

SHIPWRECKS IN THE GERRINGONG-BLACKHEAD AREA



On January, 1812 the Sydney Gazette & NSW Advertiser recorded the first shipment of Shoal Haven cedar to Sydney: *'On Monday last arrived the Speedwell colonial vessel from a place called Shoal Haven, which lies mid-way between Jarvis's Bay and the Five Islands, whereat she procured a cargo of cedar, said to be of good quality....The place appears to be very properly named Shoal Haven, as the above small vessel, being only 15 tons, grounded several times, and found the utmost difficulty getting in and out at high water.'*^{A1}

In the early 1810s, extracting cedar from all areas of the lower 'District of Five Islands' (Illawarra) – which at the time included today's localities of Kiama, Gerringong, Foxground, Broughton, Jaspers Brush and as far down as the Shoalhaven River - was an extremely arduous, highly dangerous yet very profitable undertaking.

In their search for cedar throughout the Five Islands, the early cedar-cutters mainly used existing aboriginal tracks to travel from place to place. Once a tree was selected and felled by the axe-men, it was cut into logs and pit-sawn by the whip-sawyers into flitches. The labourers then carried the flitches down the mountains on their back to the nearest cove where they were stacked ready for transportation to Sydney.

The vessels used to transport the cedar were open shallow-draught boats - usually manned by a crew of three men. These vessels, although very unstable in rough seas, were ideal for navigating the many small rocky and sandy coves along the coast.

Depending on weather conditions, the journey to Sydney in either direction, could sometimes take up to four days to complete. Heading north with the cedar, the boats also carried basic provisions for the trip. Navigation was carried out using a simple hand compass combined with the crews acquired knowledge of the coastline. On the return trip the boats brought back extra cedar workers and their equipment, as well as camp provisions (tobacco, tea, flour for damper, salted beef and pork). For the waiting cedar-cutters however, the most important items were the obligatory kegs of rum, which were always the first business of every boat to send ashore.

In those early days, no shipping records were kept of the movements of these unregistered cedar vessels. As a result, many boats which set out from various coastal coves loaded with Five Islands cedar were simply never heard of again. Over the years, there were numerous newspaper reports of un-named and unregistered cedar boats having been wrecked and their crews drowned.

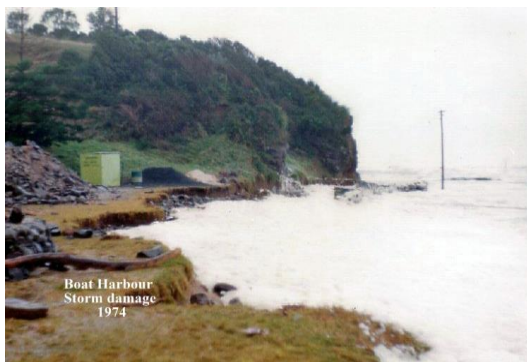
The Sydney Gazette and New South Wales Advertiser of the day reported many such tragedies: **18 February, 1815** – *‘Much apprehension has for some weeks been entertained for the safety of George Wood, of Clarence-street, and two men who accompanied to Shoal Haven, for the purpose of procuring cedar. They went from Sydney nearly a fortnight before Christmas; and a boat went from hence on Thursday the 9th inst. in quest of them, but without any flattering prospect of restoring them to the society of their friends and families.’*^{A2}

2 January, 1819 – *‘We are sorry to learn that a boat with two men, the servants of a respectable settler, left the Five Islands for Sydney six weeks ago, and have never since been heard of.’*^{A3}

11 November, 1820 - *‘Yesterday week a boat left the Five Islands with 900 feet of cedar, in which were two men and one woman, and has since not been heard of;’*^{A4}

