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# Karla Boodjar: Home Place

In every settler narrative of the 1830s, the Elaap people are described as welcoming and generous, healthy and happy.

Historical Noongar inhabitation of the South-West has been traced to forty-five thousand years of continuous presence on the land. The Leschenault estuarine system was formed after the last ice age, around eight thousand years ago.

Noongar stories of the ice age remain, demonstrating that Aboriginal culture is the world's oldest uninterrupted culture, maintaining an unrivalled relationship between a people and place. Noongar stories maintain the relationship with the land and the Dreaming spirits who created and inhabit the land, to this day.

The Noongar meaning for *Elaap* is 'on or by the water', and describes both the people and the district. In South West coastal areas, *Derbal* means estuary. *Derbal Elaap* was the original name of the Leschenault Inlet. *Boodjar* means nourishing terrain, a concept like country that includes people and ecosystem, a landscape which is alive and full of life.

The first Europeans to the Elaap district described a well-maintained, highly organised settled environment, with a population of several hundred who moved around the estuary on well-established paths and drew water from established wells. *Maya* (paper bark huts) were constructed for warmth, whilst the *Xanthorrhoea* (grass tree) huts were used for water-proofed dwellings. Clothing was made of kangaroo skin cloaks, or *bwok*.

Food was plentiful on the estuary and easily sourced. Fish were speared in the open waters and captured in permanent fish traps that were refreshed by the tides. Grasslands maintained by firestick farming attracted kangaroo, and other marsupials were speared and eaten. Grubs and yams were taken from the fringing swamps and woodlands of the estuary. Respect and care was given to creatures through kinship ties and increase ceremonies at the start of the season.

The Elaap people took their sustenance, physical and spiritual, from the land and the sacred places it contains, and the stories and *kening* (dances) that describe the land. The land in turn was sustained by the Elaap's sophisticated understanding of its working. This balance between people and place was maintained in particular by the incorporation of the land and its birds, trees and animals into the Noongar kinship system.

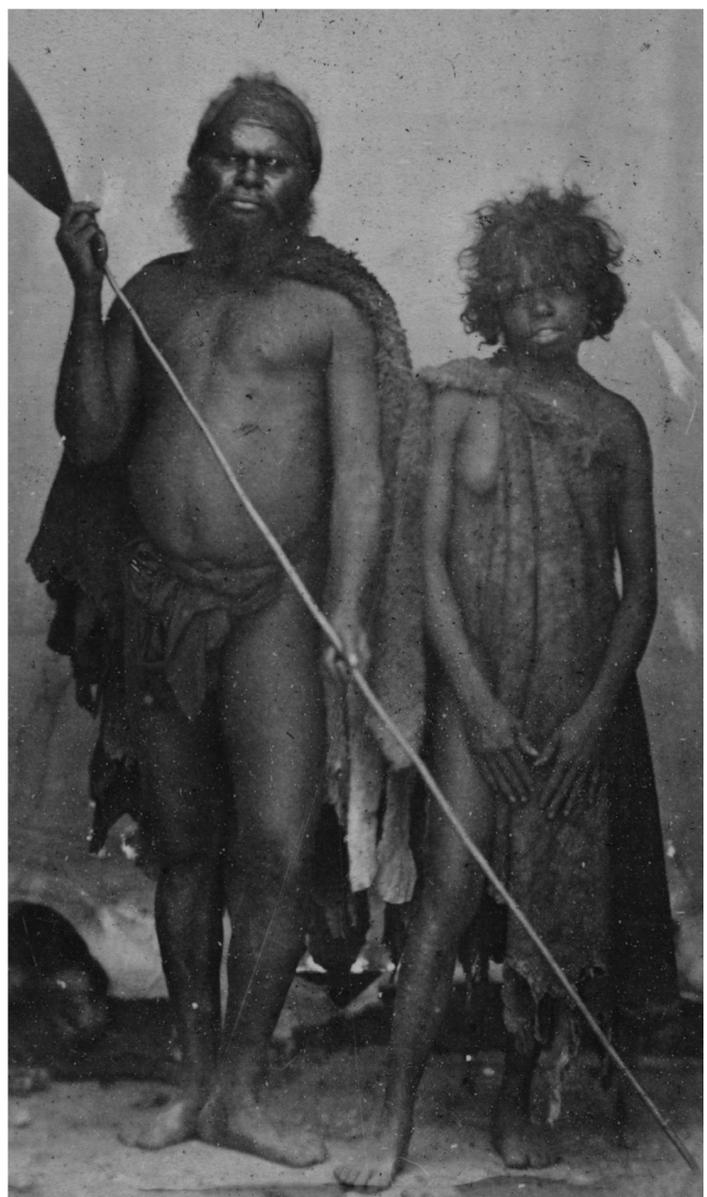
*Karl*, fire, is also the Noongar word for home, and families were obliged to care for entities such as rivers, estuaries or waterholes because this was their *karl*, or *karlap*, their home, or place of hearth-fire.

