



The background of the page is a composite image. The top portion shows a wide, flat landscape under a hazy sky, likely the coastal plain of Dirk Hartog Island. Overlaid on the right side is a historical map with a compass rose and various geographical markings. The map includes the name 'Dirk Hartoogs Eyl.' and other handwritten notes. In the bottom right corner, there is a circular inset showing a stone inscription with Dutch text, which is a reproduction of the original stone found on the island.

Dirk Hartog Island: *inscribed in* history

Dirk Hartog Island is an isle of contradictions. It features arid, spinifex grasslands and dunes and is heavily degraded in places but also has many interesting flora species, some more typical of the wetter south-west of Western Australia. It has lost several species of mammals but is home to three threatened subspecies of birds found nowhere else. It is arguably one of the most historically significant places for early European contact in WA, and the island will soon become one of our most important national parks.

by Carolyn Thomson-Dans

Dirk Hartog Island, covering 62,000 hectares, is Western Australia's largest island. It is 76 kilometres long and between three and 11 kilometres wide and boasts about 200 kilometres of coastline. On its western edge, the island plunges dramatically into the ocean and receives a constant battering from the waves and swell. This gives rise to some of the most dramatic scenery anywhere along the State's coast. The island forms the westernmost point of Australia.

Dirk Hartog Island is thought to have become isolated from the mainland in relatively recent times. Shell middens and stone artefacts dated at between 6000 and 3500 years show that Aboriginal people lived on the island at times of lower sea levels.

Tale of three plates

The earliest record of Europeans having landed on Australian soil was inscribed on a pewter plate nailed to a post on Dirk Hartog Island. Translated from Dutch, it reads:

"1616. On the 25th October the ship *Eendracht* of Amsterdam arrived here. Upper merchant Gilles Miebaais of Luick



(Liege); skipper Dirck Hatichs (Dirk Hartog) of Amsterdam. On the 27th ditto we sail for Bantum. Under merchant Jan Stins; upper steersman Pieter Doores of Bil (Brielle). In the year 1616."

History records that the plate was removed by Dutch mariner Willem de Vlamingh in 1697, who left a plate of his own, inscribed with both Dirk Hartog's original words and a record of his own visit. The original Dirk

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Main The spectacular western coast of Dirk Hartog Island.

Photo – David Bettini

Insets from left Silver coin left by Saint Aloüarn; pewter plate erected on Dirk Hartog Island by Vlamingh; part of a map produced as a result of Vlamingh's 1697 expedition.

Left Silver coin in lead seal and a bottle thought to have contained a French claim over Australia.

Photos – Patrick Baker/Western Australian Maritime Museum

Below left Replica posts in the same position as those which held historic pewter plates.

Photo – Carolyn Thomson-Dans/DEC

Hartog plate is now on display in the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam. It is the oldest European artefact that relates to Australia's history.

Louis Saint Aloüarn in the *Gros Ventre* became the first French navigator to sight the Australian continent. He landed at Turtle Bay on Dirk Hartog Island on 30 March 1772 and took possession of the country in the name of the French King Louis XV. To support his claim, he buried a bottle containing a parchment of annexation and two coins, each enclosed in a lead seal. Saint Aloüarn died before his return to France. Two coins and one bottle were rediscovered on the island in 1998, although, as could be expected after such a long time, there was no trace of the parchment.

