

Report
Boat Wreck, Turtle
Bay
Abrolhos Islands

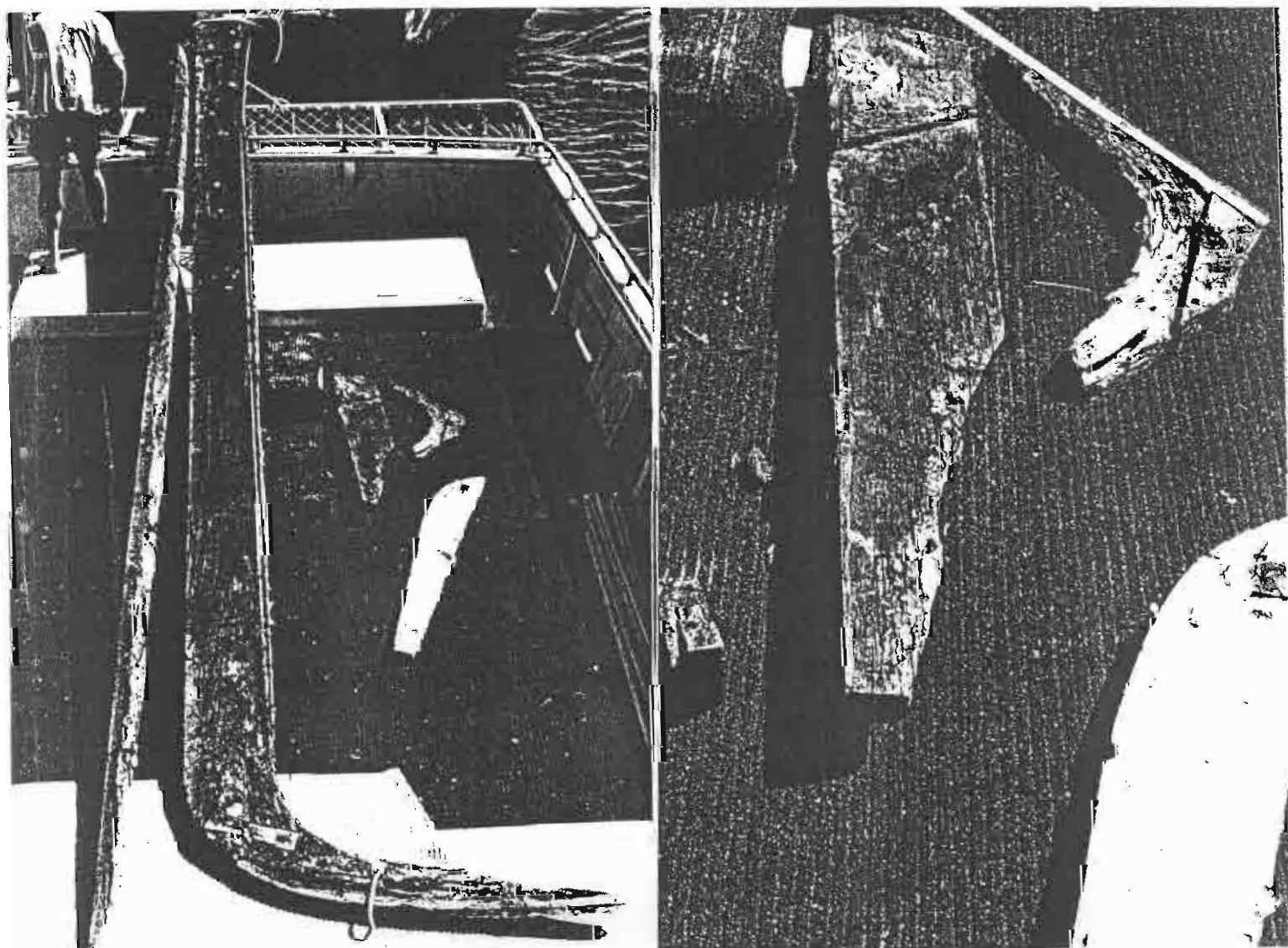
by
Peter Worsley

Introduction

In early March 1995, the Abrolhos Islands fisherman Lance Dennis of the fishing vessel *Spindrift*, found the wreck of a small boat in Turtle Bay, East Wallabi Island. The wreck was found in shallow water close to the shoreline and consisted of a keel with attached stern post and stem post, a false keel, the stern knee, a small amount of planking and sundry other pieces of timber. The keel was lying with the stern post approximately 2–3 m from the low water mark and the stem post in about 1–1.3 m of water further out in a northerly direction. The stern post and most of the keel was buried under sand with only the bow showing. (See attached sketch maps by Lance Dennis.)