This inclusive system meant that beings such as kangaroos and trees were part of the same relational system, as *borungur*, which in Noongar means totemic ancestor, or second brother. Such a totemic relation is treated with the same respect and duty of care as a human relation, ensuring the custodianship of individual animals and trees, but more broadly the *karlap* that sustained them.

This connection to place enabled Noongar people to coexist with the land over tens of thousands of years, and is called *Kurduboodjar*, meaning heartlands.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are warned that the image below may contain images of people who are now deceased.

Man and woman wearing traditional dress, c1860-1880.  
Courtesy State Library of Western Australia, 5770B/22



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# Waarkal

*Kura kura*, or long ago, during the *Nyitting*, or the cold time, the Dreaming time, which was then and is still now, the long now, the *Waarkal*, the Rainbow Serpent created this place.

His body is represented by the Darling Ranges, with its curves and gullies and ancient hills.

The *Waarkal* brings lightning and thunder and rain. It created the trees, the caves, rivers, wetlands and waterholes of this country.

As it moved through the land it pushed out the limestone ridges and sand dunes and its shape was taken by the rivers you see today. Where it stopped for a rest it created the lakes and wetlands around you. Wherever it went it left spirits to look after the land, and the people who look after the land. The spirits live today in waterholes and rivers and pools, in sacred places created by the *Waarkal*. *Waarkal* or *waug* means soul, spirit or breath.

The *Waarkal* is the major spirit for Noongar people and central to Noongar beliefs and customs. *Waarkal* has many different spellings, including *Waugal*, *Wagyl*, *Wawgal*, *Waugal*, *Woggal* and *Waagal*.

The *Waarkal* dominates the earth and the sky and makes the *koondarnangor* (thunder), *babanginy* (lightning) and *boroong* (rain).

The *Waarkal* is the giver of life, maintaining all fresh water sources. When the *Waarkal* created the *boodja*, he ensured that there was *wirrin* or spirits to look after the land and all that it encompassed. Some places such as the *karda* (hills) and *ngamar* (waterholes), *boya* (rocks), *bilya/beelier* (rivers) and *boorn* (trees) were created as sacred sites and hold *wirn* (spirits), both *wara/mambaritj* (bad) and *kwop* (good).

It is through these beliefs and customs that the sacred past is retained in the present time, the long now.

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# Middens

Shellfish such as mussels and cockles were plentiful in the Leschenault Estuary.

While the Elaap people relied upon the natural abundance of fish species such as cobbler, mullet and bream, shellfish were also easily obtained and formed a useful means of diversifying a diet.

Crushed and added to the water as burley, shellfish were also used to attract fish to an area so that they might be more easily speared.

Crushed shellfish were also placed behind stone fish traps at high tide, drawing in the various estuarine fish species that would find themselves trapped when the tides retreated.

The shells of molluscs that were either eaten or used to attract fish were cast into piles that over the countless years formed middens.

Such middens are found throughout Australia and among the estuaries of the South-West, including the vicinity of Koombana Bay.