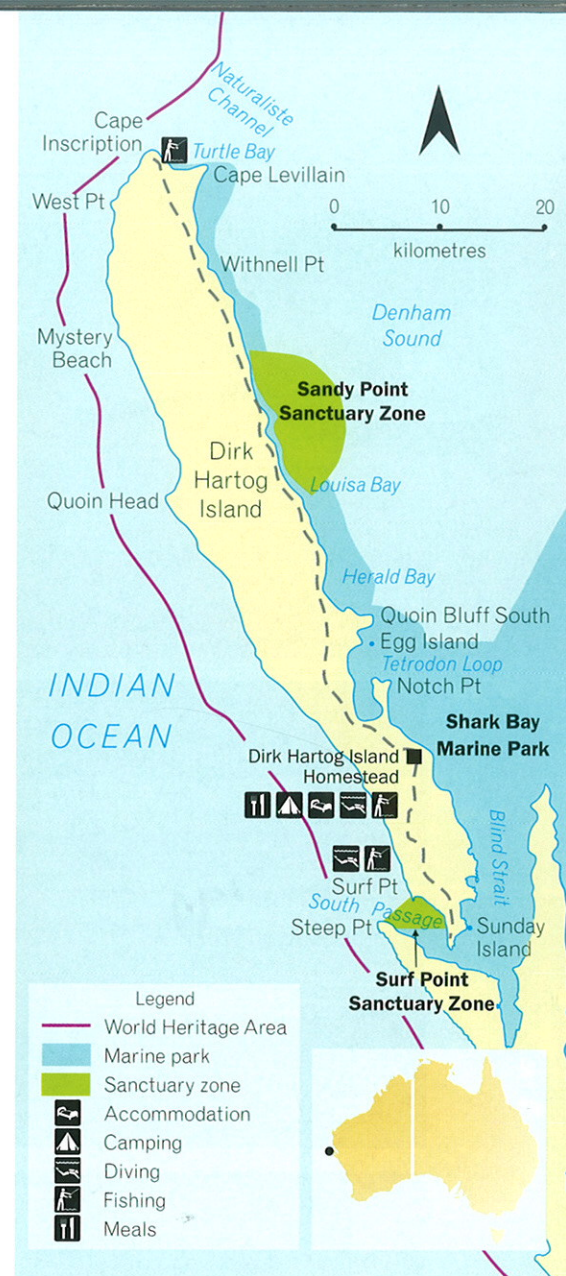
Frenchman Nicolas Baudin, who arrived in the area on the *Géographe* on 23 June 1801, was unimpressed with his first views of Dirk Hartog Island:

"During the entire afternoon we coasted, a league off, along the western shores of Dirk Hartog's Island. For its entire length, it looked arid, disagreeable and dreary. It was, in fact, worse than the part of the Terres de la Concorde that we had seen the day before. The sea broke heavily all along the coast, and we often saw it rise to the height of the cliffs, which are straight and sheer like a wall and with not one noticeable slope."

As such a scenario was a mariner's nightmare, Baudin did not endeavour to land on the island.

The following month, crew from





Top left Pied cormorants at Quoin Bluff South.

Above left The pastoral history of Dirk Hartog Island stretches back to 1868. Photos – Carolyn Thomson-Dans/DEC

had run out and the islands scraped clean, so the regiment was called back to Fremantle. The ruins of their stone storehouse and stone jetty foundations can still be seen on the island today.

When Captain Henry Mangles Denham anchored in the bay adjacent to Quoin Bluff in 1858, while conducting a major survey of the area on behalf of the British navy, he was puzzled to discover an iron tank, bottles, pipes and other remnants of the garrison. Denham released rabbits and pigeons on the island, presumably to provide a future food source. Fortunately, a major ecological disaster was averted as the rabbits did not survive. Introduced

the French vessel *Naturaliste* arrived in Shark Bay (having become separated from the *Géographie* in a storm some months before) and found Vlamingh's plate, which had fallen from its post. Captain Jacques Felix Emmanuel Hamelin insisted on nailing the plate to a new post and leaving it in situ, regarding it as 'a sacrilege' to do otherwise. He also left an inscribed plate of his own.

It seems that Hamelin's deputy Louis de Freycinet disagreed with the decision to leave this iconic piece of history on the island. Freycinet returned to Shark Bay on the *Uranie* in 1818 and took Vlamingh's plate with him back to France. There it languished, lost and forgotten, for more than a century until it came to light in 1940, on a bottom shelf in the French Academy in Paris mixed up with some odds and ends. It was repatriated to WA on 28 May 1947, a gift from the French government, and the original can now be seen in the Western Australian Maritime Museum in Fremantle. A replica can be viewed at the Shark Bay World Heritage Discovery Centre on the foreshore in Denham.

