

# The Shipwreck Watch

*A Journal of Macquarie Island Shipwreck Stories*

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## Horizontal Icicles Cling to Wreck: *Bencleugh*

Captain J. S.I. Thomson and his brother owned the whaling and sealing schooners, *Bencleugh* and *Friendship*. John Thomson was aboard the *Bencleugh* in 1877 when she was shipwrecked on Macquarie Island.

*Bencleugh* was a schooner of 66 tons, built at Port Chalmers by Sutherland and Co. in 1872, registered at Dunedin in the names of Andrew and John Sen Inches Thomson and Thomas Black.



Elephant seals on Macquarie Island.  
Photo Geof Copson.

### *In search of southern sealing grounds*

The topsail schooner, *Bencleugh*, sailed from Port Chalmers, New Zealand to undertake some sealing and whaling. They were searching for Emerald Island, which the master of the *Emerald* reported as lying south of Macquarie in 1821. Captain H.D. Bezer, and Captain J.S.I.Thomson, part-owner of the *Bencleugh*, found no trace of Emerald Island and concluded that it had never existed.

Bezer spent the next three weeks trying to head the *BenCleugh* back to Macquarie Island through furious gales, snow, hail and fogs. The crew sighted Macquarie Island several times, but the storms were so strong that it was impossible to land.

Sails were blown away, the schooner damaged and the wheel smashed during these storms. The sailors passed the broken pieces of wheel down to the cabin where they rebuilt it from staves of a flour barrel, using the ship's furniture and fittings for screw nails. They then discovered that the new wheel was too large to get out on deck and had to be taken to bits and re-assembled on deck.



Ship's wheel. Photo Glyn Roberts.

In a brief lull between storms, a whaleboat from the *BenCleugh* managed to land a store of provisions on Macquarie Island. These stores were unloaded before another serious squall arose.

*The crew spent a long, anxious night listening to the battering of the storm.*

The next morning was Sunday, so the crew did not attempt another landing. Another gale blew up from the south-east and the seas rose rapidly. A towering wave broke on board and the bower cable parted. Bezer called all hands to the deck to hoist the sails, so they could head out to sea.

In the midst of the tempest, the iron traveller moved so quickly that it became a mass of bright sparks caused by the rubbing of iron against iron. Then a great white wall of water appeared over the bow and buried the ship in fathoms of water.

*The BenCleugh was now amidst the breakers.*

The *BenCleugh's* chief harpooner, Henry Whalley, was knocked down during the storm and his leg became dislocated at the thigh. The whaleboat and davits were washed overboard, and the schooner filled with water. The men cast off their coats and boots, expecting to have to swim for shore.

*It was so cold that one of the men, who had a longish beard, found it had frozen solid as he clung to the rigging.*

*During the shipwreck, two seemingly supernatural events occurred:*

*A mass of fiery steam erupted from the companion way. At the same time two jibs were run up, as if by invisible hands. The jibs 'chattered', and blew away in rags. Huge lumps of hail pelted the ship. Most of the crew took refuge in the cabin, whilst a few took to the cabin roof, covering themselves with a spare sail. A chest containing the only supply of dry matches, and other furniture, washed around the cabin. Waves crashed, timbers stained and floating oil barrels thundered against the bulkheads. The sailors prayed to God for help. But even under these terrifying circumstances, the crew of the Benacleugh found something to make them laugh. The hatch of the lazarette had floated off as the steward was crossing the cabin floor, waist-deep in water. He was smoking a pipe and talking when he disappeared into the lazarette below. He bobbed up again soon afterwards, still talking away, with his pipe still in his firmly in his mouth.*

At last the long night ended and the crew saw in the dawn light that they had narrowly escaped shipwreck in the darkness. The storm had driven the Benacleugh into a natural cleft in a reef.

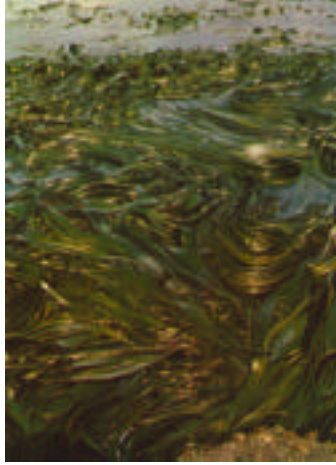
*From there the crew could see Macquarie Island, blanketed in snow from the shore to the top of the plateau.*



Snow on the coast of Macquarie Island.  
Photo Geof Copson.

