

Examination and evaluation of evidence relating to the Deadwater Wreck and other hidden wrecks in the Vasse–Wonnerup region

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Introduction

From the early days of the Vasse settlement, speculation surrounded the origin of an old wreck discovered some distance inland by the early settlers and shown to a select few, mainly surveyors and government officials. Little was said publicly for many years. The colonists concentrated on selecting land, building homes and sheds, developing their holdings and building infrastructure. But the mysterious wreck was impossible to ignore in the longer term and as the population of Busselton grew and news of it leaked out, interest in the wreck grew. It became known that a couple of old coins had been found on a beach by Mr Bussell, their origin unknown. A quantity of mercury was also discovered, which led to the suggestion the stricken ship had been in search of gold, or had gold on board. Then came talk of piracy, smugglers and buried treasure and so the legend grew. Anything pertaining to a wreck, or wreckage, or treasure, was attributed to the Deadwater Wreck. By the mid 1840s an area of relatively sheltered water in the Wonnerup district had become known as the Deadwater. As the actual location of the wreck was unknown to all but a few, it was generally accepted the wreck, known as the Deadwater Wreck, lay in the Wonnerup Deadwater. No thought was given to how and when the Deadwater formed, nor the fact that many of the recorded descriptions of the wreck and its surrounds made no sense when placed therein.

Aims

The aims of the MAAWA Busselton Wreck Project 2005–2015 were:

1. To gain an understanding of the Busselton coastline and the natural forces at play during the 1800s and carefully examine the eye witness accounts in this context; and
2. To discover the likely location of a pre-colonial wreck known locally as the Deadwater Wreck.

1801 French exploration and loss of the chaloupe

Nicolas Baudin sailed into Geographe Bay at the end of May 1801 and spent two or three days exploring and charting the area now known as Eagle Bay and Dunsborough before sailing across the bay to the eastern shore. The two ships under his command, the *Géographe* and *Naturaliste* anchored off Capel on 4 June. The weather at the time was fine and the winds easterly. Groups of scientists were taken ashore to begin collecting data and specimens (Péron 1824: 62).

Heirisson returned to his ship late on 5 June and reported he had found a large body of brackish water behind the dunes pretty much due South of the anchorage. He had followed the shoreline southwards, but had not reached the mouth. Although the weather was deteriorating, with winds tending north-easterly, Baudin decided the discovery warranted further investigation, as fresh water was scarce (Cornell 1974: 175). The following day, 6 June, 17 scientists, officers and crew were sent southward in Baudin's large longboat. This craft, known as a chaloupe, was just over 9 metres long, two-masted and lateen rigged.

Two smaller longboats with 12 men aboard were dispatched from the *Naturaliste* (Péron 1824: 63–64).

Once ashore the men split up. *Géographe*'s chaloupe, which was larger and heavier, was sent to anchor a distance offshore with two men in charge, while the smaller longboats proceeded South in search of the river mouth, with the intention of rowing a distance upstream to investigate. One group of men set off on foot southwards towards the mouth, while another crossed the dunes and walked North to explore and collect specimens. François Péron broke away from this second group, crossed the estuary at a well-used crossing point and followed the far bank. He discovered an Aboriginal ceremonial ground of unusual design, before walking further into the forest, hoping to find a freshwater stream feeding the estuary (Péron 1824: 64–65). His companions continued North to the end of the estuary, then returned via the beach (Marchant 1982: 137).

The mouth of the estuary, when found, was partly concealed behind two sandbars and was spanned by a native fish trap made of stakes. The longboat crews managed to negotiate the fish trap and row upstream a considerable distance. The river, or channel, was found to be quite narrow. The bordering marshes and swamps made landing impossible as the water was too shallow for the boats (Péron 1824: 71).

Late in the afternoon, when the various parties met back on the beach, *Géographe*'s longboat was signalled to come closer to the estuary mouth to pick up members of the shore party. The two men on board botched the procedure and found themselves embayed. One of the smaller longboats rowed out in an effort to help, but the chaloupe eventually broached and was swamped by large waves. It was then washed ashore, coming to rest in about 4 ft (1.25m) of water, with waves breaking over the top. The other small longboat had earlier returned to the *Naturaliste*, so those aboard the ships knew nothing of the accident on shore. As it was now quite dark, it was decided to wait until morning to try to refloat the chaloupe. Meanwhile, Hamelin set out to row back to the *Naturaliste*, raise the alarm and request block and tackle etc. (Péron 1824: 77). François Péron then described events as they unfolded.

Next morning the task of refloating the chaloupe proved impossible for the 25 men still ashore, as by then the boat was half full of sand and the surf dangerous. Some stores, rifles and sails had been rescued and piled on the beach. Late in the day when help had not arrived, the sails were used to rig up a temporary shelter behind the dunes, but by and large, the new day was spent searching for food and fresh water, as they had lost most of their supplies. Those on shore could not see the ships and concern grew that they had been abandoned for the duration of the storm, which was gaining in strength hour by hour, the waves now reaching the base of the small dunes behind which they sheltered.

The following morning a small group, not too badly affected by the poor quality food they had consumed the previous evening, volunteered to walk to the head of the bay where the dunes were higher, intending to light a signal fire. They were relieved to find the ships still in the area and even more so to see them hoist sail and proceed towards them. Late the previous afternoon, Hamelin had finally reached the *Naturaliste* and reported the plight of those on shore. It had taken he and his crew 22 hours to row six miles in appalling conditions. In addition to a strong headwind and swell, they battled a strong current running from North to South.

