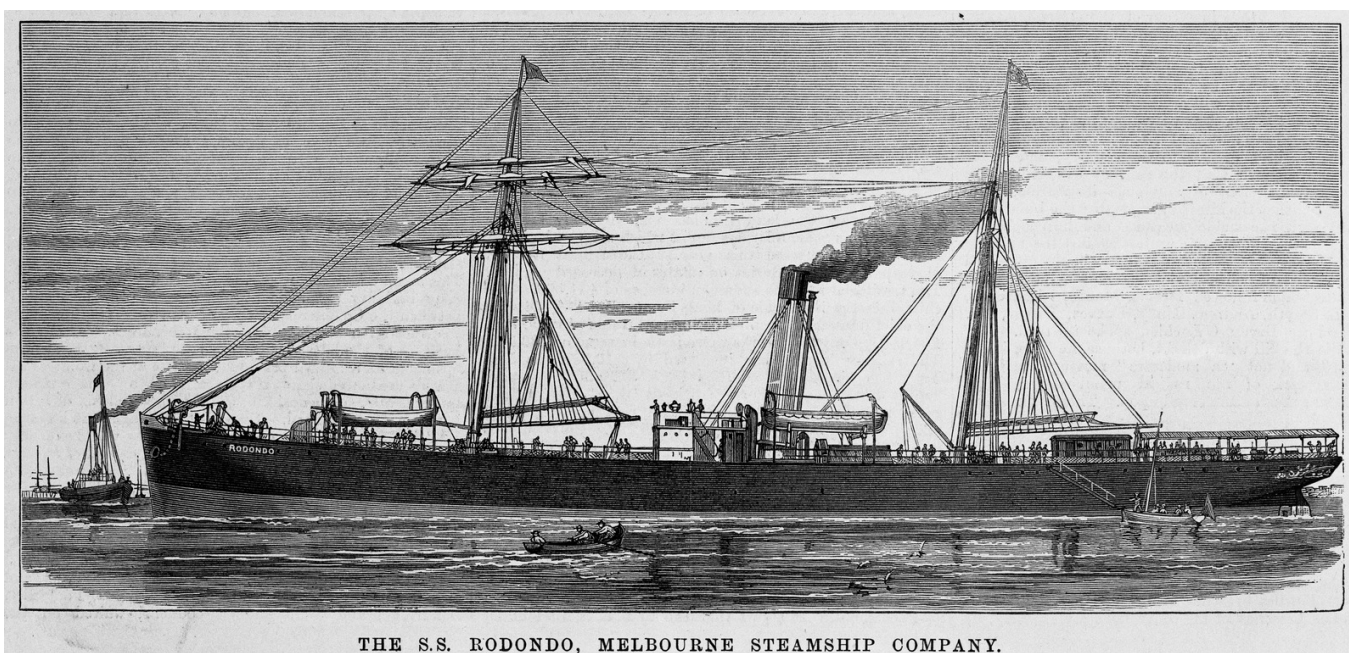


**Historical background, search and discovery of the inter-colonial  
steamship**

***SS Rodondo (1878-1894)***

**Archipelago of the Recherche, Western Australia**



**Report No. 361 – Western Australian Museum, Department of Maritime Heritage**

**Deb Shefi and Ross Anderson**

**July 2025**



**WESTERN  
AUSTRALIAN  
MUSEUM**

Cover image: SS *Rodondo*, 1879, Melbourne Steamship Company. Artist: Alfred May and Alfred Martin Ebsworth, AS.020829.P68, State Library of Victoria.

## Acknowledgements

The 2024 search, discovery and site inspection of SS *Rodondo* was undertaken as part of the Disney+ six-part documentary series *Shipwrecks Hunters Australia* Season 2 in collaboration with Terra Australis Productions, VAM Media, and Barking Mad Productions.

Marc Payne provided local knowledge and dive supervision.

Bass Marine provided vessel support.

The aerial magnetometer survey was undertaken by Thomson Airborne.

Remote sensing support was provided by Alasdair Cooke, Maritime Discovery Group and Annie Boyd.

## Table of Contents

Acknowledgements	2
Technical Data	5
Expedition	5
Historical background	6
2024 Survey	10
Summary of activities	12
Remote Sensing	12
Inspection	15
Identification	16
Site significance	17
Historical	17
Archaeological	17
Recreational	18
Legal Protection and Management Considerations	18
Recommendations	18
References	18
Newspapers	19
Appendix A List of SS <i>Rodondo</i> 's cargo	20

## List of Figures

Figure 1 SS <i>Rodondo</i> ca.1894, Artist: Allan C. Green, H92.302.88, State Library of Victoria.	6
Figure 2 SS <i>Rodondo</i> in 1879. Artist: J. Sands lithographer. State Library of Victoria.	7
Figure 3 Sketch of SS <i>Rodondo</i> sinking by passenger Mr T.E. Edmunds. Note proximity to low-lying land, possibly Cooper Island (South Australian Chronicle, 20 October 1894:7).	9
Figure 4 Map of <i>Rodondo</i> sinking events and identified priority search area 6 - 6.5 nautical miles north of Salisbury Island (WA Museum, Google Earth).	10
Figure 5 Area and flight lines for aerial magnetometer survey August 2024 (Thomson Airborne, Google Earth).	11
Figure 6 Survey vessel <i>Adrianus</i> (WA Museum).	12

