



Zuytdorp: the search continues

The disappearance of the *Zuytdorp* while en route to the East Indies in the early 18th century was one of Western Australia's most baffling sea mysteries. It was almost 250 years before the vessel's final resting place beneath the spectacular Zuytdorp Cliffs, south of Shark Bay, was finally discovered and identified. In 1992 the land surrounding the wreck (apart from a small Museum site) was amalgamated with a nearby nature reserve, to form the Zuytdorp Nature Reserve.

by Mike McCarthy



The spices and trade goods of the East Indies (now Indonesia) attracted European and American merchants long before Australia was discovered by the British. The usual route to the Indies was north-east from the Cape of Good Hope. But in 1611 seafarers realised that by staying in the belt of westerly winds and the southern Indian Ocean and then heading north, a much faster voyage was possible, with fewer deaths on board. The only problem lay in deciding when to alter course and head north (the chronometer was not yet invented) and, as a result, many East Indies-bound vessels found themselves in difficulties along the shores of WA.

One of these, the *Zuytdorp*, was lost without trace in winter 1712 whilst on a voyage from Holland to Batavia (now Jakarta). The wreck lies on the cliffs just south of Shark Bay. Seven East India ships are known to have been wrecked off the WA coast; the others are *Trial*, 1622; *Batavia*, 1629; *Vergulde Draeck*, 1656; *Zeewijk*, 1727; *Rapid*, 1811; and the *Correo de Azia*, 1816. The *Zuytdorp* is the only one whose survivors never reached Batavia to tell their tale. The remains on the seabed and the nearby shore hold the only clues to the circumstances of the wreck and the fate of the crew.



DISCOVERY!

In 1927, a wreck, later identified as the *Zuytdorp*, was found by the stockmen and women who were fencing and trapping dingoes on a remote cliff top between Tamala and Murchison House stations. One of the group, the late Tom Pepper senior, a well-known stockman, reported evidence of large campfires, broken bottles, coins, cooking pots, masts, rolls of lead, breech blocks (for firing small bronze

swivel guns) and other material on the cliff top and reef platform below. It was apparent that one or two camps had been made by survivors of a then unknown wreck. The only clues were the dates on the coins, the latest being 1711.

Tom Pepper finally told authorities of the discovery over a decade later. The first expedition in 1941 was ill-equipped and members only spent a short time at the site before being forced to leave the harsh and remote area. As a result, the location of the wreck remained a mystery.

In 1954, Phillip Playford, a geologist exploring for petroleum, befriended Pepper and received good directions to the site. After examining the remains, he returned to Perth and identified the area as the camp of the *Zuytdorp* survivors. Playford had studied records housed in Holland, and discovered that only two vessels carried 1711 coins to Batavia. One, the *Belvliet*, sailed in convoy with the *Zuytdorp* and arrived at its destination, while the *Zuytdorp* disappeared for over two centuries without trace. Subsequent efforts by Playford to find the wreck were hindered by the rugged conditions. The area is usually subject to a dangerous swell, even on relatively calm days.

In 1964, almost a decade after Playford's discovery and nearly 40 years

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Photos - Patrick Baker

Researcher Rosemary Harper with
silver coins and other artefacts
recovered from the *Zuytdorp*.
Photo - Patrick Baker



after the wreck was first found, the first successful dives were made in the area. Playford's suspicions were confirmed: the wreck lay against the reef platform opposite the land remains. He believed that the ship had either crashed into the cliff base without warning or, if the cliffs had been seen, anchors were set but the ship was still blown ashore.

Both possibilities were intriguing. If the ship had struck the honeycombed reefs in the turbulent water at the cliff's base without warning, it was likely that there were few survivors. There would have been no time to launch boats, and anybody who successfully disembarked would probably have been crushed against the reef platform or sucked under the reef into the blowholes beneath. In that case, the only hope would have lain in scaling the rigging (if the masts still stood) and dropping off onto dry land, or jumping from the high poop of the vessel onto the reef platform.