A rescue party was despatched early on 8 June. Block and tackle and carpenters were sent in the hope of repairing and refloating the chaloupe. Nothing could be done due to the weight of sand in the hull and the raging surf. The block and tackle was left on shore, as were the items recovered from the stricken vessel, the scientific equipment and collected specimens. It was impossible to do more than save the men. Even so, one man, Thomas (Timothée) Vasse, failed to successfully board one of the rescue vessels, disappeared beneath the waves and was presumed drowned (Péron 1824: 77–81).

As the rescue was taking place, Baudin moved his two ships as close as he dared to the rescue site and as soon as everyone was aboard, around 9 pm on 8 June, he prepared to set sail hoping to reach the open sea before the storm hit in earnest. The barometer fell to its lowest reading on 10 June (27.10 inches or 917 hPas). The storm raged a further 6 days and Baudin noted these were, without doubt, the worst conditions he had encountered since leaving France (Cornell 1974: 184).

The carpenter's report is significant. This was the situation on 8 June, two days after the accident:

The longboat has sunk completely and is covered by more than 2ft (60cm) of water. It is, moreover, quite full of sand and is so embedded that it makes a shallow of more than 5ft (1.52m) in circumference, upon which you may walk as if on a platform. I do not think that the longboat has been damaged, but unless there should be a Spring Tide when the sea would go out far enough to leave it uncovered, it is useless to try getting it off the land (Cornell 1974: 184).

North or north-westerly winds of increasing strength would have continued on shore for a further two or three days before a wind change on 10 or 11 June. Under these conditions it is reasonable to presume the chaloupe remained, and possibly still remains, buried in the sand where it came to rest. It may have been partially uncovered from time to time by the seasonal movement of beach sand, but being so full of sand and deeply embedded, is unlikely to have shifted.

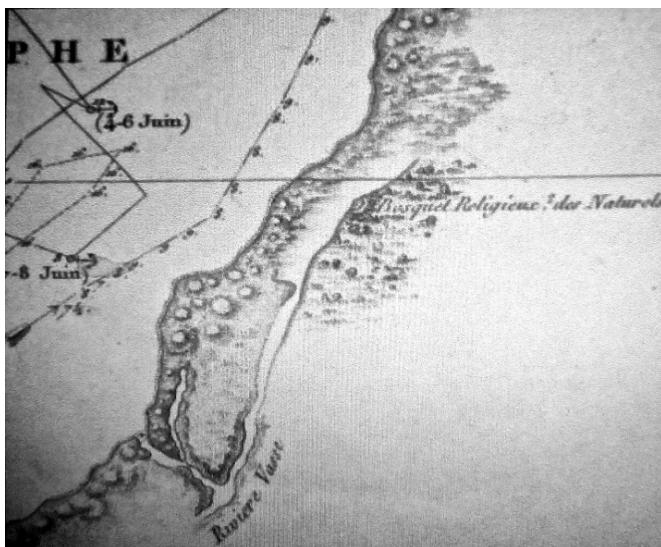


Figure 1. Wonnerup Estuary from the map produced in 1804 following Baudin's expeditions (Freycinet Atlas, 1812).

The map names the Vasse River at the head of the inlet. Baudin's men did not venture south of the Wonnerup Estuary, so did not discover the second estuary, which is known as the Vasse Estuary. Some researchers question the accuracy of the French map, as the

shoreline today is almost straight and the Wonnerup Deadwater extends much further North along the coast. Baudin had up to 27 men exploring the coastal fringes for several days and charting the coastline was one of the allotted tasks. All the material recorded in logs and journals (as outlined above) suggests the presence of headlands and bays. Baudin even called the small bay in which the incident occurred Blunder Bay (Marchant 1982: 277). It would seem the map is substantially correct. One detail which is a little suspect is the angle of the inlet to the Wonnerup Estuary. A sketch drawn by Heirisson at the time shows a more acute angle, which coincides with the course of the channel above the bends that are evident today. He measured the deadwater at 550 metres, which is consistent with the map above (Marchant 1982: 276). This area of deadwater has nothing whatever to do with the present Wonnerup Deadwater and now forms part of the channel above the Wonnerup floodgates. At some time after 1801 the inlet to the Wonnerup Estuary was blocked, either by a build-up of sand to seaward, or debris accumulating behind the fish trap, or both. Water flowing from the inland rivers was diverted along the deadwater and eventually breached the sand dunes part way along its length, cutting a new exit to the sea.

Changes to the coastline

Damming of the coastal streams in the Busselton–Wonnerup district began 3000 years ago with the development of barrier sandbars. Swamps formed behind these bars and a dune system gradually built up to seaward. It is estimated that over the past 1000 years, progradation rates of up to 0.6 metres per annum have occurred (Swan 1990). This is regarded as a fast rate, but between 1830 and 1870 the rate appears to have accelerated markedly.

