

Streeter's Jetty, Broome, Western Australia: An example of a heritage icon moving from private ownership to community control

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In the mid-1880s a small jetty made from local cadjebut (Melaleuca laucadendron) was built in Broome to service the rapidly expanding pearling fleet. A century later that jetty, now referred to as Streeter's Jetty, was one of the few remaining structures from 80 years of pearling in the northwest prior to pearl farming. In a fragile condition and requiring urgent repairs the jetty was, however, no longer of commercial value and the owners were unwilling to maintain it. This paper recounts the history of the jetty and the events which led to the Shire of Broome moving to successfully obtain control of the jetty on behalf of the community and to attract government support and funding for its restoration.

In May 1998 the Shire of Broome successfully lobbied the pearling company Paspaley Pearls Pty Ltd to relinquish ownership of Streeter's Jetty to allow control of the jetty to pass to the Shire. This brought to an end ongoing community concern about the fragile condition of this unique and historically significant jetty and paved the way for government funding for urgently needed conservation work. This is an example of an all too frequent dilemma, a privately owned structure of outstanding historical significance but of no commercial value to its owners requiring substantial funding to ensure its long term survival. In this paper the events which led to the Shire of Broome moving to successfully obtain control of the jetty on behalf of the community and to attract government support and funding are recounted together with the history of the jetty.

Modern Broome has a permanent population of about 12 000 residents which swells to well over 20 000 during the dry season, the tourist season. The Asian cultural influences introduced by Asian pearl divers from several countries during the end of the nineteenth century and the first half of the twentieth century persist to the present and Broome is one of Australia's few multicultural rural centres. During the last two decades the local economy has become increasingly dependent on tourism, although the pearling industry, now centred on pearl farms along the Kimberley coast, remains economically important. Today, the promotion and conservation of Broome's pearling heritage is a priority. Many families have their roots in the pearling industry and the few remaining structures from that era are the only symbols through which the town and its people can express their unique and very significant heritage.

Streeter's Jetty is an icon of Broome's heritage. It is listed on the Australian Heritage Council Register (AHC 18074), the Shire of Broome Municipal Heritage Inventory, 1996, and is in the Chinatown Conservation area declared by the National Trust of Australia (W.A.) in March 1983. According to a submission to the Heritage Council of Western Australia it is 'the last visible link with the pearling industry of past years...'.¹ Despite these very positive declarations which record its heritage value, government funding has not previously been available for its restoration and maintenance.

Today, just prior to its proposed restoration, the jetty has decayed almost to the point of collapse. All metal fastenings show evidence of spalling and where the spalling is extreme the deck stringers and cross-bracings have split. Many of the spreaders on the cross-bracings are missing and many cross-bracings are no longer attached to the piles. Four piles at the deep water end are so severely eroded that at low tide they hang suspended above the sand. The swell of king tides on March 11, 12 and 13, 1997 rose above the decking wrenching at its timbers. When the tide receded the last five metres of the deck at the landing end was left buckled and no longer safe to walk on.

Although the existence of large beds of the pearl oyster (*Pinctada maxima*) were observed during the voyage of the *Beagle* in 1839 pearling in the North-West of Australia is reputed to have had its beginnings in the 1860s when colonists at the Harding River noticed Aboriginal people wearing large pearl shells as decoration.² Commercial pearling commenced at Cossack in 1867 using Aboriginal divers, mostly women, many of whom were kidnapped and enslaved by blackbirders who were also establishing camps to trade black labour. This exploitation of Aboriginal labour was legislated against in 1869.³ As the pearling industry became increasingly profitable pearlers sought new shell beds and expanded up the coast. By the mid-1870s a number of pearling fleets were well established and working the shell beds in and above King George Sound to the north of Broome using 'indentured' Asian divers.

Roebuck Bay was particularly favoured as a safe anchorage and during the 1870s several permanent camps were established by individual pearling fleet owners in the sandhills fringing the bay. Permanent houses, victualling stores for the growing pearling fleets and other businesses soon followed and the township of Broome was gazetted in 1883. By 1888 George Streeter as agent for his father's company, Edwin William Streeter, jeweller and gem merchant of Bond Street, London, had established a store adjacent to his company's camp and shell shed on the coast. The company had also purchased Roebuck Plains Station and the store was to serve the company's pearling and pastoral requirements. It was also well placed to serve the needs of the town and 'developed into a store for supplying the surrounding settlers and the pioneer pearlers with the necessities for their daily lives and the carrying on of their industries'.⁴ George Streeter returned to England in 1898 leaving the management of the Company's interests in the hands of Arthur Male.⁵ The company of Streeter and Male dates from this time and remained the owner of Streeter's Jetty until part of the Company's interests were sold in 1983.

