

# SHIPWRECK DISCOVERY PROGRAM

GEORGE BASS ANCHOR, WINGAN INLET  
VICTORIA



Environment,  
Land, Water  
and Planning

OFFICIAL

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### Acknowledgment

We acknowledge and respect Victorian Traditional Owners as the original custodians of Victoria's land and waters, their unique ability to care for Country and deep spiritual connection to it. We honour Elders past and present whose knowledge and wisdom has ensured the continuation of culture and traditional practices.

We are committed to genuinely partner, and meaningfully engage, with Victoria's Traditional Owners and Aboriginal communities to support the protection of Country, the maintenance of spiritual and cultural practices and their broader aspirations in the 21st century and beyond.



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# 1. Introduction

In September 2021, Heritage Victoria commenced the Shipwreck Discovery Program aimed at facilitating the reporting of shipwreck discoveries by maritime industries. Initial focus was on the commercial fishing industry considered a key source of information on new finds due to its operational activities.

On this basis, Heritage Victoria approached Seafood Industry Victoria to seek their involvement in the program. To raise awareness, on-board stickers and cards with information on how to recognise finds was distributed to 580 commercial fishers.

Following is a report based on information provided by Helen Burvill, Eastern Zone Abalone Industry Association on 23 January 2023 of an interview which mentioned a potential discovery made by an abalone diver called John Black.

# 2. Description

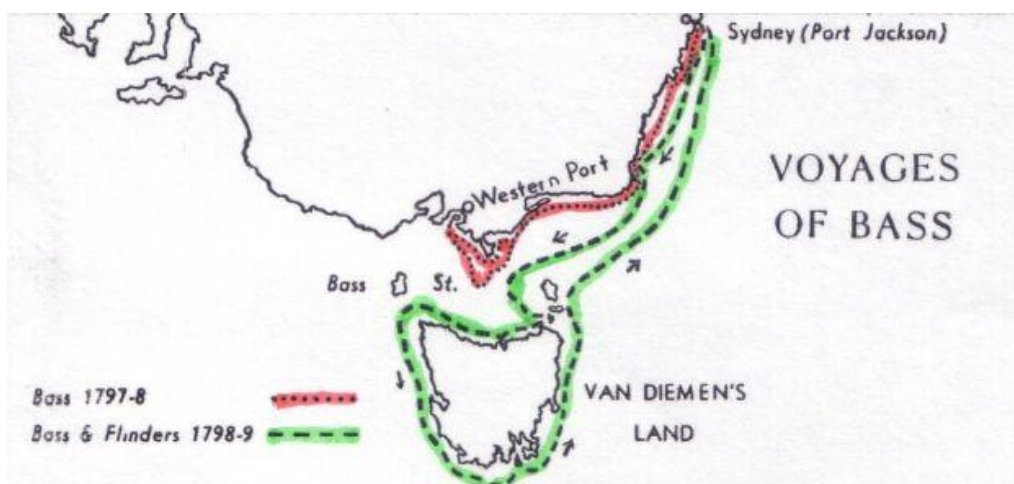
Anchor lost by George Bass at Wingan Inlet during the exploration of the Victorian coast in 1797-98.

# 3. Status

Not found. The primary source of information on the likely location of the anchor is the voyage journal kept by Bass, the transcript from the John Black interview and the Proceedings of the Royal Society of Victoria.

# 4. Background

On 3 December 1797 George Bass (1771-1803) set out on a voyage of exploration in a whaleboat with six crew and charted about 500 kilometres of new coastline including the Victorian coast from below Cape Howe to Westernport Bay (see map below).



Source: David Reilly, Australian Explorers.

Bass's whaleboat crew first set foot on Victorian soil on Thursday 21 December 1797 at 5 pm, landing 'in a little bight upon the end of a little beach about a mile north of the Ram Head', intending merely to refill their water-casks, but bad weather kept the men there for ten days. When they put to sea again – having had to abandon their anchor which had got stuck in the sand - they continued tracing the unknown coast westwards, reaching Wilson's Promontory (which Bass mistakenly thought was Furneaux's Land) on 2 January 1798" (Gregory Eccleston).

"His study of the currents, winds, and tides in this new area prompted him to suggest that Van Diemen's Land, as Tasmania was then known, was separated from the mainland by the strait which now bears his name" (Project Gutenberg Australia).

