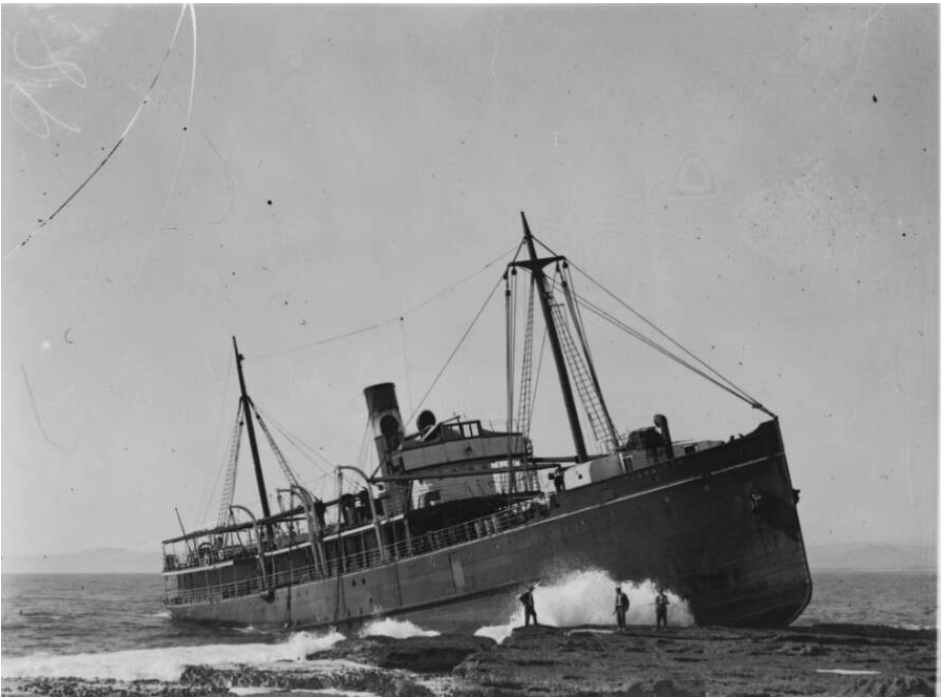


South Coast **SHIPWRECKS**

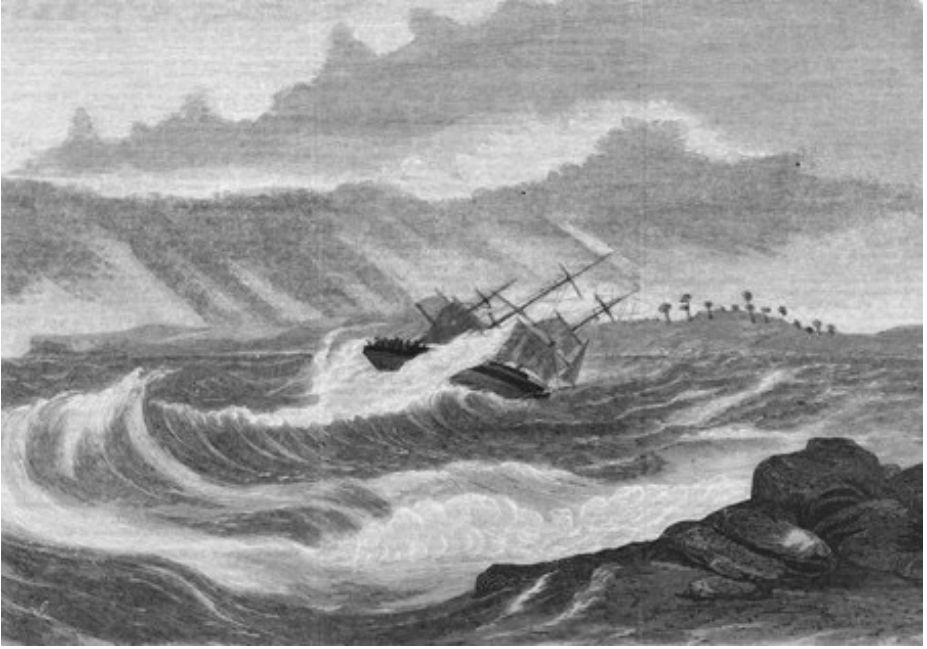
A significant, intriguing feature of our history



Merimbula, 1928

southcoasthistory.org.au

South Coast History Society Inc.