Figure 7 EdgeTech 4205 side scan sonar and Geometrics G-882 magnetometer (WA Museum).	13
Figure 8 Map showing magnetic data acquired during airborne magnetometer survey, with magnetic targets R1, R2, R3 and R4 (Alasdair Cooke, Maritime Discovery Group, Google Earth)	14
Figure 9 (left) EdgeTech 4205 image of Rodondo; (right) G-882 magnetometer reading (WA Museum).	14
Figure 10 Map of priority search Areas 1, 2 and 3 showing location of <i>Rodondo</i> ('Rodondo 4') lying within the Area 1 priority search area (WA Museum/ Google Earth).	15
Figure 11 BlueROV used to record site. Image on right shows Insta360 camera mounted for data capture (WA Museum).	16
Figure 12 (Top row) Collapsed hull structure protruding from the seafloor. (Middle left) Two (2) glass bottles exposed. (Middle right) Two (2) ceramic plates. (Bottom row) portholes resting on the seafloor, below the overhang of hull structure. Images courtesy of VAM Media and Terra Australia Productions.	16

## Abstract

The 1,119 tonne, schooner-rigged single-screw inter-colonial steamship *SS Rodondo* was one of Australia's finest coastal steamships. Between 1892 and 1893 the Western Australian gold rushes at Coolgardie and Kalgoorlie saw thousands of hopeful gold seekers from the east coast of Australia head west to seek their fortunes. Most travelled by sea, landing at Esperance, Albany or Fremantle, then walked inland several hundred kilometres to the goldfields.

East coast steamship companies hurriedly diverted their ships from their regular routes to steam to Western Australia to cater for the booming passenger and cargo trade. On its first voyage to Western Australia, on 5 October 1894, *SS Rodondo* struck Pollock Reef in the Archipelago of the Recherche, sinking in deep water with the loss of between four and eight lives.

The wreck was discovered on the 29<sup>th</sup> of November 2024, during a survey carried out as part of an expedition by a team of underwater cinematographers from the Disney+ documentary series *Shipwreck Hunters Australia* and maritime archaeologists from the Western Australian Museum.



## Technical Data

**Site name:** SS *Rodondo*

**Date lost:** 7<sup>th</sup> of October 1894

**Date of discovery:** 29<sup>th</sup> of November 2024

### Location

12 kilometres north of Salisbury Island, 2.5 km west of Cooper Island

**Lat:** 34°14.040' S

**Long:** 123°34.437'E

**Datum:** WGS84

**Depth of water:** 72 m

## Expedition

**Vessel:** MV *Adrianus* (UVI-449567), Power Monohull, Bass Marine, 23 metres, 50 tons

### Personnel:

Deb Shefi (WA Museum)

Johnny Debnam (Terra Australis Productions)

Ryan Chatfield (Terra Australis Productions)

Anouska Freedman (Terra Australis Productions)

Andre Rerekura (Terra Australis Productions)

Marc Payne (Shipwreck Hunters One Pty Ltd)

Brendan Hutchens (VAM Media)

Darren McCagh (VAM Media)

Rhys Jones (VAM Media)

Jason North (VAM Media)

### Discoverers:

#### Primary

Ryan Chatfield, Anouska Freedman, Johnny Debnam, Andrew Rerekura (Terra Australis Productions); Dr Deb Shefi, Dr Ross Anderson (WA Museum); Brendan Hutchens (VAM Media), Annie Boyd, Alasdair Cooke (Maritime Discovery Group), Mark Payne.

#### Secondary

Daemon Bass, Jane Stewart, Darren McCagh, Rhys Jones, Jason North.

## Historical background

The 73m, 1,119 tonne, schooner-rigged single-screw inter-colonial steamer SS *Rodondo* was built in Liverpool, England in 1878 with one deck, six bulkheads, three tiers of beams and an awning deck (Worsley and Green, 2015:244) (Figure 1). It was especially ordered and built for the William Howard Smith Company for the inter-colonial passenger and cargo service between Melbourne and Queensland and was “considered to be one of the finest vessels engaged in the service” (Gregory 1928:81).



Figure 1 SS Rodondo ca. 1894, Artist: Allan C. Green, H92.302.88, State Library of Victoria.

Between 1892 and 1893 news of major gold discoveries at Coolgardie and Kalgoorlie beckoned thousands of hopeful gold seekers from the east coast of Australia, where they had been living through a recession and unemployment. Regarding the sudden and massive influx of population to the Western Australian gold fields in 1894—the year of *Rodondo*’s sinking—historian Geoffrey Bolton (2008:62–63) writes:

In 1894 alone, 25,000 men decided to try their luck in the West, most of them from Victoria and South Australia. Although a few enterprising spirits came overland by

foot or bicycle, most travelled by sea, landing at Esperance, Albany or Fremantle, and tramping several hundred kilometres to the goldfields.

Steamship companies hurriedly diverted their ships from their regular east coast routes to steam to Western Australia to cater for the booming passenger and cargo trade. It was on *Rodondo's* first voyage to Western Australia, carrying a large complement of passengers bound for the Western Australian gold rushes at Kalgoorlie and Cue, that disaster struck.



Figure 2 SS Rodondo in 1879. Artist: J. Sands lithographer. State Library of Victoria.

On the 2<sup>nd</sup> of October 1894, after picking up passengers and cargo from Brisbane, Sydney and Melbourne, *Rodondo* left Adelaide under Captain Hill, heading west carrying approximately 35 crew and 164 passengers bound for the west coast of Australia (*The Argus*, 10 Oct 1894:5; *Brisbane Courier*, 10 Oct 1894, *Herald* 23 Oct 1894:4; Worsley and Green 2015:244)<sup>1</sup>. In addition to the crew, passengers and general cargo, the vessel carried a seven-tonne boiler and a winding and pumping engine for use in the Western Australian gold-mining industry, which were placed onboard as deck

<sup>1</sup> Historic accounts vary regarding exact numbers of those onboard. Numbers onboard range from 114 to 200 total, excluding stowaways.

cargo (*Brisbane Courier*, 10 Oct 1894:5, *The Argus*, 10 Oct 1894:5). Captain Hill was described as “...a bluff, straightforward, decent, careful, abstemious sort of captain, who had been 40 years at sea” (*The Argus* 25 Oct 1894:6).