The map produced in 1804 as a result of Baudin's two expeditions and that produced in 1832 following Stirling's survey in 1829, shows the coastline remained substantially the same. It appears the estuaries were in flood when the 1829 survey took place and there is no detail of the Wonnerup area available. The 1832 map does suggest some erosion of the headlands, with much of the eroded material accumulating in the bays, but despite this movement of sand, there remained a series of headlands and bays from Bunbury around to Dunsborough. The process of change was underway, however, and over the next few years the headlands all but disappeared and the bays were largely filled in, forming an almost straight coastline. Lieutenant Bunbury, who arrived in the Vasse region in December 1836 had been instructed to build barracks and plan a township on the Vasse Estuary near the inlet. Governor Stirling was keen to develop a port in the area, but Bunbury described both the Vasse and Wonnerup inlets as totally unsuitable for harbours due to moving sandbars and shallow water. He was similarly critical of the Wonnerup Townsite where, he said, mud and water were far more plentiful than dry land (Jennings 1983: 97). George Fletcher Moore, who visited the district in February 1838, a year after these reports were made, described great estuaries and much land apparently recently recovered from the sea (Jennings 1983: 146). It was not until the 1870s that Lieutenant Archdeacon, government surveyor, actually measured the change. He noted that the sea in the Vasse–Wonnerup district had receded around nine chains (180m) since the first government survey of the coast 30 years earlier (Cowan, *Western Mail* 19 December 1929: 7). This equates to around 6 metres per annum. The observation is slightly misleading, but it does confirm the reality of a dynamic coastline and very noticeable change. This is clearly demonstrated in periodic maps of the area. There was a slowing of rapid progradation after 1870, but it did continue into the early 1900s. By comparison, aerial photos taken during the 1940s and the satellite images of today show very little change. So the movement of sand and silt has, in more

recent times, slowed considerably. Why such significant change between 1800 and 1900 and so little since?

Rapid change could only occur as a result of frequent, destructive storms, the eroded material from the headlands, which were composed of sand, not of rock, fuelling the sand transportation system normally found in Geographe Bay and accelerating the build up of sand in the bays and along the coastline in general in subsequent years. As a direct result of these storms, spits and bars developed in the Wonnerup district completely altering the pre-1800 coastline.

The intense low pressure system encountered by Baudin in June 1801 undoubtedly led to some beach erosion, but one storm cannot alter a coastline. It requires many such storms to have an impact. As was noted by Hamelin in his struggle to row back to the *Naturaliste*, strong northerly winds indicative of an approaching storm, generate strong currents flowing from North to South. As the eastern shoreline of Geographe Bay is roughly parallel to this, eroded material is not only drawn offshore, or moved southward by longshore drift, some sand will be carried South in suspension and eventually south-west around the bottom of the bay. In contrast to these storm driven currents, the current which eventually brings the sand back to the beach, flows from the NW to SE and is the dominant current in Geographe Bay (Swan 1990). There are no official climate records for the period in question, but by examining the available eye witness accounts gathered by the Bureau of Meteorology, it is obvious the winters of 1829, 1830, 1831 and thereafter, were indeed stormy, leading to substantial damage to shipping in the Perth region and elsewhere. Looking at the worst of the winter storms specific to the Vasse region it was reported gale force winds were experienced in the vicinity of Cape Naturalist between 20 and 28 August 1834. 1838 was a particularly stormy winter with continuous gales and heavy seas between 24 May and 10 June. The oldest residents in the region said they had not experienced such a heavy sea before. And so it continued through to 1845, when on 28 February a terrific hurricane visited the Colony. The barometer fell steadily for five days during which time the wind from the north-north-west increased steadily. The general opinion was that it blew harder than in winter. In 1858, 1860, 1866 and '67 further damaging storms were recorded (BOM 1929: 164–168). After that time storm events seem to have taken place less frequently. After 1870 there was a noticeable slowing of progradation in the Vasse–Wonnerup district due to this decrease in storm activity and a reduction in the amount of eroded material available for redistribution.

Formation of the Deadwater

A combination of storm surge and higher, steeper, storm driven waves, causes erosion to the upper regions of a beach not normally under attack and carries much of the eroded material out to sea in suspension. The turbulence of the waves breaking off a beach also excavates a trough in the sandy bottom. Some of the sand returns to the beach, the rest is deposited on the offshore flank of the trough. Thus sand carried in the backwash and in rip currents, gradually forms an offshore sandbar and sand moving shorewards from deeper water and longshore drift add to the seaward flank of the bar. Longshore currents appear to have had a considerable influence on the Wonnerup sandbar, which is attached to land at the northern end. Here there is a noticeable inward curve of the original coastline and it is just such a divergence that allows a sandspit to grow. In time, perhaps over several storm seasons, the sandbar grows and becomes emergent creating a barrier bar, or in this case, a spit. If conditions are right, this gradually builds up further due to swash, wind action and longshore drift. These bars are separated from beaches by shallow lagoons and cut the

beach off from the open sea (Sandbar|geology|Britannica.com).
www.britannica.com/Ebchecked/topic/522050/sandbar Viewed 20 June 2015.

Thus the Wonnerup Deadwater formed as a result of significant storm action which produced an offshore spit during the course of the 1830s. The spit was not evident at the time of Baudin's visits (1801, 1803), nor when Stirling's coastal surveys were undertaken (1829). A comparison of the French map and a detailed survey of the same area produced some forty years later, shows just how much the shoreline changed during this forty year period. The second map, based on a survey by H.M. Ommanney, is the first to show the newly formed Deadwater. It is not known exactly when the sandbar emerged to become a permanent coastal feature, but it was above water when Ommanney produced survey maps of the Vasse coastline in 1839 (Maps Online|SRO. Survey plans. Historic [series 234, consignment 3844] 1772-1882.
www.sro.wa.gov.au/archive-collection/maps-online Viewed 15 May 2015.