Streeter's Jetty was built across the tidal mudflats of Dampier Creek at the end of Short Street adjacent to Edwin Streeter's shell sheds. It is believed that the jetty dates from the late 1880s when the company built its store (Fig. 1). It is referred to by George S. Streeter in his diary, maintained whilst on his world voyage overseeing his father's holdings, and was built from locally cut bush timber, probably cadjebut.⁶ This jetty was used continuously by the pearling industry from its heyday in the 1920s and 1930s when the number of pearling luggers based in Broome reached 400 until the 1980s, by which time the off-shore industry was well established.⁷ Although records of its overall dimensions are not known, from photographs it appears that the jetty retained the same design and size with only minor modifications until 1966 when the jetty was realigned, shortened and all timbers were replaced.

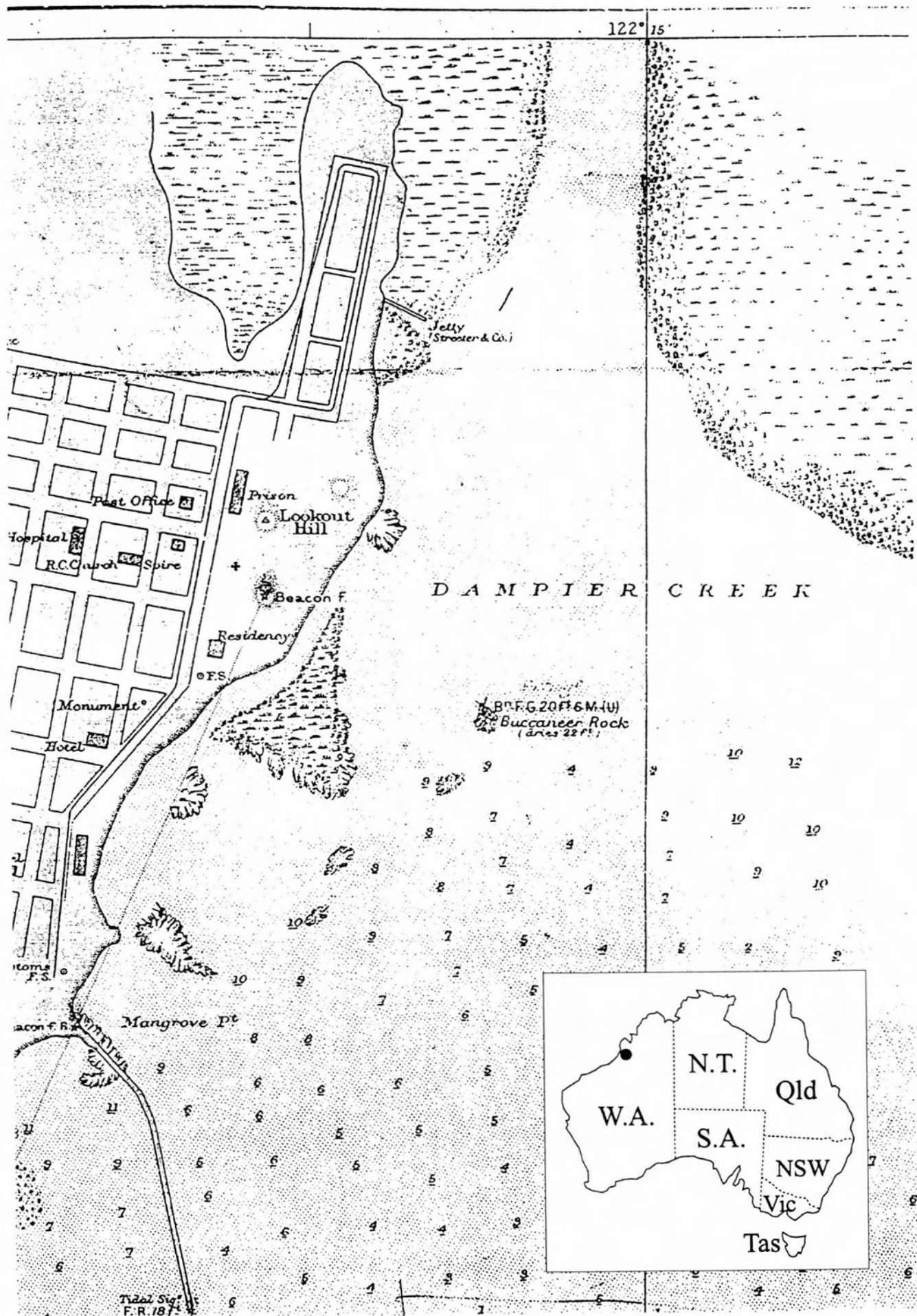


Fig. 1: Chart excerpt Roebuck Inner Anchorage (1922, last rev. 1937). BA858 (in feet).

