

RESEARCH NOTES

Pakington Whaling Station, Port Gregory: a short report on site inspections and later discoveries of whaling-related features and evidence

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A series of site inspections and test excavations were carried out at an historic whaling site at Port Gregory, on the mid-west coast of Western Australia, by volunteers and researchers of the Department of Maritime Archaeology, Western Australian Museum. The site contains considerable archaeological evidence associated with shore based whaling activities, which is also confirmed by the available historical resources. This research note provides a brief historical background to contextualise the site and its associated activities. The paper also discusses the findings of the site inspections, the extent and nature of the archaeological evidence distributed across the area (which includes both surface and subsurface evidence), the natural and human impacts from which it suffers and the archaeological potential it contains.

INTRODUCTION

Between 1985 and 2006 five site inspections were carried out by the Department of Maritime Archaeology, Western Australian Museum, at an historic whaling establishment in Port Gregory, on the mid-west coast of Western Australia, known as the Pakington whaling station (refer to Rodrigues *et al.* 2006 for the full report). Museum staff first visited the site in 1985, while on an expedition to carry out archaeological investigation of Western Australia's first coastal steamship, *SS Xantho*, which sank at Port Gregory in 1872. An opportunistic visit was then made in January 2006 in conjunction with test excavations carried out at Kalbarri, a site believed to be associated with the explorer George Grey's 1839 expedition (Rodrigues 2006). This visit was conducted in order to record the GPS position of the whaling station including significant features observed, photograph the area and its features, and to assess the station's present condition, including any evidence of more recent disturbances, deliberate or natural, since the last inspection in 2003. A discussion of the artefacts recovered during the 2003 visit is included in this report. This paper also reports on some features and structural remains that became uncovered within the intertidal zone shortly after the 27 January 2006 visit that resulted in a further site visit in February to identify these newly exposed features and structural remains.

LOCATION, DESCRIPTION AND A BRIEF HISTORY OF THE SITE

Port Gregory lies 47km north-west of the town of Northampton, which is 474km north of Perth (Figure 1). The Pakington whaling station is in the area of the proposed Pakington township (Lands and Surveys map, Pakington, A.C. Gregory 1883), located behind the sand dunes of Hillock Point, opposite Gold Digger Passage (Figure 2). To more accurately describe its historic location, it is now referred to as the Pakington whaling station. The whaling business in the area was started by Captain W.A. Sanford and his partners David Ronayne and Joshua Harwood in 1854 and another whaling party run by John Bateman operated in the area between 1857 and 1875. In addition, oral history records a whaling station operating north of Hillock Point up until the

1920s (Gibbs 1995:373; McIlroy 1987:87). It is possible that the Sanford and Bateman whaling parties lived closely on separate lots of the Pakington township (Gibbs 1995:377) although such proximity is considered unusual given the natural rivalry that could be expected between two competing shore whaling parties (see for example Kostaglou 1998). Gibbs (1998:40) reports that consolidation occurred between 1843–1869 when ownership of whaling parties had moved from broad joint investments of the 1830s to smaller partnerships or single owners. Eventually, the west coast industry fell increasingly into the hands of Harwood and Bateman who both ran more than one station on different parts of the coast.

Early explorations

The first known European to pass through the area was George Grey who, after aborting his attempt to explore the Shark Bay and Gantheaume Bay regions, was forced to walk back to Perth through this region in 1839 (Henderson 2007:215). At that time, the Swan River settlement had begun to outgrow itself and attention had turned further north for suitable land for agriculture as well as the hope of finding minerals similar to those that caused the gold rushes in the eastern states.

George Grey kept a journal (1841i and ii) in which he described the countryside around Port Gregory, which impressed him, as being 'good country'. It should be noted that Grey travelled through the area in April 1839 after a lot of rain had fallen. Nevertheless, his description of this countryside aroused much interest in Perth. In 1849, the explorer Captain A.C. Gregory described the harbour as being well protected from all winds by the reef and as well adapted for small vessels (McDonald 1993:18). By now, interest in Port Gregory began to intensify and people wondered seriously about the possibility of agriculture and available land in the area. At the same time, debate began to arise as to its suitability as well as issues of safety because of perceived problems with Aboriginal people in the area. Consequently, in 1852, Governor Fitzgerald visited Port Gregory to assess its suitability for himself (McDonald 1993:19-20). He eventually came to a decision that Port Gregory was storm-proof and appropriate for large boats to enter.