The whereabouts of Hamelin's plate are not known, although it is thought to have been erected somewhere on the north-eastern coast of the island.

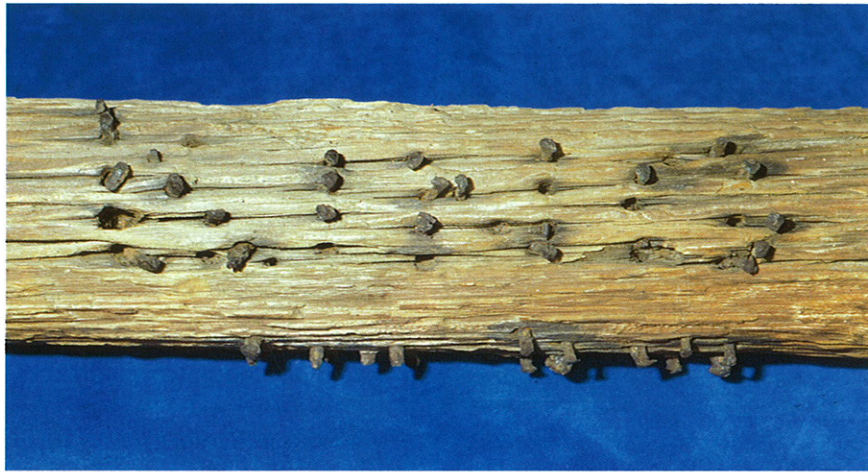
Other early history

In the nineteenth century Dirk Hartog Island became used as a base for whaling, guano collecting, pastoralism and pearling. The French whaler *Perseverant* was wrecked at Levillain Shoals at the northern end of the island in 1841.

Strangely enough, bird droppings led to the establishment of an army garrison on Dirk Hartog Island in 1851. At first the garrison was established at a site later named Quoin Bluff, with the officer residing in a wooden structure and 12 soldiers camping in tents. Accumulated guano on many of the smaller islands in the bay, which were used as seabird roosts, was an extremely valuable fertiliser at the time, and the Colonial government at Swan River established the army outpost to collect a royalty of two pounds per ton. On arriving, they found numerous vessels anchored in the bay—all collecting guano. But within months the supplies

