

PLUNDERERS OF THE STRAITS – THE SEALERS AND WHALERS

The Sealers – Australia’s first environmental pillagers

My focus in the presentation will be primarily whaling on the Bass Strait coast- there is greater documentation and detail. The sealing and whaling industries shared many similarities, yet had important distinctions. Sealing led the way, commencing from 1798 and, as with the later whaling, exhausted the living resource within a few decades. There were a few wiser heads, though they were unsuccessful in attempting to limit seal hunting to both a conservative “season” and the recognition of the importance of retaining breeding stock. In both industries, the logical response was that any limitation was pointless if not universally abided by, consequently human cupidity wiped out each business by the destruction of the resource. Both, however, would be superseded by industrial substitutes or cheaper materials.

In the latter period of hunting- the 1820’s, sealing was largely carried out by individuals or small gangs of hunters, usually left near seal colonies by a “mother ship”, with a boat and supplies, and an economic share of the catch in prospect or later, by barter, and an expected collection date. The capital investment per party was low, as the skin was generally the only part seen as valuable or economically recoverable (seal oil was much more difficult). The colonial industry was organised by merchants such as Henry Kable, Thomas Reibey, James and Joseph Underwood, Simeon Lord and Robert Campbell in Sydney, and facilitated by, initially, British ships in Australasian waters (as well as Yankee hunters). Local sealers came into the business in the 1820s. Initially, the Colonial sealers were limited to selling their skins into China, as the English East India Co. was successful in persuading the British Parliament to levy punitive tariffs upon exports from the Colonies.

Sydney became aware of the large seal colonies on the Bass Strait islands in 1799, and the proximity made it a focus for all. The geographic spread of seal colonies along the coast and islands of Australia & New Zealand, however, and the substantial annual harvest, was probably the reason that exploitation of the Victorian seal colonies was not reported (if it occurred) until the late 1820’s. The quantity taken from Victorian coastal waters was relatively very small. John K. Ling made a well documented (from original records) summary of skins landed from Australasian and sub-Antarctic waters. The Bass St, King and Kangaroo Island take of 340,000 skins (between 1798 and 1830) was about one quarter of the total, with about 60% taken in the first decade. That split was similar for the total skin harvest. The harvest effort in the first decade of the industry set parameters for progressively diminishing catches. This encouraged smaller vessel ventures and a harvest favouring individual hunters, often “banditti” (escaped convicts, bandits, isolationists, etc) who sold their take to passing sealing vessel masters for consumable goods.

The industry received good prices in England in 1806-08 which encouraged the trade. The market was underpinned by the use of the seal skins in hat-making. It was not until the early 1820’s, however, that colonial exporters were able to ship skins into the English market without punitive tariffs, although some merchants had been able to find means to sell skins in England profitably.

No figures were collected regarding employment numbers supported by sealing: the merchants might be supporting 100-200 sealers in organised gangs in the good times, and equally important locally was the labour required for ship repairs/construction, and provisioning for sealers. Costs for the merchants were high, due to insurance risks (unchartered waters, and risk of vessel/cargo loss), and the quality of curing and preserving the skins often derogated price.

Colonial ships became the major hunting medium in the 1820's, the individual cargoes reported from Bass St (for example) then were 1-2,000 skins or less, whereas the first decade of the thirty years, saw figures of 5-9,000 skins per voyage.

The noted destinations of the voyages were vague and it is quite possible that vessels, additional to the following named, made landfall on the Victorian coast for sealing. *Henry, Madiera Packet, Industry* and *Elizabeth* were sealing around Portland between 1828 and 1833, and *Fairy* arrived at Port Fairy in 1828/9, *Sally* at Wilson's Promontory in 1824. Western Port was known from 1809 with visits by *Active, Brothers* in 1813, *Sally* in 1824 and *Helen, Liberty and Comet* in 1826. Poor catches appears to be the reason for the small number of visits. Suitable seal colony locations on the Victorian coast were restricted to the islands close to Wilson's Promontory, and Cape Bridgewater and Phillip and Lady Julia Percy Islands - areas where you will find seals today.

This is a very brief summary of the sealing activity in Southern Australian and Bass St waters – if you wish to gain a broader understanding, I would suggest J S Cumpston's *Kangaroo Island*, John K Ling's survey of the exploitation of fur seals, etc (Royal Zoological Society of NSW, *Aust. Zoologist*, Vol 31, No 2 Dec. 1999), and D R Hainsworth's *The Sydney Traders*.

