

FROZEN IN TIME

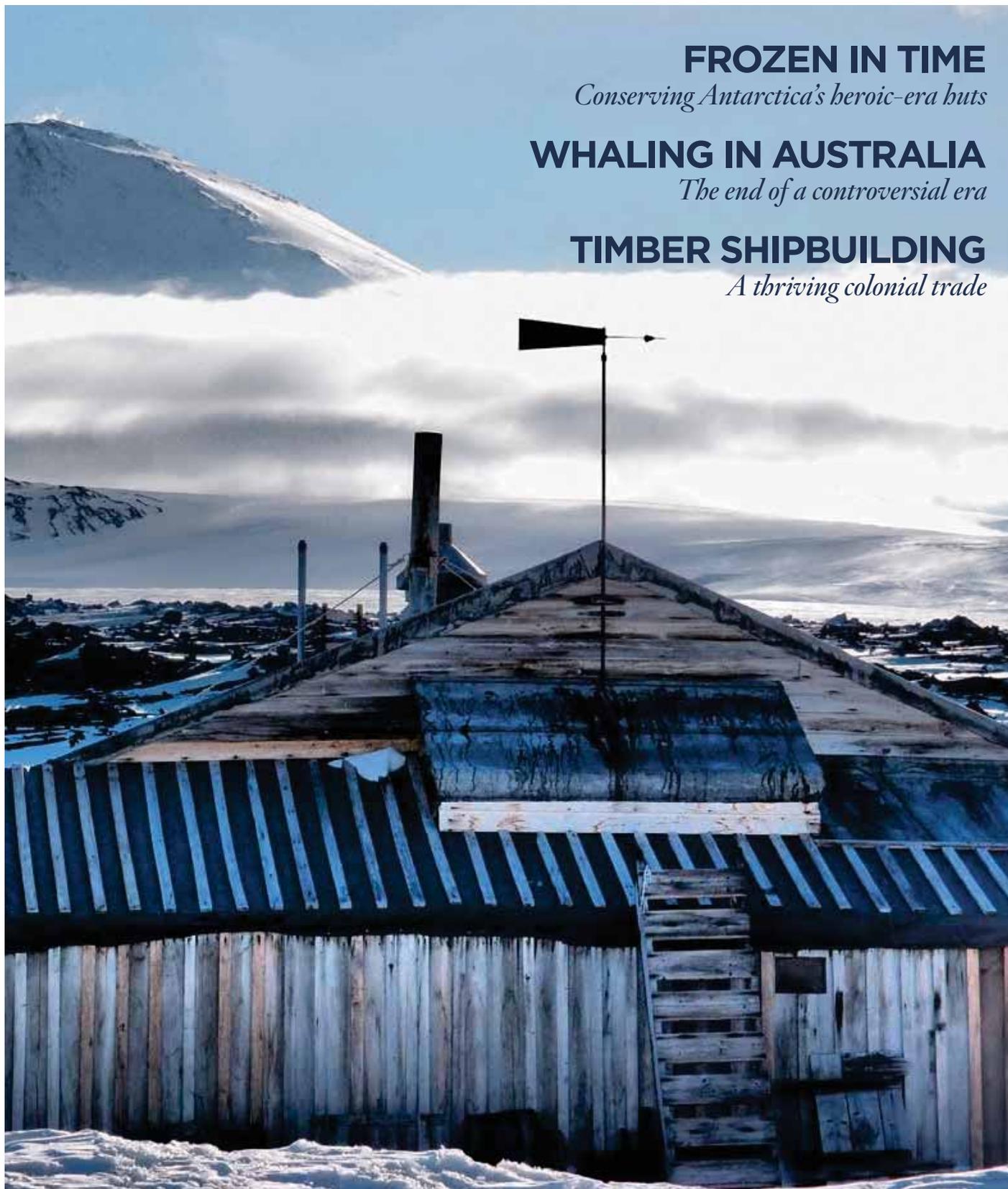
Conserving Antarctica's heroic-era huts

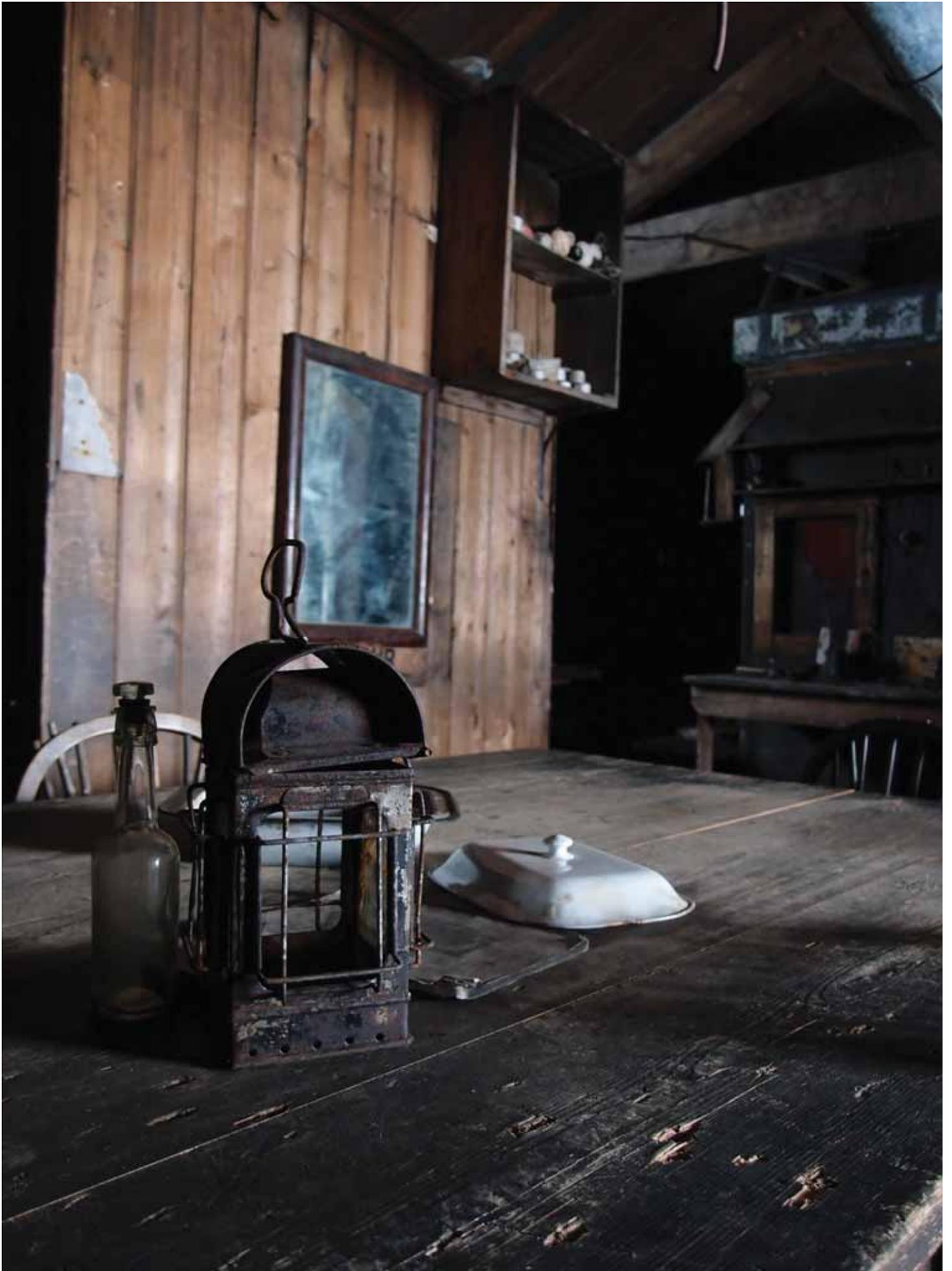
WHALING IN AUSTRALIA

The end of a controversial era

TIMBER SHIPBUILDING

A thriving colonial trade





Wardroom table inside the Cape Evans hut of Captain Robert Falcon Scott's British Antarctic (*Terra Nova*) Expedition of 1910–13. This winter the conservation of the 10,500 objects in the hut will be completed. All photographs by Sue Bassett unless otherwise stated

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CONSERVING ANTARCTICA'S HEROIC-ERA HUTS

The century-old huts built by Antarctic explorers are time capsules of another era, packed with the relics of these heroic and often tragic voyages. Former Australian National Maritime Museum staffer **Sue Bassett**, based in Antarctica through the winter, describes the work of the Antarctic Heritage Trust to conserve the historic and vulnerable expedition bases of Ross Island.

LIKE MOST WHO HAVE the opportunity to visit Antarctica, I feel very fortunate and privileged to be here and to experience the incomparable natural beauty and extreme environment of this continent. As Alexandra Shackleton, granddaughter of the great explorer and leader Ernest Shackleton, said of her first visit: 'It was a poignant and wonderful experience. Indeed, most people never quite recover from their first visit to Antarctica. It is an extraordinary place.'

One who was clearly less enamoured and inspired was the great navigator James Cook, who set out from England in 1772 aboard *Resolution* to find this rumoured great southern continent, and to circumnavigate the globe as near to the South Pole as possible. He became the first to cross the Antarctic Circle, doing so on several occasions as he traversed the oceans at high southern latitude, but didn't actually lay eyes upon Antarctica. What he found he described in his journals as 'inexpressibly horrid', stating that: 'the greatest part of this southern continent (supposing there is one)

must lie within the polar circle, where the sea is so pestered with ice that the land is thereby inaccessible. The risk one runs in exploring a coast, in these unknown and icy seas, is so very great, that I can be bold enough to say that no man will ever venture farther than I have done; and that the lands which may lie to the south will never be explored.'