Walter Hood, 1870



Dandenong, 1876

South Coast Shipwrecks

Shipwrecks have been a common, recurring feature of NSW South Coast's history.

There probably have been more than 200 of them.

For the first time ever, comprehensive details have been assembled about where, when and why each of 150 of these vessels were wrecked.

These are all available on the highly acclaimed

www.southcoasthistory.org.au website.

These 150 incredible stories now invite your interest...

So, why have there been so many shipwrecks on the NSW South Coast?

- For the first 150 years of European settlement in Australia, and for the first century of European settlement of the South Coast, ships provided the only practical means of communicating with the 'outside world'; so, anything moving in or out of Sydney (and later other settlements) had to be moved by ship. And, if a South Coast resident wanted to go anywhere else, or a local business or farmer wanted to send their goods or produce to a major market such as Sydney or Melbourne, or if they wanted to buy something that was not available locally, or if they simply wanted to communicate with others (family, friends, businesses) elsewhere, or if they just wanted to be informed about what was happening in the 'outside world', they were ENTIRELY dependent on shipping services to and from the South Coast. This was the reality for the best part of a century.
- There were, therefore, hundreds and hundreds of ships (many of them very small ships) operating along the South Coast, calling to numerous stopping-off places such as Wollongong, Port Kembla, Shellharbour, Kiama, Gerringong, Berry, Nowra, Jerrara, Huskisson, Ulladulla, Bawley Point, Peppy Beach, Batemans Bay, Nelligen,

Broulee, Moruya, Tuross Head, Potato Point, Narooma, Bermagui, Tathra, Merimbula and Eden. Very few of these could be considered 'ports'. And, it was inevitable that some of these many, many vessels would end up becoming wrecks.

- Weather conditions along the South Coast can be very rough, even very dangerous. And weather conditions can change very quickly, often placing unsuspecting crews of vessels in precarious positions. More vessels ran aground or were sunk on the South Coast because they encountered fierce storms, rough seas, heavy fog - or, in contrast, were becalmed when winds suddenly dropped and they were swept ashore by strong currents - than were wrecked for any other reason.
- There is a very strong Eastern Australian Current that extends from North Queensland down to near Tasmania and which runs just offshore along the NSW South Coast. This current is not as strong close into the shore, so ships' masters were often tempted to hug the shore when heading north to minimise the adverse power of the current...all too often with tragic results.
- Most of the vessels that operated up and down the coast were small – very small. They were either sailing vessels, or very underpowered (by today's standards) steam vessels. These had limited capabilities of rapidly



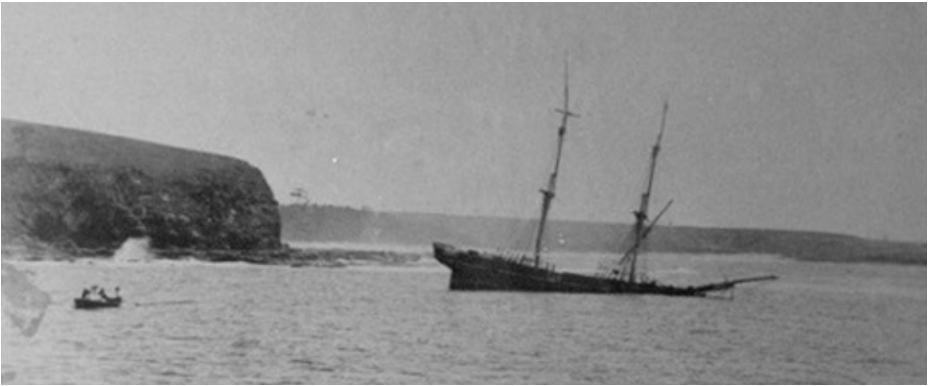
Plutus, 1882

responding to impending dangers or being able to react to sudden changes in weather. Sailing vessels, in particular, were exposed to becoming becalmed by a complete drop in wind, instantly placing them at the complete mercy of often-powerful sea swells or sea currents, and to 'southerly busters' or to unremitting gales.

