

ss *Tuncurry*

SHIPWRECK 1916

Information Sheet - Heritage Branch

Tuncurry (ON 117638) was a single screw steamer with a 33 horse-power McKie & Baxter compound steam engine. Built in 1903 by John Wright, the vessel was named after the town in which she was constructed. Tuncurry is a coastal town in the Mid North Coast region of New South Wales, about 308 km north/north-east of Sydney. When launched, the ship was 113.5ft (~ 34.5m) in length, 22.5 in breadth, 162 tons, and had a draft of 7.6ft. The vessel was initially employed in the NSW coastal trade.



Shipbuilding at Tuncurry c1900. Image courtesy Great Lakes Historical Museum.

John Wright began constructing vessels in 1877. This continued through into the 1950's as the mill and slips passed down the family from the original John to his sons under Ernest Wright, then to Ernest's son, John.

Including *Tuncurry*, there were fifteen major vessels built in Wright's yard, from the 47 ton cutter *Marion Mayfield* in 1883 to the 603 ton *Uralla* largest wooden vessel built in the southern hemisphere to that time (1942).

Tokelau and back

In 1908 *Tuncurry* was sold to the British Government for the express use of the then High Commissioner for the Western Pacific. The vessel acquired a Suvan captain, and was renamed *Tokelau* (a Polynesian word meaning "north wind") in recognition of the vessel's new home.

The name *Tokelau* refers to the group of islands comprised of three atolls in the South Pacific Ocean between 171° and 173° W longitude and 8° and 10° S latitude, approximately midway between Hawaii and New Zealand, and approximately 500 km north of Samoa. In 1877 the islands were included under the protection of Great Britain by an order-in-council which claimed jurisdiction over all unclaimed Pacific Islands. Commander C. F.

Oldham on HMS *Egeria* landed at each of the three atolls in June 1889 and officially raised the Union Flag, declaring the group a British protectorate (and the naming the group the Union Islands). The British government annexed Tokelau to the colony of the Gilbert and Ellice Islands and transferred it to New Zealand administration in 1926.



Steam Ship *Tuncurry*. Photo courtesy: Mitchell Library, Sydney. Index No: PXA1152.

Tokelau reverted to its previous name, *Tuncurry* when returning to Australia in 1915. After a sale and refit, she was re-registered on 6th September 1916, and sank on her first voyage for the new owners, Hasell & Company, on 25th October the same year. She was carrying a cargo of 1500 bags cement, 1100 cases explosives, 100 cases of whisky and 60 cases of jam.

Wreck event

Captain Hutchins and ten men, the crew of the steamer *Tuncurry* (ex-*Tokelau*) had an exciting adventure when the vessel sprang a leak and foundered three miles off Broken Bay.

According to a report to Superintendent of Navigation, Sydney, dated 23rd October, 1916, the vessel cleared Customs House on Saturday 21st October at 1300, proceeded to the Middle Harbour Explosives Depot to collect cargo, leaving there at 1600. The vessel anchored in Pearl Bay (Mosman), until 2230 when she departed for Brisbane, clearing Sydney Heads at 0035 on the 22nd October 1916.

The Captain steered a course which took the vessel NE x N1/2N. When abeam of Barrenjoey lighthouse, the ship started taking water. The crewman who first noticed water in the forward chain locker notified the Captain who apparently considered it unimportant.

The Captain retired around 0200, leaving his Mate on duty. About 20 minutes later, the Chief Engineer, Robert Clasper, noticed water coming in and worked the pumps for about 25 minutes before reporting to the Mate. Captain Hutchins was woken at approximately 0315 by the Chief Engineer who reported that the vessel was taking in water.

As this was the first voyage following the purchase and subsequent refit (when she was intentionally turned into a cargo boat for coastal work), the Captain was understandably “incredulous.” The Mate assured him that water was covering the floor in the engine room, and at 0330, it was decided to run for shelter and the course altered W x N for Broken Bay. Efforts to trace the cause of the leak were unsuccessful; the water was rapidly gaining on the pumps.

At 0425 Captain Hutchins ordered all hands launch the lifeboat. He went to his cabin to secure the ship’s papers and with them, the ship’s cat and a case of biscuits, he and the crew abandoned ship, and it foundered 20 minutes later.



Tuncurry lies in ~60 metres of water off Barrenjoey Headland, Sydney. Photo courtesy John Riley, Sydney.

There was a *fair wind and a good sea running* so a sail was hoisted and the 22 foot lifeboat headed for Sydney. The captain, his Mate, two engineers, three fireman and four sailors all reached Watson’s Bay in Sydney about 0800 on 22nd October 1916 with no lives lost.

At the Marine Court Inquiry as reported in Newcastle Morning Herald, the Mate, Morris Noel Cauvin said *the vessel was diving into a nor’easter, and at every dive about a pint of water was spurting through a leak. The sea was breaking over forward, but only slightly. The cement and explosives had about a 4ft gap between them. He could not say whether this would strain the ship. He fancied he saw the masts go together as she sank.*

Joseph Edwards, fireman, said that “he was sleeping in the engine room when water coming in from the leak drenched him. He jumped up, and was up to his knees in water. He considered that the ship was overloaded.”

Regarding the question of overloading, the Judge, assessors and solicitors representing the owner, captain, officers and crew all discussed and deliberated, and decided that the engineer could have raised the alarm earlier than he did, and that

there was a question of overloading. It was agreed that there would be no benefit in tracking down the ship’s carpenter so that he may give evidence, as it would not throw more light on the matter. The inquiry concluded with no official finding on the reason for the *Tuncurry* foundering, and *in the present evidence there was nothing to attach blame to anyone.*

Tuncurry should not be confused with a later vessel of the same name (ON 125205) that was built in 1909. The later ship also ran to Cape Hawke for Messrs. Allen Taylor & Co.

Protection and Management

Early in 2009, *Tuncurry* was located by Sydney-based recreational SCUBA diver Paul Wright and a team that included known shipwreck researcher, John Riley. The ship was found approximately 5km off Whale Beach, Barrenjoey Headland, on Sydney’s Northern Beaches in 60 metres of water.

Tuncurry is a protected historic shipwreck under the Commonwealth *Historic Shipwrecks Act 1976*. The site is managed by the Heritage Branch, NSW Department of Planning, on behalf of the Maritime Heritage section of the Commonwealth Department of the Environment, Water, Heritage and the Arts (DEWHA).

The Heritage Branch is working in collaboration with the founder divers and key maritime agencies to carry out an archaeological survey of the wreck. This includes the Royal Australian Navy, NSW Water Police, and the Australian Centre for Field Robotics at the University of Sydney.

Divers visiting the wreck are requested to observe the site’s heritage values and the current survey operations. Please note that it is illegal to disturb the site and/or associated relics in any way.

More Information

Maritime Heritage Online, Heritage Branch
<http://maritime.heritage.nsw.gov.au>

Wikipedia
[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tuncurry_\(1903\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tuncurry_(1903))

Historic Shipwrecks Program, Commonwealth Department of the Environment, Heritage, Water and the Arts:
<http://www.environment.gov.au/heritage/shipwrecks/index.html>

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