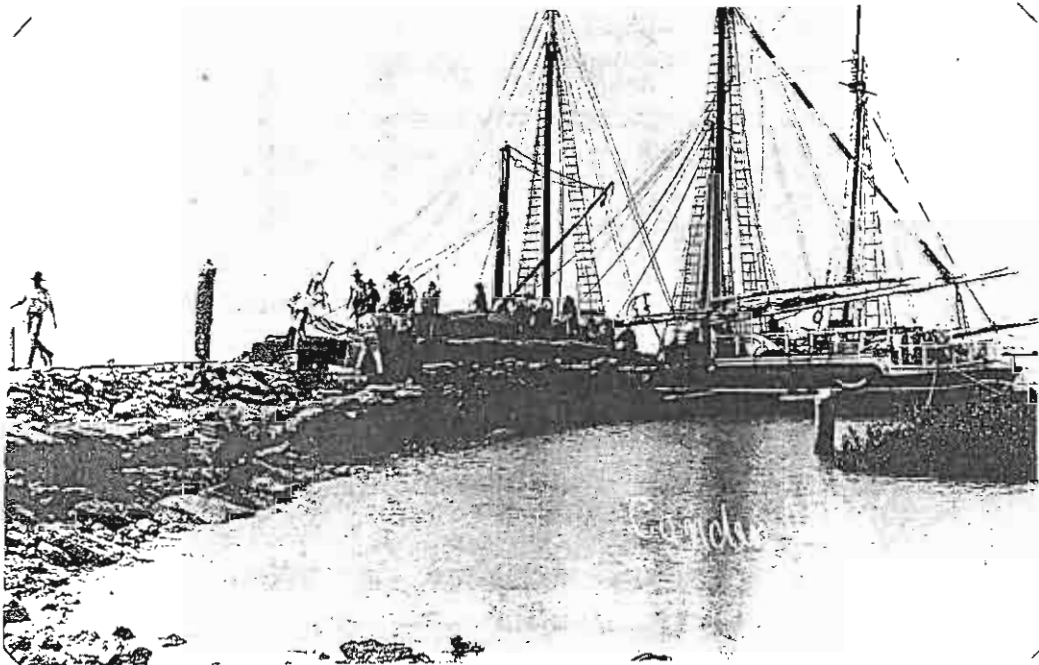


Condon

Maritime Heritage Site Inspection Report

by

D. Garratt, M. McCarthy & R. Shaw
1997



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Report: Department of Maritime Archaeology, WA Maritime Museum, No.128

Cover photograph: loading wool at the Condon Jetty (Pilbara Scrapbook, 1984)

Introduction

In September 1995 a team from the Department of Maritime Archaeology at the Western Australian Maritime Museum travelled to the Port Hedland region partly to examine a newly-reported wreck, the Ketch *Edith* which was reported lost at Condon in 1907. While in the vicinity the team availed itself of the opportunity to examine the remains of Condon. Officially called Shellborough, Condon was an abandoned 'port', whose inadequate facilities indirectly led to the *Edith's* demise.

A report, based on a brief non-disturbance visit to the Condon site and on a subsequent search of the archives, follows. This report complements reports by the authors on the wreck of the *Edith* (1891-1907) and Charles Broadhurst's pearling base at nearby Mt Blaze or Banningarra Creek, as it was also known (in prep.).

Acknowledgements

Mr Dick Vincent and staff DeGrey Station, Staff of the Port Hedland Library, Ms June Van Uden of the Port Hedland Primary School, Staff of the Battye Library, W. F. & K. Back, Ms Fairlie Sawday of the West Australian Maritime Museum.

