Norfolk Island trade routes

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This brief paper explores some of the ideas that have been raised in my work as a conservation consultant in the Kingston and Arthur's Vale Historic Area (KAVHA) on Norfolk Island.

The concept of cultural routes is very useful in thinking about significance at Norfolk Island but, combined with the need to consider all aspects of significance without unwarranted emphasis on one value at the expense of others, the implications are complex.

Figure 1
Kingston Pier today. (photo Jean Rice)

Norfolk Island is on at least several cultural routes, some probably of world heritage value. They all relate to its being an island in the middle of the South Pacific Ocean and to various peoples' travels, migrations, trade and journeys. The title of this paper refers to current sea trading and its historical roots but first the historical context is summarised.

Norfolk Island is well known as the penal colony where convicts who re-offended elsewhere in Australia were incarcerated and as the site of the infamous gaol where those who committed crimes or misdemeanours whilst on Norfolk Island were confined, and under many regimes, tortured and brutalised.

This phase of the place's history led to its inclusion in the Australian Convict Sites, Draft World Heritage Nomination. Regrettably, in my view, the people of Norfolk

Island voted against inclusion in this world heritage nomination at a referendum held by the Norfolk Island Government. With an economy which depends on cultural tourism, this seems strange, but is it?

The overt reason, in the view of some, for the rejection of world heritage nomination was that the proposal was seen as a Commonwealth land and power grab and it raised the ire of the Society of Pitcairn Descendants (www.pitcairners.org). On closer consideration however I believe that listing for this reason would not recognise the other aspects of the significance of Norfolk Island, including its place on other cultural routes, also possibly of world heritage value, and some of which are crucial to the cultural identity of today's Norfolkers.

At the ICOMOS conference in Canberra in November 2000 'World Heritage: Where Are We At?' Kevin Jones showed a map of Polynesian migration routes across the Pacific – with Norfolk Island at the westernmost end. There are in fact physical remains of Polynesian occupation of Norfolk Island though there were no Polynesians in occupation when the first European settlers arrived in 1788. Philip Gidley King records finding plantains (bananas) growing and canoes and coconuts at Anson Bay and Ball Bay. George Raper, stranded on Norfolk after the wreck of the *Sirius* in 1790, drew an adze and numerous stone tools have been found throughout the island. Atholl Anderson's recent archaeological investigations at Emily Bay have discovered an East Polynesian settlement site with postholes, an area of stone paving and an obsidian blade from Raoul Island in the Kermadec Group, over 1000 km to the east.

Sighted and mapped by Cook in 1774, Norfolk Island appears on the maps of many Pacific Ocean voyages of discovery. It offered a landfall, if difficult, for the sailing ships, with fresh water and food, and would also have confirmed their location.

The British flag was raised in Sydney (now Kingston), Norfolk Island, six weeks after it was raised in Sydney, Port Jackson in 1788. The initially tiny community was a penal farm colony intended to supply food from its fertile valleys to Port Jackson, and no doubt to ships en route to various destinations. The decision to settle Norfolk was also strategic: to preclude its acquisition by rival powers and to secure its supplies of timber and flax, which it was falsely believed would provide masts, sailcloth and ropes.

Communication and trade with Sydney and other places were by sailing ship with goods and people landed off anchored vessels via small boats. The boats had to negotiate a precarious passage round the end of the reef to the landing place. The experience is described vividly in many journals and the type of vessel is shown in drawings. The dangerous landing conditions claimed many victims including the *Sirius* in 1790.

Abandoned and fired in 1815 Norfolk was probably only used by passing whalers until the colony was re-established in 1825, and until 1855 it was a place of secondary punishment, now infamous. This period is not covered in detail in this paper but it should be noted that the township built by the convicts was still accessed and supplied in the same way, made easier by the construction of a stone pier from 1839 to 1847. Boats, pulled from boatsheds down the first penal settlement slipway, linked ship to shore.

In 1856 Norfolk Island became part of another cultural route that started with the mutiny on the *Bounty* in 1789 and has since been romanticised and recorded in artworks, film and books across the world. The mutineers and a group of Tahitian women, men and a child settled on Pitcairn Island in 1790 (just before the *Sirius* was wrecked on Norfolk, some 3000 miles to the west). When the community started to outgrow the limited resources of Pitcairn Island they appealed to Queen Victoria for assistance. They were eventually resettled on Norfolk Island in 1856 after the closure of the penal colony.

