Nautical heritage of the NSW inland rivers

The inland rivers of New South Wales are home to the remains of riverboats and wharves. Along with historic willows, they mark paths that served as our national highways until the expansion of road and rail networks. Lost through misfortune or abandonment, they have become landmarks. The silt protected remains record social behaviours, commercial aspirations, industrial achievements, the realisation of dreams and the despair of shattered hopes. Some riverboats were lost at a moment in time and entered the archaeological record with many of the personal items of the people they carried. Shipwrecks allow us to view the physical evidence of a distinct period, culture and locality.

Few studies have been undertaken of the submerged heritage of NSW inland rivers. In 1994 a study identified over 70 shipwrecks in the main stream of the Murray River alone. At this rate there could be 200-300 shipwrecks in the entire complex of our inland river system. Along with their associated relics, they form a unique but fragile resource for the promotion of the histories of local areas.

Paddle steamers and barges

River craft differed markedly from their coastal and oceangoing counterparts. They required shallow drafts. They did not have to worry about high seas but were constantly exposed to the changing form of the riverine navigational channels and unexpected submerged tree trunks. Primarily, they were workhorses carrying the produce of the vast grazing and agricultural lands to road heads and coastal shipping. Paddlewheels enabled them to turn in small spaces and their low compression steam engines were reliable and could be fired with wood or coal – handy in remote areas where coal was scarce. The paddlewheelers towed heavily loaded barges, somehow navigating the twists and bends of the inland rivers even in flood. Some displayed a unique range of marine engine and boiler adaptations.

Documentation of the building techniques for specific vessels is scarce. In some cases the shipwrecks provide our only tangible details for a vessel, its operation and employment. Often, historical records such as vessel plans and registry details simply do not survive, or never existed. The physical remains on the riverbed can provide surprises - details not recorded or expected from the written accounts.
NSW Maritime Heritage Program

The Heritage Office Maritime Heritage Program administers legislation that protects historic shipwrecks. The Office also develops education initiatives and encourages public participation in management and conservation of sites. The Office’s maritime archaeologists actively survey and inspect shipwrecks located throughout the State. Community members are encouraged to become regional “Wreck Spotters” and to promote shipwreck research, inspection, site management and protection through their local area.

Archaeological Investigation

By carefully measuring the collapsed structure of shipwrecks and wharves, archaeologists can determine much about the original structure of the vessel or wharf through the pattern of collapse and disintegration over time. Once a site is damaged or disturbed, much of this information is lost.

Protection

NSW’s riverine shipwrecks and other submerged artefacts are protected by the relics provisions of the State Heritage Act, 1977. To ensure that maximum information is recorded, an approved Excavation Permit is required before sites can be disturbed in any way.

How can you help?

If you locate a new shipwreck site, contact the NSW Heritage Office and register your find with a Shipwreck Reporting Form. You can also encouraging local councils and community groups to promote the nautical heritage of your area. This can be through tourism brochures, signage, walking trails or even more detailed publications. Imagine a Wrecks of the River cruise pointing out all the historic landing places and riverboat remains of the old riverboat routes!

You can also help record these fragile sites by observing their condition, level of exposure and unique features. The Heritage Office’s Wrecks Alive project has been established to assist this work. It provides information on how to survey a site, what to record and how to undertake historic research. You can play an active role in the long-term preservation of shipwrecks by undertaking historic research, preparing access maps and site plans and by taking key photographs and video footage.