Figure 1: Declared area (lined) of Pakington Whaling Station and the wreck of the SS Xantho (1872) at Port Gregory, Western Australia (J. Rodrigues).

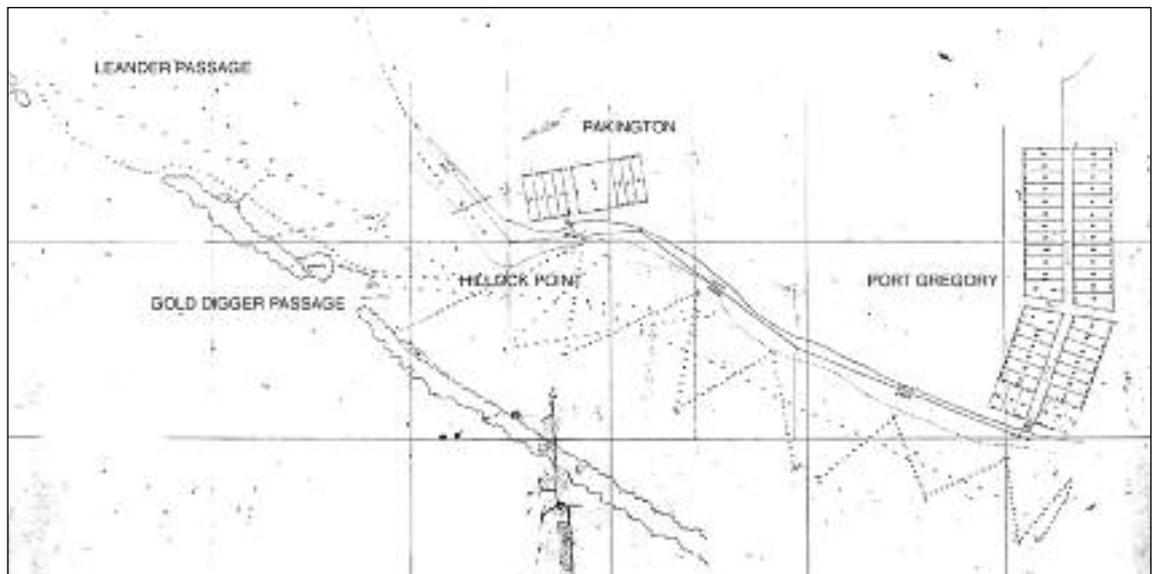


Figure 2: Location of proposed Pakington township in Port Gregory (after Lands and Surveys 1883 map).

Industry and agriculture

The establishment of a whaling station at Port Gregory followed soon after the opening of the mid-west region of Western Australia for mining and pastoral purposes (Gibbs 1995:373). Lead ore from the Geraldine Mine (Australia's first commercial lead mine and Western Australia's first commercial mining venture), located 40km north of Lynton, was shipped out of Port Gregory to Singapore. Farming of grain and grazing also occurred before whaling began, and Messrs Steele and Co. had also reported good quality salt from the lagoon immediately inland and had been sending salt to Fremantle since 1850 (McDonald 1993:1).

Lynton Convict Hiring Station

The Lynton Convict Hiring Station, located on the road to Port Gregory (10km east of Port Gregory), was established in 1853 to serve the Geraldine Mine as well as pastoralists in the area. The depot served as an employment agency where 'ticket of leave' holders could be hired by private enterprise. Lynton House was also the residence of Captain Sanford, discussed further below.

The advent of convict labour and their pensioner guard soldiers in 1853 saw a small community struggling to exist in the area (McDonald 1993:29). Life was hard for the families of pensioner guards who were still living in tattered tents in 1855, while five single women from 'Bride ships' were also recorded to have arrived at Lynton. On 1st March 1854, the Government officially proclaimed the twin town-sites of Pakington (Port Gregory) and Lynton, with building lots available for purchase. The name Pakington was chosen in an attempt to secure the favour of J.S. Pakington, the Secretary for the Colonies at the time, who did not favour the project and felt the money being spent on Port Gregory was a waste (McDonald 1993:29). In December 1856, the Lynton Convict Hiring Station was abandoned because of harsh conditions and continued problems with transporting ore from the Geraldine mine.

