

THIS PICTURE: From Esperance to Ningaloo, WA's whaling industry has a new direction — ecotourism



# The Whaling YEARS

**H**erman Melville wrote *Moby Dick* in 1851 about the manic Captain Ahab and his relentless search for Moby Dick. If you can get through the use of the old English, Shakespearian type language, you'll find a story about the old whalers, blokes as hard as nails, and their lives chasing the giants of the sea.

You'll also find the statement where Melville claims Australia was given to the world by the whalers. No doubt this would be contested by a range of people, but when you look at the history of Western Australia, there's certainly at least an element of truth in it.

Off the coast of Western Australia, the form of whaling found in *Moby Dick* was our first industry, which naturally makes it a great place to commence this series on maritime

history.

The tale of whaling is one of those stories that, on reflection, was an ugly time period. Whales are beautiful animals, harpooning and the chase that followed is a cruel way to treat any animal and the overfishing of a number of whale species was basically an environmental disaster.

But without excusing the state the industry got to, it also needs to be seen in its proper context. Until the discovery and mass production of petroleum, whale oil was the main source of lighting for lamps. This made it a necessary and lucrative industry to have and be involved in.

There were a range of other products that came from the whale as well. The baleen, a hairy tooth-like substance from the mouth of Blue, Minke or Humpback whales (to name

a few), was incredibly flexible and was used for objects that steel could not yet be used for – carriage springs, fishing rods, spokes for umbrellas and women's corsets. Ambergris from the intestines of sperm whales was used for expensive perfumes and had a very high value attached to it. Spermaceti, an oily substance from the head of sperm whales, was used for high quality odorless and smokeless candles, another main source of light for the period.

Slowly, as more and more processes, products and materials became available, the need for whales began to reduce.

## THE EARLY YEARS

Back in those earlier days of whaling it took a man of fair courage to get out and make a living on these boats.



any of these things could spook the whale and send it deep.

Slowly they'd approach and, when they were within a metre or two, the harpooner picked up his 'whale-iron' and with all his strength buried it into the whale. This was the most dangerous time, when the whale would start thrashing about in pain. The fin, tail or jaw of a large whale whipping around could easily destroy a small whaleboat and searching for the crew in a large swell or a fog was extremely difficult. If the whale chose to dive, the rope would whip off the boat and over the side, often smoking from the friction of the speed, and if the line was caught up in the boat or tangled around a whaler it would almost certainly result in life being lost.

The whale would inevitably dive and sometimes for hours the whaleboat could be towed around, waiting for the whale to tire and come to the surface.



LEFT: Whaling in the 18th century — notice the chase, the kill and towing it back to the main vessel  
 ABOVE: With a harpoon gun on the bow and a motor underneath, the modernised whale chaser upped the ante  
 TOP: The WA Maritime Museum's tribute to the early whalers

When it finally did, the job was finished and the whale was killed.

The dead whale was towed to the ship (unless the ship could sail to it), it was fastened alongside the boat and the crew then began to cut off the strips of blubber which were boiled onboard the ship in large pots to extract the oil. Where the whale was a 'baleen whale' (one that didn't have teeth but instead had bristly strips it uses to strain seawater with) the baleen was also removed.

All the time this was happening, the seamen needed to tread carefully. With all the blood and scraps of flesh floating around in the water it didn't take long to berley up the sharks. The

Voyages would vary from a few weeks, to a number of years depending on the size of the boat and the rate of the catch.

Once a whale was spotted and chased down, the crew would lumber into small whaleboats, eight to ten metres in length which were lowered

from the ship, and would then give chase either by oar or by sail if the winds were favourable enough. They had to move quietly once they started getting close, particularly on the calm days, because of the whale's incredible sense of hearing. The splashes of the oars, knocking from inside the boat,

deck of the boat was often covered in blood and oil. The platform set up for the workers to cut up the whale got slipperier as the operation continued. It only needed one wrong step to plunge into the water below and be torn to pieces.

From around the early 1800s the Americans, French and British all hunted off our south west coast. Operating with the techniques mentioned above, they worked onboard their ships and used their products to barter with the visiting traders for their daily essentials like water, tobacco, rum, food, spices, clothing and whatever else was available.

Slowly the colonies throughout Western Australia began to be established – Albany in 1826, the Swan River Colony (Perth) three years later and, with this development, the shore-based operations began to start up. By 1837 the Fremantle Whaling

provided faster operations with more opportunity to kill, and larger whales could be chased and hunted. Now the mighty Blue Whale, growing up to thirty three metres long and over one hundred and fifty tonnes in weight, was an option.

This is where whaling took its turn for the worst – the modern commercial world of whaling.

## THE 1900S

With the Western Australian population growing and life on whaleboats becoming significantly easier, more stations began to appear. In 1912 a Norwegian company was licensed to operate out of Frenchman's Bay near Albany, as well as Point Cloates (Norwegian Bay) south of Exmouth.

