

NAME: 'Fishermen's Caves', Lot 10, The Esplanade, PORT WILLUNGA

CURRENT USE: Excavated caves
FORMER USE: Excavated caves
DATE(S) OF CONSTRUCTION: Post-1915 (exact date(s) unconfirmed)

LOCATION: Lot 10, The Esplanade, PORT WILLUNGA
LAND DESCRIPTION: CT 6238/817, Hundred of Willunga

OWNER: City of Onkaparinga

RECOMMENDATION: Local Heritage Place



Seven Fishermen's Caves and Lookout at Lot 10, The Esplanade, Port Willunga (GGA, 2022)

NAME: 'Fishermen's Caves', Lot 10, The Esplanade, PORT WILLUNGA

DESCRIPTION:

Seven man-made caves associated with 20th century commercial and recreational fishing at Port Willunga following the 1915 destruction of the Port Willunga jetty, most likely constructed by members of the How family. Excavated caves of various depths and heights with excavated shelving and storage areas. Various elements of surviving timber and masonry fabric related to former usage.

It is recommended that the Fishermen's Caves, Port Willunga be included on the South Australian Heritage Register as a Local Heritage place.

A delineation of significant historic fabric is provided in the Extent of Listing.

STATEMENT OF HERITAGE SIGNIFICANCE:

The Fishermen's Caves at Lot 10, The Esplanade, Port Willunga are of significance for their association with the development of commercial and recreational fishing in Port Willunga from the early 20th century. Excavated to house boats and fishing gear, the Caves are strongly associated with the How family, prominent local fishermen who were likely responsible for the Caves' excavation. The Caves today remain a significant local landmark and tourism drawcard within the Port Willunga landscape.

RELEVANT CRITERIA (As defined in Section 67(1) of the PDI Act 2016):

- a) it displays historical, economic or social themes that are of importance to the local area; being excavated caves associated with commercial and recreational fishing activities at Port Willunga in the 20th century, primarily associated with the How family. The Caves are among the only surviving examples that relate to Port Willunga's commercial fishing history in the 20th century, now comprising an important tourism element for the district.
- b) it represents customs or ways of life that are characteristic of the local area; the Caves being constructed from the early 20th century for the purposes of storing boats and fishing gear for local fishermen, namely the How family. The Caves now remain as one of few surviving elements that document Port Willunga's commercial fishing history in the 20th century.
- c) it has played an important role in the lives of local residents; being the surviving remnants of Port Willunga's commercial fishing history in the 20th century, the Caves providing storage for fishing craft and gear.
- e) it is associated with a notable local personality or event; the Caves likely being constructed by members of the How family, prominent fishermen within the Port Willunga community.
- (f) it is a notable landmark for the area; the Caves now being a highly notable landmark and tourism drawcard within the Port Willunga landscape.

RELEVANT HISTORIC THEMES:**Theme 5: Food Production in the Southern Vales**

5.6 Commercial fishing

Theme 10: Sports, Leisure and Holiday-Making10.3 Recreational fishing

BRIEF HISTORICAL BACKGROUND:

The heritage significance of the Fishermen's Caves, Lot 10, The Esplanade, Port Willunga were first assessed within the 1985 Heritage Survey of the Fleurieu Peninsula (D. C. Willunga). The caves were assessed as a component of a larger Port Willunga Jetty complex, identified as including "...the ruins (pylons) of the Port Willunga Jetty, the remains of the cobblestone ramp, which was once the access road to the jetty, and the four dugouts – excavated by hand, and later explosives – which housed local fishermen's vessels." The 1985 Survey identified that the dugouts (then identified as four instead of seven) were excavated after the First World War, initially by hand and later with explosives and were used to house fishermen's vessels and fishing gear. The 1985 Survey also identified the site as a current tourist landmark of note and an unusual example of South Australian infrastructure changing the landscape.

The Jetty Complex was again assessed in 1997 as part of the 1997 Willunga District Heritage Survey. Also identifying the caves as a component of a larger complex, the 1997 Survey provided brief historical context, possibly based on the findings of the 1985 Survey, identifying the site as being of Local Heritage significance. The provided Extent of Listing recommended that "All elements of the complex should be retained as long as is practical and possible."

