

# THE WRECK OF THE BRITISH ADMIRAL

*No stone marks the spot, where their bodies now lay,  
But they'll not be forgotten upon their last day.*

**MIKE ROYDEN**

The wreck of the *British Admiral* has been declared one of the worst maritime disasters in Australian Maritime history and today still garners interest, especially in the Melbourne area, and specifically on King's Island in the Bass Straits, where she ran aground and came to grief on 23 May 1874 with the loss of 79 passengers and crew out of a total of eight-eight on board. This was her maiden voyage, having left Liverpool, England, fully laden with general cargo for Melbourne on 7 January 1874, under the command of Captain Taylor.

The story begins in Liverpool, where the vessel was built in the shipyard of Thomas Royden and Sons, a well established firm with a high reputation for the quality of their ships. The yard and its slipways were just a few hundred yards upstream on the Mersey from the iconic Pier Head and Albert Dock shorefront. Two of Thomas Royden's children would later become very well known in their own right, Thomas jnr becoming Chairman of Cunard Line, and his sister Maude achieving wider fame, firstly as a campaigner for women's suffrage, then as a preacher and theological philosopher. During the 1920s when she toured Australia, New Zealand and America, giving lectures in sell out venues, commentators referred to her as the most famous woman in England.



*Sister ship to the *British Admiral*, the identical *British General* launched 1874*

The *British Admiral* was one of a series of fully rigged iron clippers ordered by the British Shipowners Co.Ltd to be built at the Royden Yard. Four ships were constructed between 1866-8, and in addition to the *British Admiral* launched in 1873, the *British General* would be completed the following year. (In fact, the *British Admiral* replaced a smaller vessel of the same name which

had been sold by the company and was wrecked in 1874). She had three main masts carrying a square rig of sails, her weight being 1808 tons gross and dimensions (feet) 257.6 x 41.9 x 23.9.

The British Shipowners Co. Ltd was unusual in that it was formed exclusively to charter all its ships to other companies, including Anchor Line, American Line, New Zealand Shipping Co., Shaw, Savill & Albion, Cunard, and others. It was founded in Liverpool in 1864 by James Beazley, and by the time of these two orders, they owned one of the largest sailing ship fleets in Britain. By 1896 the sailing fleet had been replaced by steamships, although the company were to cease trading in 1906.

She had only been out of Liverpool for ten days when she encountered a heavy gale off Cape Finisterre and lost her mizzen mast, fore and main topmasts, and bowsprit, and was forced to limp back to Liverpool for repairs. She resumed her passage for Melbourne once again on 23 February with a new bowsprit, a repaired foremast and a suspicion harboured by Captain Taylor that she was over-rigged. The Timaru Herald of 15 June 1874 described the voyage,

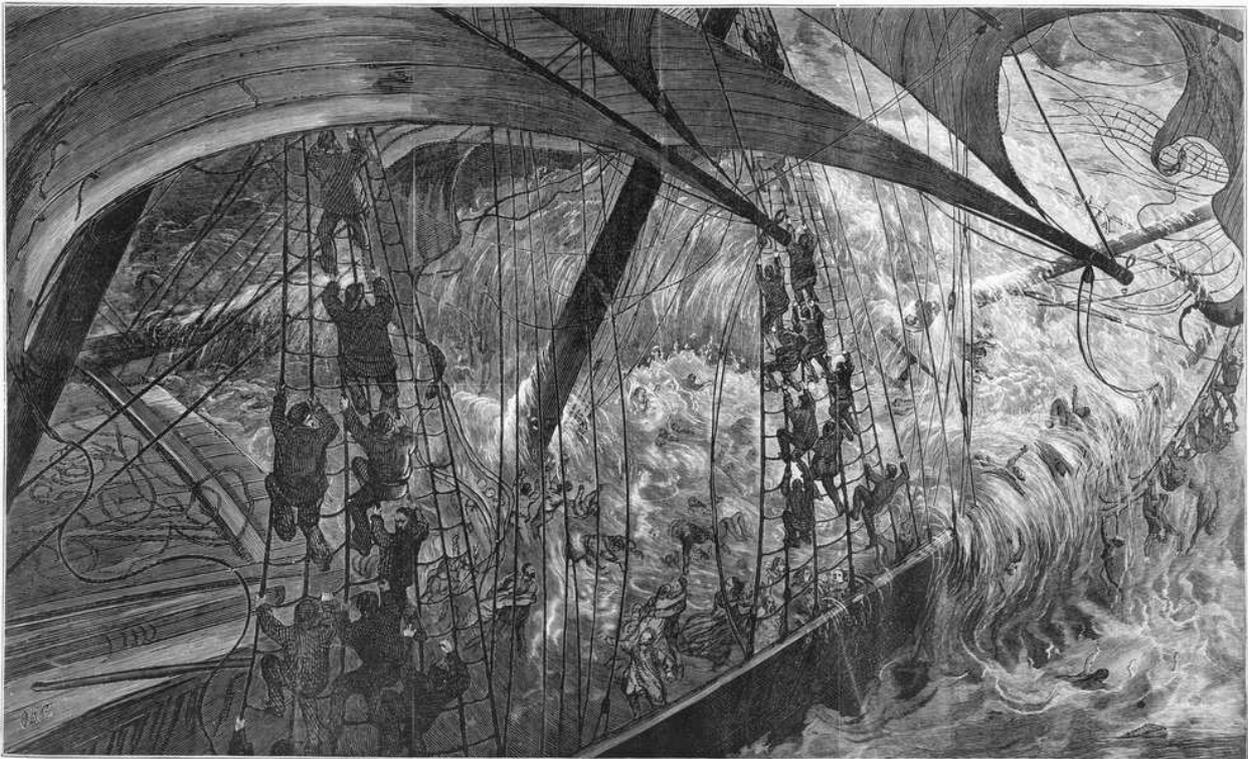
**After leaving the Mersey, heavy weather from the eastward was experienced until the ship was clear of the land, and a smart run was made to the latitude of Madeira. The N.E. trades were shortly afterwards fallen in with, and were carried well to the southward, the S.E. trades being picked up about 2deg North. These trade winds were also favourable, and the ship made such a good course, that great anticipations were indulged in of making a rapid passage out. After losing the S.E. trades, however, some dirty weather was experienced until after passing the meridian of the Cape of Good Hope. Captain Taylor evidently did not intend to run his easting down in a very high latitude, as he kept well to the northward, and at the time of year necessarily met with some heavy weather. He was compelled to heave the ship to when off St. Paul's Island, and during this time she shipped some very heavy seas which somewhat disturbed the chronometers. That was the impression of Captain Taylor, who during the voyage made observations at every possible opportunity in order to correct the chronometers. For some days before the wreck the weather was too thick to take a meridian observation, and it may therefore be surmised that Captain Taylor was unable to get the exact latitude of the vessel, and, being somewhat to the southward of his reckoning, brought his ship in too close proximity to King's Island.**

King's Island lies at the western end of the Bass Strait in the sea between Australia and Tasmania and forms a barrier to ships that sail too far south on entering the Strait, making for Port Phillip or Sydney. Over one hundred vessels, large and small, have been wrecked on the island, with the loss of over 700 lives. The *Cataraqui*, with 399 lives lost, remains Australia's greatest single national civil disaster. When you note the location of King's Island it is easy to understand why it has been named 'The Graveyard of Bass Strait'. Vessels on their last leg to Melbourne and Sydney from England had to 'thread the eye of the needle'; having rounded the Cape of Good Hope, and taken the Great Circle route which led south into the Southern Ocean, captains had to navigate through the comparatively narrow 100 km entrance to western Bass Strait - too far south and they ran on to the shores of western King Island, and the smaller New Year Isles, too far north and they struck the western Victorian coast. For a time, the lights from Cape Otway (Victoria, 1848), and Cape Wickham (King Island, 1861), were confused, adding to the destruction. The tallest lighthouse in Australia is located at Cape Wickham to the north of the island, a beautiful white granite tower 52 metres high, its light visible for 54 kilometres. Of the 140 or so wrecks around the island, the tragic loss of the *Cataraqui* is the most significant, followed by the convict ship *Neva*, with 218 lives lost. Tragically, here features the *British Admiral*, third in the list with 79 lives. After the fully-rigged ship *Carnarvon Bay*, of 1932 tons, the *British Admiral* at 1808 tons is the second largest vessel to be lost.

