

# Marooned Mariners and Mudmaps: The Search for the Ring of Stones

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## Introduction

Between 1629 and 1712 at least 73, perhaps as many as 250, passengers and crew from Dutch Vereenigde Oost-Indische Compagnie (VOC) ships found themselves permanently marooned on the coast of Western Australia. Most were mariners — gunners, soldiers, cabin boys, officers, cadets, cooks and the like — and some were passengers - company clerks, wives on their way to join their husbands in Batavia, wives of crew members, their children, their maids and their relatives (Gerritsen 1994: 12-47; 2006).

The first of these, two individuals, Jan Pelgrom de Bye and Wouter Loos, were deliberately marooned for their part in the Batavia Mutiny, probably at Hutt River 450 km north of Perth, on 16 November 1629 (Gerritsen 1994: 271-287; 2007; 2008a). They were in fact Australia's first European settlers. The remainder were survivors of the wrecks of the *Vergulde Draeck* in 1656 and the *Zuytdorp* in 1712, with a further 11 from the *Goede Hoop* lost in 1656 when they were searching for the survivors from the *Vergulde Draeck*. What became of all these folk is a mystery, one that I have been researching and writing about for 20 years. My work *And Their Ghosts May Be Heard*, published in 1994, with a second edition in 2002, is perhaps the best known piece of research on this topic. Current and proposed research in this area by myself and others include DNA testing, linguistics, oral traditions and searches for further physical evidence, including another possible shipwreck. This paper is about a recent search for physical evidence relating to the fate of the 68 survivors from the *Vergulde Draeck*. In this search maps have been of critical importance, in a situation where the most rudimentary forms of mapping have been supplemented by the most advance geospatial technologies available. The outcome of the search has, however, produced rather unexpected results.

## The Facts

Not a great deal is known about the circumstances of the sinking of the *Vergulde Draeck*. It struck a reef and “immediately burst open,” just off the coast during the night of 28 April 1656, in the latitude given as 30° 40'. It would appear 118 souls perished but 75 managed to make it to shore. A few days later 7 of the crew set out in a boat for Batavia (Djakarta) to get help, leaving 68 passengers and crew behind. The boat crew managed the 3,000 km voyage back to Batavia, arriving on 7 June to raise the alarm. (Henderson 1985: 52-3) When the boat crew left those remaining behind were in difficult circumstances as “nothing was saved and only very few provisions were thrown on the beach by the waves” (Henderson 1985: 52). They were reportedly “about to go inland” where they hoped to find “provisions and drinking water” (Henderson 1985: 54). The specie the *Vergulde Draeck* was carrying, 78,600 guilders, was not saved, it went down with the ship. (Henderson 1985: 52).

Two ships, the *Witte Valk* and *Goede Hoop* were immediately despatched to search for the survivors, without success, the *Goede Hoop* managing to lose a further 11 sailors on the Southland (Australia). The *Vincq*, on its way to Java from the Cape of Good Hope, was then diverted to search, again with no result (Henderson 1985: 53-6). Finally, in 1658 the *Waeckende Boey* and *Emeloordt* were sent to the area in a final attempt to locate and

rescue the lost mariners, once more without success (Henderson 1985: 60-108). The only traces of the survivors were two circles of planks, one with a large plank in the middle, found on the beach by the shore party from the *Waeckende Boey*. One circle appears to have been found about 26-27 km south of the wreck-site, the other on the coast immediately adjacent to the wreck-site (Gerritsen 1994:42-3).

The wreck of the *Vergulde Draeck* was eventually located by teenager Graeme Henderson while spearfishing on 14 April 1963, in latitude 30° 13' 36" S, about 90 km north Perth and 5 km from the coast. The wreck, and its treasure, was excavated by the WA Maritime Museum in 1972 (Henderson 2007: 36-9).

