

# The Great Gale and Wreck of the Steamer 'Cawarra' 1866

## Newcastle's worst shipping disaster

Thursday, 12 July 1866, will be a day long to be sorrowfully remembered by the inhabitants of Newcastle. It will be marked in the calendar as the day on which one of the most dreadful wrecks occurred that has ever taken place either here or elsewhere in the entire history of the colony. The worst among the wrecks of former years are as nothing as compared with this, if we except only the loss of the Dunbar and one or two others, whilst in many of the elements of tragic horror, this vessel going down in broad daylight, at the very mouth of the harbour, within a few hundred yards of the shore, is the most dreadful, the most calamitous, and the most heartrending of them all.

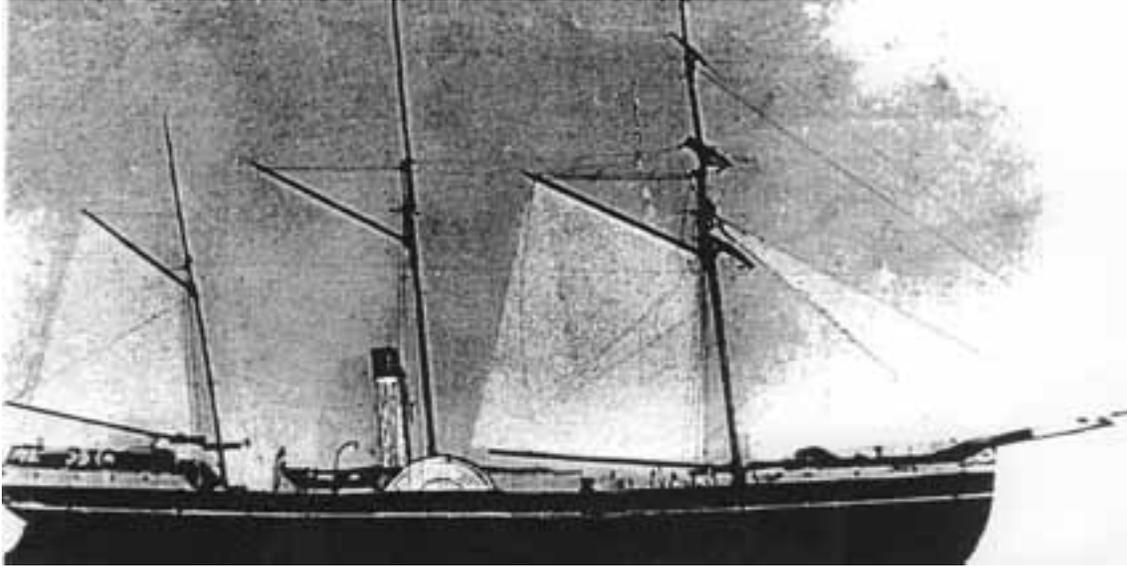
The first premonition of the storm was felt in Sydney on the morning of Wednesday, 11 July 1866. The barometer became very unsettled and heavy banked clouds along the eastern horizon became heavier as the day wore on. At about two o'clock in the afternoon the wind shifted from West to South and East and the clouds rapidly spread across the sky and grew thicker and darker until about sunset. Just before the gale came on, the Victory left Sydney Harbour for Newcastle and not long later the Cawarra under the command of Captain Chatfield, with a large and valuable cargo, left for Brisbane and Rockhampton.

Of the first portion of the gale the government astronomer reported that on Thursday morning the wind changed rather rapidly from West by South to North by East. At about half past two o'clock in the morning the wind changed rapidly from North by East to East by South, shifting entirely round the compass by the South. The greatest force of the wind occurred about seven o'clock in Sydney when it reached sixty-one miles per hour.

In Newcastle the weather, which for the past few days had been very fine, suddenly changed on Wednesday. During the day it was not very bad, but as night came on the wind freshened, and throughout the whole of Wednesday night it blew very hard from the South, and rained almost without a minute's intermission. At daylight, on Thursday morning, a stiff gale was still blowing, and a very heavy sea was running outside the harbour. Between nine and ten o'clock the gale if anything got worse, and the wind veered round to the North East, and a brig was signalled as making for Port Hunter. Her position was felt to be one of considerable danger.

A large number of persons went onto the sand-hills and over to the Lighthouse to watch her make the harbour, which she did in safety at about half-past eleven o'clock. This vessel proved to be the brig Victory, recently out from England, and quite a new vessel. Shortly before this the Sydney steamer, the Coonanbarra, had, to the surprise of almost everybody, sailed from Newcastle, and her progress as she rounded Nobby's was watched with no little anxiety. She got safely out, and proceeded on her voyage to Sydney. About the time that the Victory was nearing the port, a steamer was observed a considerable distance off, but whether making for the port or not, could not be ascertained. For several hours, now and again, as the squall cleared off, the smoke of the steamer could be seen. At one time it was thought to be the Coonanbarra returning to port. It would now appear, however, that this must have been the Cawarra all the time. What the Captain's object was in standing off the port so long before he attempted to enter, is, of course, not known, and now that the Captain himself and all on board save one solitary individual, have perished, it is not likely that it ever will be known.

The Cawarra was one of the finest steamers in the colonies being a 552-ton iron paddle steamer, which was built in Glasgow in 1864 for the Australian Steam Navigation Company. The ship was 207 feet long by 25 by 13 and first arrived in Sydney Harbour from Scotland under Captain Vaircross on 7 December 1864. Her engine power was 170hp and was schooner-rigged. It has since been a regular trader between Sydney and mostly Brisbane. On 11 July 1886 she was newly under the command of Captain Chatfield.