So it was here on King's Island that the *British Admiral* was to meet her fate. It would seem that the captain was relying on damaged chronometers and thought he had plenty of seaway in front of

him, as on Friday 22 May, when the first watch was called at 8pm to midnight, the ship was running under two topsails, reefed foresail, fore-topmast staysail, and main staysail, the wind being on the starboard quarter and the course somewhat to the northward of east. The second officer, Mr. Charles H Baker, had the first watch, and when he took charge of the deck at 8pm, the ship was making about six knots an hour. When the watch was called at midnight, the chief officer took charge of the deck, and an able seaman named Joseph Cunningham went on the forecastle as a look-out, and a man was also sent up occasionally to the topsail yard to look out for the land. Nothing was seen up to 2am., when William Smith went to the wheel. About half an hour afterwards the chief officer, who was looking over the lee-side, saw the loom of the land ahead. He at once called 'all hands', ordered the watch to 'haul out the spanker', and put the helm down to bring her round. The ship came quickly round before the spanker (small aft sail) was set, and the mainsail and mizzen-topsail, together with the jib and main topmast staysail were at once put on her in order to claw her off the land.

Then came the dreaded cry no crew member want to hear. She had not been standing on her new course five minutes when the look-out man, Thomas Crowan sang out 'Breakers ahead'. The captain was now on deck, but before he could give any orders the ship struck heavily, and for a few minutes it was expected that the masts would go too. Up to this time the passengers had been totally unaware of any danger, but the severe shock of the ship striking brought them rushing on deck, and the scene became one of acute distress. There were several women on board, one of whom was in the late stages of pregnancy, together with many young girls, and the screams and

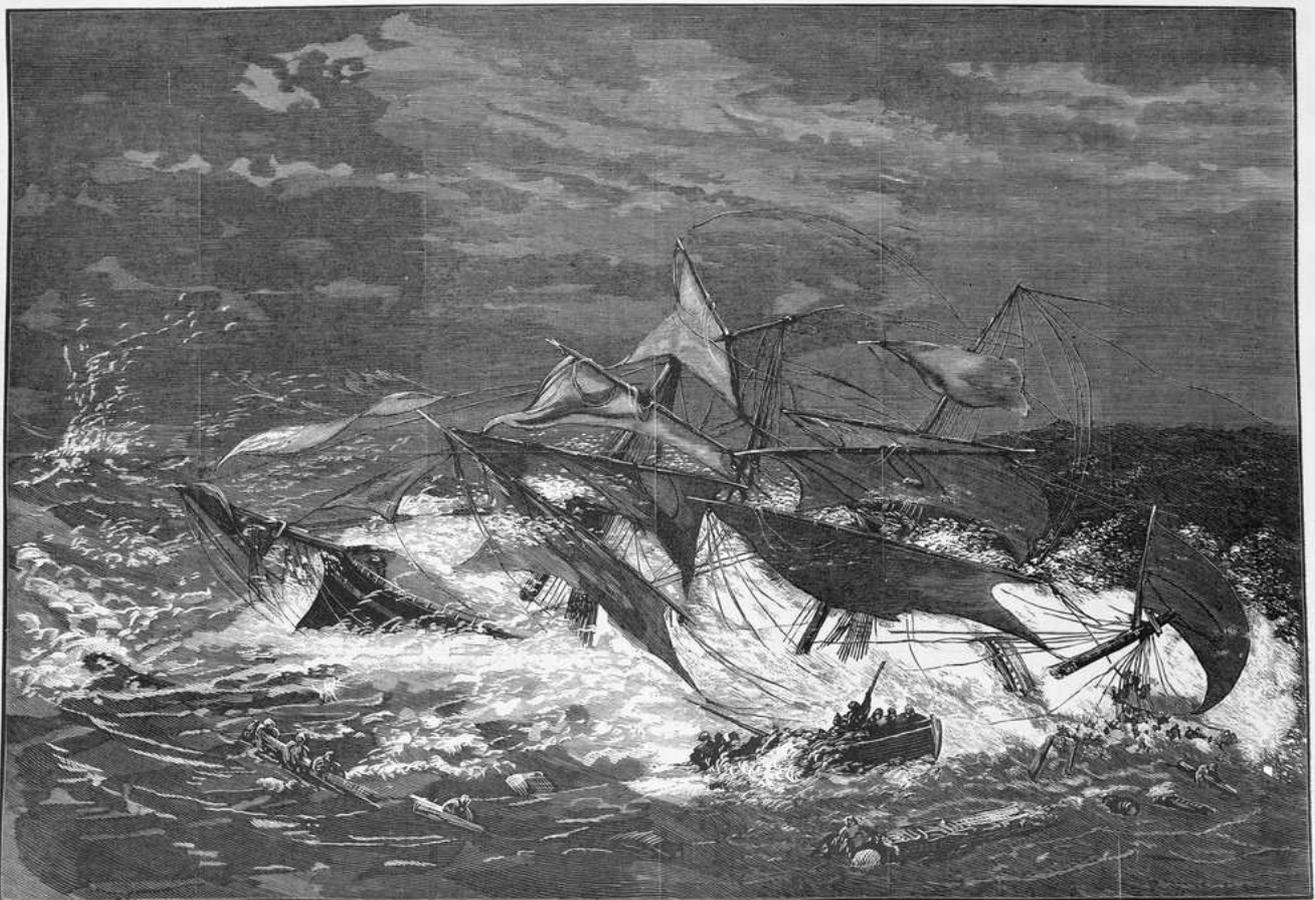


WRECK OF THE BRITISH ADMIRAL OFF KING'S ISLAND.—SEE PAGE 58.

prayers for rescue from them were heartbreaking. The women and children had congregated on the poop, and were clinging to the mizzen rigging within a few minutes of the ship striking, having been awakened from their sleep by the shock of the collision. The captain and mate at once gave orders to 'Clear away the boats.' Mr. Baker (the chief officer) at the same time ran towards the cabin for the purpose of getting an axe in order to cut away the masts. The third mate (Mr McEwan), who had been confined to his cabin for a fortnight with fever, hearing the shock, rushed on deck, and, seeing the land close to, seized some clothing and took his station on the quarter-deck.

The carpenter had fired up the pumps, and was reporting to the captain at the time the men were clearing away the boats.

There was no hurry or confusion, but, according to orders, the starboard watch went to the forward boats, the port watch clearing away the after boats. The forward boats were secured on the top of the house on deck, and the first attempt was made to cast loose the gig boat. The first and third mates, together with several seamen, cut the lashing loose and tried to launch the boat, but as the ship rolled heavily at the same time, the gig fell between the bulwarks and the house on deck, and was smashed. At the same moment a heavy wave swept across the mid-ships of the vessel, and the chief officer, together with several seamen, went with it and were drowned. The third officer, seeing the sea coming, made a run for the fore-rigging, and together with a couple of seamen who had followed his example, managed to secure their escape. The next huge wave that came on board swept away the mizzenmast, and with it the crowd of passengers who had taken to the poop and were clinging to the mizzen rigging.



