

Gerhard Cannon Site (Direction Island, Cocos Keeling Islands) Inspection Report



M. McCarthy

Technical Data

Date of Inspection: 3/11/2004

First Reported By: K&D Gerhard 24/01/2002.¹

Personnel: M.McCarthy, WA Maritime Museum OIC
G. Henderson, WA Maritime Museum
W. Murray, Parks Australia
R.Thorn, Parks Australia
A Granger, Parks Australia

Approximate Location:

In 12m of water, on the eastern bank of the entrance to Port Refuge, Cocos Islands, opposite Direction Island.

Charts:

South Keeling BA 2510

Plans:

Working sketch from the wreck Inspection Day Book Vol 10, p 18. See over

Latitude: C. 12°.05.32'S **Longitude:** C. 96° 52 '29'E

Sailing and swimming directions:

Enter the Port Refuge Channel immediately west from the moorings at Direction Island to a buoy marking the site of a recently-scuttled Sri Lankan Refugee Boat. Given the possibility of causing damage to the seabed and the materials lying there, take the hawse provided at the buoy. Swim down the mooring line to the wreck with its moorings (one a large close stowing anchor), and its substantial debris field. From there travel c. 100m north-east, past some rocky outcrops, over two lines of telegraph cables (themselves objects of considerable maritime significance), entering another debris field of material apparently jettisoned there. Another cable lies ahead and from there the cannons will normally be visible ahead.

Site Photographs:

Colour: Parks Australia Collection.

Video: Gerhard site

Site Conditions on Inspection:

