

AUSTRALIAN SEALERS IN THE SOUTH SHETLANDS - 1820-22

Michael Pearson

The paper addresses a little-known episode in the history of Australian sealing, which stresses the global nature of the sealing enterprise. The South Shetland Islands were the last major fur sealing grounds exploited, being discovered in 1819 and immediately attracting a rush by British and American sealers. The late discovery of the South Shetlands was due to their southerly location at 62°, approximately 100 km off the Antarctic Peninsula, and some 900 km south of Cape Horn.

The first confirmed sighting of the South Shetland Islands (referred to by him as the 'New South Shetlands') was made by William Smith on 19 February 1819, and confirmed by Royal Navy Master Edward Bransfield later that year. News of Smith's South Shetlands was soon the subject of speculation in the ports of Valparaiso and Buenos Aires, and quickly reached New England and British ports. Even before Smith's discovery was officially confirmed, sealing captains based in Buenos Aires were in search of the new islands, quickly followed by those from Britain and the United States.

It is generally accepted that three ships visited the South Shetland Islands and took seals in the 1819-1820 summer. They were the *San Juan Nepomuceno* and the *Espirito Santo* out of Buenos Aires, and the *Hersilia* from Stonington, Connecticut, and their crews were the first humans to live on land in the Antarctic for any length of time. The initial sealing rush to the South Shetlands was dramatic and devastating for the seal population. There were some 120 known vessel-visits to the islands in the 1819-20 to 1821-22 seasons, of which 65 were from Britain (of which four at least were part-owned or based in Chile or Argentina), 52 from the USA, and two, the brig *Lynx* of Sydney (Capt. Richard Siddins) and the ship *Caroline* of Hobart (Capt. Daniel Taylor) (and possibly two others) from Australia.

The initial sealing rush to the South Shetlands was dramatic and devastating for the seal population. There were some 140 vessel-visits to the islands in the 1820s, and a minimum of 300,000 seal skins were taken. The initial two seasons saw a record-breaking spike in fur seal skin imports into Britain, and the South Shetlands ranks among the highest producing fur seal grounds together with Mas Afuera and South Georgia. By 1823, however, the seal numbers had been so diminished that the South Shetlands were no longer profitable. The economically unsuccessful voyages of the Australian vessels the *Lynx* and the *Caroline* reflect that rapid crash in seal numbers.

The involvement of the Australian sealers reflects the growth of the Australian sealing and whaling trades. American sealers were testing the seal resources of the southern Australian coast by the 1790s, and colonial merchants took advantage of the fur and elephant seal populations in Bass Strait and Kangaroo Island from 1798, elephant seals soon becoming extinct there, and fur sealing lingering on as a peripheral small-scale trade. The islands south of New Zealand and Australia were sealed from 1791 at the Snares and Chatham Island, culminating in the discovery and exploitation of Campbell and Macquarie Islands in 1810, in which Richard Siddins, Captain of the *Lynx*, took part.

Of the 39 men listed in the *Sydney Gazette* in September and October 1820 as potential crew of the *Lynx*, 19 had previous experience either sealing or servicing sealing operations in Australia. Of the 31 men listed in the press on October 21 and 28, just before the *Lynx* sailed for the South Shetlands, 15 had previous sealing or whaling experience in southern Australia, New Zealand or Macquarie Island, and

seven of the 'greenhands' went on sealing or whaling voyages after the *Lynx's* return. The report of *Lynx's* return on 18 June 1822 lists a crew of 28 (plus the master?), so two or possibly three men either did not end up sailing, or left the ship or died during the voyage. Of the 13 crew of the *Caroline*, at least six had previous sealing experience. At least 19 of Siddins' *Lynx* crew from the South Shetland voyage went on to work in the sealing and whaling trades, one (George Grimes) as a captain.

Richard Siddins (1770?-1846) arrived in Sydney in May 1804 aboard the whaler *Alexander*. Siddins became the master of a succession of Australian ships engaged in sealing, sandalwood gathering and general cargo voyages. This included being master of the *Mercury* gathering sandalwood from Fiji in 1809 and sealing for furs and oil in Bass Strait and Kangaroo Island in the *Endeavour* in 1810. From 1811 Siddins was the master of the *Campbell Macquarie*, servicing the sealers on Macquarie Island for the Underwood company when the ship was wrecked ashore on 10 June 1812. Siddins returned to Sydney in the *Perseverance* in October, and went back to Macquarie Island in the *Elizabeth and Mary* to pick up the abandoned sealing crew and gear salvaged from the wreck of the *Campbell Macquarie*. Siddins continued sealing voyages to Macquarie Island in a replacement brig also called *Campbell Macquarie* into 1813, before a series of voyages gathering sandalwood, trading to Calcutta, and south sea whaling. Captain Siddins was master and part-owner of the brig *Lynx* (189 tons) from 1818 to 1823 (the other partner being the Sydney merchant firm of Jones and Riley).

The paper looks at how Siddins came to know of the sealing in South Shetland, his experiences when there, and how his crew lived ashore. The *Lynx* gathered 4,300 seal skins, mainly wigs (males), before retiring in March 1821 to the Falkland Islands (1,100 km to the north) for a safer winter. There she took refuge at West Point Harbour in the West Falklands, in close proximity to the American sealer Captain Davis in the *Huron*, with whom Siddins came to an arrangement to join forces for the 1821-22 season in the South Shetlands, and share the use of the *Huron's* shallop (the *Cecilia*). This arrangement turned out to be unprofitable, as the agreed share in the skins was very much in the *Huron's* favour, two-thirds going to that ship. The depleted seal stocks meant that only 700 more skins were added to the *Lynx's* cargo, so much time was spent rendering elephant seals 40 tons of oil before returning to the Falklands in February 1822 to refresh before heading home, reaching Sydney in June 1822.

The paper also looks briefly at the much more poorly documented voyage of the *Caroline*, and the two possible South Shetland voyages of Captain William Wiseman in an unnamed ship, and of Jonathan Griffiths in the *Glory*, both from the Hawkesbury River in NSW.