So long, and thanks for all the fish!

That's probably the comment of a whaler returning to Launceston in 1839, not the dolphins or a latter day Douglas Adams. I intend to explore some aspects of bay whaling.

I acknowledge three factors in my work for this paper – firstly Brendon Jarrett, who asked if I would be interested in the topic. Since I worked on the *Victorian Shipping Arrivals and Departures* books, I considered they had potential value to define the extent of whaling on the Victorian coast. The late Ian Nicholson, Graeme Broxam and R T Sexton's efforts made considerable contribution to the *Shipping Arrivals & Departures* context. Lastly, there have been many researchers, archaeologists and historians, who have made deposits to the "pool of knowledge", from which I have drawn.

I am attempting to define the structure, economic success and social impact of shore-based and bay whaling (the latter is the better term, as a significant part of the industry was supplied with moored vessels in bays using whaleboats and crews carried aboard the vessel, and reducing the captured whale to oil and bone on board the ship), rather than on-shore – which was the preferred and convenient method for Launceston based whalers. Hobart based whalers competed at Portland and elsewhere, with whalers camped onshore. That was also more convenient in South Australian waters, where land based camps had to obtain permission for occupancy, and had a tightly defined beach frontage. This industry has little to do with *Moby Dick*, or American or English vessels of 300 tons or so, out from their home port for 12 to 30 months (or more), and an industry that had been in operation for over five decades. It is focussed on the Southern Right (or Black) whale, then commonly found in the Tasman, off the east coast of Tasmania, the south east coast of mainland Australia, and across the Bight and into WA waters (my geographic reach is only the Victorian and South Australian waters), and commencing in the 1830s.

Why was the Southern Right hunted and why was the Colonial pursuit so long delayed? The oil (sometimes referred to as "train" oil), was derived from stripping the carcass of the outer layers of insulating fat and rendering it into oil by judicious heating in successive refining cauldrons. It was important as a lubricant for the industrial machines of the period (before the widespread use of mineral oil), as a fuel for street and industrial lighting, and use in paints, soap and as a lubricant in processing. An adjunct product, called whalebone, but actually baleen, was used in corsets, cutlery handles and was the 19th century plastic "look alike". It is fundamental to recognise that society of the time had limited alternatives (such as vegetable oils) to the products derived from whales, and

the industry was instrumental to maintaining economic progress and development – until oil and its by-product, plastic, became the substitute.

The whales were known to be off the coast with the arrival of Europeans in 1788, and the trade was initially confined to overseas based companies, as the market for colonial oil was in England, and a tariff made Colonial exports uneconomic. The report of Commissioner Bigge (1823) led to the reduction and later removal of the tariff, making a Colonial source competitive in the late 1820's. The crucial components, however, were capital, hunting competence, risk, and the sale of oil and bone in the London market. That required a local agent representing the London merchant, to fund the hunting, and delivery of oil and bone from the colonies some 6 or so months before it was sold, as well as a local entrepreneur to manage the fishing component.

Suitable conditions for the location of the whaling stations were limited. What was needed was a protected bay (safe anchorage for cutting-in tenders), a shallow sandy bottom (to protect calves from sharks), a shelving beach, (for launching whaleboats and as a platform to set up shearlegs and strip the carcass). Given the camp's sojourn of 25 weeks over winter, fresh water needed to be available, if necessary brought to the camp by boat as at Port Fairy. A good supply of fuel was essential for the trying out of the blubber in the pots and heating in the winter. The camp needed protection from winds, given the hours of idleness, either waiting in the whaleboat (the boats were often out at dawn) or ashore. Sheds were erected for trying out, cooking, dining, coopering and boat repair, as well as a hut as a dormitory. Lastly, if available, some small islands offered the prospect of "farming" fresh meat stock, identified as "Rabbit" and "Goat" islands at Port Fairy and the former also off Wilson's Promontory.

Whaling (or "fishing" as the activity was then termed) station locations were at Double Corner and the Convincing Ground at Portland, Griffiths Island at Port Fairy, and Refuge Cove (Lady's Bay) at Wilson's Prom., and Encounter Bay, Port Lincoln, Coffin's Bay, Cape Jarvis, Hog Bay on Kangaroo Island and Onkaparinga/Yankalilla on the South Australian mainland.