Although Captain Hill was aware of an easterly variation in *Rodondo*’s compass, he told the Court of Marine Inquiry that he did not think the engine on the deck affected the compasses (*Herald* 23 Oct 1894:4). Captain Hill believed a strong current took the vessel 15 miles off course (*ibid*).

Due to the way the vessel was loaded, it was stern heavy, and therefore, *Rodondo* struck the reef amidships. Immediately panic ensued and some passengers and crew took to the boats to abandon ship; some lives were lost during the initial abandoning, but exact numbers are unknown as there were several stowaways onboard (*South Australian Register*, 16 Oct 1894:7). Various newspaper and secondary accounts describe at least four, and up to eight lives lost in the wrecking event. Although the ship was quickly taking on water, the engines and pumps were still working, and everyone was called back on board as they made way towards the mainland.

Shortly after they were underway, the steering gear stopped responding and they could not keep the water out of the hold; the ship was slowly sinking by the stern (*South Australian Register*, 16 Oct 1894:7). At first light it was noted that they were due south of South East Island<sup>2</sup> (*South Australian Chronicle*, 20 Oct 1894:7). As they approached the island, they saw a line of breakers, indicating a reef approximately 40 yards from shore (*South Australian Chronicle*, 20 Oct 1894:7). Captain Hill called for everyone to abandon ship and take to the boats, with a skeleton crew staying onboard to try and run *Rodondo* ashore on the shallow rocky reef fringing the island. Captain Hill and the Chief Engineer set the jib sail to help steer the vessel and ran the engines at full steam ahead, intending for *Rodondo* to strike and run upon Salisbury Island, allowing it to be salvaged at a later time. They then abandoned ship, jumping into the water to be picked up by the ship’s boat following them. Their plan was to no avail, as *Rodondo* is described as ‘jumping over a shallow reef’ and steaming off to the north at full speed—probably less than 8 knots given it was already in a sinking condition—where it either sank in deep water, or struck a shallow reef ([Figure 3](#)).

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<sup>2</sup> Charts contemporary with the wrecking event called both present day Salisbury and Cooper Islands “South East Islands”, but South East Island, singular is present day Salisbury Island. Cooper Island is occasionally called North East Island.



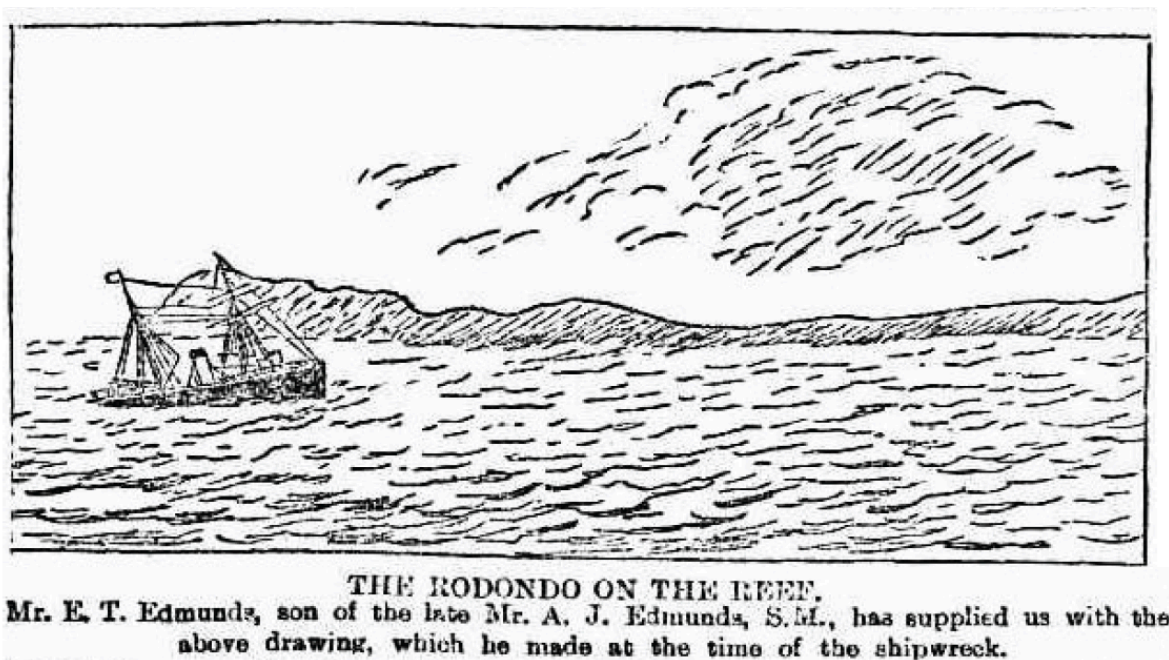


Figure 3 Sketch of SS Rodondo sinking by passenger Mr T.E. Edmunds. Note proximity to low-lying land, possibly Cooper Island (South Australian Chronicle, 20 October 1894:7).

There are variations in the many newspaper reports as to what happened when Captain Hill finally abandoned ship and set *Rodondo* on a course for the shallow reef, as well as information regarding time and location of the sinking event. Some news articles report that the vessel went down two hours after striking the shallow reef (*South Australian Chronicle*, 20 Oct 1894:7), whilst others say up to twelve hours (*Evening News*, 9 October 1894:5). Survivor statements also vary in terms of where the vessel sunk, for example: “half a mile away” (*South Australian Chronicle*, 20 Oct 1894:7), “two miles to the north-east of South-east Isles” (*Age* 23 Oct 1894:6); “towards another island northwards” (*South Australian Chronicle*, 20 Oct 1894:7); “a little more than six miles north of the island” (*South Australian Chronicle*, 20 Oct 1894:7); and, “steamed across the reef to the north of the island, and went on another six miles, where she encountered another reef” (*The Capricornian* 27 Oct 1894:4).

