

Place No. 70 West Lewis Island



Remains of a stone structure on West Lewis Island

LOCATION	
Name of Place	West Lewis Island
Other Name (1)	West Lewis Island Pastoral Settlement (ruins)
Location/Address	
Street Number	
Street Name	
Suburb/Town	Mermaid Sound, Dampier Archipelago
Other Locational descriptor (text)	Eastern shore of the Island 462380 mE, 7722290 mN (ZONE50) Longitude: 116.639 Latitude: -20.5981

OWNERSHIP & LAND DESCRIPTION				
Owner	Address	Phone/fax	Status	Item No.
DEC	PO Box 835 KARRATHA 6714	Ph 9143 1488 Fax 9144 1118		
Crown	c/o DOLA	9273 7373		
Reserve No.	Lot/Location No.	Plan/Diagram	Vol/Folio	Item No.
VCL				

LISTING AND ASSESSMENT	
HCWA Reference Number	8691
State Register of Heritage Places: (Y/N)	No
Classified by the National Trust (Y/N)	No
Register of the National Estate (Y/N)	Yes
Local Town Planning Scheme (Y/N)	Yes
Management Category	A
DESCRIPTION	
Construction Date (1)	
Construction Date (2)	
Site Type (Place Type)	Historic Site
Use(s) of Place	

<i>Original</i>	FARMING/PASTORAL: Other - Outcamp
<i>Present</i>	VACANT/UNUSED: Vacant/Unused - Ruin
<i>Other</i>	
Construction Materials:	
<i>Walls</i>	9 STONE 904 Local stone
<i>Roof</i>	
<i>Other</i>	Floor: 904 Local stone
<i>Condition</i>	Ruin
Integrity (how much of the original fabric is intact?):	Walls and floors still intact, although essentially a ruin. All roofs missing.
Physical Description	
<p>The site is on the east side of West Lewis, close to the sandbank that links East and West Lewis at low tide, and adjacent to a small creek.¹</p> <p>The site is spread over about eight to ten acres, consisting of remains of huts and a dry-walled stone yard attached to shearing/wool shed. These are easily visible from a boat soon after one enters the passage between the islands and from the air. There are seven buildings, five stone walled enclosures (stockyards and gardens) and a well. The centre of the settlement features a concentration of rock engravings, some at least historical.</p>	
History	
<p>Little is known of this site but it is believed to have been a fairly substantial settlement occupied for approximately the last two decades of the nineteenth century. This has been verified by a recently published account of the Pilbara in the 1880s by John Slade Durlacher.² Durlacher arrived in the Pilbara in 1876 and his diary captures the industry as it was and its relationship to sheep pastoralism:</p> <p>“During my first visit to the North-West coast in 1876, and for some years before and after, it may be safely stated that the pearling industry was going through its most successful stages, no diving dresses having come into use, and either Malays or natives were used as divers, the only question being which race represented the cheapest labour.”³</p> <p>In 1880 he “was one of the party who had settled on that group of islands known as Dampier Archipelago. Our main station was on Lewis Island, opposite Hampton Harbour [possibly Dampier], and distant about thirty five miles from Cossack.”⁴</p> <p>Durlacher describes the islands as being “inhabited by a mix tribe of natives, some belonging to the country. Others had fled there out of the reach of the law, as the country is very rugged and inaccessible and the shore fringed with dense mangrove thickets which made splendid hiding places for outlaws and law-breakers from the sheep stations and the settlements of Roebourne and Cossack”. In an interesting account Durlacher describes one Aboriginal man named only as ‘Cockroach’ swimming to Lewis Island (presumably East Lewis) in 1881 with two wives – a distance of half a mile, then two miles – to avoid retribution for wrongful marriage.</p> <p>Newspaper entries described buildings on West Lewis Island in 1882 and 1883. First, the <i>Western Australian Almanack</i> describes that in 1882 there were six people living on the island, three were graziers and one a pearler. In the same year an account of the cyclone of 6 March 1882 by ‘a correspondent’ in Roebourne that a vessel (the <i>Mary</i>) owned by Mr McVenn was grounded at Lewis Island and “his buildings blown down”.⁵ This suggests McVenn held the pastoral lease and that the structures at the site were rebuilt. The rebuilding occurred within the year, for in June 1883, the leases of the Dampier Archipelago were offered for sale. The cyclone destruction appears to have encouraged McVenn to sell up. The advertisement in the <i>West Australian</i> provides the best account of the pastoral venture based at West Lewis Island. The advertisement states:</p> <p>“FOR SALE. The leases of Dampier Archipelago, consisting of Lewis, Enderby, Rosemary, Angil</p>	

