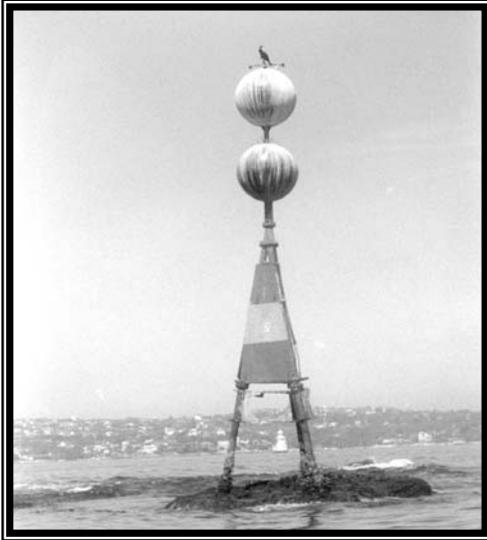


# Woollahra Library

## Local History Centre



### Shipwrecks of the South Head region



Port Jackson has been known as a safe haven for sailors since 1788, when Captain Arthur Phillip declared it 'the finest harbour in the world'. Even so, Sydney has not been free of maritime accidents - ranging from mishaps to tragedies. A few of the more notable incidents are described below.

#### Negotiating the Heads

The coastline outside the Port Jackson Heads can be treacherous in bad weather, and finding the entrance to the Harbour may be surprisingly difficult.

#### The tragedy of the *Edward Lombe* – and other early accidents at The Heads

On **25<sup>th</sup> August 1834**, Captain Stroyan of the *Edward Lombe* battled big seas and gale-force winds off Sydney's Heads for a full day, unable to locate the Harbour's entrance in the murky conditions. After dark, Stroyan navigated the *Edward Lombe* through the Heads, guided by the faintly visible beam from the Macquarie Lighthouse – but without the benefit of a harbour pilot's local knowledge. In the continuing gale, the barque was driven onto Middle Head, quickly breaking up on the rocky shore. Seven of the crew drowned, including the Captain, as did five of her passengers. After daybreak, local mariner Captain Swan, assisted by several Watsons Bay pilots, rescued seventeen survivors from the craft's remains.

The *Edward Lombe* was not the first vessel to be wrecked near the harbour's entrance, but it was Sydney's first major shipping disaster, and had various consequences. The Signal Station was re-built and equipped for night signalling, pilots were made available 24 hours per day, and Sydney residents were greatly moved by the tragedy – especially by the plight of one of the survivors who had lost both husband and brother, as well as all her possessions. It would not be the last time their sympathy would be roused by a shipwreck.

Almost twenty three years to the day later, on the night of **20<sup>th</sup> August, 1857** a disaster took place off the South Head, in similar weather conditions to those which had wrecked the *Edward Lombe*. The loss of the *Dunbar* (see Sheet No 4), with the lives of 121 on board, is Sydney's best-known shipwreck.

In between the *Edward Lombe* and *Dunbar* disasters came other accidents and mishaps at or near the mouth of the harbour. Eight of a crew of nine were lost when the *Wanderer*, a schooner, was wrecked on Middle Head on **July 9<sup>th</sup>, 1848**. In the following year, the ketch *Ellen* capsized and sank between the Heads on **9<sup>th</sup> February 1849**, with the loss of four of her five crew. The brig *Two Friends* struck the south reef, off Inner South Head, in **1851** and sank, after an attempt to tow her free failed. Two years later, the brig *Exchange* ran ashore at precisely the same point.

Outside the Heads, the ill-fated *Rosa*, an Italian brig, came to grief in heavy seas on **11<sup>th</sup> July 1853**, and gave her name to a coastal gully. The voyage had already been marred by

tragedy, with captain, first mate and four of her crew killed in confrontation with Kingsmill islanders. Short handed, and under the charge of her second mate, she headed for Sydney – and disaster on the rocky shoreline outside Port Jackson. The six remaining crew of the *Rosa* were, however, more fortunate than had been their captain and fellow sailors, escaping with their lives after scrambling to safety at 'Rosa Gully', above Diamond Bay.

### **The tragedies of 1857**

Some two months after the *Dunbar* tragedy (see Sheet No 4), on the **24.10. 1857**, more lives were lost to the sea. The ***Catherine Adamson*** was under the control of local pilot Captain John Hawkes, at the request of her captain and part owner George Stuart, as she approached the Heads late on the night of 23<sup>rd</sup> October. Hawkes was an experienced pilot, but given the rapid development of gusty, unpredictable winds, he took a risk in attempting to enter the harbour rather than waiting at sea for calmer conditions. It was an error of judgment for which he, and twenty others, paid dearly.

