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The *Samuel Wright* story

DIGGING FOR HIDDEN TREASURE

Buried deep below Koombana Bay lies the historic *Samuel Wright*, a whaling ship which was wrecked off the coast of WA in 1840. A recent development provided an exciting opportunity to explore the wreck and uncover a treasure-trove of artefacts that have miraculously survived amidst an urban and mining centre.

by Heather Quinlan



During the 19th century, hundreds of North American whaling ships sailed 10,000 nautical miles south to a place they knew as 'New Holland Ground' off Western Australia's coast, hunting whales for their valuable blubber and oil. Some of the ships were wrecked in northerly gales and washed ashore at the small settlement of Koombana Bay.

Fast forward 176 years in the bustling city of Bunbury, on a patch of Koombana Bay foreshore land destined to become the site of the new Department of Parks and Wildlife headquarters, and archaeological excavations are underway to discover the hidden treasures of one of these wrecks.

It is thought the 34-metre wooden hull of the Salem-based whaling ship *Samuel Wright*, which was wrecked on 8 July 1840, lies up to six metres underground, buried in sand below the watertable.

Locals and maritime archaeologists from the Western Australian Museum have known for many years – since sand mining operations were conducted on the Bunbury coastline in the 1960s, temporarily exposing a number of buried shipwrecks – that some of WA's richest maritime heritage could be found beneath the Koombana Bay foreshore.

This coastline and further south around to King George Sound and the western Great Australian Bight area used to be a rich hunting ground for international and colonial whalers.



At a time before petroleum and electricity, when whale oil was used worldwide for street lamps, candles, soap and many other industrial and domestic products, visiting whaling ships provided small coastal settlements with crucial trade opportunities in exchange for fresh provisions such as vegetables and kangaroo meat.

But hazardous conditions in little-known seas blew many ships ashore.

BUNBURY SHIPWRECKS

The *Samuel Wright*, one of 13 recorded shipwrecks in the Bunbury area, was buffeted high up onto the



beach in a massive northerly storm. It gradually became covered by sand in the early 1900s, after construction of rock breakwaters to make Koombana Bay safer for shipping caused sediment to build up inside the port. It is considered the most important and historically significant of the local wrecks.

One of the earliest American whaling ships to visit WA's south-west corner, its mast was used as a reference point in Government Surveyor Henry Ommaney's work pegging out the new town of Bunbury in 1841–42, making it the only city in Australia to have its town plan based on a shipwreck. The wreck was also used as a storehouse, making the *Samuel Wright* one of Bunbury's first buildings.

Excavations to determine which ship lay under the Parks and Wildlife site began in February 2016, after months of planning and environmental investigations including geophysical and water probe surveys.

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Excavating the front section of the *Samuel Wright* shipwreck.

Photo – Jennifer Eliot/Parks and Wildlife
Inset top North American whaling ships sailed to the coast of Western Australia to hunt whales.

Inset bottom Article from the *Perth Gazette*, August 1840 detailing the sale of whaler ships, including the *Samuel Wright*.

Above The excavation site at Koombana Bay.
Photo – Jennifer Eliot/Parks and Wildlife

Left A leather shoe and try-works bricks – used to build furnaces to help process whale blubber – were uncovered during the excavation.

Photos – Deb Shelf/WA Museum





“The *Samuel Wright* is one of the most historic and best-preserved shipwrecks we have in Western Australia, and indeed Australia.”

Coordinated by Ross Anderson, the assistant curator of maritime archaeology at the Western Australian Museum, the dig began with heavy machinery removing accumulated beach sand and mine tailings overlying the hull structure, and continued with an expert team carefully uncovering the ship’s features and artefacts with trowels, spades, buckets and brushes. Highly accurate surveying technology including 3D photogrammetry and laser scanning was used to record the site.

Three North American whaling ships had been wrecked at Koombana Bay, but based on historical records and water probe surveys, Ross was quietly confident the structure would be confirmed as the *Samuel Wright*.

DIGGING REVEALS ARTEFACTS

Days of digging and scientific analysis of timber hull samples and metal fastenings proved he was right – the large shipwreck was indeed the *Samuel Wright*. Built in 1831, the old whaler revealed a swathe of treasures for museum archaeologists.

Uncovered were 219 items including chopped firewood, wooden casks, leather shoes, clay pipes and numerous red, hand-made bricks from whaling vessel ‘try-works’, the furnaces used to render whale blubber into oil.

Analysis of samples showed the ship’s hull was made of white oak and

North American yellow pine and its construction, typical of early 19th century shipbuilding, used predominantly wooden materials, including fastening pins known as ‘treenails’.

Seven copper fastenings recovered from the wreck were found to have arsenic added to the metal to make them more resistant to erosion, a strategy often employed prior to the introduction of copper alloys with greater percentages of zinc and tin.

The findings from the excavation have provided insights into Indian Ocean whaling, North American shipbuilding, WA’s early colonial economy and development, and the State’s maritime history.

“The *Samuel Wright* is one of the most historic and best-preserved shipwrecks we have in Western Australia, and indeed Australia,” Ross said.

“To have it so close to an urban centre and to have survived amidst industrial sand mining activities is a miracle.

“Archaeological sites are often hard for people to appreciate because they are buried ‘out of sight out of mind’, so we have recorded the site in great detail so that we can use all of the artefacts, images and 3D digital reconstructions to interpret the site for many years to come.”

And what will become of the *Samuel Wright*? Now fully reburied, it will

Above left Measuring the remains of the bow structure.

Above One of the ship’s hand-made iron nails. Photos – Jennifer Eliot/Parks and Wildlife

continue to occupy its sandy subterranean grave, preserved beautifully below the water table for hundreds more years.

Visitors to the Parks and Wildlife precinct in future years will be able to connect with the ship’s amazing history through cultural interpretation and landscape elements overlaying the wreck site.

See video animation of the *Samuel Wright* shipwreck site



Scan this QR code or visit museum.wa.gov.au/research/departments/maritime-archaeology/samuel-wright

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See Ross Anderson’s guest column on page 7.