### **The Setting**

In 1875 an Admiralty surveyor, Alfred Burt, accompanied by a Mr Harry Ogbourne, was making his way from Woodada Well to the coast to rendezvous with Captain Archdeacon RN, the leader of the survey. As they passed through wattle thickets close to the coast about 250 km north of Perth, Burt and Ogbourne came across a ring of small boulders, about 1.2 m [4 ft.] in diameter in a clearing about 4.2 m [14 ft.] across. (Burt 1930). Burt thought it unusual and made a mental note of it, putting it out of his mind for a further 56 years. Then, in 1930 he was interviewed by journalist Dircksey Cowan who was trying to re-locate the Deadwater Wreck, believed to be a Dutch wreck north of Busselton in the south west of WA, which Burt and Captain Archdeacon had seen in 1876 (Gerritsen 2008b). In the course of the conversation Cowan made Burt aware that the *Vergulde Draeck* had been wrecked somewhere on the central west coast in 1656, and that it had been carrying 78,600 guilders in specie. This jogged Burt's memory and he recalled the "Ring of Stones", forming the belief that perhaps the Ring of Stones marked the location where the *Vergulde Draeck*'s treasure had been buried. And so he wrote to the Commissioner of Police on 3 November 1930 to inform him of the possible location of this 'Treasure Trove'. Attached to the letter was a mudmap indicating where Burt had encountered the Ring of Stones (Burt 1930).

Then, in early February 1931, two small boys, Alan and Fred Edwards, found 40 coins, including Spanish *reales* with dates ranging from 1618 to 1655, and some pieces from an old chest, in sandhills 160 km south of Burt's Ring of Stones, in the vicinity of where we now know the *Vergulde Draeck* went down (Anon. 1931; Henderson 1985: 170-1; Flowers 2001; Henderson 2007: 35). This discovery triggered a frenzy of speculation, mostly relating to the wreck of the *Vergulde Draeck*, and its treasure. Treasure hunters began to imagine there were chests of gold out there, waiting to be found.

### **Searches for the Ring of Stones**

Presumably as a result of Burt's letter and the speculation about the supposed treasure from the *Vergulde Draeck*, in May 1931 the police instigated a search for the Ring of Stones. The expedition was led by Constable Sam Loxton from Dongara and included Burt, local landowner Mr A. R. Downes, and another local, a Mr Parker. Between 8 and 11 May the members of the expedition endeavoured to re-locate the Ring of Stones. However, this part of the coast is dominated by dense scrub, mostly wattle, rocky limestone strewn ground and steep sand ridges (Burt 1931; Loxton 1931). Burt commented that in places the scrub was so impenetrable that "even a bullock could not penetrate it" (Burt 1931: 2). The expedition failed. Questions were raised about the accuracy of Burt's recall (Loxton 1931:1-2). But in the end it was decided to make

another attempt after firing the area to make movement and searching easier. And so in late February 1932 another search was launched.

The 1932 expedition was again led by Constable Loxton and included Downes but not Burt. It had been arranged for local Aboriginal people, the Juat, to fire the country prior to the commencement of the expedition. Some of these people were also recruited to guide the expedition and to fire parts of the country missed by the earlier fires. For almost a week the party trekked up and down the coast and through the bush, again with no result (Loxton 1932). Loxton noted that the "Sand Drift Hills" as he called the dunes, "increase in size so quickly I would think it quite possible that the Spot may have been covered up years ago" (Loxton 1932:2).

No further action appears to have been taken by the police following the second expedition but in July 1932 a farmer from Three Springs, Fred King, wrote to Constable Loxton informing him of a line of stones which were "placed in a straight line running east and West for about one mile at spaces about 150 yards apart pointing to a large Sandhill on the Coast and about Woodada Well on the East end about 3 miles from the sea." King noted that, "At present these stones are hidden by thick scrub" (King 1932). Although King's letter was mentioned in a newspaper report on the searches for the *Vergulde Draeck*'s treasure the following year (Anon. 1933), nothing eventuated and it was simply placed on file.