Technical Data

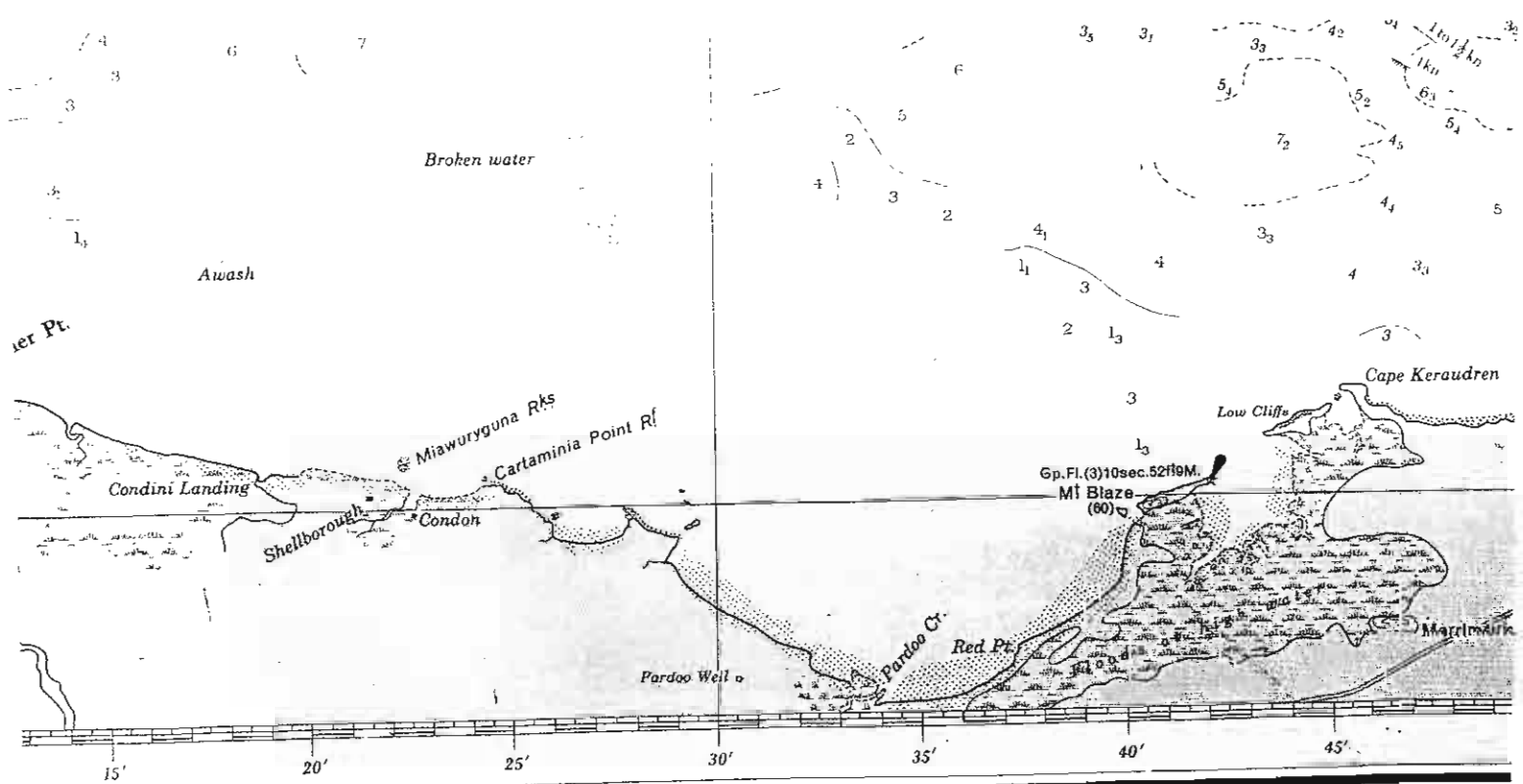
Site Name: Condon

File Name: Port Hedland Area

File No. 443/71

Figure 1
Chart Excerpt

AUS 325: Lacepede Islands to Bedout Island, showing Condon and Shellborough



Date of Inspection: 11/9/1995

Personnel:

M. McCarthy (OIC)
D. Garratt (Volunteer staff)
R. Shaw (Volunteer staff)

Location:

At Condon Creek, 16 Kilometres east of the De Grey River in the Pilbara region of Western Australia.

Position:

Latitude: 20°S.,
Longitude: 119° 21-22'E. (AUS 325)

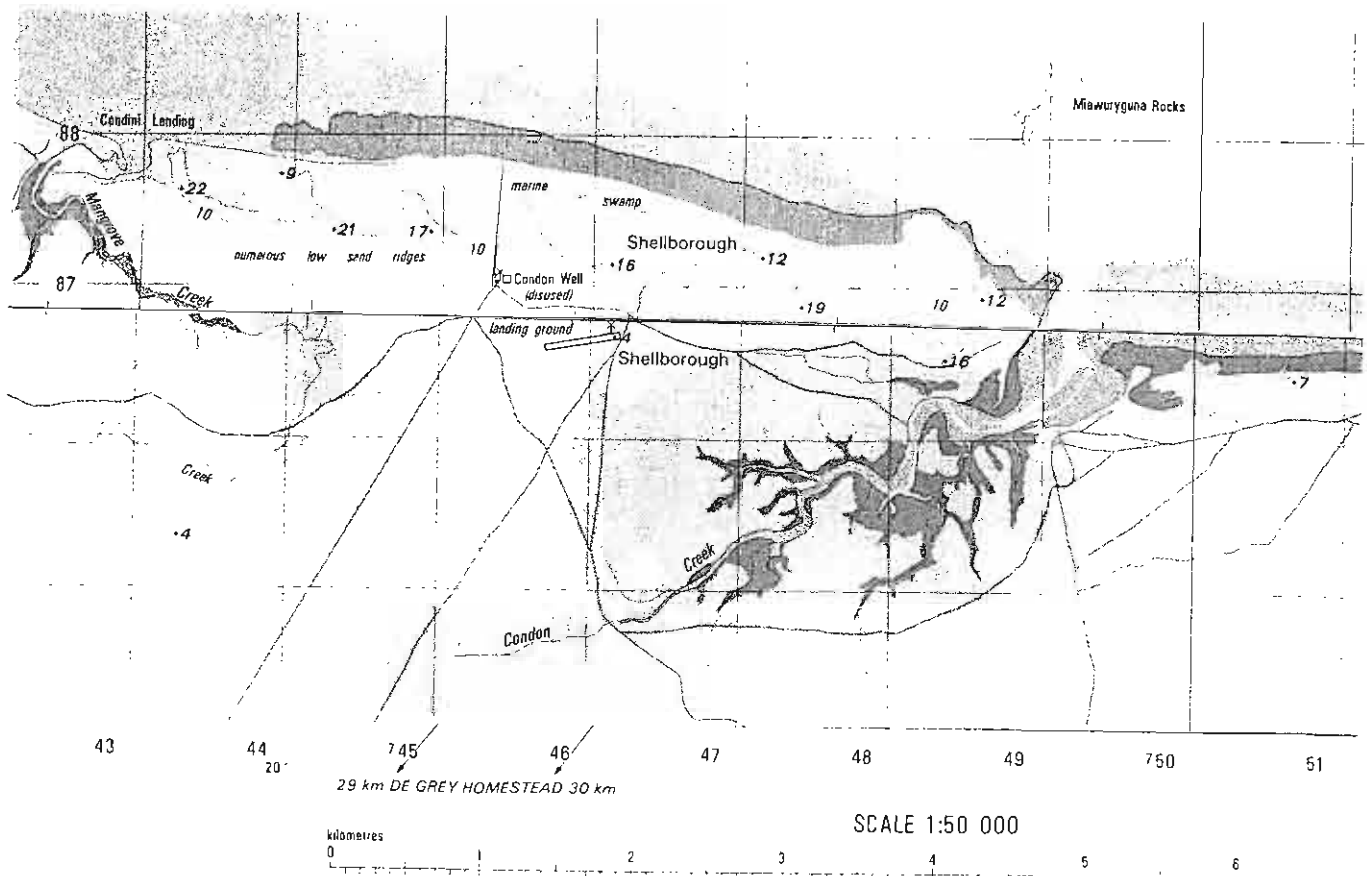
Directions:

