

Pearlers of The Torres Straits

By

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Brilliant blue crystal-clear waters, white coral reefs, golden sandy beaches and cloudless skies typifies images of the Torres Straits, which was the main source for “Mother of Pearl” and Pearls during former times and the glory days of pearling. The pearling industry of Northern Australia has an indelible place in Australia’s modern history which is rather romantically depicted by the yarns and tales of the old pearling Luggers and Schooners that plied the Torres Straits in their quest for the finest pearls and “mother of pearl” shell. Their main area of operation was between Thursday Island and Broome, but Thursday Island eventually became the main focal point for the Australian pearling industry. At the height of the pearling industry, steamers connected Thursday Island with a monthly service to Batavia (Jakarta) and to the United Kingdom, a thrice monthly steamship services provided access to Darwin, Hong Kong and Japan, whilst there were about six trips per month connecting other principal Australian ports. There was no shortage of means by which to export the illustrious “mother of pearl”.

Pearl fishermen from Indonesia and China were the first to harvest shell and pearl gems as well as sea-cucumber in northern Australian waters, well before the arrival of the Europeans. They traded with the various Aborigines living in the coastal areas, who placed little or no value on the shell or pearl gems at the time. Pearls, often considered as gemstones, had been sought in Asia and further afield throughout history as a highly prized and valuable commodity. As far as Aborigines were concerned the oyster meat was the most important, as it provided a big supplement to their diet.

The pearling industry, catering for a mass market, first started in or around the 1860s and over ensuing years became a very important feature in the economy of northern Australia, although it was usually financed from sources in Queensland or New South Wales. To give this some historical perspective it was the era when the new steamships were starting to establish new, long distance trading routes, the Suez Canal was first opened, and the overland telegraph became a reality.

The white Australian was very reluctant to become involved in diving due to the very high mortality rate and it was prohibited to employ Aborigines during the 1870s due to welfare reasons. Hence divers from Malaya and Japan were used, including women, who in fact were favored above men for their diving abilities. In those former times a diver would just jump into the water holding a heavy stone, having first taken the deepest of breaths. The diver would slowly sink to the bottom. Once on the seabed they would collect as many pearl shells as possible during the time the diver’s breath held, placing them into a bag or net, then discard the stone weight and slowly rise to the surface with the “catch” or it may be hoisted from the sea bed by the Lugger’s crew. Some divers could stay on the bottom for as long as two minutes, using this primitive method. These divers were referred to as “skin divers”.

The industry experienced its highs and lows between 1870-1890 and it continued well into the 1950s, by which time Luggers and Schooners were becoming something of a rarity. The 1970s saw the last of the

true pearl Luggers due to the advent of cultured pearls, and any remaining vessels were sold or converted for other commercial purposes. However, during the intervening years, Australia had established itself as being one of the world's principal suppliers of high quality, pearls and "mother of pearl" shell. Whilst the pearl gem itself was highly sought after and valuable, the actual "mother of pearl" shell became even more valuable, as it was in demand throughout the world for a variety of decorative purposes.

The type of vessel favored for pearling was a gaff rigged Ketch, typically of about 15-25m in length. These craft were designed with low freeboards to assist with their diving operations. They operated in fleets of up to 20 craft and usually each fleet had their identifying color scheme with name and registration number on each craft cut into the wooden hull near the bow sprit.

Generally, the sailing Masters of these vessels were Australians, although there were a few New Zealanders. Crews and divers were made up of Torres Strait Islanders, Pacific Islanders, Indians, Ceylonese, Malays, Indonesians and Japanese. A typical complement for a pearling Lugger would be, sailing Master, cook, 2-3 divers, 2-3 air-pump handlers, and engineer (if, the craft was motorized) and 2 sailing crew. Hence it was a true multicultural enterprise, but the industry did experience some notoriety for the exploitation and injustices of its labor and crews, contrary to claims by the fleet owners that their crews and divers were well treated, properly fed and accommodated. An average trip was about 2 weeks before returning to port.

One can picture the fleets of these graceful craft sailing under full sail from their home ports, in their quest for the elusive pearl shell. These fleets of Luggers were supported by larger Schooners which acted as supply and mother ships for their respective fleets. At times, the north Australian ports could become congested with Luggers due to their prolific numbers. This in turn helped establish secondary industries such as trading stores and ship chandlers, mostly dominated by the Chinese immigrant entrepreneurs. The ship chandlery business was focal to the existence and dynamics of the early mainland pearling ports, their waterfront areas and subsequent long-term development.



A Lugger heading to the pearling grounds. Note the number of crew on board and the low freeboard of the vessel.