THE WRECK OF THE BRITISH ADMIRAL. FROM MATERIALS SUPPLIED BY JOSEPH CUNNINGHAM, ONE OF THE SURVIVORS.

Heavy seas continued to sweep across the ill-fated vessel, and a few minutes afterwards the mainmast went over the side. The effect of the heavy sea now began to tell, as the decks showed signs of bursting, and those individuals who were still clinging on the fore-rigging found themselves washed away by a heavy wave that nearly swamped them; they had scarcely relieved themselves from this sea when the ship slipped off the rock and went into deep water. The third mate and some others managed to secure some timber which had floated out of the hold, and made towards the shore. This was hard work and almost impossible, but putting their trust in the tide and current – which in reality they could do little else, they managed, after considerable bruising and knocking about among the rocks, to secure a footing on dry land.

They were wet, cold, bruised, and completely drained, but as they found that they had timber and that some provisions and cargo had been floated ashore, including a cask of spirits, they managed

to provide some accommodation for themselves. The survivors, having rested on Saturday, made a start down the coast the following morning in order to ascertain whether there was any living thing on the island. On their way they saw several dead bodies washed ashore and stopped to give them a decent burial, but upon reaching Currie Harbour they found a hunter named McPherson stopping there, and on inviting them inside, they were surprised to find Jack Cunningham who had also managed to escape from the wreck. His story, and those of the casualties appeared later in the *The Timaru Herald* (15 June 1874);

**The bodies found on the beach and buried by the survivors were - Mrs Thomas, second cabin passenger; steerage passengers, Mrs Blackburn, Mrs Mills, Miss Tilly Dale, Miss Ellen Hayes, Mr Wm. Pierce, and Miss Mary Conley. The body of Miss Mary Treahy was also seen entangled among the rocks, but could not be rescued for burial. It is said that this young lady has some relations in Melbourne, keeping an hotel in Ireland Street, West Melbourne.**

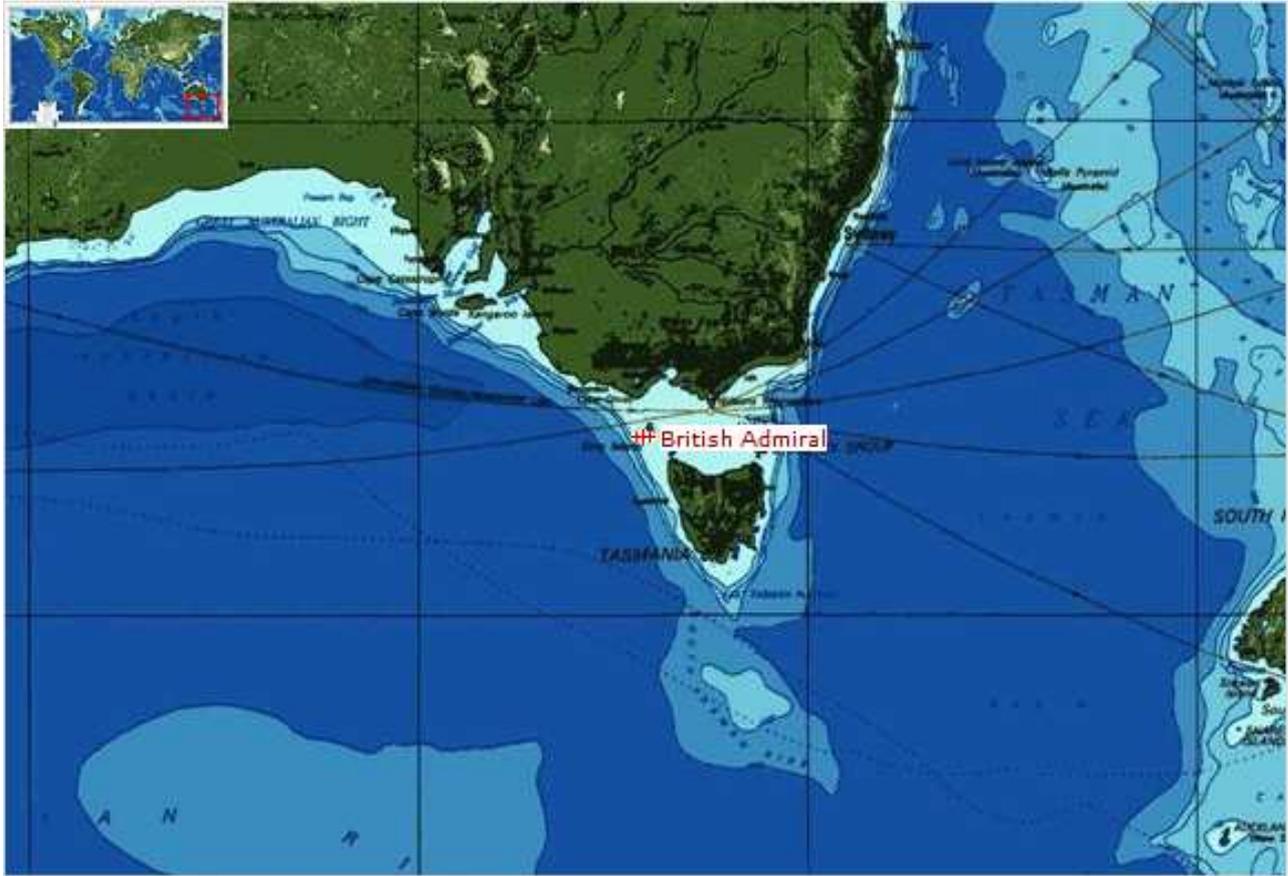
It may be somewhat a matter of surprise as to how the seaman Cunningham should come across his comrades on King's Island after both had given themselves up for lost. It appears, however, that when the order was given to 'Clear away the boats' the second officer and several others made at once for a boat on the 'skids' which they managed to cast loose. It was, however, jammed in the mizzen rigging, and it was with the greatest difficulty that they got the boat clear before the ship sank. As soon as the boat was clear, the oars were shipped with the intention of keeping as close as possible to the wreck during the night, but the wind and sea were too strong, for when the day dawned nothing could be seen of the *British Admiral*. The crew, being cold and weary pulled along the coast with the view of finding some place to land at. After pulling some distance to the northward, they made for the shore, but in the first row of 'breakers' the boat was capsized.

At the time of the accident, the following persons were in the boat; - Mr Baker (second mate); A.Wellesly, A.B.; William Tyrer, A.B.; Cunningham, A.B.; James Dotton, boy; Messrs O'Grady and Nicholson, saloon passengers and Mr Jones, steerage passenger. Cunningham, O'Grady, and Jones managed to get on the bottom of the boat, and were drifted on shore, where they were soon afterwards picked up by the hunter McPherson, who gave them every assistance in the way of food and dry clothing. The whole of the rescued men came together the next day, and as the ketch *Kangaroo* was seen at anchor under New Year's Island, one of the hunters pulled a boat across to her, and she at once made for King's Island, and taking the ship-wrecked men on board, made a start for Melbourne.

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.



*The wreckage on the beach the morning after*



‘The story of the wreck’, reported the *Melbourne Argus*, ‘is a most a most heartrending one, for no less than 79 lives have been lost, a great proportion of those who perished being women. Out of 49 passengers and a crew of thirty-nine, only nine have survived to reach this port. The survivors consist of the third officer, Mr Charles William McEwan; Cunningham, A.B.: Baker, Daniel, A.B.: Wagar, A.B.: Davidson, A.B.: Mr O’Grady a saloon passenger; David Keys, Thomas Jones, and John Harold, steerage passengers.

