

Altres museus

Engaging research at the Australian National maritime Museum

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The Australian National Maritime Museum is located in the heart of Sydney's central business district in a popular tourist precinct called Darling Harbour, one of Sydney Harbour's many bays. ANMM photograph.





Author Dr. Nigel Erskine, one of the ANMM maritime archaeological team, during an expedition to Wreck Reefs in 2009, with a rudder gudgeon from shipwreck *Cato* (1803). Photographer Xanthe Rivett.



Despite the background rumble of a generator somewhere down in the engine room, the vessel seems peacefully quiet. Low in the northern sky the moon is slowly sinking through a bank of clouds, while to the west, the Southern Cross hangs like a starry kite. On the bridge the vibrantly –coloured screens of the vessel's chart plotter and depth sounder display our position with unerring certainty– comforting reminders that despite our apparent isolation, we remain connected and secured to the world through an invisible web of satellite technology. Ironically, this knowledge makes it difficult to appreciate the era in which the ship *Royal Charlotte* (the focus of our archaeological investigation) sailed, and the plight of over 100 survivors marooned on the tiny sand cay less than half a mile from where I am writing.

Diary entry, Frederick Reef, 2012

Written earlier in the year during fieldwork, my diary note refers to an exciting archaeological program conducted off the coast of Australia which illustrates one of the areas of research at the Australian National Maritime Museum [ANMM] where I work. You may not have visited Sydney where the museum is located, but chances are you know the city is home to the Sydney Opera House and the Sydney Harbour Bridge. Located on its magnificent harbour, Sydney is the place where Australia's first European settlers arrived from Britain in 1788. In the era before air travel, the protected harbour was a natural focus for shipping and trade, and today Sydney is the largest city in Australia. Because of these strong links to the sea, Sydney was considered the logical site for Australia's National Maritime Museum. Opened in 1991, the museum is a relatively young organisation with a staff of just over 100, and a collection of around 140,000 objects and archival records.

Think of Australia and you may not automatically think of a maritime nation; indeed the country is one of the driest continents on earth! However, Australia's Exclusive Economic Zone is one of the largest in the world with a total marine area of around 10 million square kilometres

which is considerably larger than the 7.69 million kilometres of Australia's land mass. From this perspective, Australia is actually defined by the surrounding Southern, Indian and Pacific oceans, and the straits and seas of Asia –a place connected by water to stories of migration, trade and exploration, and to the rich cultures that also share these waters. For the past 20 years the museum's permanent galleries have presented a fairly traditional narrative based on stories relating to British exploration, whaling, defence, migration and recreation but today, a new generation of visitors, with very different interests and expectations, is driving reappraisal of this narrative and how we utilise new technologies to present information. Our current maritime archaeology project demonstrates some of these changes.

■ MARITIME ARCHAEOLOGY IN AUSTRALIA

Australia has been influential in the field of maritime archaeology since the 1970s. The introduction and availability of scuba diving equipment in the 1960s stimulated enormous interest amongst recreational divers in Australia's underwater environment and led to the chance discovery of two 17th century Dutch shipwrecks off the Western Australian coast. The ships were Dutch East Indiamen involved in trade with Asia, and both were carrying large amounts of silver (much in the form of Spanish reales). At the time of their discovery, there was relatively little appreciation of the archaeological value of shipwrecks, and the wrecks were soon at risk from divers only interested in recovering the silver. It was a pivotal moment in Australian archaeology which ultimately led to the National government passing laws which protected historic shipwrecks in all states and territories of Australia. By the 1980s maritime archaeologists were employed in every state in Australia and today we have a National Shipwreck Database which lists the details of thousands of ships lost in Australian waters, university programs training new archaeologists, world-class conservation laboratories for treating marine artefacts, and a reputation for excellence in the field. Indeed the maritime archaeology section at



The replica of James Cook's famous 18th-century ship of exploration, His Majesty's Bark *Endeavour*, divides its time between the museum as a display, and voyaging to Australian ports as an important outreach program. ANMM photograph.



our museum is a further legacy of this progress. However, despite these achievements, many parts of Australia's marine area remain relatively unexplored –particularly the isolated reefs and cays of Australia's Coral Sea territory situated around 400 kms off the east coast, where the museum is investigating shipwrecks associated with Australia's colonial links with India.

■ AUSTRALIA'S COLONIAL LINKS WITH INDIA

If you take a globe of the world and look at Australia's location in the southern hemisphere, you will see that it is strategically situated to the countries (and markets) of Asia and the Americas. This was an important factor in the British government's decision to establish a settlement in Australia in 1788. A colony in Australia would be just six weeks sail from India or the Cape of Good Hope, and could provide a gateway to the Pacific and its natural resources.

The cost of hiring ships to transport convicts half way around the world could also be reduced if, after unloading the convicts in Sydney, the ships continued on to China or India where they might load a return cargo for Britain. Such a cargo, consisting of valuable items such as tea, cotton goods, silk, ceramics and spices, could provide a large profit on the enterprise –a strong inducement and compensation for the sometimes dangerous work of transporting convicts.

