

Victorian Heritage Database Report

Report generated on - 22/07/24

YOUNG AUSTRALIAN

Location

Curdie s Inlet, Peterborough

Victorian Heritage Register (VHR) Number

S748

Date lost

25/05/1877

Construction material

Wood

Propulsion

Sail

Number of masts

3

Length/Breadth/Depth

0.00 Feet / 0.00 Feet / 0.00 Feet

Builder

George Dent

Year of construction

1864

Built port

Jervis Bay

Built country

Australia

Registration Port

Sydney

Date lost

25/05/1877

Departure

Maryborough

Destination

Adelaide

Cargo

70 hogsheads and some quartercasks of rum, 150 tons sugar

Owner

1864: registered in Sydney as Young Australian
 by 1867 registered as Young Australia
 1874: John Fraser: Sydney
 1875: A. Muir of Brisbane

Master

1868: Capt. Hovell
 Captain W. Whitfield

Number of crew

7

Statement of significance

<p>The Young Australian is historically significant for its association with the Fijian and Queensland blackbirding trade in native Fijian labour. The builder of the Young Australia(n) George Dent put the first road between Sydney and Jervis Bay.</p>

VHR history

The schooner Young Australian, lost at Curdies Inlet in 1877, was associated with notorious 'blackbirding' in the South Pacific, whereby islanders were persuaded or coerced to work as cheap labour on the sugar plantations of Queensland, in spite of opposition from the missionaries. The trade proved so lucrative that violence and brutality were used to recruit reluctant natives. In 1868 the Queensland Government passed laws to clean up the trade, in an attempt to ensure that the men came of their own free will and were properly treated. Just before this law was passed, two Sydney men Eldred and Spence, launched a company for the purpose of recruiting islanders for the Fijian cotton plantations. The Fijian market was the main competitor for labour with the Queensland sugar plantations. It became so profitable that vessels from Melbourne, Sydney and Brisbane, after unloading a cargo - often gin - at Levuka, the Fijian capital, would slip away to change the rig and name of the vessel and make quick runs with 'Kanaka' cargoes, before resuming their proper identities and returning to their home ports.

 In 1868, while the Young Australian was on a recruiting voyage to supply the cotton plantations of Fiji, three natives of the New Hebrides, who had been kidnapped, were shot and murdered on board, after causing a disturbance. Following this quelling of the disturbance 230 men and six women were sold in Levuka for 1200

pounds (Docker, *The Blackbirders*, p. 58) Some time later news of the shootings leaked out and the captain and one of his men were tried in Sydney and found guilty of murder. Shipping circles were shocked and horrified that a ship's captain could have been convicted for an offence against natives. The death sentence was imposed on the two men, but later remitted to life imprisonment. Another man was found guilty of manslaughter and sentenced to seven years' hard labour. None served more than a small part of their sentences. Yet it had been due to the interference of the missionaries that the murders committed on the *Young Australian* had become known, forcing a trial.

The *Young Australian* was one of the vessels that changed its identity for the Fijian slave trade. At his trial, the captain, Albert Ross Hovell, revealed that it was the custom to clear from Sydney under the name *Young Australia* with a small general cargo. At Levuka, the name would be changed to *Young Australian* and the vessel would be re-registered and provided with new papers by the British Consul while engaged in the 'blackbirding' trade to Fiji. Thurston the Consul was an old friend of Hovell and had been a cotton planter and understood the need for native labour. But according to the Sydney shipping records, the name changes of the *Young Australian* were even more complicated. The three-masted schooner was built at Jervis Bay in 1864 and registered in Sydney as the *Young Australia* and that name was continued in the port until March 1870. In May the vessel docked as the *Young Australian*, the name it retained after it was bought in 1875 by Andrew Muir. On its last arrival in Sydney on 14 May 1877, just 11 days before it was lost at Curdies Inlet, it was still known as the *Young Australian*. (Foster (1996): 43-44)

The *Young Australian* was built in Jervis Bay NSW and is recorded to have been the first three-masted schooner built in a colonial yard (ASR Jan/Feb 1923: 23). It was built by George Dent who built a number of vessels from 1861, and who marked out the first bush road between Sydney and Jervis Bay, which line was adopted by the Survey Department (ibid).

On the 25 May 1877 while on a voyage from Maryborough, Qld to Adelaide it struck heavy weather off Cape Nelson. Its fore main rigging was carried away causing the foremast to spring. The vessel nearly sank by the stern when carried aback by one squall, one of the crew threw a message in a bottle overboard to his sister to say they were lost and may God have mercy on their souls - it was later found on Warrnambool beach. The schooner made for a break in the outer reef off Curdies River and went ashore there. One of the crew William drowned while trying to get a line ashore. A line was eventually got ashore and the crew were cared for by local settlers.

Police constables from Camperdown and Warrnambool guarded the wreck from "landsharks hovering about, waiting for an opportunity for plunder" (Warrnambool Standard 8/6/1877)