Three days after the wreck, the ketch *Kangaroo* took the survivors on board and landed them at Melbourne, where the wreck became a sensation. Although the hunters were congratulated for having assisted the survivors, they were in disgrace with the authorities for not having accurately counted the number of bodies they buried, some in unmarked mass graves and others, like Tilly Dale, in individual graves, properly marked. The *Kangaroo* arrived in Melbourne and advanced reports began to appear in the local press;

**‘Ketch *Kangaroo*, just arrived from King’s Island, reports the total loss of the ship *British Admiral* on Saturday, 22nd instant. The vessel struck on the west side, and sank in a quarter of an hour, not a vestige of her remaining. Four of the crew, four passengers and the third mate managed to escape by getting up the foremast, and subsequently drifting ashore on the wreckage. She had 49 passengers and about 39 of a crew, all of whom, excepting those above mentioned, are drowned. The saloon passengers were Messrs. O’Grady and Nicholson, the latter a son of the late William Nicholson, at one time Chief Secretary of Victoria. The former was saved. The officers names were:- Jas. Randolph Taylor, master; Charles George, first mate; Charles Henry Bakor, second mate; Charles Wm McEwan, third mate (saved); and Albert Parker, fourth mate.’** A short time afterwards, the hon. the Chief Secretary received a similar telegram. A soon as Mr Francis received this telegram, he issued orders that H.M.C.S. *Victoria* should be made ready to proceed to sea, if necessary; but the arrival of the ketch *Kangaroo* in the Bay, and the story



WRECK OF THE BRITISH ADMIRAL: VISIT OF THE PHAROS TO KING'S ISLAND.

of the survivors from the wreck, soon showed that the journey of the *Victoria* to the scene of disaster would be a useless one, unless it was to bury the bodies washed ashore since the departure of the *Kangaroo*, or to carry away the few eases of cargo that might reach the beach.

As media interest grew, the master of the ketch *Kangaroo* was pressed for further information and he revealed,

‘On the 25th May the *Kangaroo* was lying at New Year's Island, when one of the hunters brought information of the wreck. Immediately we got under way, and proceeded to examine along the coast line and found the vessel had gone ashore on the west side of the island, about four miles south of where the *Netherby* was lost. During the day Mr O'Grady was seen, and picked up in a very exhausted condition. He stated that he had left another man, named Jones, some distance behind, took Mr O'Grady to Harry Weight's house, and found that Jones had got to the lighthouse, then went along the coast again to as far as Currie's Island, where five men, including the third officer, were found. Received information that there were two more men in the bush so walked about 15 miles along the coast, when seven bodies - two men, two women, and three girls - were picked up and buried. The two missing men found their way back the next day. The ketch was kept at anchor in Currie's Harbour until Saturday. During that time the whole of the hunters on the island, and the lighthouse keeper, were communicated with, and as no other survivors had been seen, it was concluded that a start for Melbourne should at once be made, and she left during that day.

Owing to the intense darkness which prevailed at the time of the disaster, and the consternation and confusion which ensued when the vessel struck, the survivors appear to have a somewhat indistinct recollection of what actually transpired outside their own immediate experience. The ship was under sail at the time, and the weather was very stormy. All hands were ordered on deck, and a command given by the first officer to make

more sail; but before this could be done the ship struck on one of the numerous reefs which skirt King's Island, a short distance from the scene of the wreck of the ill fated *Netherby*. She bumped once or twice, and then began to settle down, and in a short time she was at the mercy of the waves. The sea made clean breaches over her, and it was not long before the vessel went to pieces. Out of the eighty-eight souls on board only nine reached the shore, which was distant about six miles, Among those who perished were Captain Taylor, the first, second, and fourth officers, and Mr William Nicholson, a son of the late Hon William Nicholson.

The survivors, after undergoing a couple of days' privation and cold, were discovered by some sealers on the island by whom they were hospitably treated. The ship's papers came ashore in the captain's box and were saved but there was not a sign of the vessel two days after the wreck. On Thursday the bodies of the following were washed ashore, identified and buried:- Matilda Dale, a young girl, about eleven years old, Mrs Blackbourne, Mrs Mills, Mrs Thomas, Helen Hays Mary Conley, and William Dyer Pierce. On Friday the body of Mary Trachey was found jammed on the rocks, and from its position could not be extricated. She was coming out to her father and mother, who are said to be keeping a public house in Ireland Street, West Melbourne. The cargo consists principally of railway iron, spirits, and salt. Large quantities of the goods are strewn along the beach.

Instead of the *Victoria*, it was the *S.S. Pharos* that was despatched, with the intention of searching for survivors however unlikely, organising burials and assessing salvage. The ship left with a number of interested parties including a reporter from *The Argus*, the Melbourne newspaper, whose report appeared on Monday 8 June 1874;

## **THE WRECK OF THE BRITISH ADMIRAL** **THE VOYAGE OF THE PHAROS TO KING'S ISLAND** (BY OUR SPECIAL REPORTER)

The Government steamer *Pharos* arrived in the bay at a late hour on Saturday night from her voyage to the scene of the wreck of the iron clipper ship *British Admiral* on King's Island. The voyage was a rough and at times a dangerous one, as the western coast of the island is most rugged and bleak. It is fenced in by reefs and sunken rocks from Cape Wickham Light down to Fitzmaurice Bay, near its southern extremity, and it is only at one or two places that a landing can be effected, and then only in fine weather. Although Captain Anderson of the *Pharos* has not been successful in finding any more survivors from the wrecked ship, some little good has been done in decently interring the remains of six more unfortunates whose bodies were found lying on various parts of the coast, and in proving that there are no more shipwrecked persons remaining on the island. Those who visited King's Island on Thursday and Friday last will not soon forget the sight they witnessed as they scrambled along the coast. For 15 or 16 miles the rocks and sands were strewn with the debris of the cargo, a large portion of which consisted of beef and tobacco. At intervals, along the only sandy beach, a small piece of plank, placed upright, marked out the place where some unfortunate being had found his or her last resting-place. Among the rocks at one portion of the coast, two bodies, a man and a woman, were seen. These were recovered and buried, and about two miles below the principal scene of the wreck three more bodies were found on the sand and also decently interred. Much of the cargo thrown up by the sea was undamaged and if rapid steps are taken by the underwriters, or the purchasers of the wreck, a great deal of this can be saved. It will not, however, do to lose any time in securing what is now there, as the first heavy westerly gale will destroy a great quantity of it and bury much more in the shifting sand.