## 5. Vessel Details

This particular whaleboat had been built in Sydney, of native timber, banksia wood lined with cedar. She was 28 feet long, rather flat floored, with a somewhat curved keel, and double-bowed (with head and stern alike) as was the case with all whaleboats (Gregory Eccleston).

The whaleboat was called *Elizabeth*. The journey was highly regarded at the time as one of the great feats of seafaring. The whaleboat was left on the shores of Sydney Harbour and was regarded as something of an icon by the locals (see engraving below) (Museums Victoria).



George Bass's Whaleboat. From an engraving by Lesueur, in the Atlas to Peron and Freycinet's "Voyage de decouvertes aux Terres Australes." The boat is represented stayed up on the foreshore in front of the line of fencing.

## 6. Location

The information on the anchor's likely location is derived from Bass's Journal of a Whaleboat Voyage, 3 Dec 1797 - Feb 1798, published in Historical Records of New South Wales, Volume No.3 pp. 319 - 329. Also used was the transcript of the interview with John Black and the Proceedings of the Royal Society of Victoria.

## George Bass: Journal of a Whaleboat Voyage: 3 Dec 1797 - Feb 1798

Following is an extract (including historical annotations) from the pages of the George Bass Journal. See Attachment 1 for details.

- *Thursday 21<sup>st</sup>. (December 1797): landed in a little bight<sup>1</sup> upon the end of a little beach about a mile north of the Ram Head.*

<sup>1</sup> *Doubtless that now known as Wingan Inlet.*

- *“Friday 22<sup>nd</sup>. - A gale set in at S. W. b W., which continued for ten days.*
- *Saturday, 30<sup>th</sup>. -The gale broke up, and we had a light breeze at E.N.E. The boat had never been beached all the time we had been here, for at high water the surf washed up over the beach to the foot of the sand-cliffs, but she lay off at an anchor in a place where, though a swell came in, no breaking-water could.*

*When we attempted to weigh the anchor to go out we found it so completely buried in the sand that the boat could not lift it; we therefore waited till low water, and then attempted with our feet and with sticks to scrape away the sand from it, but in vain.*

*We tried at the next low water, when the cable parted at the clinch, and after some further ineffectual attempts we gave it up as irrecoverable, unless that at our return the sand that the late gale had thrown into the corner should be by that time worked out again. The anchor was not buried less than 4 or 5 feet.*

- *Monday 12<sup>th</sup>. (January 1798) PM: at 4 went into the bight at the Ram Head, to endeavour at the recovery of our anchor, supposing the sand thrown in by the gale which buried it might by this time have worked out again. A.M: Looked for it, but in vain; wind E.N.E. (George Bass Journal)*

## John Black Transcript

Information on the anchor is derived from the transcript of an interview conducted with John Black by Kate Fielding (Source: John Black Oral History, Culture Victoria).

### John Black

“John Black is an abalone diver and licence holder. He began snorkel diving in Sydney around 1951 and was very successful in Australia’s early spearfishing competitions. In the late 50s and early 60s he harvested and sold fish, abalone and crayfish on a small-scale amateur basis. He moved to Mallacoota to fish for abalone professionally in 1967, and was involved in the establishment and ongoing development of the Mallacoota Abalone Co-op.

“John has dived on various wrecks along the Gippsland coast including the Monumental City, Iron Prince, SS Riverina and the Schah – the 1837 wreck which John is credited with locating.”

### Fly Cove

“Another interesting thing – when I got out of diving I bought a sailing boat and went sailing, I was going to get what they call a magnetometer, and I was going to have a look around some of the old pearl diving areas see if I could find some of the old luggers that sunk up further north, but before Ken Morrison<sup>2</sup> died down here, he was with the National Parks, he said if you really read the book about Bass and Flinders, I think it was, or who ever it was – excuse my history on that side – sailed down the coast from Sydney to Tasmania, there’s a little place down off the Wingan Inlet, a little place we call Fly Cove, it’s a perfect, beautiful little anchorage, very small, big enough for about a 35 foot boat to anchor in, and he was the boss of National Parks.