However, about one o'clock, rather later perhaps, a steamer was signalled as making for Port in the usual way, and it was at once expected that the midday Sydney boat was coming in. From motives of curiosity a great number of persons soon assembled on the wharf. More and more people arrived there just as what afterwards proved to be the unfortunate Cawarra rounding Nobby's, and was abreast of the Lighthouse. It having been noted that a tremendous sea was rolling on the bar, every eye was turned towards the steamer to see how she would acquit herself in crossing it.

The excitement at this time was intense. People were rushing in all directions to the wharf, and to every place, which commanded a view of the steamer. Soon the vessel was seen to be approaching the bar, and already in the midst of a terrific sea. For a few minutes after this she continued to steam ahead. Up to this time scarcely any one dreamt that she was in imminent danger, although her position was felt to be a critical one. Suddenly she was noticed to come to a standstill. This increased the excitement, and the crowds on the wharf and sand hills increased rapidly. After remaining in one position for several minutes, the Cawarra steamed with her jib and mainsail set, in the direction of Nobby's. It was now evident to everyone that the unfortunate vessel was in great danger. Some asserted that she was losing ground and drifting to the Oyster Bank. After again remaining stationary for several minutes, she was observed palpably to be drawn back to her first stationary position. She remained there rolling and pitching in a fearful sea for a short time, and then suddenly turned around and steamed ahead as if going out to sea again. She made some little headway, but not much. Several tremendous seas struck her in succession, and an impression prevailed among the spectators that the water had got into the engine-room. Almost immediately afterwards, she made a futile effort to get into smooth water by steaming backwards. The attempt, however, was made too late. A few minutes more, and smoke ceased to issue from her funnel, plainly denoting that her fires were extinguished. A rush of steam followed, and the worst fears of everyone were realised.

In about a quarter of an hour from this time, and about half-past two o'clock in the afternoon, she was seen to be settling down, head foremost. It is impossible to describe the wild excitement that prevailed at this moment. The lifeboat, it was expected, would be launched every moment. On every hand persons were to be heard anxiously enquiring the reason for the delay in launching the lifeboat. As time moved on, there was no sign of the boat being launched.

The vessel, meanwhile, was settling down fast, and no sign of a boat of any kind putting off to her assistance. About a quarter of an hour after the Cawarra began to sink her funnel fell overboard. Some of the people on Nobby's fancied they saw at the same moment several people washed overboard. It is very probable that such was actually the case. This must have been about a quarter past three o'clock, at which time the steamer had been fully an hour in a position of imminent danger, without any attempt whatever having been made to launch the lifeboat.

Cawarra was near Nobby's when the mast fell over. It fell to windward with a slow motion. At the time great sympathy was evinced for one poor fellow whom we distinctly saw clinging to the foretop. As the mast slowly sank towards the surging waters a feeling of pity thrilled the spectators, people identified themselves with the poor fellow and a convulsive shudder and fervent "God help him" escaped them as the mast disappeared beneath a big wave. The sea past, the mast was again seen, the black form still clinging to it, another wave, and once more, for the last time, the poor fellow appeared, a sudden flutter of some fabric was observed near the black form, and all was over. It may have been his last frantic sign for help, it may have been a fluttering fragment of sail, none can tell now, but that one sad incident will never be forgotten by those who witnessed it.

By this time, some three hundred people had assembled in the vicinity of the lifeboat shed, and from that time out, group after group of people were observed to be washed off the steamer, and still no sign of the lifeboat putting off. At twenty minutes past three o'clock, the mainmast, around which some score of people could be distinctly seen clinging, was noticed to be swaying backwards and forwards. A minute or two more and over it went with its burden of human beings into the boiling, seething cauldron around.

Even at this juncture, late as it was, if the lifeboat had put out promptly, many lives beyond all doubt might have been saved. But, no. Because the proper crew were not at their posts, the boat could not be put off. The sea was now making a clean breach over the steamer, which was rapidly going to pieces. About a quarter to four o'clock the foremast, with another mass of poor drowning souls, went overboard. The bulk of the people were, of course, washed off. Two brave fellows, however, managed to cling to this spar for some ten minutes longer. As the mast was lifted up and down by the sea, the forms of the two men could be plainly seen still holding on - all, however, to no purpose. A few minutes later and a huge remorseless looking billow rolled over the wreck, and the two men on the foremast were never seen after. At last, when all but two or three poor creatures on that awful wreck had perished, the lifeboat was launched, and proceeded slowly in the direction of the wreck. Alas, it was too late.

Only a few were left on the vessel, and these had no chance of saving themselves, for the lifeboat we can positively affirm, never went within several hundred yards of the main portion of the wreck. The harrowing scene was now drawing rapidly to a close; a few minutes more only, and scarce a vestige (except floating pieces of wreck) was left standing to mark the spot where the magnificent Cawarra, steamer, with her living freight of over sixty souls, had recently floated in all her strength and glory upon the surface of the ocean. A boat belonging to the barque Maggie V. Hugg put off to the wreck shortly before the lifeboat but was unable to do any good.