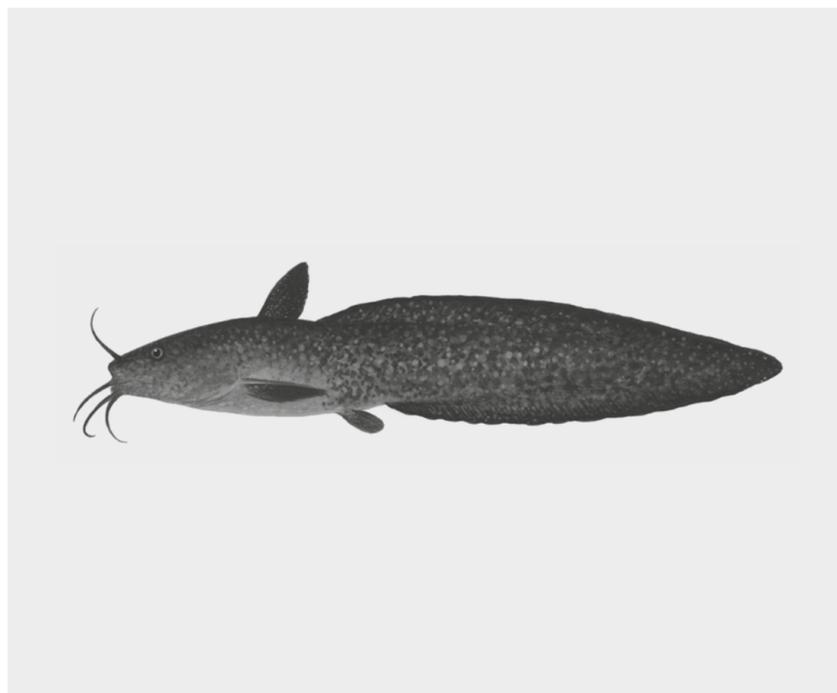
Greenlip Abalone (*Haliotis laevis*).

Illustrations © R.Swainston/anima.net.au



Estuary Cobbler (*Cnidoglanis macrocephalus*).

Illustrations © R.Swainston/anima.net.au



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# Weather

South Western Western Australia has a Mediterranean climate, characterised by rainy winters and dry, warm to hot summers.

In summer months as the land heats up and warm air rises, cooler air from the ocean arrives in the form of a sea-breeze, which in turn cools the land. *Cirrus* and *cumulus* clouds settle in the blue skies and rain is scarce.

Most of the region's rainfall occurs during winter, when low pressure storms formed in the Southern Ocean bring cold fronts sweeping across the south-west.

The Noongar divided the year into six seasons: *Birak*, describing the hot, dry time during December and January; *Bunuru*, whose days shorten over February and March; *Djeran*, describing April and May; *Makuru*, bringing the first winter rains of June and July; *Djilba*, the season of second rains during August and September; and *Kambarang*, the season of wildflowers and birth, from October to November.

## Noongar Names

*Mokur*, Winter

(about June and July)

*Jilba*, Spring

(about August and September)

*Kambarang*,

October and November

*Beeruk*, Summer

(about December and January)

*Boornor*, Early autumn

(about February and March)

*Winyarung*, Autumn

(about April and May)

Leschenault Estuary, storm approaching.

Photo by Terry Woollorton



# Always Was, Always Will Be

When the British crown claimed the western coast of New Holland in 1829, no treaty was entered into with the state's Aboriginal populations.

The legal fiction of *terra nullius*, claiming rights over the Australian continent due to a British interpretation of land use, has been found to be wrong in law. The lands of the Noongar peoples have therefore never been ceded.

The settlement of the Bunbury area by new colonists and the consequences for the Elaap people followed a sad and predictable pattern. The welcoming curiosity shown by the Elaap people toward the new arrivals and some early examples of friendly relations between the traditional owners and new arrivals did not save the Elaap people from being dispossessed from their lands. The ancient, complex and fruitful co-existence with the land that sustained the Elaap people was made impossible as land grants were taken up, fences were built and European livestock and crops were introduced. Traditional food became scarce, European diseases ravaged the local populations and those Elaap people who resisted the invasion of their lands were shot, or imprisoned. Alien laws were enforced that described, for example, Elaap people hunting on their own land and spearing European livestock as theft, and trespass. Those same British laws were rarely applied when it came to British subjects taking the law into their own hands. Violent crimes against Noongar people were often justified by the British as the defence of land and property. Women were taken. Men, women and children were forced into indentured labour on their traditional lands in the service of those who had taken their land.