Having obtained the necessary permission to travel on station tracks, head north from Port Hedland and turn left towards the coast at a track 400 metres north of the Goldsworthy/De Grey road. Proceed as per the Coolan Coolan and Shellborough 1:50,000 maps, by following a track to Blackheart Bore which has a good water supply 29.4 Km from the turn-off. This is the major water supply point. Proceed from there to to the area marked Shellborough, taking the north west fork at the disused Urangleangah Well to avoid the need to traverse on possible wet ground near Condon Creek when the season is wet. When wishing to access the east side of Condon Creek take the north route.

Site Photographs:

Colour: BRH 161-167, Broadhurst Collection.

Figure 2
Map showing the position of Shellborough.
A composite of Shellborough & Coolan Coolan 1:50,000



Description of Site

The remains at Condon/Shellborough incorporate two late nineteenth to early twentieth century settlements marked on Admiralty charts (even post 1976 charts such as AUS 325 above) as Condon and Shellborough and on the 1:50000 series purely as Shellborough. Though the sites are shown as discrete entities separated by a small inlet (Condon Creek) on the Admiralty chart, they became in effect one settlement and the two sites became generally-known as Condon. The term Shellborough was rarely used by the settlers, as will be seen.

The remains at Condon appear to have had five and possibly six elements, one of which is a graveyard. Some of these elements appear in working sketches following.

A) At QC 455871 on Shellborough 1:50000, the remains of a telegraph station situated at the terminus of a telegraph line. This site is dominated by a steel telegraph post, evidence of a once-substantial building with concrete steps at its base, oleander bushes and a large palm tree nearby. The bearing tray of a 10 cwt weighing machine lies in the sand near the pole, while scattered around are bottles, sherds, iron, and the accoutrements of a former wooden-framed and iron clad group of buildings. Indications are of at least three dwellings and a focus of habitation centred on the main telegraph office? building itself. From the few remaining steel telegraph poles visible, the line appears to run in one direction towards the south west on a heading of 255°M. and in the other, towards the south east on a heading of 145° M. Approximately 500 metres of the south west of this main agglomeration lies a small 10mX10m timber holding yard? This may have once been roofed. Remains of a small iron-clad house lie 100 metres away back towards the telegraph station area, apparently marking the western end of the main settlement. Remains of a wood stove and remnants of thick wire which was apparently used for holding down the roof in cyclones are evident in this location. On a sparsely vegetated sand ridge immediately behind and to seaward of the telegraph station remains are the remains of another set of dwellings. Half way up the ridge there appears evidence of a kitchen stove, an iron water pump, iron sheeting and bottle sherds, for example. Some of the glass appears to have been 'worked' by Aboriginal people. The top of the ridge, towards the east is littered with similar material. The remains of less-substantial structures are also evident along the same ridge to the west.

B) At QC 489867 on both Shellborough and Coolan Coolan 1:50,000 and 2.7 kilometres to the east of the telegraph station, on the west bank of Condon Creek, are concrete foundations which appear to be the remains of a large store. These lie adjacent to what appears to be a cargo landing facility at a stone groyne with some wooden mooring piles visible.