Whaling (1854–1875)

The Port Gregory whaling industry was established through the efforts of Captain W.A. Sanford who was already managing farming and grazing in the area (McIlroy 1987:82). In January 1854, it was reported that sperm whales were 'literally swarming' on the coast adjacent to the harbour. Several months later, Captain Sanford announced that he was forming a whaling party in partnership with Fremantle businessman David Ronayne. However, the party suffered difficulties and only one humpback was caught in that first year, resulting in the dissolving of the partnership. Sanford, however, still hoped to attract one of the major whaling parties up to Port Gregory so he persisted the following year and, despite losing two whaleboats, obtained 16 casks of oil valued at £800 (McIlroy 1987:82; Heppingstone n.d.:6). With the 1855 season proving more profitable, the following year saw Sanford partnered by Joshua Harwood with a three boat, 22-man fishery. Harwood was an enterprising builder and businessman of Fremantle who had been engaged in whaling in Cockburn Sound during 1854 and 1855 (Heppingstone n.d.:6). Harwood maintained a party at Port Gregory until 1860, after which he ceased all of his whaling operations. The success of this is reflected in the 1856 season where, out of the £5,000 worth of oil produced in Western Australia, Port Gregory's contribution alone was £1,600 (Heppingstone n.d.:4). From 1857, John Bateman also operated there until as late as 1875. From the early 1860s Bateman kept his party at Port Gregory only from June to September, after which he

would move them southward to Bunbury or Castle Rock for the later part of the season (Gibbs 1995:37).

Difficulties and setbacks

By 1854 Port Gregory was a hive of activity although not the happiest of places. Work on the Hiring Station was slow and the site chosen for the station was hot and airless. Fresh water and vegetables were hard to come by and men began to suffer from scurvy (McDonald 1993:24). Complaints also began to emerge about the bad road from the mine and the lack of water in summer. In addition, there were problems with the causeway between Lynton and Port Gregory. Furthermore, people felt deprived of religious services, mail services (which did not commence until 1860) and suffered general health problems. It was also found that the port was not as safe as first thought (Heppingstone n.d.:5). Setbacks, such as the loss of ships and cargo (the American whaler *Iris*, for example, was stranded for 6 months between July 1855 and January 1856), affected shipping activity. The pensioner guards managed to make the best of the harsh conditions, as they could supplement their income by collecting salt from the Hutt Lagoon to support their families.

Letters from Captain Sanford in 1854, in regard to the whaling station discussed: the want of provisions (flour); carelessness of his men who lost three boats; abusiveness and theft of rum from the stores; a drunken riot between whalers; and a series of north-west gales hampering activities and destroying equipment (Lynton to Ayshford 5 July 1854; Lynton to Ayshford 15 September 1854).

In his study of whaling stations on the west coast, Martin Gibbs (1995:373) states that:

Harwood's crew (1856–1860) is known to have lived in Sanford's storehouse, built on lot number one of the proposed Pakington town site (BL M386) ... There are no historical references which pinpoint the location of either Harwood's or Bateman's processing areas or try works, although there are several allusions in contemporary sources that the station(s) were opposite Gold Digger Passage (eg Inq 29/6/1859).

On the 1883 Lands and Surveys map there is a rectangular feature that could be a shed or another built structure aligned with, but not within, lot one of the Pakington township (Figure 3). Shortly after the 27 January 2006 visit, Mrs Sandra Simkin, regional historian and owner of historic Lynton Station near Port Gregory, advised that historic features of the Port Gregory whaling site that had never been seen before had become exposed as a result of a week of strong southerly winds. The exposed features included a stone 'jetty' in the intertidal zone on the beach (exposed at very low tide), a pile of brick 'rubble' also on the beach (possibly relating to a try works) and further erosion from the existing sand dune blow out/four-wheel drive track, exposing a stone 'floor' of a built structure (Rodrigues *et al.* 2006). Overall, the extent of the site based on the 2006 visits, previous documentation and the more recent report (Rodrigues *et al.* 2006) suggests a much larger extent than was initially known, covering an approximate area of 200x70m and encompassing the protected section behind the dunes as well as the beach and fore dune areas.