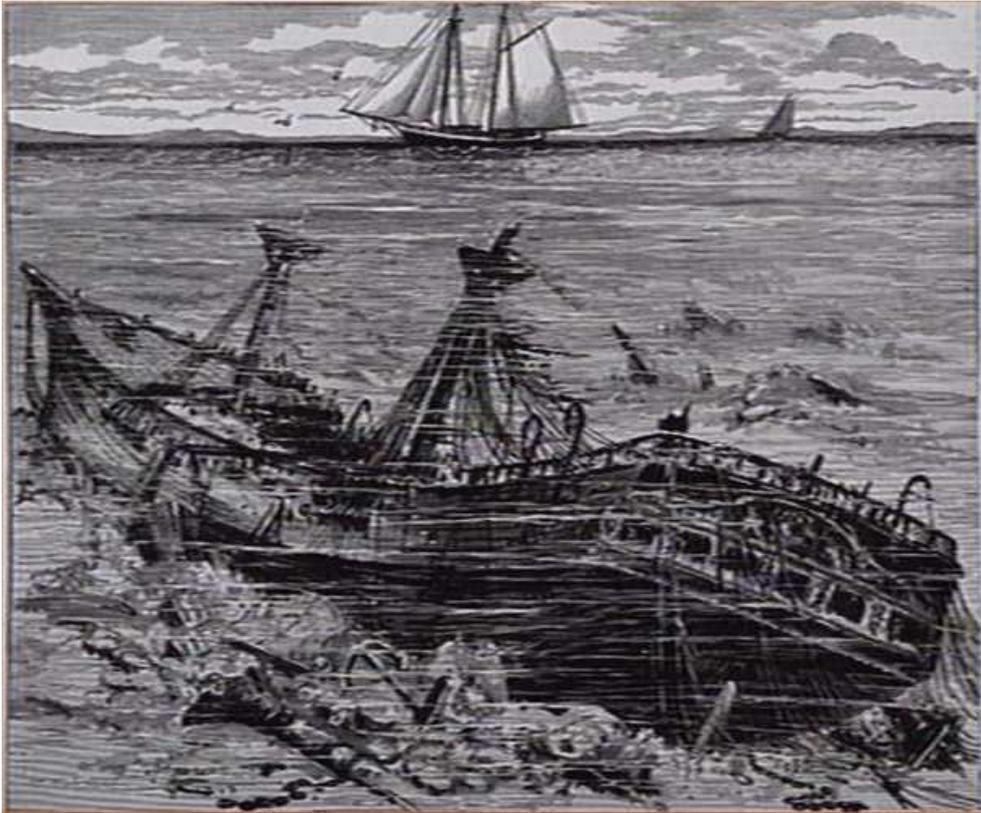
The wreck of the *British Admiral* has been one of the worst that has happened on our coast since the loss of the steamer *Admella*. King's Island, and especially the western coast, has had an unenviable notoriety in the way of wrecks, but fortunately the majority of them have been unattended with loss of life. Since the year 1830 there have only been two wrecks on

the western coast where the loss of life has exceeded that of the *British Admiral*. In 1830 the *Neva* was wrecked on the western part of the island, and 300 lives were sacrificed, and in 1843 the *Cataraqui* was wrecked some 10 miles below where the *British Admiral* was lost, and 414 human beings then met with a watery grave. Since that time five vessels (exclusive of the *British Admiral*) have come to grief on the western side of the island, and all within a length of six miles. Those have been - the *Brahmin* in 1854, when seven lives were lost; the *Maypole*, in 1855, when three lives were lost; the *Aurora*, in 1865, when one life was lost; the *Waterwitch*, in 1866, and the *Netherby* in the same year. In the two latter cases no lives were lost. To this long list of disasters the *British Admiral* has to be added, with the loss of 79 lives. This should be sufficient to show the Governments of Victoria and Tasmania that the present light at Cape Wickham on the northern point of the island is quite insufficient as a guide to masters of ships bound to Melbourne or through Bass's Straits, especially if their chronometers are in any way defective, as was the case with the *British Admiral*. A powerful light is urgently needed on some portion of the western coast. This has long been urged by seafaring men, and it is to be hoped that the subject will at once be taken into consideration. There are three points on the coast that would be suitable for the erection of the light, viz., the Waterwitch Point, Point Netherby, or the outlying point of Fitzmaurice Bay.

King's Island is about 45 miles long by 15 miles in breadth, and is in most parts covered with a dense scrub, with occasional patches of open country. It abounds with kangaroo and wallaby, the hunting of which for the sake of the skins constitutes the support of about 10 men. Among the rocks lining the west coast are to be found plenty of fish, and a few small craft occasionally run across from Melbourne to secure a cargo. Crayfish are abundant. At the Cape Wickham lighthouse there are stationed the families of the lighthouse-keeper and his assistants, and these constitute the whole population of the island.

It is somewhat to be regretted that in their own interests, as well as in that of humanity, the underwriters did not at once despatch a vessel to the scene of the disaster, for it would then have been known positively how many bodies have really been recovered from the wreck. The men on the island allege that they have buried 29; but their statement will have to be received with caution, as they cannot show the graves of one half that number, but account for this by saying that they have buried more than one in a grave. Nor can they give a definite statement of the sex or approximate age of those buried, so that the whole matter is most doubtful. Even if their statement is correct, there are still 44 bodies unaccounted for. There are nine survivors; 29 buried by the men on the island; and six buried during the visit of the *Pharos*, only make up 44 out of a total of 88. It is possible that some more bodies will be washed ashore yet, and that some will ever remain buried under the ship on the reef.

It was anticipated that the *Pharos* would have left for the island soon after midnight on Monday last, and every preparation was made at Williamstown to despatch her, but through some slight misunderstanding a delay of 24 hours took place before she got fairly away. It was not until 3 a.m. on Wednesday that the *Pharos* with a full head of steam headed down the bay, and at 7 o'clock she passed through the Heads. The instructions given to Captain Anderson were to the effect that he was to ascertain whether there were any more survivors from the wreck of the *British Admiral* still on King's Island, to bury any bodies that might be washed on shore, and to take steps to ascertain the position of the wreck; also to take down certain passengers and afford the Customs officers every assistance in his power in order that property might be secured.



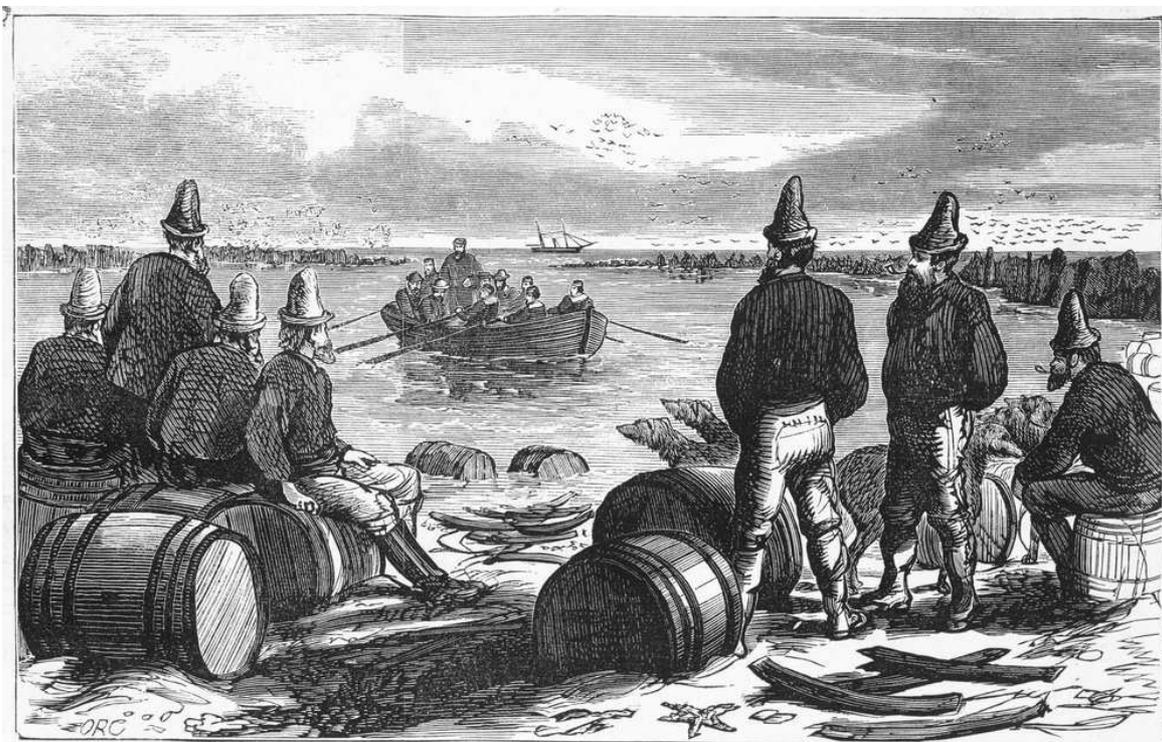
*The sunken British Admiral, as seen from the deck of the Cygnet*