The Court of Marine Enquiry held in Melbourne on the 25<sup>th</sup> of October 1894 found Captain Hill guilty of gross negligence in the navigation of his vessel and suspended his master’s certificate for twelve months. It found that on the 5<sup>th</sup> of October, Captain Hill was ten miles out of his course, and that he did not make sufficient allowance for the current that was shown on the chart, thereby jeopardising the lives of all on board. While Captain Hill did not recover the ship’s logbook, the Court found that the bridge book that was recovered showed evidence of alterations and erasures, and the Court was not even satisfied that the altered positions were correct. The Court also found that Second Mate Le Maistre did not have access to the charts and was not aware of Pollock

Reef being in the vicinity. Captain Hill was permitted to apply for a first officer's certificate for the ensuing twelve months (*South Australian Register* 26 October 1894:5).

## 2024 Survey

Desk-based historical research was undertaken to identify priority search areas for a planned vessel-based side scan sonar survey. As seen above, the newspaper accounts varied widely in their descriptions of where *Rodondo* sank. It was also important to clarify which island South East Island referred to, as it was sometimes written in the singular, and sometimes plural. This was significant as some key reports described the distance of the wreck from South East Island, in the singular.

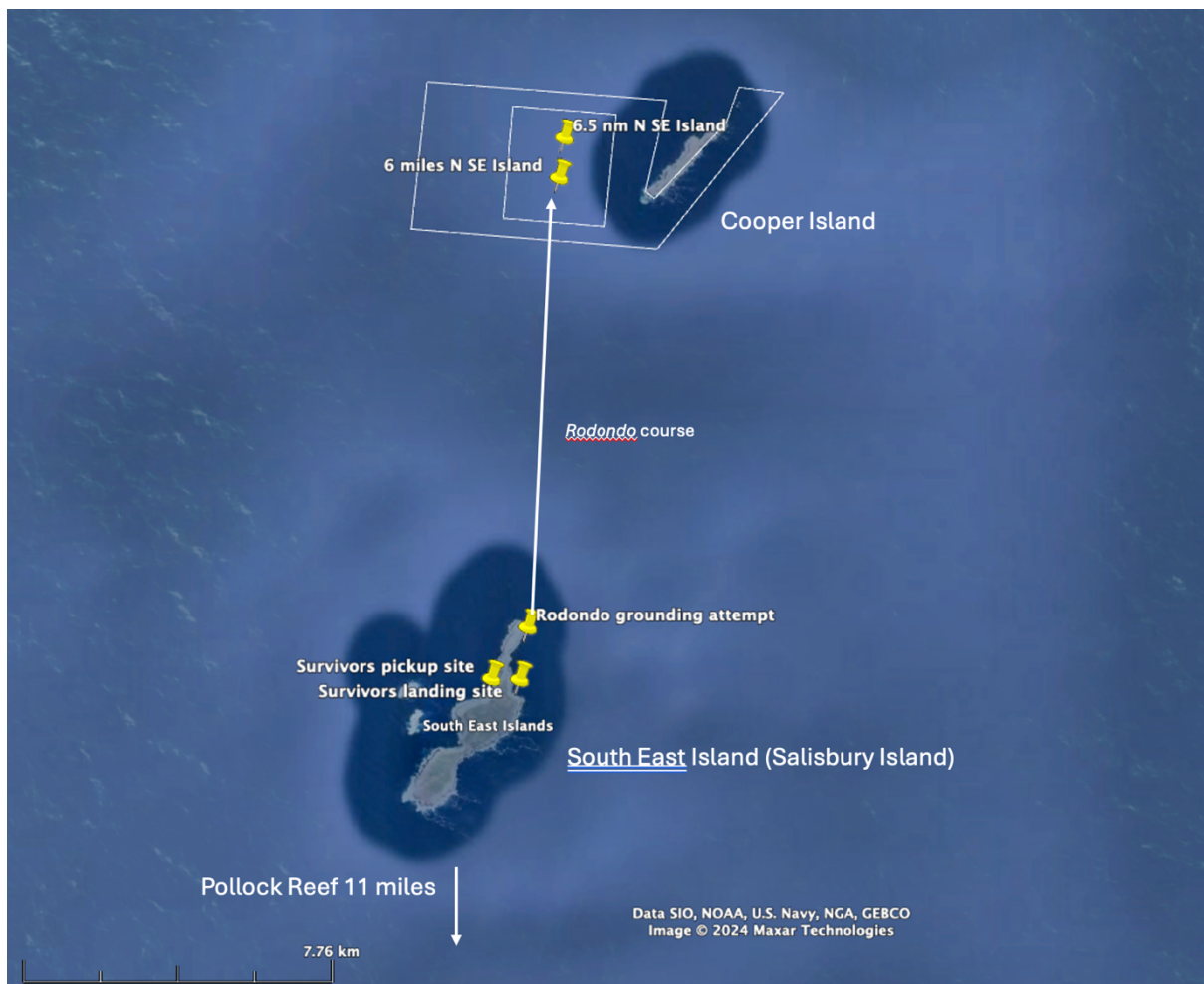


Figure 4 Map of Rodondo sinking events and identified priority search area 6 - 6.5 nautical miles north of Salisbury Island (WA Museum, Google Earth).

The research showed that 'South East Isles' plural in the accounts of the wreck referred to both Salisbury and Cooper Islands, but accounts of survivors sheltering on an island with two large hills is a clear description of Salisbury Island, as opposed to the flatter Cooper Island, and therefore 'South East Island' singular was confirmed as referring to Salisbury Island. Also, some accounts of the sinking location reported from crew or

passengers with a high level of maritime knowledge, such as Captain Hill, were weighted as being more important than other passengers' accounts of the sinking location reported in the newspapers. A map of *Rodondo* sinking events was created, from the time it struck Pollock Reef to the time it finally sank. These included identifying locations where the survivors likely landed and were picked up on Salisbury Island, a point off the northern end of the island where it was unsuccessfully attempted to run *Rodondo* ashore, and an area between 6 and 6.5 nautical miles north of Salisbury Island as the likely sinking location ([Figure 4](#)).