Above right: The spectacular Zuytdorp Cliffs rise some 170 metres above sea level.

Photo - Patrick Baker

Maritime archaeologist Mike McCarthy inspects one of the cannons from the wreck.

Photo - Jon Carpenter



If the cliffs had been seen and the anchors set, there would have been time for some to leave the ship. Perhaps they took part of the precious cargo of silver that the East India ships normally carried on the voyage. If that was the case, their remains would now lie somewhere between the wreck site and Batavia.

The answer to the question lay in the number of anchors on the wreck and whether some were lying further out to sea. East India Company vessels of the period carried at least five anchors. Thus, unless there were at least five anchors on the wreck, the crew may have set some to seaward prior to the ship's loss. In such a case, survivors could have left the wreck, but failed to reach Batavia. This puzzle was not solved until early in 1988.

EARLY DIVES

On the first dive conducted on the site in 1964, a team of Geraldton divers led by Tom Brady saw two anchors, several iron cannons, lead ingots, ballast stones and a number of smaller, badly eroded brass cannons. Though unable to see all of the site, they began preparing a plan of the wreck. The group made their notes available to the WA Museum and the wreck site was protected on the basis of their report. They made many other attempts to dive on the site, but could not properly examine the stern section of the wreck until 1967. There they found a virtual 'carpet of silver' of several square metres.

With the discovery of the wreck of the *Trial*, the *Batavia* in 1964, and then the equally rich *Vergulde Draeck* (Gilt Dragon) in 1969, the Museum established its own diving team. The team recovered a number of coins and artefacts from the *Zuytdorp*. A maritime archaeologist, appointed to the Museum in 1971, led a number of shore-based dives on the site. The owner of nearby Murchison House station, Mr Jah, once the Nizam of Hyderabad, provided logistical assistance and built a large 'flying fox' - a cable and pulley system - that allowed the divers and their equipment to descend to the water and haul each other back up onto the cliff top. The sea soon destroyed the construction, but the team managed to recover a large quantity of coins and artefacts and recorded further details for the site plan. Again, only two anchors were seen, though the position of the anchors varied slightly on each of the plans.

Because of the large amount of silver on the site, the Museum installed a watchkeeper on the clifftop. When the weather was good or on the mend he called the team, who would travel by air from Fremantle, land on a small strip, and prepare for a dive. Conditions changed so quickly that they often arrived to find the wreck undiveable. The *Zuytdorp* was difficult to work and the changeable conditions led to many close calls.

Because of the dangers, the vast expense of employing a watchkeeper and of conducting the excavation, and the pressures of working on other wrecks, the Museum halted work on the *Zuytdorp* in 1981. The wreck was protected by aerial surveillance, the declaration of a restricted area a square kilometre around the wreck,

and a part-time warden living in a nearby shanty. In November 1986, the Museum recommenced work on the site.