A detailed report on the condition of the jetty prepared in 1995 recorded the dimensions of the jetty then as being: overall length: 67.1 m (220 feet); width: 1.8 m (6 feet); height at the seaward end: 2.4 m (8 feet); height at the land end: 1.5 m (5 feet). The rail line stopped short of the seaward end and extended 23.2 m (76 feet) beyond the landward end of the jetty.⁸ Until the late 1980s there was also a fuel platform (Fig. 2); there is almost no evidence of this today.

It is believed that cadjebut has been continuously used for the main piles and cross-bracings. This timber is available locally and, according to Mr Kim Male, repairs and maintenance were carried out by employees of the company, at least until 1989 when Streeter and Male Pty Ltd was purchased by Paspaley Pearls Pty Ltd. Local knowledge about where to find stands of suitable timber and how to place the timber has always, therefore, been an intangible feature of the jetty and a further significant reason why it is valued by the residents of Broome. An exception was the recent use of treated pine to replace the last four piles and cross-bracings at the landing end of the jetty. This use of inappropriate and poor quality timber may have contributed to the lifting and buckling of this end of the jetty in 1997.

The decking timber originally used was jarrah, shipped from the southwest of Western Australia. Although some of the recently replaced decking is not jarrah, much of the jarrah placed in the rebuilding of the jetty in 1966 remains. All but six of the piles and all cross-bracings were replaced with cadjebut cut from the Willies Creek area, 35 km northwest of Broome.⁹ The existing iron fastenings also date from 1966 (Fig. 3).

The jetty construction uses a repeating trestle formula resulting in elegant proportions and an aesthetically very pleasing structure. Fig. 4 illustrates the nature of the cross-bracing between each pair of piles and the stringers under

the decking. The single rail track down the centre was replaced by a double track. It is certain that these tracks contributed significantly to the structural integrity of the jetty and to its survival in an environment where cyclones occur. The tracks were removed in 1995 because they were no longer used and the then owners were very concerned about public liability and the risk they presented. Sadly, they also unwittingly removed a significant reinforcing element.

This jetty, adjacent to the shell sheds and the victualling store of Streeter and Male Pty Ltd, was the hub around which the pearling industry in the North-West was conducted for over eighty years. The unique Broome pearling luggers used the jetty to unload their haul of pearl shell and to load stores for their next voyage. At first they used a small trolley which ran along the single rail line and, after 1896, a larger four wheeled trolley was pushed along the double rail line past the shell sheds to Streeter and Male's store at the end of Short Street. The line was the main connecting element between the boats and the store and between the jetty and the foreshore.

The period following the Second World War was a time of decline for both the pearling industry and for the town of Broome. When the industry recovered during the 1970s and 1980s it no longer depended on the famous Broome pearling luggers to take the divers to the increasingly distant shell beds and to transport pearls and pearl shell to port. The advent of pearl farms along the coast transformed the industry and Streeter's Jetty and the Broome foreshore were no longer the hub of the pearling industry in the North West. As the number of pearling luggers declined so did demand for the jetty. Gradually it fell into disuse and, because it was no longer of commercial value, deteriorated to the condition described above.