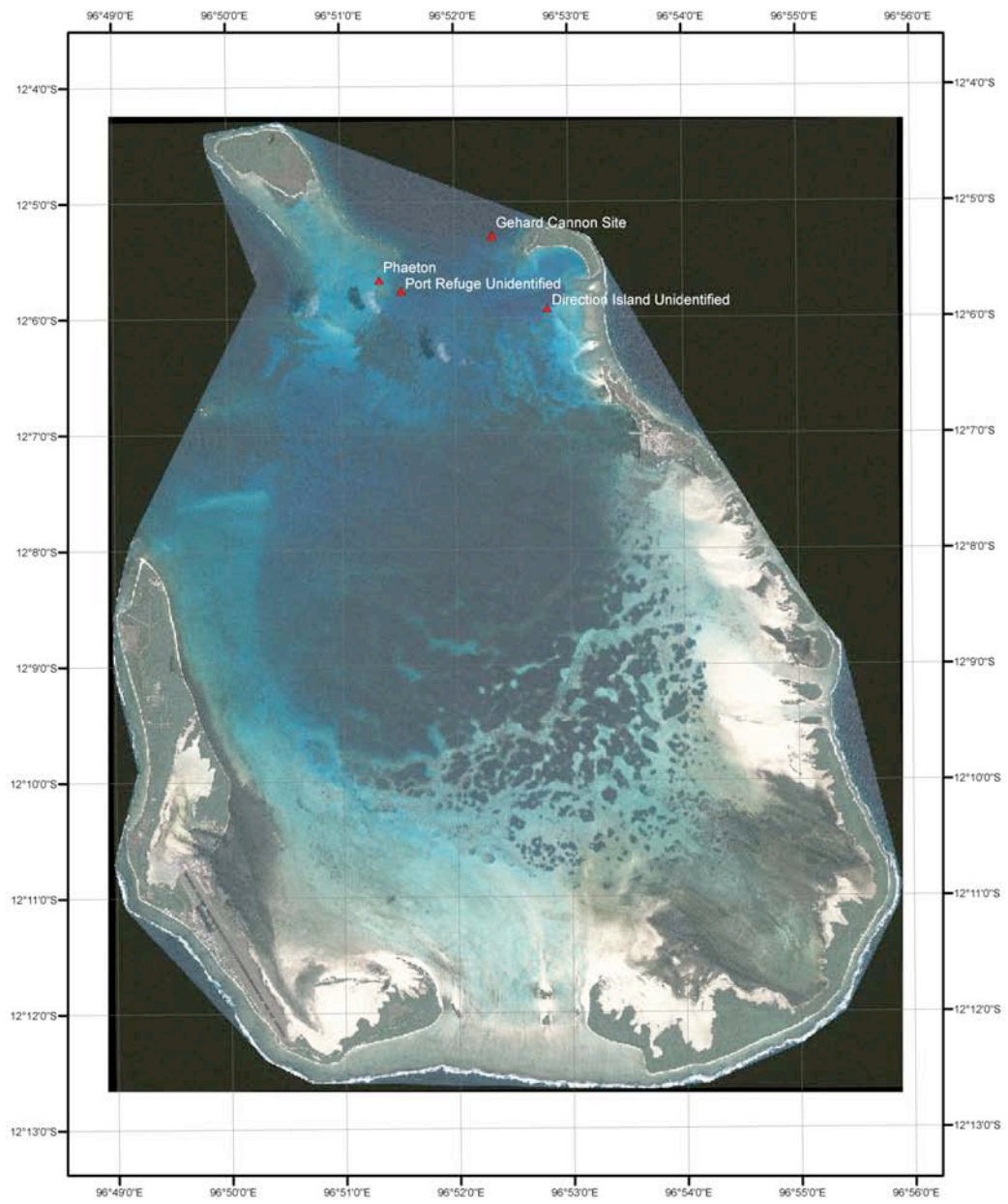
Swell: Nil

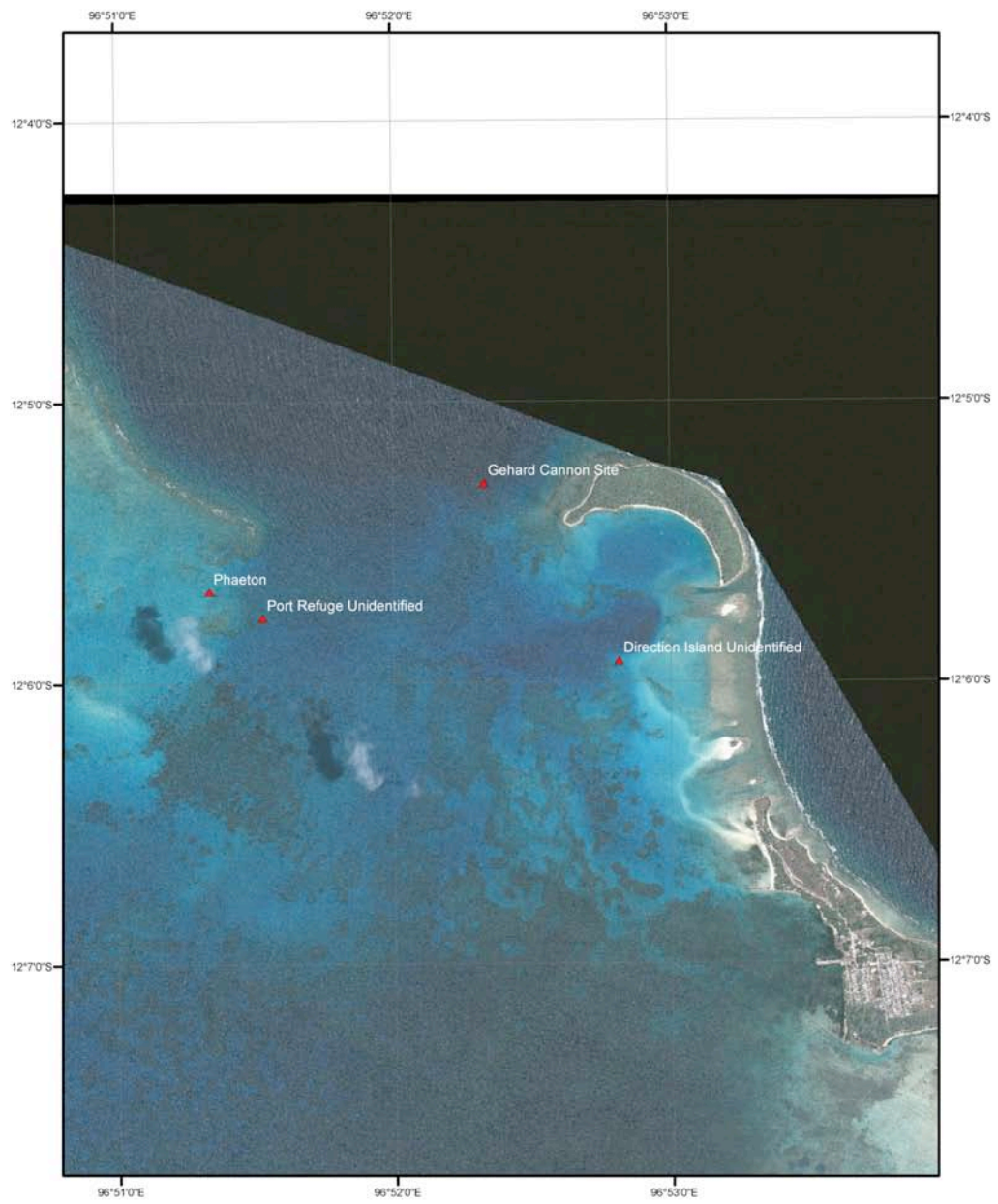
Visibility: c. 10m plus

Current: little was evident below

Sea-bed coverage: sand, rock and some coral

¹ Parks Australia staff have indicated that Greg and Gabbi Allen, had earlier dived the site while acting as dive shop operators for D&K Gerhard.





Description of Site

The guns lie in a debris field of concreted metallic objects (including an old clothing iron) that appear to have been abandoned over the years. The iron appears to have been lifted from the seabed and placed on a rock, as a curiosity for visiting divers.

In the brief inspection that was conducted (given the reduced bottom time including travel underwater to and from the mooring), it is