5 May, 1821 - *‘On Tuesday night three men left Sydney Cove with provisions for a cedar-party at Illawarra (the Five Islands). They started in a tight and well-equipped boat about ten at night.... A rudder and mast have been picked up in the vicinity of the Five Islands... As no tidings have been gained of the men, it may be calculated as a certainty, that the boat has been overturned at sea, and that the three men are drowned....Many lives have been lost, within the last few months, in this perilous undertaking; and should not such melancholy events conspire to make men more cautious of their lives, particularly when return is rendered so uncertain and precarious, from the extreme danger attending such daring enterprises?’*^{A5}

18th November, 1823 – *‘H.M.cutter Mermaid, has been the means of restoring two unfortunate men to civilized life. Their names are Thomas Pamphlet and John Finnegan. These poor men sailed from Sydney, on 21st of March last, in an open boat, intended to bring cedar from the Five Islands; and were then accompanied by Richard Parsons (part owner of the boat) and John Thompson. They were driven off the land by a gale from the west; and supposing they had been carried by the current to the southward, when the gale abated they pursued a northerly course, which they continued for nearly three weeks, before they were able to land. Their sufferings, owing to want of water were dreadful; and poor Thompson died of thirst before they landed. The wretched sufferers were at length thrown on Moreton Island; and their boat being lost, they have since lived among the natives, who treated them with the utmost kindness, and a consideration which indicated but little of the savage. Parsons, in spite of the remonstrance of his companion(sic), pursued his course to the Northward along shore(sic), being still infatuated with the belief that he was to the Southward of these Settlements.’*^{A6}



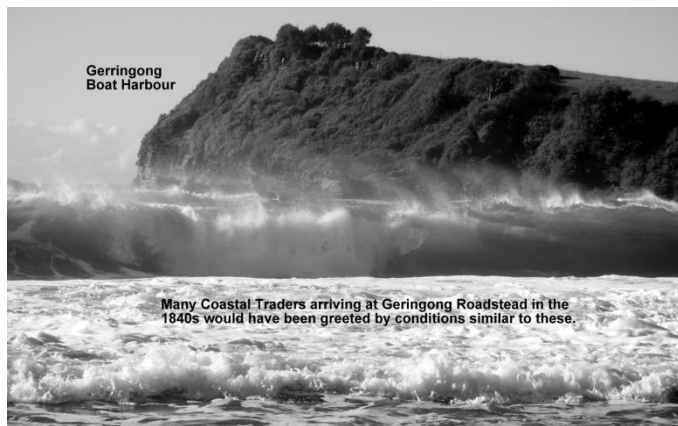
One timber merchant whose vessels operated out of the cove at Geringong (Illawarra- the Five Islands) in the 1820s, was Thomas Hyndes who on 24th July, 1824 was promised a ‘free land grant’ of 1,000 acres called “Hyndeston” to west of today’s Gerringong. This land

was later sold by Hyndes to Alexander Berry who was granted it on 18th October, 1839.^{A7a}

On the **14 October, 1825** the Sydney Gazette reports: 'Mr. Thomas Hyndes has unfortunately met with the loss of a fine little vessel, that he had purposely built for the cedar trade. **The Charlotte**, on Thursday night, was leaving the Five Islands heads for Sydney, with a cargo of wood, when a tremendous gale of wind came on suddenly, attended with a heavy sea, which soon drove the vessel on shore. The crew, however, were all saved.'^{A7}

Since the Five Islands at the time stretched from north of today's Wollongong to the Shoalhaven River, there is no certainty that the Charlotte was wrecked off Gerringong.

From the 1830s small coastal trading vessels began arriving at the Jerringong Roadstead (today: Boat Harbour) to pick up the local cedar, timber and produce. Here they were often greeted by mountainous seas that only the most experienced of masters were prepared to confront. Today, as we all know only too well, the extended south headland jutting out to 'Big Rock' provides little or no protection at the best of times. On numerous occasions we see it being pounded mercilessly by huge waves resulting from the full force of any N.E. or S.E. gale.



