

The Sealers' Shanty

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James Kelly, Master Mariner

James Kelly was an adventurer. Being shipwrecked on Macquarie Island at the age of twenty-one was only one of many memorable episodes in a long and colourful seafaring career in the early Australian colonies.

A Currency Lad Apprenticed

James Kelly was born to an Irish convict mother in 1791 only three years after the First British Fleet arrived in New South Wales. This made him a 'Currency Lad', one of the first generation of children born in the Australian colonies. He was apprenticed as a mariner at the age of thirteen, which was not an unusually young age for boys of that time. Kelly must have been good at his job, because by the time he was twenty-one he was first mate on the *Campbell Macquarie*. This was an Indian-built vessel bound for the sealing grounds of Macquarie Island.



James Kelly, by an unknown artist.
Tasmaniana Library, State Library of Tasmania.

Kelly and the ship's gunner were on watch the night the *Campbell Macquarie* arrived at Macquarie Island. There was a heavy sea fog and they did not see land until it was too late - the *Campbell Macquarie* became trapped in surf. She was blown towards the rocks in what is now known as Hasselborough Bay, on the north-west of Macquarie Island. Captain Siddins tried to head the vessel back to sea, but to no avail. The force of onshore winds and the pull of the breakers were so strong that the *Campbell Macquarie* was soon shipwrecked.

In the midst of a furious gale, in the winter dark of a subantarctic night, thirty five shipwrecked sailors launched the ship's rowboats and rowed ashore. Miraculously, they all made it ashore alive. **The *Campbell Macquarie* crew was marooned on Macquarie Island for the next four months.**

During that time, four Indian sailors died.



On 3 October 1812, the *Perseverance* arrived to collect another

sealing gang. There was little room aboard the small brig after the *Perseverance* sealers and their haul of seal skins were taken on board. Nonetheless, the master offered Captain Siddins, Kelly and ten other castaways a passage to Sydney. The Indian sailors, or 'Lascars' as they were known, had to wait for another vessel to collect them.

Heavy winds were blowing around Port Jackson when the *Perseverance* tried to sail into Sydney Harbour. Her master decided that it would be prudent to sail north and enter Broken Bay, about twenty miles north of Sydney.

Kelly was probably the keenest man aboard to reach Sydney Town. He was courting seventeen year old Elizabeth Griffiths, a 'Currency lass' who lived there. He volunteered to walk to the twenty miles to Sydney, a brave act in the days of hostile Aborigines and escaped convicts. Kelly successfully made his way back to Sydney and reported the shipwreck wreck to the owner of the *Campbell Macquarie*, Joseph Underwood, and to the *Sydney Gazette*.

Underwood was obliged to rescue the crewmen who were still stranded on Macquarie Island, but had no suitable vessel for a trip to the subantarctic. He quickly bought the *Elizabeth and Mary* and sent her to Macquarie Island. Although it was unlike Kelly to miss an adventure, this time he was not on board. Ten days later, he married Elizabeth Griffiths.

Kelly had not been married long when he was off to sea again as master of the *Brothers*, a small sealing schooner. A year after the *Campbell Macquarie* shipwreck, Kelly returned to Macquarie Island as master of the sealing brig *Mary and Sally*. He and his gang slaughtered large numbers of fur and elephant seals there.

At one stage the *Mary and Sally* became caught in a heavy squall and Kelly came close to being shipwrecked again on Macquarie Island. Fortunately he had learned from previous experience and headed the *Mary and Sally* out to sea in time to avert another shipwreck.

Kelly became a colourful and notorious character in Sydney and Hobart Towns.

One of his escapades involved a violent conflict with Maoris in New Zealand. Another of Kelly's adventures involved rowing around Van Diemen's Land in a whaleboat.

He kept many logs and diaries of his trips.

Kelly died in Hobart at the age of sixty five.



James Kelly's grave in St David's Park, Hobart.
Photo Glyn Roberts.

***R*eferences**

Bowden, K.M., 1964, *Captain James Kelly of Hobart Town*,
Melbourne University Press, Adelaide, pp 1-2, 13-19.

Rose, L, 1984, *Richard Siddins of Port Jackson*, Roebuck,
Canberra, pp. 61-72.

***F*urther *R*eadings**

You can read more about the *Campbell Macquarie* shipwreck in:

[First Known Shipwreck: *Campbell Macquarie*](#)

and about Kelly's visit to New Zealand in 1812 in:

[Chief Harpooner, Henry Whalley](#)