Shipwrecks – Evans Head

Sailors clinging to their disintegrating ship, battling overwhelming seas, clutching at floating debris, gasping for momentary breaths in foaming surf - these are the images and experiences of shipwreck.

The NSW coast and waterways are littered with thousands of shipwrecks. Their timbers, iron plating, anchors and cargoes have become fragile records of a heroic maritime history. They are the last remnants of a time when industry, commerce, and families were directly or indirectly reliant on transport by sea.

River boats, trains and road transport linked the inland regions of the State with the ships that plied our coastal and international shipping lanes. Freight and passenger vessels came in various shapes and sizes, their form influenced by their ocean going habits or the shallow river bars of small coastal ports. Technology and cargoes also shaped the construction of the ships while commercial and political decisions determined when and where ships, rail or road were the dominant transport network.

The ships that form our maritime heritage were built locally and at ports around the world - from the small riverside slipways on the NSW coast to the mighty shipyards in England, Scotland, Canada and the USA.

Commercial and public interests did not always result in good record keeping for these vessels, the people who served on them, the passengers who entrusted their welfare to them or the cargoes that they carried. Often they were too mundane, just workhorses that kept the economy together. Many ships passed on with no surviving image to record their appearance. The day to day experiences of the passengers and crew were rarely written down. The remains on the seabed often contain the only surviving clues.

Generally, ships are not totally destroyed when they are wrecked. Parts are preserved, covered in sand, mud and marine growth. A flat expanse of sand can cover a large part of the story of the ship and the people who were associated with it. The only visible clue may be the fluke of an anchor. If this or other visible evidence of the ship is taken away, the site may be lost forever or inadvertently damaged by modern day anchors, dredging or other human activities.

We as a community can help to preserve the information held within shipwreck sites. By becoming aware of their location and place in history we can relive the joys and fears of the people they carried. We can also feel something of the trepidation and anguish of those who waited upon their arrival.

This information sheet lists some details of ships and aircraft lost near Evans Head. If you wish to obtain more information or if you wish to share information from other sources, please contact:

Maritime Archaeology Unit
NSW Heritage Office
Locked Bag 5020
Parramatta NSW 2124
Phone: 02-9635 6155  Fax: 02-9891 4688
Email: heritage.office@heritage.nsw.gov.au
Shipwreck Databases:  Maritime Heritage Online at http://maritime.heritage.nsw.gov.au/, or

See also the Shipwreck Atlas of New South Wales, (ed 3), available from the NSW Heritage Office.

Legislation

All shipwrecks over 75 years of age are automatically protected from disturbance under the State NSW Heritage Act 1977 & Commonwealth Historic Shipwrecks Act 1976.

Relics off the NSW coast likely to be associated with historic ships are also protected under the Commonwealth Act. Relics in NSW lakes, rivers and harbours over 50 years of age are protected under the relics provisions of the Heritage Act.

The Heritage Office should be notified as soon as possible if a shipwreck or other underwater relic is located or prior to any activity likely to disturb shipwrecks and relics. Severe penalties apply for non-compliance with the legislation.

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The Shipwrecks of Evans Head

**Cahors** – Police from Evans Head camped on the beach to protect cargo washing ashore from the wreck of the **Cahors** on 10 June 1885. On a voyage from Sydney to Brisbane, the new iron steamer with about 200 passengers and a large cargo, belonged to the Australasian Steam Navigation Company (ASN). Travelling at top speed, **Cahors** ran up onto Evans Reef about 6pm, as Captain David Walker was debating their position in the chart room.

The terrific impact heeled the vessel around and a huge sea crashed over the decks flooding the saloon and putting out the engine fires. One of the lifeboats capsized but the crew were recovered. The wrecked vessel was dramatically lit up when burning cotton waste soaked in kerosene was attached to iron poles. Blue lights and rockets were fired and about 10.30pm, the steamer **Burwah** approached. The male passengers and some crew were pulled aboard the **Burwah** by line through the sea. This was made more thrilling when a large shark waited close by.

By 5am, most had been evacuated except for the married men, their wives and children – the latter numbering about 40 people. These were taken off at daylight by the bow crane. Second Mate Thompson was apparently drowned during later salvage work. The wreck was sold at auction but not recovered.

**Cahors** was an iron screw steamer built in 1883 at Scotland with a length of 76-metres and tonnage of 1254 tons and a compound engine. Registered Sydney as 54 of 1884, British Register of Ships and Official Number 89867.

**Jessie Matilda** – the 86-ton timber schooner left Sydney for the Richmond River with a general cargo. Riding out a terrific gale, the **Jessie Matilda** was finally driven ashore on 21 July 1889 and was wrecked broadside on the beach, after striking Evans Reef. Captain Daniel Padden and his crew survived but the vessel was a total loss.

The **Jessie Matilda** was lost during storms that drove five vessels ashore at Byron Bay - **Fawn**, **Bannockburn**, **Spurwing**, **Hastings** and **Agnes**, the **Annie Moore** at Sandon Heads, schooner **Nicolai** at Seal Rocks, and the ketch **Lady of Lorn** at Moonie Creek. The **Jessie Matilda** was a two-masted timber brigantine built at Cape Hawke, NSW in 1877. The vessel had a length of 26-metres and was registered in Sydney as 51 of 1877, British Register of Ships, Official Number 74929.

**Pilot** – The two-masted timber schooner, **Pilot** was on a voyage between Melbourne and the Richmond River when lost on 17 January 1874. The small 21-metre vessel was driven ashore about five miles north of Evans Head when caught in a southeast gale. Few details of the event were recorded in contemporary sources. The vessel was in ballast and owned by Cooke & Sons, Melbourne. The timber schooner had a tonnage of 101 tons and was built at Scotland in 1845. Its Official Number was 31784.

**Beaufighters A19-194 and A19-36** – Two Royal Australian Airforce Beaufighter aircraft collided in mid-air and crashed into the sea south of Evans Head on 10 November 1944. The Evans Head World War Two airfield was a well-known training ground. The Bristol Beaufighter was developed as a twin-engined long-range escort fighter and night-fighter from 1940.