

# VICTORIA'S HERITAGE

## SEALERS COVE – SEALED AND DELIVERED

By Mary Ryllis Clark, circa 1996

*When night recedes and day begins, time seems suspended at Sealers Cove. It is neither silent nor still. The occasional scream of a gull rises above the sound of small breakers collapsing on the sand. The wide expanse of slate-grey water streaked with silver moves constantly.*



Cream Wagon and Jinker at the Telegraph Hut, circa 1922. Photograph by Mrs William Astbury, courtesy of DSE.

To be at Sealers Cove at nightfall means camping overnight. This involves a three-hour walk along a narrow and at times difficult track from the Mount Oberon car park through thick forest of ferns, trees and scrub, mountain streams and granite boulders. Apart from a couple of glimpses of forest and distant sea, the only view is from Windy Saddle. Reaching Sealers Cove is a revelation.

When George Bass sailed into the cove on his epic voyage of discovery from Sydney to Westernport Bay in 1798, he was less moved by the beauty of the scene than by its commercial potential. "The aspect of the country is agreeable only at a distance," he wrote. Having noted the thousands of fur seals in the vicinity, he added, "from the use it may be of to anyone coming here to seal . . . there is plenty of fresh water and wood enough at hand to boil down any quantity of blubber."

Bass named the spot Sealers Cove and sealing was soon underway. Historian Patrick Morgan calls the men who descended on the

coves of Wilsons Promontory and the islands of Bass Strait "a motley group of vagabond freebooters" who lived a rough, Robinson Crusoe-like existence, often in the company of Aboriginal women whom they had kidnapped. They wore kangaroo and seal skins and survived on local wildlife, by growing a few vegetables and on basic supplies dropped from passing ships. Occasionally, the sealers were joined by convicts escaping from Van Diemens Land.

Sealing was a lucrative business. The oil fetched 40 a ton and the skins up to 14 shillings each. According to the Sydney Gazette of July 1804, in 18 months, one ship alone had collected 28,282 skins and 266 gallons of oil from the 63 men working in the straits. By the 1840s, the great sea elephants had disappeared entirely from Bass Strait and Australian fur seals had dropped to about 100. No one knows how many there were before sealing began but numbers have now risen to about 18,000.

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The hut that was at Sealer's Cove in 1942. Courtesy of DSE.

During the 1830s, as seal numbers dropped, whaling stations were also set up at Sealers Cove and nearby Refuge Cove. But the work was harder and competition from deep-sea whaling ships led to their demise.

By the middle of the century, Sealers Cove was being exploited for yet another resource - timber. By 1854, a timber mill was operating with a small community of 53 men and eight women. Today keen eyes can detect the remnants of a timber tramline built through the coastal scrub into the dense forest behind the beach and the outline of primitive saw pits.

Apart from Ferdinand von Mueller's expeditions to the east of the Prom, including Sealers Cove, in 1853 and again in 1874, few people had appreciated the natural significance of the area until the Field Naturalists Club was formed in 1880. On a walking tour from Traralgon to the Wilsons Promontory lighthouse in 1884, three members, C. Robinson, A. Lucas and J. Gregory, prophesied that "practically inaccessible as it is at present, we believe that the future yet awaits it as a summer haunt of lovers of nature, lovers of scenery". Gregory called it the Cornwall of Victoria.

The mere suggestion of carving up Wilsons Promontory for settlement so appalled the influential members of the newly founded Field Naturalists Club in the early 1880s, they called for its preservation as a national park.

After several years of serious lobbying by naturalists, 60,000 acres was set aside for a national park in 1898. But Sealers Cove was excluded because of renewed timber milling from 1903 until 1906 when the timber settlement was destroyed in a bush fire.

In 1908, the whole of Wilsons Promontory was protected by legislation, again mainly thanks to the efforts of the Field Naturalists. Their studies of the flora, fauna, geology, shells and archaeology carried out from 1904 to 1905 laid the foundation for an understanding of the values of the park.



Picnic at the Prom around the turn of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Courtesy of DSE.

The Field Naturalists Club continues to carry out extensive research in the park it helped to establish more than 100 years ago.