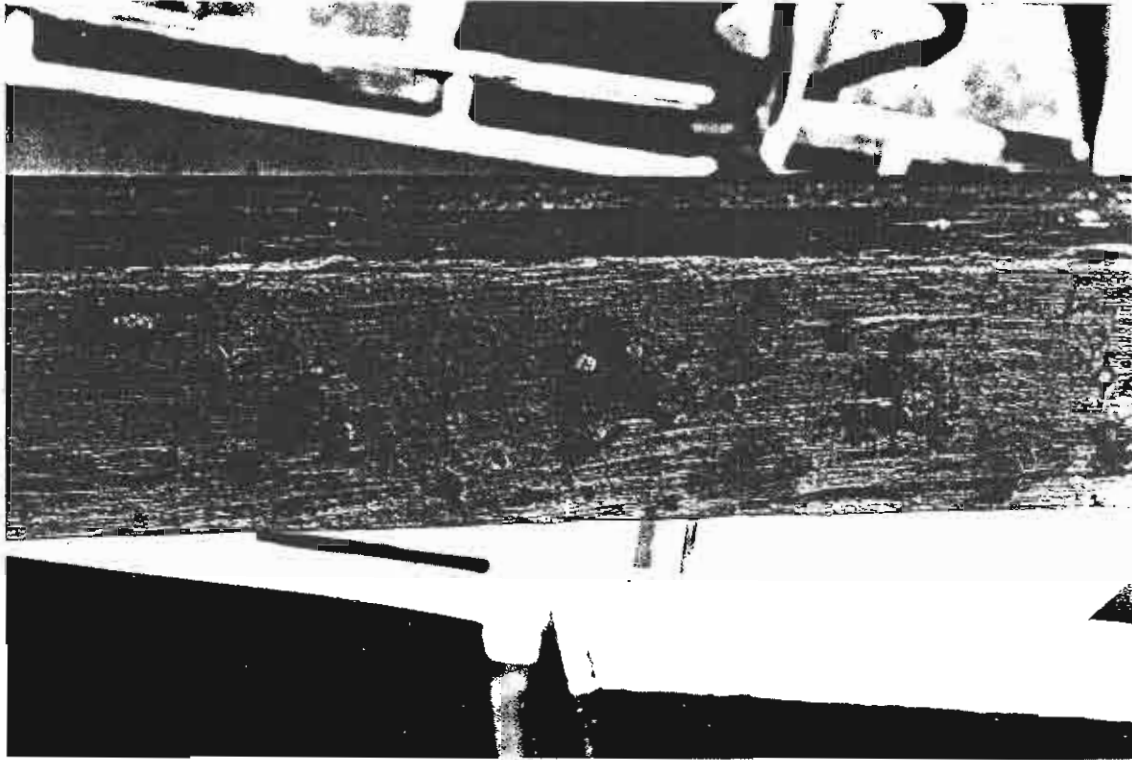
Turtle Bay is on the northern side of East Wallabi Island, open to the north, north-west and, to a lesser extent, the north-east. There are shallows surrounding Fish Point which projects towards the north-east and forms the eastern arm of Turtle Bay.

Lance Dennis contacted the Geraldton Region Museum regarding his find. He was of the hope that it might be a lifeboat or ship's boat associated with the sinking of HMAS *Sydney* to the north of this area. The Museum suggested he speak to Jill Worsley and myself. He phoned on 11 March 1995 and said he had brought the wreck from the Abrolhos Islands on the deck of his fishing boat. Jill and I immediately went to the Fishing Boat Harbour and examined the wreckage. Measurements and photographs were taken. It appeared to be part of an engineless sailing boat about 7.6 m (25 ft) long. The vessel was either double-ended or had a very small, tucked up transom.