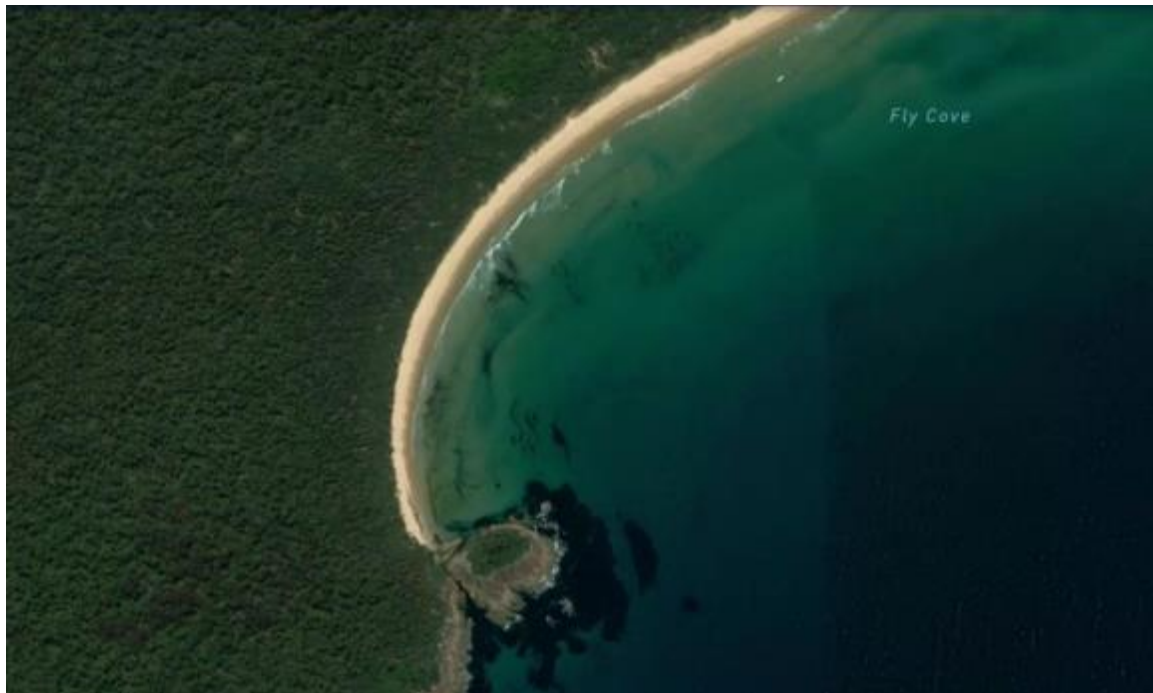
“He said, according to him, he said they wrote they lost an anchor and he said he’d back it in that it was at Fly Cove. I’d be very interested to go down there and have a bit of a fossick around. It is an area that’s very, very bouldery on the bottom, if an anchor was put down there to hold a boat it could

possibly jam in. It's also an area that when the sand moves, a bit like the entrance here at Mallacoota, and each time I've been down there this bay is just completely full of sand, there's no way you can see the rocky bottom. But I have been down there after really huge seas and idled in there, it's been too rough to jump in, and it is quite a rocky bottom. So there maybe a real good bit of history down there. That's one anchor I haven't found yet but I wouldn't mind having a bit of a scratch for that one day down in that little Fly Cove area. It would be interesting."

<sup>2</sup> In 1964 Ranger Ken Morrison, was appointed to look after Lind, Alfred and Wingan Inlet National Parks, in addition to the Mallacoota Inlet National Park, where he was based. Over the next few years Ken carried out basic improvements to the campground facilities, constructed a new walking track to the beach, and supervised works on the access road. (Graham Parkes).

### Proceedings of the Royal Society of Victoria 1969

What Bass identified as Ram Head is the feature which has that name today. The whaleboat anchorage is a tiny sheltered cove at the westernmost end of the sand bar which separates Wingan Inlet from the ocean; it is protected on the sea-ward side by a little rocky peninsula (N.A Wakefield).



Map of Fly Cove, Wingan Inlet, Victoria.

## 7. Assessment

George Bass is one of Australia's principal explorers and the discovery of the anchor would be of national importance.

According to the information provided, Fly Cove is "a tiny sheltered cove", so the area to be covered in any search is not great (according to John Black "very small, big enough for about a 35 foot boat to anchor in"). Finding the anchor may be difficult because of the anchor's likely small size. However, it was significant enough for Bass to return to the location to look for it.