Big, stalwart men, with brawny arms and weather beaten faces, turned from it with tearful eyes, whilst down the faces of many of the more tender-hearted of the spectators, the tears rolled thick and fast. At length, when it was all over, shortly after four o'clock, the concourse of people began to wend their way homewards.

Later in the evening, one man named Frederick Hedges who had grabbed a plank as the ship sank was eventually washed, more dead than alive, against a harbour buoy. He was picked up near the red Fairway buoy by Henry Hannell (the son of the lighthouse superintendent), James Johnson and one other, James Francis a fisherman.

Frederick Valentine Hedges, the sole survivor of the Cawarra wreck, was born at Bristol in England on 14 February 1835 and came to the colonies in December 1857 in the ship Granite City. Frederick Hedges was the son of Thomas Powell Hedges, a Bristol accountant. On 10 September 1851 Fred joined the British merchant navy. For six years Fred sailed between England and the eastern ports. He was discharged from the Granite City on 20 December 1857 and joined the Australasian Steam Navigation Company who owned the Cawarra. He was thirty-one years old and a single man when shipwrecked.

He gave the following account:

"We left Sydney on Wednesday, 11 July and cleared Sydney heads about six o'clock in the evening with the wind from the East. The weather was threatening with a strong breeze blowing but the sea was not very rough. The gale increased during the night, with heavy squalls. We went with ordinary speed during the night. In the morning we set the fore-topsail to keep her steady, the sea being very high at the time.

In the morning at daylight, it was rumoured on board that the Captain intended to run for Port Stephens. Between nine and ten o'clock on Thursday morning something occurred to the safety valve. The fires were drawn and the second engineer repaired the damage. It was quite trifling.

A little after eleven o'clock we made out the land just in the bight near Newcastle. About twelve o'clock the Captain made out Nobby's. Before this I heard it rumoured that the Captain intended to go into Port Stephens or Newcastle, whichever he could make. Just after we sighted Nobby's there came on a very heavy squall. We lowered the fore-trysail and as soon as the squall was over we attempted to set the fore-staysail. It blew to pieces in attempting to set it. We then set the fore-trysail. Shortly after one o'clock we bore up for Nobby's. When we were near Nobby's the Captain gave orders to see both anchors clear. The port anchor was clear. The starboard one was on the fore-castle deck, and the cable unbent. We had no time to get the starboard anchor ready. At this time we lowered the fore-trysail down. In rounding the reef at Nobby's we set the jib. That blew away as soon as set. We were setting the fore-trysail when the ship broached to. We couldn't set the sail properly on account of the seas breaking over her, which filled the fore cabin. She went ahead into the breakers. Those on deck ran aft to clear away the starboard boats, to save crew and passengers. I did not hear the Captain order them to do that, but he pointed out some smooth place where we might land. There was "no signal of distress" hoisted on board and the fires were not out at this time. I never heard any order given to stop the engines, but I think they were stopped. Two of the quartermasters were at the wheel at the time she drifted out of the breakers into smooth water. The Captain gave orders to loose the fore-sail, and throw the deck cargo overboard. He called upon the passengers to assist in doing so. He ordered the head-yards to be braced aback, but immediately after he countermanded the order to loose the sail and gave orders to go full speed ahead. I suppose the Captain intended going to sea, as the ships head was pointed that way. He made use of the words "Lets get out of this" when he gave the orders to go ahead.

We steamed seaward. Several very heavy ones broke aboard the Cawarra. The first sea struck her aft-wards and in a very short time filled the stoke hold and put her fires out. It was blowing very hard at the time. A squall struck us on rounding the reef, and continued over us this time. From that moment many on board gave it up for a bad job. Everyone ran aft onto the poop. The Captain ordered the crew to clear away the boats. As the first boat was being cleared away some chinamen got into her. There were a lot of people in the port lifeboat. The Captain told them to

come out. It was not fair as there were women on board the ship and that they should have the first chance. They left the boat. The Captain ordered two of our own hands to clear her away for lowering. Before she was cleared they threw a woman into the boat. I think she was a saloon passenger. After that a lot of men came into the boat. After the boat was cleared she almost directly capsized and swamped, the inmates of her of course, being left to the mercy of the remorseless billows.

I never heard any screaming. There was of course a slight confusion on board, but very little apparent terror. Everybody seemed to take it coolly and calmly, and appeared perfectly resigned. I have often witnessed far more confusion and fright when there was much less real danger. Even the Chinamen got out of the boat immediately they were ordered to do so by the Captain. There was an expectation that the lifeboat would come and the Captain said "take it coolly lads, the lifeboat is coming".

Another man and I in obedience to the commands of the Captain made preparations to clear away another lifeboat and we jumped into her. The after-tackle of the boat was either let go in mistake or carried away. I managed to scrambled on board the steamer; the rest fell into the water. I was the only one that got back on board. The chief mate was in the boat and gave me a knife to cut the patent lowering apparatus, instead of working it.

I climbed into the main rigging. The second engineer was alongside me in the main rigging, and a number of other people. I held on there until the funnel went overboard. The next sea washed me out of the main rigging. I swam to a piece of the wreck, and changed from one piece to another. I caught hold of a large plank and got out from the wreck. I saw Mr. Fountain, chief engineer, on a piece of the wreck and several others, say twelve or fifteen in number. I spoke to a man who was on a piece of the wreck, and who was within some three hundred yards of the beach, but which turned out to be the Oyster Bank. It is likely that he and those near him perished in the surf.