Description

The keel consisted of a reddish brown, hard timber 300 mm deep by 100 mm wide and 7.3 m long. There was a rabbet cut near the top of the keel and, near the stern, some planking still attached in the rabbet. This planking was 16 mm thick and of a reddish brown colour. The keel seemed to be coated on the sides and bottom with a blackish substance which may have been tar, old varnish or old paint. There were a number of iron dumps in the top of the keel which appear to be where floors and frames were fastened.

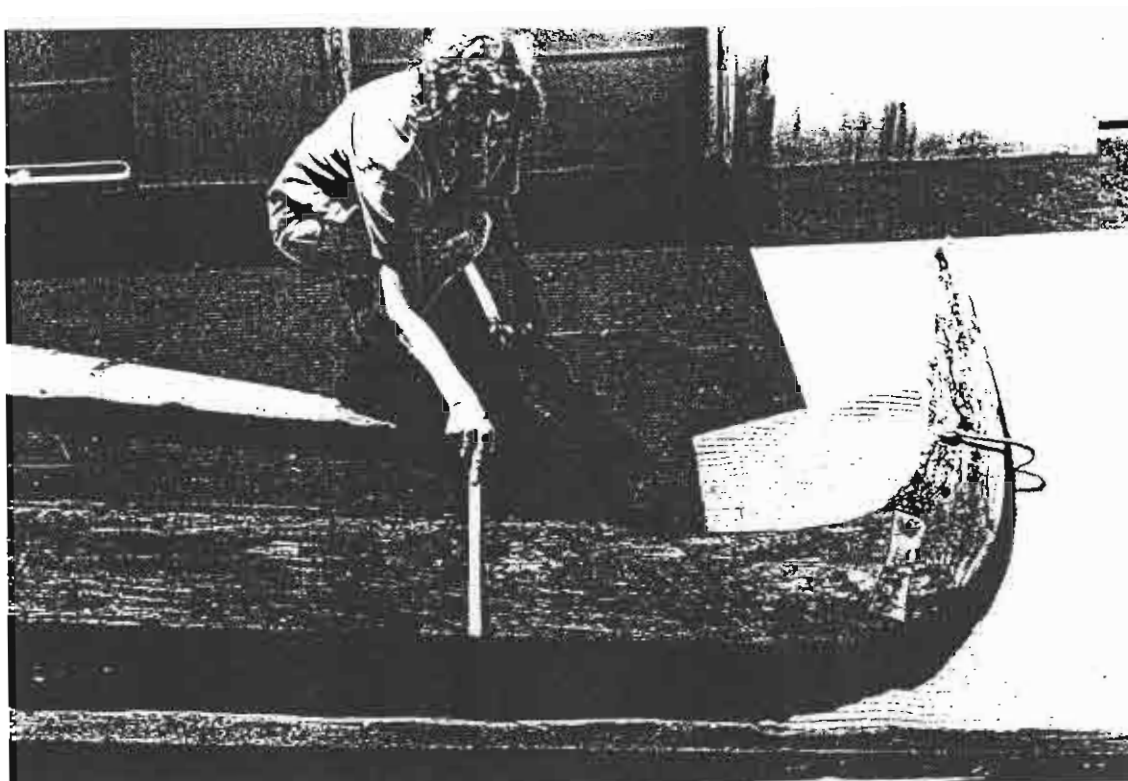