There could possibly be an associated land site with artefacts given Bass stayed there for 10 days. Based on Bass's Journal, the landing at Fly Cove in December 1797 makes it the second oldest officially recorded European landing site in Victoria after the *Sydney Cove* Longboat landing in February 1797.

## 8. Directions

Wingan Inlet is within the Croajingolong National Park, in East Gippsland, Victoria. The inlet is of historical significance. James Cook recorded the existence of the Inlet on his chart while naming the nearby southern headland, Ram Head, on Thursday, April 19, 1770.

Wingan Inlet Campground is a 6.5 hour drive east of Melbourne. Head along the Princes Highway and, approximately 17km east of Cann River, turn down West Wingan Road. The campground is at the end of the unsealed road (Parks Victoria).

The nearest boating facilities are at Mallacoota Inlet (Gippsland Ports) and Cape Conran (Better Boating Victoria).

## 9. Finder Information

If the anchor is found, please leave it where it is. If possible, record the GPS co-ordinates or estimate the position on a map, take photos and call Heritage Victoria on 03 7022 6390 or email: [heritage.victoria@delwp.vic.gov.au](mailto:heritage.victoria@delwp.vic.gov.au).

Information on how to identify shipwreck and artefact discoveries can be found on the Heritage Victoria website under "Shipwreck Discovery Program" [Commercial-Fishing-Industry-Victoria-Guidelines-For-Reporting-Shipwreck-Discoveries \(11\).pdf](#) , [Commercial-Fishing-Q-and-A \(20\).pdf](#).

Heritage Victoria welcomes the involvement of the diving community in identifying the exact location of the anchor. Discoveries can be formally acknowledged by Heritage Victoria with the inclusion of the discovery in official records and the awarding of a certificate.

## 10. References

- David Reilly. Australian Explorers website. [George Bass \(davidreilly.com\)](#).
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- Parks Victoria. Wingan Inlet Campground website. [Wingan Inlet Campground \(parks.vic.gov.au\)](#).



- Gippsland Ports website. [Mallacoota Inlet - Gippsland Ports](#).
- Better Boating Victoria website. [Cape Conran | Better Boating Victoria](#).

## 11. Attachments

Attachment 1. George Bass. Journal of a Whaleboat Voyage, 3 Dec. 1797 - Feb 1798. Published in Historical Records of New South Wales, Volume No.3. pp 319, 320, 321, 329.

Tuesday, 19th.—A M. : Sailed at daylight with a light breeze at N.N.W ; at 7 rounded the north point of a bay which seemed capable of affording security for shipping. At 9, the sea-breeze coming at N.E., we continued sailing round the bay, and then stood away to the southward ; for I thought it better to leave this bay for further examination at our return than lose a fair opportunity of getting to the southward.\*

Wednesday, 20th.—P.M. : Wind N.E. At 5, the wind coming at S.S.W., we anchored under the lee of a point, but could not land.

A.M. : Daylight, with a light air at north ; 10, sea-breeze at E.N.E ; 11, passed Cape Howe ; at noon our latitude  $37^{\circ} 30'$ .

Thursday, 21st.—P.M. : 5, landed in a little bight† upon the end of a little beach about a mile north of the Ram Head to fill as much water as we could cask, for as the coast was now very rapidly becoming more sandy and low as we advanced to the southward, and we had every reason to believe the country at this time to be everywhere unusually dry, I was under some apprehension that, unless we had a stock of water to serve for several days, we might be obliged to return to the northward from the difficulty of meeting with it, and so lose the object of our research.

Friday, 22nd.—A gale set in at S. W. b. W., which continued for ten days. The country here is in general low, sandy, and not without lagoons, yet in figure hilly, but the hills are little else than sand ; they have indeed a patched covering of green which might deceive the eye at a distance, but the usual sterility of soil still prevails. The best I have been able to find is like what at Port Jackson is reckoned so favourable for potatoes, which is a mixture of sand with a very small proportion of vegetable earth.

The general productions are short deformed gum-trees, the tea-tree, some small shrubs, and patches of an almost impenetrable underwood of small brush, ground fern, and vines. The foliage of the underwood is rich and green, but the trees are far more dusky and brown than I have seen anywhere else. A luxuriant crop of grass may occasionally be found in places where the underwood has thinned off, but the soil is still the same. Where thick grass belly-high and fern plants are growing together one might expect a better soil, but it is only a blackish sand like the rest.

