Shipwrecks and What They Tell Us

Clippers, colliers and catastrophic calamities

Ships of all types have been wrecked in NSW waters. From naval battle cruisers to fully rigged ships, our shipwrecks have many stories to tell. Some are associated with significant tragedy like the *Dunbar* (1857), others were wrecked in comical circumstances like the *Queen of Nations* (1881). Many represent common working types such as coastal cargo carriers, tugs and river paddle steamers. They date from the State's earliest recorded loss in 1797 until the present day and represent changing technologies from timber vessels to iron/steel or a combination of both. Some display a unique range of marine engine and boiler developments. In many 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 were not recorded in sufficient detail. Sometimes the physical remains on the seafloor provide surprises - details not recorded or expected from the written accounts of a particular time.

Cargoes - the movement of goods and people

Shipwrecks can provide exciting clues on goods traded to and from Australia and along our rugged coastline. Sometimes these include objects belonging to passengers or crew, or bulk cargoes being traded and sold. Shipwrecks like the *Walter Hood* (1870) document the diverse range of goods being imported to Sydney in the later nineteenth century, while others like the *Myola* (1919) represent the regular "sixty-miler" coal trade between Newcastle and Sydney.

By carefully measuring the collapsed structure of shipwrecks, archaeologists can determine the pattern of vessel collapse and disintegration over time. This is a slow process. Shipwrecks up to several thousand years old have been found in the Mediterranean. Our shipwrecks are part of this body of material evidence. Once damaged or disturbed, they cannot be replaced.

Time Capsules

The world's oceans, harbours and rivers are littered with historic shipwreck remains. Because of the nature of shipwreck, the remains become an archaeological record of a precise moment in time. Today, when we examine them carefully, many interesting facts can be revealed about past technologies, trades, skills and life on board. Shipwrecks are time capsules of the past - allowing us to view the physical evidence of a distinct period, culture and locality.

Shipwrecks of New South Wales

Like other parts of Australia and overseas, NSW has numerous historic shipwreck sites. Records indicate that some 1,800 vessels were lost within our coastal and State waters. Of this impressive number, relatively few have been located to date.

Shipwrecks and their associated relics form a fragile, unique resource for scientific study. They also serve as impressive sites for recreational activities such as SCUBA diving and underwater photography. Because of their complex and irreplaceable nature we need to be especially careful when visiting them.
Doing Shipwreck History

Where to start? The NSW Heritage Office's Historic Shipwrecks Database, developed in conjunction with the Australian Institute for Maritime Archaeology (AIMA), provides information on NSW shipwreck losses. The database can be accessed on this web site by using the 'Search' facility. The National Shipwreck Database can be accessed on the Australasian Institute for Maritime Archaeology web site - www.heritage.nsw.gov.au-. The Shipwreck Atlas of New South Wales is available from the NSW Heritage Office.

Important information about shipwrecks can be found at the State Library of NSW, State Records NSW, and the library of the Australian National Maritime Museum, Sydney. Historical Societies, local studies reference libraries and maritime museums hold other important collections. In particular, look for contemporary newspapers, shipping registers, marine enquiry reports and photographic collections.

Protection

NSW's shipwrecks are protected by either the Commonwealth Historic Shipwrecks Act, 1976 or the NSW Heritage Act, 1977. An approved Excavation Permit is required before sites can be disturbed in any way.

Wrecks Alive - guide to preparing shipwreck survey report prepared by the NSW Heritage Office and downloadable frm the Maritime Heritage online website.