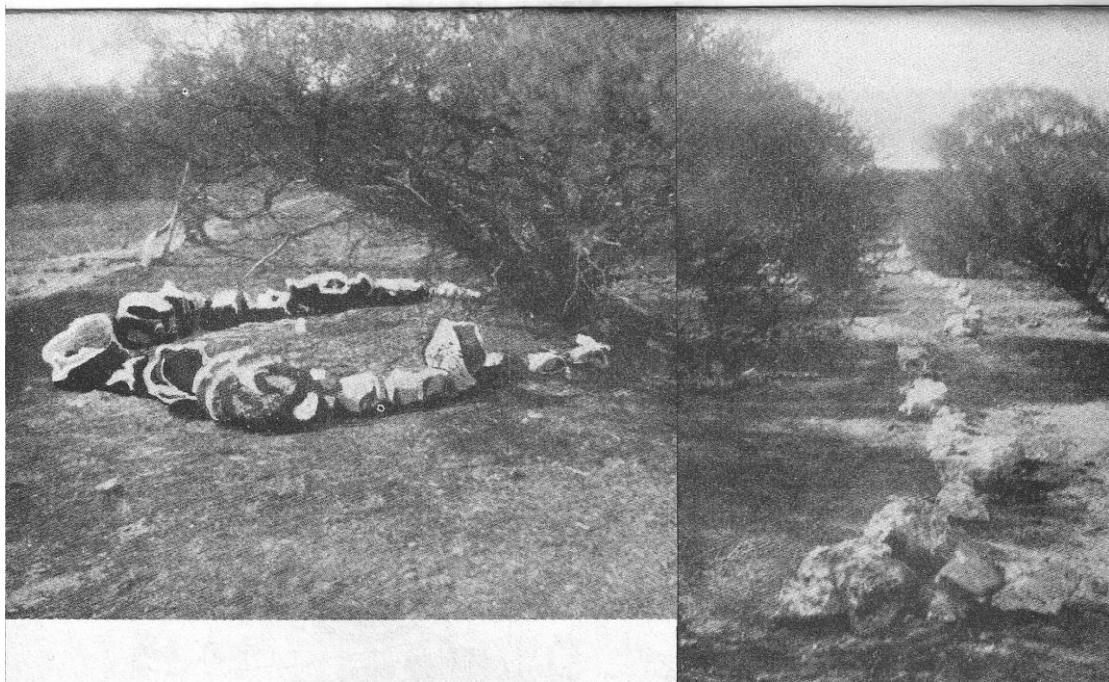
In March 1933 Constable Loxton filed another report indicating a Mr Stokes, at that time ill in hospital, claimed he had been with Burt and Ogbourne when they found the Ring of Stones in 1875 (Loxton 1933). These matters rested until a well-known bushman J. E. Hammond, a friend of Alfred Burt's, decided that he would endeavour to find the Ring of Stones. It appears that some time in 1937 Hammond spent a fortnight searching, burning "several hundred acres of scrub" in the process, without success, concluding that the Ring had been covered by drifting sand (Uren 1940:39-40).

Speculation about the treasure from the *Vergulde Draeck* then re-intensified in March 1938 when more old coins were found by children from the Baramba Assisted School, in the same locality as the Edwards find (Anon 1938; Flowers 2001). Then, finally in December 1938 it seems the Ring of Stones was re-located by Jack Hayes and Gabriel Penney.

It appears Penney, a brumby hunter, had come across a stone arrangement around 1931 but did not investigate (Anon. 1939; Uren 1940:41). But then in December 1938 he told Hayes, licensee of the Dongara Hotel, of it and the two men set out to relocate the site. They drove in a utility to within about nine miles [14.4 km] of the circle and then made their way on foot. They were "considerably hampered by the thorny bush," but Penney led Hayes to the exact spot. As they described it:

*"There were three groups of stones in a cleared area ... One was in the form of a ring and the other two were rectangular in shape, situated on each side of the circle. One of the rectangular areas had a base line of about 22 yards in length with sides about three feet long."*

Photos were taken, unfortunately of poor quality, which show the Ring and part of one the projecting lines of stones.



**Figure 1: The Ring of Stones**  
(Uren 1940:opp. p30.)

According to Hayes, the “whole formation was arranged in such a manner as to act as a pointer” (Anon 1939). The Ring was located “at least two miles from the coast” (Uren 1940:42), but no more specific locational information was provided. Of course they duly dug for the treasure, and all they found was limestone bedrock “under not more than two inches of sand, with occasional potholes about six to nine inches deep” (Uren 1940:42). And so there the treasure hunt ceased.

In *And Their Ghosts May Be Heard* (1994:237-43) I speculated that perhaps the Ring of Stones had been constructed by the lost sailors from the *Vergulde Draeck*, to indicate to any would-be searchers that they were heading inland, in a north east direction as indicated by the longer arm of the projecting line of stones. Other possible explanations for the Ring of Stones, such as it being an Aboriginal stone arrangement or a stock route marker, were considered but neither appeared to be viable alternatives. The oldest stock route ran through better watered country about 15 km inland. Aboriginal stone arrangements in southern WA are rare. None appear to be of the form described by Hayes, and they are not usually sited in such inhospitable and out-of-the-way places. But neither of these possibilities should be dismissed. The only way to be certain was to re-locate the Ring of Stones and carry out a more thorough investigation.

