

Shipwrecked crews and Aboriginal contact in NSW

A brief summary of information from the Heritage Office shipwreck research.

SUMMARY

The following is a brief record of several important meetings between European shipwreck crews and the Aboriginal populations during the eighteenth and nineteenth century in New South Wales. It is not a complete list and there is scope for much more research.

The European arrival at Botany Bay by HMS *Supply* on 18 January 1788 ahead of the rest of the First Fleet is well documented.

Initially, official European policy on contact with the Aboriginal populations around Sydney was for least-conflict and mutual respect. The pattern of settlement, expansion and exploration soon created a rapidly changing situation. Aboriginal response to this momentum was varied, particularly in developing centres outside of Sydney.

Some of the earliest contacts between the new arrivals and Aboriginal inhabitants resulted from exploratory excursions made from Sydney in search of food, arable lands and natural resources. Others were made in times of desperation, by convict parties attempting to escape the new colony in stolen boats. With the developing pattern of sea-borne trade, other ship's crews interacted with Aboriginal peoples as a result of tragic shipwreck.

The NSW Heritage Office has identified sixteen shipwreck events within the State that involve direct Aboriginal. This list is preliminary only. Some of these events occurred long after the initial settlement at Sydney Cove. The pattern of this contact over the period might allow a picture to be formed of changes of attitude between the two groups, the effect that distance from Sydney played, and of the individuals concerned.

This is a new area of study in New South Wales and augments the Aboriginal Contact Study Project undertaken by Lesley Sylvester in Western Australia begun in 1996, Phase 1 - Western Australian contact sites and events.

The preliminary documentation suggests that the stories were varied in terms of the nature of that Aboriginal contact. It is envisaged that further historical research into each event could examine the impact each had on the traditional Aboriginal groups identified in each target area.

Wild coast

The identified shipwrecks extend the full length of the New South Wales coastline.

The coast has been a threat to mariners since the earliest days. Its long sweeping arc from Eden up to the outlying cape at Byron Bay, created problems for vessel's hugging the coast northwards. This was exacerbated by entrapping bays with projecting capes, offshore islands and reefs, and by the prevailing storm and sea activity from the south. This had an effect to drive vessels close inshore where it was too late to recover. Vessels travelling south encountered other difficulties including the predominant offshore current streams. Even with the establishment of a string of lighthouses along the full extent of the coast, shipwreck events continued to occur.

The NSW north coast had further obstacles for mariner's. These comprised the important inland river systems that required entry over sandbar ridden entrances. Such was the danger in traversing these obstacles, that all river ports, such as the Macleay, Clarence, Richmond and Tweed, became dotted with shipwreck events.

The shipwrecked crews

Who were the sailors that landed upon the shore as a result of tragic shipwreck events? They were a varied group of individuals, the majority trained in the arts of coastal, and sometimes, great ocean sailing. They were a multicultural group as can be glimpsed from an article published in the Sydney Morning Herald of 11 March 1857 in relation to the loss of the whaler, *Packet*, in 1857. The report states that "the crew was the most heterogenous we have ever seen, consisting of Spanish, Portuguese, Malay, New Zealanders', Sandwich Islanders, Tahitians, with the majority being islanders. The Chief Mate is a Tahitian and the Second Mate, a native of Hawaii". In the earlier days of settlement, the crews were predominantly from the United Kingdom, with the majority of coastal vessels crewed by resident settlers and their descendants.

One of the earliest recorded contacts with Aboriginals outside of Sydney, occurred on the southern coast of New South Wales as a result of a shipwreck in Bass Strait. When the trader *Sydney Cove* wrecked on Preservation Island in the Flinders Group during 1797, a party of seventeen of the crew sailed across to the Victorian coast in an open boat and walked to Sydney. After two and a half months, only three survived the arduous trek, being found at Wattamola near Botany Bay. They had traversed the entire southern coastline from Cape Howe, and discovered coal at Coalcliff near Wollongong!

These survivors were largely native Indians from the Bengal area, known as Lascars, and a handful of British officers and traders from the vessel. A published account of their epic walk reveals a mixture of genuine compassion from the various Aboriginal groups that they encountered, to all out conflict, probably as a result of territorial and resource infringements.

