

The Japanese Pearlers of Broome

For thousands of years, the Aboriginals of Northern Australia collected pearls from shallow waters and wore them as jewellery or traded them for other goods. In the mid-1800s, Europeans started to notice the value of the pearls and were eager to harvest them as a business.



Shark Bay was the main pearling hot spot where local Aboriginals and Europeans would swim through the water and collect pearls from oyster shells. The aboriginals, particularly the women, were highly skilled in “skin diving”. They swam without clothes or any diving equipment to collect hard-to-reach oysters. Some could dive over twelve metres to collect oysters.

In the late 19th century, a large number of Japanese fishermen migrated to Australia to work in the pearl fields. They were employed as indentured labourers which meant they were working without pay in order to pay off their debts. Most of these Japanese migrants worked in Broome as pearl divers. Broome quickly became the new centre of the pearling trade and produced around 70% of the world’s pearls.



From the 1880s, most divers wore diving gear that helped them stay under water for longer. The diving suit consisted of a canvas body suit and a gigantic bronze helmet which was called a ‘hard hat’. The hat was extremely heavy to put on and wear. Even with diving gear, pearling was still a very dangerous job. Storms, sharks and a sickness called ‘the bends’ claimed many lives.

The Second World War brought changes to the pearling industry. Because Japan had joined the war against Australia, many Japanese left Australia. Those who did not leave quickly were held in Australia as prisoners of war. In 1942, Broome was bombed by the Japanese. The blasts destroyed many of the pearling luggers.



Japanese migrants to Australia made an important contribution to the pearling industry. They are remembered today for their hard work as well as the tragedies that led to their deaths. The Japanese Cemetery in Broome features gravestones, memorials and even a big obelisk statue, which is dedicated to all those who lost their lives.

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Questions

1. Why do you think the Europeans were eager to harvest pearls as a business?

2. Where did many Aboriginals and Europeans swim to retrieve pearls from oyster shells?

3. What is an indentured labourer?

4. What were some of the ways Japanese pearlery died?

5. What is 'the bends'?

6. Why do you think the Japanese tried to leave Australia during the Second World War?

7. Do you think the Japanese were respected for their work as pearlery? Why/why not?

8. What would you write on a memorial stone dedicated to the Japanese who lost their lives pearlery in Broome?

Answers

1. Why do you think the Europeans were eager to harvest pearls as a business?
The Europeans were eager to invest in pearling trade because they believed it would turn into a wealthy business.
2. Where did many Aboriginals and Europeans swim to retrieve pearls from oyster shells?
Many Aboriginals and Europeans swam in Shark Bay to retrieve pearls from oyster shells.
3. What is an indentured labourer?
An indentured labourer is someone who is working without pay, usually to pay off debt that is owed.
4. What were some of the ways Japanese pearlery died?
Many Japanese pearlery died in storms, were killed by sharks or contracted 'the bends' sickness.
5. What is 'the bends'?
The bends is a diving sickness.
6. Why do you think the Japanese tried to leave Australia during the Second World War?
The Japanese tried to leave Australia during the war because they were worried they would be imprisoned as prisoners of war. This is because Japan had joined the war against Australia.
7. Do you think the Japanese were respected for their work as pearlery? Why/why not?
Students own answers.
8. What would you write on a memorial stone dedicated to the Japanese who lost their lives pearlery in Broome?
Students own answers.

The Japanese Pearlers of Broome

Long before Europeans arrived, the Aboriginals of Northern Australia collected pearls from shallow waters and wore them as jewellery or traded them with other people and tribes. In the mid 1800s after Europeans had arrived, the trade began to change. The Europeans showed an interest in establishing a large trade business and were eager to see it reach success.

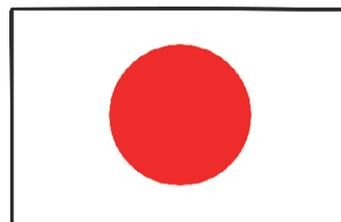


At the time, the main fishing area was Shark Bay, where local Aboriginals and Europeans would swim through the water and collect pearls from oyster shells. The Aboriginals, particularly the women, were also highly skilled in “skin diving”.

They swam without clothes or any diving equipment to retrieve hard-to-reach oysters. In order to collect the oysters, they would often dive twelve metres below the sea level.



In the late nineteenth century, a large number of Japanese fishermen flocked to Australia to work in the pearling industry. Nearly all of these fishermen came from the Japanese city of Taiji. In Australia, they were employed as indentured labourers which meant they were working without pay in order to pay off debt; they often had to repay their passage to Australia. Many Japanese migrants worked in Broome as pearl divers. Broome quickly became the new centre of the pearling trade. At that time, over seventy percent of the world’s pearls were cultivated in Broome.