### **Searching For the Ring of Stones**

Information in the public domain regarding the location of the Ring of Stones is scant. All that was known was that Burt and Ogbourne had seen the Ring of Stones near the coast when travelling from Woodada Well to the coast. The information supplied by Hayes in this regard was also extremely limited. He and Penney had journeyed an indeterminate distance south of Dongara to the Ring of Stones, which Hayes reported was “at least two miles from the coast” (Uren 1940:42) or “about two miles inland” (Anon. 1939). In trying

to identify the likely location of the Ring of Stones it was assumed that Burt had proceeded directly west toward the coast from Woodada Well in 1875. Based on this supposition I concluded the Ring of Stones should be about 3.2 km inland on the same latitude as Woodada Well.

In April 2004, in company with my collaborator Bob Sheppard and others, using a 4 wheel-drive vehicle, we set out to search this locality. The result was disastrous. Within a couple of hours every tyre, including the spares, had been staked. We were forced to withdraw, barely making out of the area and limping back to the town of Leeman to find a garage. This inhospitable country had defeated us as it had others in the 1930s.

In 2008 I decided I would make another attempt to find this elusive Ring of Stones. By this time new tools, such as Google Earth had become available. Google Earth is better in most instances than any of the aerial photography resources that are publically available, is far more flexible, has almost universal coverage, and is very easy to access. And so, remote searching using Google Earth was undertaken, concentrating on the area between Woodada Well and the coast, particularly the locality 3.2 km inland. A Google Earth image of the area in question is shown below in Figure 2.

