

S H I P W R E C K S & S A F E H A V E N S

# Cataraqui 1845

“One terrific smash, and all was over ... not a hundred yards from the shore.”

BISHOP ER. NIXON *The Cruise of the Beacon, 1857*

The wrecking of the *Cataraqui* remains Australia's worst peacetime disaster more than 150 years after it took place. Four hundred people lost their lives on this shore, with only eight crewmen and a single passenger surviving.

After striking a reef without warning at 4.30 am, the ship began to break up immediately, and many of those passengers who had managed to scramble up on deck were washed away by heavy seas. By dawn, around 200 were still clinging to the wreck.

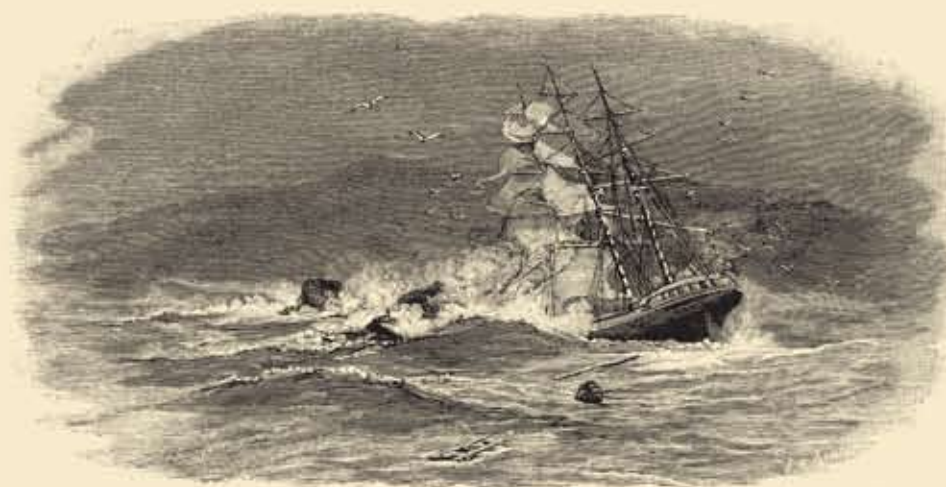
Over 36 agonising hours, the ship disintegrated. The *Hobart Town Advertiser* gave this account: Noon – ship parted in amidships, when about 100 more perished; about 90 still clinging to the fore part of the ship, which still hung to the reef till midnight, when she parted abaft the

fore rigging and left only the starboard head of the fore castle above water – 50 still cling to the wreck. From this time till morning several dropped dead off the wreck – killed from the cold and severity of the weather. At daybreak she commenced breaking up altogether. Seven p.m., a sea broke into her fore castle, and every thing parted.

The crew did everything they could to save their passengers, cutting away the masts, rigging lines across the wreck to give them something to cling to, and making an unsuccessful attempt to float a line ashore on a makeshift buoy. Captain Finlay tried to swim to shore with a line, but was forced back.

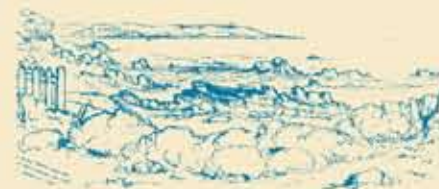
If you think swimming 100 metres to shore doesn't sound too difficult, read the description of the scene given by John Fletcher, who brought the survivors to Melbourne aboard his ship *Midge*: During a breeze the surf upon the shore is tremendous near the position of the wreck of the *Cataraqui*. I stood upon a

ledge of rock forty feet above the level of the sea, and found that over this, had been driven by the sea, the whole of the midship part of the vessel, from the after main to the mizen, a mass of about 40 feet by 15.



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WRECK OF THE EMIGRANT SHIP "CATARAQUI" ON KING'S ISLAND, 1845.

Bishop Nixon visited this site in 1857 to lay a commemorative tablet. He was accompanied by David Howie, who at the time of the wreck had been on the island, shipwrecked himself. He and his men took the survivors into their care, and undertook the task of burying the dead. Bishop Nixon describes Howie's reaction to the scene: "At last we came to the great grave of all, within sight of the very rocks on which the ship was dashed to pieces. "Here," he said in a hoarse whisper, each muscle of his face quivering with the remembrance of the horrid task of former years, "here I buried 245."



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## A fateful decision

The voyage from Liverpool had been smooth and uneventful, apart from continuing friction between the ship's captain and the surgeon superintendent.

With bad weather looming on what was expected to be their last night at sea, Captain Finlay gave orders to shorten sail as a safety precaution. As Bishop Nixon relates the story, the captain then "overheard the surgeon criticising his caution in very disparaging terms, and attributing a commendable prudence to personal fear. In a moment of impatient irritation he went up on deck and gave his counter orders, "Shake out the reefs, and stand on!"

His change of mind cost 400 lives.



## Family tragedies

The *Cataraqui* was crammed with emigrants setting out for a new life in a new land. Of a total 376 passengers, 186 were children, and on the passenger list are families with six, seven, eight and nine children. During the voyage five babies were born, and six others died.

The excitement must have been mounting as the last night of their voyage came around.

In the afternoon the captain had given permission for their boxes to be brought up from the hold, so that they could select their best 'holiday attire' for arrival in Melbourne the next day.

Only one of those passengers, Solomon Brown, lived to complete the long journey. His wife and four children are buried in one of the mass graves on this site.

## Facts and figures

Name	Cataraqui	Date	4 August 1845	Location	Fitzmaurice Bay
Rig	Ship	Construction	Timber	Tonnage	802
Date built	1840	Place built	Quebec, Canada	Place of register	Liverpool
Length	138'	Breadth	30'	Depth	22'
Owner	Smith & Sons			Master	C.W. Finlay
Departure	Liverpool, England	Destination	Melbourne	Cargo	Coal
Crew	44	Passengers	367	Casualties	400



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