The effects on Noongar populations and culture was catastrophic. Born out of the racist theories associated with 19C Social Darwinism, the belief that Noongar people were dying out saw the introduction of segregationist and assimilationist government policies. Aboriginal people became wards of the state, subject to a raft of laws that legitimised the removal of children as well as restrictions placed upon freedom of movement, of marriage and employment. Those Noongar people not working as indentured labourers on farms, where they were never appropriately compensated for their labour, survived in grim circumstances on reserves at the edges of towns. Children forcibly removed from their families were placed on missions, which were designed to separate them from their family and culture while training them for service in the domestic and manual arts.

Roelands Mission, located not far from Bunbury, was one such place. The children housed at Roelands would occasionally be brought to Koombana Bay for swimming and recreation. It was a special time where they could be free and escape from under the gaze of authority.

The policy of the forcible removal of children resulted in what has become known as the Stolen Generations. The policy, continuing until the 1970s, has left a legacy of trauma and loss that continues to affect Aboriginal communities, families and individuals. The damaging effects of dispossession, cultural dislocation, incarceration and the subsequent enactment of harmful government legislation is still manifest today, and yet the spiritual and physical nourishing link between the Elaap people and their land remains unbroken. Many families in the Bunbury area trace their lineage directly to those Elaap ancestors who before the coming of Europeans were sustained by, and who in turn sustained this land.

That Noongar people have maintained a connection to their land and their practices speaks of a great and enduring cultural resilience.

An Aboriginal Raid.

*The South Western Times, November 9, 1929*

## AN ABORIGINAL RAID BUNBURY TAKEN BY STORM

There were more people in the main streets of Bunbury on Thursday night than there have been for any celebration since Armistice night. It seemed as though all Bunbury, and a large proportion of the country visitors to the Show had turned out, the occasion being the Corroboree, organised by the R.S.L., as one of the attractions of Centenary Week. At 8 o'clock the loud siren at the Electric Light Station created a terrible din, and simultaneously music from five loud speakers in Victoria-street struck up. Then came the "Abos." One party came from the North, one charged down on the town from the West, others swarmed in from the South, and in a short space of time the street was full of "blacks." Some were in the traditional costume of the original inhabitants, opossum skins and chest decorations, while playing a prominent part others were more of the carnival type of black, while others relied on a bathing costume and "Nuggett" for their transformation. There were gorgeous gins, picanninies, dogs, clothed and unclothed abos, and at various corners they corroboreed, or two sections met and a fight followed. The motor lorries patrolled the streets with a freight of black humans, but later in the evening the ubiquitous small boy was conspicuous on the wagons. The "tribes" met at the Rose Hotel corner, and there followed a grand corroboree, at the termination of which a flashlight photo was taken from the balcony. At various spots throughout the town there were whistles and camp fires, but no sooner did the warriors group themselves round a fire than the crowd closed in, and only those in the front rank could see anything. Under these circumstances the original plans were altered, the various parties broke off and held tribal dances, or charged down on another unsuspecting body, the street being plentifully littered with bottle straw, which played an important part in many of the make-ups, as a result of the encounters. The fun waxed fast and furious for an hour and a half, and the warriors then retired to remove their disguise, but many of the public remained listening to the music, the loud speakers and wiring for the installation being kindly supplied to the Centenary committee gratis by Musgrove's Limited.

Wardley; Mr. and Mrs. E. Green and sister; Mr. and Mrs. Pickers; Mrs. Bowell; Mr. and Mrs. and mother; Mrs. Finloan; Mr. and Mrs. John; Mrs. J. Robinson; Mr. and Mrs. H. B. Taylor; Mrs. F. Thomas; Mrs. Harris; Mr. and Mrs. Perkins; Coutas and family; Cunno; Mr. and Mrs. family; From Leonard's