Over time the Japanese, mostly originating from Okinawa, became a domineering influence in the industry with their pearling expertise rising to the fore. The Japanese shipwrights controlled the few shipyards that built these elegant craft which were mainly constructed on Thursday Island using local

Australian timbers. Also, the Japanese immigrants were very active as divers, having previously gained their diving experience in Japan where pearl diving was a centuries old occupation, therefore they brought with them superior diving and harvesting techniques. There was great competition between these divers to see who could obtain the most “mother of pearl” shell.

These pearling fleets often made fortunes for their owners whilst their imported crews were not so well compensated considering the many daily risks they encountered. At one stage pearl shell was in such high demand it warranted the highest possible prices, with Australia becoming the world’s largest producer. This was particularly so in Europe and the Americas where pearl shell was used for the manufacturing of “mother of pearl” buttons and decorative ornaments.

Pearl diving could be dangerous, and a hazardous occupation with the diver being solely reliant on simple air pumps and their designated deckhand that operated their air hoses and air pump. The “Bends”- decompression sickness, and “Raptures of the Deep”- nitrogen narcosis, was quite common amongst the divers, leading to frequent fatalities, since not a great deal was known about these conditions during the fledgling years of the industry. Similarly, there were periodic shark attacks which either killed or maimed scores of divers. The currents in which these divers worked could be strong and unpredictable but their quest for pearl and pearl shell was their ultimate endeavor above all else since the divers were paid based on the amount of shell they collected. Hence the amount of time they spent underwater was highly valuable to them in terms of potential income.

In the early 1860s the diving equipment was very primitive so mainly “skin” divers were used in the shallower waters of up to about 8 fathoms. These divers only wore swimming trunks and goggles and carried a stout knife. Hand dredging was also common in these shallows and stripped the seabed of almost everything, including large quantities of shell and marine vegetation. This compelled the diving industry seek more efficient ways and means of diving in deeper waters

The early diving suit was normally made of thick canvas and the diver wore heavy leaden boots plus weights which restricted his movements. They also wore heavy brass helmets with visors, to which the hoses were connected. Hence, diving was restricted to relatively shallow water where shell could easily be harvested but as time went on, so the divers ventured deeper because hand dredging of shallow waters quickly laid bare vast areas.

In 1875 an improved diving suite was introduced with the divers who donned them becoming known as “dressed divers”. The “dressed divers” could now access to a depth of 20 fathoms and by the 1930s further improvements in diving suits allowed them to go much deeper. The work became extremely hazardous as the diving depths increased and by 1916 fatalities had risen to 10% amongst the diving workforce.

Seasonal Cyclones that frequented the north end of Australia, mainly between the months of November and April were another danger these small craft had to contend with, remembering weather forecasting was somewhat unsophisticated during the 1900s era, and radio was unavailable at the time for such types of sailing craft, it being limited to large ocean going ships.

During WW2, pearling in the Torres Straits was disbanded, with some of the Luggers being requisitioned by the Royal Australian Navy. These craft were motorized and used to patrol the Torres Straits Islands which had become extremely strategic in nature during the time of hostilities and were subject to

constant surveillance by the allies. As a precaution all residents of the Torres Straits Islands had been evacuated to the mainland, between 1942 and 1946, for fear of a Japanese invasion of Australia, stemming from their occupation of New Guinea.

Following the war, due to the interruption and instability these intervening years had caused, it became difficult for the industry to re-establish itself mainly because of lacking demand for pearl shell since the common button was no longer made from “mother of pearl”, but rather plastic, which had been introduced during WW2. This transformed the pearling industry, making it less economically viable, the consequence of which was that the remaining Luggers were progressively phased out from pearling and deployed to other commercial activities. However, by this time pearling had become a mere skeleton of its former glory years. Some pearling did struggle through to the 1970s, but the final death blow came with the introduction of cultured pearl farms as well as high yielding oyster farms, many of which are responsible for producing the high quality oysters to which we have now become accustomed, for our dining tables.

The last Pearl Schooner which I personally saw during my seagoing years was in the vicinity of Thursday Island during the early 1970s, and what a sight it was, striking forth under full sail making a decent speed and heading in the direction of Darwin, with its many crew on deck all waving as we passed at close quarters. It was the last of an era, but at least I had the privilege of seeing the genuine article in its home waters. Today, the remaining Luggers and Schooners have now been seconded, to the no less important tourist sector, providing sailing and diving adventures and tours between the northern locations of the Australian mainland and the various Torres Straits Islands. Even if not in original form it does allow these old vessels to remain in the public eye and serve as a reminder of their past history and glory, and the contributions they made to the pearling industry in northern Australia and the Torres Straits.



Left, is a pearling Lugger, becalmed in the Torres Straits, during one of those tranquil sunsets, for which the region is universally renowned.

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References: The Australian National archives, National Maritime Archives, and various online data available on Public Domains, from which some material has been sourced.

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