- The skills and dedication of crews varied considerably and were sometimes questionable. Reports of shipping tragedies along the NSW South Coast include suggestions that the ships' captains were drunk (the captain of the *Kameruka*, wrecked in 1897, being one) or were neglecting their duties, with the result that their ship came to grief. And the masters of steamers that regularly serviced the Coast were often attempting to keep to tight timetables which meant, at times, they were less cautious than they perhaps should have been.
- There are few 'safe havens' for shipping along the South Coast. Jervis Bay is one, Twofold Bay is perhaps a second (although many other ships foundered or were wrecked in and around Twofold Bay). Reaching many 'ports' also often involved (as at Moruya) crossing very dangerous bars at the mouths of rivers, or (as at Ulladulla) avoiding other natural hazards.
- Maps/marine charts – at least in the early days – were either non-existent or rudimentary and there were no aids to navigation. Light stations (intended to provide 'a highway of light' to shipping along the coast) were ultimately constructed in an attempt to reduce the number of shipping losses. They were not always effective, as is illustrated by the loss of the *Ly-ee-Moon* in 1886 that ran into rocks, at full speed, at the very base of the Green Cape Lighthouse in what were described as calm conditions.

Shipping on the South Coast

- Shipping arrivals and departures were enormously important local events. The Sydney Morning Herald, for example, (as did local newspapers, as they emerged) had a shipping column recording the arrivals and departures of ships, details about the freight they were transporting, the names of the passengers they were carrying. This coverage applied not just to large or important ships, but also to the tiniest of coastal traders.
- Visiting ships' crews, in practice, were accepted as 'locals'. They became familiar and were considered valued members of local communities. In some cases they became essential members of the community – for example, if a town did not have a doctor, a visiting ship's doctor might be called upon to provide necessary medical assistance. So when, for example, the Neptune was wrecked in Kiama harbour in 1856, the Illawarra Mercury newspaper wrote that Mr E. Parks, both the owner and captain of the vessel, 'is a poor man (and) this loss presses heavily upon him. It is to be hoped that the benevolence of the Kiama people will prompt them to contribute something towards his relief.' The community responded, and a short time later it was reported that '£43 or thereabouts' had been raised; and when the Spec foundered off Gerringong in 1865 and its captain lost his life, the Kiama Independent observed that 'Captain Dawson, we understand, was a married man, whose wife and two or three children – residing in Sydney, are by this sad event bereft of their support and left in a state of destitution. For their relief it is intended to appeal to the sympathy of the public by means of subscription lists, which will be found at the banks and principal stores in the town.'
- Shipwrecks became just an everyday part, an accepted part, of life. They occurred so regularly that, for example, The Sydney Morning Herald had a 'shipwrecks' section in its regular shipping column. Extensive details were published about some wrecks, scant details



Nile, 1883

were provided about others – the report of the loss of the *Mary* in 1874 simply reading ‘The schooner ‘*Mary*’, of and from Melbourne, bound to Newcastle, was totally lost in Wreck Bay on the 8th February, during a heavy southerly gale. All hands saved.’