When comparing the two maps (below) it is helpful to use the prominent point part way along the seaward shore of the inland estuary as a reference. This is the point at which Péron crossed to the far shore.

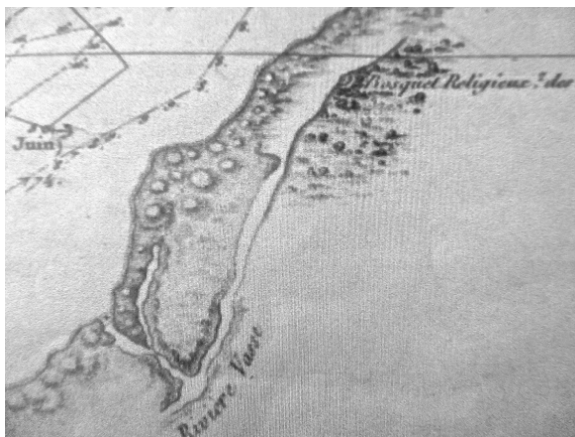


Figure 2. Wonnerup Estuary 1804 (Baudin).

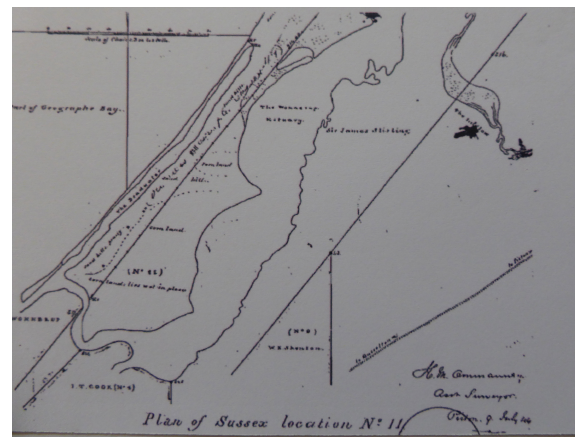


Figure 3. Wonnerup Estuary 1844 (Ommanney).

MAAWA's chaloupe investigation 2009

In 1801 the Wonnerup inlet/egress ran to the sea in a straight line, but was eventually blocked by shifting sand, causing the inland waters to divert along the deadwater, before cutting a new exit to the sea. Over time the shallow bay in which the chaloupe was lost filled with sand, so the site of the stranding now lies a distance inland. In order to examine the area, MAAWA obtained permission to enter both private and government land to consider the situation.

Even today the 1801 course of the Wonnerup inlet is discernible and forms a slight, but obvious depression when compared to the surrounding farmland. The present channel turns northward following the original deadwater, but a small amount of water seeps through the bank at this bend and follows the old course, making a section of the paddock to seaward of the bend very wet and boggy, particularly in winter. This is very obvious on satellite images and gives a good indication of where the inlet was situated at the time of Baudin's visit.

In March 2009 a small group of MAAWA members; Ian McCann, Brunhilde Prince, Annie Boyd, Sandy and Helen McCall, travelled to Wonnerup in an attempt to locate the likely position of the chaloupe. This was not recorded at the time. For the chaloupe to become embayed, it would have been north of the inlet, but how far? The men who had collected on shore awaiting the arrival of the chaloupe, were cooking what little food they had and were obliged to walk some distance to the stricken vessel (Péron 1824: 77). That is the only indication we have.

The original breach in the dunes, situated some 400 metres along the old deadwater is now silted, except when flood waters deepen the channel. The present course continues further to the north. There has been one definite report of wreckage seen in the old channel after floods (Peter Espinos saw wreckage in 1929). This sighting was recorded in a sketch map of the Wonnerup area prepared by Thomas O'Brien of Bunbury in 1993. Another report made by local fishermen is a little ambiguous. It is not clear whether they referred to a position roughly 200 metres above, or 200 metres below the Wonnerup floodgates when reporting the ribs of a large longboat at the bottom of the estuary. If around 200 metres above the floodgates, it would place this wreckage in a similar position to that seen by Peter Espinos. With silt now completely filling the channel, the MAAWA team was unable to locate anything of significance on the surface and metal detectors were of limited benefit, being unable to detect metal objects at any great depth in swampy soils. If not evidence of the chaloupe itself, we had hoped the metal detector search would give some indication of articles left behind on the beach by Baudin's men. Some of these items, such as rifles, cutlasses, pistols and blunderbusses, have a significant metal component. Unfortunately, mineralisation of sand in the area gave confusing, inconclusive readings and we had not obtained permission to disturb the soil. Indeed, such action was strictly forbidden. Our visit to Wonnerup was very much a learning curve. One positive was the opportunity to make very useful contacts in the area.

Deadwater wreck

A 17th or 18th century wreck of considerable size would surely have aroused interest and comment among Baudin's men. They explored the coast to the north and the south after leaving the longboats, so could not have missed seeing a wreck washed up in one of the bays. There was no shelter along the 1801 Wonnerup coastline, the exception being the 550 metre long deadwater and that lay a good distance south of the present Wonnerup Deadwater. Such an old wreck lying somewhere out to sea would long since have broken up. Wreckage may have remained along the shore, but no such discovery was reported. Stirling and his surveyors did not report a wreck along this section of coastline in 1829, nor did Henry Ommanney following his coastal surveys in 1839–40 (Maps Online|SRO).