apparent that the site comprises two groups of three cannon (guns) with two individual guns lying apart. These eight small cannon are all of iron between 1.8m (6 feet) in length down to 1.3m (4 foot, 4 inches) long, of varying styles. Some appear to be small carronades. The distances separating the groups and individual guns are 23m, 12m and 4.5m. (See site plan)

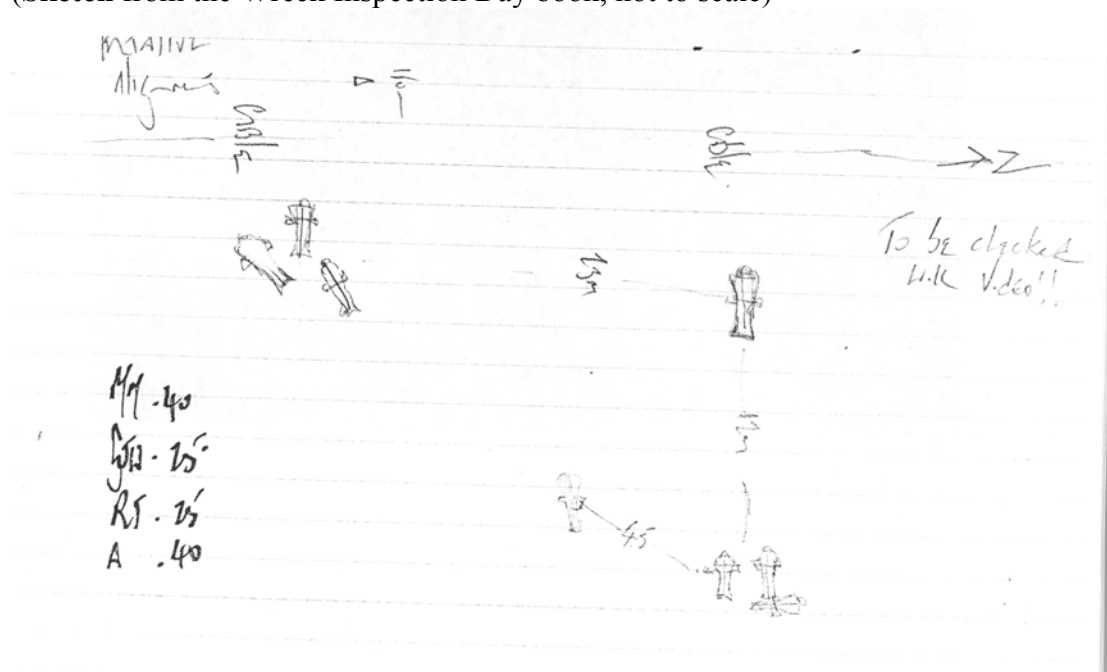
From this apparently random configuration, the cannons appear to have been jettisoned from a vessel, once anchored above, or maintaining a close station on the surface. Little marine growth and surprisingly little concretion appears on the surfaces of the guns and the bores are virtually clear, though not clean enough to enable a meaningful measurement.