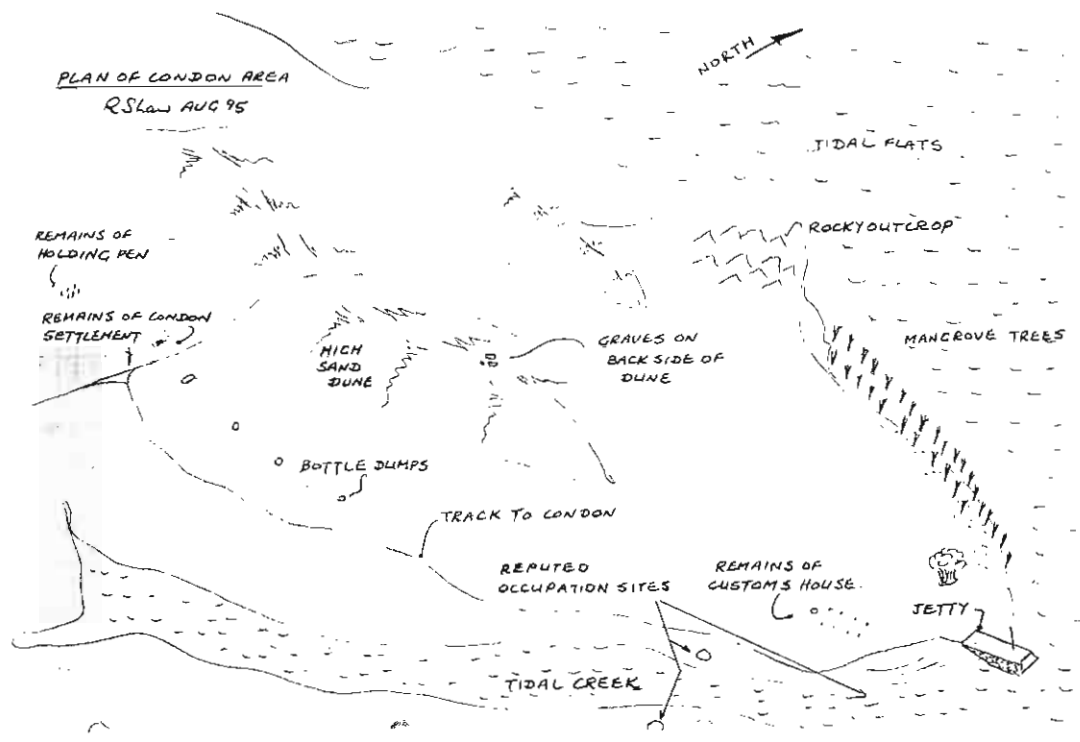
C) The inspection team were later advised by a family of shell collectors (who were regular visitors) that further along the west bank are other indications of substantial occupation areas in the form of sherds and piles of broken bottles. These areas were not examined given that the information was received just as the team were departing for Port Hedland.

D) In addition, research conducted later indicated the original Condon was on the east bank of the creek (see historical precis following).

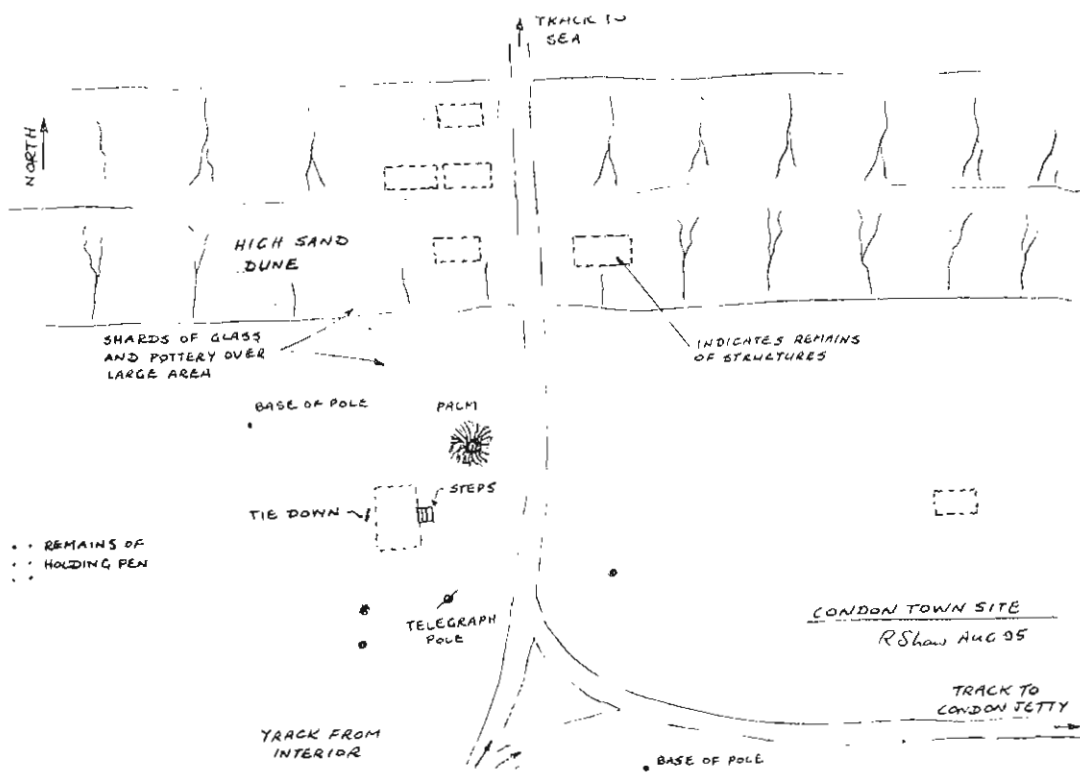
E) In between, A) the telegraph station and B) the landing on the west bank of Condon Creek, are what appear to be the remains of a number of isolated habitation sites. At a point 200 metres east of the telegraph station, for example, lie the remains of an iron stove door and 100 metres further on appears a large conglomeration of 1880s bottles some carrying the embossing '10 to the gallon'. At a point 2 kilometres east of the telegraph station appears an area with many bottles and metal strapping in an area 10mX10m with willow pattern ceramics. These occupation sites appear to mark a route between the two centres noted above.