The usual crew of the vessel consists of 11 men all told, but on this occasion she had on board an extra crew, consisting of the second engineer of the *Cerberus*, two firemen, a quartermaster and six able seamen from the same vessel. The *Pharos* had also on board a few passengers. These consisted of representatives of the Melbourne daily papers, Captain Daish, who went down to the island in the interests of the underwriters; Mr T. D. Hammond, tide surveyor; Mr George Warne, tide waiter; and Thomas Parlane, a Customs boatman. The three latter were sent down by the Customs department to take charge of all dutiable goods, and will remain at the scene of the wreck until the whole of the salvage has been shipped for this port. When the *Pharos* cleared the Heads her fore-and-aft canvas was at once set, and she then made good progress across the Straits. About 4 p.m. the land near Cape Wickham was seen, but it was dark before the steamer was near enough to signal the lighthouse keeper. Captain Anderson was in some little doubt at first whether to at once run down the coast, or wait until daylight, in order to first ascertain whether there were any survivors housed at the lighthouse. If he ran down under New Year's Island, it would be necessary to come back to Cape Wickham in the morning, as it was a matter of surety that if any survivors had been discovered they would have been taken to the lighthouse. To do this would entail an extra delay in the morning, and as time was precious, Captain Anderson decided to stand off and on all night, so as to be in readiness to signal the lighthouse keeper at daylight. This decision was no doubt the best, but it did not tend to ease the minds of the passengers on board, who were aware that there were some ugly reefs and rocks in their immediate vicinity. The 'Harbingers' and the Navarine reef formed a general topic of conversation during the evening and night. The fires in the engine-room were, however, banked, and under reefed canvas the *Pharos* stood off the land until 4 a.m., when she was put round, and under easy steam stood in for the Cape. It was evident that the lookout had seen the vessel the night before, as the ensign was at once hoisted. By flag signals the question was asked, 'Have you any shipwrecked seamen?' A prompt negative being returned, the *Pharos* came round on her heel, and steered for New Year's Island. A close watch was kept along the coast by means of glasses but nothing was discovered. After rounding the islands the steamer ran down the west coast of the island at a distance of three

miles. The tide, or current, was setting heavily to the northward at the time, so that the progress made was very slow, and it was not until 11 o'clock that smoke was seen issuing from the scrub at the head of Currie Harbour.

This is about 20 miles to the southward of Cape Wickham light, and about 15 miles south of New Year's Island. As soon as the smoke was seen, the steamer's head was turned in the direction of the harbour and she proceeded under half steam, feeling the way carefully with the lead. The rocky, un- even character of the bottom was quickly shown, as while one cast would give no bottom at 12 fathoms, the next minute the lead grounded at seven fathoms. After standing in as closely as was deemed prudent - about one and a half miles from the land - the whale boat was lowered, and under the charge of the mate pulled in shore with the passengers on board.

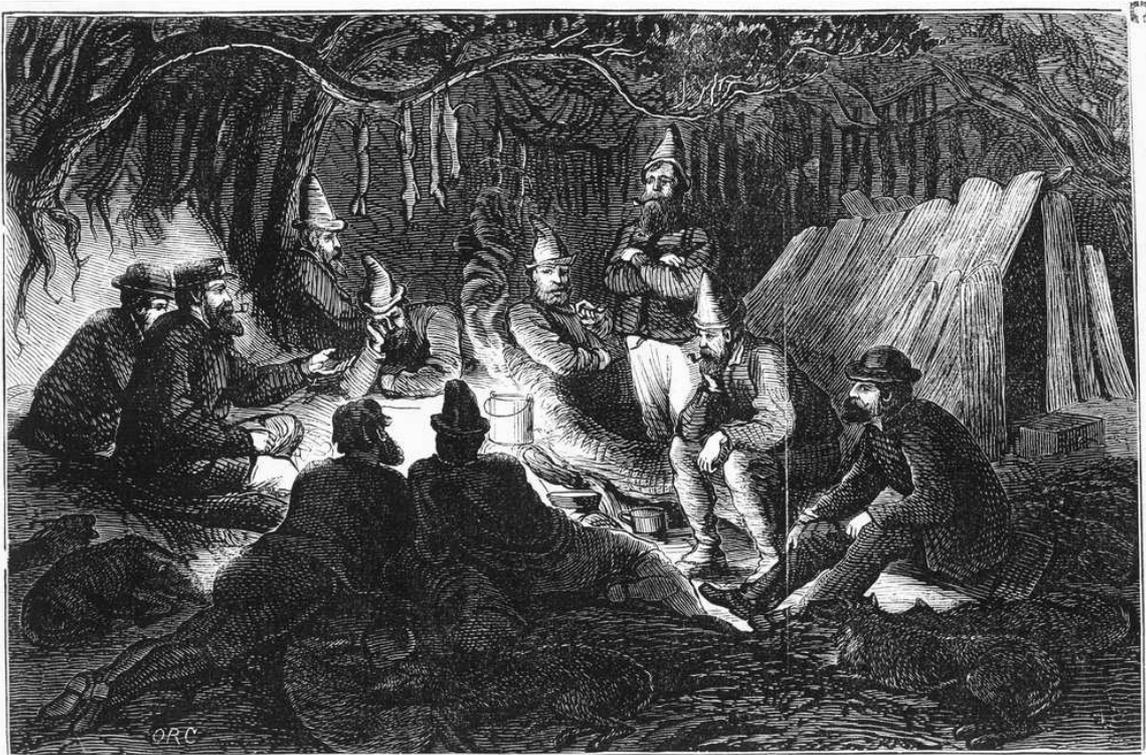
Currie Harbour is a small semi-circular cleft in the rocks, about three acres in extent, and when the wind is blowing anything to the eastward boats can easily land. It was at this place that a jetty was erected by Mr. H. B. Donaldson, the purchaser of the *Netherby* wreck, and the remains are still there. There are several rocks in the harbour, and it requires some little skill on the part of the steersman of a boat to secure a safe landing-place. As soon as the whale-boat was beached the party was met by two men belonging to the ketch *Kangaroo*, who had been left on the island when the nine survivors left for Melbourne, and two of the hunters living there. These men were apparently most anxious to give every information; but at the same time their statements were so vague and contradictory that it was impossible to place any reliance upon them. Each of them was anxious to take the credit of having saved life, secured property, and buried the dead, but from subsequent investigations it was evident that they were only desirous of throwing the Customs officers off the scent and securing, if possible, any reward that might be obtainable. The boat was at once sent back to the steamer in order to bring on shore the tent and stores for the customs officials, and while away the party proceeded round the coast to the scene of the wreck.



*The King's Island hunters about to welcome the salvage party from the SS Paros at Currie's Harbour*

There is apparently great confusion with regard to the names and positions of the various headlands and points on the west coast of King's Island, in consequence of the names given

by Captain Stanley in his recent survey of the island. The chart of this has not yet been published, but a tracing of it was given to Captain Anderson as a guide to him in taking the *Pharos* down the coast. By Captain Stanley's chart, Point Netherby is set down to the northward of Currie's Harbour, but this is locally known as Waterwitch Point - a vessel named the *Waterwitch* having been lost there in 1866, while the reef on which the *British Admiral* was lost has been named the *Waterwitch shoal*, although it is fully two miles to the southward of Currie Harbour, and three from Waterwitch Point. This change of names has caused no little confusion with regard to the exact position of the wreck, but from the appearance of the débris of the cargo on shore, and taking into consideration the winds and currents that prevail along the coast, there is no doubt but that the *British Admiral* struck the inner portion of the *Waterwitch shoal* or reef, as was stated in *The Argus* of Tuesday last. The outer portion of the *Waterwitch shoal* consists of a patch of rocks with 6ft. water on them, on which the sea always breaks. This is about two and a half miles distant from the shore in a straight line, but about three-quarters of a mile nearer the beach, there is another and a smaller patch of rocks - no doubt the continuation of the same reef - on which the ill-fated ship must have struck, and within a few lengths of which her remains are at present, together with the heavy part of her cargo, viz., iron. It is quite possible that the greater portion of this may be recovered in fine weather, but it is doubtful whether this can be done during the winter months, as whenever the wind is at all to the westward, there are always heavy rollers setting in on the coast, which would prevent any work being carried on.



