

WA researchers scour Australia's north for last traces of HMS Beagle

By **Tabarak Al Jrood**

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A group of experts may have made a breakthrough in maritime history after discovering what they believe could be the last remaining artefacts from the HMS Beagle.

The famous survey ship is best known for transporting Charles Darwin on a global expedition from 1831 to 1836, during which he developed his theories of evolution and natural selection.



Marine surveyor Chris Lane, diving expert Richard Bradley and expedition leader John Canaris hunt for two anchors cast away by the HMS Beagle in the Victoria River, in Australia's north.

Darwin was not on board when the Beagle visited the Australian coast in 1839 but was remembered by his shipmates, who named Port Darwin after him.

Despite being a part of one of the most important scientific expeditions, the Beagle was eventually left to rot away near a muddy riverbank in England, with no artefacts from the ship believed to have survived – until now.

The Darwin Beagle Anchors Project, a team of Darwin locals and Perth-based industry professionals, was formed to recover two anchors lost from the vessel on the remote northern coast of Australia in 1839.

Earlier this month, expedition leader and geologist John Canaris led a team of 11 on their second expedition to survey the Victoria River, where they had discovered one of the two anchors last year.

The group spent six days scanning and sounding the riverbed to find that the highly mobile sandbars identified in last year's expedition had since covered the

anchor and likely obscured the second undiscovered one.

Mr Canaris said a drone magnetometer survey was also completed to further confirm the 2018 anchor and hopefully identify the location of the second one.

“While we hoped the anchors would be visible in the scanning sonar images, the information collected and the mobile sandbars will help provide for the first time an explanation as to how the anchors became stuck and were abandoned,” he said.

“It will also provide invaluable information for the eventual excavation and recovery of these globally significant maritime archaeological objects.”



Researchers have been scouring the Victoria River for two anchors cast away by the HMS Beagle on its journey to Australia.

Mr Canaris said the Beagle was sent to survey the northern coast of Australia, where one of its missions was to investigate the big rivers to discover whether they led to the interior of the continent or were connected to an inland sea.

The vessel sailed into the Darwin Harbour before it went on to survey the largest single river in the Northern Territory, the Victoria River, about 282km east of the WA border.

After about a month of surveying the river, the Beagle set off to return to the ocean, but two of its anchors were stuck. They were cut away and left at the bottom of the river, where they have remained since.

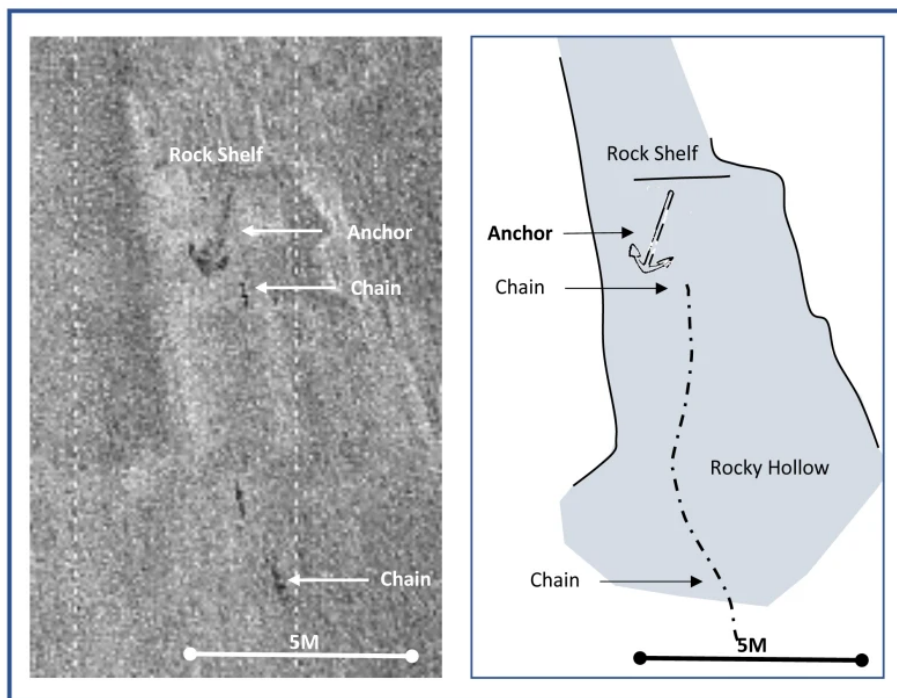
Funded by the Heritage Branch of the Historical Society, this month's expedition was the fourth attempt to find the lost anchors, which are believed to be the last remaining fragments of the ship anywhere in the world.

However, during a search on the land near the anchorage where the Beagle recorded it had dug two water wells, metal detectors also unearthed five handmade copper nails and a musket ball.

Mr Canaris believes once the nails and musket ball are verified, they may be the only known objects – besides the anchors – left behind by the vessel.

“There has been an intense search to find any remaining fragments of the Beagle and until now, it looked like there was none,” he said.

“So this is very significant.”



A visual of the riverbed where the team believes they have found an anchor cast off by the HMS Beagle.

Coming from a long-standing Darwin family, Mr Canaris said it was important for him to find the anchors because of the Beagle's role in the history of Darwin.

“My objective is to recover these two huge anchors and have them put on display in the town of Darwin with the narrative around the discovery and surveying of the city,” he said.

“It's an opportunity to give something back.”

After losing its anchors, the ship continued on its journey around Kimberley Close to the Abrolhos Islands and then eventually to Perth.

Mr Canaris said the Beagle's voyage played an important role in the colonisation of the Swan River, as well as having a geopolitical influence in the early colonisation of Perth.

The results of the expedition are expected to be released in the coming weeks, with another expedition already planned.
