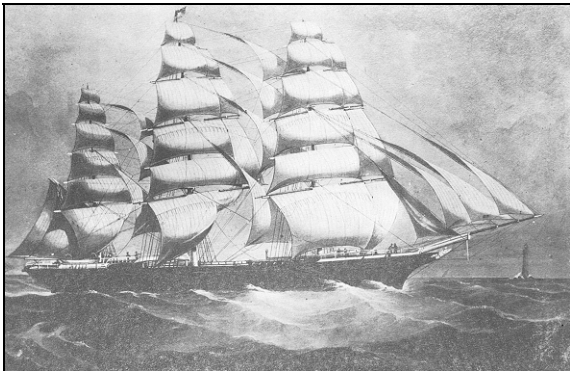


# Centurion SHIPWRECK 1887

## Information Sheet NSW Heritage Office

### “*Particularly Unfortunate*”: the wreck of the *Centurion*.

Spread out on the harbour floor in the midst of the 21<sup>st</sup> century metropolis of Sydney, lies the *Centurion*, a timber sailing ship lost inside North Head in 1887. Few travelling to work on the Manly Ferry would know of its existence beneath their course – a reminder of the days when Sydney Harbour was a major shipping destination, once congested with international and coastal sailing vessels, belching steamers and harbour craft. The loss of the *Centurion* was recorded as ‘avoidable’, having occurred during daylight hours.



*The Centurion as launched in 1869: a magnificent international clipper ship. Painting courtesy: Mr Andrew Donald, Aberdeen.*

The *Centurion* was built as a magnificent clipper ship, later converted to a barque - square-rigged on two of three masts. With a length of 63 metres, the timber vessel was built in 1869 at Aberdeen, Scotland, in the celebrated yard of Walter Hood & Sons. The latest to join the famous Aberdeen White Star Line owned by George Thompson, *Centurion* was built alongside one of the world’s most famous clippers - *Thermopylae*. That ship famously raced the surviving *Cutty Sark* in the China tea and Australian wool trades. *Centurion* made many fine voyages but was not regarded as one of the elite group of clippers that won household acclaim.

Three other vessels built in the Walter Hood shipyard also lie wrecked in NSW – *Fame* (1857) in Sydney Harbour, the builder’s namesake, *Walter Hood* (1870), in *Wreck Bay*, and *Queen of Nations* (1881) at Wollongong

*Centurion* was departing Sydney Heads under tow for Newcastle in order to load coal for Honolulu when it got into difficulties. It was towards the end of its life and the once proud passenger and cargo carrier now served as an ordinary collier. Stored in its hull were 400 tons of coal and 60 tons of rock ballast. As the steamer *Phoebe* manoeuvred the *Centurion* through the Heads, the *Manhegan*, moored in the centre of the entrance impeded its passage.

*Centurion*’s tow rope slipped and fouled the *Phoebe*’s propeller. An anchor was immediately dropped, but the vessel washed onto the rocks of North Head, near the ‘Old Man’s Hat’. Recovering the tow rope, *Phoebe* pulled *Centurion* off but the vessel sank, fatally holed, inside Cannae Point.

Today the site comprises the largest timber shipwreck site in Sydney Harbour and is very popular with recreational SCUBA divers. The complicated archaeological structure is spread over 40 x 15 metres on sand in 19 metres of water. Major elements include a pile of stone ballast, anchor chain, sections of iron-plated masts, and many iron fastenings from the hull. Sections of the hull’s timbers can be seen, particularly when sand levels change, exposing previously buried portions of the structure.



*The Centurion in the process of being wrecked at North Head in 1887. Illustrated Sydney News, Jan 1887. Courtesy State Library of NSW.*

While popular for divers, the site has seen little detailed archaeological recording since its discovery c.1983. The NSW Heritage Office undertook a detailed site survey in 2003-04.

The archaeological site contains an important range of data on hull construction techniques in a period of changing ship technology. While built as a timber sailing vessel, *Centurion* included innovative changes: iron deck beams and supports instead of the traditional timber, iron diagonal straps along the side of the hull, iron-plated lower masts and yards.



A large section of mast protruding through iron deck supports is a central feature of the low relief wreck site. Photograph by David Nutley.

These features have been identified as key elements of a specific transitional building style, known as 'composite' construction. While *Centurion* did not possess novel iron framework associated with that style, it was built during a time of transition in large sailing ship design and construction, and the trialling of new materials and forms, such as iron components.



Heritage Office Maritime Archaeologists surveying the exposed section of timbers that mark the northern end of the wreck site. Photograph copyright: Mark Spencer.

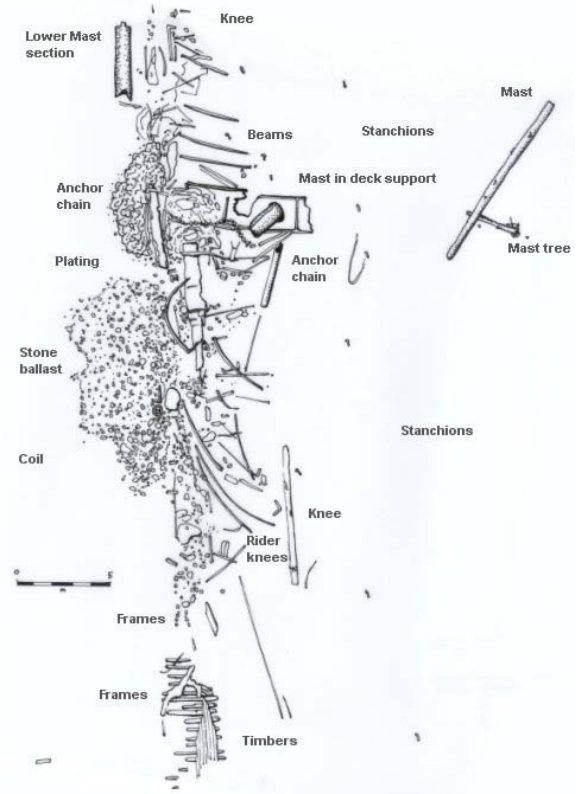
*Centurion* therefore stands as an important marker of these changes and a boon for archaeologists and divers alike. Additional details of the site can be found on the Heritage Office's *Maritime Heritage Online* web site <http://maritime.heritage.nsw.gov.au>.

### Disturbance

*Centurion* is a protected Historic Shipwreck under the NSW *Heritage Act 1977*. Divers are asked to report any disturbance activities immediately to the NSW Water Police, Sydney, or the NSW Heritage Office.

**Visiting Historic Shipwrecks is a privilege. Respect Our Wrecks.**

The Heritage Office wishes to thank NSW Waterways Authority, Manly Hydraulics Laboratory (Department of Commerce), the Australian National Maritime Museum and underwater photographer, Dr Mark Spencer, for their contributions to the *Centurion Project*.



### Sources:

- *Maritime Heritage Online* (NSW Heritage Office web site) <<http://maritime.heritage.nsw.gov.au>>
- *Shipwreck Atlas of New South Wales*. Edition 3. 1996. Heritage Office, Sydney.

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