I was drifting in towards the harbour and was picked up near the red buoy by a small boat and taken to the fisherman's hut on the beach at Nobby's.

The vessel was in proper trim. The steering apparatus was quite perfect. No order was given to let go the anchor when she got into smooth water. The last time I saw Captain Chatfield was when he gave orders to clear away the boat. He seemed cool and collected. There was no confusion and all the Captain's orders were obeyed. The Cawarra carried four boats, two life boats, one cutter and one dingy - of which the two life boats were supplied with the patent apparatus for lowering. I heard someone on board say "the life boat is coming" but I did not see the lifeboat myself. I saw a small boat, it was a smaller boat than the lifeboat. It may have been the boat that picked me up. I should think if the lifeboat had been there it would have saved some persons from the floating wreck."

The following is a list of passengers and crew of the ill-fated Cawarra: -

<b>Name</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Position</b>	<b>Inquest</b>	<b>Death Cert.</b>	<b>Comments</b>
Henry Chatfield		Commander	18 July 1866	501437/1866	He was late of the Boomerang and a gentleman of first class reputation as a seaman. He was for many years closely connected with steamships. He left a wife and family.

Joseph R McDowell		Chief Officer	18 July 1866	501440/1866	Had commanded the steamer Florence Irving on her passage from England to Sydney.
Thomas Burroughs		Second Officer	19 July 1866	501453/1866	Left a wife and six children
William Kay	28	Carpenter		501445/1866	
William Freeman	33	Boatswain			
Joseph Jenkins	26	Quartermaster	18 July 1866	501444/1866	Joe the Dutchman alias Lavender Bill
Thomas W Butler	38	Quartermaster		501455/1866	
Francis Hubert	26	Quartermaster			or Herbert
Augustus Coste	38	Quartermaster			
William H Bland	29	Seaman		501458/1866	Left a wife
Gabriel Hanson	22	Seaman			
Frederick Valentine Hedges	31	Seaman			Saved. The sole survivor. Born Bristol 14 Feb 1835. Arrived in Sydney on the Granite City in December 1857.
William R Phillips	30	Seaman			
John Callan	22	Seaman			(or Cullen)
Edward Carey	21	Seaman	19 July 1866	501447/1866	
William Mantin	16	Lamp trimmer	18 July 1866	501452/1866	
John Fountain	33	Chief Engineer	18 July 1866	501438/1866	Native of Scotland
John Auchincloss	28	Second Engineer	18 July 1866	501439/1866	(or Harkencross)
Robert Barnett	29	Fireman			(or Barrett)
Alexander Livingstone	33	Fireman	18 July 1866	501442/1866	
Peter Coley	30	Fireman		501457/1866	
Daniel Rogers	29	Fireman			
James Taylor	32	Fireman			
James Leonard	30	Fireman		501450/1866	
David Aucheson	25	Coal Trimmer			
Robert McMurray	24	Donkey Driver			
Edward Jones	22	Trimmer		501448/1866	(Thomas Jones?)
David Thoburne	23	Trimmer			
William Henry Morgan	29	Second Steward			
Stephen Goddard	25	Pantryman			
John Darvell	26	Fore-cabin Steward			(or Darwing)
Joseph Abrahams	17	Officers Servant	18 July 1866	501443/1866	
John McDermid	28	Chief Cook			(or McDermott or McDiarmid)



before her fateful departure towards Rockhampton. Only those who were identified appear to have been registered in the NSW Death records. Many of the above have left widows, and some of them large families, to mourn their sadness and irreparable bereavement.

## **Remarkable Coincidences**

There are a number of remarkable coincidences in connection with the loss of the unfortunate Cawarra steamer. The first has reference to the late Captain Chatfield who was in the port of Newcastle, in command of the Boomerang, at the time the Eleanor Lancaster was wrecked on the Oyster Bank. On that memorable occasion Captain Chatfield rendered signal assistance in rescuing from the wreck of the Lancaster several half-perished people. From that time until Thursday 13 July, one of the masts of the Eleanor Lancaster has remained standing to mark the fatal spot where she was wrecked. Singular to relate, that identical mast, which for so many years had withstood the fury of successive storms, and served as an excellent beacon to mariners, was washed away simultaneously with the loss of the Cawarra and the drowning of Captain Chatfield. The coincidence is certainly a striking one, and well worthy of placing on record.

Another coincidence has reference to the chief steward of the Cawarra, whose name is William Newland. Mr. Newland, was formerly chief steward of the Star of Australia, a vessel that left Newcastle some years ago and was never heard of afterward. She is supposed to have foundered at sea. At the time the Star of Australia sailed from Newcastle, Mr. Newland had a sore foot, and on that account did not go with his vessel. Strange to say, on Wednesday 11 July 1886, when the ill fated Cawarra left Sydney on her voyage to Rockhampton, this same man William Newland again had an injury to his foot, and on that account was prevented from proceeding to sea with his vessel, thereby again saving his life - for there can be but little doubt that had he gone he would have shared the same dreadful fate as the rest of the crew, except only one solitary man.