*The hunter's camp*

As soon as the party started from Currie Harbour to proceed along the coast to the scene of the wreck, they found that they had more work before them than they anticipated. When leaving the starting-point they were informed that the distance was about two miles, but it ultimately proved that, in consequence of having to follow the curves of the coast line, the distance was extended to a good six miles. Nor was this over a sandy beach, the greater portion of the way being over water-worn boulders or heavy shingle, that gave way at each footstep. 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 effluvia from which frequently gave rise to the suspicion that decomposing bodies were beneath the surface. The first thing that was met with was the ship's cutter in which the seaman Cunningham and Mr. O'Grady, a saloon passenger - who were saved - together with the second officer, and several others left the

ship after she went down. This boat was capsized when she got into the breakers at the mouth of Currie's Harbour, but the two men named managed to get ashore on her keel. The boat had been hauled upon the beach above high-water mark, but she was considerably damaged, being bilged on one side, and having her gunwale carried away on the other side. She could, however, be made seaworthy with some little outlay, and might be used in securing some of the cargo now on the beach.

Upon reaching the southern point of the bay, very rocky, the body of a man was discovered floating among the rocks about a dozen yards from the shore. The features were totally undistinguishable - fishes and crows having removed every vestige of flesh from the head, leaving only a grinning skull. The other portions of the body, covered by the clothes, were in good preservation, and from the clothes worn it was surmised that this was the body of Mr. Charles Henry Baker, the second officer of the ship. The clothes on the body consisted of a pair of blue pilot cloth trousers, a blue cloth vest, and a black and white checked Crimean shirt. Some two or three more small rocky inlets were passed, in which casks of beer and rum, broken cases, and pieces of lumber and flooring were to be seen in all directions. Up to this time the amount of wreckage seen was comparatively small, but on clearing the next point a sandy beach opened out to view. This was about a quarter of a mile in length, and it was at once apparent that here the greater portion of the wreck had come on shore. One of the first objects seen was the body of a woman washing about among the rocks. In this case also it was impossible to recognise the body, as it was greatly mutilated both by abrasion among the rocks, and also by the attacks of the black crows, which hovered closely round the bodies, and were only disturbed by the close approach of the party.

As it was understood that a boat's crew was to be landed from the *Pharos* for the express purpose of searching for bodies and burying them, the party pushed forward. Cargo of all kinds was strewn about the sand. Hogs-heads 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. On some portions of the beach might be found hundreds of small glasses filled with sand, used for egg-boilers. These had quite escaped the fury of the waves, while within a few feet might be seen a large portion of the 'tween decks of the ship with the iron knees attached, plainly showing that the power of the waves had been sufficient to break up the ship on the reef, while one of the most fragile portions of the cargo had been safely washed on shore. A little further on a still more extraordinary scene was observed. The lumber or timber planks were piled up to a height of about 4ft., and those were apparently woven into a barricade by giant hands to prevent the further encroachment of the sea. So interlaced were the planks that it would take the united efforts of a dozen men for several days to remove the whole of the cargo here piled up. The most fragile articles were mixed up with heavy cases and planks, but the slightest goods appeared to have escaped in a most miraculous manner.

The sea was at this time breaking on the beach in a dull, slow manner, but there was a hollow murmur in the sound of the wind that promised a heavier surf next day. Some two miles and a half out could be seen the heavy breakers on the Waterwitch Reef, and three quarters of a mile nearer in shore the sea was seen to break occasionally over the rocks which are supposed to have sent the good ship *British Admiral* to her last resting place. By this time the sun was getting low and several members of the party were desirous of getting back to Currie Harbour, in order that they might get on board again before dark. The majority were, however, in favour of going along the beach somewhat further, more especially as the next rocky point exhibited a flagstaff on which two pieces of calico were fluttering, and which was understood to be the point where the most of the survivors from the wreck first landed. Another dozen yards brought them facing the grave of the little girl Tilly Dale, who has always been spoken of as the 'pet of the ship'. The grave has been made a long way above high water-mark and is covered with a lot of heavy planks. At the head has been placed a piece of board, on which is cut the following inscription:- '24-5-74. *In memory of Tilly Dale.*' On the upper portion of the plank above the inscription, one of the

gilt cornices belonging to the cabin was fastened. Strange to say, right facing the grave of this poor girl, one of her boxes had been washed ashore, and, although the lid had been broken off by the wash of the sea, the painting on the front of it was quite distinct, '*Matilda Dale, Passenger to Melbourne. Not Wanted on the Voyage.*'

In the box were many little things that a child would preserve for a voyage to a new country that was to be her future home. There were a number of illuminated texts, books of a religious character, and a half finished crochet antimacassar, which was secured by one of the gentlemen present as a memento of his visit to the island. A few yards further along the beach the mia-mia erected by the survivors when they came on shore was reached. This consisted of a few planks, placed in such a position as to ward off the cold blast of the westerly gales and additional protection had been obtained by winding round it a roll of grey tweed that had been washed up in the vicinity. There was no want of tobacco or grog at this part of the beach, as cases of tobacco were to be seen every few yards, while cases of bottled stout and casks of English ale were quite as handy. Proceeding on to the southernmost portion of this beach, it was found to end in a wild rocky projecting point, on which the shipwrecked men had erected a kind of flagstaff, where two fluttering ends of calico showed that what was intended for a flag had once been exhibited. A few yards out to sea, and disconnected from this point, was a small patch of rocks on which a quantity of planking had been piled up by the action of the waves in the most grotesque and fantastic form. A close scrutiny was made of this in consequence of some of the men on the island having stated that they had observed portions of the bodies of men and women protruding from under the timber, but had been unable to reach them at the time for want of a boat. From what could be seen from the shore there was not much foundation for this statement, but as there was a possibility that such might be the case it was determined to make an examination of the place when the tide was lower. As the sun was now declining rapidly, a start was made for the landing place at Currie Harbour. On the way back the party met the boat's crew who had landed from the *Pharos* in order to bury any bodies, and learned from them that they had buried the body of the woman previously mentioned. One of the boat's crew having been on the island before surveying, took the party a narrow cut through the scrub, by which means a considerable distance was saved, but it was greatly to the detriment of the habiliments of those who faced the bush pathway.

When the landing place was reached, it was found that Captain Anderson had landed the tent sent down for the customs officials, together with their stores, but not being desirous of remaining on such a rocky and inhospitable coast all night, had determined to give his passengers an opportunity of experiencing the pleasures of 'roughing it,' and had consequently stood off the land, under easy canvas, until daylight. Mr. Hammond, the customs officer in charge, quickly made everybody welcome to a share of his tent and provisions, and, as there was plenty to do, each man set himself heartily to work. But when the stores came to be opened it was found that the Government official who shipped them had but a very slight notion of what three men would require for a sojourn of at least three weeks on an island where no store can be requisitioned for a fresh supply of provender. One pound of tea, three pounds of sugar, and one pound of pepper, were the principal articles of the fit out, independent, of course, of beef and bread. Such a miserable supply of course excited the laughter of all present, but a hearty meal having been made of fried steak and some brandy and water, providentially provided by one far-seeing individual in the crowd, attention was paid towards providing the necessary material for bedding for the night, and also for a good fire. While some cut down the softer branches of the tea tree scrub as bedding, the remainder of the party were engaged in making up a good fire, and the bush for yards round was felled in order to give warmth to those who were camped.