In October 1840, newspapers began recording, on a regular basis, the movements of the coastal shipping trade in and out of Sydney and also reporting of the many Coasters that were wrecked.^{A8}

The first such recorded shipwreck at our Roadstead occurred in early May 1841 when the 'fine little craft,' the 24t. Schooner **EMPRESS**, 'the property of Mr. John Robertson, timber merchant, Market Wharf ... had just completed taking her cargo of timber at Gerringong...when a heavy gale came on: the vessel was secured to the moorings and also by both anchors, but such was the violence of the wind that she tore up the moorings, parted from both anchors, and was driven ashore a total wreck.'

1

On 15 March 1842, the 26t. wooden cutter² **SWALLOW** 'was unfortunately wrecked as she was getting out of the harbour of Jerringong owing to the breaking of the warp. [The warp was a long rope which ran from a fixed ring or spike to the boat to enable the crew to manoeuvre the vessel]. Two persons, a man and a boy, were drowned '³ The Illawarra Correspondent for the Sydney Herald reporting on this tragedy at 'Jerringong',⁴ wrote the following scathing comment: 'This is the fourth or fifth vessel that has been wrecked within a short time...it is madness sending any craft to such an open place, exposed to the full force of the S.E. gales; nor can all the art of man make a harbour of it.'⁴

This tragedy was soon followed when on 9 October 1843, one of the regular cutters the 16t. fine vessel "**FRIENDSHIP**' belonging to Mr. George Green, was completely wrecked on the 9th instant near the Red Head (today: Red Cliff or 'The Bluff' at Nth. Warri) about five miles to the southward of

*Kiama; she was standing inshore at the time, when the wind came from the south-east, and a sudden puff carried away her mast. The principal part of the wreck fell in board, and before the anchors could be cleared away the vessel struck on the rocks. The master and one of the seamen reached the shore safely, but the other sailor, named Thomas Redding, was drowned. It is considered that the loss to the owner will amount to about £400.'*⁵

Five months later came the news of the destruction of the 10t. regular 'Cutter "**Fly**"- We have been furnished... with an account of the loss of this vessel together with her cargo of potatoes, belonging to Mr. Miller and Mr Rennie. It appears the cutter was lying in the harbour at Jerringong, the master and crew being engaged in getting her under weigh, when, through some mismanagement, she drifted on the rocks at the north side of the harbour, and became a total wreck in the presence of a number of persons, who from their position, were unable to render any assistance. The accident is attributed in some measure to her being so lightly manned.'⁶ Master Shaw, his crew and part of the wreck were taken back to Sydney aboard the DOLPHIN a few days later.⁷

Next: 'The cutter **MERMAID**, 12 tons, Baxter, master and owner, during the heavy north-east gale on Wednesday night last, was driven ashore in the harbour of Jerringong and became a total wreck. No lives were lost and her cargo, consisting of cedar and plank, was saved.'⁸

16 October 1850 then saw the 10 ton cutter **ROSALINO** wrecked off Gerringong.⁹ It was carrying a cargo of fine Portuguese wine - saved from the wreck of the JUNIPER. The crew were saved but the wine was lost.¹⁰

Wreckage of a ship – believed to be American - was found on the beach near Black Head by the crew of the schooner **ANN** in August 1852. 'Pieces of bunks, railings, cabins and masts indicate that the vessel had gone to pieces. It was never positively identified.'¹¹

Following this, the Jerringong correspondent for the Illawarra Mercury of 14 January 1856 reports: 'We have had no arrivals at our harbour for some time, the only visible sign of our harbour being a shipping port, is the remains of a vessel... but now laid up in ordinary [old nautical expression meaning 'decommissioned'^{12a}] - "called the **COBBLER**," which was near fully rigged.'¹²

In January 1859, Mr Miller highlighted at a public meeting 'the utter fallacy of ever making the harbor of Jerringong available as a shipping port as even in his time (1837 - 1859) **seven vessels** had been wrecked there.'¹³