Site conditions

Port Gregory is bounded by the Pink Salt Lake and is itself a lagoon formed by a reef running parallel to the coast for about 3km. The enclosed area of water forms a safe harbour for boats and small ships and is entered through one of three

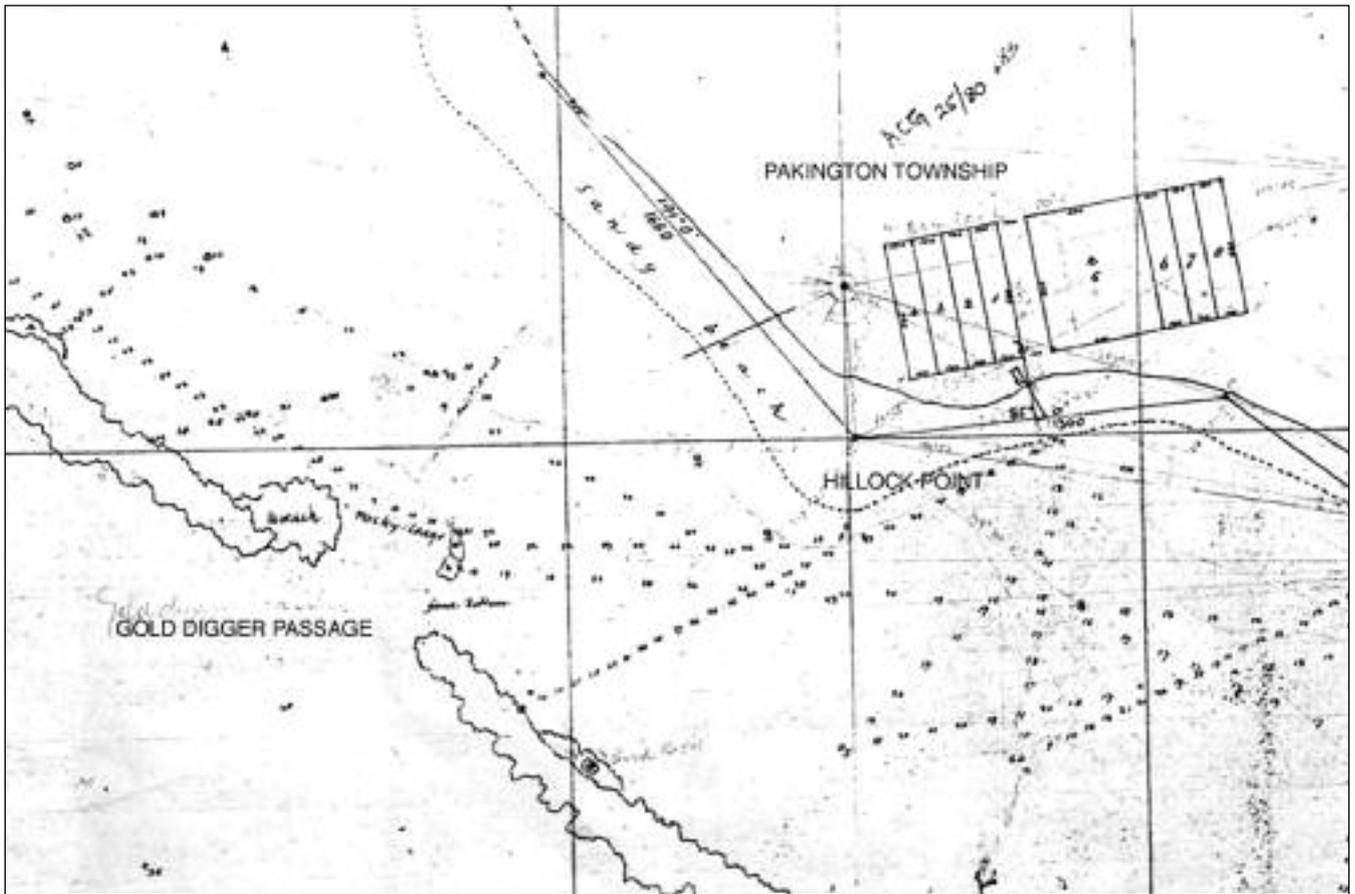


Figure 3: Lot 1 in Pakington township showing possible built structure indicated by arrow (after Lands and Surveys 1883 map).

passages at the far northern end of the reef (Gibbs 1995:376). McIlroy (1987:79) also observed that the site was less isolated compared with many other whaling stations along the Western Australian coast.