Top of keel showing dumps



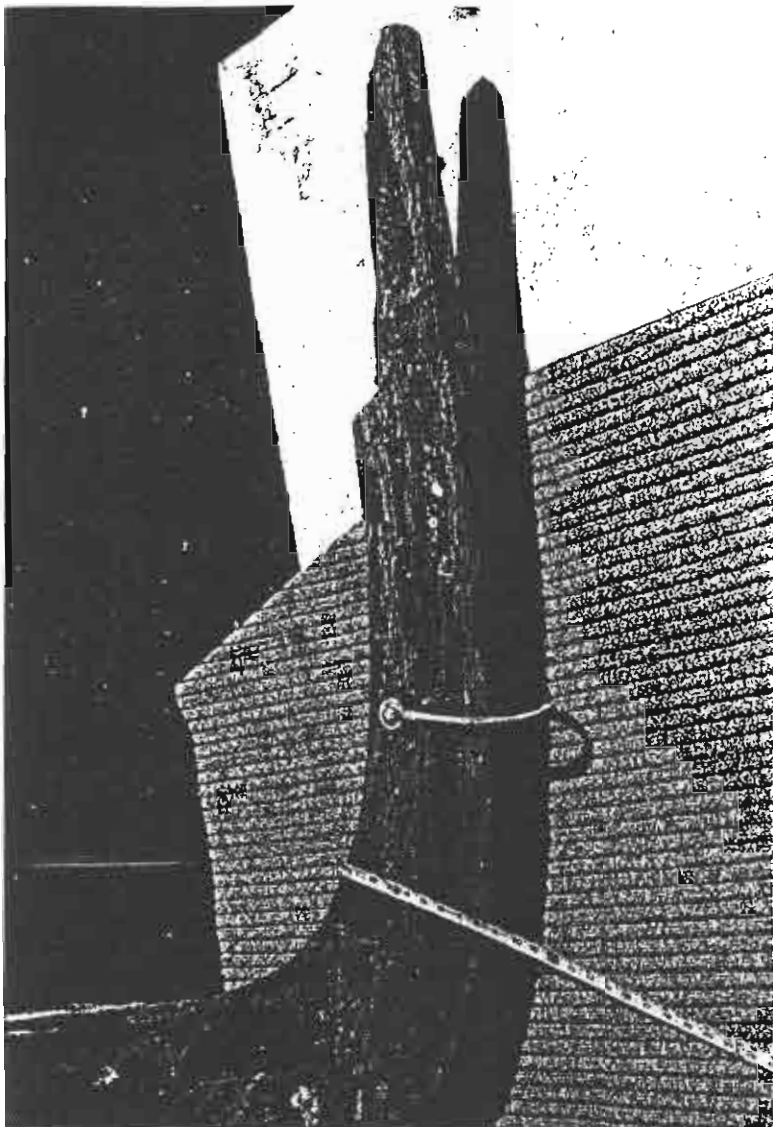
Top of keel near stern showing edge of planking

Both the stem and stem posts appeared to be of a more yellow coloured timber as was the knee. These timbers were in much poorer condition than the keel. The stern post appeared to have been burnt on the top. The stem was complete and both stem and stern posts were attached to the keel with bronze fish plates fastened with copper dumps. The stem post also has a bronze bail or towing loop fastened to it by a 20 mm diameter bronze pin. The bail is 12 mm in diameter.