[sic], Gidley, Dolphin, and Legandre Islands, having an area of about 60,000 acres. The islands are held on a 14 years lease. Their character is primarily volcanic hills, richly grassed, and covered with herbs and shrubs, of a fattening nature. Sheep thrive admirably on them, and the wool being clean brings a good price [...] The improvements consist of a large substantial house, situate on Lewis Island, with everything requisite for working the islands.”

Three years later an Aboriginal population of unknown purpose is described as “giving trouble at Lewis Island”, presumably to the community at the island.⁶

The lease continued into the twentieth century, 6,000 acres being granted in 1900. However, by 1901 the settlement was apparently abandoned, for there is no account of residents when WA Museum naturalist John Tunney stayed at the settlement.

Archaeology

The settlement consists of several slightly ruined structures of dry stone construction, most with standing walls and no roofs. There is one structure (1, on plan) where there is no presence of walls. This may represent the floor of a structure demolished in a cyclone, such as that in 1882. The remaining buildings are cyclone ready, with massive thick walls with buttresses. Most stand close to the protection of the rocky outcrop at the centre of the settlement. These all suggest a committed pastoral venture. The fan shaped yards were designed to collect herded sheep into large yards before being funnelled into a small yard for selection for shearing, culling, dagging and other tending. The wool shed may have stored equipment, fleece, and possibly workers.

The rock engravings at the settlement presumably predate the colonial period, although a non-Aboriginal artist seemingly engraved at least one motif. Another is by a visiting WA Museum naturalist who, in 1901, carved his name ‘Tunney’. The local rock wallaby is one of several species named after the man.

Aboriginal archaeology. There is one Registered Aboriginal Site for the engravings on an outcrop around which the buildings are located (DAA Site ID 9736, Pastoral Settlement Engravings).

SIGNIFICANCE

Historic theme (s)

- 1. DEMOGRAPHIC SETTLEMENT & MOBILITY
 - 102 Aboriginal occupation
 - 103 Racial contact and interaction
 - 107 Settlements
- 3. OCCUPATIONS
 - 301 Pastoralism
- 6. PEOPLE
 - 601 Aboriginal people
 - 603 Early settlers
 - 606 Famous and infamous people

Statement of Significance:

The settlement is the only island pastoral settlement in the Pilbara and a rare example of use of semi arid islands for sheep-raising. The site represents early colonial activities in the Dampier Archipelago, particularly pastoralism but also pearling. It is a reminder of colonial labour, which may have involved Aboriginal as well as European workers. It reflects adaptation to islands by pastoralists and to cyclones. The site is associated with famed WA Naturalist J.T. Tunney. The ruins and engravings are in excellent condition and the best preserved colonial sites in the islands.

ASSOCIATIONS

Other Associated Person(s)

WA Naturalist John T. Tunney
John Slade Durlacher

OTHER

References

See endnotes

John Slade Durlacher, *Landlords of the Iron Shore*, Hesperian Press, Carlisle, W.A., (1900) 2013**NOTES**

