

British Admiral 1874

“We buried them as tenderly as we could...”

WILLIAM HICKMOTT Assistant lighthouse keeper, Cape Wickham

“The bodies were coming ashore now, many were women. It was pretty clear that they had been asleep when the ship struck and had tried to dress themselves as best they could.”

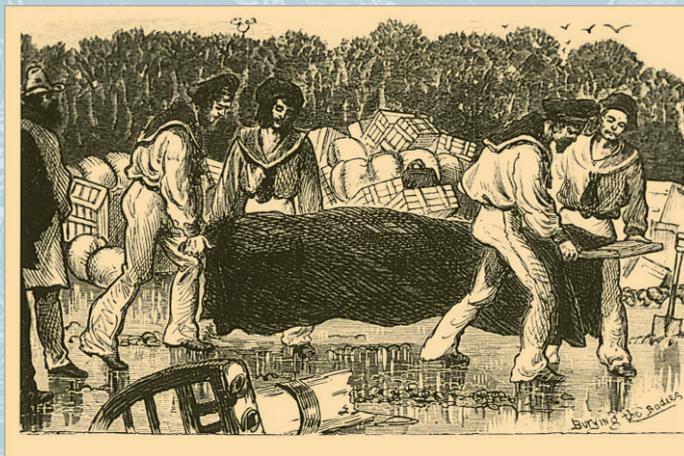
Hardened men were reduced to tears at the sight that met their eyes on the morning of 23 May 1874. The *British Admiral*, on her maiden voyage from Liverpool, had struck a reef off the coast at 2.30 am, and sunk in less than half an hour. Of 88 passengers and crew, only nine survived.

Kangaroo hunters on the island took them in, making them as comfortable as they could in their spartan camps. The hunters also took on the unwelcome task of burying the bodies. Without spades to dig with, they used their bare hands to make shallow graves in the sand.

Uncovered by wind and water, and ravaged by half-starved hunting dogs, the corpses presented a gruesome sight to the rescue party when it arrived.

They had already had a hard time even getting to the site from Currie harbour: a six mile trek around rocky headlands and shingle beaches. “In some places the path would be for yards across patches of rotten kelp, in which the party would sink to the ankles, and the effluvium from which frequently gave rise to the suspicion that decomposing bodies were beneath the surface.” —*Melbourne Argus* 8 June 1874

If this hasn't put you off taking a walk along the beach, you will see a memorial stone at the southern end.



Tabloid journalism isn't a recent phenomenon—newspaper reports of the day devoted many column inches to spelling out the horrors of the *British Admiral* shipwreck in graphic detail. This illustration, 'Burying the Bodies', is from *The Australasian Sketcher* 11 July 1874.



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Above: A portrait of the survivors, whose arrival caused a great stir in Melbourne: "...as the word passed round that the survivors of the wreck were in the boat, quite a rush took place to have a sight of the poor fellows, who were scantily clad and looking battered and careworn".

—*Melbourne Argus* 3 June 1874

In the right place at the right time

Third mate Charles McEwin told his story of survival to the inquiry into the shipwreck:

I made a jump at the fore rigging, and was the first there. The vessel bumped and rolled heavily, and the sea washed over her. Shortly afterwards the mizzenmast went by the board, soon followed by the main and foretopgallant mast. I could hear the cries of people when the mizzenmast went. ... We shipped a heavy sea which washed everyone away but myself.

Davidson and a man named Raw climbed back again. They had just time to take breath again when a wave came, and the ship seemed to tumble over. I let go and came to the surface again when I saw Davidson.

Just then somebody sang out 'This way for the timber', and we swam out in the direction indicated. Davidson and I managed to get some planks and things together, and we lay down on them and were washed ashore.

Facts and figures

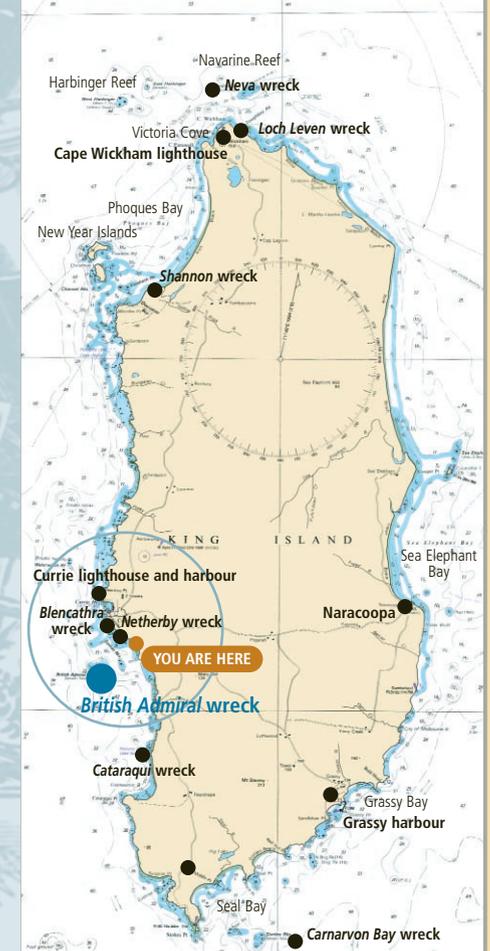
Name	<i>British Admiral</i>	Date	23 May 1874	Location	British Admiral Reef
Rig	Ship	Construction	Iron	Tonnage	1868
Date built	1873	Place built	Hull, UK	Place of register	London
Length	257.6'	Breadth	41.9'	Depth	23.9'
Owner	British Shipowners Assn			Master	J.R. Taylor
Departure	Liverpool, UK	Destination	Melbourne, Vic	Cargo	General
Crew	39	Passengers	49	Casualties	79

It's an ill wind...

When the rescue party arrived, they found cargo strewn along 15 miles of coastline: “Hogsheads of beer, boxes of tobacco, cases of porter, bales of cloth, dresses and paper, crates of glass and china, cases of books, casks of hardware, piles of lumber, together with portions of the ship and her internal fittings, were piled up in most inextricable confusion.”

The first salvage crews worked with bullocks to remove goods that had floated ashore. Later, a team of divers spent a year recovering goods from the wreck where it lay in 7 fathoms of water.

But not all the salvaged goods reached Melbourne. As King Islander William Hickmott recalled, “...after the wreck of the *British Admiral* I didn't buy any tobacco for a long time...”



KING ISLAND REGIONAL DEVELOPMENT ORGANISATION