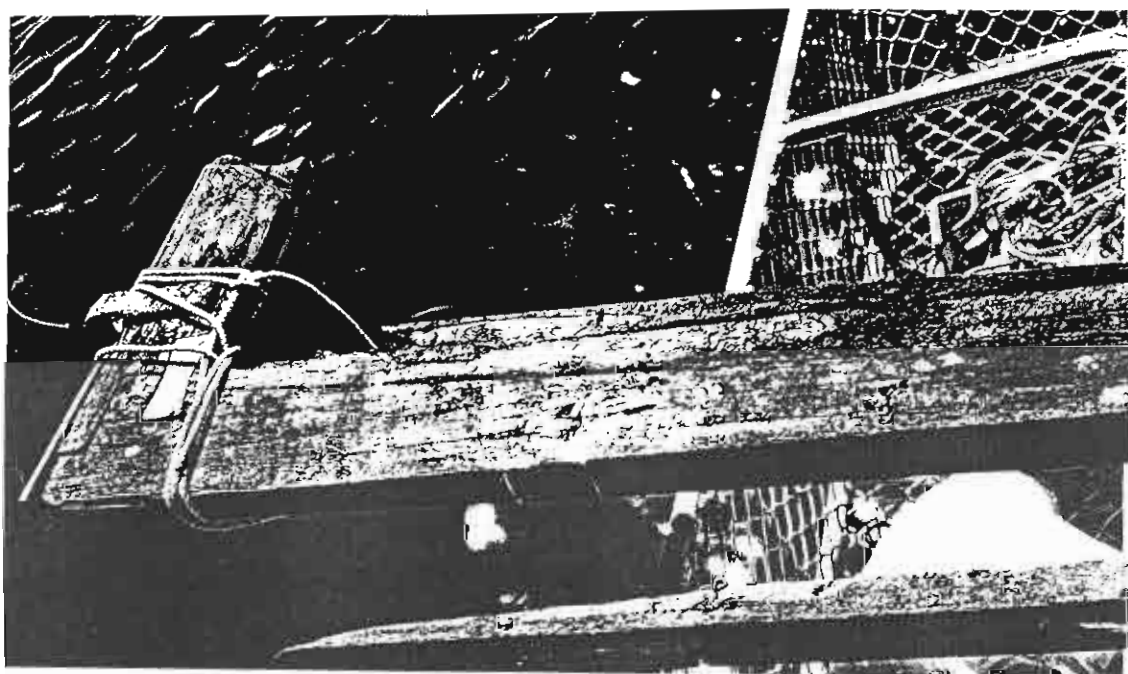
Stem post, keel and false keel

The false keel is of a similar wood to the keel, the same length, and 100 mm wide by about 100 mm depth. The top surface is in good condition but the underside shows considerable wear. On the after end is a bronze plate 6 mm thick in which is a 16 mm hole. This appears to be a bearing plate for the bottom of the rudder



Stern post showing bail and fish plate

The stern post has a rudder gudgeon attached (bronze).



Stern post showing gudgeon and fish plate. False keel below.

There are some screws in the timbers and these are all bronze. There also appears to be the remains of a thin keelson on top of the keel in one place.

Possibilities

There are a number of possibilities regarding the origins of the boat.

1. It may have been a small sailing fishing boat of pre 1950s which was wrecked at or near Turtle Bay or which was wrecked some distance away but was carried there by ocean currents.
2. It may have been a ship's boat or a lifeboat from a larger vessel wrecked on the coast or the islands and which drifted into the bay.
3. It may be the remains of a whaleboat from the shore whaling carried out at Port Gregory. Port Gregory is on the mainland reasonably adjacent to the Wallabi Group.
4. It could be a lifeboat or ship's boat washed overboard, during a storm, from a passing vessel.
5. It could be a boat from the *Sydney/Kormoran* battle.

Investigation

Analysis of the timbers of the keel, stern post and false keel by Dr Ian Godfrey at the Western Australian Maritime Museum shows them to be eucalyptus wood. (see attached report.)

Interviews by Lance Dennis and myself, with a number of older fishermen who know the Abrolhos well, indicate that the wreck has been in Turtle Bay at least 40 years and buried in the sand, underwater for at least that time. Recent scouring out of sand in the shallow waters has uncovered the bow section which then became visible and was discovered by Lance Dennis. In examining the bow he realised that there was the rest of the keel, stern post etc. still buried and he recovered these.

Articles in local newspapers were arranged in the hope that anyone who might know about the wreck would proffer information.

Information from Lieutenant Commander (retired) W.H. (John) Ross given to me by Mike McCarthy of the WA Maritime Museum indicates that the boat is not from HMAS *Sydney*. John Ross was a member of *Sydney's* crew from pre-commissioning until just before her sinking. That this was not an HMAS *Sydney* boat has been confirmed by Dr Godfrey's analysis of the timbers. HMAS *Sydney* was built in the United Kingdom by Swan Hunter and Wigham Richardson Ltd at Wallsend-on-Tyne and not purchased by the RAN until 1934 or 1935. Her ship's boats would have been also built in the UK and consequently they would have been of oak, mahogany and rock elm, the timbers usually used in Montague whalers and similar ship's boats.

HMAS *Sydney* carried, besides her motor boats, the following:-

- 2 cutters of 32 ft, 12 oared in davits. These were sea boats
- 2 whalers of about 30 ft, narrower than the cutters and used mainly for harbour sailing and training.
- 1 gig about 30 ft
- 1 skiff of 12 ft.

The only boat replaced during the life of the *Sydney* was in the Mediterranean Sea after her battle with the Italian cruisers *Bartolomeo Colleoni* and *Giovanni Delle Bande Nere* on 19 July 1940. John Ross has said that the boat was badly damaged, jettisoned and replaced almost immediately while she was still in the Mediterranean. No other replacements were made and

therefore the boat from Turtle Bay cannot be off HMAS *Sydney*. Because of the timber, it must have been Australian, more likely Western Australian built.