It is but very few miles that I have been able to penetrate into this close country, but by the sand patches, which when I ascended the Ram Head I could distinctly see peeping out of the sides of the back hills, I can conclude no otherwise than that the soil to a great distance inland is equally [as] poor as, if not worse than, that which I have already trodden over.

\* This was evidently Twofold Bay. See the entry under date 15th February, 1798.—Post, p. 320.

† Doubtless that now known as Wingan Inlet.

1797-8 We had remarked at every stage from Jervis Bay to Barmouth  
30 Dec. to Creek that the fresh water kept increasing both in badness and in  
1 Jan. difficulty of procuring it.

The supplies On this coast of almost mere sand we expected the difficulty to  
of fresh increase in a still greater proportion, but we were deceived, for  
water. there are here many little runs of excellent water that, draining  
out of the sandhills, trickle over the rocky spots at their feet or  
sink through the beaches into the sea.

An anchor Saturday, 30th.—The gale broke up, and we had a light breeze  
lost. at E.N.E. The boat had never been beached all the time we had  
been here, for at high water the surf washed up over the beach to  
the foot of the sand-cliffs, but she lay off at an anchor in a place  
where, though a swell came in, no breaking-water could. When  
we attempted to weigh the anchor to go out we found it so com-  
pletely buried in the sand that the boat could not lift it; we there-  
fore waited till low water, and then attempted with our feet and  
with sticks to scrape away the sand from it, but in vain. We  
tried at the next low water, when the cable parted at the clinch,  
and after some further ineffectual attempts we gave it up as irre-  
coverable, unless that at our return the sand that the late gale had  
thrown into the corner should be by that time worked out again.  
The anchor was not buried less than 4 or 5 feet.

Appearance Sunday, 31st.—A.M. : Daylight, got out and steered along to the  
of the coast. southward in anxious expectation, being now nearly come upon an  
hitherto unknown part of the coast. The wind was at E.N.E. ;  
our course up till noon, when our latitude was  $37^{\circ} 42'$ , was about  
W.S.W. ; we had then run, according to our rough way of reckon-  
ing, about 30 miles, the land all the way being of nearly the same  
height as about the Ram Head—in front, long beaches at the  
bottom of bights of no great depth, lying between low rocky pro-  
jecting points—there might be about three of these in the whole  
distance; in the back land lay some short ridges of lumpy irregular  
hills at a little distance from the sea.

Ninety-mile Monday, Jan. 1, 1798.—P.M. : The wind continued at E.N.E.,  
Beach. and we steered along close in with the land. By 9 we supposed our-  
selves to have gone upon a nearly W.S.W. course about from 30 to  
36 miles, but we here and there observed a draining of a current  
which increased the uncertainty. The land in the whole of this  
distance was nothing but a low beach—a very small hummock  
appeared indeed every now and then inland. There were many  
large smokes behind the beach, as we conjectured by the sides of  
lagoons, of which there was reason to believe the back country  
was full.

A moonlight At 10, being bright moonlight and the sky without a cloud, we  
night. could see the land distinctly ; it was still low and level. At 11-30  
we lost the distinct sight, so as not to be able to judge of any gaps  
or breaks there might be in it ; it was low, however, but a haze

had arisen over it. At 12, the haze thickening, we could scarcely see the land at all. At 2 a.m., the sea becoming more hollow and lofty, we judged ourselves to be getting into shoal water, or that the beach was altering its direction; we therefore hauled out to S.W. b. S., having since 9 ran about S.W. 10 or 12 miles. At 3.10 sufficient day had broken in upon the sky for us to see the land; it was still low and level sand, and seemed to trend in nearly the direction of our course. At 7 we were surprised by the sight of high hummocky land right ahead, but at a considerable distance. We steered for it, but that did not oblige us to quit the beach, for it also appeared to be making the same way in nearly as straight a course as it was able. At noon our latitude was  $38^{\circ} 41'$ ; the high land was now abreast of us; its northernmost end bore W. b. N., 2 or 3 miles. There were several small islands laying in various directions to the southward. Vast flights of petrels and other birds flying about us. Our course and distance since 3.10 had been about S.W. b. S. from 35 to 40 miles or more, the beach keeping by the side of us until within a few miles of the high land, where it bighted back in two or three places that had the appearance of inlets. I now found we had filled up the before unexplored space between what is called Point Hicks, a point we could not at all distinguish from the rest of the beach, and the land seen by Furneaux in latitude  $39^{\circ} 00'$ , for this high hummocky land could be no other than the land seen by him.

