whaling stations is limited, mainly due to the small amount of survey and excavation that has been carried out. The evidence for interactions between whalers and Indigenous people has been found at the Point Collinson whaling station. A field survey carried out by staff and students from Flinders University in 1997 found black bottle glass that had been flaked by Indigenous people to form tools. Such tools were found at two locations near the whaling station.¹⁷

Black bottle glass flaked by Indigenous people found near Point Collinson (April 1997)

Photo by Mark Staniforth; courtesy of the AWSA project

While there is the possibility the glass came from other European visitors to the area the station is the most probable source. The proximity of Indigenous sites containing reworked European material near the whaling station shows that this location was an area of interaction between whalers and Indigenous peoples.

¹⁴ *The Southern Australian*, 7 August 1839.

¹⁵ Robinson, 54.

¹⁶ *The Adelaide Chronicle* 20 April 1933.

At a second station, Flinders Island, more conclusive evidence of the interactions between Indigenous people and whalers has been found. Historical documents record the presence of Indigenous women and children on the Island:

“A son, Bill Bryan Junior, was born to him by an Aboriginal girl, reputedly kidnapped by Bryan prior to his arrival on the island.”¹⁸

In June 1998 a group of four staff and students visited Flinders Island to carry out a small survey of the stations ruins. At one of the sites associated with the whaling operations an imported quartz hammerstone was found. This tool had obviously been brought to the Island as no quartz of that variety is found naturally on the Island. It is not believed that Indigenous peoples used the Island prior to Bryan’s arrival due to its distance from the mainland. The hammerstone is therefore almost definitely associated with the Indigenous women brought to the Island by Bryan.¹⁹

White quartz hammer stone found near Bryant’s hut on Flinders Island (June 1998)

Photo by Mark Staniforth; courtesy of the AWSA project

These are two examples of the archaeological visibility of the interaction between whalers and Indigenous peoples. With further research it is hoped more will be learnt about these first contacts and Indigenous adaptations and resistance to the presence of whalers.

Recent events in the Archaeology of whaling in South Australia

In November 2000 a small team of postgraduate and other students assisted Dr Mark Staniforth with the partial excavation of a slab hut associated with a whaling station at Cape Jervis. The work was done with the co-operation and assistance of Terry Arnott at Heritage SA. This whaling station began operations in 1841, when shipping records show that whale oil from Fishery Beach was delivered to Port Adelaide aboard *Sophia Jane*, a cutter owned by John T. Haynes. Haynes was the licensee of the Commercial Hotel at Port Adelaide and also owned the Fishery Beach whaling station. At least 20 people would have lived at the site during the whaling

¹⁷ Staniforth, p.62

¹⁸ *South Australian Register*, 6 June 1878, p.6

¹⁹ De Leiu, 1998, pp.85-86

seasons. In 1851 Mr. Clark was accompanied by his wife to the station, where they lived in a small slab hut, “the picture of neatness and order” and were surrounded by ducks, fowls, pigs, turkeys, caged parroquets, a tame magpie, a pet cat and an infant cockatoo.

The hearth, constructed from the local slate, dominated the hut site. The hut had a single layer of stone foundations that revealed the width of the wooden slabs as well as the way in which the slabs were supported at the bottom. A pattern of wooden postholes visible within the earthen floor of the hut are believed to be the remnants of the posts that supported the roof structure.

Overall view of Mr and Mrs Clark’s hut at the Cape Jervis Whaling Station (December 2000).

Photo by Mark Staniforth; courtesy of the AWSA project

Hearth of Mr and Mrs Clark’s hut

Photo by Mark Staniforth; courtesy of the AWSA project

The site proved to have very small amounts of portable material culture such as ceramics and glass. The majority of artifacts were clear glass fragments that appear to have come from a single bottle. The most interesting find was fragmentary pieces of a kaolin tobacco pipe. The pipe was manufactured by T. White who may have operated from Glasgow although further details are unknown. The low artifact numbers may be indicative of the difficulties of supply, a high level of curation of ceramics and glass vessels and/or the disposal practices (and general cleanliness) of the residents.

Clay tobacco pipe from Mr and Mrs Clark’s hut (maker – T. White)

Photo by Susan Briggs and Tracey Treloar; courtesy of the AWSA project

Plan of the Cape Jervis Whaling Station site

Plan by Chris Lewczak; courtesy of the AWSA project

Discussion

Archaeological survey and excavation, together with detailed historical research has been able to shed some light on the involvement of Indigenous people, women and children in whaling. Archaeological evidence of Indigenous involvement in and interaction with whaling and whalers

is still minimal with only two sites showing evidence so far. This is likely to be due to the focus placed on the whalers and their operations rather than Stations as areas of interaction between the two cultures. The glass artifact found at Point Collinson and the hammerstone from Flinders Island indicate that the evidence is there, it just needs to be looked for.

Further archaeological excavation will also add to our knowledge of women and children at whaling stations. The historical records do not contain large amounts of information, however, recent excavations at Cape Jervis failed to provide any more real information regarding their lives at whaling stations. The hearth is the only structural or artefactual evidence that could be attributed to Mrs Clark. While today it is considered sexist to assume the female cooked this was almost definitely the case considering the era. That the hearth was the best-constructed section of the hut can not tell us any more either as it was a necessity so the hut did not burn down. It can be speculated that the lack of artifacts was due to Mrs Clark's cleanliness. This could be seen as a reaction to the filth and smell of whaling in which she was forced to live.

Captions

Map showing the location of South Australian whaling stations mentioned in this article (Fowlers Bay, Point Collinson, Flinders Island, Thistle Island, Cape Jervis)

Map by Chris Lewczak; courtesy of the AWSA project

One of the house sites at Whalers Bay on Thistle Island in 1907.

Courtesy Mortlock Library, Adelaide.

Whaling lookout at Point Fowler near the Fowlers Bay whaling station

Photo by Mark Staniforth; courtesy of the AWSA project

Black bottle glass flaked by Indigenous people found near Point Collinson (April 1997)

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White quartz hammer stone found near Bryant's hut on Flinders Island (June 1998)

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Overall view of Mr and Mrs Clark's hut at the Cape Jervis Whaling Station (December 2000).

Photo by Mark Staniforth; courtesy of the AWSA project

Hearth of Mr and Mrs Clark's hut

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Clay tobacco pipe from Mr and Mrs Clark's hut (maker – T. White)

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Plan of the Cape Jervis Whaling Station site

Plan by Chris Lewczak; courtesy of the AWSA project

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Susan Briggs is a recent Honours graduate in Archaeology from Flinders University. Since completing her degree she has been working as a research assistant for the AWSA project. She is currently working to establish a postgraduate research project to investigate the living conditions of the working classes in Port Adelaide.

Chris Lewczak recently completed an honours degree in Archaeology, specializing in maritime archaeology, at Flinders University. He has been working as a research assistant for the AWSA project.