The type of timber used in the boat would seem to preclude it being from the wreck of a bigger ship close by on the coast or islands. As far as I know all the large ships wrecked in this vicinity were built overseas and would presumably not have been equipped with lifeboats of Australian hardwoods.

I know only the names of a few vessels damaged by storms off the Western Australian coast. In these instances the ships were foreign built and would presumably not have had eucalyptus timber boats.

Conclusion

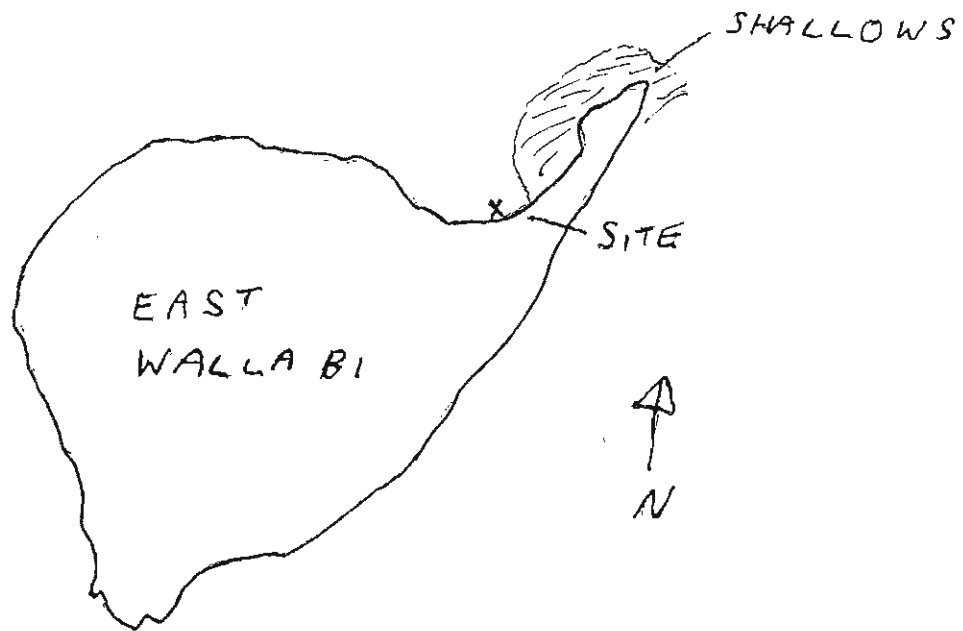
The most likely origin of this boat is that of a local fishing boat of the pre-1950s lost on the Abrolhos or on the mainland adjacent. Most of the fishermen who would know of such a loss have now died. Questioning the few remaining was not successful. At one stage the 'Cove Fishing Company' (correct title not known) ran a crayfish canning factory on West Wallabi Island. They used boats somewhat similar, as far as I can ascertain, to the wrecked vessel for catching the crays. These operated throughout the Wallabi Group and down as far as Rat Island in the Easter Group. Turtle Bay has the best beach for landing in the Wallabi Group should a boat get into trouble. Other suggestions have been to do with the sinking of the *Winetta*, a fishing boat, at the Wallabi Islands in June 1955 and the *Suomi*, also a fishing vessel, which sank near the Abrolhos Islands, date unknown. These were both motor vessels and would not have been big enough to carry a boat the size of this wreck. The *Winetta* was 38 ft long. Another suggestion has been that the boat was the *Thelma*. There were three sailing fishing boats about 25-30 ft long sunk or damaged in the mid to late 1930s. Two, the *Violet* and the *Lily of the Valley* were known to have been brought ashore at Geraldton and burnt or dismantled for the metal fittings. My informant, George Marsh, did not know where the *Thelma* was wrecked or what subsequently happened to any wreckage. However, Rincie Miragliotta told me that the *Thelma* was his boat and that it had a centreboard. As the wreck shows a whole keel with no sign of any centreboard slot or fittings, it cannot be the *Thelma*.