F) At a point 1.6 kilometres from the telegraph station site a track leads north across the dune to three well-marked graves two sandhills back from the beach. One prominent headstone carries the inscription *Tracy Peter Powell, 16/11/1893. Age 38.*

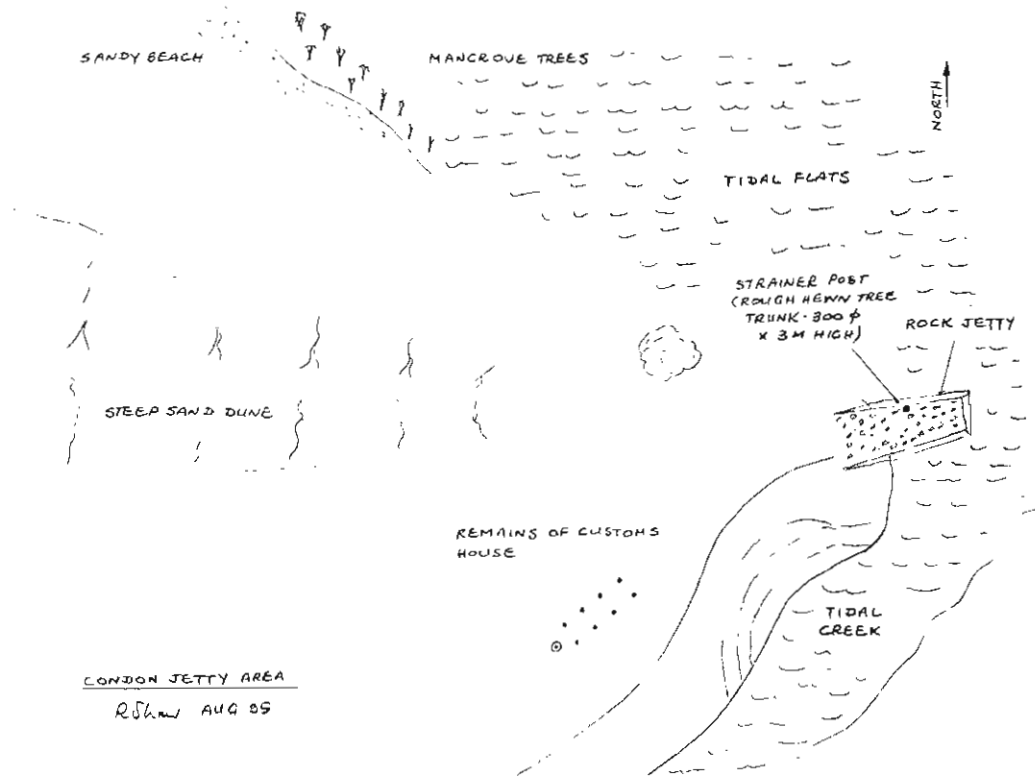
Figures 3-6
Sketches of the Condon sites (Not to scale)
 By R. Shaw.



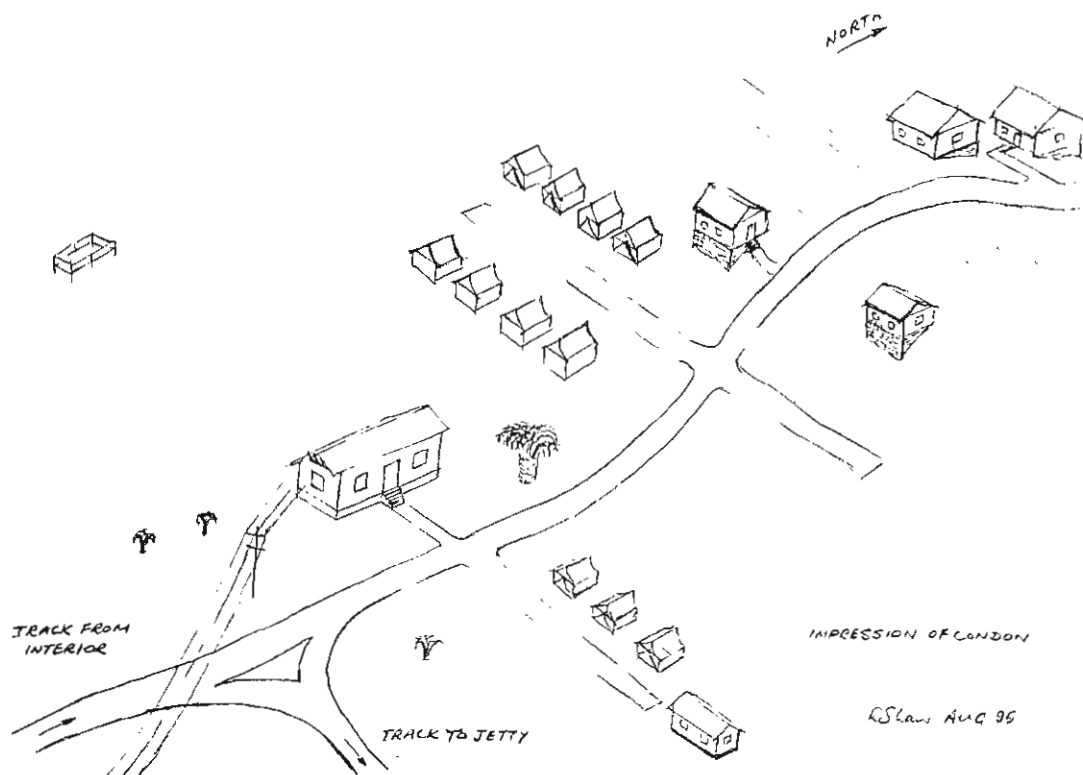
The Telegraph station (town?) site



The jetty area at Condon Creek



An impression of the telegraph station area based on the remains



Condon/Shellborough

Historical notes (by M McCarthy)