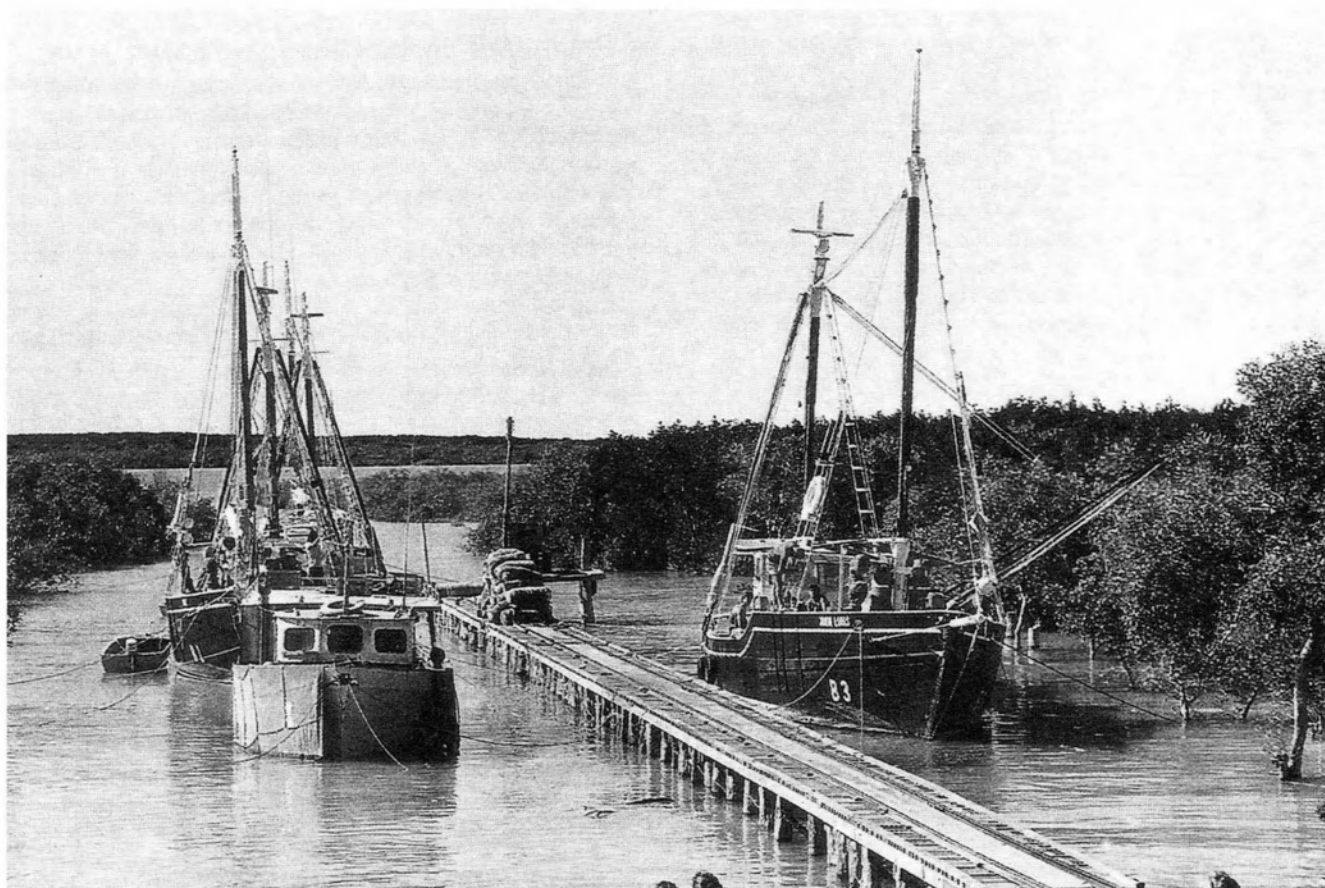


Fig. 2: High tide at Streeter's Jetty, 1981, showing the fuel platform. (Photograph by Roger Garwood, Perth.)



Fig. 3: The seaward end of Streeter's Jetty, 1997, illustrating the fragile condition of the piles and cross-bracings. (Photograph by P. A. Smith.)

This story is a familiar one for many heritage buildings and structures. No longer of commercial value the owners either have no incentive to maintain the structure or can no longer afford to. In the case of Streeter's Jetty lack of maintenance over the last two decades has resulted in a fragile decaying structure requiring substantial funding for repairs and maintenance.

When Paspaley Pearls Pty Ltd took control of Streeter and Male Pty Ltd in 1989 Streeter's Jetty was included in the assets of the company. The substantial pearling interests of the new owners were invested in pearl farms along the north and northwest coast and the jetty was no longer used. Also, unlike the previous owners, the company had no historical links to the structure and therefore felt no personal connection to it or responsibility for it. In 1992 a high wire fence ('Cyclone'-type) was erected to prevent public access to the jetty and about this time the adjacent shell sheds were demolished despite their inclusion in the conservation area declared by the National Trust of Australia (W.A.). Furthermore, the registration of the jetty fell under the jurisdiction of the Marine Division of the Department of Transport with their policy that a jetty in private ownership which had been allowed to fall into disrepair and which was a public risk, should be removed. To its credit the Department has never taken any such action with regard to Streeter's Jetty, although it was feared that such an order could be made at any time.