Based on analysis of the available historical accounts, the WA Museum recommended a priority search area 'Area 1' to include a point measured 6 to 6.5 nautical miles north of Salisbury Island. Area 2 was an expanded search area if nothing was found within Area 1, that would also take in the south side of Cooper Island, with an additional search 'Area 3' to include a pinnacle off the northeast end of Cooper Island ([Figure 10](#)).

Unfortunately, the vessel-based side scan survey expedition was thwarted by adverse weather conditions, so the *Shipwrecks Hunters Australia* team funded an aerial magnetometer survey, flown by Thomson Airborne in August 2024 ([Figure 5](#)).



Figure 5 Area and flight lines for aerial magnetometer survey August 2024 (Thomson Airborne, Google Earth).



The survey covered 342 line kilometres flown with 200 metre lane spacing, 50 metres above sea level. Annie Boyd and Alisdair Cooke independently reviewed the aerial magnetometer data from the August 2024 survey, identifying three promising magnetic targets amongst the background geological magnetism, all in deep water around 60-70m depth.

Between the 27<sup>th</sup> and 30<sup>th</sup> of November 2024, staff from the Maritime Heritage Department at the WA Museum participated in the search for *Rodondo*, as part of the Disney+ six-part documentary series *Shipwrecks Hunters Australia* Season 2. The project was undertaken in collaboration with Terra Australis Productions, VAM Media, and Barking Mad Productions, aboard the vessel *Adrianus* (Bass Marine, UVI-449567).

The aims of the survey included:

1. Ground-truth magnetic targets<sup>3</sup> near the South East Isles (present day Salisbury and Cooper Islands) using boat-based remote sensing equipment.
2. Use a remote operated vehicle (ROV) to capture imagery of any targets of interest for archaeological assessment and identification.

## Summary of activities

### Remote Sensing



Figure 6 Survey vessel *Adrianus* (WA Museum).

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<sup>3</sup> *Shipwreck Hunters Australia* commissioned an aerial magnetometer survey in August 2024. Three main targets were identified, with a fourth “possible” identified during production.

Remote sensing activities were undertaken using the 50 ton, 23m power-monohull, vessel, *Adrianus*, out of Esperance, Western Australia (Figure 6).

The vessel departed at night on the 26<sup>th</sup> of November 2024 and arrived at Salisbury Island in the early hours of the morning on the 27<sup>th</sup> of November. Strong winds and swell limited the survey time.

A total of three days were used to ground-truth these three magnetic targets. An EdgeTech 4205 tri-frequency side scan sonar (SSS) with a Geometrics G-882 Magnetometer piggy-backed to the SSS were utilised during the survey (Figure 7).



Figure 7 EdgeTech 4205 side scan sonar and Geometrics G-882 magnetometer (WA Museum).

Unfortunately, all three targets were determined to be geological. Contact was made with the geophysical experts, and Alasdair Cooke identified a fourth, small magnetic anomaly lying within the Area 1 priority search area (Figure 8). Unfortunately, the winds and swell came in strong in the afternoon and the survey had to be called off for the day. A decision was made to deploy the remote sensing gear and run a line over Target 4 as *Adrianus* headed towards safe anchorage.

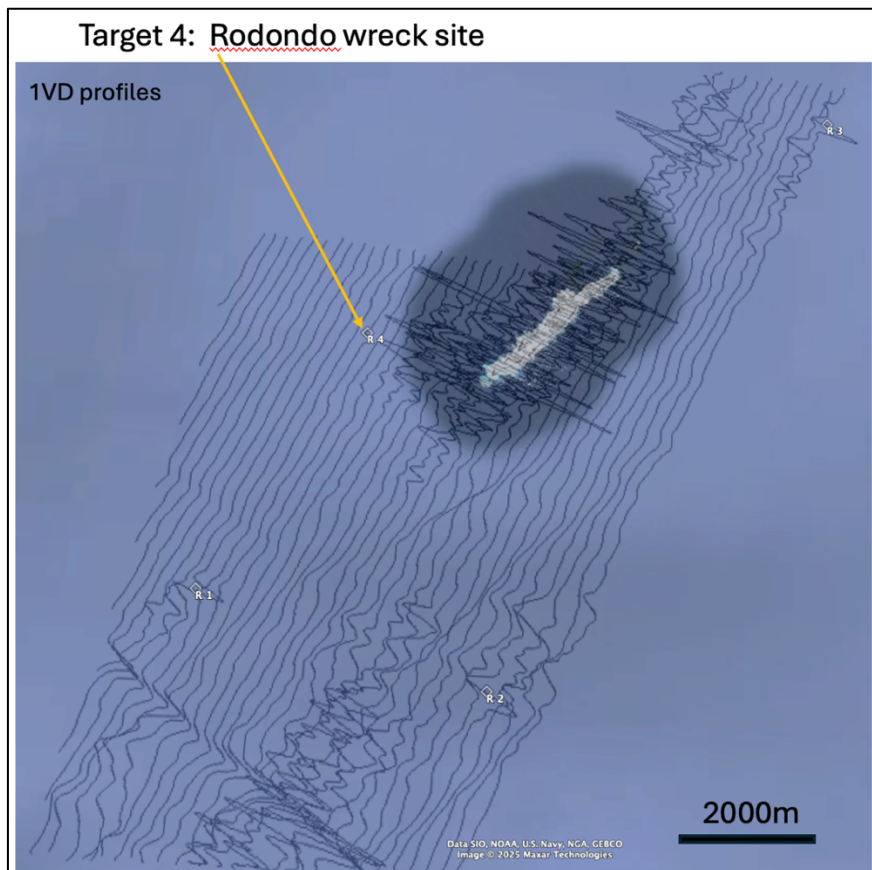


Figure 8 Map showing magnetic data acquired during airborne magnetometer survey, with magnetic targets R1, R2, R3 and R4 (Alasdair Cooke, Maritime Discovery Group, Google Earth)

As the sun set on the 29<sup>th</sup> of November, the silhouette of a large shipwreck emerged from the side scan sonar data in 72m of water, 2.5 km west of Cooper Island within the priority search area (**Error! Reference source not found.-10**).