Informants

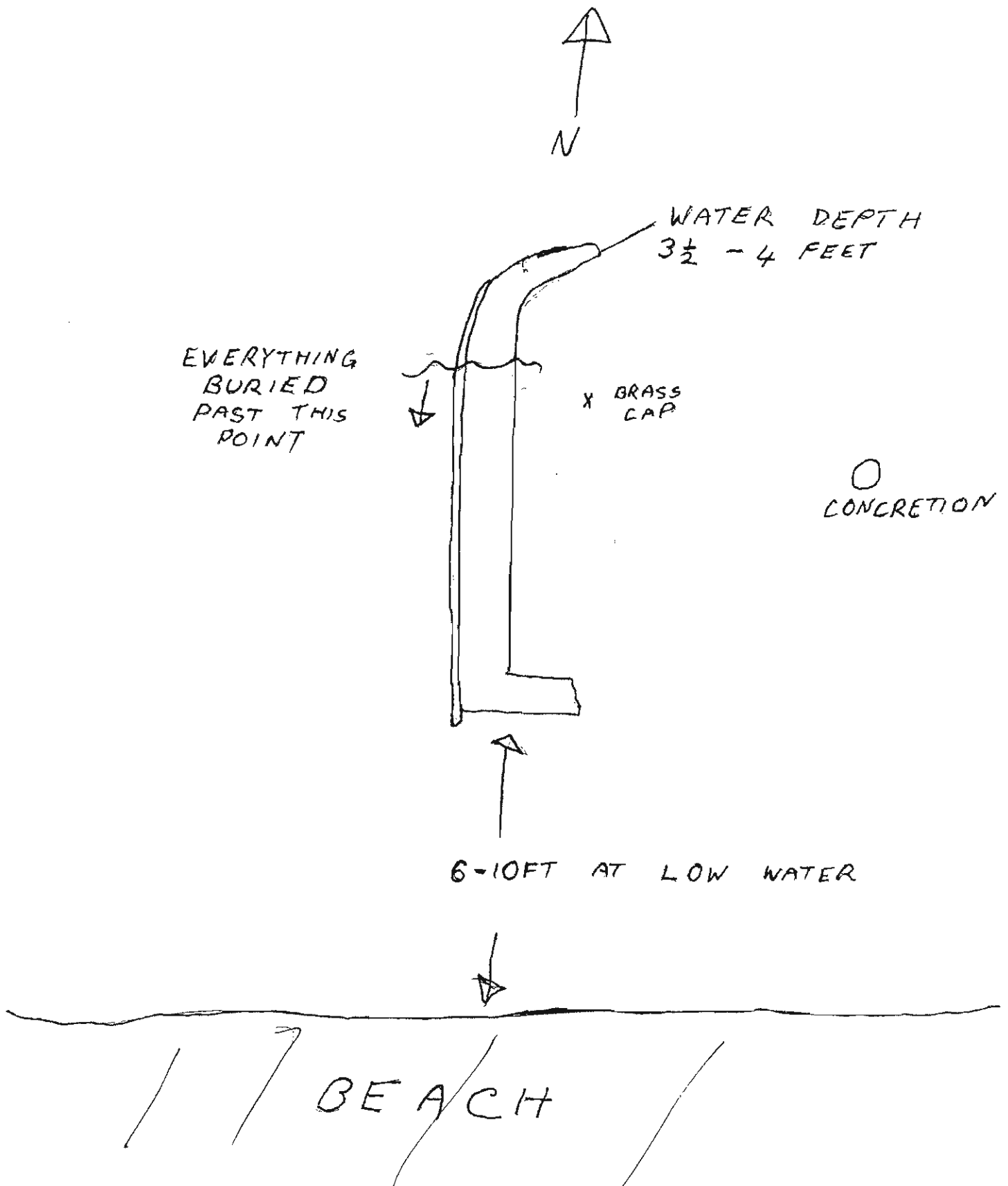
The following ex-fishermen of Geraldton have been of considerable help:

Harry Akerstrom
George Marsh
Chris Russell
Noel Burton
Les Mott
Rincie Miragliotta

- Kerr, G., (1985). *Craft and Craftsmen of Australian Fishing 1870-1970*. Mains'l Books, Portland.
- March, E.J., (1970). Inshore Craft of Britain. In *The Days of Sail and Oar*. David & Charles, Newton Abbot, Volumes 1 & 2.
- McMurtrie, F.E., (1941). *Ships of the Royal Navy*. Sampson, Low, Marston & Co. Ltd., London.
- Phelan, P., (1992). Whaler to Workhorse. *Classic Boat*, 48, June.
- Winter, B., (1984). *Sydney Fact Fantasy & Fraud*. Boolarong Publications, Brisbane.