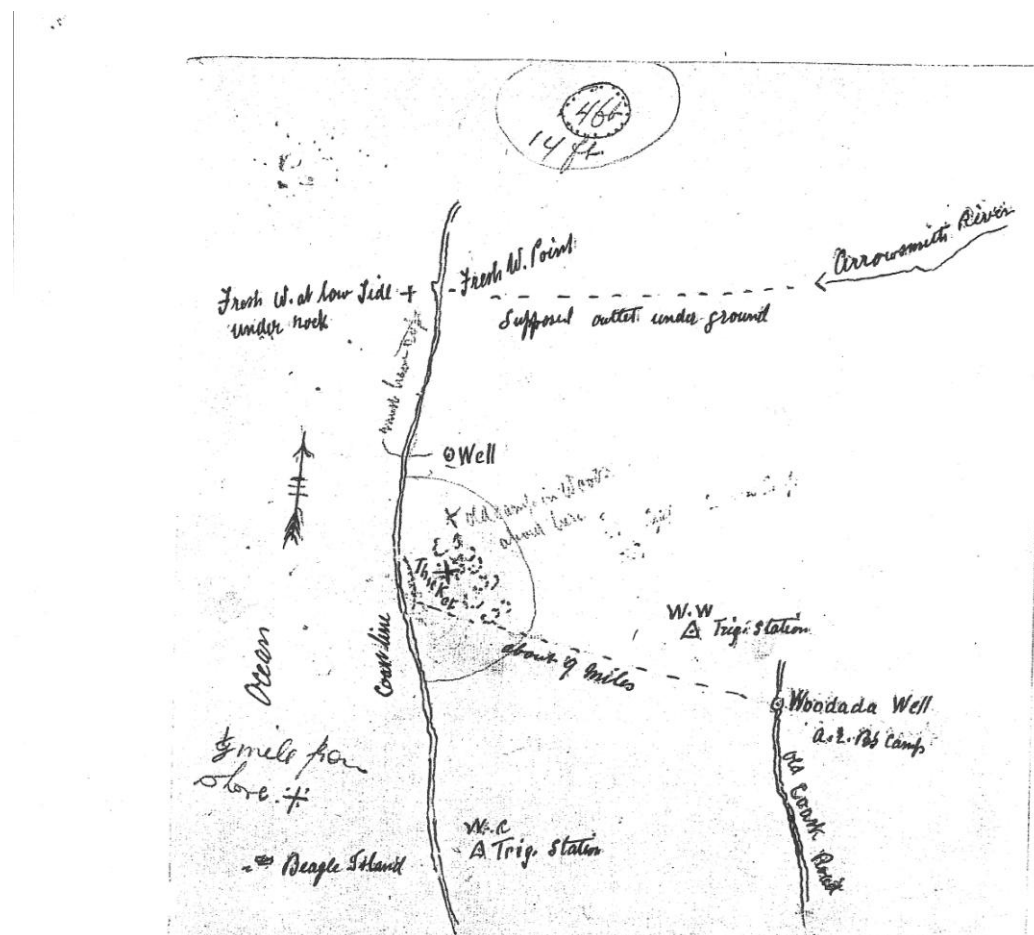


**Figure 2: Google Earth Image Where Ring of Stones Thought To Be**  
(Google Earth™ mapping services)

Unfortunately this search was not successful, and highlighted the limitations of public domain satellite imagery. The resolution of the Google Earth images from this region were not sufficient to reveal anything on the scale of the Ring of Stones. Google Earth appears to employ its highest resolution in built up areas and areas of economic significance. This is not the case in the region of the Ring of Stones, the area is almost uninhabited and has little economic value. But even if the resolution had been comparable, the density of vegetation and the lack of contrast between the Ring of Stones and the rocks and soils in the area probably would have made detection extremely difficult.

Finally I decided that the most viable method of re-locating the Ring of Stones was to carry out an intensive search on foot. Preparations were duly made with the intention of carrying out an initial two day search in late October 2008.

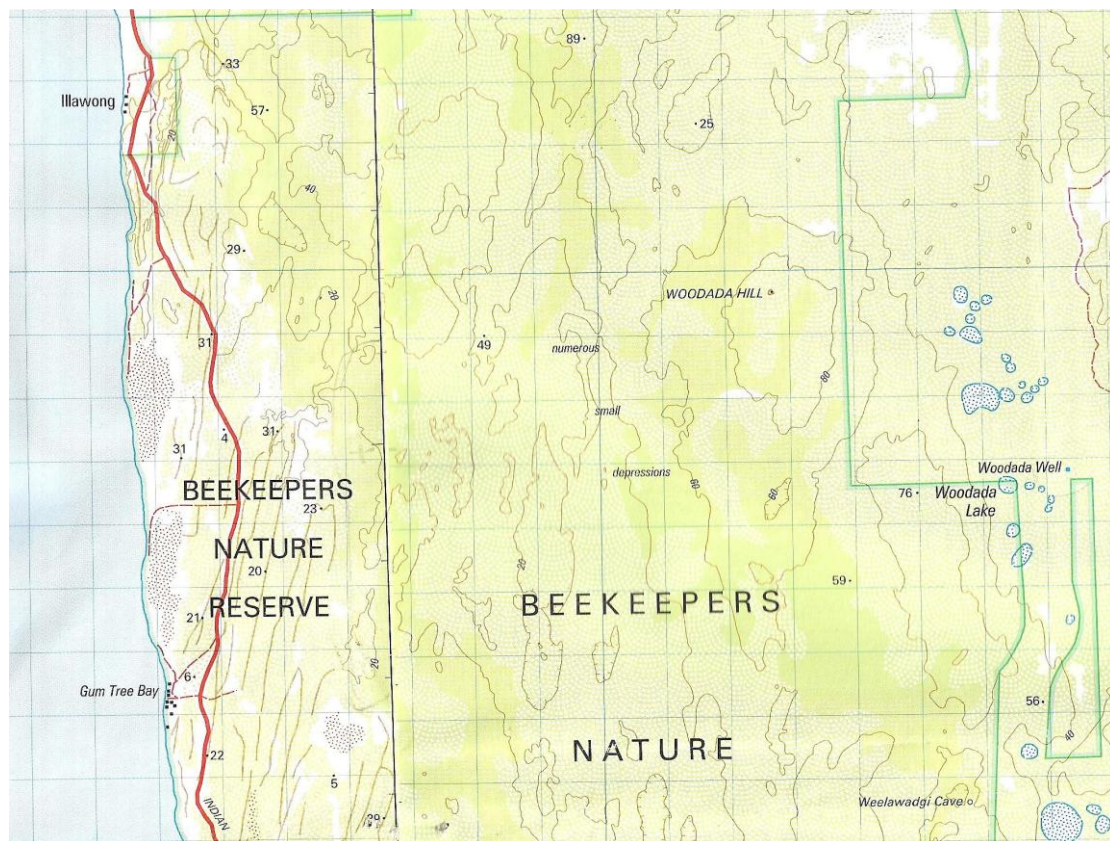
Only a matter of days before I was due to commence my search my collaborator Bob Sheppard contacted me. Bob informed me that a Native Title researcher in the WA Department of Indigenous Affairs had come across all the original documentation from the 1930's in WA Police Archives, including Burt's original letter to the Commissioner of Police, Burt's diary from the first expedition and Constable Loxton's reports. More importantly, in the file was a mudmap Burt's had drawn up to accompany his 1930 letter. The researcher had provided copies of all the documentation and Bob immediately emailed a copy of Burt's mudmap to me.