The Pakington whaling station site is located behind the high foredune surrounding Hillock Point (at the north end of the harbour) and is generally well protected from wind and spray. The site is generally covered by thick shrub so that the archaeological features and isolated artefacts, even though located within small sandy clearings, are not immediately visible. Good water was also known to have been available 0.6m (two feet) below the surface (Roe 1854 in Gibbs 1995:376). This is interesting given that one of the complaints from residents at the time included the lack of fresh water.

The site predominantly consists of brick and other light artefact scatters on the surface including isolated features of burnt or blackened bricks showing evidence of animal fat, possibly blubber. Other features include whalebones, as well as a variety of glass bottles (mainly dark olive green) and ceramic fragments in the rubbish heap located along the track connecting the site to the beach. Gibbs (1995:376) excavated a 1m square test pit and found subsurface material buried to a depth of 50cm. Deteriorated ironwork was also reported previously by Museum archaeologists. Iron fragments were recovered during the 2003 inspection and some were also observed during the 2006 inspection, including what appeared to be a 'hook'.

Feature and material recording

During the January 2006 inspection, GPS positions were taken of individual features of the site, which included brick and stone scatters, ferrous metal, whalebone and a previously

unrecorded rubbish heap of historic material including glass, ceramics, bone, oyster shells and brick exposed by a four-wheel drive track cutting through the fore dune (Figure 4).



Figure 4: Four-wheel drive track cutting into foredune (WA Museum).

Previous site visits

On 5 May 1985, Mack McCarthy, Steve Cushnahan, Brad Duncan, Nancy Mills-Reid and Jon Carpenter carried out a search over Leander Passage, which included a preliminary survey and predisturbance recording of artefacts. The team saw signs of holes made from souvenir-hunting activities and probing, which had unearthed one camp oven. They concluded that it was either an 1840–50 whalers' camp or wrecking camp associated with the whaler Iris which ran ashore on Hillock Point in 1855. Some evidence of Aboriginal post-working of glass fragments was also recorded.

Table 1: GPS positions of site features.

WPT#	Feature description	GPS positions (Datum: WGS84)
6	Fragment of whalebone in sand dune	28°11.1929 114°14.4463
7	Top of large sand dune (possible lookout)	28°11.2026 114°14.4436
8	Brick scatter (approx. 20 half [broken] coarse hand-made bricks, orange colour, iron fragments including a 'hook', piece of whalebone rib (Fig. 5))	28°11.1772 114°14.4211
9	Brick scatter (approx. 24 bricks mainly broken halves, one with mortar, 3x whole bricks)	28°11.1733 114°14.4157
10	Brick scatter of blackened/ burnt bricks (pyrolysed animal fats i.e. blubber?)	28°11.1679 114°14.4152
11	Chunk of worked white granite	28°11.1663 114°14.4140
12	Large rubbish heap in four-wheel drive track cutting – historic material including broken glass from ale/wine bottles, square case bottle, animal jawbone, green glass, white glass (window pane?) oyster shells, metal and brick fragments. Mixed with modern rubbish eg: commercial fishing floats, rope, bottle glass	28°11.1975 114°14.4615
13	Blue and white china fragment in rubbish heap	28°11.2116 114°14.4630

McCarthy (pers comm. 2008) advises that on 19 March 1988, he swam looking for a 'reef of whale bone' but was unsuccessful. He subsequently proceeded to Sanders' whaling camp where he noted, with disappointment, that a whaling tour taken through the site had caused disturbance to the site and those involved had failed to cover their disturbance, thus, leaving it open to natural and human degradation. On 29 July 1999, another visit was made to the whaler camp at Port Gregory for a general site inspection. In October 2003, McCarthy and volunteers from the Maritime Archaeology Association of Western Australia (MAAWA) again visited the Pakington site. This time, they searched for but found little evidence apart from some surface scatters, which were recovered for identification and analysis.