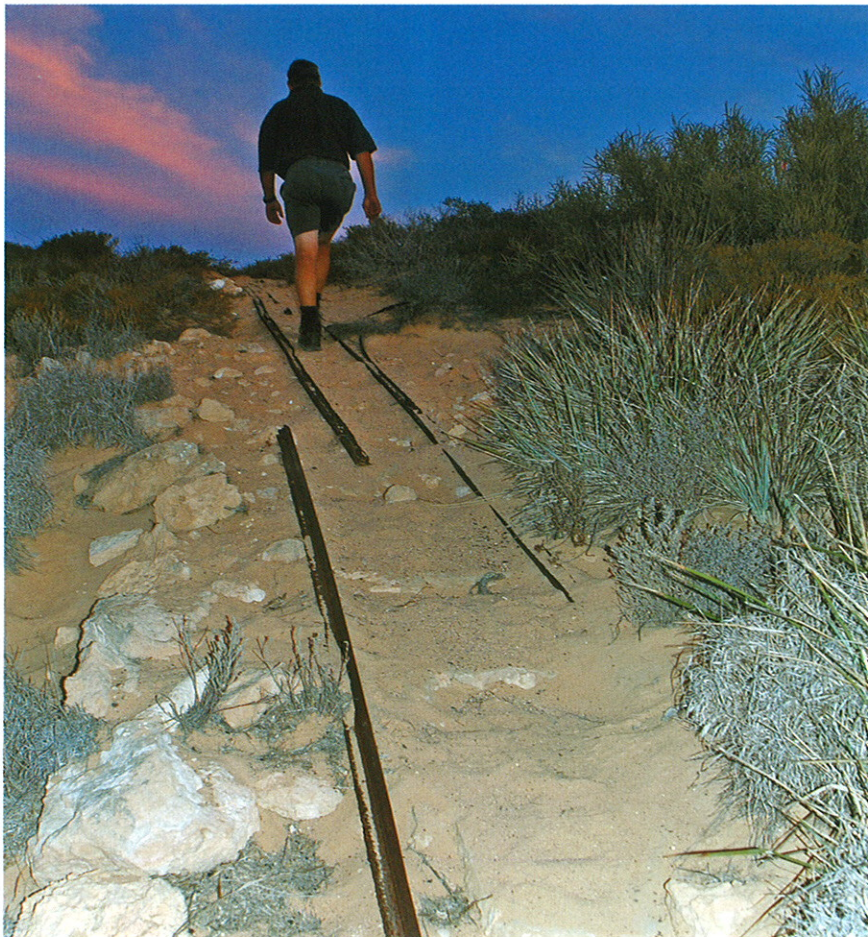


pigeons are found on the island today. Aubrey Brown and the von Bibra family were among the earliest pastoralists in Shark Bay. Frank von Bibra was granted a lease to run sheep on Dirk Hartog Island in 1868. With no water on the island, one of the von Bibras' first tasks would have been to sink wells. They subsequently built a homestead, a shearing shed and shearing quarters. Aubrey Brown settled at the southern end of the island. As it took time to build up the flocks, supplementary income from collecting guano, pearls and sandalwood was important to the Browns and von Bibras in the early years.



The Cape Inscription lighthouse and keepers' quarters were built between 1908 and 1910. The lighthouse still operates, but is now automated. The keepers' quarters were unused for many years and fell into disrepair, but are now being renovated by the Shire of Shark Bay.

After a series of lessees, the island was finally leased by Sir Thomas Wardle (better known as 'Tom the Cheap', as his chain of supermarkets was called) in 1968.



Wildflowers and wildlife

Dirk Hartog Island has tremendous biodiversity conservation values, with 84 species of birds and 48 species of reptiles recorded there. With more than 250 native plant species, it has one of the most diverse island floras in the south-west.

The island is a special and important place for birds. The isolation of Dirk Hartog Island from the mainland has given rise to several subspecies that are

Top left This knob-tailed gecko is a common Dirk Hartog Island inhabitant. Photo – Carolyn Thomson-Dans/DEC

Above left Freycinet had removed Vlamingh's plate by the time Phillip Parker King visited Cape Inscription in 1822, so King nailed his name on one of the posts. Photo – Patrick Baker/WA Maritime Museum

Left A tramline was built at Turtle Bay early last century to service the lighthouse. Photo – Carolyn Thomson-Dans/DEC

Right Dirk Hartog Island in spring.
Photo – Eva Boogaard/Lochman
Transparencies

found nowhere else. Three of these birds are listed as threatened, primarily because of their small population size and vulnerability to habitat modification by introduced stock and the threat of fire. They include the Dirk Hartog Island black-and-white fairy-wren (*Malurus leucopterus leucopterus*), the Dirk Hartog Island southern emu-wren (*Stipiturus malachurus hartogi*) and the Dirk Hartog Island rufous fieldwren (*Calamanthus campestris hartogi*). Although there are differences between the plumages of these species and their counterparts on the mainland, recent genetic studies have indicated that at least one of these species—the Dirk Hartog Island black-and-white fairy-wren—may not be sufficiently different to the mainland birds to be regarded as a separate subspecies. This bird looks similar to the white-winged fairy-wren of the mainland, but is black and white rather than blue and white. Dirk Hartog Island also has the largest breeding colony of pied cormorants in WA, with up to 2500 breeding pairs at Quoin Bluff South.

The island is home to a threatened reptile, the western spiny-tailed skink (*Egernia stokesii badia*), and supports a lizard, the Shark Bay ctenotus (*Ctenotus youngsoni*) that, although not threatened, is confined to Dirk Hartog Island and nearby Edel Land.

