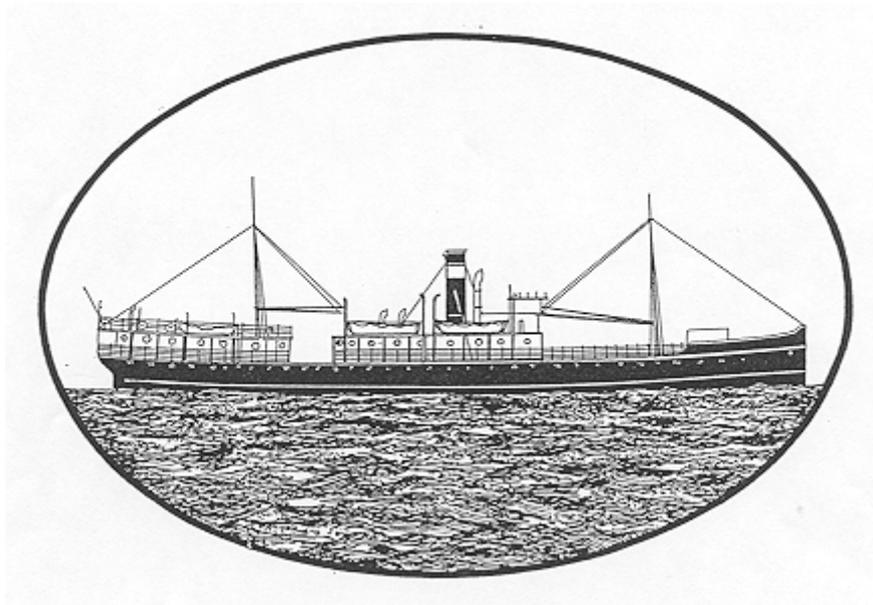


S.S. MERIMBULA



WRECK INSPECTION REPORT

Department of Planning, Sydney 1992

D Nutley & T Smith

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s.s. *Merimbula* (1909-1928)

WRECK INSPECTION REPORT

INTRODUCTION

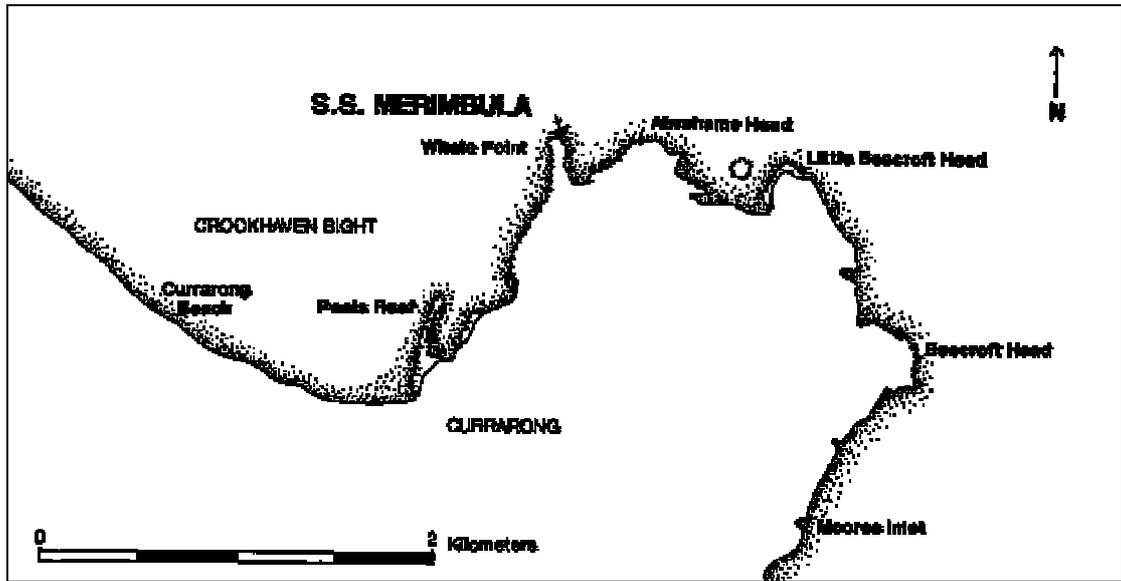
The Department of Planning enlisted Manly Hydraulics Laboratory (MHL) to assist in undertaking a survey of the s.s. *Merimbula* shipwreck site.

MHL was required to assist in locating the wreck and to provide diving support for the underwater survey of the remains. The fieldwork was carried out on 23 August, 1991, following earlier land based inspections of the site on 10 November, 1988 and 22 August, 1991.