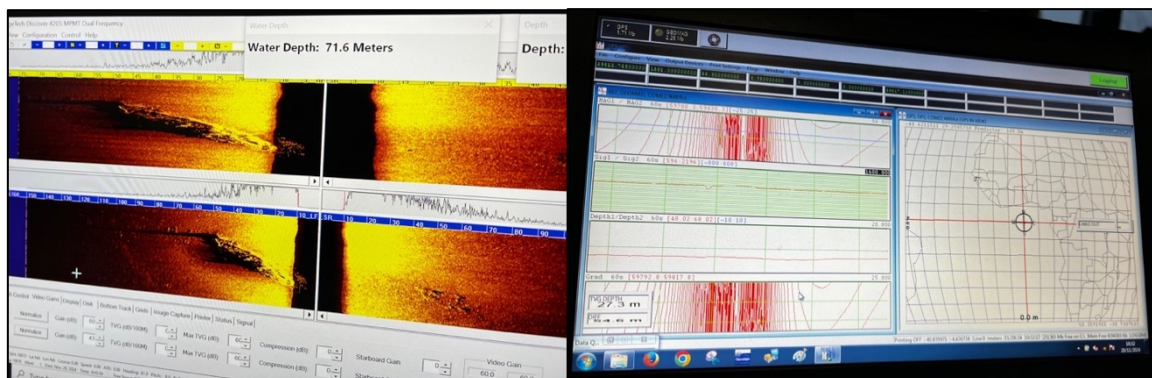


Figure 9 (left) EdgeTech 4205 image of Rodondo; (right) G-882 magnetometer reading (WA Museum).



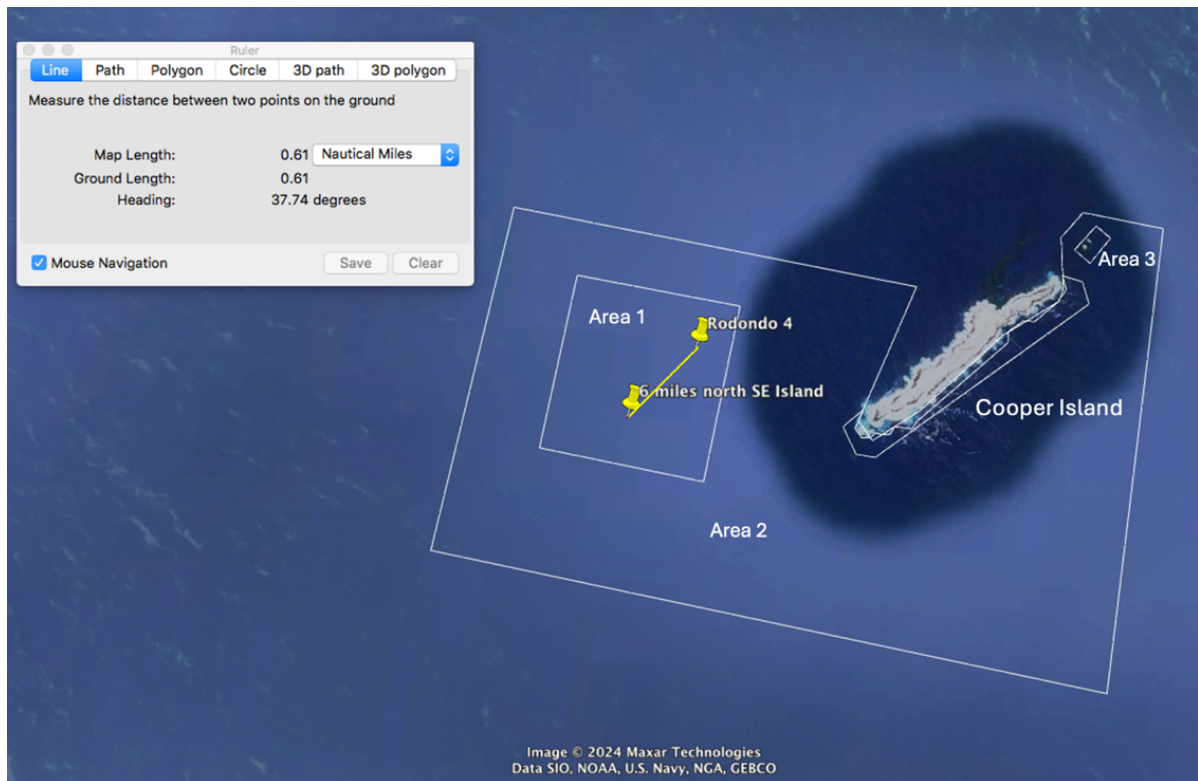


Figure 10 Map of priority search Areas 1, 2 and 3 showing location of Rodondo ('Rodondo 4') lying within the Area 1 priority search area (WA Museum/ Google Earth).

## Inspection

A BlueROV was deployed on the 30<sup>th</sup> of November 2024 to visually confirm the site (

Figure 11). Strong winds and rough sea conditions were unfavourable, causing both anchors deployed from *Adrianus* to drag, resulting in limited time and access to the site.

The wreck is approximately 70 m in length and rests in 72 m of water, on a flat sandy seafloor, running approximately SSW (bow) to NNE (stern). The upper decking has collapsed, but portholes, plates and bottles are amongst the collapsed hull structure (Figure 12).

*Rodondo* is a thriving artificial reef, with a myriad of fish and corals residing in and on the hull remains.



Figure 11 BlueROV used to record site. Image on right shows Insta360 camera mounted for data capture (WA Museum).