While very little information relating to the history of the Fishermen's Caves have been identified, available information largely supports and contextualises historical findings. The caves were most likely excavated for storage of fishing equipment following the destruction of the Port Willunga Jetty and embankment in 1915; the ongoing degradation of the Jetty and embankment in the years following likely lead to the need for new storage facilities away from these decaying elements. Photography dating to c.1920 shows extensive jetty and embankment infrastructure still in place at that time with the largest northern-most cave then excavated (see Historical Images). It is presumed the southern caves were excavated following the demolition of the embankment with direct access to the beach in the years following. A fishermen's lookout was formerly located to the clifftops above the Port Willunga jetty ramp.

The caves and lookout have been primarily associated with the activities of Port Willunga's How family, notable fishermen for the district. Three generations of the How family have been historically associated with Port Willunga fishing activities in the 20th century; it is understood the How family are likely responsible for excavating the caves for their fishing equipment, though this remains unverified. Identified members of the How family in the Willunga district include Henry William How (1852-1904), described as "...one of the oldest residents of Port Willunga". Descriptions of the How family fishing activities in the mid-20th century have identified a Stan and Bill How, both among the eleven children of H. W. How. Members of an attributed third generation of How family fishermen have not been identified.

A 1926 newspaper article describes the activities of a fishing family at Port Willunga, now attributed as the sons of Henry William How and likely including Stan and Bill How. This description is provided as follows:

Practically all the fishing at Port Willunga is carried on by three brothers, two of whom are on duty on the beach, while the third watches for schools of fish from a look-out on the top

of the cliff about 70 ft. above sea level. As soon as fish are sighted, the man on the cliff signals energetically to his brothers indicating the position of the fish, and the boat (a heavy one) is pushed out until it is just floating. While one man holds the boat, the other runs back and wheels the hand cart carrying the nets out to the boat, and, together they lift the nets on to the stern.

They row off with swift, powerful strokes, all the while watching the signal man as to the direction the fish are taking. One day I saw them get a school of yellow tail quite close in shore. One man held one end of the net on the beach, while the second rowed round the fish and brought the other end of the net back to the beach. By this time the third man had run down from the cliff top, and together they pulled in the net containing about 40 of these big, powerful fish. There was a tremendous splashing and flapping in the shallow water until one man ended the struggles by cutting the gills of the fish. (Port Willunga Professionals, Saturday Journal, Sat 21 Aug 1925, p.5).

The above description provides detail of what gear was stored in the Port Willunga caves in the early 20th century, including heavy timber boats, fishing nets and a hand cart used for net transportation amongst other items. While the largest, northern-most cave is documented by c.1920, it is unclear when the other caves were excavated. The 1985 description of four caves rather than seven may relate to the number that existed at that time. The original lookout, shown in historical photography (see Historical Images) is understood to have been located on the site of the upper Port Willunga beach carpark though the structure has now been demolished.

While no longer used for commercial fishing purposes, the Fishermen's Caves at Port Willunga comprise a significant heritage feature of the former Port Willunga Jetty site and a major tourism drawcard for the district, in addition to the Port Willunga Jetty ruins.

EXTENT OF LISTING:

The form and materials of all fabric associated with the seven Fishermen's Caves, including current excavated stone, surviving masonry and timber infrastructural fabric and all other early elements that remain to the site.

As noted in the 1997 Survey, all surviving elements relating to the Fishermen's Caves should be retained as long as is practical and possible.

It is recommended that an inspection schedule should be established to determine current condition and longevity of all fabric associated with the Fishermen's Caves.

It is recommended that the City of Onkaparinga should instate appropriate signage near the Fishermen's Caves to allow for an informed understanding of the site's history and surviving fabric. Sign installation should not however inhibit the site's attractive setting.

REFERENCES:

Department of Environment and Planning, Heritage Survey of the Fleurieu Peninsula, District Council of Willunga, Item Ref. No. 142.

McDougall & Vines, 1997, Willunga District Heritage Survey, p. 186.