Known shipwreck and Aboriginal contact events

<i>Sydney Cove</i> 1797	After the loss of the two-masted trader in the Flinders Island group, survivors made it across to the mainland and walked to Sydney along the coast. It was the first recorded meeting between Europeans and Aboriginal populations in the south-east of New South Wales. Sometimes assisted by the Indigenous populations, the walk was also beset with conflict, its cause often not adequately identified.
<i>Hazard</i> 1809	The master of the sloop <i>Hazard</i> drowned when the vessel wrecked at Box Head, Broken Bay. His only companion, a boy, was saved by several Aboriginal people who were witnesses to the event. The vessel was later recovered. <i>Sydney Gazette</i> 25/9/1808, 25/3 26/3, 2/4/1809
<i>Endeavour</i> 1813	The schooner <i>Endeavour</i> wrecked near the Shoalhaven River in 1813, under command of Captain Kable. He had left Sydney to pick up cedar from the area. The vessel was lost about half an hour before the <i>Mercury</i> . The crew allegedly stole 8-9 fish from an Aboriginal camp site during their return overland to Sydney. <i>Sydney Gazette</i> 13/3, 20/3/1813 <i>Cumpston Arrivals & Departures</i> 1816
<i>Mercury</i> 1813	The schooner <i>Mercury</i> wrecked near the Shoalhaven River about the same time and place as the schooner <i>Endeavour</i> . After losing a rudder on a sandbank, the vessel became unmanageable., breaking the keel. The crew allegedly stole 8-9 fish from an Aboriginal camp site during return overland to Sydney. <i>Sydney Gazette</i> 13/3, 20/3/1813

<p><i>Recovery</i> 1816</p>	<p>Survivors from the wreck of the sloop <i>Recovery</i> walked from near Port Stephens to Newcastle. Newspaper reported that they were 'stripped' of their clothing by a group of Aboriginals.</p> <p><i>Sydney Gazette</i> 6/7/1816 <i>Cumpston 'Arrivals & Departures' 1816</i></p>
<p><i>Trial</i> 1816</p>	<p>It was certainly a trial for the band of desperate convicts who, on 12 September 1816, steered their stolen vessel northward towards freedom. The timber brig <i>Trial</i> had earlier been at anchor near the Sow and Pigs Reef in Sydney Harbour. Thirteen convicts seized the vessel, its passengers and crew and forced them to sail from the harbour. After being wrecked in a deep bay, the convicts built another vessel from the remains and sailed off again. Aborigines told how the Europeans capsized at sea and drowned.</p> <p>Meanwhile the original captain and his fellow captives (numbering between 6 and 8) attempted to walk by foot to Newcastle for help. They were lost in the bush and never seen again. A convict stowaway from the vessel, a woman with a young baby, was believed to have fallen in with Aborigines and to have lived with them. Marines from the <i>Rosetta</i> and <i>Lady Nelson</i> found the wreck, but no sign of its occupants. The bay was later named Trial Bay after the dramatic event. No details have survived for the <i>Trial</i>, although it was owned by Sydney identity Mr Simeon Lord and captained by a Mr Burnett. To prevent further escapes, no vessels were allowed to anchor near the Sydney Heads after this time. The wreck has not been discovered.</p> <p><i>Sydney Gazette</i>, 1 February 1816 <i>Sydney Gazette</i>, 8 February 1816 <i>Sydney Gazette</i>, 15 February 1816 <i>Sydney Gazette</i>, 22 February 1816 <i>Historical Records of Australia (HRA) I x</i></p>
<p><i>Hawkesbury Packet</i> 1816</p>	<p>The sloop <i>Hawkesbury Packet</i> was wrecked at the entrance of the Minnamurra River in 1816 while seeking a load of cedar. Solomon Wiseman's vessel's and crews seem to have been in regular conflict with the Aboriginal people around Port Stephens in particular.</p> <p><i>Sydney Gazette</i> 6/7/1816, 1/2/1817 and 6/9/1817. <i>Bateson, C., Australian Shipwrecks. 1972,p.54.</i> <i>Sydney Gazette</i> 6/7, 20/7/1816, 1/2, 6/9/1817 <i>Cumpsten, Arrivals & Departures, 1817</i></p>
<p><i>Hive</i> 1835</p>	<p>The wreck of the convict transport <i>Hive</i> at Wreck Bay, south of Jervis Bay, in 1835 was significant as the only transport actually wrecked in NSW's waters. Aboriginal people assisted the 350+ survivors to make contact with European residents in the area and thereby to get a message to Sydney for help. The name Wreck Bay derived from this and a number of subsequent shipwrecks.</p> <p><i>Sydney Herald</i> 14/12, 17/12, 21/12, 24/12/1835; 4/1, 7/1, 11/1, 14/1, 25/1/1836 <i>The Australian</i> 15/12, 18/12/1835 <i>Historic Records of Australia Series 1, Vol xviii 1923</i> <i>Register of British Ships</i> <i>Lloyd's Register 1835</i> <i>Journal of His Majesty's Convict Transport 'Hive', Mitchell Library, Sydney</i></p>