The wreck of the Cawarra had a connection with the well-known loss of the Dunbar in Sydney. The Dunbar was initially deployed as a troop ship in the Crimean War and did not become involved in the Australian trade until 1856. During the night of 20 August 1857, the ship was approaching the entrance to Port Jackson on its second trip. There were fifty-nine crew and sixty-three passengers on board under command of Captain Green. Approaching the Heads in a violent storm, the ship was driven against the cliffs of South Head and rapidly broke apart. Only one out of one hundred and twenty two survived. Able Seaman James Johnson managed to cling to the cliff face until rescued some almost two days later. Bodies and wreckage filled the harbour. James Johnson was eventually employed in Newcastle as the lighthouse keeper and on 12 July 1866, helped (as the coxswain) rescue the sole survivor, Frederick Hedges, from the Cawarra disaster at Newcastle.

Frederick Valentine Hedges, the only survivor of the Cawarra, was a deeply religious man. As well as a baby's caul, he kept a Book of Devotions in his waterproof canvas bag all through his seafaring career. According to an old superstition, a baby born with a caul, or a sailor who carried one, would never die by drowning, and this held for Frederick Hedges. He died at his home in Willoughby Sydney aged 87. He was at sea for twenty-five years, from 1851 until 1876. In his sailing years he also served on the Yarra Yarra but had left before the Yarra Yarra was wrecked on Oyster Bank, Newcastle where all hands drowned in 1877. The very spot where the Cawarra foundered some 11 years earlier. As with the Cawarra wreck harsh criticism was made of the lifeboat committee and their inability to offer effective assistance during the disaster of the Yarra Yarra. This latter incident led to the re-organisation of lifeboat procedures.

## **Cawarra was not the only loss near Newcastle**

Newcastle, situated at the entrance to the Hunter River 170 km north of Sydney, developed as a major port due to the discovery of coal in 1797. The entrance to Port Hunter was not altogether sympathetic to shipping, and over two hundred vessels have been lost entering or leaving the port, many on the infamous Oyster Bank - a place almost as famous for calamities as the Goodwin Sands. The "great gale" of 12 July 1866 claimed more than just the Cawarra. In the Newcastle area alone the following was reported.

The schooner Mary and Rose, from Warrnambool, to Brisbane with a cargo of potatoes, was wrecked north of Port Stephens, and out of a crew of seven, only the Captain and one seaman escaped alive.

The 384-ton barque, William Watson, which was built in Scotland and had a length of 117.6 feet, found it impossible to enter the Port Hunter during the "great gale" on 12 July 1866. She was swept over the Oyster Bank and onto the North Beach and she became a total wreck. The carpenter and steward lost their lives but all others reached safety along a line swum out to the stricken vessel by one Harold Holt.

Two vessels were seen coming up the coast, and in spite of signals to keep off, both made for the harbour. Many had collected on Nobby's and watched with intense anxiety for the result. The first was a small wooden ketch, the 39-ton Arthur, which was built in NSW and had a length of 55.8 feet. She foundered when attempting to enter the channel into Newcastle at about half past twelve during the "great gale" of 12 July 1866. She was unable to make headway into the harbour against the strong ebb tide. Two or three heavy seas appeared to strike her, and she capsized. Three or four men were seen clinging to her, another breaker washed over her, and she disappeared with all hands - with the loss of five lives.

The 88 ton schooner Lismore followed the ketch closely and half an hour afterwards she was in the position in which the ketch went down, and finding it impossible to enter the channel, she ran for the beach, struck on the outer edge of the Oyster Bank, and was eventually forced on the beach a short distance from the William Watson. A rope was got onboard her by means of Manby's patent apparatus, and all the crew (eight in number) were rescued by the rocket and line team. The NSW built Lismore had a length of 74 feet and had 130 tons of coal on board.

Two crewmen from the barque, Keder, were drowned when their boat capsized in an attempt to retrieve a cask of spirits that came away from the foundered Cawarra.

A vessel foundered, claiming five lives, during Thursday night or early Friday morning off Newcastle lighthouse, causing a quantity of timber to float into Port Hunter on Friday morning. The wreckage was since found to have belonged to the Seagull, from Richmond River. A name-board tossed up on a beach was the only identification as to who had been lost. The 64-ton Seagull, which was built in NSW, had a length of 73.8 feet.

The a timber laden 76 ton wooden schooner, Roderick Dhu, which was built in NSW with a length of 77 feet was lost at four o'clock on Friday morning, 13 July 1866, 14 nm south of Port Stephens at Stockton Bight. All hands were saved.

## **Recovery of Bodies - Harrowing Scene**

Up to a late hour on Friday night, 13 July 1866, none of the bodies had been washed ashore. On Saturday afternoon, the following day, the first bodies came ashore. Since then nearly thirty corpses were picked up at various points, the majority having been washed onto the beach on the North Shore. Under the superintendence of Mr. Inspector Harris, as many bodies as possible were brought over from the North Shore on Sunday and placed in the hospital. As soon as it was known that the bodies were being cast on shore, a number of shells were ordered to be made, and the first five or six bodies that were brought to the hospital were at once placed in the coffins prepared for them. On Monday night eight or ten more were taken to the hospital but owing to no shells being in readiness they were laid upon the straw in the large room on the ground floor of the new hospital. The scene in the hospital at this time, as one by one the corpses were brought in naked, and laid side by side upon the straw, was awful in the extreme. Several of the bodies were much bruised and mutilated, and all of them were without covering, except shoes and stockings, and in one instance a pair of trousers.