You will have heard of the "leading" headsmen (such as Dutton, the Mills Brothers, Campbell), but there were numerous others not "well-known". They were a multi-cultural community, with one Hobart vessel favouring an all Maori crews; evidence of Americans, both white and black, (undoubtedly deserters from deep-sea whalers frustrated by considerable service periods and confinement); Aboriginal and mixed race whalers, ex-sealers, as well as young Colonial lads- all seeking the excitement and enticement of financial reward. Success was financially recognised. This was the fundamental underpinning of the fishing – adequate return for results, with skills recognised and support services well remunerated. I suggest that the principles laid down for reward were ground-breaking at the time, and were significant in later capital/labour remuneration arrangements in Australia.

Capital was supplied by successful on-shore entrepreneurs, who had connection "in the trade". Merchants, ship-builders and owners, agents and successful whalers were partners in the high risk undertaking of financing the supplies for 27 men, at least 3 and usually 4 whaleboats, a supply ship (with the risk of wreck), loss of oil through evaporation or leakage, wear and tear. Syndicates were formed with short-term agreements between partners to meet the costs and share the profits. The Launceston Fishing Company (John Griffiths, Michael Connolly and James Henty) made a 3 year commitment from 1836, each partner providing relevant skills. There was an initial investment of £1,100 (whaleboats and whaling gear, & the hire of a supply vessel), (the vessel could be used elsewhere out of season), and a seasonal stake of £1,070, being the cooper's wages, provisions, allowances, freight, depreciation and equipment loss. This sum was at risk, funded indirectly by a bank or the agent representing London, and recovered only with a harvest of some 13 average sized

whales for the season. The bulk of wages were paid as a predetermined share of the revenue from oil and bone, so effectively covered by the harvest. For a 13 whale harvest, the proprietors might realise a return of 26% on their seasonal outlay. If the catch was doubled (27 whales) then the return would be 144% - you can see why the industry was appealing – as long as the whales continued to return!

Whalers were contracted for the season of 25 weeks (April to September), with flour, meat, tea, sugar and tobacco and grog supplied. Remuneration was based on the “lay” system, with varying fractions of total income earned by the crews. The cohesion and experience of the crew was critical (the fastest crew to reach the whale had the best chance of success), and, as mishaps would occur, the crews were equally rewarded (the total yield of the 3 or 4 crews was aggregated), to maintain morale and reduce the fickleness of “luck”. To reduce the chance of employment by another syndicate in the off-season, the whalers were offered waged employment. Employers were supported by magistrates if the former could find any absconding whalers. An attempt by a moralistic owner to discourage the use of tobacco and spirits by the offer of financial incentive was refused, and the failure to deliver such “supplements” to the whalers’ lives could lead to refusal to take the boats out. The Customs Officer noted that the 120 whalers at Portland were consuming rum and tobacco at prices which indicated duty was not paid, which the administration accepted, as enforcement was impractical.

The London market price was reckoned at £24/tun, which included the cost of casks, which were supplied and owned by the agent, though they would require repair and maintenance by the syndicate cooper, and the shipping risks) and “bone” at £125, and the syndicate was offered £15 per tun for oil, £100 per ton for bone. The price for oil and bone offered to the 3 headsmen was £10 and £65 respectively, and for the remaining operatives (boat-steerers, steward, cook, bullocky and 23 pulling hands), £7.10.0 and £35 per ton. This differentiation preserved the margin for the entrepreneur’s risk, and a premium for the crucial headsmen over the “hands”. Every whale caught provided a benefit for every member of the team, thus securing the economic bonds and unity of purpose until the season concluded. Assuming a catch of 13 whales, a hand would earn £15.11.8 for the season (12/6 per week, less his purchase of slops in camp) (trade wages were about 8/- p. week then) and the chief headsmen £100.8.4 (£4.6.0 per week). The established and universal structure of remuneration was fundamental.

The failure of the camp to capture whales was demoralising. Some camps departed their location in their whaleboats when the whales did not appear, or if the camps had been sited poorly, or from the non-arrival of the scheduled delivery of provisions. Desertions were a problem, as they compounded a failing venture. One wonders what the whalers did in their spare time – without scrimshaw, and other nautical skills that occupied deep sea whalers, and their limited literacy.