On the evening of Thursday 17 November 1859, the 153 ton brig **ROSCO** 'while off Gerringong, sprung her forward butt and immediately opened. [The joint of two planks on the side of the ship split open] The coal ran out rapidly through the aperture, and the vessel jerked up behind, and in a very short time sunk. The crew, nine in number, all marvously (sic) escaped in an open boat, saving nothing but the clothes they then wore. They were not fifteen minutes gone from the vessel when she went down. Captain John Cameron speaks in kindly terms of the hospitality of Messrs Boxell and Lang [Lang opened The Jerringong Arms in 1857¹⁴ – then renamed it The Lanterrick Hotel in late 1861¹⁵] of Gerringong.'¹⁶

We next read: 'Whether there were any vessels suffered damage in the gale off this coast, I have not been able to ascertain, but a ship's hatch branded **No. 14**, has been picked upon Weary (Werri) Beach.'¹⁷

The following Telegraphic Message was received by the Sydney Morning Herald on 20 October 1865: *'Wednesday, 4.35p.m. Schooner **SPEC**, James Dawson, master, 17 tons register, heeled over and went down about noon yesterday, one mile and a-half off Blackhead, a point of land off Gerringong...Sunk five minutes after being struck in a terrific squall. Little cargo on board. Captain and George, a foreigner, both drowned. Edward Ross, survivor, swam to Gerringong beach [today: Seven Mile Beach] in heavy sea; reached Mr. Kerwick's house about 1 same day, naked, much cut and injured. He last saw the captain on bow of vessel when going down, and George swimming.'*¹⁸

The Kiama Independent of 22 May 1871 reports: *'that the **AGENORIA** was on the rocks at Blackhead...she came down (from Sydney) with a fresh north-easter, and was... unable to make her usual moorings in the harbour, (Gerringong) so that Captain Fell thought it best to go onto Black Head and remain there for the night... early in the morning, when in the act of weighing anchor and setting sail to come round to Gerringong, a gust of wind came up from the south and drove her onto the rocks in spite of all the efforts to prevent it.'* Scores of people arrived to help remove her 14 tons of cargo to dry land. Kedges were then placed in various positions and at high tide she was refloated and despatched directly to Sydney for any necessary repairs.¹⁹

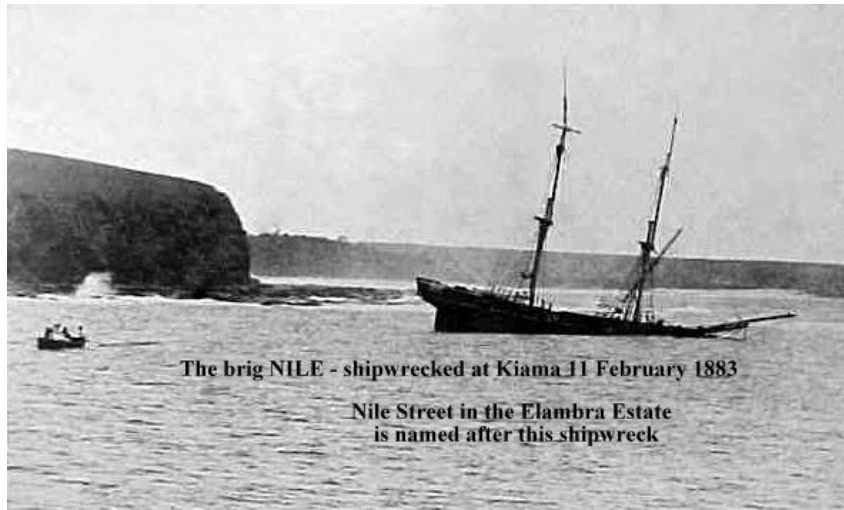
The Hobart Mercury of 1 November, 1876 reports on Gerringong: *'portions of a ship's rigging may be seen floating nearly opposite Mount Pleasant, about 100 yards from the beach. (today: Deadman's Beach) Mr. George Buchanan, was the first to observe it, and made it known at Boat harbour, but the sea was, on that day too boisterous to put out a boat, and since that time the weather has been too changeable to venture out. Mr. Buchanan [The Buchanans later ran the Omega Retreat Butchery]^{20a} describes the parts to be seen as resembling a portion of a ship's mast, with ropes, etc., attached. This part appears to be entangled to some sunken object, as it remains in the same spot, as the distance I have mentioned from the shore... It is supposed to be part of the ill-fated **DANDENONG**.'*²⁰