Hawkes soon found the clipper beyond his control, driven by the gale towards the North Head, where she eventually struck the rocks. Responding to distress calls, Watsons Bay local, Captain Creer, brought his paddle steamer *Williams* to the scene, offering to tow the clipper out of danger. Although this proved impossible, Creer was able to save 21 crewmen, including the skipper, who had put out in two boats. Pilot Hawkes, twelve crew and eight passengers were drowned as the clipper disintegrated. They were buried in the same mass grave that held the recently interred *Dunbar* victims, and the colony and local Watsons Bay community mourned again.

### **Mishaps on the Sow and Pig's Reef**

Even after safely clearing the Heads, sailors are confronted by a pattern of reefs, shoals and channels that complicate the passage of vessels into Sydney's harbour. The Sow and Pig's reef is located just inside the Heads, dividing the entranceway to Port Jackson into two channels of deep water which ships must follow to safely negotiate this section of the harbour.

The reef, submerged at high tide, has long been recognised as a navigational hazard, with architect Francis Greenway proposing in 1816 that a warning beacon be installed to mark it. However, it was not until 20 years later that the schooner *Rose* was anchored off the reef to provide a manned, lighted marker. The *Bramble*, a former naval vessel, replaced the *Rose* in 1856, and was in turn replaced by a purpose built lightship in 1877. Various fixed markers have followed in more recent times.

A number of vessels have come to grief on the Sow and Pigs Reef; among them were the following:

- ***Joke***, a schooner carrying a cargo of maize, ran onto the reef on the night of **18<sup>th</sup> June 1821**. By jettisoning (throwing overboard) most of the cargo, the crew was able to lighten the small vessel sufficiently to take her to the safety of the shore – but the schooner was damaged beyond repair.
- ***Phoenix***, a 600-ton ship, was wrecked on **5.8.1824**, while being piloted into port after transporting convicts in Hobart. Stranded on the reef for two days, when salvaged, *Phoenix* was found to be badly damaged, and was condemned. She became Sydney's first convict 'hulk', moored in Lavender Bay.
- The ***William Cossar***, on **14<sup>th</sup> February 1825**, after taking part in a towing operation in high seas, foundered on the reef. The large waves pounding the Reef brought the government owned boat to a rapid end, but not before all seven of her crew – including her Master, Captain Wise – had escaped the wreckage to await a difficult rescue operation. The *Cossar* appears to have been particularly ill fated; less than twelve months before this final destruction she had capsized off Fort Macquarie (the site of the present Sydney Opera House) with the loss of three of a crew of thirteen.
- The cutter ***Emma Kemp***, just two years after the loss of the *Cossar*, was badly damaged when blown onto the reef in a southeasterly gale. The accident occurred as the cutter attempted to make her way out of the Harbour, bound for Tasmania, on **11<sup>th</sup> February, 1827**. Only the removal of her mast spared her from complete destruction, and after extensive repair, she set sail for Hobart again in May. The *Emma Kemp* was ultimately wrecked in 1840.

The case of both the **Como**, which ran ashore on the reef in **1848**, and the wooden barque **Fame**, which came to grief on the Sow and Pigs in July/August **1857**, were proof that the reef posed an ongoing danger, even once marked. **Fame** would not be the last vessel to curse the existence of the Sow and Pigs, though this incident was eclipsed by the later maritime disasters of that year.

The manned lightships of the Sow and Pigs were to prove their worth as more than navigational markers. When the 11-ton cutter **Ranger** capsized between the Heads on **5.12.1842**, her crew was rescued by a boat dispatched from the lightship *Rose*.

### **Other maritime disasters of the South Head**

Two other tragedies that have been etched deeply into the maritime history of the South Head are the stories of the sailing boat **lolanthe** and the ferry **Greycliffe**. On **26.12.1892**, a party of day-trippers sailed two hired craft, the *lolanthe* and the *Iverna*, to the South Head area. Turned away from their chosen picnic site because it was private land, the party re-embarked to sail elsewhere in a strong southerly wind. The *lolanthe*, in the hands of two crew, and with twenty-three passengers aboard, capsized off Inner South Head, with the loss of seven lives.

Fifteen years later, *lolanthe's* story was revived as part of William Notting's campaign to have harbour foreshore land made public. Notting argued that, had the party been allowed to continue their picnic, the tragedy might never have occurred. His crusade saw the creation of various well-known public reserves.

The wooden ferry **Greycliffe**, on its regular run to Watsons Bay on the afternoon of **3.11.1927**, was cut in half by the departing passenger liner *S S Tahiti*. Forty-two ferry passengers were drowned; among them many residents and school children of the close knit communities of Vacluse and Watsons Bay. This was Sydney Harbour's worst disaster, and once again involved the South Head region.

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**Photograph of the Sow & Pigs marker**  
**By Bruce Crosson, 1986.**

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