In point of fact, soon after the foundation of the settlement at Sydney, there was also interest from British merchants in India to supply the colony and by the early 19th century a regular trade had been established between India and Australia. Over time, with the expansion of settlement across Australia, new links to India were forged as garrison troops, administrators and investors moved between the two countries. Such movement was by sea and inevitably involved finding safe routes through some of Australia's most challenging waters. The story of these links to India has been largely overlooked in Australia, something which the ANMM is seeking to address through its work in the Coral Sea.

■ SAILING ROUTES THROUGH THE GREAT BARRIER REEF AND CORAL SEA

Ships followed two main sailing routes from Australia's colonies on the south-eastern coast to India. In the southern summer the preferred route was to sail westward via the south coast of Australia and then north into the Indian Ocean and on to India. This route was largely free of dangers but was impractical during winter when strong contrary westerly winds prevail in the Southern Ocean. At that time a northerly route along the east coast of Australia could be followed using the favourable south-east trade winds. However, this also meant negotiating the reef-strewn waters of Australia's Great Barrier Reef or Coral Sea. The great navigator Captain Cook had almost lost his ship on a reef in northern Australia in 1770, and mapping these dangerous waters became a priority for Australian administrators in the early years of the colony. Despite increasingly sophisticated hydrographic surveys and the publication of new maps in the 19th century, this area demanded a high level of seamanship (and some luck) in order for ships to pass through safely. Inevitably, many ships succumbed to the hazards of storm, darkness or unsuspected currents, to be wrecked on a barely visible reef in the middle of the ocean. In general, many of these wrecks are so isolated that they have attracted little attention from Australian maritime archaeologists and the entire area –particularly Australia's Coral Sea territories is a new focus for the museum's maritime archaeology section.

Funding for this work is provided through a combination of competitive government grants and corporate sponsorship and goes to support collaborative fieldwork involving university students, archaeologists, biologists, technicians and other professionals. Due to the isolation of the area where we are working, expeditions are typically around three weeks and involve anywhere up to 30 people. In January this year the focus of our research was to locate the remains of the ship *Royal Charlotte* wrecked on Frederick Reef in 1825 while transporting troops and other passen-



gers from Sydney to Madras. The ship had left Sydney in winter and after enduring a succession of storms, had the misfortune to strike Frederick Reef –a crescent-shaped reef extending over several kilometres, enclosing a relatively protected area of water marked by a small sand cay. After striking the reef, the *Royal Charlotte* was pushed by waves further onto the reef where it stuck fast. The next day the danger to all aboard was obvious, and with the discovery of the sand cay, around 100 soldiers and other passengers abandoned the wreck, wading more than a kilometre across the reef to the small sand cay where they were to remain for six weeks until eventually rescued. Since it was barely large enough for the group and awash at high tide, the ship's carpenter constructed a rough platform to raise the women and some of the officers above the water's reach.

As for the *Royal Charlotte*, although badly damaged and in an extremely precarious position, it did not break up, and the captain and many of the crew preferred to remain aboard throughout the ordeal. Ultimately all the survivors were rescued and after briefly returning to Sydney, continued to India on other ships. This history we know, but the aim of our expedition was to learn more from the archaeological remains of the incident, and to better understand the environment in which this drama took place.

■ ARCHAEOLOGY AND THE MUSEUM

The archaeological work in the Coral Sea represents a gradual accrual of information that is likely to continue for a number of years as the museum's archaeologists aim to investigate several wrecks and reef systems. However, regardless of the ultimate archaeological outcomes, the museum is keen to involve visitors in the process immediately. To this end, the expedition carries satellite communications and video cameras so that it can stream live video and interviews with archaeologists directly to the museum and media, or capture video for online audiences. Throughout the expedition, our photographer is also busy making a photographic record of the work which is intend-

ed for use in later exhibitions and publications. Later there will be public lectures and education programs.

At another level, research into our links with India forms the focus of a major exhibition planned for 2013 and we have opened a dialogue with several Indian and British cultural organisations to foster awareness and collaboration. What should be clear from all this, is that the museum's research program produces a range of results from academic papers to tweets, from online content to exhibition display, all intended to engage our visitors and maximise the return on our work.

■ OTHER AREAS OF RESEARCH

The archaeological program is, of course, just one area of the museum's research. Other areas include a recent conference focusing on Australian Indigenous watercraft that has stimulated enormous interest, work by our exhibition designers looking at developments in interactive technologies, and the expertise of the museum's library staff in using modern databases to assist visitors with family history projects. Our museum is just one player in an increasingly competitive and connected environment where technology has raised visitor expectations and choices about where and how they invest their time. At a time when, increasingly, governments are adopting a 'user pays' philosophy, museums need to make the most of their research to engage audiences and to ensure we remain relevant in the modern world. It is not an easy task, but it is one which we ignore at our peril!

Visiting school children handle a piece of ballast from James Cook's *Endeavour*, recovered by archaeologists from the Great Barrier Reef, Queensland, Australia. ANMM photograph.



Personal belongings recovered from beneath the sea, from Sydney's best-known shipwreck, *Dunbar* (1857) lost in a storm with all 121 passengers and crew at the entrance to Sydney Harbour, at the end of a voyage from England. ANMM photograph.