No markings were visible, though admittedly the inspection was cursory, given the small amount of time spent in examination. This was predicated on the need to allow for the time taken to swim up to and back from the site without entering decompression times.

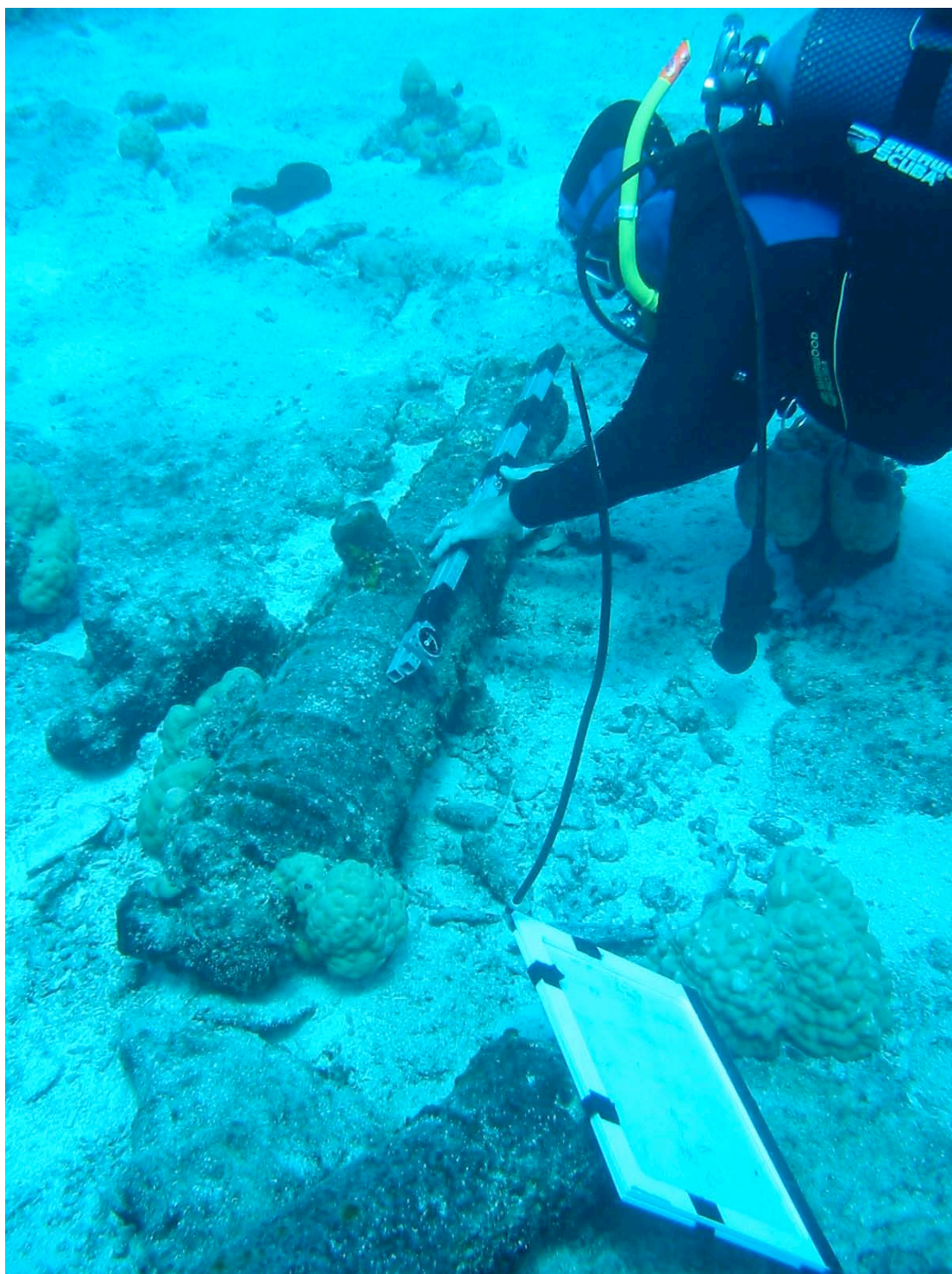
Images and sketch of the site

(Images by R Thorn)

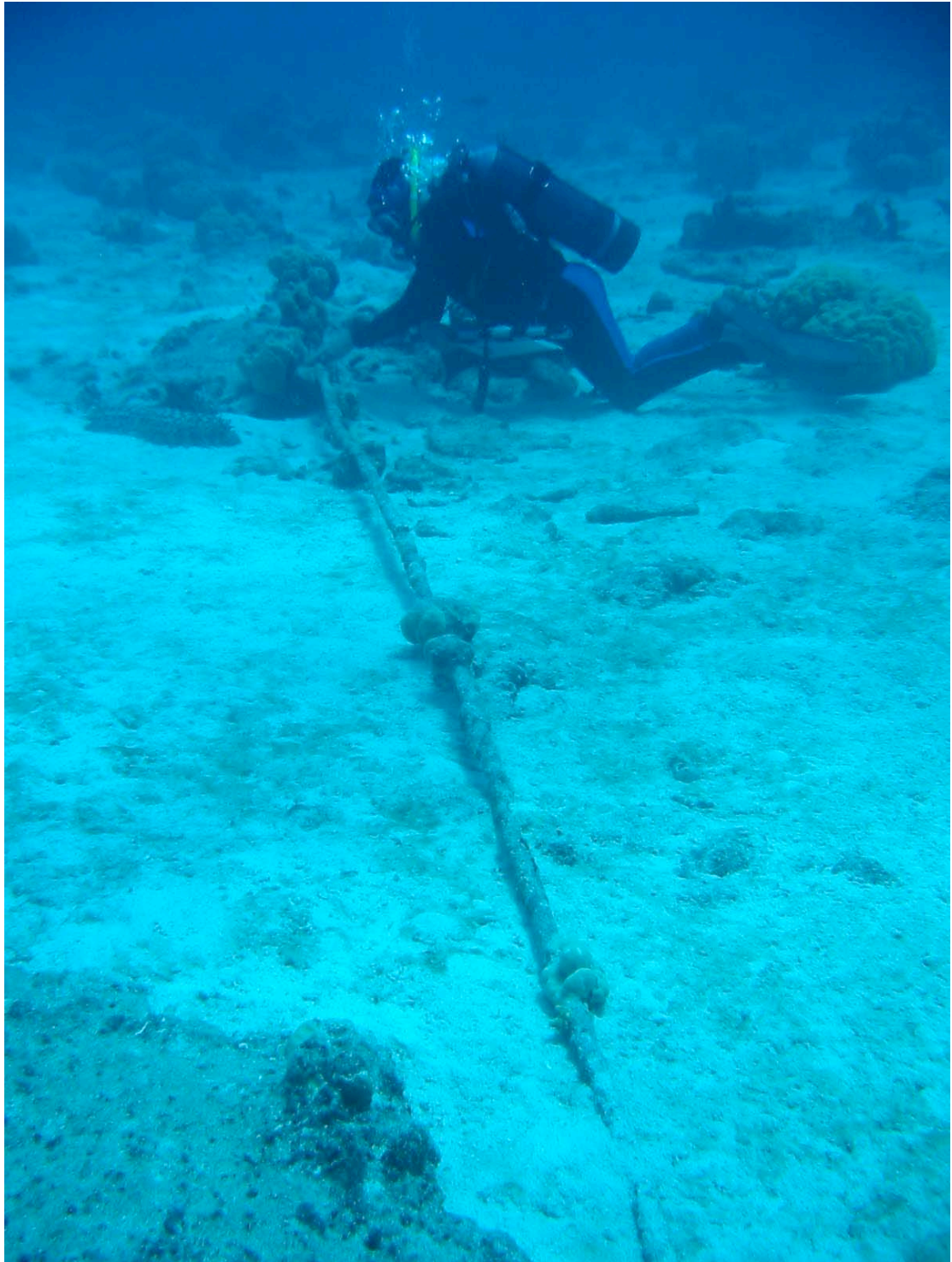
(Sketch from the Wreck Inspection Day book, not to scale)