<p><i>Rover</i> 1841</p>	<p>Archived letters record exceptional efforts of 4 Aboriginal people from Broulee in rescuing 11 of the survivors.</p> <p>The schooner <i>Rover</i>, 87 tons sought the safety of Broulee Bay during a terrific gale on 13 October, 1841. The twenty-three persons aboard braved the conditions while anchored during the night. Used to ferry convicts around to different settlements, the <i>Rover</i> was carrying eleven prisoners of the Crown, a military escort of four members from the 28th Regiment, passengers and crew.</p> <p>By early morning the vessel succumbed to the seas and the anchors parted. Forced close inshore amongst the breakers, the <i>Rover</i> was rolled completely over several times. With huge waves breaking over the wreck, those aboard had no choice but to make out for the beach.</p> <p>Of those on board, only eleven lives were saved, mainly by the brave efforts of local Aborigines and settlers who plucked them from the water. Brass breastplates were later awarded to four of the Aborigines, known to the Europeans as Warragal Tom, Jerry - "Chief" of Broulee, Broulee Billy and Boulbee. The breastplates were inscribed with the words "Bale me jarrad" - which has been interpreted to signify the concept, 'I am not afraid'. One of these breast-plates was examined by the Australian National Maritime Museum in recent years when it came on the market.</p> <p><i>Sydney Herald</i> 25/10/1841 <i>State Archives of NSW, letters: 41/10688, 41/10987 & 41/10491 in CSO 4/2542.5 Register of British Ships</i></p>
<p><i>Port Phillip</i> 1843</p>	<p>The <i>Sydney Morning Herald</i> noted the schooner high and dry on Korff's beach (Coffs Harbour). The vessel was lost while awaiting a cargo of timber. Aborigines greatly assisted the survivors during their 12-day overland return walk. Register of British Ships 2/1843 Melbourne closed the register in 1876 with "vessel missing".</p> <p><i>Sydney Morning Herald</i> 29/2, 13/9/1848 <i>Register of British Ships 2/1843 Melbourne</i></p>
<p><i>Endeavour</i> 1852</p>	<p>The cutter <i>Endeavour</i> was wrecked near Port Stephens in 1852 and reportedly set on fire by Aborigines.</p> <p><i>Sydney Mail</i> 11/8/1852</p>
<p><i>Phoenix</i> 1852</p>	<p>Police constables were sent to protect cargo and personal property that washed ashore from the wreck of this timber paddle steamer on the northern side of the Clarence River entrance. Contemporary newspapers record that by the time they arrived, Europeans and Aborigines had taken advantage of the windfall and removed much of the material.</p> <p><i>Sydney Morning Herald</i> 22/8/1845; 26/4, 3/5, 4/5, 5/5, 15/6/1852 <i>Daily Examiner</i> 10/3/1947 <i>Register of British Ships</i> <i>'The Bawden Lectures', from the records of the Clarence River Historical Society</i></p>
<p><i>Agnes Napier</i> 1855</p>	<p>After capsizing at the outlying Middleton Reef, winds kept the schooner's boat and survivors at sea for 28 days until they landed at 'Nambuccra' (Nambucca). The survivors apparently lived on oysters for three days, then made it to Trial Bay. An Aboriginal man took them to his camp and 'treated them very kindly'. The <i>Prospector</i> carried them to Sydney.</p> <p><i>Register of British Shipping</i> <i>Sydney Morning Herald</i> 10/12/1855</p>

<p><i>Slippery Charlie</i> 1866</p>	<p>The schooner <i>Slippery Charlie</i> ran ashore at Nambucca Heads in 1866 with the three victims, a women and two children, were buried by Aborigines from the area. The schooner is said to have been named after the Premier of NSW, Charles Cowper.</p> <p><i>Sydney Morning Herald</i> 23/7/1866, 23/8/1866 <i>Clarence River Historical Society newsletter, Issue 54, 28 march, 2000.</i> <i>Register of British Ships</i></p>
<p><i>Walter Hood</i> 1870</p>	<p>With an outstanding career behind it, the clipper ship <i>Walter Hood</i> left London for Sydney on 22 January 1870. After several days of appalling weather while turning up the east coast of Australia, the vessel drove hard onto reef in Wreck Bay, south of Jervis Bay.</p> <p>The clipper was torn in two, casting the 35 passengers and crew into chaos. The following days witnessed pathetic scenes. Eventually the steamer <i>Illalong</i> brought some hope when it arrived to recover thirteen survivors still on the wreck and by then in a forlorn state.</p> <p>A large crowd of settlers had gathered on the beach and was actively plundering cargo that washed ashore. It was alleged that even the bodies of the drowned were robbed. One onlooker was found head down in a barrel of beer!</p> <p>Another account told of Aborigines who also gathered at the wreck site and who found a box of theatrical costumes washed up on the rocks. The account records that they proceeded to dress themselves in "fantastic theatrical array" – no doubt finding great amusement in the strange attire.</p> <p><i>Daily Examiner, 3 April 1925</i> <i>Empire, 9 August 1853</i> <i>Sydney Morning Herald, 18 May 1870</i> <i>Town and Country Journal, 7 May 1870</i></p>
<p><i>Bertha</i> 1879</p>	<p>The schooner <i>Bertha</i> wrecked on north side of Bass Point near Shellharbour in 1879. Aboriginal witnesses to the shipwreck saved the lives of the Captain and crew by taking a line from the vessel to the shore.</p> <p>The vessel was involved in carrying road metal from Kiama to Sydney.</p> <p><i>Sydney Morning Herald</i> 10/9, 24/9/1879, 15/3/1880 <i>Illawarra Mercury, 12/9/1879</i></p>