

# The Science Observer

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## Shipwrecks into Huts: Karen Townrow

During the summer of 1986-87, archaeologist, Karen Townrow, spent five weeks collecting samples of shipwreck materials and driftwood and excavating historical sites on Macquarie Island. Her research indicated that some wood found in some of the huts she excavated had most likely come from shipwrecks.

### *An archaeological survey*

Archaeologist, Karen Townrow, located ruins and scattered artefacts around Macquarie Island during the summer of 1986-87. She surveyed ruins of huts at the Isthmus, the Nuggets, Lusitania Bay and Hurd Point and found parts of an iron stove, a clay tobacco pipe bowl, staves of a barrel, and tools such as vices, anvils, barrels, coal and settling tanks.



Karen Townrow inspecting a digester at Lusitania Bay watched by King Penguin chicks.  
Photo National Parks and Wildlife Service, Tasmania.

Karen Townrow also located tryworks at Hurd Point, Caroline Cove, Lusitania Bay and the Isthmus and digester works at the Isthmus, the Nuggets, Hasselborough Bay, Lusitania Bay and Hurd Point. These digesters were shipped to the island by sealing businessman, Joseph Hatch in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. The Macquarie Island digesters are probably the only machines of this type in the world to have been used for extracting penguin oil. Hatch's employees used to boil down King Penguins at Lusitania Bay and Royal Penguins at Hurd Point.



Digestors at the Nuggets photo Geof Copson

Karen Townrow reported that the Lusitania Bay works had one small and one large digester and a boiler. These were all originally housed in a large shed, and water had been piped in to the boiler. She dug a trial trench at the Isthmus, 1 metre by 6 metres. This trench uncovered a porch or workshop area.

*She found tools and a horse harness, which probably belonged to Nugget or Taggart, two Clydesdales that used to pull the blubber sled during the later phase of oiling operations.*

Karen Townrow also unearthed floor joists, posts and some wall planking lined with tar paper, iron tools, guttering, wall insulation, glassware, domestic pottery, elephant seal teeth, two spent gun cartridges and parts of a cupboard or tea chest.

Townrow also collected samples from driftwood and hut remains along the coastline. These samples were then sent to the CSIRO for analysis. The CSIRO advised on the species of wood in the samples. The results were then compared with information about the seven known wooden shipwrecks on Macquarie Island.

The problem with matching wood samples to shipwrecks is complicated by the fact that some sealers brought timber to the island for use in constructing huts. Another problem is that timber from other locations around the world drifts to Macquarie Island. A third problem with analysing the samples was that ships often consisted of a variety of different timber species.





Excavation at Hurd Point sealers hut, Macquarie Island, Karen Townrow, Tasmanian Parks and Wildlife Service.

However, if the wood came from a northern hemisphere species such as spruce, Townrow and her colleague, Mike Nash, concluded that the wood had probably belonged to a shipwreck.

*The study confirmed that early visitors to Macquarie Island reused some shipwreck timber when building their huts.*

### References

- Townrow, K, 1988, 'Sealing sites on Macquarie Island: an archaeological survey', Papers and Proceedings of the Royal Society of Tasmania, Volume 122 (1).
- Townrow, K, and Nash, M, 'Close shave from Sub-Antarctic: an analysis of timber samples from archaeological sites on Macquarie Island,' Bulletin of the Australian Institute for Maritime Archaeology, 14.2:9-16

### Further Reading

You can read the stories of these seven wrecks in:  
First Known Wreck - Campbell Macquarie  
'All Hopes in a Longboat' - Caroline  
Lord Duncan Aids Ailing Countess - Countess of Minto  
Horizontal Icicles Cling to Wreck - BenCleugh  
'All Hands safe: Tremendous Battle with the Seas!' - Gratitude  
'I can't Face Hatch' - Jessie Niccol  
Third Hatch Shipwreck - Clyde