The following is the list of bodies that had been identified up to six o'clock on Tuesday night, making 37 in all: Sophia Matilda Cramp, a lady passenger. Her body was sent to Sydney per the Morpeth steamer. Joseph Abrahams, assistant fore-cabin steward. His body was taken to Sydney. Catherine Crozier, stewardess. Her body was also taken to Sydney. Captain Chatfield. Mr. McDowell, chief officer. Mr. John Auchinclose, second engineer. Mr. Fountain, chief engineer. Mr. Kay, carpenter. A sailor, name unknown. Sandy, a fireman. Joe the Duchman, alias Lavender Bill, quarter master. A Chinaman named Ah Fool. A nephew of Mrs. Cramp's, aged five years. Alexander Livingstone, fireman, identified by his wife. William Manton, lamp-trimmer, identified by his mother and sister. James Leonard, fireman, identified by a fireman of the steamer, Susannah Cuthbert. Miss Anderson, cabin passenger on board the Cawarra. John Hyde of the barque William Watson and Alexander Brash, passenger on board the Cawarra.

On 13 July an inquest, with a full jury of twelve men, was commenced at Newcastle by the coroner, Mr Knaggs, on the bodies cast ashore. The evidence of three witnesses was taken, chiefly for the identification of the bodies, and the inquest was then adjourned until the following day at three o'clock, and was then resumed and continued daily until Wednesday. In the course of the investigations the management of the lifeboat and the conduct of those by whom it was manned appeared in a very unfavourable light, and to the verdict returned of "Found drowned or died from exhaustion" was attached the following rider, "and the jury recommend from the tenor of the evidence laid before them that a strict inquiry be instituted by the Government into the present very unsatisfactory arrangements of the lifeboat - its present position and inefficient management, with a view of ensuring a double crew and quick despatch of the life boat when required for the purpose of saving life."

## **Public Funeral**

Directly it was arranged that the numerous bodies lying at the hospital should have a public funeral. No time was lost in giving the matter publicity. A large number of placards together with an announcement in the extraordinary publication of the Newcastle Chronicle, of Tuesday, made the decision arrived at by the public meeting, pretty generally known by an early hour on the morning the funeral was to take place. More publicity would doubtless have been given, had time permitted, which it did not. However, everything that could be done under the circumstances was done, and the immense concourse of people who attended to witness the funeral, obsequies performed, pointed very conclusively to the fact, that the committee of management had done their work well.

The morning of Tuesday broke cloudless and serene. A more beautiful day is seldom experienced, even in the sunny clime of Australia. The sun shone out resplendently from an

unclouded sky, and the air was soft and balmy - it was more like a spring day, in fact, than one in mid-winter. As early as half-past eight or nine o'clock groups of people, many of whom were clad in the habiliments of mourning, might have been observed wending their way in the direction of the hospital. As every quarter of an hour passed over the number increased, and by half-past nine o'clock an assemblage of persons, numbering in round numbers, somewhere about a thousand, had congregated in front of the hospital. The time appointed for the funeral procession to start, was ten o'clock, but it was fully half an hour later than that, when the head of the cortege was first observed to be in motion. At a quarter-past ten o'clock the first preparations were made for starting, by the drawing up in front of the hospital, the various drays and hearses, in which the corpses were conveyed to the churchyard. It took seven drays and two hearses to hold all the coffins, which were lifted from the building onto the conveyances by members of the Naval Brigade, under the superintendence of the gentlemen composing the committee appointed by the public meeting held on the previous day. The whole of the coffins having at last been placed upon the drays and the hearses, Mr. J. Hannell, M.P., on behalf of the committee, ascended an elevated mound of sand to the right of the hospital, and announced the order in which the procession was to move. It was as follows: -

## **Funeral Procession**

The clergymen of the city, three abreast, consisting of the Revs. Mr. Mayne, Mr. Coutts, Mr. Prichard, Mr. Lane, Mr. Gainford and Mr. Bain.

The Committee of Management, consisting of Captain Allen, James Hannell, Esq., M.P., and Dr. Brookes.

Hearse No. 1, containing the body of the late Captain Chatfield, commander of the Cawarra, and Mr. McDowell, chief mate.

Hearse No. 2, containing the bodies of Mr. Fountain, chief engineer of the Cawarra, and Mr. Auchinclose, second engineer.

Members of Naval Brigade on either side, same as first hearse.

Mr. J.R. Fox and Mr. Dagwell in command of the Naval Brigade.

Dray No. 1, containing four bodies.

Dray No. 2, containing three bodies.

Dray No. 3, containing three bodies.

Dray No. 4, containing two bodies.

Dray No. 5, containing two bodies.

Dray No. 6, containing two bodies.

Dray No. 7, containing two bodies.

Two members of the Naval Brigade on either side of each dray.

Relatives and friends of the deceased.

Captains and officers of the ships in port.

Seamen belonging to vessels in port.

His Worship the Mayor (S. Kemp, Esq.).

Aldermen composing the Municipal Council and the Town Clerk, Citizens, four abreast.

Having announced the order in which the procession was to go, Mr. James Hannell requested on behalf of the committee that every one would, to the best of their ability, observe the arrangement decided upon. The gentlemen composing the Naval Brigade had consented to act as pallbearers, and also to keep a line from the churchyard gate to the church. He trusted their efforts would be seconded by the public generally, so that no accident or confusion might occur when the funeral service was being conducted.

About this time the report of the first minute gun was heard, fired by the Volunteer Artillery in Barrack Square.