However, an old wreck **was** later reported in the Wonnerup Deadwater. We have a fairly precise location, thanks to Mr Bindloss, who wrote to the Colonial Secretary on 26 April 1876:

It is contemplated to form a Party to explore an old wreck; but before doing so; would like to know whether your government have any claims upon it; if so what! The wreck is covered with water, sand and seaweed to the depth of about fourteen feet (4.27m) and is situated, in what is now known here, as the Dead Water, a portion of the Estuary which runs to the north of its present mouth about 40 yards (36.6m) from the beach, and about 2¼ miles (3.62km) from the Jetty of West Australian Timber Coy. Mr Reynolds claims that portion of the Estuary and the wreck as he says, he has land each side of it (CSR 891/7).

The Attorney General ruled that the wreck belonged to the crown:

It lies in an arm of the sea, its rights over which have not been parted with by the Crown. I should imagine Mr Reynolds claim to be without foundation (CSR 891/9 Attorney General' Office dated 5 May 1876).

Whether Mr Bindloss and his friends carried out their examination is not known. It is claimed Mr Reynolds recovered some cutlery from the wreck and he later admitted to selling off the ironwork soon after he made the discovery in the early 1860s (Gerritsen 1995: 37).

At the time of this written enquiry, local children played on and fished from the wreck and claimed the vessel moved when they jumped aboard. Later, during the 1880s, John Moriarty, who regularly fished from the wreck, noted the deck timbers were becoming so rotten as to be unsafe and were now level with the bank (McRae n.d.: 12). Presumably he refers to the sandbank as the wreck was reportedly 40 yards (36.6m) from the beach. During the 1890s it was reported the deck lay well below water level. A man standing on the deck would be waist deep in water (McRae n.d.: 7). The wreck was slowly sinking and before long may well have been swallowed by silt and sand deposits as the mouth of the Deadwater narrowed, the strength of the tidal flow reduced and the sandbank grew in size and elevation. Certainly there were no further reports.

Confusing the issue regarding the origin of the wreck in the Wonnerup Deadwater, was a response by Worsley Clifton, Receiver of Wrecks, to the letter sent by Mr Bindloss. In a memorandum written at Custom House Fremantle on 29 April 1876 he wrote:

The "Wreck" referred to in this letter, has been a subject of the greatest interest, and speculation, to the settlers of the Vasse from the earliest days of the Colony; it is evidently ancient, and from the Crutch of her Boom, rings of the Masts, and large Grapling Iron, found many years ago, near the Wreck which I have seen, she must have been a very large ship. George Eliot, then RM of Bunbury and I together examined the spot some thirty years ago and the interest is that there is a sand hill of some height between her and the sea. I think Mr Eliot sent the Crutch and large five fluked Grapling Iron Home; a large Hemp Hawser was dug out of the sand which had an incrustation of many inches thick round it – the rope was so good that the finder used it to tie thatch on his house!! Two ancient Coins, I was informed by the late J.G. Bussell J.P., were found on the sand beach a few years ago but I failed in getting any further information to my great regret – also about 70 lbs of Quick Silver was found in the sand (CSR 891/8).

Worsley Clifton was born in England in 1830, so was around 15 or 16 years of age when he visited the wreck site with Mr Eliot during the 1840s. Worsley lived with his family in Australind having arrived aboard the *Parkfield* in 1841. He moved to Perth around 1851 to take up a junior position at the Colonial Secretary's Office. His working life was spent in Perth and Fremantle, so although he visited the wreck site as a teenager, he was not overly familiar with Busselton (Mennell 1892). Why did he assume the wreck mentioned by Mr Bindloss was the same wreck he had seen thirty years before? The following description of the location of this old wreck may explain to some extent:

Deadwater Wreck. The name was given to a wrecked vessel in that section of the Vasse Estuary formerly used as a port and known as the Deadwater (Jennings 1983: 5).

During the early days of settlement the Vasse Estuary was completely separate from the Wonnerup Estuary and was sometimes used by the colonists to move goods upstream. Despite concerns voiced by Lieutenant Bunbury in 1837 regarding the suitability of the Vasse as a port, it appears the landing site continued in use for several years. In official correspondence on 6 September 1839, John Molloy R.M. made reference to it:

I beg to acquaint you that from the place where the Commissariat Stores have been directed to be landed, much useless expense will be incurred in getting them up from the beach to the store. There is a tub placed on a pole in the townsite of Busselton which appears to be the most favourable point of landing (quoted in Jennings 1983: 175).

Worsley Clifton assertion that at the time of his visit there was a sandhill of considerable height between the wreck and the sea is totally at odds with the Wonnerup Deadwater wreck site, but is consistent with an area of deadwater just inland from the Vasse inlet. His description closely resembles others regarding the site of a pre-colonial wreck. These will be discussed shortly. A newly emerged sandbar cannot be likened to a sandhill, especially not a sandhill of some height. Although roughly 80 metres wide in one or two places, the Wonnerup spit of the mid 1840s was very much narrower over most of its length. It had not had time to develop any elevation and was almost certainly washed by waves during storm events.