Wreckage of two rowboats, oars and barrels were strewn along the beach. A great fringe of sea weed up to fifty feet long, lashed the rocky shore.

Since the rowboats had been washed overboard, there was no other way ashore but to swim. Captain Bezer called for volunteers to swim ashore with a rope. Two men offered, but Thomson, as the ship's owner, decided that he should be the one to risk such a dangerous deed. His first attempt failed and he was swept back towards the schooner and hauled aboard again. The second time he succeeded in swimming through dangerous kelp strands in the icy water.



Macquarie Island kelp. Photo Isobel Bennett

With the help of the rope, all crew members reached the land. They had no coats, hats and shoes; two of them had broken legs, and several others were injured. All of them were wet, cold, weary and hungry. Out in the bay at Middle Beach, they could see what remained of the once beautiful schooner, *Benacleugh*.

*Her masts and yards were awry, and clustered with icicles that had frozen horizontally in the gale.*

The castaways stumbled northward, their wet clothes frozen solid. Eventually they reached two wooden sealers' huts. These huts were in a poor state, but the men were happy for the shelter and soon had a fire going. They had meagre supplies of soup and coffee, which had been brought ashore earlier in the whaleboat. In order to make coffee they had to melt snow, but the sea spray on the snow made the coffee taste salty, although none of them complained. They tried to boil some potatoes, but

found that they had been badly damaged by frost and were inedible.

Thomson, Bezer and the steward claimed one hut while the remaining crew crammed into the other. The bunks were hard boards and they had no bedding, but were grateful for any sort of shelter. The next day the men searched for salvage and were delighted when they found a half sack of pearl barley sodden with salt water. They boiled bucket after bucket during the night, adding a little ancient liquid sugar they found in a keg in one of the huts. They managed to salvage more supplies from the wreck of the *Benacleugh* before she broke up.

*Soon after the shipwreck, chief harpooner, Henry Whalley, died in one of the huts.*



Artists impression of Henry Whalley by Belinda Kurczok

In the four months before their rescue, the survivors busied themselves improving the huts. They made a stove out of a five-gallon oil drum and used a preserved meat tin to construct a lamp that would burn sea elephant oil. For cooking, they used a small tripod and fried scones on a broken old shovel. At night they covered dough in wood ashes and had damper in the morning. During the time they were on the island they

cooked themselves thousands of pancakes made from penguin eggs.



The huts where the BenCleugh castaways sheltered.  
Sketch by J.S.I. Thomson.

The *BenCleugh* crew considered themselves very lucky to find three bottles of lime-juice. That, and a diet of 'Macquarie Island cabbage' meant that they did not succumb to scurvy.

*The cold gave them enormous appetites and they slowly fattened up on a diet of sea-elephant tongues and steaks, penguin liver and kidney stew.*

The men were lucky enough to salvage two sail needles. They tailored themselves some 'elegant' suits from sails, using wood and knotted rope in a 'Turk's head' for buttons. Only Thomson still wore his tweeds until his rescue. He found his coat washed up on the shore and repaired it with twine made from teasing out threads of canvass.

*The men were at first without shoes because they had kicked off their boots in order to swim ashore.*

They made themselves moccasins from sea leopard skins and when their socks wore out they substituted dried grass. They had plenty of supplies of tobacco and the castaways used the back teeth of young sea-elephants as pipe bowls and the quills of albatross feathers as stems.

They scouted the shores everyday for anything that washed up. Once they found a can of red paint and, since, they had few cooking utensils, they tried to use the paint can as a coffee pot.

*They became violently ill from lead poisoning, and were lucky to recover.*



Considering their circumstances, there was little fighting or quarreling amongst the men. Good fellowship prevailed until the *Friendship* took them back to New Zealand in time to spend a welcome Christmas, 1877, with their families.



## **R**eferences

Thomson, J.S.I. 1912, *Voyages and Wanderings in Far Off Lands and Seas*, London, 1912, pp139-191.

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

You can read about the chief harpooner of the *BenCleugh*, who died on Macquarie Island in:

Chief Harpooner, Henry Whalley.

and about Thomson's walk around Macquarie Island in

The Legend of the Eagle