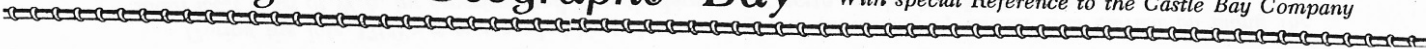


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Whaling In Geographe Bay *With special Reference to the Castle Bay Company*



Whale capturing utilising "Mother Ships" in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries was conducted from small boats rowed by oarsmen, usually six or eight in number, with a harpooner standing in the prow with his iron lance attached to a line or rope. After capturing the whale the carcass was then towed by oarsmen in the boat to the "Mother Ships" for processing, after a tow of often many miles. Often if there was contrary wind blowing the tugs would anchor the whale at night fall and return at daylight to tow the carcass in, risking the sharks and killer whales descending on the body of the whale.

During the years 1845-46 a company of Perth and Fremantle business men formed a company to whale in Geographe Bay with a shore station at Castle Bay, naming it the Castle Bay Whaling Company. All the attributes of a shore station were built on the west side of the creek flowing into Castle Bay, with look-out situated on a treeless hill to the east of the creek or gully.

Frederick William Seymour was engaged as headsman and harpooner and afterwards managed the station for the Company even when the Principals changed and others bought and sold their interests. A small number of rowing boats, or whale boats as they were known, were used to catch and tow in the whales when harpooned and killed. The carcasses were then winched on shore to the flensing area and the try pots. A portion of the beach cleared of rocks and stones can still be seen, and the darkened sand owing to the spillage of oil and blood etc. can also be observed.

The Castle Bay Company experienced fluctuating success over the many years of operation. In his diaries, Frederick William Seymour gives many instances of difficulties at "The fishery" drunkenness and absconding of the men, careless workmen, bad weather and in 1849 all the boats and boat-sheds were destroyed in a bush fire, lack of barrels for the storage of whale oil, and in 1859 the part-owner and manager were drowned whilst returning from The Vasse to the Fishery. His step-son, George Layman continued with the management of the station on behalf of his twice widowed mother. George also bought the cutter the "Brothers" and operated that for many years in addition to his work at the Whaling Station.

It was in 1859 that oil was discovered in Pennsylvania, U.S.A. and from that time fuel and lubricants of mineral oil gradually superseded whale oil and whaling declined throughout the whole world. The wars that occurred at this period in which France, England and the U.S.A. were involved depleted the shipping to such an extent that there was, and remained, an acute shortage of sea-going vessels.

The shipping and harbour dues which were imposed at Fremantle and Koombana Bay made Geographe Bay more frequented by the whalers, as no dues were levied at the Port of Vasse.

The capturing of whales usually commenced in June, with the northward migration of the Mammoths to the vicinity of North-West Cape to breed and ended in November. It can be seen that the worst of winter months coincided with the killing of whales in Geographe Bay, so it can be noted that great credit was due to the men operating that there were not more fatalities associated with the early ventures.

A triple fatality did occur in 1847 when a new small company was formed at Toby's Inlet with a single boat operating. On one of the first efforts to capture a whale resulted in the loss of three whalers when their boat was 'stove' by a whale. The bodies of Mark Bitney, John Nutten and Charles Westall were recovered and the remains buried beneath the peppermint trees near Toby's Inlet.

William Frederick Seymour continued to manage the Castle Bay Whaling Station even after he purchased land for farming from Chapman of Dunsborough, where his home stood until the 1980s when it was removed to Millbrook and set up as a display for tourists. The home consisted of 3 cottages nesting amongst the fruit trees and peppermints near the waterfront.

An interesting tale is told by John Seymour of the early days on the farm, where much meat, fruit, vegetables and other produce was supplied to the "Fishery" employees. Mulberry wine was made in quantity also, and one evening during bright moonlight a number of whale men, after consuming a considerable amount of the potent brew, were rowing back to Castle Bay from Seymour's farm when they saw what they thought to be a large whale close in shore. They decided to harpoon the animal and tow it back to the "Fishery" and thereby gain the usual reward for the capture of a whale. Unfortunately, the "whale" proved to be a partly submerged rock with the appearance of a sleeping whale and the results were bent and broken whaling irons for which they were duly charged by the "Fishery."

On one occasion Bateman, the Fremantle trader, lost a ship and cargo of oil and bone on returning to Fremantle from Castle Bay, when his ship foundered and sank after striking the Murray Reef. This was another misfortune which occurred in conjunction with the Castle Bay venture.

The most successful year of operation of all was in 1871, possibly as so many of the foreign ships no longer competed in Geographe Bay for the available whales. The last major shipment of oil was reported in that year.