Those present on the 1991 inspection were:

D. Nutley, Department of Planning, Maritime Archaeologist (Officer in Charge);
T. Smith, Department of Planning, Assistant Maritime Archaeologist;
C. Browne, MHL (Diver Supervisor);
P. Clark, MHL (Diver Attendant).

Location Map - Figure 1



OBJECTIVES

General

To accumulate data regarding the wreck site in relation to its environmental and archaeological characteristics; to develop site interpretation and an assessment of archaeological potential.

Specific

1. To locate the site and record an accurate position of the remains.
2. To assess existing sketches of the site provided by sports divers and to identify any changes.
3. To document the nature and spread of the exposed remains and to assess environmental impacts on the site.

METHODOLOGY

A history of the s.s. *Merimbula* was prepared by consultant archaeologist Adam Wolfe as part of "The New South Wales Historic Shipwrecks Study", prepared for the New South Wales Department of Planning in 1990. Additional information regarding the vessel and wreck site was obtained from Mr. John Riley who had inspected the remains previously in 1978 and 1984.

Wreck Site Location

Prominent landmarks were used to obtain an approximate position of the site. This position was confirmed by divers conducting a snorkel swim over the target area. The wreck structure was found to lie at a depth of between 4m and 13m (stern).

Wreck Inspection

An underwater inspection of the remains was conducted by David Nutley, Timothy Smith and Colin Browne. The dive aimed at examining the visible extent of the wreck structure and concentrated on validating existing site sketches obtained from sports divers. These sketches proved to adequately record the general layout of major features associated with the wreck.

Measurements were taken of the port boiler face and forward portion of hull flooring. Key features were recorded using still photography and video footage.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Adapted, in part, from Wolfe, A., 1990, "The New South Wales Historic Shipwrecks Study", prepared for the New South Wales Department of Planning.

Today, the s.s. *Merimbula*, a large twin screw steamship, lies at a depth of between 4-13 metres below Whale Point on Beecroft Peninsula, north of Jervis Bay. The vessel ran its bows onto the point on the night of 27 March, 1928, later sinking down the steeply shelving reef.

The steamer was ordered by the Illawarra and South Coast Steam Navigation Company, following the loss of the *Bega* which hit a submerged object and sank off Tathra on 5 April, 1908.

Built by the Ailsa Shipbuilding Company of Troon, Scotland, the *Merimbula* was launched in 1909. With a length of 209'6", breadth of 32'2" and depth of 21' 1", the steamer was the largest vessel ever ordered by the company. Fitted with twin triple expansion engines, also built by Ailsa, the vessel was capable of 14 knots. The two boilers were built by Hudson and Sons of Glasgow.

The *Merimbula* had accommodation for 96 first class and 10 second class passengers. The first class cabins were L-shaped which allowed each cabin to have its own porthole.

On 20 October, 1909, the new vessel sailed from the Clyde to Sydney via the Suez Canal, Aden, Colombo, Fremantle and Albany. The *Merimbula* was immediately put into service in the southern trade, the normal run taking in the ports of Sydney, Bermagui, Tathra, *Merimbula* and Eden. The *Merimbula* usually managed two runs a week. The vessel, however, was found to be unstable in some sea conditions. To rectify this problem, a large number of cast iron blocks were placed in the hold for stabilisation (1).

The steamer remained in the South Coast trade throughout World War I. In 1917, the *Merimbula* helped refloat the *Cumberland* which had run aground on Gabo Island after being mined on August 12.

In 1918, the *Merimbula* was chartered by J. Rowe and Sons of Hobart to carry apples, agricultural produce and passengers between Hobart, Sydney and Brisbane. In August 1920, the steamer was again under charter carrying a load of coal from Newcastle to Hobart. The *Merimbula* was only employed in these trades when business was slack on the south coast (2).

New regulations concerning award conditions for seamen, led to the conversion of the second class accommodation to crew space in 1921. The 1920's was a period of decline for the *Merimbula* in the face of competition from the railways and roads. The *Merimbula* carried fewer passengers and found it increasingly difficult to find cargoes.

Wreck Event

The *Merimbula* left on a return trip from Sydney to Eden on 25 March, 1928, under the command of Captain O'Connor. The steamer steadily ran into worsening weather to the south.

At 1 a.m. on the morning of 27 March, 1928, the thirteen passengers were awoken by the grinding impact of the vessel driving onto Beecroft Peninsula. The dramatic nature of the grounding was later captured by photographers (3).