- There were several areas along the coast that were particularly shipwreck-prone. Areas around Wreck Bay, Jervis Bay, Twofold Bay, Crookhaven and Long Point (now Bass Point) were particularly to be avoided, especially when foul weather or fog were present. A significant number of wrecks occurred in these vicinities. There is, however, virtually nowhere along the South Coast that has not ‘hosted’ at least one shipwreck.
- Some ships’ captains were just plain unlucky. Many sought shelter in what they considered to be ‘safe havens’ only to find their vessels came to grief: the *Rover* was wrecked in 1841 whilst taking shelter off Broulee; the *Neptune* was wrecked in 1856 whilst sheltering in Kiama harbour. And sailing ships (having no secondary form of propulsion) were particularly vulnerable to sudden changes in the weather: in 1865 the *Corlina* was crossing the Wagonga Inlet bar when the wind suddenly dropped and she was swept by currents onto rocks; the *Martha & Elizabeth* was lost in 1855 and the *Caroline* in 1859 following sudden drops of the breeze off Point Perpendicular; the *Twin Sisters* was wrecked near Kiama in 1851

when, once again, the wind dropped and the sea currents swept it onto rocks where it was then wrecked. Perhaps the most unlucky crew, though, was aboard the Growler in 1888 when, tied to a buoy off Gerringong Jetty and being repaired after surviving ‘a terrific and sudden squall, which carried away the fore-sail, stay-sail, and jib, and the steering gear’, it was hit by a squall for a second time and was wrecked within minutes.

- For ships that went aground, there was usually a very short window available for attempts to be made to refloat them or for cargo to be salvaged. Many of the vessels that did go aground had, of course, been driven ashore by high seas and, once the hull of a ship had been broken and water had entered the ship, those seas usually then created a ‘free surface phenomenon’ (the trapped water, sloshing continuously inside the vessel from one side to the other) that significantly and rapidly increased the chances of the vessel becoming a total wreck. Unsurprisingly, therefore, most newspaper reports about vessels that had grounded on the South Coast indicate that they had rapidly broken up.
- There are numerous stories of local Aboriginals coming to the aid of stricken vessels or guiding survivors to nearby lighthouses, or even guiding them to Sydney: the survivors of the Sydney Cove in 1797 would have had absolutely no chance of reaching Sydney had Aboriginals not guided them and helped them in other ways; when the Bertha hit rocks on Long Point in 1879, local Dharawal Aboriginals witnessed the shipwreck and saved the lives of the passengers and crew by taking a line from



Kameruka, 1897

the vessel to the shore. (Incidentally, the owner of the Bertha lost another of his ships nearby and on the same day, in the same storm); the survivors of the Nancy were guided by local Aboriginals to Jervis Bay in 1805; and, in 1806, the survivors of the George, having fled after being attacked by Aboriginals in Twofold Bay, were ultimately guided from Jervis Bay to Sydney by more-friendly local Aboriginals. But there are also stories of shipwreck survivors being attacked by hostile Aboriginals – even to the extent of having their clothes taken from their backs!

- The most common vessels that became shipwrecks were those that were regularly transporting timber from numerous mills along the South Coast, or were transporting coal from Newcastle to Melbourne or Adelaide (much of it so that steamers could take it on board



Bellbowrie, 1913

to fuel their boilers when operating out of Melbourne or Adelaide – neither place having local supplies of coal), or were transporting blue metal from Kiama to Sydney for use on the extensive railway lines

then being built across the state. These vessels were often owned by the timber millers or the blue metal suppliers themselves (colliers were more likely to be contracted on a voyage-by-voyage basis), so that they had a guaranteed, ready means of transporting their outputs to markets.

- From the late 19th century, steamers began to replace sailing ships as the coastal traders and regular timetabled services were able to be introduced, principally by the Illawarra and South Coast Steam Navigation Company. The accidents involving steamers were fewer in number than the accidents involving sailing ships but, in reality, the rate of accidents involving steamers was not substantially less