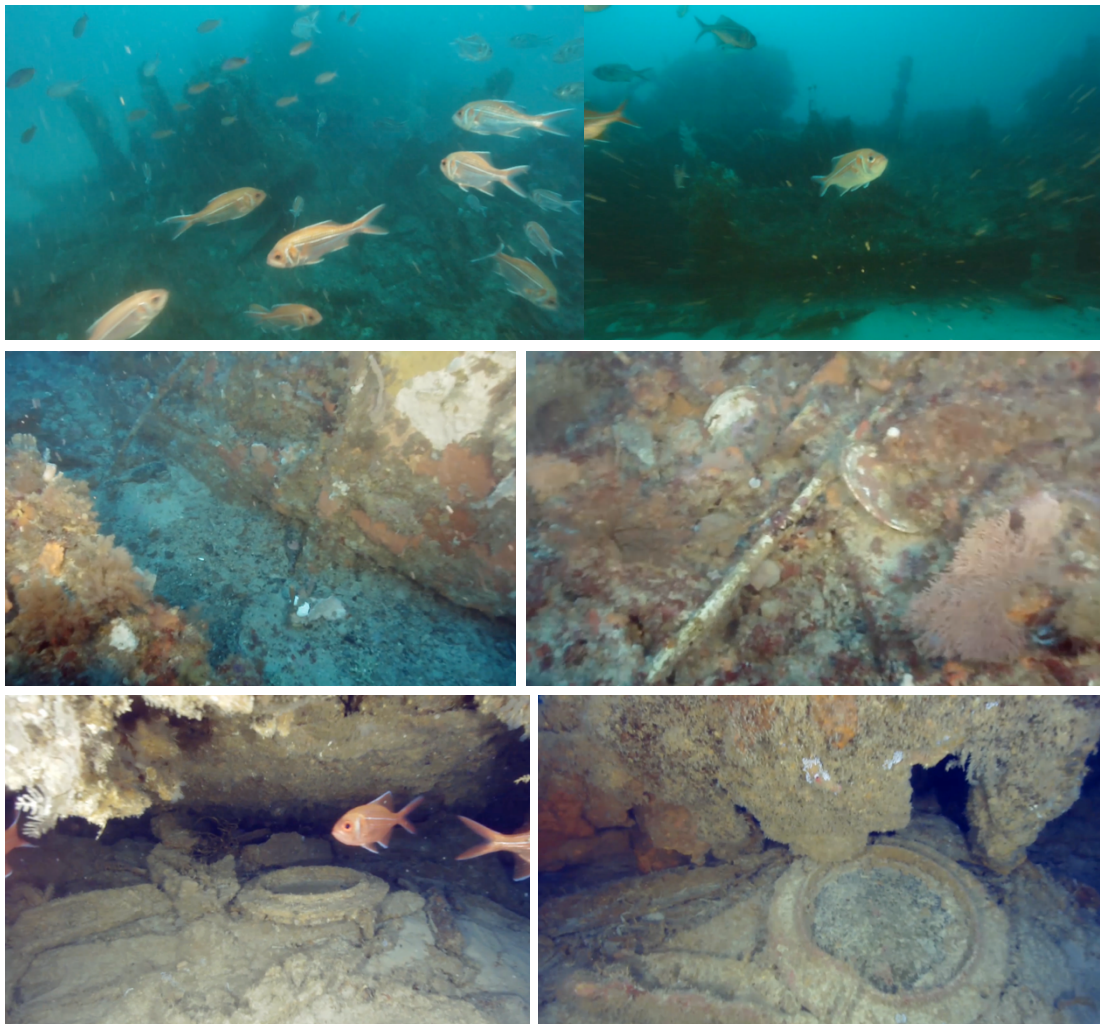


Figure 12 (Top row) Collapsed hull structure protruding from the seafloor. (Middle left) Two (2) glass bottles exposed. (Middle right) Two (2) ceramic plates. (Bottom row) portholes resting on the seafloor, below the overhang of hull structure. Images courtesy of VAM Media and Terra Australia Productions.

## Identification

Overall, the depth, location, type and length of the shipwreck supports the positive identification of SS *Rodondo*:

- The location is consistent with the historical account of *Rodondo*'s sinking, located in the priority search Area 1;
- The wreck is an iron steamship;
- The wreck's length of approximately 70m and its layout is consistent with *Rodondo*'s recorded length of 73m and layout; and
- *Rodondo* is the only large wreck of an iron steam ship recorded to have occurred in the vicinity of the South East Isles.

## Site significance

### Historical

During the gold rushes, intercolonial steamships such as SS *Rodondo* played a crucial role in the development of Western Australia transporting goods, equipment and people. In particular, *Rodondo* was transporting mining equipment including a seven-tonne boiler carried as deck cargo and a winding engine and gear for the Bendigo and Coolgardie Proprietary Company, reflecting the economic activities and industrial advancements of the period.

### Archaeological

The vessel was not salvaged, with passengers and crew escaping with the bare minimum of clothing and possessions. The wreck will contain a complete range of artefacts typical of a late-19<sup>th</sup> century inter-colonial steamship and its crew's and passenger's domestic possessions. All of the technical aspects of the wreck such as engine, boiler and engineer's tools will be completely intact and unsalvaged. This is rare for steamships which have in the past been targeted by divers using explosives to blow up steam engines to recover their valuable copper alloy piping and engine components.

The cargo included a range of materials including cases of glassware, pianos, machinery, mining machinery and equipment intended for the Western Australia goldfields (Appendix A provides the full cargo list). Considering that many of the passengers were young men intending to move to and live in Western Australia bringing with them their necessary possessions for a period of time to make good in the diggings, the wreck is a complete time capsule of a 'gold rush vessel'.

## Recreational

The site is a new discovery in challenging technical diving depths, featuring good visibility, abundant marine growth and sea life. However, the location is remote, and there is a high risk of shark encounters in this area, being located in proximity to Western Australia's largest long-nosed fur seal colony, and a white shark breeding ground at nearby Salisbury Island (<https://www.findingsalisbury.com>).