In heavy rain, the engines were stopped and everybody arrived on deck. The crew battled to free the lifeboats which got stuck. Rescue rockets were fired but there was no answer. The Captain believed the vessel was in no immediate danger and sent the passengers back to the lounge, still with their lifejackets on. There they spent the remainder of the night drinking coffee and eating sandwiches.

Rain continued the following morning as the lifeboats were lowered. The passengers were rowed across to the mouth of Currarong Creek where they found shelter in a fisherman's hut.

In the meantime, Captain O'Connor and some of his crew set out to find help. The Captain walked across Beecroft Peninsula to the lighthouse at Point Perpendicular, which he reached, wet and exhausted. He then telephoned the Illawarra and South Coast Steam Navigation Company in Sydney to advise them of the grounding. The lighthouse keeper, Pilot Evans also notified Sergeant Matheson in Nowra of the situation.

Three cars were sent from Nowra to pick up the passengers who were taken back to Nowra. Marine assessors arrived at the wreck site on 28 March and concluded that there was a remote chance of refloating the *Merimbula*. The bow was high and dry and the stern awash. A salvage vessel was chartered for the operation. However, the *Merimbula* began to sink on the following day and the attempt was cancelled. The Captain and crew were taken from the scene on the 31st and the *Merimbula* was later auctioned in Sydney on 2 April. The purchaser bought the wreck for £300 and still hoped to refloat the vessel using a coffer dam. This was not successful and explosives were later used to blast open the hull to salvage machinery. The remains eventually slid completely into the sea, only the bow section remaining up on the rocks (4).

A Marine Board of Enquiry was convened to investigate the cause of the wreck. The Board was unable to draw any conclusions, though praised the Captain and crew for their subsequent handling of the affair.

Much looting by local residents was reported and today it is possible to see reminders of the steamer in living rooms throughout the Shoalhaven Shire (5). The loss of the *Merimbula* marked the termination of the Illawarra and South Coast Steam Navigation Company's passenger services, and subsequent to 1928, they confined their activities only to cargo services.

s.s. MERIMBULA - CONSTRUCTION DETAILS (14)

Official Number : 125225 Port Number 3 in 1910, Sydney
Launched : 1909
Where Built : Troon, Scotland
Builders : Ailsa Shipbuilding Company
Owners : Illawarra and South Coast Steam Navigation Company
Construction : Steel, twin screw steamer. Rigged as a two masted schooner
Dimensions : L.209'6", B.32'2", D.21'1"
Gross Tonnage : 1111.49 tons
Propulsion : Two triple expansion engines

NOTES

1. Wolfe, A., 1990, The New South Wales Historic Shipwreck Study. New South Wales Department of Planning. p.51.
2. Ibid., p.52.
3. Ibid., p.52.
4. Ibid., p.53.
4. Vickeridge, G., 1988, Wreck of the *Merimbula*. The Shoalhaven Chronograph, Vol.18(5):1.

ENVIRONMENTAL DESCRIPTION

Location

The site's co-ordinates were found using a Global Positioning System (GPS). They are:

Lat 35° 00' 16"
Long 150° 49' 42"

Map names:
CURRARONG 9027-1-N
1:25000

CURRARONG W8217-1
Orthophoto map 1:4000

The remains are located adjacent to the north side of the reef which extends from Whale Point, Beecroft Peninsula. Wreckage can be located immediately in 4 meters of water and extends out from the reef to a depth of approximately 13 meters.

Periodically subjected to heavy swell and sea conditions due to the exposed nature of Beecroft Peninsula, the area is especially dangerous when north-east swells are running. Most of the remains lie amongst boulders on reef, the stern lying at the greatest depth on sand. The exposed bow section is located approximately 300 meters to the south-west of the main deposit.