William Frederick Seymour died in 1874 aged 54, after a protracted illness. He had come to W.A. from England on one of Bateman's ships and had proved a capable manager at both the "Fishery" and on his farm. His wife lived for nearly

fifty years after her husband's demise and carried on the farm work with the aid of her two sons and daughters. The "Fishery" had closed several years before William Frederick's death.

(Note: In some records the name is given as William Frederick and in others Frederick William).

BUSSELTON HISTORICAL SOCIETY. — 1977

1846: Notes from the Diaries of the days

Oct. 9: Most of the men drunk.

Oct. 11: Great many humpbacks in sight.

Oct 18: Stafford came to the Rock with his 6 oared boat. Clement drunk.

Oct. 24: Rose two humpbacks. Clement fastened to one and got his boat stove and forced to cut his line.

Oct. 25: Clement Fastened and got his boat capsized—No one hurt

Oct. 29: Employed cleaning bone.

Nov. 12: Killers very active, often killing whales.

Nov 19: "The Young Shepherd" arrived at the rock to load oil etc. 12 tons of sperm oil. 80 gallons of Humpback oil, three-quarters of "rite" whale bone and three quarters of Humpback bone.

1847:

Aug. 24: The Castle Bay Whaling Company commenced with two boats.

Sept. 16: "Meres" from Augusta "Rite" in site— chased with "Mereps" boat and got the whale.

Sept. 24: Hamersley rose twenty Humpbacks.

Sept. 28: Albert rose 2 Humpers—Palmer fastened to one but was forced to cut 17 miles at sea.

During the late 1700's it is recorded that the catching and processing of whales was carried on along the south west coast of W.A. by American and French ships as far north as the North West Cape.

"Mother" ships were employed for the treatment of the whale and the only foreign station along the south west coast was at Flinders Bay, where a cairn marks the site of the American Station.

Reference to the presence of American Whalers at Augusta, is found in the diaries of the Molloys, Bussell and Turners, who all welcomed the visits of the Whalers, who relieved the isolation of the settlement and often provided food and goods when these items were in short supply as was the case in the first few years of the ill-fated settlement. Mails were dispatched by the American Captains as often the Colonial Schooner failed to call, and the settlers took opportunity of sending and receiving mail.

Geographe Bay was utilised by visiting whalers from early times, even before the settlement of The Vasse, it being a favourable fuelling and watering place as well as safe harbour. Lt. Bunbury's diaries record him having seen the smoke rising from the chimneys of the settlers huts in the vicinity of what was afterwards Dunsborough.

Evidence is shown that more than one man "jumped" ship" in the bay, and there is a record of one Brown who had lived with the natives in the vicinity of the present Caves House at Yallingup, living off the land and tanning wild animal skins for sale to the visiting whalers when they returned at intervals. This man had evidently "jumped ship" prior to the settlement of the Swan River Colony.

The many whaling ships visiting Geographe Bay and using it for a safe anchorage and whaling ground, were of great assistance to the early settlers as they supplied needed commodities to such an isolated area. These Whalers brought iron-ware, cloth, biscuits, other food and clothing as well as spirits, a much needed addition to the welfare—and often the curse—of the early settlers and workmen. These goods were exchanged for fresh vegetables, fruit, salted butter and meat, so necessary after several years at sea.

Bunker Bay, Meelup, Dunsborough and the Vasse were recognised watering places for the whalers, and wood for fuel was obtained from the forests adjacent to the shore. Barrels of water tied together, were rafted out to the ships anchored in the Bay.

At one period in the 1840's another record states there were seventeen whalers in Geographe Bay, being mostly American ships with some French and only one British vessel.

"Westbrook" the home and farm of Elijah Dawson, eight miles to the west of The Vasse, and the earliest farm in that area, was the venue for much bartering by the American Whalers, one veranda being enclosed and known as the barter room until after the turn of the century.

The American Captains often left their pregnant wives at "Westbrook" until their return on the following trip to avoid the rough and hazardous passage around "Horn" before the babies were born. Most of the American Whalers came from New Bedford and the east Coast of America. Several babies of American Captains and their wives were registered as having been born at "Westbrook" where the wives taught school in payment for their accommodation, as one of the first schools in the whole area of The Vasse was conducted there. Even after the school was moved to a block about a mile away, on the present site the name was retained as "Westbrook School" until the end of the century.

It was also at "Westbrook" that Charles Keyser, an American, cut his first timber for export to America on the whaling ships. The first record of Keyser being associated with The Vasse and timber was in the year 1835, when the vast timber reserves of the west coast of America were unknown and unexploited. Keyser afterward built Yelverton Mill at Quindalup in 1856 as evidently he was one of the few men experienced in the local timber cutting and trade. How much timber was exported in the first fifteen or twenty years of The Vasse is not recorded as prior to the 1840's licenses were not required to cut timber on crown land, and Keyser cut a considerable amount on private land.