

### PHILLIP PARKER KING – LEGENDARY SURVEYOR OF THE AUSTRALIAN COAST: PROGRESS TOWARDS THE 200TH ANNIVERSARY CELEBRATION OF HIS VOYAGES

On 3 July 2019, **Chris Done**, a former CALM Regional Manager in the Kimberley, and **Andrew Burbidge**, a prolific Kimberley wildlife researcher, enlivened the audience with a summary of Phillip Parker King's Kimberley coastal surveys and the plans in place for a 'Mermaid Tree' Bicentenary. Part of the project brief for Phillip Parker King and the 'Mermaid Tree' Bicentenary is reproduced below to convey the essence of the presentation. The appendices mentioned in the opening paragraph are based on *Australian Dictionary of Biography* entries, and a fourth appendix is being drafted for [Bungaree](#), an Aboriginal man from the Sydney area, who accompanied King on his 1820 expedition.

In the period 1817-1822, [Phillip Parker King](#) (Appendix 1) commanded a series of voyages of exploration and hydrographic survey around the Australian coast. The main vessel used in the work was His Majesty's Cutter *Mermaid*. In September-October 1820, as the *Mermaid* was leaking and needed repairs, King careened it at Careening Bay in the Kimberley, now within the Prince Regent National Park. During the period the crew were ashore, 'HMC Mermaid 1820' was carved into the trunk of a large boab. Also while ashore, [Allan Cunningham](#) (Appendix 2), botanist/naturalist aboard the *Mermaid*, collected many plants new to science. Also on the *Mermaid* was [John Septimus Roe](#) (Appendix 3), who later became Western Australia's first surveyor general.



The tree was sketched by Aeneas Gunn who visited with Joseph Bradshaw in Bradshaw's schooner *Gemini* in 1893, and then apparently forgotten until 'rediscovered' in 1973 by a group of Perth scientists who were conducting a biological survey of Kimberley islands. Paul Wilson from the WA Herbarium, who wanted to re-collect Cunningham's plants, some never seen since, drew the group's attention to the possibility that the tree and its inscription may still be there. The 'Mermaid Tree' is now a 'must see' destination for most of the cruise ship passengers on Kimberley coastal cruises.

In 2020, it will be 200 years since the inscription was made. It also marks 200 years since the mid-point of PP King's Australian survey work.

King went on to do similar work for the Royal Navy in the extreme south of South America, and his exploits and work there have been recognised in Chile, whilst his Australian endeavours remain almost totally unknown to most Australians. King went on to become (amongst many other achievements), the first Australian born (Norfolk Island - 1791) person to become a Flag Officer of the Royal Navy.

A small committee is promoting and guiding progress towards commemorating the achievements of King and his crew during the bicentenary period, particularly in the Kimberley of Western Australia. The committee consists of Colin Ingram and Peter Sharp (Department of Biodiversity, Conservation and Attractions WA (DBCA) (DBCA's Head Office), Craig Olejnik (DBCA Broome), Brian Abbott (PP King descendant and author), Andrew Burbidge (one of the 1973 're-locators' of the iconic Mermaid Tree), and Chris Done and Richard Diggins (who first proposed the commemoration). Gerard King and Jeremy King, descendants of PP King, have attended meetings of the committee, as have Nathan Greenhill (DBCA Coordinator Recreation, Planning and Design Unit) and Catherine Belcher from the WA Museum.

The committee is planning an event in two locations to celebrate the carving of the tree and the achievements of King and the *Mermaid's* crew. The first location will be Careening Bay, with the commemoration to be held on Friday 25 September 2020. The current boardwalk and signage will be upgraded and two young boabs, cuttings from the Mermaid Tree taken and grown by Chris Done, will be planted either side of an extended walking track. The committee is currently interacting with possible sponsors to help fund this event.

The second location, confirmed since the Kimberley Society talk, will be at the WA Maritime Museum in Fremantle. The committee proposes that the two events be held at the same time, hopefully with a video hook-up via satellite. The involvement of a TV station and/or film crew would be welcome.

The committee is currently liaising, or will liaison, with:

- Wunambal Gaambera traditional owners
- The Royal Australian Navy
- The Royal Australian Mint
- Academia
- Australia Post
- Kings Park and Botanic Garden (part of DBCA)
- The Western Australia Museum
- The WA Parks Foundation
- The Kimberley Society
- Kimberley coastal cruise operators
- King and Roe descendants
- News media
- Possible sponsors

The committee proposes that a suitable permanent memorial be designed and built for the Perth event, possibly a plaque with details of the 'Mermaid Tree' and King's achievements, as well as acknowledging the contributions of Roe and Cunningham and the Traditional Owners of the site. There should be comprehensive information available at the Perth event. It is possible that our events could be part of a larger, national commemoration of PP King's achievements, which included:

- Accurate mapping of many previously uncharted, or poorly charted sections of the Australian coastline, particularly northern Australia including the Kimberley, but also the inside passage west of the Great Barrier Reef and parts of Tasmania.
- Important scientific discoveries made during the journeys.
- The achievements of senior crew members, particularly Alan Cunningham (botanist and scientist) and John Septimus Roe (surveyor).

For further information or to register your interest in the project please contact Colin Ingram by [email](#) or phone 08 9219 9938.