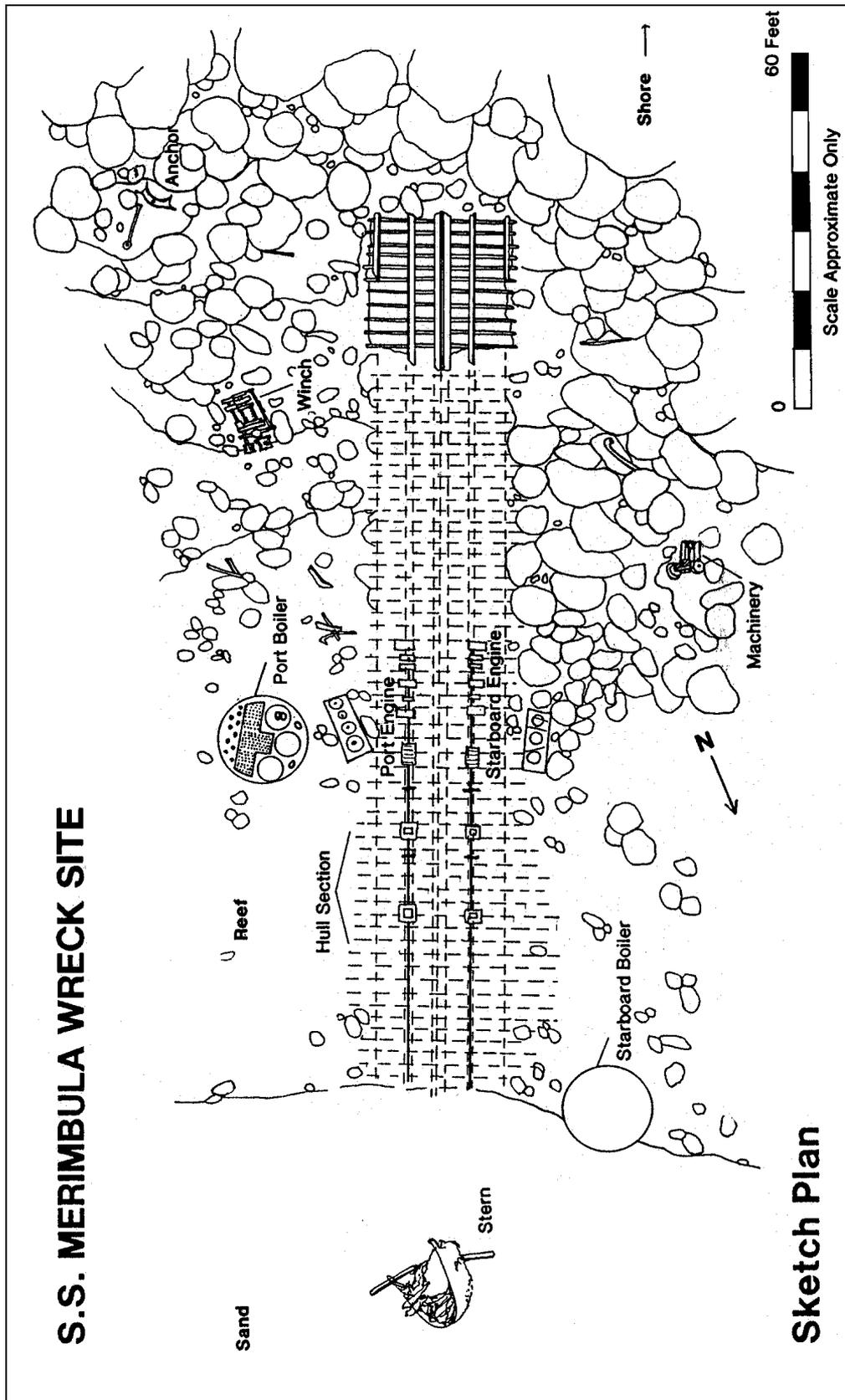
Access to the submerged remains can be made directly from the exposed reef in suitable conditions, via the NPWS walking track.

Archaeological Remains

Substantial sections of the lower hull plating (floors), engines, boilers, an anchor, winches, propeller shafts and counter stern (separated), can be found. The hull lays out from the reef for approximately 55 meters, with the boilers lying to either side (Figure 2).

The dive confirmed the suitability of the *Merimbula* for future extensive recording. The well integrated wreck structure, being easily visible on the reef, lends itself for interpretation through an informative graphic display.

Figure 2 - Wreck Site Sketch Plan.



ASSESSMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

Significance has been assessed in accordance with the nature and degree of significance of the site's primary attributes. These include attributes related to historical, social, archaeological, scientific and interpretative significance.

Historical (concerned with range of context)

The s.s. *Merimbula* documents the last steam passenger service operating on the New South Wales south coast.

The loss of the *Merimbula* marked the termination of the Illawarra and South Coast Steam Navigation Company's passenger services. Subsequent to 1928, they confined their activities only to cargo services.

Technical (concerned with technical or creative achievements)

The largest vessel ever built by the Ailsa Shipbuilding Company for the Illawarra and South Coast Steam Navigation Company.

Archaeological (Concerned with research potential through investigation of material remains)

Although the archaeological potential of the site has been reduced through salvage of the wreck before its total loss, there is potential for the survival of unsalvaged cultural material amongst the wreck structure and surrounding reef.

