

A HISTORY OF GUANO MINING ON THE LACEPEDE ISLANDS

On 1 November 2006, Tim Willing visited Perth to share his research findings with the Kimberley Society. Tim works out of Broome—as an expedition guide with Pearl Sea Coastal Cruises—where he is well known for his familiarity with the flora, fauna and history of the Kimberley coast. That work, and his skill with a camera, enabled him to include lots of superb images in his PowerPoint presentation. The following notes, generously provided by Tim, convey the essence of his talk.

The Lacepede Islands lie some 20km west of the Dampier Peninsula coast, 150km north of Broome. They comprise four sand cays, perched on an extensive coral reef, although the two larger islands (West Island, 107ha, and Middle Island, 54ha) have significant exposures of beach rock and limestone.

The Baudin Expedition named the Lacepede Islands in August 1801, when the northbound sailing ships *Geographe* and *Naturaliste* sighted them. In recognition of their abundant seabirds, the islands were named for Bernard-Germain-Etienne De La Ville-Sur-Ilion, Count Lacepede (1756-1825), a Paris-based zoologist and taxonomist. During the period 1820–1850, American whalers from New England are believed to have hunted Humpback Whales around Lacepede waters, although surviving records are sketchy.

In May 1876, the WA Colonial Government authorised the Melbourne firm of Poole, Picken & Co to commence the export of guano from Middle Island, for use as agricultural fertiliser. On 26 June, a band of adventurers sanctioned by the American Vice-Consul-General in Melbourne, Samuel Perkins Lord, raised the Stars and Stripes on a flagpole there. It appears that Lord was acting on his own commercial initiative, as a merchant, as much as on behalf of Uncle Sam. The Perth press referred to the Lacepede claim as 'another piece of Yankee audacity' because the *Catalpa* had famously liberated six Fenians from Fremantle Jail the previous April. A polite war of words ensued as Governor William Robinson corresponded with Downing Street, while Lord—based at Perth's Weld Club—maintained that Britain had failed to formally claim the Lacepedes. In May 1877, the Governor received advice that US President Ulysses Grant had repudiated Lord's annexation.



A sub-adult Brown Booby, one of the seabirds found on the Lacepedes
Image courtesy of Tim Willing (Copyright, 2006)

In November 1876, the colonial administration sent Irish-born Richard Wynne to the Lacepedes with a constable, three boatmen and a Chinese cook. Wynne's main job was to ensure that the guano deposits were worked in a systematic manner, royalties were paid, and law and order prevailed. He was to wear many "hats" as Harbourmaster, Customs Officer, J.P. and Postmaster, but slept in a tent. After numerous letters to Perth, Wynne was rewarded with a two-room limestone office cum post office cum gaol—known rather grandly as "Lacepede House"—for which PWD plans still survive in State Archives. Nearby, a fifty-foot flagpole with a hoisted lantern and daytime signal flags assisted dozens of sailing ships to locate the dangerously exposed anchorage offshore. Arriving barques brought bundles of cornsacks for loading guano from open boats: a tediously slow process. The barques were invariably in ballast, which was often casually dumped in the anchorage, much to Wynne's displeasure. Several surviving maps show that Melbourne-based rival contractors (WA Guano Co and F.E. Beaver & Co) laid down trolley lines across Middle Island. Horse-drawn trolleys hauled the guano along the lines to makeshift wooden jetties on the northern shore.

Wynne wrote a hair-raising, eyewitness account of the catastrophic cyclone of 16 February 1877, during which the barque *Aboyne* was driven ashore and wrecked in minutes. Six lives were lost, and three other vessels (*Albert Victor*, *Helen Malcolm*

and *Isabellas*) were also wrecked. Several graphic—and rather gothic—lithographs of this event appeared in Melbourne newspapers of the period.

Richard Wynne was nominally responsible to the Resident Magistrate in Roebourne, R.J. Sholl of Camden Harbour fame, while Captain Pemberton Walcott supposedly delivered his supplies (including water and firewood) every two months in the Government Revenue Cutter. The closest reliable water supply was from springs at Beagle Bay. On his visits, Walcott assisted Wynne with the administration of justice.

In April 1878, Wynne wrote to Perth that there were 165 persons on the island digging guano, but they were on strike, insolent and drunk. At the same time, the Surveyor-General reported that 57 vessels had received guano licences and paid £12,357 royalty on 24,715 tons total. While some guano went to Mauritius, the principal export destination was Hamburg in Germany, where demand was high. In May 1878, the Colonial Government called for a sole guano tender for the remaining 40,000 tons, to take effect from 1 January 1879. This was awarded to London-based contractors McDonald & Mockford, who were later irate on being advised that, in reality, only 15,000 tons remained! In August 1888, the Colonial Government finally agreed to pay £9,783 damages to McDonald & Mockford.

With all the commercial guano gone, Wynne left the islands with his party in November 1879. His former boatman, J.W.S. Kelly, was appointed caretaker. Taunton, in his book *Australind* (1903), alleged that Kelly, widely known as “Shiner”, was responsible for faking the unique cross arrangement in the Southern Cross pearl. In January 1880, another cyclone washed Lacepede House, along with its stock of postage stamps, off Middle Island. The W.A. philatelist Brian Pope has humorously detailed how a dubious Postmaster-General had Kelly investigated for the missing two quids worth of stamps! Kelly was dismissed in March 1884 for taking bribes from pearlers and allowing the Lacepedes to be used as an illegal depot for Aborigines kidnapped for pearl diving.

In 1970, the Lacepede Islands became a Nature Reserve, in recognition of their enormous colonies of nesting seabirds (the source of the guano deposits) and Green Turtles. In 1986, turtle researcher Dr. Bob Prince successfully eradicated the Black Rat population, which apparently had become established during the guano era a century ago. Smaller nesting seabirds, such as Bridled Terns and Common Noddies have been the principal beneficiaries.