1798  
1 to 2 Jan.

Wilson's  
Promon-  
tory.

Point Hicks.

Tuesday, 2nd.—P.M.: We stood in to the southward along by the high land, with the wind fresh at E.N.E. At 2 steered down for a large hummock, bearing S.  $\frac{1}{2}$  E., that had just risen out of the water, and from its being so much larger than the rest, I suppose might be the main continued on by very low land from the back part of Furneaux's Land. At 4 the hummock proved to be an island. Furneaux's Land, too, appeared like an island; we could see no land joining to it, either on the east or west sides. We continued standing on for the hummock island, expecting, as it seemed large, to get shelter there, or, perhaps, landing.

Rounding  
the Promon-  
tory.

At 6 we anchored under its lee, but could not land. Vast numbers of petrels, gulls, and other birds were roosting upon it, and on the rocks were many seals with a remarkably long tapering neck and sharp-pointed head. At daylight, the wind being very strong at N.E. b. E., and apprehending we should not fetch Furneaux's Land, I judged it best to steer about S.  $\frac{1}{2}$  E. for the islands lying to the northward of Van Dieman's Land. Accordingly, we sailed, but at 6 the wind shifted to E. b. S., when I presently found from the sea that was going, and the lee way the boat was making by being obliged every now and then to launch her off to the westward before the heaviest of the breaking seas, that we should not fetch near the land we were steering for. I stood on, however, with an intention, as we were thus far from the

In Bass  
Strait.

recollecting this part of the shore, I found that we had after we hauled out ran along about 10 miles of it lying in the same direction. The wind having died away gradually, a short interval of calm succeeded. At 10 it set in strong from the E.N.E. As we had no part to bear up for nearer than the inlets, and the boat was in no condition for keeping the sea with a foul wind, I thought it most proper, although there was a heavy surf going upon the shore, to hazard her taking the beach; accordingly, having tripped her off and on until noon, in order to get the latitude, which was  $37^{\circ} 47'$ , we pushed in through the surf and landed her safely. 1798  
10 to 16 Feb.  
Beaching  
the boat.

Sunday, 11th.—The country at the back of this place is nothing but dried up swamps and barren sandhills. Some natives came to us with very little hesitation, the usual signs of friendship being offered and accepted on each side. By their manner we concluded they had never seen white people before, or ever heard of them. In the evening the wind, at E.N.E., died away. Natives.

A.M. : At 2 the wind and clouds came away strong from the S.W., and seemed to threaten us with a gale. As with this wind the surf must very speedily rise so much that it would be impossible for us to leave the beach until some time after the gale was over, we determined to try if the boat could get through it. There was no time to be lost; therefore we immediately dragged the boat down to the water's edge, got everything into her, and, as soon as we had light enough to see what we were about, launched her into it, and succeeded in getting her out; then bore away to the northward. At noon the Ram Head was just come in sight. Ram Head.

Monday, 12th.—P.M. : At 4 went into the bight at the Ram Head, to endeavour at the recovery of our anchor, supposing the sand thrown in by the gale which buried it might by this time have worked out again. A.M. : Looked for it, but in vain; wind E.N.E.

Thursday, 15th.—P.M. : At 4, the easterly winds being done, a strong breeze set in suddenly at S.W. We immediately stood to the northward with it. At 10 passed Cape Howe. A.M. : At noon we were off the mouth of the bay we had sailed round on the 19th December, and found the latitude to be  $36^{\circ} 53'.$ \* Stood into the bay. Cape Howe.

Friday, 16th.—At 1 p.m. landed in the upper part of the bay. I employed myself until sunset in examining the country round, and had the mortification to find that the same sterility we had almost everywhere witnessed upon the coast still attended it.

The figure of the land, especially on the N.W. and west sides, is hilly in hummocks. The hills are stony; the sides of the gullies between them and some little low land at their foot is well covered with soil, in patches, at the expence of the higher ground. The natural productions are the general ones of the country. The Twofold  
Bay.

\* Twofold Bay. The correct latitude is  $37^{\circ} 5'$ .—Ante, p. 319.

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