If not the wreck mentioned by Mr Clifton, what was the wreck referred to by Mr Bindloss and how did it get there? The spit was definitely narrow enough in places for a vessel to be carried over during a storm, but given such an incident was never reported, that scenario, although possible, seems unlikely. By the 1840s settlers were beginning to move away from the tight-knit Busselton community, firstly to the Sabina River and then into the Wonnerup district (Jennings 1983: 123). Lack of security had delayed this process and simmering unrest in the Aboriginal community remained a problem well into the 1840s (Jennings 1983: 196). As tensions eased and the population at Wonnerup grew, it became common practice for smaller craft to seek the calmer waters of the Deadwater during a storm. Whilst some successfully weathered the adverse conditions, others did sustain damage and there remains assorted wreckage in the vicinity of the combined Vasse–Wonnerup inlet of today. But exactly how and when an unknown vessel came to rest part way along the Deadwater is not known. Nor is there a good description of the size and type of vessel or the amount of damage sustained. All that is known is she had a deck and lay abandoned.

American, French and English sealers and whalers had been working in Geographe Bay for some years before settlement. They welcomed the newcomers and the opportunity to trade goods. Most of the trading was perfectly legitimate, but an illegal trade in rum and tobacco soon flourished. Tales of piracy and smuggling were rife in the early days and were partly true. By the mid 1800s there were many ships and boats operating in the area and many significant storm events during the years leading up to the discovery of a wreck in the Deadwater. It was rumoured that Mr John Hurford was murdered by his wife and an accomplice in order to acquire treasure he had recovered from the wreck. Although this rumour proved quite untrue, it persisted and, it seems, eventually aroused the interest of Mr Bindloss. John Hurford was murdered in 1855 by his second wife and her lover after a turbulent four years of marriage. The motivation was not pirate treasure, but access to the £2000 he had accumulated during his working life—quite a fortune in those days (*Perth Gazette* 14 September 1855: 3–5). Hurford's wife and her accomplice, later confessed to the crime and were hanged.

John Hurford was among the early settlers at Augusta and there he prospered as a farmer and sawyer (Jennings 1983: 169). Many of his neighbours moved North to the Vasse, but he stayed on at Augusta until around 1839. He had earlier selected 1000 acres (404 hectares) of coastal land at the Vasse just West of the future town of Busselton, but once living in the area, decided to purchase a further 270 acres (109 hectares) at

Wonnerup, where he took up residence (Statham 1979: 168). Having done so, he found the land quite unsuited to farming, being little more than coastal dunes and marshland; a narrow strip along the length of the Deadwater. On 25 July 1843 he wrote to the Resident Magistrate hoping, through him, to persuade the Government to offer a land swap:

I should have come over, but the country is like the open sea, the great part of my last purchase is under water during Winter and in Summer it produces nothing but samphire. I cannot turn it to any purpose whatever (CSP 121/76).

It was April of that very year (1843), that strong winds produced a huge storm surge in Geographe Bay (BOM 1929: 165). Although the offshore bar offered his land some protection from the ferocity of the waves, the Deadwater was still very much linked to the ocean and he could not escape the storm surge and coastal flooding. Severe storms during two of the three previous winters had probably produced similar flooding. It was mid 1844 before the Colonial Secretary replied, rejecting Hurford's request.

Two years later John Hurford, in partnership with Charles Penny, launched a whaling venture to supplement his income (Statham 1979: 168). Mr Penny had arrived in Bunbury aboard the *Parkfield* in 1841, planning to settle at Australind. Listed among the ship's passengers as Charles Beach Penny, he was 34 years of age, a sawyer and brewer. As neither Hurford nor Penny had whaling experience, they probably sought the assistance of itinerant whalers; those who had abandoned ship or been wrecked along the coast. Whatever the nature of the partnership, the venture, although moderately successful in the short term, was short lived. Charles Penny sailed off to the eastern colonies at the end of the 1846 whaling season and did not return (Statham 1979: 264). It is just possible Hurford's whaling venture holds the key to the origin of the wreck in the Deadwater; not necessarily the product of storm action, but a vessel used by Hurford for whaling or other purposes and left abandoned when he was murdered in 1855. The first recorded mention of this particular wreck appeared in the 1869 diary of Mr Princep, who noted that Mr Reynolds had told him of a wreck he discovered in the Deadwater (Gerritsen 1995: 37). Mr J.G.Reynolds now owned the Hurford land in addition to a large acreage of more productive land inland (Jennings 1999: 372).

It is still generally believed that the wreck discovered in the Wonnerup Deadwater was the 17th or 18th century wreck mentioned by early settlers. For that reason searchers have concentrated their efforts in this area. Many attempts to find evidence have lead to disappointment, but some years ago, Brian McRae, a keen wreck hunter, found a piece of timber in the immediate area, which had three large iron straps attached. The timber proved to be mahogany (*Swietenia macrophylla*), native to Honduras and Central and South America. This raised the possibility of an early Portuguese vessel; a caravel, perhaps (McRae n.d.: 6). While it is true many Portuguese caravels were made of mahogany, it is also true this timber was widely used for ship building throughout Europe and elsewhere, well into the 18th and early 19th century. Native forests had been cut out and timber imports were necessary to make up the shortfall. Mahogany was the timber of choice, as it had many excellent qualities and was relatively cheap. After exhaustive tests a Portuguese provenance was ruled out (McRae n.d.: 16), but it is quite possible the timber did come from the wreck – a vessel built at a much later date.

In 1905, Mr Reynolds gave two corroded pistols to the Perth Museum. He found them near the site of an old well, which was reputedly dug by the survivors of the pre-colonial wreck. While this seems unlikely, it has also been suggested the well was regularly used by

whalers and sealers to obtain supplies of fresh water, not easily sourced in this area. After examining an x-ray of one pistol, Brian McRae concluded the pistols were probably American made, dating from the period 1830–1860. Disappointing for the wreck hunters, but in line with the whaler theory (McRae n.d.: 15).