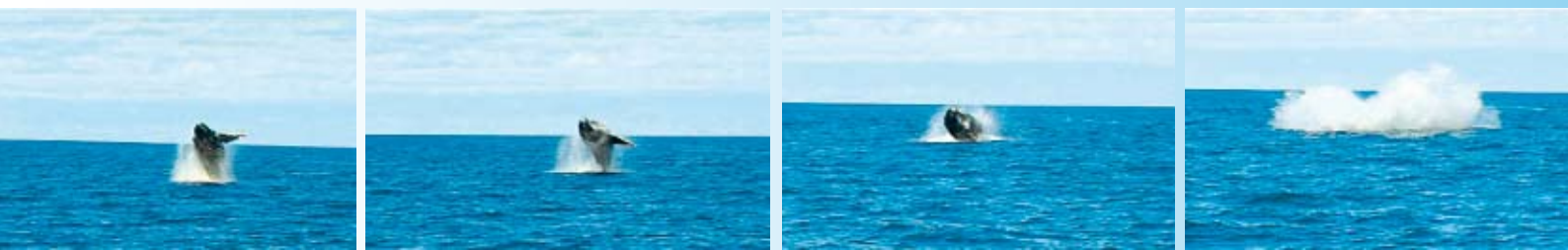
In the 1940s the Albany Whaling Company began a two year operation from Frenchman's Bay. In the 1950s the Cheynes Beach Whaling Station,

Generally the chasers would continue to hunt until one of a number of reasons forced them to stop – the weather was coming in bad, there were no more whales to catch or there was a surplus of whales at the factory already. It was then a case of locating their kill, chaining them together on either side of the boat with up to five in a row behind each other, and beginning the slow trip back to the station.

Back at the station every part of the whale except for its teeth went into the pressure cookers. Once the cooking process had been completed the oil was removed and the leftovers were used to make a high protein powder that was combined with other ingredients to make stock or poultry feed.

## LIFE AT SEA

Spending all that time at sea you were never short of something interesting to see and the late Ches Stubbs, in



Company was working out of Bather's Beach in Fremantle and the Perth Whaling Company was working from its operations based on Carnac Island. In the 1840s the Castle Rock Whaling Station was in service just north of Dunsborough.

These stations created products for both the local and international markets as they both became more established. As far as their kills went, they tended to focus on the Right Whale because they were the 'right whales' to look for – they were generally close to shore and they floated well when killed.

As these became scarce, they were forced to move further and further out to sea which made hunting more difficult ... until the birth of two new inventions – the engine and the explosive harpoon. These two innovations revolutionised the whaling industry. Now boats could chase whales faster, longer and with less crew. Now they could hit a whale from onboard the main boat. All round it

Australia's last operational whaling station, commenced as well as the Australian Whaling Commission, an Australian Government company which began to operate from Babbage Island near Carnarvon.

The changes in technology and the new land based whaling stations meant the whaling process was now so much easier than what it used to be.

Depending on where you were based, the new process now went something like this:

Up before the crack of dawn and out to the whaling grounds by first light. When the first whale was shot, sometimes with the use of spotter planes and sometimes without, it was brought alongside the boat, filled with air to keep it afloat, fitted with a flag, a light and a radio buoy, and left to float around while the boat went and continued chasing the pod or looking for new prey. The flags, lights and beacons all helped identify where the whale was and whose boat it belonged to.

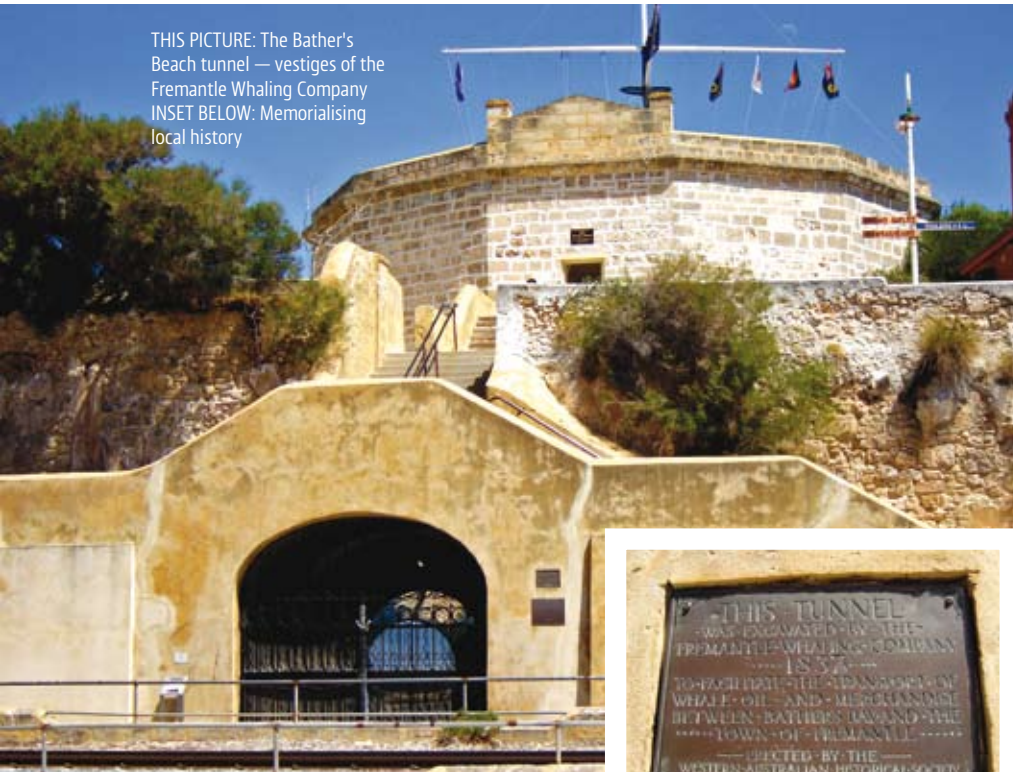
his fantastic book "I Remember... Memoirs of a Whaling Skipper", recounts so many of them you hardly stop laughing or marveling at some of the things they saw and experienced.

