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BEACH DAYS... HARBOUR SIGHTS... CITY NIGHTS

## Shipwrecked in Newcastle

The infamous Oyster Bank was feared and dreaded by all sailors who entered Newcastle Harbour. At least 100 ships are believed to be wrecked along Stockton Beach and the Oyster Bank. The Shipwreck Walk, compiled by the Stockton Historical Society, encompasses the most famous of these wrecks. However, not all the ships recorded on plaques along this walk, were lost on the bank. Many were hulked and placed in position as part of the breakwater, which began construction in 1898.

The vessel to achieve the dubious honour of being the first in a long line of vessels wrecked on the Oyster Bank was the Colonial or Government schooner *Francis*. The original 'Sixty Miler' schooner was lost on 20 March 1805, when she was driven from her anchor onto the beach opposite Nobbys. Fortunately, the crew was rescued and there was no loss of life.

The loss of the *Cawarra* was the most tragic of all the shipwrecks on the notorious bank. An iron paddle-wheel steamship of 552 tons, the steamer was built in 1864. En route to Brisbane with passengers and cargo, the steamer was overtaken by bad weather. The master Captain H. Chatfield, tried to run into the Port of Newcastle for shelter, but the steamer was overwhelmed by the sea with the loss of approximately 60 lives. There was only one survivor, a seaman who had grabbed a plank and was eventually saved by the lighthouse keeper.

The wreck of the French four-masted barque *Adolphe* also lies off the Stockton breakwall. The account of the wreck is a story of the courageous and skilful work of the lifeboat crew who saved every life on board. On 30 September 1904, the "Adolphe", under the command of Captain Layec, was inward bound from Antwerp. It was picked up by the tugs "Hero" and "Victoria" about 9am and with Pilot Stevenson aboard made an attempt to enter port. When rounding the southern breakwater huge seas struck the barque and caused the "Victoria's" hawser to snap. The "Hero" could not hold the barque up and another succession of rollers lifted the "Adolphe" right on top of the remains of the wreck "Colonist", where she remained hard and fast. The seas swept her from stern to bow, tons of water poured into the lower decks and the crew had to take refuge on the poop. The doomed vessel presented a splendid though terrible spectacle standing perfectly upright with her bow heading to the harbour - she seemed to be defying the shocks of the huge sea.

When the signal guns were fired, the lifeboat in command of Coxswain A. McKinnon was quickly launched and with thousands of spectators watching, made her way to the wreck. Several attempts were made to take the boat around the stern of the "Adolphe" but after breaking four oars this was abandoned. Through skilful



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manoeuvring McKinnon was able to get a line onto the "Adolphe". The lifeboat was then anchored and down this line the seamen slipped one by one. The "Adolphe" struck at 10:25 a.m. and at 12 o'clock the last of the ship's company (Captain Layec) slid down the line to safety. With forty-seven men on board, the lifeboat made the return trip and when in smooth water was taken in tow by the Customs tug.

The *Sygna*, located further north along Stockton Beach, is the largest shipwreck ever to be washed up on the eastern coast of Australia. It was one of the Hunter's biggest storms in living memory. The Newcastle Herald and other media at first called the storm event a hurricane but the meteorological office confirmed it was a cyclone. It became known as the 1974 Cyclone or the 'Sygna storm'. It struck in the early hours of Sunday 26 May 1974, and on the following morning the 53,000 tonne Norwegian bulk carrier, which had been anchored off Newcastle Bight, was found shipwrecked on Stockton Beach. To this day, pilots and signalmen compare bouts of high wind and turbulent seas to the early morning of May 26, 1974. The bow section was salvaged and taken back to Japan and the stern remains as a popular fishing location and landmark.

Newcastle made international headlines in 2007 with the infamous Pasha Bulker shipwreck. The 40,000 tonne vessel was blown aground 20 metres off Nobbys Beach on June 8 2007, at the height of a storm that brought gale force winds, huge seas, torrential rains and flooding to Newcastle and the Hunter. The giant bulk carrier became a surprise tourist attraction while stranded, attracting thousands of visitors. The Pasha Bulker was successfully refloated nearly a month later on the 2nd July 2007, with salvage operations costing close to \$2 million.

*To find out more about Newcastle's maritime history contact:  
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