SAND AND SURGE

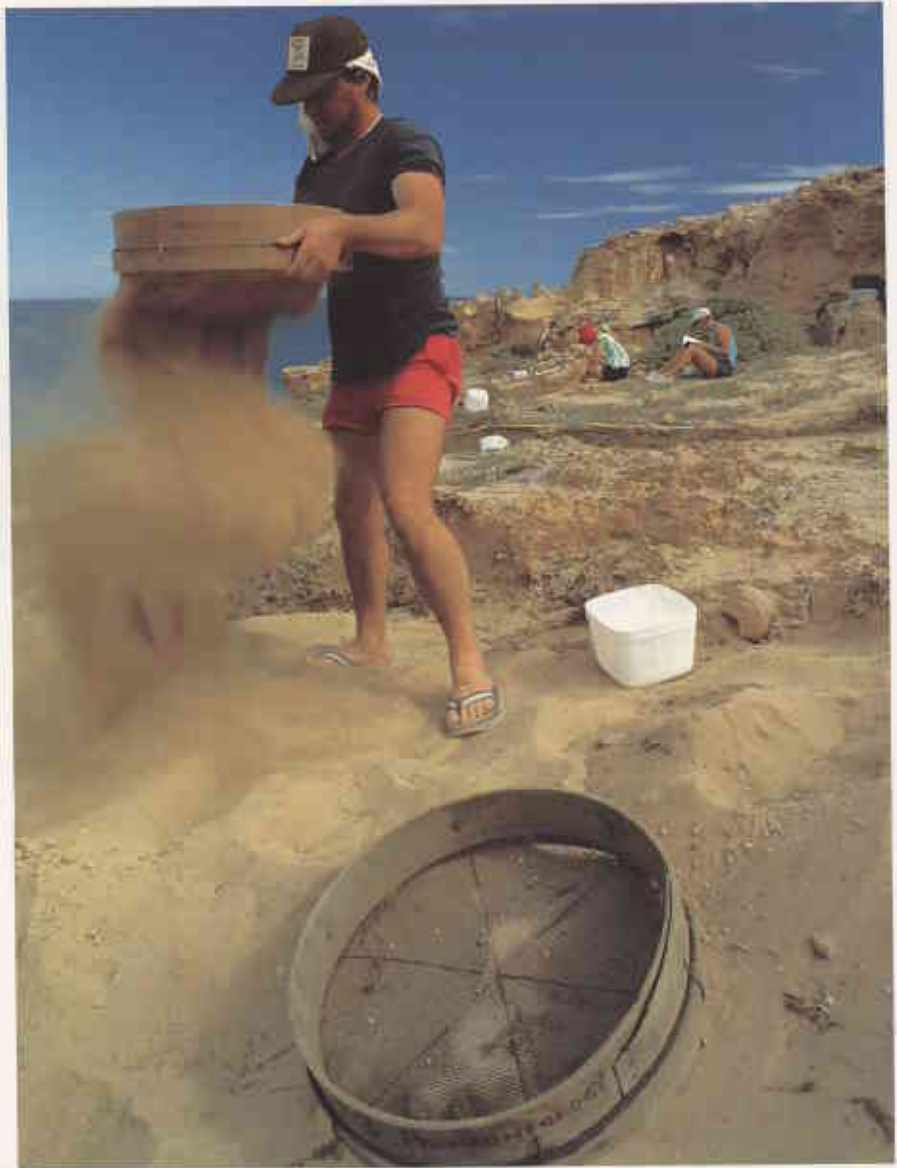
A number of shore-based familiarisation dives revealed that the wreck was suffering from severe seasonal sand accretion and scouring. These factors made it almost impossible to view the entire site during any one dive or series of dives. In mid-1987, for example, the wreck was completely covered in sand, but soon afterwards the layer had gone, revealing cannons, ingots, coins and other material hidden only a fortnight before.

By this time, fast rock-lobster boats had almost entirely replaced the old lumbering fishing vessels of the 1960s and 1970s.

Kalbarri fisherman Andrew Young invited the team to work from his vessel *en route* to his fishing ground further north. The offer was accepted and new methods were developed for working the site using the Museum's fast 5.5 m aluminium work-boat, which took just over an hour to reach the site from Kalbarri. The Kalbarri fishing community, notably Bob Mitchell and the Glass family, helped the Museum to recover a large number of artefacts in the 1987-88 season. These included an English eight-pounder cannon, many coins, a pulley block, pipe fragments, exquisite glassware ceramics, small arms, a large pewter dish with hundreds of other objects embedded into its surface, combs, and the largest anchor yet recovered by the WA Museum. Local involvement also led to better policing of the site.

Further work was done on the site plan and the question of what happened to the ship in its last moments. During reasonably good conditions in May and June of 1988, the team found eight anchors grouped around the vessel's bow. Four of these were housed in the traditional fashion, with two on each side of the bow. Two more lay just aft of the bow anchors on top of a large rock. Another two lay together some 12 metres forward and slightly inshore of the bow anchors, along with two cannons and other material.

