

Blencathra 1875



“The next thing I heard was somebody singing out, ‘All hands on deck—save ship!’”

WILLIAM FISHER *Second mate aboard the Blencathra*

About to complete her maiden voyage, the *Blencathra* was lost in the early hours of the morning on 3 February 1875. Realising too late that their course was taking them onto the rocky shore, the crew tried three times to turn the ship, but failed at each attempt. As a last resort, they threw out both anchors, attached to chains 60 fathoms long, but these didn't reach the bottom.

But luck was on their side. The ship drifted slowly onto the rocks only

50 metres from shore, and despite heavy seas the crew and their single passenger were able to escape aboard the lifeboats without injury.

In a further stroke of luck, the distress signals they sent by flashlight were answered immediately from the shore. They had run aground on an inhabited stretch of coastline—right in front of a workers' camp. The men living there had been employed to salvage the cargo of the *British Admiral*, wrecked just south

of here. With all hands safe, attention turned to retrieving what they could of the ship and her cargo.

One of the most precious items aboard was a huge store of spirits and ale. William Hickmott, who worked at the Cape Wickham lighthouse and helped with many salvage operations, tells the story: “They landed 800 cases of whisky ...

The next step was to select trusty men from

their own number to watch the same, until a vessel arrived to carry it away. Loaded firearms were deemed necessary to protect it by night.

“And yet, by some unaccountable means, 75 cases evaporated the first night, even the cases themselves disappearing.”

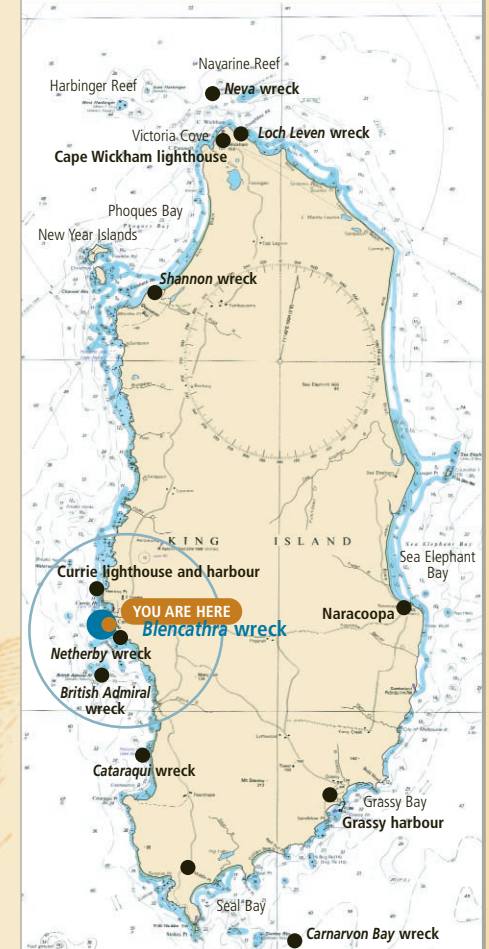


Pictured above, and a detail at left: Loading salvage from the *Blencathra* at Currie harbour, as shown in the *Illustrated Australian News*, 24 March 1875. —STATE LIBRARY OF VICTORIA

“It is all right, Mr Hudson, I can see the light.”

With these words Captain Nicholas showed his relief at finally sighting the lighthouse signal he had been looking for. His entry into Bass Strait had been worrying. The weather was thick and dirty, with no observations possible. Communication with the *Mary Blair* on the previous day had given him cause to doubt his compasses. He had been on deck day and night for the past 48 hours, taking every possible precaution in the treacherous waters.

His relief was short-lived, however. He had mistaken the Cape Wickham light for Cape Otway's, and his altered course took the *Blencathra* straight onto the coast.



Every home should have one

Now that Australia has its own manufacturing base, we don't have to source the essentials of life from the other side of the world. Newspaper reports of the day listed what the *Blencathra* was carrying when she went down. Take a look at what a 'general cargo' of the 19th century included.

Items ranged from the truly massive—cast-iron water pipes (509 tons), pig iron (80 tons), bar iron

(20 tons), bricks and flooring boards—to smaller but no less essential items—paper, fabrics, pots and pans and tobacco pipes.

Another indispensable import was alcohol—2,023 cases and casks of bottled beer, 111 hogsheads of ale, 535 cases of ginger wine, 410 cases of cordials, 44 casks and 1,173 cases of whisky and 100 cases of rum.

Facts and figures

Name	<i>Blencathra</i>	Date	3 February 1875	Location	Currie Harbour entrance
Rig	Barque	Construction	Iron	Tonnage	933
Date built	1874	Place built	Whitehaven, UK	Place of register	Whitehaven, UK
Length	202'	Breadth	32.3'	Depth	19.9'
Owner	G. Nelson & Co.			Master	D. Nicholas
Departure	Glasgow, Scotland	Destination	Sydney, NSW	Cargo	General
Crew	20	Passengers	1	Casualties	0



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