

Australian Hydrographic Office - Wollongong News Item

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HMAS MERMAID – Kimberley Cruising, Past and Present

(from an article written by LCDR Mike Pounder for Navy Annual 2006)

SML HMAS *Mermaid* (LCDR Mike Pounder, RAN) had a busy 2006 commencing with the completion of extensive surveys of the Warrior Reef system in the Torres Strait followed by a deployment to Napier Broome Bay, Western Australia. The highlights of the year were visits to out of the way places such as Wyndham and a chance to explore the eastern Kimberleys.

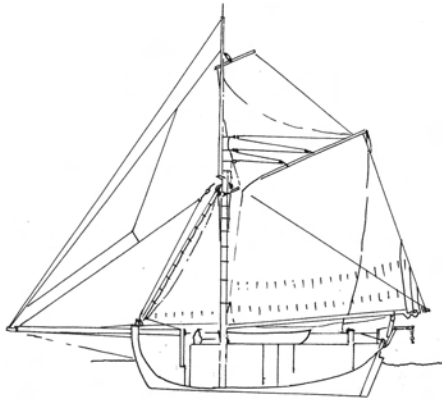
This coast has close ties with a previous *Mermaid*, HM Cutter *Mermaid*, commanded from 1818 to 1820 by the then Lieutenant Phillip Parker King, RN, one of Australia's foremost hydrographers. In a little known bay, Careening Bay, and an equally little known channel in the Kimberley coast, Port Nelson, King had carved "H.M.C. MERMAID 1820" into the trunk of a conspicuous Boab tree, in October of that year and it was to that living monument *Mermaid* headed in early May.

SMLs are small, but King's *Mermaid* was very small, being only 56 feet (17m) from stem to stern, with a beam of 18ft 6 inches (5.6m) and a draught of 9 feet (2.7m). Weighing 84 tons and having built of teak in Calcutta, she was less than one year old when commissioned on 16 October 1817. For the next 3 years King used her for her designated task of 'Exploring and Surveying the Coast of Australia', a somewhat vague form of Hydrographic Instruction, under which modern military hydrographers still abide.

Mermaid survived three voyages of discovery under King's Command but it was the final voyage involving a complete circumnavigation of the Australian mainland which draws closest scrutiny. On 8 May 1819 *Mermaid* sailed north, for the Torres Strait, conducting the first reliable survey of the Great Barrier Reef Inner Route, opening it to commercial traffic, then due west for Arnhem Land, sighting the Wessel Islands in July 1819. From then onwards King ran running surveys along the entire coastline until, on reaching Prince Frederic's Harbour, with *Mermaid* leaking badly, he knew this survey was over. Inspection required her to be inspected beneath her copper plating clear of the water, or careened. Therefore on a gently shelving beach, at the location King named Careening Bay, the hull was patched up for 3 weeks until 9 October. During this time the historic graffiti was carved on the single Boab tree at the rear of the bay. *Mermaid* sailed and entered the calm waters of Sydney Cove on 9 December 1820, some 25 weeks and 3 days since sailing, having circumnavigated the continent. Unfortunately, after hard years in Government service *Mermaid's* fate was sealed when, ironically, she ran aground in the very route she had opened to shipping off of the present site of Cairns, in 1829, and was lost.

HMAS *Mermaid* visited Careening Bay on 13 May 2006 and found the site as idyllic as King had described. The opportunity for exploring this remote part of the Kimberly Coast was not lost on the crew throughout the survey, who prior to an advanced departure from Wyndham to avoid Tropical Cyclone (TC) Monica, had made the most

of El Questro Station and the delights of Wyndham and Kununurra. HMAS *Mermaid* returned to Cairns on 25 May 2006, after a relatively meagre 9 weeks and 1 day deployed, but having sounded 1681 nautical miles across the western half of Napier Broome Bay. Following surveys later in the year included Clarence Strait, allowing for a return to Wyndham, to finish what TC Monica had interrupted, and eastern Papua New Guinea.



HM Cutter *Mermaid*



Photo: Shows XO MERMAID, LEUT Sarah Turner and CO MERMAID, LCDR Mike Pounder at the 'Mermaid Tree'

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