By the 1880s, the way pearls were harvested had changed. Most pearl luggers, or boats, now used diving gear. Divers wore a suit that consisted of a bulky, canvas body suit and a gigantic, bronze helmet often referred to as a ‘hard hat’. The hat was extremely heavy to put on and wear. It made diving easier as divers could stay under the surface longer but it was still a dangerous job. Cyclonic storms, sharks and ‘the bends’ (a diver’s sickness) contributed to many deaths. Between 1882 and 1935, over 800 divers and crew members lost their lives due to cyclones. Unfortunately, many Japanese migrants perished in Broome.

The Japanese Pearlers of Broome

In 1901, the Australian government created the White Australia Policy, which attempted to keep out anyone with a non-European background, including the Japanese. They recruited a number of British navy divers to work in the pearl fields, however, most of these men died on the job. The government decided Broome was exempt from the White Australia Policy and so they continued to employ Japanese migrants. By 1910, there were over 3500 people fishing for pearls around Broome. The majority of these fishermen came from Japan, Malaysia and China.

The Second World War brought more change to the pearling industry. Because Japan had joined the war against Australia, many Japanese left or were held in Australia as prisoners of war. In 1942, Broome was bombed by the Japanese, destroying most of the remaining fishing luggers.

The Japanese migrants in Broome contributed enormously to the success of Australia's pearling industry. Today, they are remembered for their hard work and how they lost their lives. The Japanese Cemetery in Broome features gravestones, memorials and even a grand obelisk dedicated to those who lost their lives.



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Questions

1. What did the Aboriginals do with the pearls they collected?

2. Why do you think the Europeans showed an interest in the pearl trade?

3. What is an indentured labourer?

4. What made up the diving gear that divers wore from the 1880s?

5. Why was pearl diving considered dangerous?

6. Why were the Japanese held as prisoners of war in Australia?

7. What occurred in 1942?

8. Do you think the Japanese were appreciated for their hard work in the pearl fields? Why/why not?

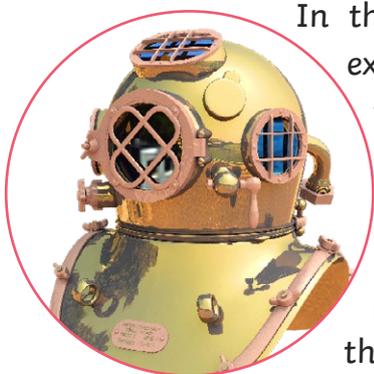
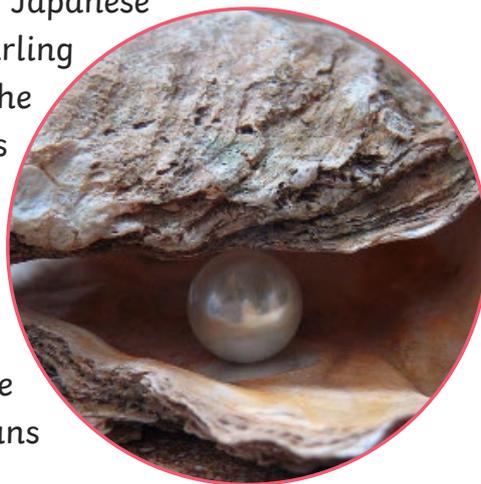
9. What do you think might be written on a memorial stone commemorating the Japanese who worked and died in Broome? Write your own message on below.

Answers

1. What did the Aboriginals do with the pearls they collected?
They wore pearls as jewellery or traded them for other goods.
2. Why do you think the Europeans showed an interest in the pearl trade?
The Europeans showed an interest in the pearl trade because they thought it would become a prominent, successful business and bring money to the country.
3. What is an indentured labourer?
An indentured labourer is someone who is working without pay, usually to pay off debt that is owed. Japanese migrants often had to repay their passage to Australia.
4. What made up the diving gear that divers wore from the 1880s?
The diving gear consisted of a bulky, canvas bodysuit and a bronze helmet.
5. Why was pearl diving considered dangerous?
Pearl diving was considered dangerous because of the risks involved with retrieving the oyster shells. These include shark attacks, being caught in a storm, drowning and contracting 'the bends' sickness.
6. Why were the Japanese held as prisoners of war in Australia?
Many Japanese were held as prisoners of war because Japan had joined the war against Australia and they were seen as a threat to the country.
7. What occurred in 1942?
In 1942, Broome was bombed by the Japanese. The bombing destroyed many pearl luggers (boats).
8. Do you think the Japanese were appreciated for their hard work in the pearl fields? Why/why not?
Students own answers.
9. What do you think might be written on a memorial stone commemorating the Japanese who worked and died in Broome? Write your own message on below.
Students own answers.

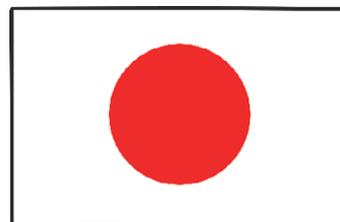
The Japanese Pearlers of Broome

Before European settlement and long before Japanese migrants arrived, there was already a small pearling trade in Northern Australia, established by the coastal-dwelling Aborigines. They harvested pearls from shallow waters and often wore them as jewellery or traded them for other goods. When the Europeans arrived in Australia, they spotted some decorative pearl shells called Riji made by the local Aborigines in Nickol Bay. Because of the potential for business opportunities, the Europeans quickly developed the pearling industry.