For example, he recounts the tale of one of his crew coming to him while they were drifting along doing some repairs to the engine one day, to tell him that there was an enormous great white shark circling the ship and taking a bite of out one of their whales each time it went around.

Ches told him to go and shoot it, knowing they had a shotgun and stag shot onboard, and then proceeded to nod back off to sleep ... until the whaling gun went off. Heading out to see what happened he saw that the mate had shot the shark with a killer harpoon! They got it alongside but the harpoon they used was one that was meant for finishing off a whale rather than catching it so it had no barbs and pulled out before they could get it on board.

There's no shortage of shark stories, as you would expect but there are

THIS PICTURE: The Bather's Beach tunnel — vestiges of the Fremantle Whaling Company  
INSET BELOW: Memorialising local history



"From around the early 1800s the Americans, French and British all hunted off our south west coast. "

others; like trolling for tuna while they were looking for whales, the general fascination the men had with the ocean and what it held, the great leveler of sea-sickness, stories of cooks getting their revenge on crew, horrific injuries and of storms and their fury.

One other thing Ches Stubbs mentions that is worth noting, which applies at least for the boats heading out from Cheynes Beach Whaling Station in Albany (now Whale World), is the choices they made regarding the whales they shot. It was law that no cow (female whale) with a calf could be shot. This was something they rigidly stuck to, not because of the law, but because of the fate they knew would be in store for that calf – to die of malnutrition or be killed by sharks or Killer Whales.

He also notes their willingness to suffer the consequences for killing undersized whales. Rather than cut undersized whales free and avoid the heavy fine that awaited them on their return, in their view it was better to have

the whale used and pay the fine. Make what you will of his words, you can take them as truth or you can look at them cynically, but when you read the book you know he writes from the heart.

## THE CLOSING CHAPTERS

Whale numbers started to come under incredible pressure with this build up of the industry and also with the next technological breakthrough – the factory ship. These ships, the concept of which came out of Norway, could do everything onboard that was otherwise being done via ship and whale station. Further to this they were hard to police because they were able to process any sized whale that was caught.

With the declining numbers being more and more publicised and the increase in conservation group activity, whaling began to come under increased pressure. In 1963, the taking of humpback whales stopped and in 1965 a worldwide ban was put in place. Slowly, people started to realise what was happening and public opinion towards the industry began to change. This combined with the global slowdown in whaling related products, as there were now increased alternatives for lighting and steel works.

In 1978, on Monday the 20th of November, the last whale in Western Australia was taken in Albany and the Cheynes Beach Whaling Company began to close up shop. The following year, Australia adopted an anti-whaling policy which put a permanent end to whaling in Australian waters. This was based on commercial whaling no longer being needed to meet essential human needs, the cruelty of whaling being an unacceptable practice and the recognition of other benefits and the need for the existence of whales.

These represent such amazing changes from where they once were. There are many tales of industries that developed following the commercial and domestic need of a product, then it increases so much that the industry reaches a tipping point where it needs to change or risk environmental disaster. Forestry, fishing and now the use of fossil fuels are some examples of these industries.

Whaling has had a significant impact on the history of Western Australia. We may detest the current practices of certain countries and transfer that disgust to the origins of the industry but we can't deny the influence it has had on the development of our state or the need it filled at the time.

When we consider these things it brings some balance to our perspective. As an industry it has brought necessary resources, development, recognition, revenue and people to Western Australia. Now it continues to do the same – but, thankfully, with a change of tact.

Eco-tourism is a booming industry in WA and whale watching is a key feature of that. From Esperance to the Ningaloo Reef there are now opportunities to appreciate the magnitude and the grace of these amazing creatures from the comfort of the coast if you don't have your sea-legs or from the back of the boat if you do.

We can still reflect on the bygone days of whaling. Whale World, located on the site of the old Cheynes Beach whaling station just out of Albany, provides us this fascinating opportunity but I think we'd all agree, the new industry is a much fresher, more positive and more sustainable industry to be involved in.