

KEILAWARRA DISASTER 1886

Information Sheet NSW Heritage Office

Introduction

The tragic loss of the iron steamship *Keilawarra* ranks as one of the worst peacetime maritime tragedies in New South Wales. The incident occurred near North Solitary Island, Coffs Harbour, at night on 8 December 1886. Steaming north from Sydney for Brisbane and Queensland ports, the vessel ran straight into a southbound steamer, the smaller *Helen Nicoll*. In scenes later echoed in the *Titanic* sinking, over forty people were to lose their lives in the dark.



Keilawarra/Helen Nicoll Collision. Courtesy: Clarence River Historical Society.

The shocking loss of life rocked maritime centres around Australia. The scale of the disaster, the unnecessary waste of life and tales of cowardice raised alarm, then anger.

Located by recreational divers 114 years later in deep water south of North Solitary Island, the historic wreck site now serves as a permanent marker to those drowned and a reminder of the dangers of coastal sea travel during the nineteenth century.

The vessel

The 784 ton *Keilawarra* was a fine steamship of 200 feet (61 metres). Powered by a compound marine engine generating 140 horsepower, the vessel had been launched in Fife, Scotland, in 1878 for the legendary Howard Smith & Sons line.

Cargo

For the fateful voyage, *Keilawarra* loaded passengers and crew, while the stevedores loaded the bags of maize, bran, oats and

potatoes. Casks of pork, whisky, port and ale, cases of paint, acetic acid, tea, golden syrup, fruit, tobacco, cigars, cheese and butter were carefully stowed. Special cargo included four anchors, two bulls, one heifer, bedsteads, buggy hoods, a box of bees, and two racing horses for Rockhampton. The vessel was under the command of Captain Buttrey, aged 45 years, and a veteran with twenty years service with Australian Steam Navigation Company (ASN).

An unforgiving coast

1886 was to be a bad year for shipwrecks in NSW. Already the magnificent steamer *Ly-ee-Moon* had smashed ashore at Green Cape with 70 lives lost. The steamer *Corangamite* ran ashore at St Georges Head, Wreck Bay, on 7 December, the day before the *Keilawarra's* loss! Aleck Mathews, a steerage passenger, was reading of the event at the exact moment of impact! In all, twenty-six shipwrecks were to occur by the years' end.

Final voyage

As the *Keilawarra* steamed north, all went well as far as Coffs Harbour. Now dark, the children were asleep while several of the adults stayed up to watch the stars or smoke in the saloon.



Captain Buttrey. Courtesy: Peter Johnstone

In the dark, smoke from funnel of the south bound *Helen Nicoll's* obscured the view. At the final moment, Captain Buttrey sounded a single warning blast from the whistle, turned the vessel towards the open sea and ordered the engines "slowed" then full reverse! His actions actually drove *Keilawarra* across the other ship's bow. The 8.20 p.m. impact as the ships collided was catastrophic. The side of *Keilawarra* was sliced open, momentarily pushing the vessel over on its side. Both steamers' lay entwined together.

Aleck Mathews described the terrible scenes; the saloon passengers came *"crowding up the companion stairs - men in their shirts and after them women and children, some partly dressed and others almost uncovered"*. Others recalled *"terrible shouts and cries from the passengers and crew of the Keilawarra, and great confusion"*. The *Keilawarra* was to last just seven minutes.

With the bow shattered, many from the *Helen Nicoll* jumped onto the deck of *Keilawarra*, thinking their smaller ship was going to sink. Four of the eleven who crossed over were to drown. The *Keilawarra's* bow went underwater. As panic seized those on board, *"a great rush was made for the [port] boat while she was being lowered"*, many drowning. Most were men, Captain Buttrey was heard to yell, *"shame on you men! Have you no thought for the women?"*.

One of the *Helen Nicoll's* passengers, Reverend Gray saw *"a lot of men jump overboard with lifebuoys"*. Another recalled, *"women rushed at me and clung to me, and prayed me in God's name to save them. Little children, some quite naked were running shrieking with fear about the deck, quite demented, and some were clinging to their mothers so tightly that they could not be torn away"*.

The *Keilawarra* rose almost vertically, its great revolving propeller broke the surface and reared skywards. With an awful shriek from those aboard, *"she plunged right down; there was a sort of gulf of the water and then everything was perfectly still that last shriek from the vessel as she went headfirst into the water made [the] blood run cold"*. A survivor stated that *"the deathlike calm and quiet that prevailed at this time was one of the most dreadful experiences that he had ever known"*.

Planks, merchandise and debris were strewn about the surface of the dark sea. Captain Buttrey went down with his ship, after earlier refusing a lifebelt, which he gave to a female passenger. Boats from the *Helen Nicoll* attempted to find survivors. When the *Helen Nicoll* eventually limped back to Sydney, terrible scenes greeted the survivors, *"strong men wept and women went into hysterics, some uttering piercing shrieks"*. Only two bodies and two of the *Keilawarra's* lifeboats were ever located ashore.

The passengers

Mrs Alice Wilson was the only adult woman on *Keilawarra* to survive. Waves knocked her and her husband Robert overboard. She attempted to hold her injured husband above water, but had to let him go and he drowned. Overcome with grief, she managed to reach a floating box. Mr Schepper, his wife and six children were last seen on deck *"calmly grouped together, and when they found that escape was hopeless, were engulfed with the ship"*. 12-year-old Alice Cornwell was the only other female to survive. Recovering from a major eye operation, she was washed overboard but managed to cling to a bag of chaff stowed for the horses. Her mother was lost. The only lifeboat successfully launched contained about twenty men with at least another five clinging to its side.



