

Cossack

Ghost town of the north-west

There is something about a ghost town that captures the imagination. Cossack is an abandoned township on the Western Australian coast about 1570 kilometres from Perth and about eight kilometres from the town of Roebourne. It was the first port in the north-west and was the port for Roebourne. The town was settled in the late 1800s, and in those years was home to a vibrant multicultural community. The collapse of the pearling industry early in the 20th century and silting of the harbour reduced Cossack to a byway of history. Nearly a century later, Cossack is being rediscovered by tourists, artists and historians.

Today, most of the settlement lies in ruins except for few finely restored buildings like the Customs House and Court House, which have withstood cyclones and heat for over a century.

In 1871, the Governor of Western Australia, Sir Frederick Weld, visited the area aboard *HMS Cossack* and, the town's name was chosen in honour of this event. Previously it had been known as Butcher's Inlet or Tien Tsin Harbour.

Cossack was declared a townsite in 1872 and was linked by a tramway to Roebourne, which was to become the administrative centre. Early Cossack settlers noticed that local natives wore necklaces of pearl. The settlers began collecting pearl shell and an industry was born. By 1868 the pearl rush was on and in 1874 the industry was worth £80,000 a year. During the 1880s, the town

The former Customs House is one of the best preserved buildings in the ghost town of Cossack on the north-west coast of Western Australia. Clayton Roberts explores the story of the remote, abandoned port and the harsh lives of its customs officers.

boomed. It was the major port of the area, moving the wool clip out and importing supplies and other goods.

Pearling and Asians

Pearling supplied much of Cossack's income for many years. It was the home port for pearling luggers until the early 1880s when the industry moved further north to Roebuck Bay, Broome. A local gold rush meant boom conditions for many years. At its peak in 1894-95, the town's population was about 400, including 225 Asians. In 1884, the Western Australian Imported Labour Registry Act changed the population of the Roebourne District by allowing the mass introduction of Asian labour.

People attracted by the pearling industry included Chinese, Japanese, Malays, Koepangers (Timorese) and Manilamen (Filipinos). Many worked as laundrymen, gardeners and cooks. Asians had market gardens in Cos-

sack and Roebourne, which meant fresh vegetables in adequate quantities for the first time since European settlement. Chinatown, also known as Japtown, was the most colourful part of Cossack. It boasted two Chinese stores, a Chinese bakery, a Japanese store, a Turkish bath house, a brothel and a Singhalese tailor. "The tailor expertly made white drill suits to measure for 13 shillings". Sly grog shops were numerous and gambling for high stakes took place.

Inscriptions on the cemetery tombstones tell the stories that go with pioneering in a harsh, unforgiving environment. The wife of Customs officer W.F.S. Richards lies in a neglected grave in a corner of the cemetery. The inscription reads:

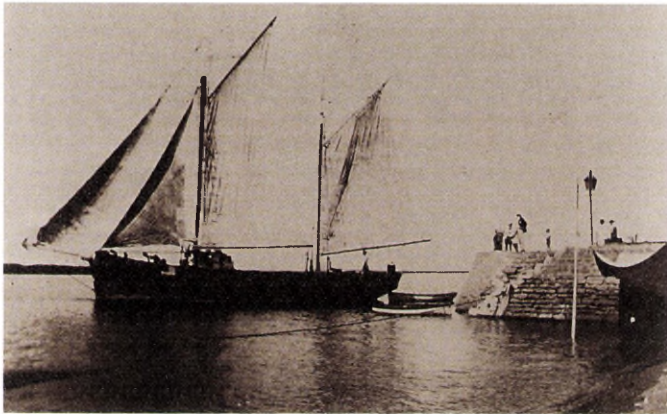
*In loving Remembrance of Lottie
Beloved wife of
W.F.S. Richards H.M.C.
Died 3rd Oct 1909 Aged 47
Lead Kindly Light*

The cemetery is divided into European and Japanese sections with Europeans occupying the higher ground. Even in death separation was absolute. According to writer Nancy Withnell-Taylor in *Yeera-Muk-A-Doo*:

Japanese headstones in unconsecrated ground stood at the foot of the graves. Some were erected to those who lost their lives at sea and whose bodies were never recovered. However, if any of the departed one's belongings were found they were buried under the tombstone.



*Unloading beer from a lighter at Cossack's jetty.
The cargo ketch 'Battler' about to depart from Cossack.
The lighter 'Nicol Bay' which brought cargo from ships anchored
about eight kilometres away.
The abandoned Customs House.*



Each year a ceremony was held at the cemetery. Food and drink was left for the departed spirits, and small boats laden with food were set adrift and floated out to sea. Formerly, spirits in the form of sake was placed on the boats but irreverent individuals watched the boats depart, helped themselves to the spirits and became gloriously drunk.