Figure 5: Brick scatter and whalebone, waypoint 8 (WA Museum).

Artefacts recovered during 1985 inspection

Samples of artefacts were collected in 1985. There included ceramic fragments consisting of white sherds with blue prints or patterns, including stoneware and earthenware. Most of the sherds are in forms indicating bowls or jars (HPC1, HPC29 HPC36 and HPC44). There is also one obvious bowl base fragment (HPC46, Figure 6) and one unidentified small fragment (HPC7). A clay pipe bowl with a design around the lower half and a stem fragment was also recovered.

The glass artefacts consist mainly of bottle fragments. These consist of two bottleneck fragments, fragments of a

circular, olive-green bottle (HPC4) similar to HPC3 and one square or case bottle fragment (HPC43). The olive-green bottles are a common item found at nineteenth-century historical sites and often referred to as 'wine bottles' (based on the shape of the neck and body) though they could have contained some form of ale as well. At least one of the HPC3 necks has twisting marks, a flat-sided lip and lower neck ring. The other fragment has a rounded lip with a v-shaped string rim. The remaining glass fragments consist mainly of light or pale green bottle fragments. There is one near complete, circular, pale green pickle jar (HPC45), which is missing its base. HPC2 and HPC42 appear to be fragments from circular, pale green pickle jars though not of the same one judging by the difference in thickness and form. HPC37 are two fragments of pale green glass.

The lead artefacts include two fragmented flat sheets of lead (HPC39) and two pieces of collapsed lead sheets (HPC6 and HPC35). HPC6 appears to be made of thin lead strips that have collapsed or crumpled into a 'ball'. Ten fragments of orange bricks were recovered (HPC8), which are only part of the number of orange bricks still on site. These are consistent with what can be found at whaling sites, as they are normally associated with try works. At least one orange brick observed on site had evidence of having been burnt with what looked like animal fat residue. Six pieces of charcoal or burnt wood were recovered from the site (HPC10). This is to be expected



Figure 6: Ceramic bowl fragment (HPC46) (WA Museum).

given that manufacturing of whale oil on site as well as other forms of cooking or heating processes would have occurred.

An iron nail or bolt (HPC34), identified as a ship's fitting, has been recovered from the site. Five fragments of iron bolts (HPC11) were also recovered including fragments of long, flat iron pieces of varying thickness (HPC12 and HPC13). It is not known what these were used for. A brass pen nib (HPC31) and a copper alloy nail fragment (HPC38) were also collected, the nail fragment being a possible sheathing tack.

The marine artefacts in the collection consist of limpet shells (HPC15), possible sea snail/winkle shells (HPC16), oyster shells (HPC18) and white coral fragments (HPC33). A variety of animal bones were recovered from the site. HPC14 consists of fish bones, an exoskeleton piece and crab claw section. HPC19 are mandible or jaw fragments of a large mammal. There are also assorted bone fragments (HPC20), some with butcher marks. HPC21 are whalebone fragments showing signs of surface erosion. In the collection are also knuckle bones (HPC22). HPC23 is an assortment of bone pieces including ribs, tibia and femur. There are also rib fragments (HPC24) and also some butchered bones. HPC26 are bone fragments of a large unidentified mammal, which consists of two pelvic fragments and other pieces with butcher marks. HPC27 are assorted bone fragments and HPC28 includes bone pieces from a large mammal.

The evidence points to a variety of activity in the area associated with whaling but also of daily activities associated with those who lived and worked on the site. The evidence of the try works, remains of whales as a result of whale hunting and processing, as well as other animal bones, glass bottles and jars reflecting what was consumed by the people, all confirm the archaeological potential of the area associated with nineteenth-century whaling-related activities.

Threats to the site

One advantage of the site is that it is hidden behind the sand hill and not obvious particularly to visitors unaware of its existence. Brick scatters and other features within the area are often also hidden by thick and prickly shrubs and unless one is aware of an old whaling establishment in the area it would generally be difficult to come across these features. The four-wheel drive track leading to the site has some modern rubbish indicating that people have passed through in more recent times. The dirt track running through the site is probably the only direct and obvious disturbance.