### BERTRAM SMITH.

General of Bertram Smith, the infant who was in Lechenault Estuary at the Roman Catholic of the new cemetery. Archdeacon Hales officiating were received from Daisy and Uncle Ralph and family (Northam); Father; Myra and Kathleen; Mrs. Cook; Cousin Josie, Cora, Bert and Auntie Frank; Nurse Stockley and Mrs. (Perth); Uncle Geo. Little Pal Noel; Hislop and family; Little Brother Bill; Jimmy Kendal; Bert Harry; Mr. and Mrs. Mr. H. Mitchell and family; Guvic and Addie; Baker; Mrs. Jones; Boulden; Mr. and Mrs. and Stella; Mr. and Mrs. Finnie; J. Grahame and family; Mrs. Smith (Merredin); friend; C. Morgan;



would like to suggest... or so next week... from the schools... by their teachers... in the various articles... in this way they could... and far more... in history than... which would bring home... more clearly the early... city and district in wh... and also perhaps give... idea of the marvell... by those splendid pe... of this great... If this can be... did think girls and boys... upwards would be t... to start from and pe... of \$d. each, although... could be better to make... in the case of schoo... is going to prevent a... ing the display, who c... it. There are, howev... who could not man... re named sum. I hope... too late for somethi... e in this matter.—You  
R. STEWART-MURR.

### RACING.

HELENA VALE—TO

#### Selections.

HURDLE RACE.

About Two Miles.

Chilabong . . . . .

Constellation . . . . .

Petman . . . . .

BREEDERS' PLAT.

Seven furlongs.

Cunningman . . . . .

Lost Sheep . . . . .

Poletac . . . . .

HELENA PLAT.

Six furlongs.

Arooff . . . . .

Chilabong . . . . .

Perfect Juggins . . . . .

BLACKBOY HANDIC.

11 miles and 100 y.

Metonic . . . . .

Wallace Porteviot . . . . .

First Prince . . . . .

HELENA FURSE

One mile.

Moncrest . . . . .

Cobrason . . . . .

Abergwain . . . . .

WELTER HANDIC.

Seven furlongs.

Endamatch . . . . .

Sanolean . . . . .

Sweetmagne . . . . .

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# Whalers

Each May, southern right *Eubalaena australis* and humpback whales *Megaptera novaengliae* begin their migration.

They migrate from their feeding grounds in the cold waters of the Southern Ocean to their breeding grounds in the north, following Western Australia's coast, before returning south in November.

From the 16th Century in Europe and North America whale oil was a valuable commodity, used for lighting and for making soap, candles and many other products. As Northern hemisphere whale fisheries were overexploited, British, French and North American whalers expanded into the 'South Seas fishery' following the whales' migration routes and targeting their breeding and feeding grounds.

Whalers often visited Western Australia's coast prior to British colonisation in 1829.

After colonisation, French and North American whaling ships visited early coastal settlements at Bunbury, Augusta and Albany.

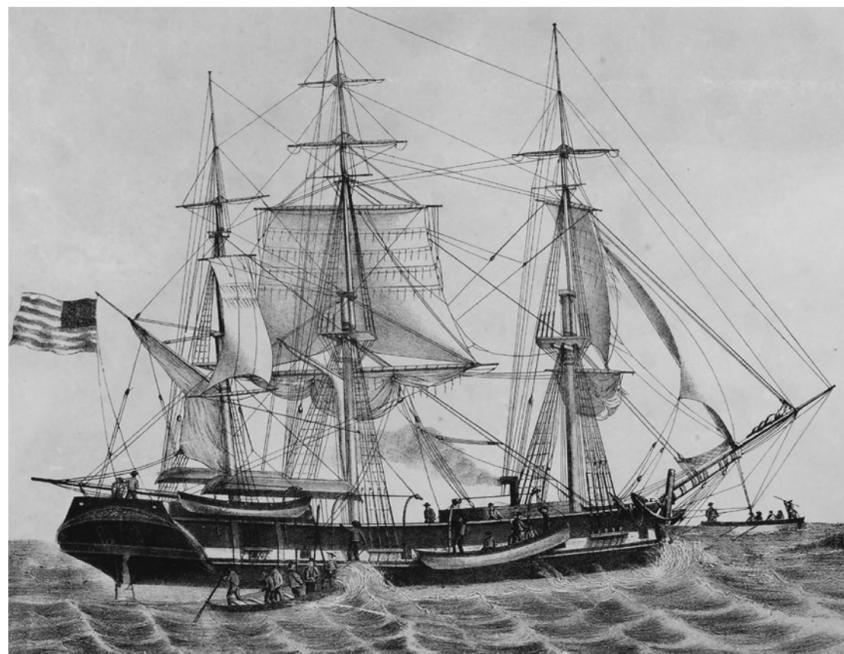
The American whalers carried trading goods that they sold or bartered for locally grown vegetables and fresh meat, and that helped maintain the viability of early settlements.