These people were the basis of the Norfolk community today. This is evidenced in many aspects including family names. Descendants of the Pitcairners share only a few family names: Adams, Christian, McCoy, Quintal and Young are the 'Bounty names'; Buffett, Evans and Nobbs are the 'Pitcairn names'; and Blucher, Bataille, Robinson, Snell, Rossiter and Bailey are among the 'Norfolk names'.

There are still strong sea links with Pitcairn Island and the sea has been the main communication and trade route since 1856, linking the place to Australia, New Zealand and Pacific ports. Throughout the 150 years of 'Pitcairner/Norfolker' life in the place the same methods of unloading ships has been used. It was enhanced by installation of a stiff leg crane on each of the piers at Kingston and Cascade in the early twentieth century and today by the use of a mobile crane and launches to pull the lighters. There are numerous historical drawings and photographs illustrating this, including one of the practical Bishop Selwyn at the sweep oar of one boat.

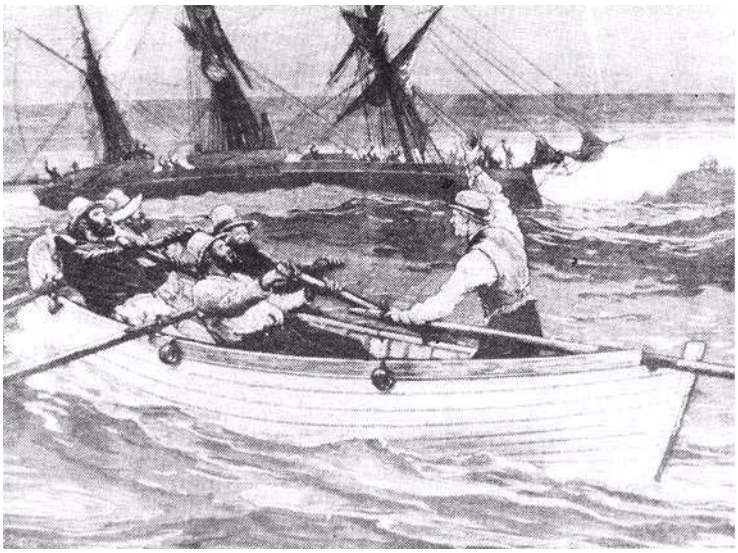

Figure 2
Bishop Selwyn greeting an incoming ship.
(Norfolk Island, Old Military Barracks collection)

Another possible cultural route, or is it practice? is South Pacific whaling. Whaling was carried out on Norfolk at various times and American whalers regularly visited the place. This route has not been fully investigated but it is another important strand of the cultural heritage of Norfolkers. Buffet and Evans, who joined the community on Pitcairn Island, were whalers and the influence of American whalers can be seen in

the celebration of Thanksgiving on Norfolk. Whaling on Norfolk was based at Cascade but the buildings at Kingston were also used. There are images of whales pulled up at Kingston pier and early whalers used convict made cooking vessels for boiling down. The whaleboats are similar to the boats used to unload sailing vessels and to the lighters used today. Whaling ceased in 1962 but many men remember working at the whaling station and a replica whaleboat is being built as a community project. Norfolk whaling is also remembered in ballads learnt by children, including mine, in kindergarten in New South Wales.

Air travel, since the runway was built during World War Two, has taken over passenger transport but the bulk of the island's trade still arrives by ship. The ship M.V. *Maasmond* travels a route from Yamba via Norfolk to Auckland and return and the *Capitaine Cook* travels between Sydney and Norfolk; the routes of these and other ships have not been studied.

Cargo is still unloaded by local families via wooden lighters, which are built on the island. The lighters are now stored on trailers in the convict boatsheds at Kingston and the launches 'up top' near Burnt Pine. Lighterage notices are broadcast on local radio and the men involved leave there usual jobs and report at either Cascade or Kingston depending on the conditions. The launches are lowered into the water and first take out Customs officials and men who operate and load the ships' cranes. The launches then tow lighters out, each crewed by three to four men. The lighters tie up on the lee side of the ship and loads are lowered in cargo nets or slings. Two lighters are lashed together for large loads such as trucks and buses or building materials. The launches tow the lighters to shore and they have to ride the waves past the reef while the sweep steers the lighter around the niggerhead and up to the pier. The load is then lifted onto the pier by crane and the process begins again.