Site Identification Comments

The area in which these cannons lie provides a site in the lee from the prevailing South East Trades, safe from seas and swell in those conditions, close to the harbour, and of sufficient depth to ensure that abandoned materials are not visible from the surface.

For the inhabited South Keeling group of the Cocos Islands to have a designated marine dump of this sort and in this sort of location is to be expected. Island Administrators would certainly have discouraged dumping of any sort in the lagoon or on any seabed visible from the surface. This would have been by common consent if an environmentally-conscious local administration existed. Later it was enforced by legal stricture. On the other hand, wartime abandonment may have been more haphazard as troops withdrew from theatres of conflict or overseas bases, often at very short notice.

Ship's Graveyards and—as a corollary—marine dumps were commonplace throughout Australasia until the late 60s, for example. They were first recognised under the Commonwealth *Beaches, Fishing Grounds and Sea Routes Protection Act 1932*, for example.

From their configuration on the seabed it appears possible that the abandonment of these guns is the result of a single event as the vessel used to transport them swung at anchor on the surface. It is also possible, given that the area is clearly a well-used marine dump for nearby Direction Island and possibly for Home Island further south, that the area was once marked with a buoy and that the dumping of these cannon and other metallic objects took place over quite some time as ships or barges came up to the buoy.

The abandoned guns are of a similar size and vintage as the those (of iron) at the rear of the Cocos Islands Museum and one (of bronze) outside the Administration Building on Home Island. All appear to date back to the early and mid-nineteenth century, a time when vessels generally carried up to three small guns for signalling and rudimentary defence. Being expensive and heavy items, it is expected that most if not all the guns on the island and in this dump would have come from the many ships known to have been wrecked on the islands and subsequently salvaged. In this circumstance, it appears unlikely that the island people would need to purchase many guns, if any.

As an example, and as quoted elsewhere in this report series, in April 1842, a Captain J.J. Duijntjer of the *Dankbaarheid* put in for repairs and in his notes records that seven wrecks occurred in the period 1828-1842. i.e. the period under review for these guns. For reasons discussed in the report on the Direction Island Unidentified wreck, for example, one of these, the *Gudden Barstow*, a New Bedford ship wrecked in 1839, appears a prime candidate for the small bronze gun 2.46m long, with a three and a half inch bore—possibly a 4 pounder—presently set on a concrete base outside the Shire Offices on nearby Home Island. Inscribed on its right hand trunnion is CA &Co Boston and on the left appears the date 1837.