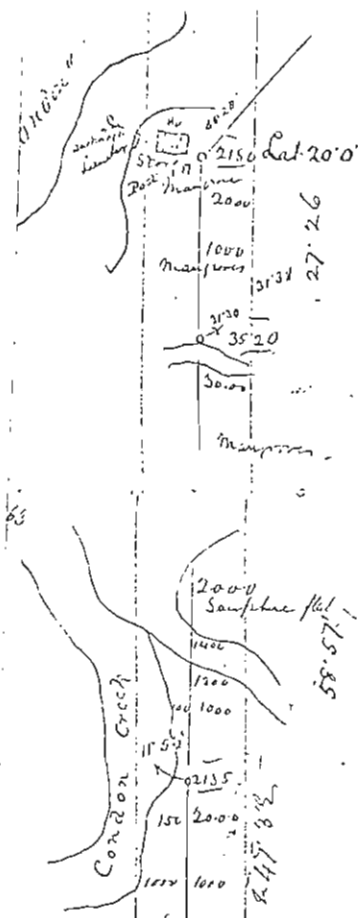
Condon

It was estimated that between 70 and 80 boats operated out of the Condon Creek area in 1872 (Research notes, LH 008/1). In that year Condon and Charles Broadhurst's base at nearby Banningarra Creek, which was 'much frequented by pearlers' (CSR 714/37) became the *de facto* headquarters of the fleet. As an indication of the risks from disease, malnutrition and the sea, it is recorded that between 19 and 30 March six divers died at Condon (CSR 714/57).

A study of the archival material held at the Port Hedland library and the State Library (SAWA) in Perth, indicates that a settlement on the west bank of Condon or Condong Creek (as it was then known) was first surveyed in 1872 by H.P. Loftie (Site B). This followed the decision to send Robert Sholl, the Resident Magistrate at Roebourne (with its port at Cossack) east to Condon in order to control the activities of the burgeoning pearling fleet (SAWA, RN 740; *Inquirer*, 24/4/1872; McCarthy, 1990: Cha 4). Four town lots at Condon Creek were leased in 1872 with the apparent intention to purchase. Despite this auspicious start, Sholl successfully resisted the pressure to establish an office at Condon (McCarthy, 1990:206; CSR 714/37&98). This and the rapid depletion of the pearling beds possibly led to there being little further development on the shores of the creek, bar some limited infrastructure for the pastoral industry. In 1878, for example, the surveyor Alexander Forrest noted only a 'store' on the eastern shore of Condon Creek (Site D).

Figure 7

Excerpt from Forrest's Field book
(Port Hedland Library, Research notes LH/008/1)¹



*Alexander Forrest noted a store
near the east landing, during
a Trig. Survey in 1878.
(Field Book 25)*

¹Unfortunately, the name of the author was not legible.

The surrounding pastoralists continued to use the area for loading wool and dumping supplies, however. In 1887, for example, the surveyor (H.F. Johnston) noted that there were a store, woolshed and stockyard at the 'east landing' (i.e., at Condon Creek). No buildings were noted at what he called the 'upper west landing' nearest 'Lofties' original townsite survey' on the west bank of Condon Creek i.e. site B) above. This information indicates that Site B, the jetty and store adjacent on the west bank of Condon Creek, may have not been developed at the time and that the facilities at Condon were all located on the eastern bank in the region shown in Figure 7 above.

Shellborough

On 15 June 1887 Johnston completed the survey of the telegraph route from Roebourne to Condon, but chose a site for the telegraph station at a well 'some distance west of the townsite'. This was named Shellborough.

In April 1889 the telegraph office was opened and the first town lots at Shellborough were sold to Frederick Pearse of Roebourne. The finding of gold inland saw the area become a recognised landing place for stores destined for the mines and outlying stations. In 1893 the townsite was re-surveyed and the telegraph line from Perth to Wyndham was opened, followed a year later by the line from Marble Bar. The Condon/Shellborough area was once recorded as the only European settlement north of Cossack and it served the gold mines at Marble Bar, Nullagine and Bamboo Creek as well as the pastoral industry. A post office was opened at the Shellborough telegraph station in 1895 (Research notes, LH 008/1). The illustration below, which shows that by 1897, there were at least thirteen buildings in the area. The photograph is taken from the ridge above Shellborough.

Figure 8
Shellborough in 1897
(Pilbara Scrapbook, 1984: April)



Thus the townsite of Shellborough was to the west of the settlement at Condon, but as indicated earlier, the former name was seldom used and in effect Condon became the name given to the entire settlement encompassing the sites A) through to F) above. This encompassed structures and facilities around the telegraph station/post office and the East Landing, which by then presumably included the facilities noted in 1878 on the east bank of Condon Creek and a store and jetty later built on the west bank.

The WA Year book contains the following comment for the years 1894-5, for example.

Shellborough, better known as Condon, so named from the creek on which it is situated, lies on the sea coast, 100 miles from Marble Bar. It is here that most of the stores and machinery are landed from small coasting vessels and lighters. The place has a telegraph station, a weekly mail service, and frequent communication with Roebourne.

It is evident that the Telegraph station and the East Landing and the 'various parts of the town' were joined by a light rail carrying a horse drawn 'tram'. Evidence for this, and for the multicultural nature of the population who settled there, appears in a newspaper article entitled 'Condon-a port of the past' by Hugh Ryan thus

Mr [James] Mr Monaghan made his living from pearl shell operating two small boats out of Condon. He lost both of them in cyclones.

Born inland at Warragine, the son of an Aboriginal mother and an Irish father, he was taken to Condon by an American family in 1889 when he was a young boy. He stayed there til 1916.