This provides the site with better protection compared to other sites where, for example, well-used camping areas are built directly over remains of former whaling stations (Nash 1998:27) which is directly impacting on archaeological evidence. Being protected behind the high foredune also means that the site is significantly protected from wind and spray. The only natural erosion noted recently took place on the beach, including the intertidal zone and sand dune blow out and four-wheel drive track, which is impacting on the historic material.

SIGNIFICANCE ASSESSMENT

Features consistent with relatively long-term occupied shore whaling sites include storehouses and sheds to house whaleboats, whaling gear, casks of oil, try works whalebones and discarded material. Most of the structures were built on or just behind the beach to allow easy access to the boats and for processing of whales. The recently discovered features are consistent with whaling related structures expected to be found at such a site, especially given the reference to

'Sanford's storehouse' and the absence of historical evidence of other activities in the area that would have used built structures. In addition, the exposure of the structures on the beach and intertidal zone, as well as the subsurface materials as excavated by Gibbs in the mid 1990s, suggest that more material may lie buried along the beach area as well as within the site. A previous archaeological assessment states that 'The Port Gregory site contains no extant structures related to the whaling period' (Gibbs 1995:376), so the identification of such features would quite significantly increase the heritage and archaeological values of the site.

The site and artefacts so far recovered provide the potential for insights into the lifestyle and diet of the whalers. There is certainly sufficient evidence to indicate that the site is archaeologically and historically significant. From a scientific point of view, there is also a potential to compare the rate and extent of disintegration with other whaling stations along the Western Australian coast to assess the environmental and human impact in contributing to this process.

The Pakington site is associated thematically with a number of other archaeological whaling sites as well as aspects of early exploration and industry expansion in Western Australia. For instance, Port Gregory was explored and established as a result of the Swan River settlement's expansion. Port Gregory was also first discovered by a significant historical and political figure, George Grey, who was travelling south to Perth after being forced to abandon his plan of exploring and charting the Shark Bay and Gantheaume Bay areas in 1839. The Pakington site, being one of Western Australia's earlier whaling stations, is also significant in its potential to inform about the state's early whaling industry. Furthermore, the site may also provide insights into early European contact with Aboriginal people.

CONCLUSION

The variety of artefacts recovered in 2003 as well as those remaining in-situ provide sufficient diagnostic evidence of nineteenth century whaling and associated activities. The archaeological evidence associated with the site, along with supporting historical documents, confirms the site's significance in terms of its operations and associated historical identities.

Harwood's crew is known to have lived in Sanford's storehouse, built on Lot One (Figure 3) of the proposed Pakington townsite. It is probable that Bateman would have been required to lease land within the Pakington townsite subdivisions, although no record of this has been found. No historical records pinpoint the location of either Harwood's or Bateman's processing areas or try works although, as mentioned earlier, there are several allusions in contemporary sources that the station(s) were opposite Gold Digger Passage (eg *The Inquirer* 29/6/1859:2). The only reference directly relating to a processing plant is an 1858 report, which states that the try works building and a considerable quantity of whaling gear had been completely destroyed in a fire originating from the tryworks furnace (*Perth Gazette* 13/8/1858:2). As Bateman had not formed a Port Gregory party during that season, this could only have been Harwood's plant (Gibbs 1995:376).

An assessment should be made of the significance, condition and potential for damage to the exposed remains, and if site stabilisation work is required if natural processes do not rebury the exposed remains. Furthermore, the four-wheel drive track should be closed and/or re-sited in consultation with the Port Gregory community to avoid further damage and erosion to a significant part of the archaeological site.

Further research should be carried out into historic sources and the distribution of artefacts over the site in order to determine if there are the remains of one or two whaling stations in the area. As well, in accordance with a research design, test excavations should be carried out on the exposed structures to determine their likely function and extent, that is, to confirm if they are associated with whaling activities. Comparisons can then be made with the findings of excavations carried out at other shore-based whaling sites, such as Bathers Bay in Fremantle (Pearson 1983), and on the subject of examining the historical and archaeological evidence for the selection and use of particular locations for whaling and the living and working conditions of whalers, as examined by Gibbs (1998:36).

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