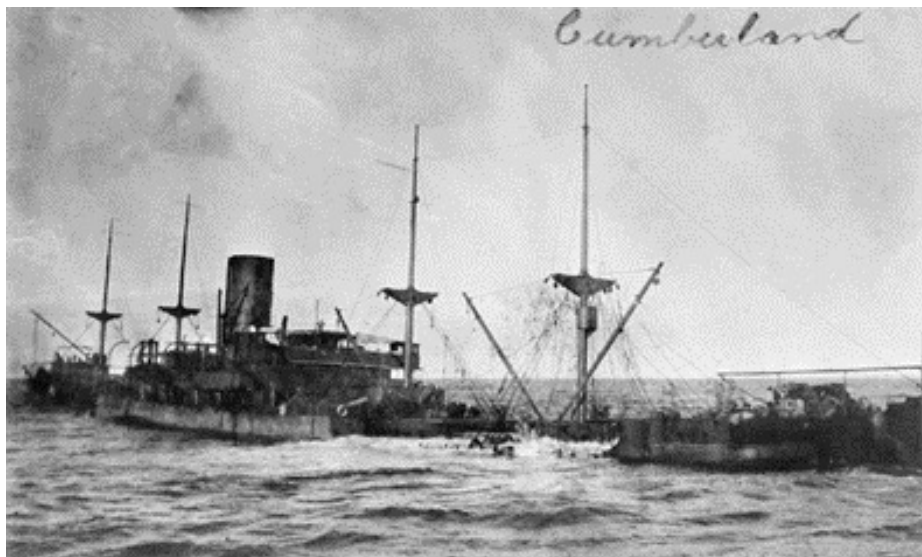
than the rate of accidents involving sailing ships, simply because the number of vessels operating along the coast decreased substantially in the 20th century as road transport became a more attractive alternative.

- In World War II, seven vessels were lost on the NSW South Coast as a result of enemy submarine activity.

**With 150+ stories of South Coast shipwrecks to choose from,
at www.southcoasthistory.org.au, where should you start?**

Perhaps with...

- **The Longboat from the Sydney Cove, 1797.** The first recorded shipwreck on the NSW South Coast (or the South Coast of NSW, as it was then), led to the surviving crew embarking on a 63-day overland trek to Sydney. The party were helped by Aboriginals in some places and were attacked by Aboriginals in others. In the early days, surviving a shipwreck on the South Coast was really just the



Cumberland, 1917

start of an ordeal – to be ‘rescued’ necessitated a long overland walk to the nearest settlement (which often was Sydney) and Aboriginals that were encountered on the way were not always friendly: as is illustrated also by the stories of the *Nancy*, 1805, the *George*, 1806, the *Hawkesbury Packet*, 1817, the *Mary*, 1821, and the *Olivia*, 1827.

- **The Hive, 1835.** This was the only ship carrying convicts to be wrecked on the Australian mainland – somewhat appropriately in what became known as ‘Wreck Bay’, just south of Jervis Bay. 15 other vessels were wrecked in the same bay between 1805 and 1922. And in a postscript to the wreck of the Hive, its captain was aboard a schooner sent to salvage stores from the Hive that was also wrecked in Wreck Bay – so that captain had the dubious distinction of being shipwrecked twice on the same beach!



Bodalla, 1924

- **Collisions between two ships** accounted for a few South Coast shipwrecks – including the *Rose* which collided with the cutter Harriett in 1844, the trawler *Palmerston* that sank after it collided with the Millimumil off Point Perpendicular early in the morning on 29th May 1929... but, the collision that resulted in the greatest loss of life was between the aircraft carrier HMAS Melbourne and the destroyer HMAS *Voyager* in 1964. 82 men were killed in that collision.
- **The loss of the Teazer in 1854** vividly illustrates how totally vulnerable sailing ships were to adverse weather conditions. A ‘perfect hurricane’ blew the Teazer all the way from Bass Strait to Twofold Bay, where she was wrecked. Or, in contrast the *Martha and*

Elizabeth in 1855 and the *Caroline* in 1859 were both becalmed only to be swept ashore by strong seas. And in 1911, the *New Guinea* (a steamer, not a sailing ship) ran aground and was wrecked when it encountered thick fog.