**Figure 3: Burt's Mudmap 1930**

Burt's mudmap dramatically altered the nature of the search. On it he had indicated that the Ring of Stones was "1/2 mile from shore", with a mark to indicate the approximate location of the Ring of Stones. Furthermore, it indicated that he had proceeded west north west from Woodada Well in 1875, not directly west as had been assumed. Another feature on his map was a squiggly arc near the coast which I took to indicate a dune field in that area. The search area had shifted and narrowed. On a modern map, this was the area where the Ring of Stones should be.





**Figure 4: Ring of Stones Search Area**

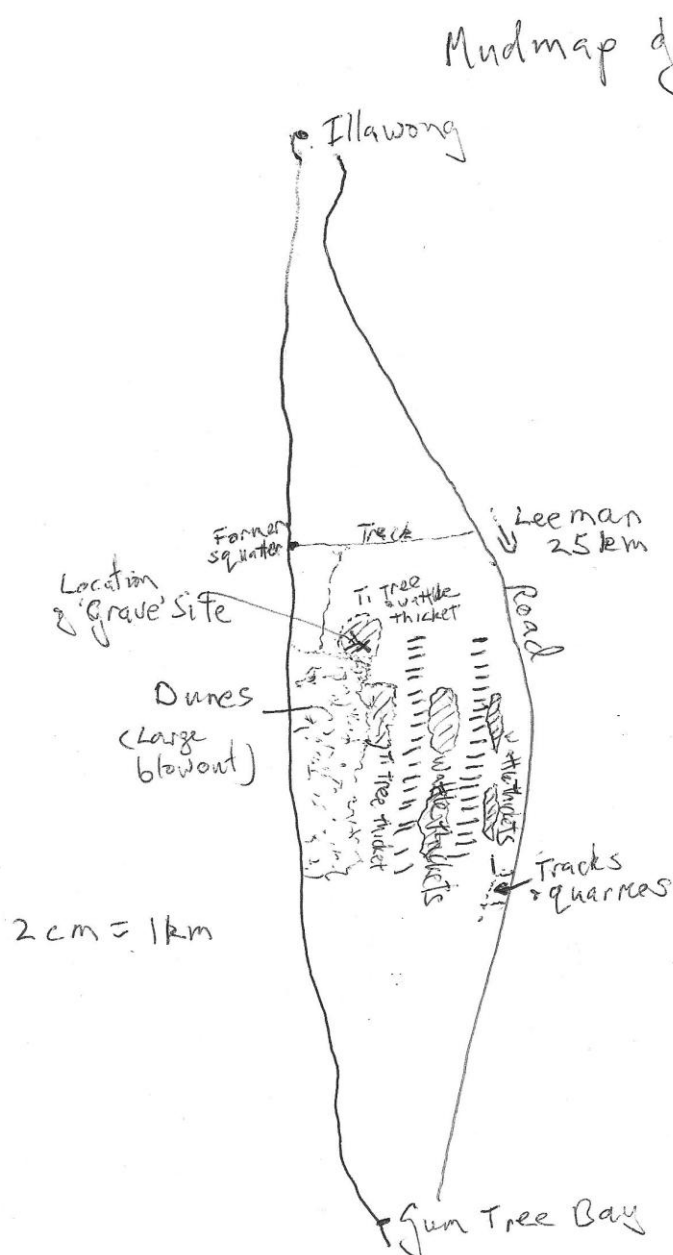
And so on Tuesday 28<sup>th</sup> October I commenced to search for the Ring of Stones, using Burt's mudmap as my guide. Fortunately, there are tracks leading to the coast these days, making my initial entry into the area relatively easy. I began the search in the vicinity of the northern dunefield, climbing the highest dune to survey the surrounds. The wattle and ti tree thickets are patchy these days and can be scouted around but climbing up and down scrubby rocky ridges, and surveying ground that is covered in limestone rocks in most places was not easy. However, late in the day I made my way into thicket just on the north eastern edge of the northern dunefield. In a cleared area I observed something rather unexpected. It was what appeared to be a grave.