In the mid-nineteenth century, the pearling industry had expanded. European immigrants were eager to invest in the industry after noticing the pearls' value and their global popularity. At the time, one of the industry's main cultivation areas was Shark Bay, where local Aborigines and Europeans would wade through the water and collect pearls from oyster shells. The aborigines, particularly the women, were also highly adept at "skin diving" and used this method to retrieve hard-to-reach oysters. Without any mask or breathing apparatus, they could dive 12 metres underwater to collect oysters.

By the turn of the twentieth century, a large number of Japanese fishermen flocked to Australia to work in the pearling industry. Nearly all of these fishermen came from the Japanese city of Taiji. In Australia, they were employed as indentured labourers, which meant they were working without pay in order to pay off debt - usually for their transportation to Australia. The majority of the Japanese worked in Broome, known as Roebuck Bay at the time, as divers. Broome became the new centre of the pearling trade where around 70% of the world's pearls were harvested.



The Japanese Pearlers of Broome

By the 1880s, the diving experience had changed considerably and many vessels were now equipped with diving gear to assist divers. Divers wore a suit that consisted of a bulky, canvas body suit and a gigantic bronze helmet often referred to as a 'hard hat'. The hat was extremely heavy to put on and wear. The Japanese were known for their ritual of drinking a bottle of port before getting into their heavy diving suits. Perhaps the drink was used to relax the divers a little before participating in this dangerous and often fatal task. Cyclonic storms, sharks and 'the bends' (a decompression sickness) contributed to many deaths. Between 1882 and 1935, over 800 divers and crew members lost their lives due to cyclones. Divers wearing the diving apparatus were also at risk of hitting the ocean floor. As a result, they would not be able to stand up because of the weight of the helmet. Unfortunately, the Japanese divers perished in a myriad of ways.

In 1901, the Australian government created the White Australia Policy which attempted to keep out anyone with a non-European background, including the Japanese. They recruited a number of British navy divers to work in the pearl fields, however, most of these men died on the job. Broome thus became exempt from the White Australia Policy and continued to employ Japanese migrants. By 1910, there were over 3500 people fishing for pearls around Broome, with the majority of these fishermen coming from Japan, Malaysia and China.

During the Second World War, the pearling industry almost came to a complete halt. Japan had joined the war against Australia and this led to the Japanese in Australia being held in prisoner of war camps, if they did not leave Australia early. In March 1942, Broome was bombed by the Japanese, destroying most of the pearling luggers that remained. It took the industry many years to recover.

The Japanese migrants in Broome contributed enormously to the success of Australia's pearling industry. Today, they are remembered for their hard work and the tragedies of how they lost their lives. The Japanese Cemetery in Broome contains gravestones, memorials and even a grand obelisk dedicated to those who lost their lives.



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Questions

1. Where was considered one of the pearling industries main cultivation areas?

2. What does the phrase “all corners of the globe” mean?

3. What is an indentured labourer?

4. What did the diving apparatus consist of?

5. List some of the ways the Japanese divers were killed in Broome.

6. Why were many Japanese in Australia held in prisoner of war camps?

7. From which countries did the majority of fisherman working in Broome come?

8. Do you think the Japanese were liked in Broome at the time? Explain your answer.

9. What was the purpose of the White Australia Policy and why was Broome exempt?

10. What do you think might be written on a memorial stone commemorating the Japanese who worked and died in Broome? Write your own message below.

Answers

1. Where was considered one of the pearling industries main cultivation areas?
Shark Bay was considered one of the pearling industries main cultivation areas.
2. What does the phrase “all corners of the globe” mean?
This phrase means all around the world.
3. What is an indentured labourer?
An indentured labourer is someone who is working without pay, usually to pay off debt that is owed. Japanese workers were often paying off their transportation to Australia.
4. What did the diving apparatus consist of?
The diving apparatus consisted of a bulky canvas bodysuit and a bronze helmet.
5. List some of the ways the Japanese divers were killed in Broome.
Any three from the following: storms, shark attacks, ‘the bends’ sickness and drowning.
6. Why were many Japanese in Australia held in prisoner of war camps?
Many Japanese were held in prisoner of war camps because Japan had joined the war against Australia and they were seen as a threat to the country.
7. From which countries did the majority of fisherman working in Broome come?
The majority of workers came from Japan, Malaysia and China.
8. Do you think the Japanese were liked in Broome at the time? Explain your answer.
Students own answers.
9. What was the purpose of the White Australia Policy and why was Broome exempt?
The purpose of the White Australia Policy was to prevent more non-Europeans from migrating to Australia. Broome was exempt from this policy as it relied heavily on skilled divers from namely Asia, to retrieve the pearls.
10. What do you think might be written on a memorial stone commemorating the Japanese who worked and died in Broome? Write your own message below.
Students own answers.