Shipwrecks – Homebush Bay

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 inland 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 5 of the vessels abandoned within Homebush Bay, Sydney, when that place was used as a ship-breaking yard. If you wish to obtain more information or if you wish to share information from other sources, please contact:

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

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Location

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.
The Shipwrecks of Homebush Bay

Approval to use portions of Homebush Bay as a ship-breaking yard was granted by the Maritime Services Board in 1966. A monthly rental was charged to private firms to moor vessels in the bay for breaking up ashore via a ramp constructed for the purpose in 1970. Vessels known to have been broken up from 1970 include the Kookaburra, Branxton and Samson by Goldfield Metal Traders, two barges by Nicholson Bros. Harbour Transport Pty Ltd., and Kara Kara by Marrickville Metals. The steamer Meggol was recovered and scuttled off Long Reef as part of the shipwreck reef formed from 1976 as were other Sydney hulks.

Ayrfield - a steel single screw steam collier, 1140 tons. 70.10m in length, built at Grangemouth by the Grangemouth Dockyard Company, United Kingdom in 1911. Registered at Sydney, folio 6 of 1945 – formerly folio 1 of 1912, Official No. 131496. Powered by a vertical direct acting triple expansion engine, the vessel was launched as ss Corrimal. One time purchased by the Commonwealth Government and used to transport supplies to American troops in the Pacific, it was sold again to Bitumen and Oil Refineries Australia Ltd in 1950. Soon after in 1951 the vessel was purchased by the Miller Steamship Company Ltd. who renamed it Ayrfield. From this time it operated as a collier on the sixty-miler run between Newcastle and Sydney. The vessel’s registry was cancelled on 6 October 1972 and the hull said to be broken up. One of the Homebush hulks is thought to represent the remains of this vessel.

Crane Barge - Located in the immediate vicinity of Heroic and Karangi, this unidentified wooden vessel may have served as a crane barge or crane lighter. Ownership has not been ascertained. It is similar to the ex-Maritime Services Board barge MSB 16 still located alongside the ship-breaking ramp.

Heroic - a steel tugboat, built at South Shields, United Kingdom in 1909 by J.P. Rennoldson & Sons, 268 tons and 38.10m in length. Registered in Sydney as folio 25 of 1909, Official Number 125198. Built for Thomas Fenwick of Sydney, the famous Sydney tug towed an ex-French three-masted warship Eure to Sydney from Numea for breaking-up in 1911. Commandeered by the British Admiralty during World War One and renamed Epic, it was engaged in rescue work off the Scilly Isles. Back home in 1919, the Heroic rescued the freighter Allara when torpedoed off Sydney during World War Two. It is unclear when Heroic was hulked at Homebush Bay although c.1973 it was sold to J.B. Mullins who intended to rename the vessel Bustler II.

HMAS Karangi – a steel boom defence vessel of 971 tons, 54.25m, built at Cockatoo Docks & Engineering Company Ltd, NSW in 1941 (Penant P.282). Modelled on the British “Bar Class” of boom defence vessels, the Karangi and sister ships Kangaroo and Koala. Karangi assisted in laying the defences of Darwin and was involved in the Japanese attack there in 1942. It was also present in the Monte Bello Islands during British Atomic tests in 1952. Removed from Navy lists and partially scrapped in 1965-6, the vessel was abandoned in Homebush Bay at an unknown time.

Mortlake Bank - a steel single screw steam collier, 1371 tons gross and 71.65 in length, built at Walsend-on-Tyne, UK, 1924. The vessel was powered by a triple expansion direct acting engine. Registered at Sydney, folio 12 of 1937, Official No. 147708. The vessel was bought by McIlwrath McEacharn Ltd. of Melbourne in 1934 and operated on the famous sixty-miler route between Hexham and Mortlake for the Australian Gas Light Company. The vessel’s registry was closed on 4 October 1972 and the hull said to have been broken up. This appears to have been incomplete and one of the hulks is thought to represent the vessel.

Barges – Several barges, dredges and lighters are visible in Homebush Bay but their identification and history is incomplete. Records from the ex-Maritime Services Board suggest that the following barges were at one time moored in the bay, although it is not known whether some were scrapped, removed or left there: L 989; L 498; No.7 crane; FP 1569; L 409; L 906; No.2 Punt and 1630 Crane.