Colonial shore-based whaling ventures were also established that included hilltop lookouts and whaleboats rowed from shore.

Colonial whaling crews included Aboriginal whalers, who were highly regarded for their excellent eyesight and hunting skills.

'American Whaler' by Nathaniel Currier.

Michele and Donald D'Amour Museum of Fine Arts, Springfield, Massachusetts. Gift of Lenore B. and Sidney A. Alpert, supplemented with Museum Acquisition Funds Photography by David Stansbury



Humpback whales during a heat run.



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# Geography

Koombana Bay's wide sandy beach is protected from prevailing winds and generally has calm waters.

Situated at the southern end of the Swan Coastal Plain, the dune system that forms Koombana Bay was formed only seven thousand years ago, mirroring the gently sloping underwater sands and sea-grass beds of the bay.

The nearby estuary of the Collie-Brunswick and the Preston-Ferguson rivers that forms the Leschenault Inlet (14kms long and 1.5-2.5kms wide) drains from an inland catchment on the Darling Plateau of 770 sq kms.

Like everywhere on the Swan Coastal Plain, the area is highly biodiverse. On the older limestone ridges and dunes inland rise tuart, peppermint, banksia and jarrah trees, while on the estuary fringe paperbarks, sedges, rushes and samphire can be found.

Significantly, the estuary contains the southern-most example of the white mangrove tree, along with over sixty species of resident and migratory birds, some forty-two species of fish and that crustacean so very popular with recreational fishers - the blue manna crab.

A view of Koombana Bay,  
by Thomas Colman Dibdin.

*Courtesy National Library of Australia*



Bunbury looking east.

*From the collections of the Noel Butlin Archives Centre,  
Australian National University*



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# Industry & Economy

The first decades following the establishment of Bunbury were a difficult time for the new settlers.

Shore-based whaling was an early industry, but the work was seasonal, and sheep grazing lands were limited to the local area. It wasn't until the introduction of convict labour in 1850 that a reliable workforce was secured to expand grazing lands and to build the necessary infrastructure that would eventually turn Koombana Bay into what is today Australia's ninth largest port.

The construction of the Bunbury Timber Jetty in 1864 saw the beginning of extensive timber exports from the port. Alongside the export of the sought-after aromatic sandalwood, jarrah, or Swan River Mahogany as it was then known, was a sought after commodity for use in railway sleepers in Britain, South Africa and India, and in the construction of British timber jetties and roads.

With increased agricultural and mining production in the area, Bunbury Port served to export goods including coal, wool, wheat and minerals. In 1951 the port was closed off from the estuarine flows of the Leschenault Inlet and Vittoria Bay was engineered to serve as a deep water harbour.

The major commodities exported through Bunbury's port today are alumina, woodchips and mineral sands. Beef, dairy, wool, viticulture, vegetables and fruit are all industries now common to the Leschenault Catchment.

Tourism is also popular, with increasing numbers of people drawn to Bunbury's beautiful coastline.

Jetty extension.

*Courtesy Bunbury Historical Society*



Koombana Bay from Mariston Hill town lookout, 1995.

*Courtesy National Library of Australia*



# Mineral Sands

Over billions of years the Archaean rocks of the Darling Scarp have been desiccated by the sun and washed by the rain.

This slow erosion of the gneiss and granite formations of the scarp and plateau carried minerals from the water catchments of the uplands, by way of brooks and rivers, down onto the Swan Coastal Plain. When rivers flooded the minerals were carried along the coastline in longshore currents until they washed ashore to settle into the sands.

Some of the minerals are useful and valuable, such as the titanium-containing minerals ilmenite, leucosene and rutile; the rare earth metal-containing xenotime and monazite; and the industrial minerals zircon, kyanite and garnet. Over millions of years these minerals have become concentrated and available for extraction by way of mining.