A recent exhaustive search conducted by *Australia on the Map* in 2012 failed to find any new evidence of the wreck in and around the Deadwater (Sheppard 2012: 9). The search was initiated by the late Rupert Gerritsen, who spent many years uncovering evidence relating to the Deadwater Wreck. Sand mining in the 1960s may have disturbed the wreckage (Gerritsen 1995: 4), but it is unlikely it was removed from the area. The remains of the vessel are probably buried too deeply to be located by ground penetrating radar or metal detectors. The deck was reportedly waist deep and sinking in the 1890s (McRae n.d.: 7). Evidence will remain at depth, but the wreckage is unlikely to be that of the pre-colonial Deadwater Wreck. A vessel dating from the 1840s or 50s is much more likely.

The pre-colonial wreck

At the same time a spit developed North of the Wonnerup inlet and created the Deadwater (the 1830s), significant changes to the Vasse inlet also occurred. A substantial spit running parallel to the shore formed on the western bank in the years before settlement forcing the waters of the Vasse to flow a short distance to the north-east before reaching the open sea. As this spit slowly grew in length and volume, so the two inlets, that of the Vasse and the Wonnerup Estuaries, grew closer together. Finally, around 1870, the two inlets became one. Over time, sand accumulated in and around this combined inlet, closing the gap between the two spits. A new shoreline was born on the seaward side of the spits. This is the situation we are familiar with today.

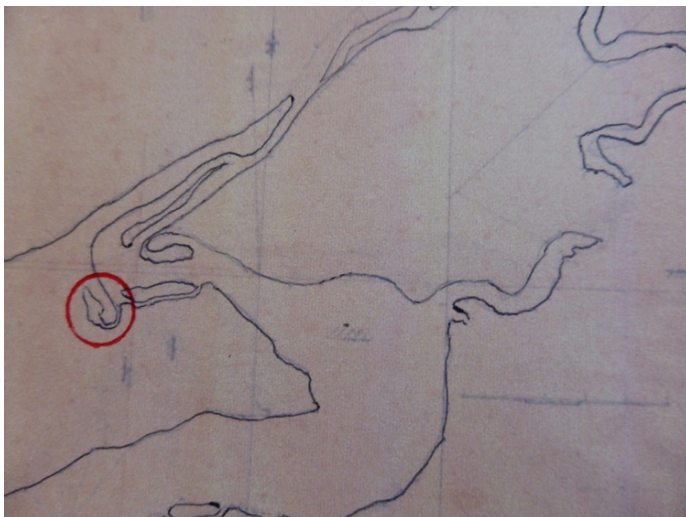


Figure 4. Vasse Inlet 1839 with an area of deadwater circled.

Let us consider the old wreck reputedly discovered early in the history of Busselton. Does this pre-colonial wreck really exist? It is difficult to give a definitive answer, but given the number of reports and the calibre of the men making those reports, it is likely it does exist. These reports, given at different times and in different circumstances, are remarkably similar in many important respects. What they all lack is a detailed description and an exact location.

1861 wreck report. F.T.Gregory – Government surveyor:

The remains of a vessel of considerable tonnage have been discovered in a shallow estuary near the Vasse Inlet and now quite shut out of the sea, which from its appearance, I should judge to have been wrecked more than 200 years ago, during which time the land seems to have risen about 2 to 3 feet (60–90cm) (Gregory 1861: 482).

Although reported in 1861, it seems Frank Gregory saw the wreck some 14 years earlier whilst working in the area (Gerritsen 1995: 7). Two points of interest arise from the above report. The reminiscences of both Worsley Cliften (quoted previously) and Frank Gregory are very similar, especially with regard the ship being very old and in an area cut off from the sea. More important are the words *in a shallow estuary near the Vasse Inlet*. As mentioned earlier, the inlet of the Vasse was quite separate from that of the Wonnerup at that time. They were 1 to 1.5 kilometres apart (Maps Online|SRO). On the Vasse floodplain sheltered behind the coastal dunes, there is ample evidence of old and altered watercourses, offering areas of deadwater. This seems the most likely location of the old wreck. Because of the popular and long held view, consideration must be given to the Wonnerup Deadwater as an alternative site. The Deadwater, however, is not and never was an estuary and a surveyor would not use that terminology in describing it.

Alfred Burt, draughtsman, was taken to the wreck site by Mr McGibbon. McGibbon told Burt he first saw the wreck in 1834 and described the hulk of an old ship lying in deep water about half a mile (800m) from shore. It was rumoured to be the remains of an old Dutch man o'war and several articles recovered from the area were said to be similar to those found on Dutch ships of that period (Cowan *Western Mail* 19 December 1929: 7). The claim that the ship once lay in deep water, whereas Frank Gregory (above) mentioned a shallow estuary, may be explained by ten or twelve years of silting in the old estuary as it was now cut off from the main channel and from the direct action of the sea.

By the time Mr McGibbon took Alfred Burt to the site in 1876, it seems further silting had occurred. Alfred Burt is quoted as saying:

*the deadwater was an almost land locked pool and the old ship was part buried in mud. It lay about half a mile (800m) from shore on the landward side. There was a ridge of land between it and the sea beach. The ship then stood some 2–3 feet (60–90cm) above the water, had a high stern and was built in the olden style (Cowan, *Western Mail*, 19 December 1929: 7).*

By 1876 the sand spit which had turned the waters of the Vasse northward, had indeed become a continuous ridge of land and was used as a coastal route from Busselton to Wonnerup. 1876 is the same year Mr Bindloss wrote with regard to the wreck in the Wonnerup Deadwater, describing it as 40 yards (36.6m) from the beach and covered in water, sand and seaweed to the depth of around 14 feet (4.27m). The two descriptions do not match, which certainly suggests two completely separate wrecks.