Brass plate perhaps from one of *Keilawarra's* lifeboats. Courtesy: Clarence River Historical Society.

Ramifications

The Marine Board held an inquiry into the disaster. They blamed Captain Buttrey for *"recklessly navigating his vessel"*, in not slowing when lights had been seen ahead, and for cutting across the *Helen Nicoll's* path. The court also severely censured Mr Knowles, First Mate of the *Helen Nicoll*, for proceeding at full speed.

New regulations were introduced for all coastal steamers to carry sufficient lifebelts for every person aboard, specially stowed for easy release. This was sixteen years before the fatal loss of *Titanic*, which led to a greater compliment of boats to be carried.

Discovery

A diving team led by John Riley located the wreck site on 18 September 2000. After several dedicated searches, the wreck was located in 74 metres of water using mixed gas diving apparatus.

Protection

The *Keilawarra* is protected under Section 4 of the Commonwealth *Historic Shipwrecks Act* 1976. The remains cannot be disturbed and divers are asked to respect the site as a marker of a significant maritime tragedy. The remains survive as an irreplaceable archaeological resource for detailed study and appreciation - a unique "time capsule".

References

Register of British Ships, 5 of 1879, Melbourne; 50 of 1879, Sydney.

Town and Country Journal, 11 December 1886.

Sydney Morning Herald, 8, 10, 17 December 1886, 1 January 1887.

Following the loss, contemporary newspapers gave varying figures for those drowned (37 aboard *Keilawarra* according to *Sydney Morning Herald*, 10 December 1886 and *Town & Country Journal*, 11 December 1886; 32 according to *Sydney Morning Herald* 8 December 1886; and 33 according to *Sydney Mail*). Research suggests that 37 drowned aboard the *Keilawarra* (14 crew and 24 passengers), together with 4 from the *Helen Nicoll*.

Total drowned: 41.

Keilawarra saloon passengers drowned (18):

Mr F. Schepper
Mrs Schepper
Master Schepper
Master Schepper
Miss F. Schepper
Miss J. Schepper
Miss H. Schepper
Miss C. Schepper
Mr Robert Wilson, farmer, near Oxley Creek, Brisbane
Mrs Johnston and child
Miss Mary Calder
Miss M. Gallagher
Mr C.J. Bulpin
Mr F. Scott
J. MacDonald
Mr Teddy McGrade, jockey
Capt (or Major) John McDonald, Sydney Scottish Rifle Volunteers

Steerage passengers drowned (5)

Mrs Cornwell (also stated as Cornwall)
Mrs Hayes and 2 children
Mr J. Wilson (drowned?)

Keilawarra's Officers and crew drowned (14):

Capt Nathan Gough Buttery
Mr F. Nation, Fireman
Mr T. Garrett, Fireman
Mr E. Bradley, Fireman
Mr W. Shillas, Trimmer
Mr S. Shepherd, Trimmer
Mr W. Porch, Steward
Mr W. Hill, Fore-cabin Steward
Mr Hugh Stoke, Bedroom Steward
Mr E. Dubois, Mess Room Steward
Miss Pearce, Stewardess (24)
Mr J. Fletcher, Cook
Mr H. Hoffman, Second Cook
Mr L. Bundy, Third Cook

Lost from Helen Nicoll:

Mr Alfred Bailey, passenger
Mr E. Quinn, foreman
Mr R. Thompson, Able Seaman
Mr J. Geromsen, Able Seaman

Keilawarra crew saved (24):

Mr James McGeorge, First Officer
Mr Peter O'Brien, Second Officer
Mr Robert Grierson (also R. Pearson), Third Officer
Mr J.M. Corby (also as John McCorby/Carby), Chief Engineer
Mr J.W. Johnson (also G.W. Johnson), Second Engineer
Mr J.E. Russell (also as J.R. Russell), Third Engineer
Mr John Nelson (also: Nilson/Netson), Able Seaman
Mr W. Davidson, Able Seaman
Mr C. Fyfe (also C. Fyfe), Able Seaman
Mr J.S. Scurr (also John S. Seurr), Able Seaman
Mr J.E. Patten, Able Seaman
Mr George Frank, Able Seaman
Mr L. Lawrensen (also J. Lawrenson/Lawrence), Able Seaman
Mr Robert Campbell, Able Seaman
Mr S. Wannop (also Wanhope/Wannohop), Fireman
Mr Matt Robertson (also Robinson), Fireman
Mr T. Cullen, Fireman
Mr W. Thelwell, Fireman
Mr R. McLure (also McClare), Donkeyman
Mr J. Young, Trimmer
Mr J. Durning (also Dunning), Trimmer
Mr W.A. Birtell (also as A. Butles; Birtle; B.A.Birtell), Trimmer
Mr W.H. Higgins, Second Steward
Mr. J. Johnson, Pantryman

Saloon passengers saved (5):

Mrs Alice (also R.) Wilson
Mr G.H. (also S.) Copeland
Mr J.J. Lough
Mr A.P. James, comedian
Mr W. Notts

Steerage passengers saved (6):

Miss Alice Cornwell
Mr Timothy Connolly, labourer (L. Connell/E. Connors - same person?)
Mr Charles Goedert, (also as G. Goddard)
Mr Aleck Mathews
Mr G. Haines, carpenter
Mr Jas Gitcham

Helen Nicoll's passengers/crew recovered in water:

Rev Maurice Gray, saloon passenger
Mr McClaren, saloon passenger
Mr Maher, saloon passenger
Mr Ayres, saloon passenger
Mr Barton Lodge, passenger
Mr Breach (or Branch), steward
Mr Greaves, steward

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