**Figure 5: The Grave**

The grave was about 2.1 m long, 1.0 m wide and 20 cm high. It had rocks on the top, many with areas of lichen on them indicating they had been in position for an extended period of time. I closely examined the site, took photos and a GPS reading and left. The next day I conducted a search along the course Burt indicated he had followed in 1875. By this means I returned to the grave site. Again I took photos, another GPS reading and swept the grave and area around it with a metal detector I had brought with me, obtaining numerous readings of a variety of metals. These spots were marked with sticks. After departing and returning to my accommodation in Leeman I drew my own mudmap.





**Figure 6: My Mudmap of The 'Grave' Site**

The following day I returned to Canberra, speaking briefly with my collaborator Bob Sheppard as I passed through Perth, informing him of my discovery. Upon my return to Canberra I sent photos, the mudmap and the GPS coordinates to Bob, who undertook to visit the site as soon as he was able. I also made contact with a colleague at the Western Australian Maritime Museum, providing the same information and indicating that Bob would visit the site to confirm my observations. Bob was able to visit the site the following Monday, 3 November. He located the site without any difficulty. Being an expert in archaeological metal detecting he swept the site but found nothing of interest. It

is likely, due to my inexperience, I had set the sensitivity on my detector too high and had simply been picking up trace elements. Bob did, however, concur with my opinion that the mound did indeed appear to be a grave (Bob Sheppard - Personal Communication, 3 November 2008). We then informed the Western Australian Museum of Bob's confirmation.

The Western Australian Museum, after consideration, formally advised us that as it appeared to be a grave, we should inform the police, as this was a potential crime scene (Ross Anderson - Personal Communication, 4 November 2008). We were advised that given the circumstances it was possible the police would need to take an archaeologist and anthropologist when they investigated the site. I duly contacted Inspector Davis of the WA Police and subsequently provided him with all the relevant information. The WA Department of Indigenous Affairs was also informed and provided with all relevant information on the basis that the grave could possibly be an Aboriginal burial. Inspector Davis subsequently informed me that the matter had been passed on to the Major Crime Squad (Inspector Trevor Davis - Personal Communication, 7 November 2008).

On 3 February 2009 I contacted Acting Inspector Kevin Bradshaw of the Major Crime Squad. He informed me that police officers had been to the site, had investigated the grave and found it to be a pile of rocks, with a large limestone slab or boulder at the bottom of the pile. He also pointed out that the police officers who had visited the site had noted that it was in a cleared area within a thicket (Acting Inspector Kevin Bradshaw – Personal Communication, 3 February 2009).

As one can imagine, this was a rather unexpected turn of events. But two important observations have arisen from our endeavours to locate the Ring of Stones. The first is that the pile of rocks was in a cleared area of about the same dimensions as the clearing in which Burt had indicated the Ring of Stones lay. It is also in the same area where Burt had reported the Ring of Stones to be. We now suspect that the pile of rocks may in fact be the remnants of the Ring of Stones, perhaps destroyed by some misguided treasure seeker at some time in the past. We will be revisiting the site to investigate it further.

Perhaps a more significant conclusion arising from this phase of the search for the Ring of Stones is that there were in fact two Rings of Stones. It is now apparent to us that Burt's Ring of Stones is different from the stone arrangement found by Hayes and Penney. The locations in terms of distance from the coast are different, half a mile in the case of Burt's Ring, two miles for Hayes and Penney's stone arrangement. The dimensions of the Rings are different in both cases, four feet across for Burt's Ring as shown on the mudmap, as opposed to eight feet for the Hayes/Penney Ring (Uren 1940:42). And the Hayes/Penney Ring of Stones is a far more complex stone arrangement than a circle of stones. Consequently we believe the Hayes/Penney stone arrangement has yet to be found and could potentially be a far more revealing when re-discovered. And so, the search for the Ring of Stones will go on.

### **Acknowledgements**

I would like to heartily thank Bob Sheppard, Dr Mike McCarthy and Ross Anderson of the Western Australian Museum, Inspector Trevor Davis and Acting Inspector Kevin Bradshaw of the WA Police, Dr Martin Woods, Curator of Maps, and the Map Collection staff at National Library of Australia, Ron Gerritsen and Dr Janet Barry for their kind assistance in this research.

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