Where possible all useful items, including guns, would have been recovered from these ships. In reproducing a list that Clunies-Ross had provided him, Duijntjer also names eight ships, British, American and Dutch that called in for repairs (apparently)

in the period 1828-1842. These two examples provide some indication of, first of the number of wrecks expected to lie on the islands from which these guns could have emanated and second the extent of the ship repair/ship breaking/ship building industry there. An exchange of useful fittings and fixtures, like guns, anchors, chain timbers and the like is to be expected.

In that context perhaps the eight guns underwater and the remaining examples on land could have been part of a stockpile initially readied for exchange—but later rendered valueless except for ballast as sea travel became safer during the *Pax Britannica*. This phenomenon is recognised in the mid-19th Century, through to WWI. As an example, it is worth noting also that merchant ships calling into remote Indian Ocean locations, like the Swan River Colony (now Fremantle) regularly carried up to three small guns for signalling and defence until the mid-19th Century when the practice was virtually abandoned.

Given their number it is also possible that these guns (in the dump and on land) were part of a larger collection, and may have once formed part of a rudimentary defence facility erected at the entrance to Port Refuge, possibly on Direction Island. It is possible then that their abandonment was associated with the erection of the far-more-effective 6 inch gun battery at Horsburgh Island opposite, in WWII.

From their configuration, the lack of both marine growth and the sort of concretions and coral growth expected over time in a warm water coralline environment, it appears equally likely that the guns may have been dumped in their present location in the post WWII period.

Associated Shipwrecks and Land Sites

The guns at the Cocos (Keeling) Museum and the brass gun at the Shire Offices are of similar size and period. As indicated above, it is possible they and the eight underwater are all part of group collected, stockpiled or maintained in the Islands as salvable and sellable items, or as an aid to defence.,

Assessment of Site Significance

(i) Historical:

All accessible wrecks on the Cocos (Keeling) Islands have been heavily salvaged. Evidence for this rests with the relative lack of anchors, ground tackle (e.g. chains), copper and alloy fastenings on all the known sites in the region. It is also known that the Clunies-Ross family and their labour-force prized shipwreck materials and stored them for the purposes of a ship-building and repair facility they had established by the mid 19th century. In other cases they built vessels of excellent quality, one even receiving an A1 classification from Lloyds (Souter, G., ND).

Given the large number of wrecks that occurred and the expertise of the Clunies-Ross family and their Malay workforce in ship-breaking and salvage, it is not expected that they would have needed to import heavy items like guns, or to purchase them as trade. Thus it is reasonably-concluded that the eight guns underwater and those on land at Home Island came from 19th Century wrecks.

(ii) Technological/Cultural/Scientific: These guns all provide a very useful opportunity to study a representation of the sort or armament carried on Indian ocean traders and whalers in the 19th Century.

(iii) Educational/Recreational/Tourism: The eight guns, the scuttled refugee boat, the dump and the three lines of cable as a unit, are regularly visited by Scuba divers an integral part of the offerings of the Island dive charter operators. These heritage remains have the potential of being a focus for educational activity if properly marked and documented.

Recommendations

(i) As these guns would most likely have emanated from some of the many 19th Century wrecks in the Cocos (Keeling) Islands, it is recommend that the Gerhard Cannon Site be gazetted as an Historic Site under the terms of the Commonwealth Historic Shipwrecks Act, 1976.

(ii) An underwater marker should be erected on the site that will include interpretive material about these guns and linking them with those on shore. The same could refer to the cannons on land. The site should appear on maps and pamphlets showing the location of all historic sites and heritage items in the Cocos (Keeling) region

(iii) A detailed archaeological survey of the Gerhard site, the ‘dump’ and the nearby telegraph cables should be conducted with a view to the better recording and identification of each gun and the nearby remains.

Acknowledgements

With field and technical assistance from: A. Granger, J. Green, G. Henderson, W. Murray, and R. Thorn.