His first job was to drive the horse-drawn tram that operated from the jetty to the post office about a mile away linking the various parts of the town (Research Notes, Port Hedland Library, LH 008/1).

The Post Office Directory for 1895-6 lists a number of sheep farmers and stock owners, a chemist, a teamster, 3 carriers and a blacksmith as the chief businesses. Two stores and three hotels were also in operation. Condon was described a few years later as a 'small settlement' about 20 miles east of the De Grey River consisting of 'two "bush pubs", a store, and a few huts, with a Japanese "house", all built mostly of corrugated iron' (Simner. nd : 372).

Condon was regarded as a safe location from which to tranship mining equipment and stores and to take on board wool from the sheep stations in the hinterland (*West Australian*, 6/4/1886). Apart from the jetty and the stores at the 'East Landing' there were effectively no real port facilities catering for large vessels, however. Small coasters, such as those shown in the cover photograph used the jetty while others, such as the 24 metre ketch *Edith* appear to have been too large to use the facility to off load their cargoes and take on wool. As a result lighterage from the landing out to ships lying in deeper water would have been the norm. The cargo could then be transhipped to larger vessels at sea or taken on to more suitable ports. Alternatively, where ships had the appropriate hull form and where masters were confident enough to avail themselves of the gently-shelving shore and 6 metre tides, they allowed their ships to settle on the seabed offshore at the 'Upper West Landing' (which was apparently near the mouth of the creek close to Loftie's original townsite) as the tide receded. Bullock drays were then driven out across the dry seabed to the waiting ships. Their cargoes and passengers could be transferred. Examples are the iron barque *Arabella* and the SS *Minitya* shown below.

Figure 9
The barque *Arabella* and bullock drays at Condon (Simmer, nd: 374).

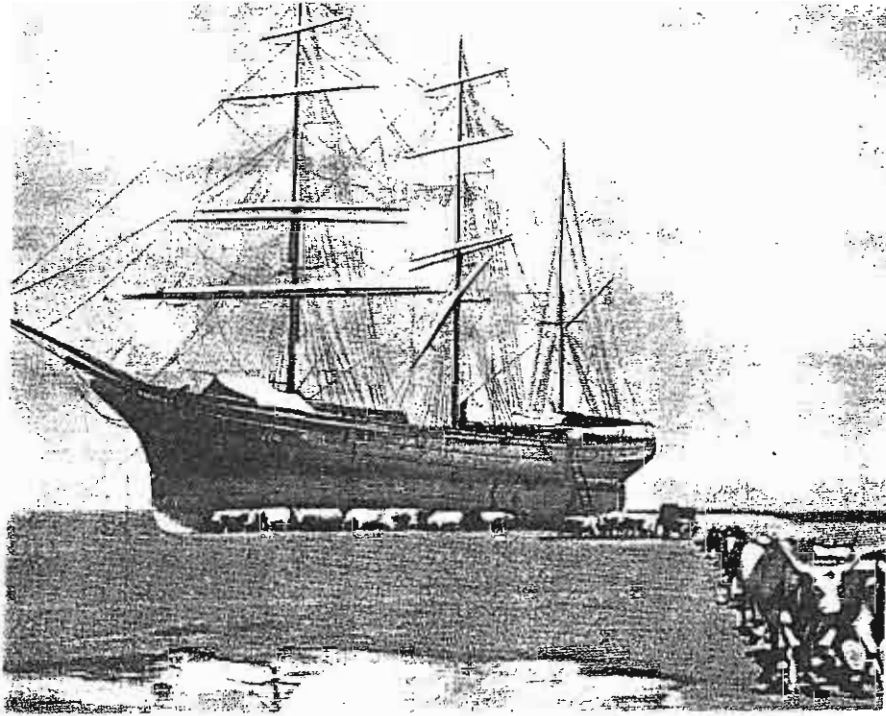
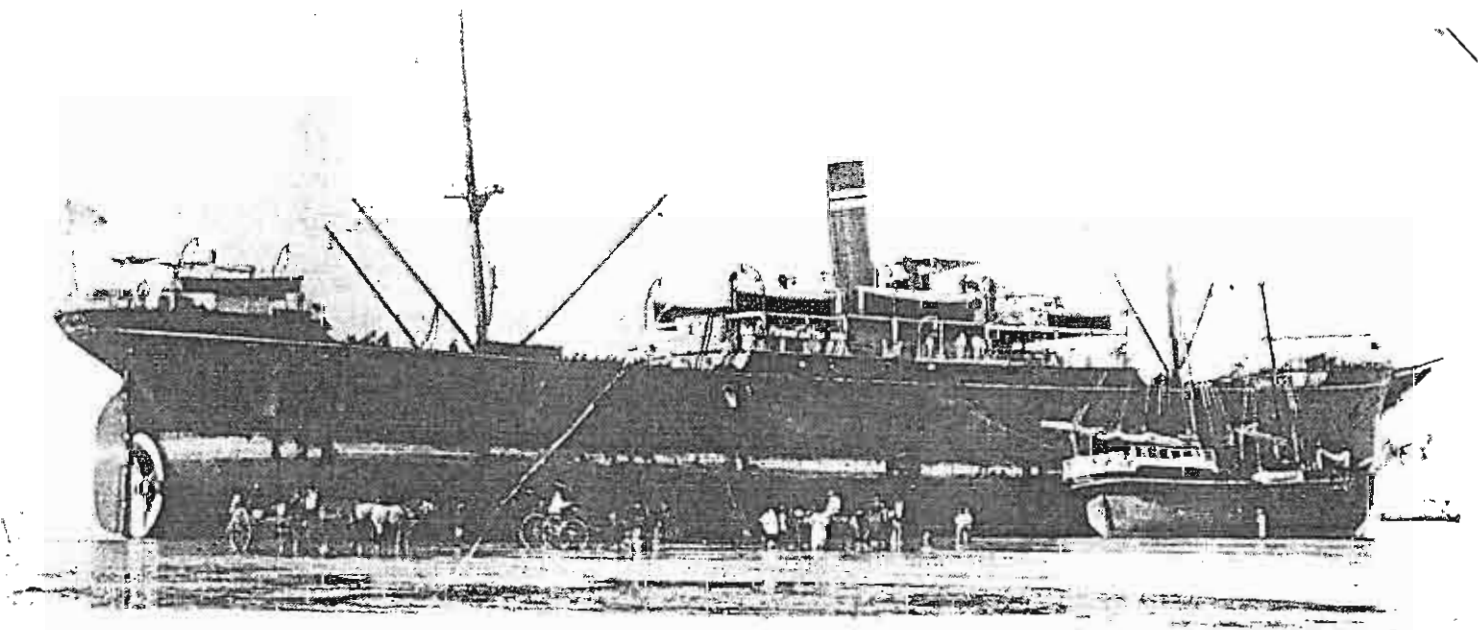