Aldinga, Chronicle, Sat 18 Jun 1904, p.12.

Port Willunga Professionals, Saturday Journal, Sat 21 Aug 1925, p.5).

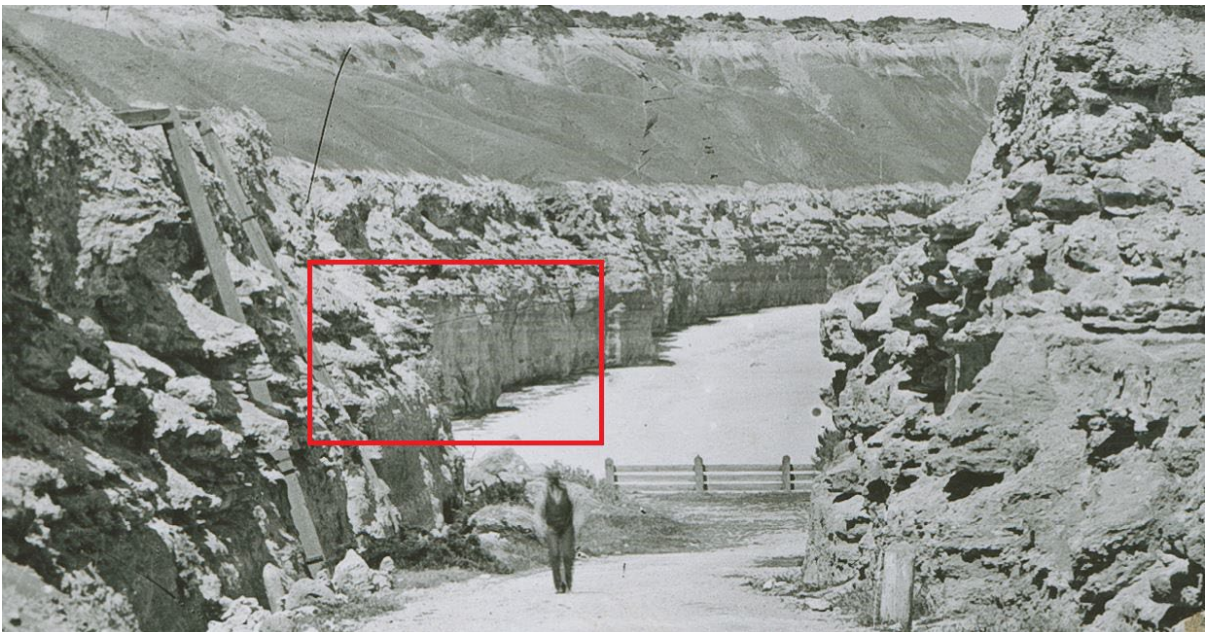
<https://www.geni.com/people/Henry-How/6000000027292702795>, accessed 15/3/2022.

SITE MAPPING:



Site of Port Willunga Fishermen's Caves; Lot 10, The Esplanade, Port Willunga shown within blue hatch and dotted outline, site of Fishermen's Caves within red rectangle. (Planning SA SAPPa)

HISTORICAL IMAGES:



Site of Fishermen's Caves, Port Willunga, photographed in c.1910 (SLSA, B 13320)



C.1920s photograph of Port Willunga Jetty site (SLSA image description erroneously describes a date of c.1910); northern-most cave shown in red square; How family lookout shown at cliff top (SLSA, B 16429).



C.1920 photograph of a Butterfish catch on the Port Willunga Jetty; two fishermen likely members of the How family (SLSA, B 24150)



c.1935 of the bay at Port Willunga, Stan How shown in foreground (SLSA, B 55417/247)



c.1945 photograph of the How family lookout, Port Willunga, now demolished (SLSA, B 16429)

OTHER IMAGES:



Seven Fishermen's Caves, Port Willunga (GGA, 2022)



Excavated shelving and timber bracing to interior of one of the seven caves (GGA, 2022)



Excavated fabric, including shelving and concrete fabric to rear of cave (GGA, 2022)



Relatively shallow cave to the south, with excavated shelving (GGA, 2022)