

The Shipwreck Watch

A Journal of Macquarie Island Shipwreck Stories

Volume 1

1810

Captain Frederick Hasselburgh, master of the sealing brig, *Perseverance*, discovered Macquarie Island during the winter of 1810. He may not have been the first to see Macquarie Island, however, because at the time of his visit, the wreckage of an old sailing vessel was lying high in the grass. The origins of this wreck remain a mystery to this day.

A new sealing ground discovered

Captain Frederick Hasselburgh had been sealing on Campbell Island during the winter of 1810 when his brig, *Perseverance*, was blown off course. On 11 July 1810, Hasselburgh came across an uncharted group of remote, subantarctic islands south-west of Campbell Island. He named the main island and its outlying reefs and smaller islands 'the Macquaries' after the Governor of the colony of New South Wales.



Half length portrait of a standing man by Thomas Bock 1793-1855. Allport Library and Museum of Fine Arts. State Library of Tasmania.

This island group was bustling with fur seals and the skins of these seals were fetching good prices on the London market. Hasselburgh stood to gain a fortune from sealing activities there, provided no rival sealing gangs found the new sealing ground. He immediately landed a gang of sealers and sped back to Sydney for more salt supplies to preserve the skins, and to hire another sealing gang.

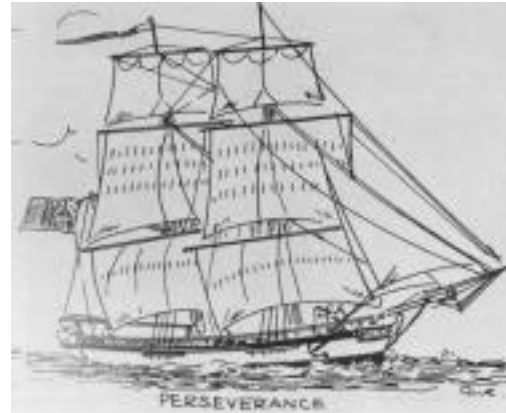
Before returning to Sydney, Hasselburgh made his crew swear that they would not, under any circumstances, tell anyone the location of the island. According to one story, however, it was Hasselburgh himself who, in a drunken state, revealed to other sealers at Sydney Cove, Macquarie Island's latitude and longitude and started the Macquarie Island 'seal rush'.



The location is revealed: photo Glyn Roberts.

Hasselburgh landed another sealing gang on Macquarie Island, then sailed to Campbell Island, where he had left his original gang of sealers some months earlier. Tragically, Hasselburgh and two young people drowned at

Campbell Island when the ship's boat overturned.



Sketch from J.S. Cumpston, *Kangaroo Island*

An Unknown Wreck

Captain O. F. Smith, master of the *Aurora*, had been at Campbell Island at the time Hasselburgh drowned, and one of Smith's crew managed to extract the secret location of the island from one of Hasselburgh's men. Smith wasted no time in sailing back to Sydney for supplies, then set sail in search of Macquarie Island. He spent several months sealing there and returned to Sydney with a rich haul of fur seal skins at the end of 1810. Smith was interviewed by a reporter from the *Sydney Gazette*, who wrote:

'Captain Smith saw several pieces of wreck of a large vessel on this island, apparently very old and high up in the grass, apparently the remains of the unfortunate De la Perouse.'

This wreck could not have belonged to De la Perouse, because the remains of the French explorer's missing ship, Boussole have since been found in the Solomon Islands.

Polynesian oral histories include stories of long southern voyages and sightings of icebergs, and there is a very remote chance that the vessel could have been Polynesian. It is more likely, however, that the wreck was a sealing or whaling vessel that came to grief somewhere in the Southern Ocean west of Macquarie Island, and washed up on one of the shores of Macquarie Island.

We are uncertain of the precise location of this wreckage. The *Sydney Gazette* report seems to indicate that it was found on the nearby Bishop and Clerk Island. However, there is no grass on Bishop and Clerk, which suggests that the wreck was lying on the main island.

There have been several other reports of unknown wrecks on Macquarie Island. When Captain J.S.I. Thomson and the crew of the *Bencleugh* buried their chief harpooner, Henry Whalley, in the shingle near the isthmus in 1877, they uncovered the ‘ribs’ of ‘an unknown waif of the sea’. This may have been the remains of the *Countess of Minto*, or it may have been the same wreck reported by Captain Smith in 1810.

It is too cold and windy for trees to grow on Macquarie Island, and sealers and shipwrecked sailors used to burn ships’ wreckage for cooking and heating

For this reason, and because it is difficult to determine the exact location of the wreck reported in 1810, we will probably never know its origin.

References

- Bannerman, J.W.H. 1913, *Milestones or Wrecks of Southern New Zealand*, Bluff Press, p1.
- Cumpston, J.S. 1968, *Macquarie Island*, Australian Antarctic Division, Melbourne, p15.
- James, T.H. 1838, *Six Years in South Australia*, J. Cross, London, pp46-50.
- Thomson, J.S.I. 1912, *Voyages and Wanderings in Far Off Lands and Seas*, London, 1912, p152.

Further Reading

The story of the drowning of Hasselburgh and two young people is told in:

[Tragic Drownings - Campbell Island](#)

Stories of the Countess of Minto and Bencleugh Wrecks are found [Lord Aids Ailing Countess-](#)

[‘Horizontal Icicles Cling to the Wreck’ -Bencleugh](#)

[Chief Harpooner, Henry Whalley](#)

Mystery

The origin and location of Macquarie Island's unknown wreck, reported in 1810, remains a mystery to this day.