Interpretative (concerned with public education values)

A shipwreck which, due to its integrity, dramatic location and historical documentation, has considerable potential for public interpretation through displays, brochures and other publications.

The site is already included on the National Parks and Wildlife walking trail of Beecroft Peninsula and is marked with an interpretative plaque.

Social (Concerned with community regard or esteem)

A site which ranks as one of the most popular wreck dives in New South Wales, noted especially for its scenic qualities and photographic possibilities.

The site is valued as a tourist attraction by the local community / Shire and has been incorporated into a Beecroft Peninsula walking trail. The site is also valued by sports divers because of its visual appeal and accessibility.

Degree of Significance

Representative (concerned with the typical or characteristic)

Representative of the steamers used in the south coast passenger / cargo trade.

The *Merimbula* was a well appointed passenger steamer employed by the Illawarra and South Coast Steam Navigation Company on the New South Wales south coast.

STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

The *Merimbula* wreck site and its associated relics are representative of the well appointed passenger services which linked the communities of the New South Wales south coast in the early part of the century. A site which, due to its integrity and accessibility has considerable importance as a recreational dive site.

RECOMMENDATIONS

As a result of the historical research, wreck site inspection and subsequent assessment of significance, it is recommended that:

1. the s.s. *Merimbula* (1909-1928) and its associated relics be declared historic pursuant to Section 5 of the Commonwealth Historic Shipwrecks Act, 1976.
2. that the gazetted position of the s.s. *Merimbula* be stated as:

Lat 35° 51' 07.7"
Long 150° 11' 00.0"

2. interpretative broadsheets be prepared for distribution to dive shops, dive clubs and the Shoalhaven Shire Council.
4. a Management Plan be prepared for the site and its associated relics.

PHOTOGRAPHIC RECORD



Bow section lying exposed on Whale Point, Beecroft Peninsula.



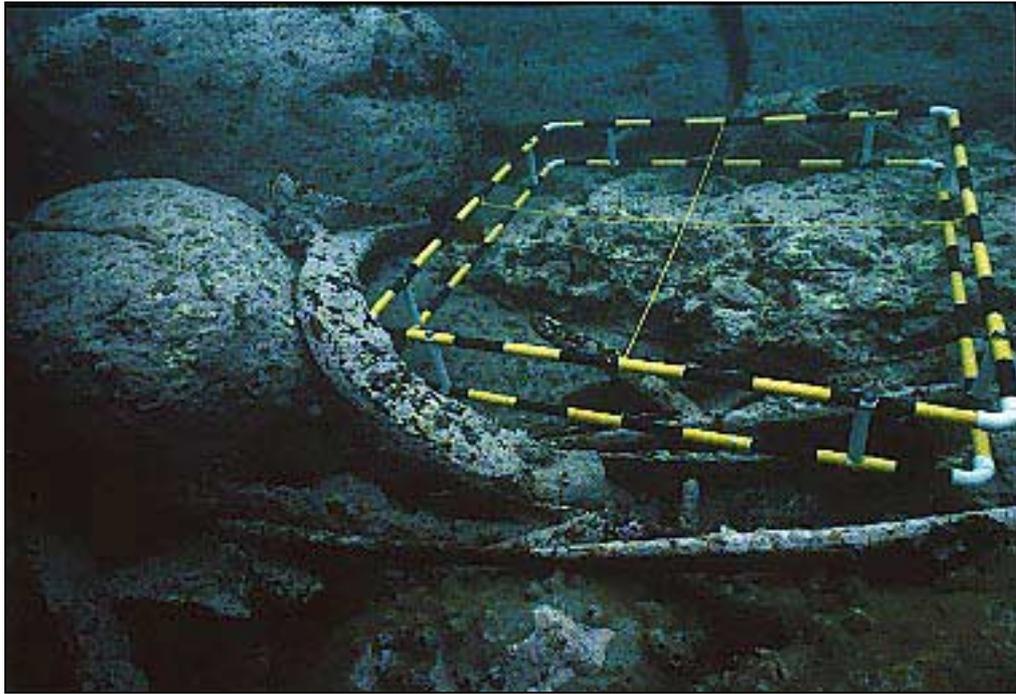
Diver, Colin Brown recording video footage of main area of wreckage. (Photo: D Nutley)



Ship's boiler on port side of the hull remains. (Photo: D Nutley)



Winch and miscellaneous wreckage lying outside of the hull remains, to port. (Photo: D Nutley)



Anchor stock visible immediately below exposed reef. (Photo: D Nutley)



Wreckage in the midship's area. Starboard boiler visible to left. (Photo: D Nutley)