The Australian Historic Shipwreck Protection Project: the *Clarence* project

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Monash University Seminar
Introduction 1

- British settlement of Australia
- The need for shipping particularly small vessels for coastal trade
- Ship building industries became quickly established
- Ship building based on British traditions
- Lack of historical (archival) records - small (often unregistered) vessels
Introduction 2

- How did the early Australian settlers adapt to a new land?
- How did they build small wooden vessels from the local timbers?
- New research program at Flinders University
- Focus on construction of Australian built vessels
- Focus on timber analysis
- British & American influences on Australian ship-building

Rick Bullers conducting timber analysis (photo by Debra Shefi).
Australian colonial ship-building

- Cultural continuity - methods and designs derived from parent culture
- First vessels - deep draft full bodied cutters
- Quickly developed a distinct style of vessel built to suit the environment - shallow draft and flat bottom
- Changing length/breadth ratio shows changing hull shape
Archaeological potential

- Australian National Shipwreck Database lists 2,786 Australian built vessels wrecked in Australian waters
- 271 have been located (10%)
- 14 have been archaeologically surveyed or excavated (0.5%)
- Identified as a significant theme in Australian maritime archaeology (Historic Shipwrecks National Research Plan 1995)
Clarence (1841-1853)

- Schooner built on the Richmond River, NSW
- Wrecked in Port Phillip Bay, Victoria
- Excavated by Peter Harvey and the Maritime Heritage Unit in the 1980s
- Showed that Australian built vessels were not poorly built as some historians had suggested
Water Witch (1835-1843)

- Cutter built by John Gray at Hobart, Tasmania
- Sank while moored in the Murray River, SA
- Excavated by the SA Heritage Branch in the 1980s
- Showed that Tasmanian shipwrights used mainland Australian timbers

Zephyr (1851-1852)

- Schooner built by John Gray at Hobart, Tasmania
- Ran ashore on the east coast of Tasmania
- Showed that Australian-built vessels were over-built in terms of scantling dimensions
Zephyr (1851-1852)

- Probe survey and recording in 2005 as part of Rick Bullers’ Masters research
- Fieldwork undertaken as part of the 2005 Maritime Archaeology Field School

Above - closely spaced frames
Left - treenail used in construction
(Photos by Rick Bullers)
Zephyr

- Site plan established by probe survey and visual recording
- 13 frames on the port side and outer planking
Mary Ellis (1897-1907)

- Ketch built at Kincumber in NSW
- Wrecked on Eyre Peninsular, SA
- Test excavation and recording in 2005 as part of Rick Bullers’ Masters research

Right - ceiling planking and frames
Left - recording the hull
(Photos by Debra Shefi)
Mary Ellis (1897-1907)
Site plan established by test excavation and visual recording

Double frames, outer planking and ceiling planking

Iron lodging knee showed the use of iron in Australian-built vessels
Australian wooden ship-building

- Australian timbers were markedly different to European timbers

Research questions include:

- What timbers were used for different parts of a vessel?

- How quickly did Australian shipwrights adapt to the local environment and the different properties of the indigenous timbers?
Very few Australian built vessels have been surveyed and excavated.

Very little is known about timber usage in Australian-built vessels.

Australian Research Council (ARC) Discovery grant application in 2009.

Collaborative support for the project from government agencies and universities in Tasmania, Victoria, NSW and SA.

Project is expected to take eight to ten years.