- **‘It’s a mystery how it could have occurred’** include the wrecks of the paddlesteamer *Mimosa* in 1863 that was run into rocks ‘during the day, in calm seas, in fine weather when a light north-easterly wind was prevailing, and on a coasting track that has been constantly traversed by vessels trading to and from Sydney for more than half a century’ and the steamer *Ly-ee-Moon*, 1886, that ran into rocks at high speed at the base of the Green Cape Lighthouse on a clear, calm night. Today, the wreck of the Ly-ee-Moon is more remembered because of one passenger who had been on board and lost her life.
- **‘We were coming to help you, BUT... we’ve also been wrecked!’** Talk about unlucky – the *Angus and Henry* and the *Mary Cosgrove* were sent to recover cargo from the *Camden* in 1870. Both were wrecked when caught in a southerly buster. Similarly, the *Maid of Riverton*,



Merimbula, 1928



Northern Firth, 1932



Dureenbee, 1942



Athol Star, 1950

1870, was wrecked when sent to salvage effects from the wreck of the *Summer Cloud*.

- ***The wreck of the Walter Hood, 1870***, may have had the most grizzly ending of any South Coast shipwreck. (1870 was one particularly bad year for shipwrecks!)
- ‘**A Yacht Sunk by a Whale**’ was the newspaper headline in 1894 when the *Tea Tephi*, moored in Twofold Bay, was ‘kicked’ and sunk by a passing whale.
- **The steamship Bega, 1908, simply turned turtle** between Tathra and Bermagui after having been overloaded and not properly balanced at Tathra.
- **The only enemy action that occurred in Australia and against Australia in World War I** occurred on the South Coast of New South Wales. On the morning of 6th July 1917 the SS *Cumberland*, a cargo ship bound for England and laden with war materials, struck a mine off the coast between Merimbula and Eden. This mine had been laid by a German Raider, the Wolf.
- **The Merimbula ran aground** on Beecroft Head, near Jervis Bay, on March 27th 1928. Her loss spelled the end of the Illawarra and South Coast Steam Navigation Company’s passenger services to the



Salvatore V, 2020

South Coast. From 1928 to the early 1950s the Company confined its activities exclusively to cargo services. Between 1863 and 1928, 15 of the ISCSN Co's vessels were lost – including one where a pig then swam a line from ship to shore, enabling its 50 passengers and crew to be safely landed.

- **A World War II South Coast Shipping Losses, 1942-1944** article provides details about six vessels that were sunk off the NSW South Coast by Japanese submarines, and one that was sunk by a German U-boat, in World War II. Plus, it provides a comprehensive overview of all of the many attacks by submarines in World War II on shipping elsewhere along the NSW coast.

...which all just confirms that
'Where there's a ship, there's a shipwreck!'

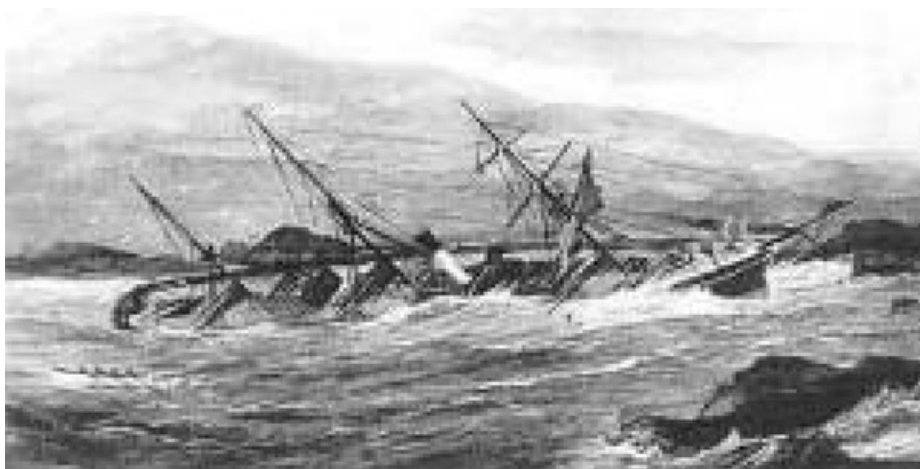


Volition, 2025

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City of Sydney, 1862