

# BEGA

## SHIPWRECK 1908

### Information Sheet NSW Heritage Office



*Bega after construction in 1883. Mitchell Library/State Library of NSW.*

#### Introduction

The nineteenth century was dominated by the shipping movements of coastal and interstate steamers. Local communities depended upon the regular passage of these vessels for transport, transshipment of supplies, goods and mail. Several shipping companies dominated the trade and the vessels were familiar names to many households.

The iron twin screw steamer *Bega* was one such vessel. It plied the regular south coast shipping lanes linking communities like Eden, Merimbula, Tathra and Bermagui to Sydney. It was operated by the Illawarra and South Coast Steam Navigation Company. A reliable vessel, the loss of *Bega* in 1908 came at a time when maritime travel was considered relatively safe with improved technologies and better navigational aids.

However the dangers of ocean travel could always make their mark. *Bega* succumbed to a problem with stability on 5 April 1908 and foundered in the vicinity of Bunga Head, north of Tathra. Today the wreck site has been identified and provides a snap-shot of our past maritime history. A unique archaeological site, the remains are protected from disturbance by the Commonwealth *Historic Shipwrecks Act* 1976.

#### The vessel

*Bega* was built in 1883 as an iron twin screw steamer. Powered by a compound 98hp engine, the 567-ton, 57.7metre vessel was built in Greenock, Scotland. With official number 83765, the vessel was built by Russell and Co.

and was reputedly the largest steamer on the south coast run at that time.

The new *Bega* was fitted with a unique engine arrangement, as were the company's steamers *Allowrie* and *Kameruka*. This technique was known as "Rankine's Wonders". A two-cylinder disconnecting compound engine drove the twin propeller shafts by using a high pressure cylinder to work the starboard propeller and a low pressure cylinder, the port. The technique increased operating efficiency, although required a flywheel to assist starting the engine. Each engine (cylinder), had its own reversing gear and either could be run independently of the other (Richards, 42).

The *Bega* arrived in Australia after a voyage around Cape Town, South Africa.

#### Wreck event

*Bega* departed the town wharf at Tathra on 5 April 1908 for Sydney after a voyage up the coast from Eden and Merimbula. Cargo had been loaded, including over 2000 cheeses, butter, racehorses, prized livestock for the Royal Easter Show, 176 pigs, furniture, wool and a special consignment of £2000 in gold coinage (561 ounces in weight) for the Sydney Branch of the Commonwealth Bank.



*Bega departing in 1903 on a regular voyage. Mitchell Library/State Library of NSW.*

The 25 year-old *Bega* was under command of Captain Bishop, when it departed Tathra about 7.00 p.m. A list to port was noted. Before long the captain became alarmed at the increasing list and checked the ballast tanks. Concern grew when it was suspected that the cargo may have shifted. *Bega* was slowed and turned so that the wind and swell were against the lower side. Many of the 176 pigs were transferred to the high side in an attempt to stabilise the lean.

### Pigs sacrificed

With the transfer of pigs, however, the vessel suddenly heeled over to that side and the bow settled noticeably lower. It appeared that water had now entered the hull. *Bega* was turned around in the direction of Tathra in an attempt to reach port and safety. Water was now steadily entering below deck spaces. Bishop ordered all of the pigs overboard – a significant sacrifice - but to no avail.

### Death of a passenger

The passengers were ordered onto the deck, which was now cantered over at 45 degrees. Everyone fought to keep on their feet by clinging to anything within reach. *Bega* had now been turned around again in a northerly direction. Captain Bishop ordered the engine shut down and everyone to “Abandon ship!”. All got into the lifeboats, while blue distress flares were burnt on deck – the distress rockets could not be located! After some delay, lifebelts were found for all.

At this time, an elderly passenger named David Clarke suffered a heart attack and died at the rail, amidst the confusion. It was now 10.30 p.m. and two of *Bega*'s boats and two small rafts were launched. The survivors struggled in the dark with the body of Clarke. *Bega* was seen afloat for only another twenty minutes after abandoning ship. The bow had settled low in the water and the stern rose high in the air. As the *Bega* slid beneath the waves, the final lights went out. The survivors tried to keep the boats and rafts together and make the shore. This became impossible and they separated in the night.

The main lifeboats reached Cuttagee Beach the next morning, twelve hours after the *Bega* sank. The two rafts with the captain made shore at Wallacoot, south of Tathra later in the morning. Chief Engineer, Mr McCubbin, recalled the strangeness of the scene when a passenger, Mr Levy, handed around salvaged cigars. Squatting closely together on and around the body of Mr Clarke and up to their waists in water, “we looked to be quite a comfortable party as we sat there on the rafts smoking cigars!”. Exhausted and wet, all 61 were eventually safely landed.

A Court of Marine Enquiry was later held and could not determine a cause for the loss. Arguments were raised about the packing of cargo, sabotage with a theory of opened sea-cocks, the placement of a new refrigerator system on deck, the opening up of hull plating, or overloading of cargo.



*Bega* historic shipwreck: looking forward towards the bow. Copyright: Mark Spencer.

*Bega* had earlier itself participated in the transport of survivors from the wrecked steamer *Corangamite* at Wreck Bay in 1886.



View of port side of hull, showing boiler (to left) and ship's funnel lying on sand in centre. Copyright Mark Spencer.

Local Bermagui divers Fred Billington and David Prior re-located the wreck site in 2004 following dedicated sounding and video camera surveys, drawing on information provided by historic records, and commercial fishing operators. October 2004 witnessed the first 76-metre dives to the site by *The Sydney Project* dive team, who confirmed the site's identification.

*Bega* is a protected historic shipwreck under the provisions of the Commonwealth *Historic Shipwrecks Act 1976*. Severe penalties apply for disturbing the shipwreck structure or for removing items. A special Protected Zone has been gazetted around the site which requires an approved entry permit issued by the NSW Heritage Office, Sydney.

Source: NSW Heritage Office Wreck File + research notes  
Gleeson, Max., 1996, *Shipwrecks, Storms and Seamen*. Toppan Printing. Sydney.  
Richards, Mike., 1987, *Workhorses in Australian Waters*.  
Richards, Mike, 1997, *Pig and Whistle Run: Men and Ships of the NSW South Coast*. Grafton.

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