The difficult conditions and the seasonal sand build-up had hidden the



anchors from the earlier groups. Although they had recorded only two anchors on three separate site plans made over a decade, they had actually seen six. It was wrongly assumed that the slight differences that appeared in these plans were due to the effects of the poor conditions. The vessel probably struck the reef without anchors set, and came to rest close enough to the reef platform to allow some people to bridge the small gap to apparent safety.

LAND CAMPS

Once it was established that the vessel had hit the reef, virtually without warning, attention swung to the land camps, and the fascinating possibility that local Aboriginal tribes helped the survivors find water. Water is scarce at Shark Bay in any season except winter, when the *Zuytdorp* was lost. Without the help of local Aborigines, the unfortunate Dutch would probably have died with

the onset of hot weather. However, water had been found on the coast by earlier Dutch parties. Charts produced by de Vlamingh only a decade before the loss of the *Zuytdorp* showed the area in some detail and marked water sources at Kalbarri, 40 nautical miles to the south of the wreck.

Questions about possible interaction between the two groups remain unanswered. The WA Maritime Museum, Professor Sandra Bowdler of the Centre of Prehistory at the University of Western Australia, and Dr Playford are examining the movement of artefacts from the wreck to wells and soaks in the hinterland, and a possible genetic link between the Dutchmen on the *Zuytdorp* and the local Aborigines. This genetic link appears as the introduced disease *Porphyria variegata*, a malady that originated at the Cape of Good Hope in 1688.

The archaeological evidence shows that the survivors built and fired huge

beacons in the hope of attracting salvation from passing vessels or searching ships. As the Dutch vessels of the *Zuytdorp* era were commanded to sight the WA coast at 27 degrees south, in almost the exact latitude of the wreck, the survivors probably stayed near the wreck for as long as possible. Their hopes were in vain. Having lost men and boats on expeditions to locate vessels lost earlier, the authorities at Batavia left

them to their fate. To make matters worse, no passing vessels were lured close enough to the cliffs to investigate what probably appeared to be the fires of Aboriginal people.

Work is still under way on the land and sea sites. However, it will be some time before the question of what happened to the *Zuytdorp* and its crew is resolved.

The task of recording and plotting

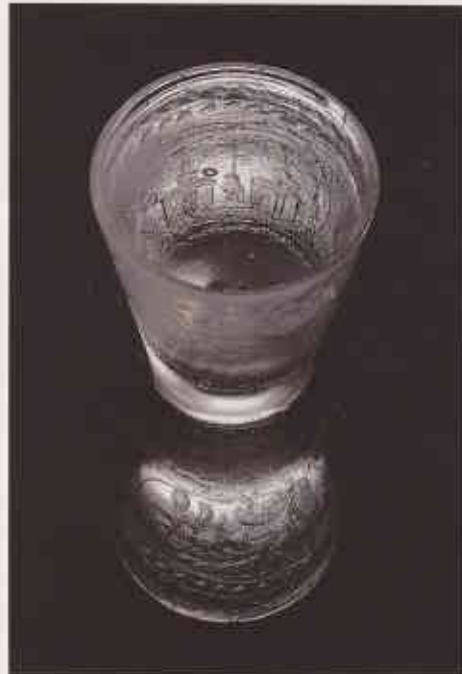
the wreck continues. With the help of aerial photography, all the land sites, past and present excavations, and artefacts can now be shown accurately on a superimposed grid. High-quality site plans are on display at the Maritime Museum in Fremantle. The plans of the wreck site may also help fix the position of any future land and sea excavations and help authorities to manage the remains and the general area.