Finally, during the early years of the 20th century E.L.Grant Watson claims he was shown the old wreck by a friend he met at *Cattle Chosen*, a property owned by the Bussell family:

The ship was there all right, though not very much of her was above the surrounding swamp. At low tide we clambered aboard, the deck appeared to be intact, though all the hatches were full of mud, which had sifted in, tide after tide, and now probably filled every hollow space. The boat lay a good half mile (800m) inland from the coastline, and a thick tangle of vegetation had grown into that region where the salt and fresh water met (Grant Wilson 1968: 75).

Grant Wilson's account appears in a book written in 1968 and tends to confirm a Vasse Estuary location as there is no fresh water source in the Wonnerup Deadwater. Nor has the Wonnerup Deadwater ever been 800 metres inland from the beach. Certainly what started out as a narrow spit has grown in width and elevation over the past 175 years and is now indistinguishable from the coastal profile in general, but what remains of the Deadwater is no more than 200 metres inland.

MAAWA's investigations on the Vasse floodplain 2012–15



Figure 5. Site of MAAWA's metal detector search.

The Vasse Estuary is intentionally flooded during the winter months to provide a breeding ground for coastal birdlife. It takes some time to dry out, so the inspections carried out by MAAWA took place during autumn of the years 2012–2015. Despite covering large areas on foot in search of evidence, nothing of any proven significance was found and maybe that is to be expected. Consider the Vasse floodplain as it was in the early days of settlement. With no floodgates, the lower reaches of the estuary were subject to tidal influence on a daily basis; this plus significant storm surge at times, particularly in winter. Floods were commonplace, scouring out the main channels to considerable depth and sometimes carving new ones. It has been suggested the old wreck was completely immersed at times. At best, sections of the stern rose just two to three feet (60–90cm) above the surface. The water must have been clear enough on some occasions to look down and make out other features of the hulk, enabling some estimate of the size and type of vessel.

As the ship came to rest in an estuary and did not break up to any extent, there must have been survivors. Unable to refloat her, they would have stripped the vessel of anything of use to them and several centuries of weathering and scavenging by the local inhabitants, would leave little of any significance above ground. Thus, we decided, our best hope lay in a metal detector search, which was conducted in April 2014 with the kind assistance of Bob and Zack Sheppard from *Heritage Detection Australia* and two archaeology students, Liam Phillips and Jayden van Beck; all four volunteering their services for this endeavour. They were accompanied by five MAAWA members; Col Cockram, Brunhilde Prince, Ian McCann, Sandy and Helen McCall. At Bob's suggestion we concentrated on areas of higher ground likely to produce evidence of wreckage washed ashore or items taken ashore by survivors or scavengers. On this occasion we had received permission to dig to a depth of 200mm. Three teams of detectorists covered all likely locations, but found nothing except a few short lengths of highly corroded iron, possibly nails. As with the chaloupe

search, we were hoping that some substantial metal object lay buried not too far beneath the surface, but no strong signals were obtained. Although we covered a relatively small area in terms of the floodplain as a whole, extending the search may not be the answer. Our search covered the locations most likely to produce results and included two old waterways. One once continued westward under the road and into the Port Geographe development, so was partly off limits. The other we covered in full. Until new technology enables penetration to greater depths, little more can be done.

Conclusion

It appears there are three hidden wrecks of historical significance in the Busselton–Wonnerup region. The origin and history of the chaloupe is known, but not that of the wreck in the Wonnerup Deadwater, nor that of the Vasse Estuary wreck. Both the wrecks of unknown origin were known locally as Deadwater Wreck. This has led to great confusion over the years. Both wrecks lay in areas of deadwater (absence of current). In an attempt to avoid further confusion, we have given the popular name to the wreck in the Wonnerup Deadwater.

When first found in the early 1830s, it was thought the wreck discovered near the Vasse inlet was Dutch in origin. There is no direct evidence of this, but an interesting anomaly arose in research into Dutch influence on aboriginal language conducted by Rupert Gerritsen. Several Dutch ships were wrecked on the West Australian coast north of Perth. In more than one instance, there were known survivors. No trace has ever been found of these survivors, but it is widely believed that some, at least, were accepted by the local Aboriginal people and lived among them. Compelling evidence of Dutch influence on a local Aboriginal dialect occurred in the region of Busselton and Bunbury, which is a great distance from any known pre-colonial shipwreck of Dutch origin (Gerritsen 2008: 9). There also appears to be Aboriginal folklore mentioning white men living in the Capel area long ago (Gerritsen 2008: 9). This is quite separate from the marooning of Timothee Vasse, who, it was claimed, survived his brush with the ocean only to die a lonely death on the beach a year or two later (Jennings 1983: 4).

MAAWA is satisfied that its stated objectives have been met so far as current technology will allow and with deference to local sensitivity regarding the estuarine environment. Hopefully future technology will allow accurate positioning of all three wrecks, enabling the retrieval of items to aid in identification, whilst causing minimal disturbance to the soil. Until that time the mystery and the speculation will doubtless live on.

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