## Legal Protection and Management Considerations

Being over 75 years old, *SS Rodondo* is automatically protected under the Commonwealth *Underwater Cultural Heritage Act 2018*. It also lies within the boundaries of the recently declared Madjet Kuditj Sanctuary Zone in the Wudjari Marine Park, with no fishing permitted in the Sanctuary. Following the release of *Shipwreck Hunters Australia* Season 2 in August 2025, it is likely the site will attract interest from technical divers and possibly illegal fishers and may be at risk of damage from vessels anchoring, although the location and depth will be limiting factors for most recreational divers.

## Recommendations

- 1) Further archaeological documentation and assessment is recommended to determine the extent of the site, identify any areas of high archaeological potential and to fully document the wreck using ROV photography and 3D photogrammetry methods.
- 2) The WA Museum should liaise with the Department of Biodiversity, Conservation and Attractions and Esperance Tjaltjraak Native Title Aboriginal Corporation (ETNTAC) to help inform future joint management strategies for ongoing protection, research and monitoring of the site.

## References

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- Gregory, D., 1928. *Australian steamships past and present*, The Richards Press Ltd, London.
- Worsley, P. and J. with Green, J., 2015. *Green Seas and White Horses: Western Australia's Maritime Heritage Between Flinders Bay and Eucla*. Australian National Centre of Excellence for Maritime Archaeology Special Publication No.17, Australasian



Institute for Maritime Archaeology Special Publication No.18, Western Australian Museum, Fremantle.

## Newspapers

*Age*, 23 October 1894, pg. 6

*Brisbane Courier*, 10 October 1894, pg. 5

*Evening News*, 9 October 1894, pg. 5

*Golden Age* 12 October 1894 p.2

*Herald*, 23 October 1894, pg. 4

*South Australian Chronicle*, 20 October 1894, pg. 7

*South Australian Register*, 16 October 1894, pg. 7

*Sydney Morning Herald*, 9 October 1894 p.5

*The Argus*, 10 October 1894, pg. 5

*The Capricornian*, 27 October 1894, pg. 4

## Appendix A List of SS *Rodondo*'s cargo

Seven-tonne boiler carried as deck cargo (*Sydney Morning Herald*, 9 Oct 1894:5) and a winding engine and gear for the Bendigo and Coolgardie Proprietary Company (*Golden Age* 12 Oct 1894:2)

### THE CARGO FROM SYDNEY

690 tons coal, 39 cases meats, 562 hides, 412 bales wool, 17 bags oysters, 12 bundles empty bags, 6 bales basils, 13 cases pines, 5 cases tomatoes, 8 kegs skins, 479 cases fruit, 6 packages tea tins, 5 cases tacks, 6 bales millet, 10 barrels glucose, 40 casks oil, 10 cases electro [plated]goods, 14 packages earthenware, 9 packages glassware, 14 packages tea, 24 grindstones, 5 cases fruit trees, 4 cases scales, 7 cases confectionery, 20 cases biscuits, 100 cases chloride potash, 11 cases cheese, 110 cases jam, 10 empties, 23 boxes tobacco, 6 sacks split peas, 12 drums oil, 324 pieces pine, 60 cases cylinder oil, 20 cases wine, 14 bags pork, 9 cases drapery, 6 cases salad oil, 6 casks vinegar, 50 doors, 10 drums sulphide of sodium, 6 cases almanacs, 20 cases stout, 16 cases boots, 282 bags cocoanuts.

### THE MELBOURNE AND ADELAIDE CLEARANCES

The steamer cleared at Melbourne with 43 passengers in the saloon and 87 in the steerage (names not given), and the following cargo - 160 bags sugar, 158 packages tea, 300 bags pyrites, 170 cases salmon, 55 cases champagne, 11 bales hops, 3 cases pianos, 13 packages leather, 250 bags potatoes, 26 cases oil, 40 bags salt, 14 packages steel, 136 cases fruit, 185 bags onions, 34 packages machinery, 42 bars iron, 29 bags cocoanuts, 6 cases brandy, 18 cases eggs, 20 cases twine, 110 cases stout, 46 bags oats, 40 bags wheat 10 bags barley, 5 bags maize, 3 cases jellies, 9 cases stationery, 11 cases drapery, 6 cases books, 136 packages merchandise, and original cargo remaining on board from Sydney for Adelaide and Western Australia.

Her Adelaide clearance is dated 3rd October. Passengers-Messrs Simtnina Edmunds, Marchant, Blackney, and Gollan, in the saloon 3 in the second cabin, and 119 original passengers en route. From this final clearance before leaving Adelaide for Albany there appears to have been 132 passengers on board.

Adelaide cargo -For Albany 1 case sundries, 1 case beehive, J M Sinclair and Co; 3 packages drapery, Malpas and Little; 1 cases cotton, Central Agency; 20 bags flour, Adelaide Milling Company; 5 bags nuts, Charlick Brothers.

For Fremantle 20 cases gin, 1 tank 1 case, G H Adams; 1 case 1 bag seed 2 cases drapery, J M Sinclair and Co; 133 packages 2 tanks 1 case machinery, 4 cases, G Wills and Co; 2 cases, 9 packages, W Detmold; 20 cases Harrold Colton and Co; 6 hogsheads ale, A W and T L Ware , 7 packages W Pyne and Co; 1 case, Malpas and Little; 10 packages, T Lock; 1 case, Smith, Channon, and Co; 150 bags bonedust, L Conrad; 2 packages M Ey.

For Geraldton: 5 bags, 164 packages, 1 bottle quicksilver, W Pyne and Co; 1 cases plateglass, H L Voss; 3 packages machinery, Forward. Down, and Co.

(*Sydney Morning Herald*, 9 October 1894: 5)