Cossack was periodically devastated by cyclones. To combat the hurricane force winds, the houses had heavy shutters. Apart from government buildings, houses were built of wood with galvanised iron roofs and anchored by chains bolted to boulders buried in the ground.

Decline

During the Boer War, Cossack had a brief revival as the embarking point for volunteers being recruited in Perth. At the turn of the century, Point Samson about four miles further north, became the port for the district, as Cossack Harbour had silted up so much that it was no longer practicable for shipping. All vessels calling at Cossack had to anchor about five miles from the jetty and goods were landed by lighter.

With World War I, the pearl shell market collapsed, never to rise. The Depression and competition from the cultured pearl industry hastened the end of this exciting era. By the 1930s only 50 luggers were operating in the north-west; by 1969 there were only 12.

The municipality of Cossack was dissolved in 1910, but a few people lived there until after World War II. A Cossack Customs and Excise report dated 1926 stated that imports consisted of rice, petrol and tinned vegetables while main exports were mainly pearl shell and wool. By 1938 most Europeans had left and the town was mainly occupied by Japanese. With the pearling industry re-established at Broome, the town eventually lost all its source of income, and was abandoned in the 1950s.

The historic value of the townsite has been recognised by restoration of several fine stone buildings, including the Customs House. Today these buildings, some ruins, a stone wharf and the neglected cemetery are all that remain.

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The restored Customs House at Cossack.



The Customs connection

The Customs connection goes back to the appointment of Robert Sholl as Government Resident and Sub-Collector of Customs, who held office from 1865 to 1881. Government Residents, later known as Resident Magistrates, formed a most important part of the judicial system of the colony. Their responsibilities included dealing with crimes, native problems, registration of births and deaths and collecting customs duties.

Conditions were harsh in those early days as Postmaster and Tidewaiter Trevarton C. Sholl (1865-1866) recorded in his journal:

27 Nov. 1865 at Tien Tsin Bay. *Last, was a night of torture. The mosquitoes and sandflies were in swarms which together with the heat have made people, who are not usually addicted to the bad habit, swear most terribly.*

12 January 1866: *8 pm. I am now writing enveloped in smoke, caused by the burning of cowdung in the tent to keep away the mosquitoes.*

21 Feb. 1866: *At 3:30 pm. left camp with mount and the native "Peter" on horseback for the Emma with the mails. Stayed on board to tea. Saw old Mulligan [Chief of the Tien Tsin Bay Aboriginal tribe] for the first time since his arrival from Perth, on board the vessel, he is looking as jolly as an old "Tar" – but furious with a native named "Mingamarra" who has ab-*

sconded with one of his [Mulligan's] wives, he says he will not spear this native, as that would be treating him too leniently, but he will shoot him.

Not long after, Trevarton Sholl became a shipping casualty along with 39 other people when the *Emma* disappeared on a voyage from Cossack to Fremantle.

Cossack Customs House and Bonded Store were completed in 1897. Built of local stone with corrugated iron roofs, they incorporated a 7000-gallon underground water tank. Shortly after completion and despite solid construction, the buildings were severely damaged by the cyclone in April 1898 which also wrecked the port installation.

Dr David Day in his book *Smugglers and Sailors, The Customs History of Australia 1788 – 1901*, writes about one of the early Government Residents named Edward Hayes Laurence, who was a man of liberal instincts:

A thousand miles from Perth, Laurence was responsible for collecting Customs duties, licensing the pearling boats and enforcing other unpopular laws of a far-off administration.

Eschewing popularity, Laurence sought instead to project a principled concern for the welfare of all the inhabitants, whether supervising the Sunday school or delivering the service in the absence of the rector... he caused a furore in May 1882 when he authorised the burial in the settlement's cemetery of a Chinese man whom he employed as an interpreter and whom he believed to be a Christian.

Although the grave was dug eighteen yards from the nearest European grave, a noisy public meeting protested at the Chinese man finding in death the equality that had been denied him in life.

Laurence stood firm in the face of the protests, although his own hold on life was none too secure. He died of tuberculosis on 17 November 1885, just two months short of his fortieth birthday.

Sources:

Day, David. *Smugglers and Sailors, The Customs History of Australia 1788 – 1901*, AGPS, Canberra, 1992.

Journals of Trevarton C. Sholl 1865 – 1866. QB/SHO in Battye Library.

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