Community concern about the deteriorating condition of Streeter's Jetty was continuously expressed during the 1990s. In 1995 two reports made recommendations about Streeter's Jetty. The report *Port related Structures on the coast of Western Australia* recommended its inclusion on the Register of the National Estate.¹⁰ A detailed report on the condition of the jetty by Dr M. McCarthy for the Department of Maritime Archaeology, W.A. Maritime Museum recommended that the jetty be listed on the W.A. Register of Heritage Places and the Municipal Register.¹¹



Fig. 4: The trestle formula used in the supporting structure of Streeter's Jetty, 1982. (Photograph by R. M. Smith.)

A submission on behalf of the Broome Historical Society to the Heritage Council of W.A. for the inclusion of Streeter's Jetty on the State Register of Heritage Places was sent in 1995.¹² In 1996 it was included in the Shire of Broome Municipal Heritage Inventory. None of these reports and recommendations, however, ensured the much needed funding to undertake urgent repairs and by 1997 the jetty was still not listed on the W.A. Register of Heritage Places.

Following the completion of the Broome Cultural Planning Study, which again contained recommendations for urgent conservation measures, the consultant for the Cultural Planning Study together with a representative from the local paper met with the Regional Manager of Paspaley Pearls Pty Ltd to discuss the current status of the jetty.¹³ One proposal was that the paper launch an appeal to raise funds to restore the jetty and the company was asked if they would be prepared to hand ownership of the jetty over to the community. They were not. It also became apparent that the company had plans for the development of the foreshore adjacent to the jetty, although future public access was assured by an easement for a major town drain close to the end of the jetty. It was decided that the benefit of a public appeal might be compromised by these development plans and not in the best interest of the paper.

The structural condition of the jetty was by this time very fragile and there was concern that it would not withstand a cyclone. In mid-1997 Paspaley Pearls Pty Ltd engaged a consultant, Pam Smith, to prepare a funding submission to the Heritage Council of W.A. for stage one of a conservation program.¹⁴ Although sympathetic, the Council resolved that it would be inappropriate to provide government funding for the jetty whilst it was privately owned.

Paspaley Pearls Ltd were subsequently persuaded by the Shire Chief Executive Officer (CEO) to relinquish control of the Jetty to the Shire of Broome and the Shire Community Development Officer (CDO) developed a media campaign to raise public awareness of the significance of the site and to seek financial support from the community. The response was considerable in terms of offers of equipment, materials and voluntary labour. Most of the offers were made by people whose fathers and relatives had worked on the jetty and these people had many fond memories of their childhood playing on and around the jetty. The Shire CDO also prepared submissions for funding which were successful and submitted the amended proposal to the Heritage Council of W.A. The Heritage Council then agreed to provide \$27 600 for a conservation plan and urgent restoration work and the Broome Chamber of Commerce donated \$10 000. That conservation plan has now been completed and provides a document which describes the cultural significance of the jetty and which will determine the implementation of future policies. It will also be used as a basis to attract future funding.

Streeter's Jetty will no longer be a commercial jetty as it is unlikely that boats larger than small pleasure craft will be able to use it after the conservation work has been completed. Its use and function have changed and its future as a valued heritage structure has been secured. It is destined to be a valued and loved centrepiece of the Broome Heritage Precinct around which an active tourist industry is already developing. This funding will ensure that Streeter's Jetty will survive and continue to convey images of Broome's pearling history well into the next century.¹⁵

NOTES

- 1 Broome Historical Society 1995.
- 2 Battye 1915:113; Broome Municipal Heritage Inventory 1996:3; refer also to Akerman with Stanton 1994.
- 3 Battye 1915:113.
- 4 Battye 1915:141.

- 5 The date for this event is given as being 1896 in Broome Historical Society (1995).
- 6 Streeter G.S., Diary 1880-1890, referred to in Broome Historical Society 1995. In a submission to the State Register of Heritage Places from the Broome Historical Society it is recorded that Streeter's Jetty had a T platform at the deep water end and a rail track by 1896 (Broome Historical Society 1995). This is also a description of the deep water jetty built at Town Beach in 1896 (refer to the Broome Shire Municipal Heritage Inventory) and Streeter's Jetty may have been confused with this later jetty, although it could also refer to each of the jetties.
- 7 James 1979:239.
- 8 McCarthy 1995.
- 9 Broome Historical Society 1995; interview with Mr Kim Male, 1997.
- 10 Cumming *et al.* 1995.
- 11 McCarthy 1995.
- 12 Broome Historical Society 1995.
- 13 Smith 1996.
- 14 Smith 1997.
- 15 If you would like more information about the progress of Streeter's Jetty contact the Broome Shire community website address: www.ebroome.com

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