Left: Discovering evidence of survivors' camps on the mainland.
Photo - Jon Carpenter

Far right: Senior diver Geoff Kimpton excavating in the surf zone.
Photo - Patrick Baker

Exquisite glassware was uncovered from the wreck site.
Photo - Patrick Baker

Museum staff working at the wreck site encounter difficult conditions.
Photo - Brian Richards





ZUYTDORP NATURE RESERVE

The 59 000-hectare Zuytdorp Nature Reserve was declared in 1992. The Nature Reserve includes the majority of the permanent and seasonal soaks that the stranded Dutch would have had to rely on to survive. During a goat eradication program, staff from the Agriculture Protection Board, Department of Agriculture, Department of Conservation and Land Management and local pastoralists flew over this remote wilderness country locating and plotting the soaks up to 60 km from the wreck site. As part of CALM's management of the Reserve the soaks will be protected.

In addition to its cultural links, the Zuytdorp Nature Reserve has a high diversity of plant species. World Heritage Listing of Shark Bay recognised that the Reserve represented the transition zone between two major botanical provinces; 145 species of plants grow here at their northern limit, and 39 more at their southern limit. Many vegetation formations are plant species only found in this interzone area, and there are also extensive banksia woodlands.

Access to the Zuytdorp Nature Reserve and wreck site is both dangerous and restricted. Management tracks are hazardous and expeditions to the area generally take two vehicles for safety reasons. Due to the history of this wreck and the current investigations, the Museum has closed the immediate area surrounding the wreck and land sites, which they hope to reopen once the



Above left: The land sites are now closed to the public, but may reopen once work is finished.

Photo - Jon Carpenter

Above: The area adjacent to the wreck was declared a nature reserve in 1992.

Photo - Patrick Baker

The Zuytdorp figurehead is on display at Geraldton Maritime Museum.

Photo - Patrick Baker



research is finished. The Museum will work with CALM, in the context of its land management schemes for the Shark Bay area, to determine the best way for the public to view the location of one of our most significant and baffling sea mysteries.

All known data on the land and sea sites is being compiled and a public information sheet has been produced by the Museum. There is a new display at the Fremantle Maritime Museum and at Geraldton, and a small interpretive display is planned for the new Kalbarri civic building. The figurehead is on display at the Geraldton Maritime Museum.

The problems with the *Zuytdorp* are many, but solutions, though few, are beginning to emerge. With luck we may one day solve this fascinating mystery.

Mike McCarthy is the *Zuytdorp* project leader with the Maritime Archaeology Department of the WA Museum. He can be contacted on (09) 431 8436.

LANDSCOPE

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'Where there's fire there's smoke'. We look at one of the lesser known and misunderstood products of bushfires on page 10.



Banksias and blackboys are normally associated with the sandplains of the coast and wheatbelt rather than the Great Victoria Desert. See page 22.



The mountains of the Stirling Range are a refuge harbouring many ancient species of spiders. Spider expert Barbara York Main shows us some of them on page 28.



The disappearance of the Zuytdorp remained a mystery for many years. The story of its rediscovery and the formation of the Zuytdorp Nature Reserve is on page 42.



A new book, Perth Outdoors, aims to encourage people to get outdoors and enjoy nature and to learn more about Perth's unique natural communities. See page 35.

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COVER

The palisade spider (*Neohomogona stirlingi*) is endemic to the Stirling and Porongurup Ranges. It builds a shallow burrow with an open entrance surrounded by a palisade, or collar of leaves and twigs, which may project several centimetres above the ground or litter.

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Managing Editor: Ron Kawallak

Editor: David Gough

Contributing Editors: Verna Costello, Grahame Rowland, Carolyn Thomson

Scientific and technical advice: Andrew Burbidge, Roger Underwood

Design and production: Sue Marais, Sandra Mitchell, Stacey Strickland

Finished art: Sue Marais

Advertising: Estelle de San Miguel ☎ (09) 389 8644 Fax: 389 8296

Illustration: Ian Dickinson, Kellee Merritt, Sandra Mitchell

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