



Tasmanian Shipwrecks

As an island, Tasmania has always been dependent on shipping services to connect it to the outside world. However, lying in the path of the winds known as the 'roaring forties', the waters around Tasmania have proved treacherous to mariners.

Since the wreck of the ship Sydney Cove in 1797, around 1,000 vessels of all sizes are known to have been lost in Tasmanian waters.

Where are the shipwrecks?

The locations of less than 10% of the shipwrecks in Tasmanian waters are presently known and consequently these sites are an important part of our national maritime heritage.

While many shipwrecks can only be visited by suitably qualified divers, artefacts may also be seen on the sea shore or in tidal zones.

Many shipwreck sites are often left unlocated or undisturbed for years. Some natural processes of decay and decomposition are stopped or substantially slowed in the underwater environment. For these reasons shipwreck sites are time like capsules which can open a window into history.

The wreck of the **Brahmin** is one fine example of an accident with an incredible outcome. The 616 tonne, fully rigged ship, Brahmin was built in Scotland in 1842 and wrecked in 1854 off King Island.

On 5 February 1854 the Brahmin left Gravesend, England, bound for Sydney with a general cargo, five passengers and a crew of 35 under the command of M. McEachen. By late May the vessel was sailing under gale force winds west of Bass Strait. The weather prevented the Captain from taking accurate navigational observations and at around midnight on the 21st the Brahmin struck a reef off the western coast of King Island.

Despite the conditions, the vessel held together until daylight when the ship's longboat was launched. The boat was subsequently swamped with the loss of 12 of the crew and four passengers before the remainder reached the shore. Captain McEachen was the last to

leave the Brahmin and he too was drowned before reaching safety.

The survivors of the wreck spent five months on King Island until the schooner Waterwitch was wrecked there in September. Using a small boat from the Waterwitch two of the crew managed to sail to Melbourne to seek help. The steamships Electra and Manchester were despatched to pick up the castaways who arrived in Melbourne on 25 October 1854.

Listed below are just some of the shipwrecks that occurred in the waters surrounding Tasmania during the last two hundred years.

Bulli: The steamship Bulli was built at Greenwich, England in 1872 and wrecked in June 1877 off Deal Island.

Cambridgeshire: The Cambridgeshire was built at Newcastle, England in 1873 and wrecked during September 1875 in Banks Strait.

Cataraqui: The 710 tonne barque Cataraqui was built at Quebec, Canada in 1840 and wrecked on the south-western coast of King Island in 1845.

Tasman: The iron steamship Tasman was built at Glasgow, Scotland in 1873 and was wrecked on the Hippolyte Rocks in 1883.

Litherland: The Litherland was built at North Birkenhead, England in 1834 and was wrecked in 1853 off Clarke Island in Bass Strait.

Nord: The Nord was built at Greenock, Scotland in 1900 and foundered off the Tasman Peninsula in 1915.

Otago: A three-masted iron barque, the Otago was built at Glasgow, Scotland in 1869 and dismantled in 1957 for scrap metal.

Svenor: The Svenor was originally built as the Corryvreckan at Glasgow, Scotland in 1884 and was wrecked in 1914 on the Tasmanian west coast.

Sydney Cove: The Sydney Cove is the eighth oldest wreck located in Australian waters having sunk in 1797 off Preservation Islands in the Furneaux Group.

Care of the maritime heritage

In Tasmania, the Tasmanian Heritage Office of the Department of Tourism, Parks, Heritage and the Arts are responsible for the management of the State's historic shipwrecks and other maritime heritage sites.

From its base in Hobart the Branch is actively involved in researching, locating and surveying shipwreck sites. The Cultural Heritage Branch is also concerned with the dissemination of information through publications, and actively works with organisations such as the Queen Victoria Museum and Art Gallery, Launceston, on the conservation and display of artefacts.

In recent years the Office has also carried out an extensive research and excavation program on the Sydney Cove shipwreck in Bass Strait.

The Tasmanian Heritage Office is responsible for the administration of legislation that provides protection for a number of shipwreck sites in the State's internal and coastal waters, including sub-Antarctic Macquarie Island.

Shipwrecks and the law

Two laws protect the remains of shipwrecks in Tasmanian waters. The Commonwealth *Historic Shipwrecks Act 1976* applies to Australian Commonwealth waters extending from the low water mark to the outer edge of the continental shelf. The State Historic Cultural Heritage Act 1995 applies to shipwrecks that lie within the state waters of Tasmania (harbours, enclosed bays, estuaries, rivers and lakes).

Under both these Acts all shipwrecks and their associated artefacts which were lost over 75 years ago are automatically protected. Shipwrecks that occurred less than 75 years ago may also be individually protected under these Acts if they are considered to be significant. In special circumstances when a shipwreck is considered highly significant or vulnerable a 'Protected Zone' may be declared around the site, requiring a permit from the management authority to enter.

In all instances members of the public are welcome to visit shipwrecks provided they do not collect artefacts or otherwise disturb or damage the sites. Underwater sites are often quite delicate and even apparently small disturbances can result in considerable long term damage. Under the current laws it is illegal to interfere with a protected shipwreck site without a permit from the managing authority.

Both laws require discoveries of a shipwreck or the possession of artefacts from protected shipwrecks to be reported. For the reporting of sites, permits, advice or information concerning Tasmania's shipwrecks and other maritime heritage places please contact the Tasmanian Heritage Office.

Contact

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Further information

Parks and Wildlife website <www.parks.tas.gov.au>

Michael Nash (1996). *Shipwrecks of the Fureneaux Group*. Occasional Paper No.37 - Tasmanian Parks and Wildlife Service.

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