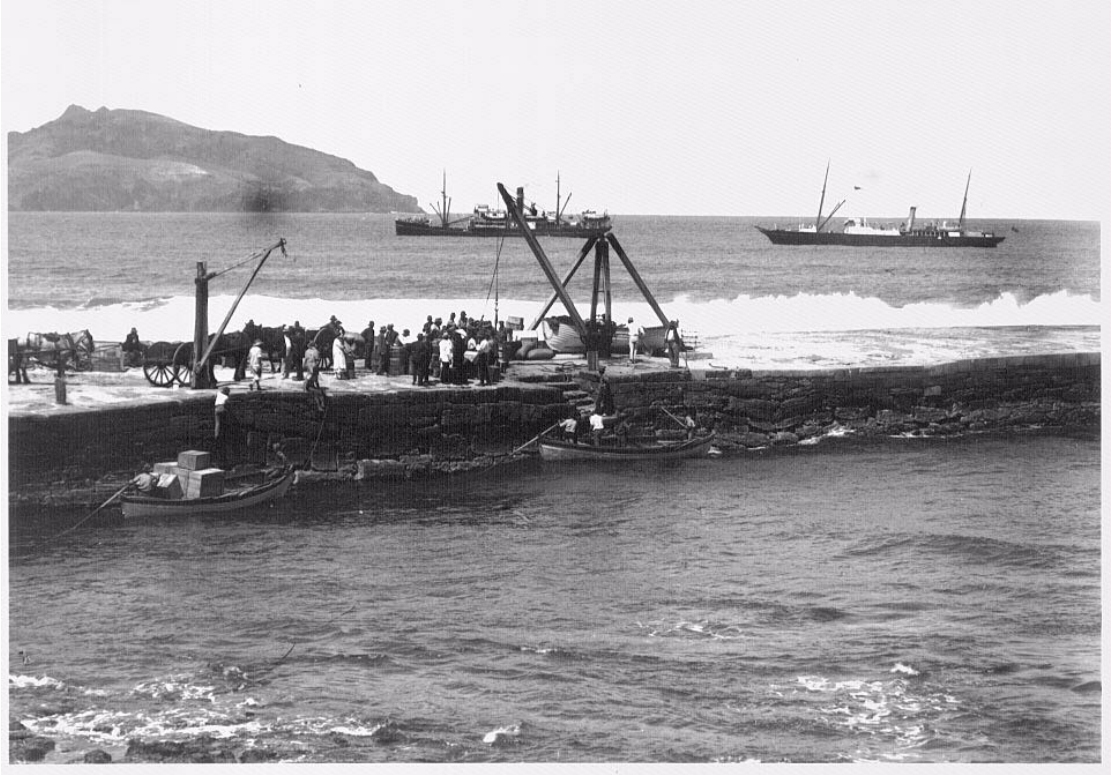

Figure 3
Lighters and ships at Kingston in the mid-1920s.
(State Library of NSW, ML ON 62-5, Berkelman Collection)

The method of loading and unloading and the skills involved are rooted in seafaring traditions and techniques handed down from the Bounty sailors, used on Pitcairn island and reinforced on Norfolk by unloading practices and facilities of the penal colony and by the American whalers.

The practice suggests a more general analysis of the ways of unloading ships in small island communities. Brief historical and current comparative analysis reveals historic images of similar boats, both with and without small sails, at places as disparate as Tristan da Cunha, Bermuda, the Caribbean and of course Pitcairn Island. Many of these places were in fact linked by the routes of sailing ships and many of the historic drawings of these places where done by the same artists on these journeys. Thus we have Augustus Earle drawing both Tristan da Cunha and Australia, and George Raper mapping the Cape Verde Islands, Tristan da Cunha, Port Jackson and Norfolk Island.

Tourists now watch the lighters negotiate the coral reef and men take pride in their skills but the work is dangerous and ships are often turned back or delayed when conditions are rough. Every few years a new scheme for a permanent harbour emerges from the business community but lack of funds have inhibited development. However, a safe harbour could see the end of the lighters and a deeply rooted custom, now rare in the world, which links a fascinating range of historical and current trade, communication and settlement routes. Recent engineering inspection of the convict built pier has revealed that it is badly undermined raising direct fabric conservation issues. The analysis in this paper raises other questions of how do we, or can we, or should we protect such cultural traditions and cultural routes? A more general concern

is the application of the concept of cultural routes and serial sites when there are multiple routes and multiple values of heritage significance.