Dirk Hartog Island supports the largest loggerhead turtle breeding colony in Australia, with possibly as many as 1000 turtles nesting at the island's north-eastern corner each year. The rookery is also globally significant, as these numbers place it in the top five most important sites in the world. The loggerhead turtle is considered to be the most threatened turtle that nests in the Australian region.

Navigator William Dampier was the first person to collect Australian plants and his first specimens came from Dirk Hartog Island. He described

the island's vegetation, as seen during his visit in 1699, in his book entitled *A Voyage to New Holland*:

“The Grass grows in great Tufts, as big as a Bushel, here and there a tuft: Being intermix'd with much Heath, much of the kind we have growing on our Commons in England. Of Trees or Shrubs here are divers Sorts; but none above 10 Foot high: There [sic] Bodies about 3 Foot about, and 5 or 6 Foot high before you come to the Branches, which are bushy and compos'd of small Twigs there spreading abroad, tho' thick set, and full of Leaves; which were mostly long and narrow. The Colour of the Leaves was on one Side whitish, and on the other green; and the Bark of the Trees was generally of the same Colour with the Leaves, of a pale green. Some of these Trees were sweet-scented, and reddish within the Bark, like the Sassafras...”

Today, Dirk Hartog Island contains quite a large number of species growing at the ends of their ranges. As well as being the type locality for a large number of Western Australian plants, Dirk Hartog Island has a mixture of south-west and arid-zone species. There are many colourful wildflowers growing on the island, including Fraser's lantern bush (*Abutilon fraseri*), running postman (*Templetonia retusa*) and native rosemary (*Olearia axillaris*).

Towards a national park

In 1993, Geoff and Keiran Wardle (son and grandson of Sir Thomas) assumed management of the Dirk Hartog Island pastoral lease and began to develop it as a tourist attraction. Their tourism operations are generally open to the public between March and





Above Large mobile dunes at Dirk Hartog Island are visible from the mainland.
Photo – Carolyn Thomson-Dans/DEC



Left The Tamala rose (*Diplolaena grandiflora*) was collected by William Dampier from Dirk Hartog Island in 1699.
Photo – Jiri Lochman

Below Detail of Vlamingh's plate.
Photo – Patrick Baker/WA Maritime Museum

designated areas. Following the removal of the sheep, feral goats and feral cats from the island, a huge project to restore the natural values of the island will start. Baseline monitoring of small mammals and reptiles is being done on an annual basis to establish exactly which species live there. Further scientific studies—such as a comprehensive botanical survey—are also planned.

Because Dirk Hartog Island has immense historical significance, is

located within a scientifically important World Heritage Area and is an island on which feral animals can therefore be controlled, the Department of Environment and Conservation's (DEC's) vision is to turn it into a showcase national park.

Many of the 15 native mammal species originally found on the island are now locally extinct, most likely because of feral cat predation, but several of these species will be reintroduced after DEC undertakes a restoration program of the island's vegetation and controls feral cats. These mammals—most of them listed as threatened—include the chuditch, dibbler, western barred bandicoot, woylie and boodie.

Eventually, the proposed Dirk Hartog Island national park will become a secure haven for threatened species and will enhance the values that make Shark Bay worthy of World Heritage listing.

October. Accommodation is provided in the station homestead and there are also six designated camping areas. Visitors can bring their four-wheel drives to the island by barge from Steep Point (by prior arrangement). The island is particularly popular with fishing enthusiasts but also provides superb diving and snorkelling opportunities. It is an interesting place to explore on foot and a variety of marine animals such as whales, sharks, manta rays and turtles can be seen from higher vantage points.

The State Government has started a process to preserve Dirk Hartog Island as a national park which will require the surrender of the pastoral lease on the island. The Wardle family will retain some small parcels of land so they can continue to provide limited, low-key, nature-based tourism facilities in



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