Figure 10
The SS *Minilya*, a schooner? and townsfolk at Condon (Pilbara Scrapbook)



The situation was obviously unsatisfactory, though there was no obvious alternative and Condon began to assume some importance as the port for the region. In the year 1898-1899, for example Condon boasted 200 residents, two hotels and several stores. This dropped dramatically in the ensuing decade to around 50 people, one hotel and 'several stores' as Port Hedland was established as a viable alternative after 1896. In the period 1900-4 and by 1905, for example, Condon had dwindled to one hotel, one store and 12 people. The inevitable shipwrecks occurred e.g., *Edith* in 1907 (Garratt, McCarthy & Shaw, 1996). This wreck lies in the mud east of Miawurguna Rocks shown in Figures 1 & 2.

By WWI Condon came to be considered 'not a place of any importance' (Battye, 1915: 167), and was soon abandoned. By 1917 only the postmaster, his family and a linesman were in residence-the others having moved out, taking even their houses with them.

A former resident of Condon, Ms Elsie Clutterbuck recorded these events thus

When the causeway connecting Port Hedland to the mainland was built, and the jetty started, it became the port for the Pilbara district and the inhabitants of Condon moved there, about 40 miles down the coast.

My father pulled down our house, loaded the timber on to a schooner, and with my mother, sister and myself, furniture, cats and dogs we left for the new port (*The Countryman*, March 22, 1963:13).

The telegraph station was abandoned in 1927.

Site Condition and Integrity

The main threat to the integrity of the site is posed by human interference and modern contamination though random camping and rubbish disposal.

Visible, attractive loose artefacts have long since been removed, leaving only sherds, fragments or iron sheeting, wire, some timbers and some intact bottles visible on the surface of the areas visited. There is considerable evidence of human interference. Metal detector enthusiasts are expected to have been very active over the last 20 years, though evidence of their excavations have long-since gone. The Condon area generally offers little to attract visitors that is now readily available at other more-accessible locations, such as Pardoo Station a recognised tourist destination further east. Condon is visited by a core of holiday-makers and shell collectors keen to take advantage of the remoteness of the location and the fishing, however.

Assessment of Site Significance

The area represents the remains of an important, though short-lived multicultural settlement of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. It was of significance to contemporary Aboriginal people, to pearlers and pastoralists and to the people in the service industries, including post and communications.

Condon could also prove a place of historical interest and value to modern visitors and tourists wishing to experience the difficulties that people has in developing the pastoral, pearling, port and communications industries in the 19th and early 20th centuries.

Recommendations and further studies

The site(s) should be noted by the Shire of Port Hedland and other heritage interests with a view to Condon being added to heritage inventories.

A number of occupation sites were not examined on this visit, most notably (and somewhat ironically) the original site of Condon on the east bank of Condon Creek. Given the importance of the site(s), these need to be located and examined.

The survey conducted on this visit was both cursory and brief. Further work is clearly warranted, both in the field at Condon/Shellborough and at the various archives.

Research and fieldwork needs also be conducted at nearby Condini Landing. This place is shown on Figures 1 and 2 above to the west of Shellborough. The British Admiralty Chart BA 1048, Australia North-west Coast, Buccaneer Archipelago to Bedout Island, first published in 1883 with new editions in years such as 1886 and 1911, clearly shows a track from Condini Landing and the Condon area to nearby DeGrey Station.

References

Maps and Charts

AUS 325: Lacepede Islands to Bedout Island

Coolan Coolan Series R 712 1:50,000

De Grey Western Australia 1: 500,000

Shelborough 1: 50,000

BA 1048, Australia North-west Coast, Buccaneer Archipelago to Bedout Island

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Author unknown: *Research notes Condon*. Port Hedland Library LH 008/1

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CSO Letters Forwarded to Settlers

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Mt Newman Mining Company, 1984, *Pilbara Scrapbook, A Calendar*. Public Affairs Department, Mt Newman Mining Company, Port Hedland.

Simmer, G. L., (nd.), "Arabella" a woolship of the 'Nineties'. In *Journal of the Honourable Company of Master Mariners*, London: 372-4.