At the conclusion of the season, the whalers adjourned to the public house, spending much of their earnings and causing mayhem, until removed to Launceston with their equipment (Henty referred to the departure of “the rabble”). They left us, however, with whaling terms – “here’s a pretty kettle of fish”, and “what’s that got to do with the price of fish”. The term “fish” was probably derived from the concept of “fishes royal” –whales, dolphins and sturgeon found cast up on British shores which were asserted by statute to be the property of the sovereign. Some of you will also remember “bulls wool” – originally stringybark used by whalers to remove (if that were possible) whale oil from their hands and body.

I’ll not detail the hunt, described in many books, with the crew at risk of injury from the running lines, the threshing whale and its tail, and the sinking of the boat. The whalers had a code of cutting a fastened line to assist a crew in distress (in return, being granted half the whale’s output) and

Henty noted men pulled from the water after 30 minutes – without life jackets and limited swimming skills, but an oar to rest upon - not bad in Portland's winter water. The whales' tail fins were removed to reduce the drag as the crew rowed boat and trailing whale to shore, a pull that may take many, many hours. No wonder they needed the grog and a smoke when they reached shore! There were deaths – there was no doctor, wounds were likely to be infected and scalds a risk. While adventure appealed, the duration of whaler's service was generally not long.

The whalers were focussed on the yield of oil and bone only. The carcase meat was sought by local aboriginal tribes and dingoes. It is likely that Aboriginal women were involved in the whaler's camps, but the inter-racial relationships are either unexceptional (in the contemporary accounts) or were ignored by diarists. A source of trouble would have been the loss of equipment if stolen from the whalers' camp. A fringe group were the "tonguers", who were granted the right to access the stripped carcase to obtain what remained, as well as the oil content of the tongue.

My interest in the subject was piqued by the lack of definition of the whale catch/yield at the various mainland stations. The only estimate of whales taken was by W H Dawbin (Australian Museum, 1986), who relied upon Colonial Secretary Returns, with significant caveats. I have used the cargoes landed at Launceston, figures of catch by vessels stationed at whaling bays, and contemporary Press and diary details, albeit with subjective adjustment for unenumerated cargoes, "missing" years, and the uncertainty of the relevant tonnage lifted from southern mainland fisheries, when the vessel also collected oil from stations in Van Diemen's Land, before berthing in Launceston or Hobart. Between 1830 and 1839, Dawbin estimated a kill of 533 whales in Victorian and 161 in South Australian waters. In the following decade, 150 in Victorian and 208 in SA waters, a total of 683 in Victoria and 369 in South Australia. (Small beer compared with his estimate of 7,311 in VDL for the same 20 years). My estimates for Victoria are (for respective decades) 743 and 312 and for South Australia 153 and 235, making totals of 896 and 547 respectively. Another third again, but in the context of the total, little difference. The mainland fisheries generally provided an attractive, but uncertain, and certainly, declining return for the years between 1834 and 1841. Returns were dependent upon the extent of competition in each station location, with Portland always frequented at this time by at least 3 or 4 competing syndicates. I will be talking at the Port Fairy Historical Society on Saturday May 21st (2 p.m.) more specifically about whaling at Port Fairy.

An unresolved query has been the origin of the term "convincing ground" at Portland – was it the site for settling arguments physically, the massacre of the local Aboriginal tribe or the name given when Major Mitchell located Europeans on the southern shores. I suggest neither is, how shall I say it – "convincing"! At the risk of adding further confusion, I suggest the answer is more practical –the headsmen would not have tolerated a major issue and whalers would have resolved differences behind the dunny, and the massacre may have occurred, but has limited verification, rather than supposition, and the Mitchell suggestion seems far-fetched.

A logical explanation is that the area was used to explain the relatively complex lay payment system to the whalers, most of whom were probably illiterate. The whalers will have been gathered for each season, and would always include new crew, as the industry had a high turnover. Discussing the remuneration fractions and outlining the relatively sophisticated payment system (probably adopted from U.S. whale ships) would have been a logical discussion at a location point for the 27 men. Henty uses the term in 1836 and the term was used in another station, suggesting a similar process to get all to understand how it worked, and why teamwork would benefit everyone. What wasn't mentioned, I imagine, was that if the station got 27 whales, the whalers "wages" doubled, but the principals' return rose five times. Who says capitalism does pay!

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