



Denison Leads and Lights

Maritime Heritage Site Inspection Report

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Contents

Acknowledgments.....	3
Introduction.....	3
Background.....	3
Technical Data.....	3
Management Considerations.....	4
Description of Site.....	4
Site Identification Comments.....	4
Associated Shipwrecks.....	5
Assessment of Site Significance.....	6
Recommendations.....	6
References.....	7

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Introduction

The purpose of this site inspection was to make a preliminary assessment of the extent of the remains of the historic navigational lights and leads of Port Denison.

Background

Technical Data

Date of Inspection: 21 July 1995.

Approximate Location: On Point Leander at the southern end of the Port Denison Marina.

Charts: BA 1033, *Champion Bay to Cape Naturaliste*. 1960, 1 : 625,000 and plan *Approaches to Port Denison*, 1 : 73,500.

PWD 48520 *Port Denison*. 1980, 1 : 25,000 and plan *Port Denison Fishing Boat Harbour*, 1 : 10,000.

Directions: The site is within the Port Denison Marina Near the base of the southern breakwater on Point Leander.

Site Condition and Integrity: The obelisk with navigational light is still used to aid vessels entering Port Denison and is in good condition. The stone remains of the other obelisk which was in the sandhills to the east of the Point Leander obelisk are believed to be still visible. However these could not be located during the site inspection.

Management Considerations

(1) Natural Forces. The obelisk and light are above the level of any wave action and would only be affected by wind and salt laden air.

(2) Present and Future Human Forces. The structure is within the townsite and has a carpark around it and a number of plaques attached as an informative tourist attraction. Because of this it could be the subject of vandalism. It is still in use, however, as a lead to the port. As such it is maintained and considered of great importance by the town population, which mainly relies on the fishing industry.

(3) Projected General Site Stability. As an essential navigation aid the obelisk can be expected to be maintained in good condition.

Description of Site

The obelisk was originally the lower, forward lead of a pair that guided shipping through the reefs outside the port. It consists of a stone pyramid set on a slight rise about 75 metres from the beach. There is a navigation light on the seaward face.

Site Identification Comments

In 1868 Surveyor Phelps put barrel beacons along the coast near the mouth of the Irwin River and a short way up the estuary. Although these helped guide ships through the offshore reefs the loss of the *Swan* in 1869 resulted in a call for a lighthouse. A kerosene lamp with a red glass was sent to be placed on a gallows at the end of the jetty. This proved unsatisfactory and on 21 December 1869 a tender of £45 was accepted from Richard Sparkes to build an obelisk on Point Leander. Yearly tenders were also called to whitewash the obelisk to ensure its visibility to shipping. This, and the higher structure inland, had lights placed on them and were intended to guide vessels through the outer reefs. A light on a metal tower on a sandhill 150 metres inland from the base of the jetty then directed the ships to the anchorage. This tower was removed in recent years.

The obelisk with its light is now the higher, back lead light as a new light on a post has been erected forward of it near the beach.

Associated Shipwrecks

Leander

A 173 ton brigantine, the *Leander* struck a reef on 14 November 1853 and lost her rudder and began to take water badly. The Captain made sail and drove the vessel ashore approximately 24 kilometres south of Dongara. This wreck has not been located.

Albatross

This 18 ton cutter had been sent from Champion Bay to the Irwin River to assist in refloating two coasters which had dragged ashore during storms in June 1868. On her return trip she put about because of heavy weather. She was swamped, rolled over and finished up aground near the mouth of the Irwin River. Seven men and a woman were drowned, including the owner/builder William Garrard. Three crew made it to shore. The *Albatross* was built from timber Garrard bought from the wreck of the *African*.

Swan

The schooner *Swan* (24 tons) was wrecked near Port Irwin while attempting to make for shelter in the reef in October 1869.

Argo and Dawn

Two schooners driven onto the reefs at the Irwin on 10 March 1872. Both were refloated with minimal damage.

Premier

A strong north-westerly wind caused this 51 ton schooner to drag her anchors and be wrecked on the rocks at Port Irwin on 1 July 1873.

Annie Agnes

Stranded at Port Denison October 1878 but later refloated after a period of 5 or 6 years.

Minnie

Stranded at Denison 12 December 1883 but later refloated unharmed.

Planet and Electra

Both vessels dragged anchors during heavy weather at Port Irwin in May 1900. The *Electra* (92 ton schooner) was not badly damaged but the *Planet* (65 ton schooner) was wrecked.

Julia Percy

Badly damaged while alongside the jetty during a storm on 2 June 1905 this steamer sank in 17 feet of water. She was later raised and repaired. The 42 passengers were sent to Perth by train.

Assessment of Site Significance

(1) Historical. The Point Leander obelisk and light is associated with the history of the Port of Denison and the early coastal shipping services to the north of Fremantle. It was linked with the prosperity of the pastoral and agricultural interests of the region including the shipment of cattle by The Cattle Company, a company formed of influential people along the Irwin River.

(2) Technological. There is nothing of technological significance in the stone structure. The current light is relatively new and replaces a previous oil lamp.

(3) Educational. The obelisk already has some descriptive plaques relating to some of the shipping history attached. More information would increase its educational value.

(4) Cultural. The Point Leander obelisk was, and remains, a vital part of the history of Port Denison which itself is so closely linked with the history of the Irwin District. It is a popular tourist attraction.

Recommendations

(1) That the Point Leander obelisk be gazetted as an Historic Site.

(2) That efforts be made to locate and examine the remains of the other obelisk in the sandhills to the east of Point Leander to ascertain its suitability for inclusion as an Historic Site.

(3) That a sign be erected at the obelisk giving a short informative history of the port and the obelisk's navigational importance.

(4) Consider requesting the Irwin Shire or the school children from the local high school to prepare an informative brochure expanding on the information given on the on-site signage.

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