The scene at this moment was a most solemn and impressive one, and brought tears to many an eye. Right in the front of the spot on which the bulk of the people stood, could be discerned the

fatal bank on which the Cawarra was lost, - immediately at hand were no less than twenty two lifeless bodies, representing the form of as many human beings who but a short time previously, were in the enjoyment of their usual health and strength, - to the right was the mighty Pacific, the fury of whose waves had been the cause of so much bereavement and sorrow, but which now presented the appearance of comparative tranquillity and repose, -on the left hand, in the distance, was the graveyard - the last, long home, where the inanimate and mangled remains of the dead were about to be deposited, - above, was a bright and unclouded sky, forming a sharp and striking contrast to the day on which the calamity that had brought together such an immense assemblage, happened - and then last, though not least in impressiveness and significance, there were the upturned faces of hundreds of human beings who were about reverently to listen to the reading of the words of Him who permitted, doubtless for some wise end, the occurrence of so fearful a catastrophe. Added to all this, there was the booming of the minute guns, which breaking in upon, as they did, with startling suddenness the impressive ceremony, tended materially to heighten the general effect. Altogether, it was a mournful and affecting sight, and one calculated to move the feelings of the most indifferent and callous. At this time the number of people present had increased probably to about fifteen or sixteen hundred. Throughout the city, business was almost entirely suspended, all the shops being closed. The flags from all the vessels in harbour, as well as from a number of buildings in the city, including the Custom House, were floating half-mast high. The whole town wore an aspect of gloom and sorrow.

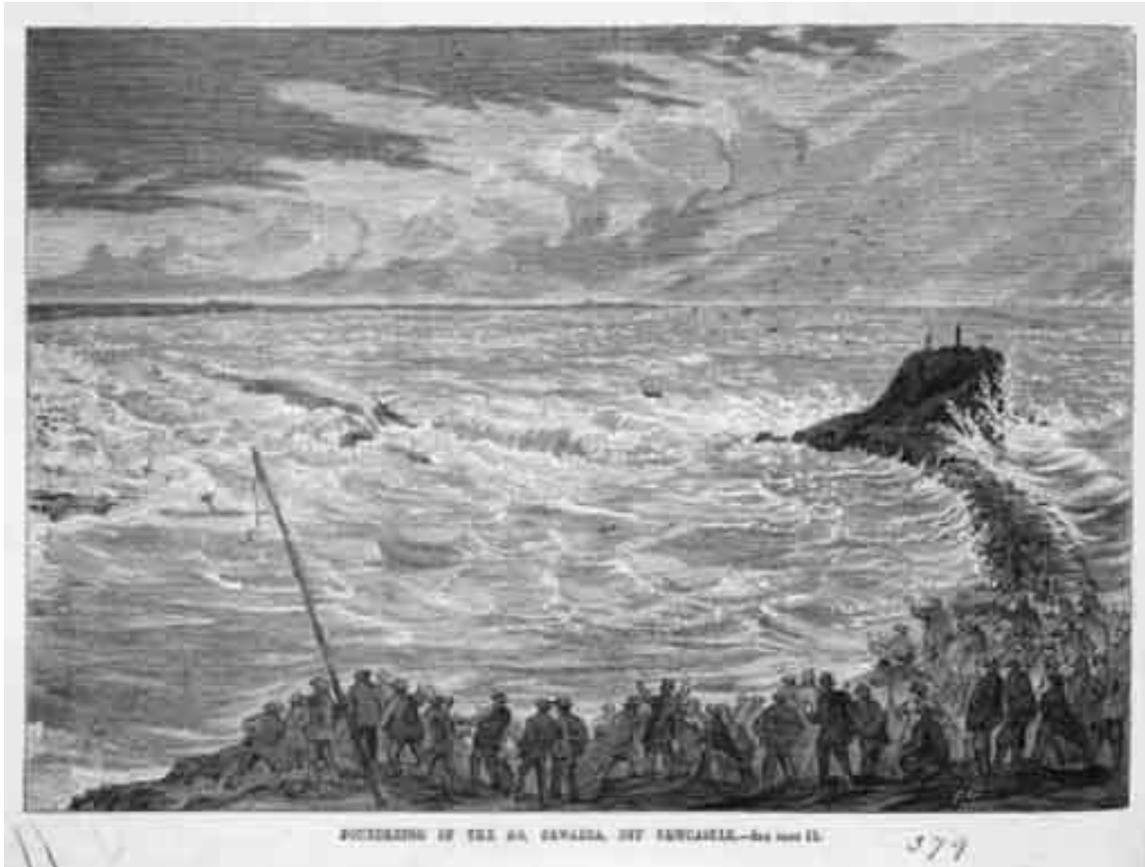
The procession was then formed in the manner indicated above, and proceeded slowly up Watt Street, and along Church Street to the Christchurch burial ground. On arriving at the churchyard gates - the coffins were taken from the hearses and drays and carried on the shoulders of the men composing the Naval Brigade, to an open space in front of the church doors, which was kept clear by the committee, assisted by the police and members of the Naval Brigade. Upon the first three coffins being brought in, they were met by the Rev. Mr. Bode, and the Rev. Mr. Millard, who preceded the corpses, intoning alternately the introductory verses to the Church of England Burial Services. The rest of the bodies were then brought in and placed on the open space in front of the church, in the form of a semi-circle. All the coffins were covered with flags. This sad task occupied from fifteen to twenty minutes. All this time the minute guns had continued firing, and the bell of the church had been tolling. The whole of the coffins having at length been brought in, the two clergymen before named, ascended a temporary dais in front of the church doors, and proceeded to read that portion of the Burial Service usually read over the body inside the church. The Psalms were read by both clergymen, Mr. Bode reading one verse, and Mr. Millard another, alternatively. The lesson for such occasions, taken from the 1st epistle of Corinthians, and the 15th chapter, was read by the Rev. Mr. Millard in a very impressive manner.