The first viable deposit of mineral sands at Koombana Bay was mined in 1956. Heavy mineral sands have subsequently been

discovered up to fifty metres underground and thirty kilometres inland from the coastline. As a result, Western Australia has become the world's most important supplier of titanium minerals. These minerals are used in the production of pigment because titanium dioxide is one of the whitest substances in existence.

Titanium dioxide is also used in other substances such as plastics, paper, ink, rubber, textiles, cosmetics, leather and ceramics. The mineral rutile is also used to produce titanium metal for use in aviation, for spacecraft, and in motor vehicles.

Because titanium is biocompatible with the human body, it is also commonly used for temporary and permanent surgical implants.

Loading ilmenite onto a ship.

*Courtesy Bunbury Historical Society and Australind Genealogical Society*



Magnetic separation at an ilmenite treatment plant in Capel, 1957.

*Courtesy State Library of Western Australia, 003497d*



# Shipwrecks

When first touring the Leschenault area in 1830, Colonial Surveyor John Septimus Roe made the point that the Koombana Bay anchorage would make a “fine summer resort for vessels of any size”, but because of its openness to winds from the north and west, could not be recommended as a “winter port”.

The truth of Roe’s words would soon become apparent. Koombana Bay was, with its curving shape drawing a protective arm against the prevailing southerly winds, a fine port, but it was not long before the north-westerly storms associated with winter wreaked havoc. The first ships to break their moorings and be “piled up into the curve of the fishhook” were the North American whalers, *Samuel Wright*, and *North America*, both wrecked in the same storm on 8 July 1840. Described as a ‘perfect hurricane’, the storm was so vigorous that waves broke over *Samuel Wright*’s top mast, and it dragged its three anchors.

Surveyor Henry Mortlock Ommaney laid out Bunbury’s town plan in 1842 using conspicuous landmarks as survey reference points. One particularly significant feature was the mainmast of ‘Coffin’s Wreck’, as Ommaney described *Samuel Wright*. By his actions, Bunbury became the only municipality in Australia to have its town plan based on a shipwreck.

To protect Koombana Bay from northwest gales, in 1896 construction began on a rock breakwater. Along with later breakwater extensions, these had the effect of trapping sediment in the bay caused by the flooding of the Leschenault Inlet, and coastal sand movement. In an attempt to remedy this, and to expand the port, the original Inlet mouth was closed and replaced with a new opening, ‘The Cut’, to the north.

Despite this, the coastline of Koombana Bay’s North Beach has extended approximately 200 metres north from the pre-1896 coastline, so that thirteen shipwrecks are now buried 200 metres inland or in the bay. Their buried hulls have been well-preserved in the waterlogged and low oxygen environments of the “sands of time.”

They might have remained buried if it weren’t for the mineral sands mining operations that began in 1956, which led to the discovery of four shipwrecks at North Beach, including one North American whaleship tentatively identified as *North America* (1843). This shipwreck was initially excavated by the Bunbury Historical Society and various artefacts such as bricks, glass, ceramics and a wooden cask lid branded with the words ‘Prime Pork Baltimore 18-1’, were retrieved. It was subsequently thought best to preserve the shipwrecks by reburying them in the Koombana Bay sands, where they remain to this day. Subsequent excavations in 2011 and 2016 were undertaken by the WA Museum/City of Bunbury and the WA Museum/ Department of Parks and Wildlife.

The ships wrecked and remaining in Koombana Bay include:

*Samuel Wright* (1840);  
*North America* (1840);  
*North America* (1843);  
*Elizabeth* (1843);  
*Perseverance* (1845);  
*Midas* (1872);  
*Annie M. Young* (1876);  
*Citizen of London* (1880);  
*Cingalee* (1887);  
*Star of the South* (1888);  
*Carbet Castle* (1897);  
*Solglyt* (1901); and  
*Laughing Wave* (1903).

The wreck of the *North America* (1843).  
Courtesy Rod Dixon Collection/WA Museum



Standing on the wreck of the *North America*.  
Courtesy Mr Julian Sanders/ WA Museum