*'Loaded with timber, the 25t.ketch **MARGARET** went ashore near Jerringong on 28 December, 1879 and soon went to pieces. At an inquiry into her loss, the master Captain P.Peterson claimed that a squall had carried away her rudder and made her unmanageable.'*²¹*'All hands were saved.'*²²

On 18 March 1888: *'The **GROWLER**, a coasting vessel of 40 tons, broke away from her moorings in the boat harbour at Gerringong on Sunday night, and was driven into a rocky inlet south of the jetty, where she is likely to become a total wreck, as the sea is breaking over her.'*²³ *'Captain C. Johnston states, that the kindness shown himself and crew by the residents in the vicinity of the disaster was most opportune and genuine.'*²⁴

In July 1888: *'A lifeboat, in which three fishermen left Nowra for Sydney has been found bottom up off Gerringong, and the gunwale belonging to the boat has been found on the beach. There is no trace of the bodies.'*²⁵ *'Constables Goodhew and Reynolds returned to Nowra on Saturday night after searching the coast carefully for several days.'*²⁶

*The last recorded early shipwreck was on 19 July 1894 when the smack **LIZZIE AGNES BROOKES** capsized in a gale off Gerringong and was lost.'*²⁷



1. Sydney Herald 11 May, 1841 **3.** *ibid*, 21 March, 1842 **4.** *Ibid*, 28 March, 1842 **2.** Bateson, Charles *Australian Shipwrecks Vol.1 1622-1850 p.156* **5.** Sydney Morning Herald 16 October, 1843 **6.** *Ibid*, 11 March, 1844 **8.** *Ibid*, 4 September, 1849 **18.** *Ibid*, 20 October, 1865 **23.** *Ibid*, 21 March, 1888 **24.** *Ibid*, 22 March, 1888 **25.** *Ibid*, 9 August 1888 **7.** *The Australian* 16 March, 1844 **9.** Loney, Jack Aust. *Shipwrecks update 1622-1990 p.34* **10.** Crabb, Peter *Shipping and Shipwrecks, Lady Denman Heritage Complex Huskisson p.70* **11.** Loney, Jack *Sea Adventures and Wrecks on the N.S.W. South Coast p.28* **12a.** *Guide to Knowledge Vol.1, 1833 p.420* **13.** *Kiama Examiner* 15 January, 1859 **15.** *Ibid*, 15 October, 1861 **12.** *Illawarra Mercury* 14 January, 1856 **14.** *Ibid.* 14 December, 1857 **16.** *Ibid*, 29 November, 1859 **17.** *Kiama Independent* 6 October, 1864 **19.** *Ibid*, 22 May, 1871 **20.** *Hobart Mercury* 11 January, 1876 **20a.** *Ibid*, 29 March, 1879 **21.** Loney Jack, *Australian Shipwrecks Vol.3: 1871 to 1900 p.107* **27.** *Ibid*, p.238 **22.** *Sth Aust. Advertiser* 30 December, 1879 **26.** *Melbourne Argus* 9 August, 1888

A1. Sydney Gazette & NSW Advertiser 4 January, 1812 **A2.** *Ibid.* 18 February, 1815 **A3.** *Ibid.* 2 January, 1819 **A4.** *Ibid.* 11 November, 1820 **A5.** *Ibid.* 21 May, 1821 **A6.** *Ibid.* 18 November, 1823 **A7.** Sydney Gazette 14 October, 1825 **A7a.** Bayley William, *Blue Haven* **A8.** Sydney Herald 3 October, 1840

Photos: Nile Shipwreck: Kiama & District Historical Society. Kiama Municipal Council

©This Article & photographs are copyright: GERRINGONG & DISTRICT HISTORICAL SOCIETY Inc. 2014