The number of people present at this stage of the proceedings was very large, much larger than before starting from the hospital, altogether there must have been close upon 3,000 persons within the boundary of the churchyard. 3,000 was the outside number, notwithstanding that opinions have been expressed to the contrary. We heard the number variously estimated from three to six thousand. That portion of the service which is generally read inside the church being concluded, and before the bodies were removed to the grave, the Rev. Mr. Bode then addressed the assemblage.

On Wednesday afternoon between four and five o'clock, nine more bodies were interred in the Christchurch burial ground. The funeral services were conducted by the Rev. Mr. Bode. A considerable number of persons witnessed the interment of the bodies. The young lady passenger (Miss Anderson) was buried previous to the nine men, and thanks to the Christian feeling and humanity of the Rev. Mr. Bode, her body was placed in a coffin similar to that in which Captain Chatfield's body was interred. A third interment took place on Thursday, on which occasion three more bodies were committed to the dust.

A monument is to be erected to the memory of the drowned with the expenses to be defrayed by public subscription.

It is important to nearly omitted to mention that Mr. Archibald Hay had the conduct of the procession, and was the undertaker for the funerals of Captain Chatfield and the officers of the Cawarra. Mr. Lewis Wood had the contract for the shells in which the remaining bodies were interred.



The Government appointed a Commission, consisting of Mr E. O. Moriarty, Engineer-in-Chief for Harbours and Rivers; Captain Hixson, Superintendent of Harbours, Light-houses and Pilots; and Captain Goss, Mail Agent, to inquire into the general management of the life boat at Newcastle, the allegations of delay in launching her, and the efficiency exhibited during the late storm. They were also to inquire into the recent wrecks and lamentable loss of life, with a view to an improved management of the life-boat, if found to be defective, and to prevent, so far as possible, a recurrence of such heart-rending scenes as those witnessed during the late gale.

When the lifeboat was finally launched and made its way to the Oyster Bank most of those on board the Cawarra were already gone. By the time it arrived close to the doomed ship the lifeboat itself was also in trouble. Most of its oars had broken or were lost overboard and many of the crew were experienced. It was this that caused the delay in launching. The captain of the lifeboat, James Taylor, a pilot was further up the harbour when the Cawarra tragedy occurred. He had just piloted the Victory into the harbour. With Taylor absent it fell to the acting harbour-master, Captain Alexander Collins, to skipper the lifeboat. He was reluctant to do so because the available crew were mostly inexperienced. He had to pull one drunken crew member from the boat before it was finally launched.

Captain Collins also called for a full inquiry as he had been blamed for the lifeboat's failure to put to sea earlier than it did. The inquiry exonerated Captain Collins but decided that there was unnecessary delay in launching the boat; that it was not possible to pinpoint where the delay had occurred; and that it was the system under which the lifeboat worked that was the prime cause of the delay.

The system was changed. The lifeboat moved from Stony Point; a lifeboat committee was formed and the lifeboat service was organised along the standards adopted by the Royal National Lifeboat Institute. It is noted that when the Yarra Yarra was wrecked in the same location in 1877 with the loss of all hands the lifeboat was criticised for being very so to come to aid.

The Government also appointed a Commission of Inquiry to make diligent and full inquiry as to the cause of the loss of the steam-ship Cawarra. The Commission members were Mr E. O. Moriarty, C. H. Smith, Henry T Fox, Thomas Watson and Robert T Moodie. Their report, of 6 November 1866, concluded that the catastrophe was one of those lamentable occurrences that befall at time the best ships and the most experienced commanders, and which human efforts are powerless to avert.

The wreck of the Cawarra was salvaged, and 230 bags of flour, three hogshead of rum, 22 casks of wine and spirits, packets of tea, brass railings, parts of a winch and the anchor were recovered. The ship broke into two sections and a section of the wreck was sold at auction for 125 pounds.

As a warning to ships, a buoy, the Cawarra Buoy, was placed over the wreck. It remained there for many years before another ship, the Colonist, foundered on the same spot in 1894. Over the years the Yarra Yarra (1877), the Colonist (1894), the Wendouree (1898), the Lindus (1899) and the Adolphe (1904) all joined the Cawarra. Remains of the Cawarra are still in Newcastle Harbour, underneath the wreck of many of the above vessels with the Adolphe still to be seen above them.

The sole survivor Frederick Valentine Hedges married an Irish girl, Kate Synnett, whom he met while recuperating after the wreck at the Great Northern Hotel in Newcastle. He was presented with a miniature memorial to the people who died around him that July day. It's now in the Newcastle Maritime Museum.

Nowadays the Cawarra tragedy is almost forgotten. Only the gravestone of engineer John Fountain can be found among the remaining gravestones in Cathedral Park. The mass grave, the fence surrounding it and the gravestones are no more.



*Plaque on the Stockton Breakwall that shows the Cawarra's final resting place*

*Information was sourced from the internet and the Newcastle Maritime Museum*

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If you have additions or alterations please email me at [lakescanslist@netspace.net.au](mailto:lakescanslist@netspace.net.au)