Sketch map by Lance Dennis. Not to scale



Sketch map by Lance Dennis. Not to scale

REPORT:

WOOD IDENTIFICATION - TURTLE BAY, ABROLHOS

Four wood samples were supplied by Mr Peter Worsley of Geraldton. They had been recovered from the beach at Turtle Bay in the Wallabi Group of the Abrolhos Islands.

The end-grains of each of the samples were polished to a 1200 grit finish before they were examined microscopically. The tangential longitudinal surface of the sternpost was also polished. Results of the microscopic examinations are recorded below.

(i) Sternpost:

The rays are narrower than the pores and the abundant parenchyma tissue surrounds the pores. The parenchyma is also aliform with the wings connecting with those of neighbouring vessels to create bands of soft tissue. The pores are moderately numerous, of intermediate size (visible to the naked eye without any strain) and are arranged in radial multiples up to 4 high. The pores contain tyloses. Examination of the tangential longitudinal surface revealed that the rays are predominantly uniseriate with most of the rays being up to 10 cells high.

A burning splinter test produced a full white ash.

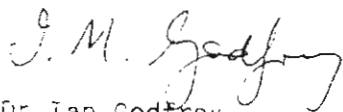
On the basis of the above features the sample in question is a *Eucalyptus* species, being a very good match with *E. calophylla* ('marri'). Marri is a light coloured Western Australian timber which is characterised by its strength and elasticity.

(ii), (iii), (iv) Keel, plank and false keel:

The microscopic features of all three samples are typical of those of *Eucalyptus* species - rays that are narrower than pores; vasicentric parenchyma; pores that are moderately numerous, intermediate in size, predominantly solitary though arranged in oblique fashion and which contain abundant tyloses.

The wood of the keel and of the false keel were very similar whilst that of the plank differed slightly in having a much more strongly developed oblique arrangement of the pores. The end-grain features of these three samples are found in numerous *eucalyptus* species including *E. marginata* (jarrah) and *E. diversicolor* (karri).

Microscopic differentiation between *eucalyptus* species is both time consuming and somewhat difficult and thus, following discussions with Peter Worsley, no further effort was made to identify the wood samples at the species level. If archival searches or other information indicates that there is a need for more precise identifications of these samples then radial and tangential longitudinal sections could be prepared for high power microscopic examination.



Dr Ian Godfrey
Department of Materials Conservation
20 March 1995



Marine Archaeologist Jill Worsley measures the width of the ship's keel.

Experts puzzled by shipwreck find

A SHIPWRECK found at Turtle Bay off East Wallabi Island last month has stumped the experts prompting a plea for anyone who has information about the mysterious sunken vessel to come forward.

Local fisherman Lance Dennis, working off the Abrolhos Islands four weeks ago, noticed what appeared to be part of a ship in shallow water, partly covered by sand.

Mr Dennis told the Fremantle Maritime Museum of his find and the museum contacted local Geraldton Region Museum friend and shipwreck enthusiast Peter Worsley.

The ship's keel and bow post were later raised from the sea bed and samples of the wood were

sent to Fremantle Maritime Museum for testing.

Timber specialist Dr Ian Godfrey believes the wood is from a eucalyptus tree suggesting the ship is of Australian origin.

"Initially we thought the ship might be a lifeboat from the Mayhill or Ben Ledi but it seems the wreck is much more recent than that," Mr Worsley said.

"A boat from the HMAS Sydney was another theory we canvassed but now we believe this ship is a 50 to 60 year-old fishing boat.

Mr Worsley has made a plea for older fishermen who may have information about the wreck to contact the Geraldton Region Museum or Fremantle Maritime Museum.

— By Stuart McKinnon.

MID WEST TIMES 5 APRIL 1995 P.3.