MHI 1996

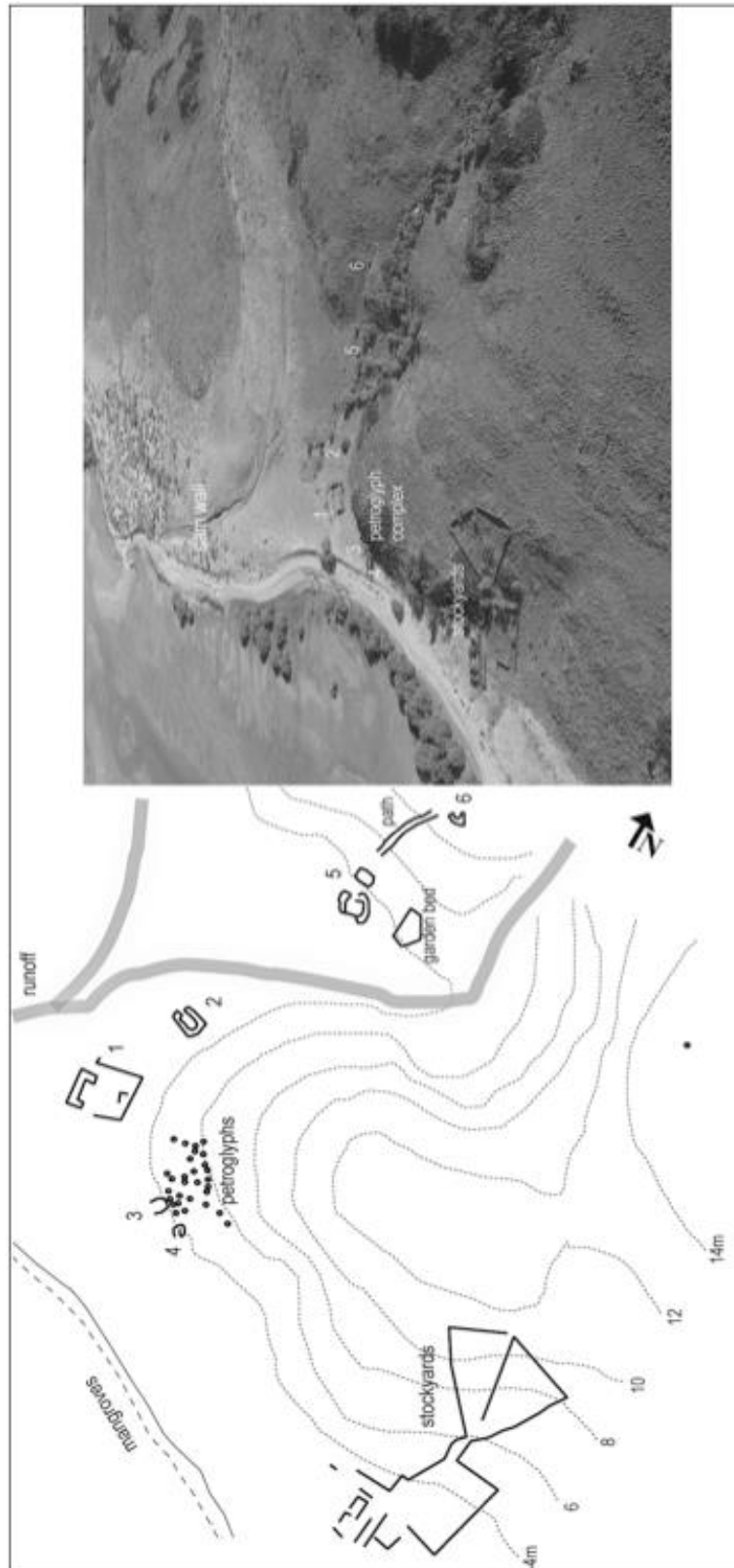
Site assessed and Place Name Record created

MHI Review 2012

Entry updated



Aerial image of West Lewis Island



Plan of features on West Lewis Island

¹ Jack McIlroy, *Dampier Archipelago Historic Sites Survey*, for Australian Heritage Commission, 1979.

Alistair G Paterson and Corioli Souter, *Cultural Heritage Assessment & Management Proposal for Historical Archaeological Sites – Dampier Archipelago, Western Australia*, Karratha: Conservation and Land Management (Karratha), 2004.

Alistair G Paterson, 'Towards a Historical Archaeology of Western Australia's Northwest', *Australasian Historical Archaeology* 24, 2006, pp 99-111.

Corioli Souter, Alistair G., and Hook, Fiona, 'The Assessment of Archaeological Sites on Barrow Island and the Dampier Archipelago, Pilbara, Western Australia: A Collaborative Approach', *Bulletin of the Australasian Institute of Maritime Archaeology* 30, 2006, pp 85-92.

² John Slade Durlacher, *Landlords of the Iron Shore*, Hesperian Press, Carlisle, W.A., (1900) 2013, p 4.

³ Durlacher, *Landlords of the Iron Shore*, p 24.

⁴ Durlacher, *Landlords of the Iron Shore*, p 24.

⁵ 'The Late "Willy Willy" at the North West', *The West Australian*, Tuesday 4 April 1882, pp 3-4.

⁶ 'Roebourne Notes, 11 November 1886', *The West Australian*, Wednesday 24 November 1886, p 3.