But explored they were, and the Antarctic continent and surrounding islands are now home to more than 70 research bases from 30 countries, all supporting scientific investigation under the Antarctic Treaty System. More than 40 of the bases are occupied year round, one being New Zealand's Scott Base, from which the New Zealand-based charity Antarctic Heritage Trust, on behalf of the international community, carries out its on-ice conservation program of the earliest expedition bases from the 'heroic era' of exploration ... a couple of centuries after Cook's time. These are the Ross Island expedition bases of Robert Falcon Scott's

National Antarctic (*Discovery*) Expedition of 1901–04, Ernest Shackleton's British Antarctic (*Nimrod*) Expedition of 1907–09, and Captain Robert Falcon Scott's fateful British Antarctic (*Terra Nova*) Expedition of 1910–13.

These sites were listed on the World Monuments Fund 2008 Watchlist of the World's 100 Most Endangered Sites, and are protected under the Antarctic Treaty System. They stand as monuments to the spirit of adventure, discovery and endurance, and are among the most evocative heritage buildings in the world. Indeed, for me, entering the huts for the first time was the most real 'stepping-back-in-time' experience I've ever had – a testament to the Antarctic Heritage Trust's work in preserving not just the tangible items, but that intangible spirit of place.

Containing thousands of artefacts, and still pervaded by the smells of seal-blubber stoves and close living, the huts make it easy to believe that the early expedition members have just stepped outside for



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a while and will be back at any moment. And these are people whom, because of the excellent written and photographic records that exist from the time, we know not just by occupation but by name and appearance – and the artefacts that remain are often so personal we feel as though we're intruding a little on their lives. We know where each man slept, their clothing sizes and what they wore (under as well as over!), what many of them did on an almost daily basis, and, often, from their writings, what they felt. And that, together with the unique and spectacular setting, is what sets this conservation project apart from others with which I've been involved, and makes it so appealing.

The huts are all of timber construction and were prefabricated in the United Kingdom or Sydney. Together, they contain more than 15,000 artefacts left by the early expeditions' explorers and scientists, who carried out their hydrographic, magnetic, glaciological,

meteorological, geological, zoological and other research there. The work to conserve the huts has included intense summer programs of weatherproofing (such as roof repairs, recladding and gap-filling), lifting floors to de-ice below, and digging trenches to install diversion dams around the outsides – all virtually undetectable to the eyes of visitors.

For the Antarctic Heritage Trust's winter teams, the work is just as intense, but we're based full-time in a laboratory at Scott Base. There we treat artefacts through the many months of darkness, and only visit the historic huts at the beginning and end of our season. So those visits are very special moments for us, and enable us to see the fruits of our labours. Objects we conserve range from small straightforward items such as an unused test-tube, a key from a sardine tin or a Christmas tree decoration to more complex items like a pony harness, reindeer-skin sleeping bag, wooden case



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of tinned foodstuffs, set of long-johns, or part of the acetylene lighting system. The diversity is enormous and we find the objects fascinating, so our interest levels remain high and it's not difficult to maintain the motivation throughout the long winter months.

And who, other than us, actually gets to see all of these things and appreciate this work? Perhaps more people than you might expect, with about 500 tourists visiting on expedition cruises each season as part of a maximum of 2,000 visitors per hut per year (under a permit system) – plus an unlimited number through Google Earth, which now offers an online virtual tour.

To learn more about the Antarctic Heritage Trust's work and follow the on-ice activities of the team during the winter of 2014 through weekly Antarctic blogs, go to www.nzaht.org. Blogs are also hosted by the Natural History Museum, London, at www.nhm.ac.uk/natureplus/community/antarctic-conservation

- 01 Inside *Nimrod* hut, which had been prefabricated in London, and was erected at Cape Royds, Ross Island, by Ernest Shackleton's British Antarctic Expedition of 1907–09. From here, Shackleton's party reached the furthest point south at the time, 156 kilometres short of the South Pole. The conservation of the 6,000-plus artefacts in the hut was completed by the Antarctic Heritage Trust in 2008. An ongoing monitoring and maintenance program is now in place.
- 02 Scott's *Terra Nova* hut at Cape Evans today.
- 03 *Hut and Mount Erebus photographed by moonlight*, taken by Herbert G Ponting on 13 June 1911, during Robert Falcon Scott's British Antarctic (*Terra Nova*) Expedition of 1910–13. Canterbury Museum. Reproduced with permission
- 04 The conservators at work in their winter lab in the Hillary Field Centre, Scott Base, Antarctica.
- 05 Some of the members of Ernest Shackleton's British Antarctic Expedition of 1907–09 at *Nimrod* hut. Canterbury Museum. Reproduced with permission

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