

Sirius raises a treasure trove for Bicentennial

By BERWYN LEWIS

GRAEME Henderson is a bit of an underwater Indiana Jones.

He sometimes carries a knife for knocking back barnacles or sea urchins and for wrestling with the occasional length of seaweed.

But Mr Henderson, leader of the Norfolk Island-based Sirius Shipwreck Expedition, a Bicentennial project funded by British Airways, is also found with a pintle (rudder hinge) or bolt in hand, as he surfaces from the reef which wrecked the Sirius in March 1790 off Sydney Bay, Norfolk Island.

This week Mr Henderson, who is holed up with an underwater expedition team in Kingston, Sydney Bay, has been concentrating his underwater explorations on the Sirius ballast mound, iron blocks measuring 9m long by 3m, each weighing 3 hundred-weight.

There were 340 on board the Sirius when she headed for Australia and so far the expedition has exposed more than 100.

Last Sunday the expedition team began digging trenches through the ballast site to

raise the blocks and expose what lies beneath them.

"We hope to find some evidence of the hull," Mr Henderson said.

In 1983 the expedition team began investigations of the site. They found anchors and a carronade (a short gun cannon with a light ball invented by the Carron company just before the Sirius left England in 1787).

Originally built as the Baltic trading ship, Berwick, in 1780-81, the HMS Sirius is best known as the principal naval consort to the First Fleet.

Her career ran aground when, carrying desperately needed supplies, she struck a reef in Sydney Bay.

But the expedition team discovered the Sirius was also the equivalent of a modern-day war ship when they found an underwater stone causeway used for hauling the guns ashore on gun carriages.

This discovery has led to a theory that there was more to Norfolk Island than just a convict dump. It is now believed that the colony was a well-intentioned port to provision ships for future

strategic activities in the area at that time related to China, France, and the Dutch and Spanish.

Touching the relics from this first ship is like making a connection with something akin to an Australian version of the Mayflower.

For this reason, the Sirius expedition is one of the more significant events in the Bicentennial. There is more to it than chains, shackles and manacles.

Discovery

And this event links the history of transport from the old world to the new antipodean land which is why British Airways has come into the picture and become the leading funding interest.

In 1985 it was established that the Sirius wreckage was scattered over an area of a square mile around Kingston Pier.

In 1987 the team discovered the ballast mound.

Mr Henderson, curator at the Department of Maritime Archaeology, at Western Australia's Maritime Museum in Fremantle, is now laying a 1m by 4m grid and

chipping away at ballast blocks.

The discovery of the pintle has been overshadowed by two major finds last week, another carronade and a small Spanish coin.

"The carronade was sitting right out in the open," Mr Henderson said.

"We were surprised we hadn't seen it before. It was covered by seaweed.

"Suddenly what we thought was a rock turned into a cannon."

"Our aim with the work on the Sirius is to learn more about the ship and in turn, the colony and our origins."

The most complicated work on this diving site is identifying, measuring and positioning items.

"You're being buffeted and thrown around a lot so we sometimes tie a buoy on to the nearest rock to the item and then attempt to start raising it," Mr Henderson said.

One of the most unusual finds so far has been the discovery of cannon balls, some of which were grapeshot, in what remains of a canvas-type bag.



Riches . . . Mr Graeme Henderson emerges from the water with the treasured pintle — Picture: RAY STRANGE