The scene about midnight would have given full scope to the brush of a *Salvator Rosa*, as about that time the party was increased by the arrival of two more hunters who had ridden down from the Yellow Rock opposite New Year's Island, in consequence of seeing the *Pharos* steam down the coast in the morning. They were accompanied by a troop of gaunt-looking kangaroo dogs, and having run down a couple of wallabys on the road, they made

their appearance in the camp heavily laden. Of course they had their story of the wreck to relate, and proved - to their own satisfaction - that had it not been for them, the nine men washed on shore must have inevitably perished. The hunters who were on the spot of course took exception to this statement, and a melee appeared to be the next step. The whole of them, however, thought better of it, and when they adjourned, the party in the customs tent lay down on their bed of scrub to secure the best night's rest possible.

Before sun-rise there was a general move, and the first look was cast to seaward, where the *Pharos* was to be seen standing in for the land, and at an early hour Captain Anderson cast anchor in seven fathoms water, about two miles from the harbour. He at once came on shore with a boat's crew, and it was decided that one party should proceed along the coast to the northward, while the remainder of the men should go along the beach to the southward of the point reached the previous afternoon, in order to ascertain whether there were any more bodies. It may here be stated that to the northward of Currie Harbour, the coast was found to be very rocky, and the only trace of the wreck to be seen in that direction consisted of a number of casks of beer among the rocks. The remainder of the men, led by Captain Anderson, proceeded at a rapid pace along the coast to the south-ward, stopping on their way to bury the body of the man seen among the rocks the day previous, and believed to be the second mate. After passing Flagstaff Point, where the search was concluded the night previous, another small bay was found, in which was deposited a great quantity of school books, evidently intended for the Education department. At the extremity of this there was a small creek, which was perfectly brown from the amount of tobacco submerged in it. Leaping across this, the party had to rise a small sandhill, and there a most horrible sight was witnessed. The body of a young woman was on the ground. The features were undistinguishable, and although it appeared as if some attempt had been made at covering her up with the sand, this had been unavailing, as the dogs had scraped away the sand, and had been gnawing the body. A grave sufficiently deep to properly protect the body was at once dug, and the unfortunate woman was carefully placed in it, and covered over. About a dozen yards from this, and just as the point was turned, three more bodies were discovered. The first had evidently only been washed ashore by the morning's tide, and was lying face downward on the beach. The only clothing on it was a Crimean shirt, an undershirt, and a waistcoat. Captain Anderson, who was the foremost of the party, had passed the body, giving instructions to bury it, but from some unaccountable impulse turned back and commenced to search the pockets of the waist-coat. In doing so, a pouch was discovered next to the skin, and secured by a strap across the right shoulder. A closer examination of this showed that it contained six sovereigns and three papers. The first was a steerage passage ticket issued by Messrs Ismay, Laurie and Co., of the White Star Line of Packets, Liverpool, to William Dyer Pearce, aged 25, in consideration of receiving the sum of £15. The other two papers were bank drafts. The first was one drawn by the East Cornwall Bank, Liskeard, 27 December 1873, upon the English, Scottish and Australian Chartered Bank, Melbourne for £170, the other was drawn by the Union Bank, London, upon the Melbourne branch for £225, dated 29 December 1871, both in favour of William Dyer Pearce. This property was taken possession of by Captain Anderson, and will of course be available for the friends of the deceased. A few yards further along the beach the body of another man was discovered, but in this case there was no possibility of recognising him. It appeared to be the body of a man about 50 years of age. He was evidently a passenger, and of stout build. From the appearance of his skull he must have been bald on the upper part of the head, as there was a small circle of hair round the lower portion of the head. Not many yards from this body was seen that of a young girl about 13 years of age. Both of these bodies had been mutilated to some extent by fish and birds, and were interred in one grave, above high-water mark.

By this time the weather began to look threatening, and heavy rollers were breaking on the beach. A rapid return was made to the *Pharos*, and having landed all available stores for the use of the Customs officers left behind, the anchor was picked up at 7 o'clock, and a full head of steam was put on to clear the rocks off the coast before the full force of the coming gale was encountered. A very heavy passage was made across the Straits in the teeth of a

hard northerly gale. It was not until half-past 6 p.m. on Saturday that the Heads were reached, and the *Pharos* did not pick up her moorings until nearly midnight. A word of praise should be given to Captain Anderson, of the *Pharos*, and his officers, for the manner in which they conducted the search of a dangerous coast, and also for their courtesy to the passengers who encumbered the little vessel with their presence during the trip.



*The survivors of the wreck: Third Officer, Mr Charles Wm. McEwan; Cunningham, A.B.; Baker, A.B.; Wagard, A.B.; and Davison, OS.; Mr O'Grady, Saloon passenger; David Keys; Thomas Jones, and John Harold, steerage passengers. Only Thomas Jones (back row left) has been identified. Mr O'Grady is missing – apparently he felt it was beneath him to be photographed with the others.*

Within days the auction of the wreck was organised, as the *The Argus* (Melbourne) reported on Wednesday 10 June 1874,

**THE WRECK OF THE BRITISH ADMIRAL.  
SALE OF THE WRECKAGE.**

At noon yesterday the wreck and cargo of the iron clipper ship *British Admiral*, now lying off the western coast of King's Island, was submitted to auction by Captain Coffey. In consequence of the great number of persons that attended the sale, it was found necessary to adjourn from the auctioneers rooms in Collins Street West to the Western Market. At this time there were about 500 persons present and Captain Coffey, having mounted a hogshead, read out the conditions of sale, which provided, amongst other matters, that cash should be paid on the fall of the hammer if required by the auctioneer.

The interested parties were numerous and several objections were raised at the auction being allowed to go ahead. Several letters were received and each were read out to the court -

Melbourne, 33 Collins Street West, June 1 1874

*'To Messrs James Service and Co, or agents of the ship British Admiral; to H A Coffey, auctioneer, and to whom it may concern,*

*'I hereby give you notice, that amongst the cargo of the ship British Admiral, wrecked on King's Island on the 23rd May last, was a package marked on the bill of lading as one case of apparel, &c and addressed to Mrs W. C Hill, Murphy Street, S Yarra, Melbourne, which package belongs to me, is uninsured, and upon which I am prepared to pay salvage. I therefore caution you against the disposal of this property in any way under the sale of the wrecked ship British Admiral and cargo, advertised for sale on Friday next by H. A. Coffey as under your instructions - I am, yours faithfully,*  
W C HILL

Melbourne, 6 June 1874

Captain H. A. Coffey,

Sir,-I hereby beg to give you notice that as you are selling the wreck of the *British Admiral*, I claim, on behalf of owners of the ketch *Kangaroo*, salvage on all goods landed on beach at King's Island, which have been saved from the surf by the above parties and branded K, and I request that you will notify this at the time of sale.

I am, sir, your obedient servant,

A. J. JOHNSON

Market street Melbourne, June 8, 1874

Messrs James Service and Co, agents for the *British Admiral*,

Gentlemen I beg to give you notice that on board the *British Admiral* was a cargo of goods belonging to me and which Mr Beazley, the owner of the ship was good enough to send out for me under the captain's care in the saloon or his cabin, free of freight, I do not know whether the goods were insured or not. The case was addressed Arthur Seddon, Melbourne and is not in the manifest. I give notice that the case is not to be sold with the wreck and cargo, but I offer to pay salvage and I request that the case may be recovered and delivered to me.

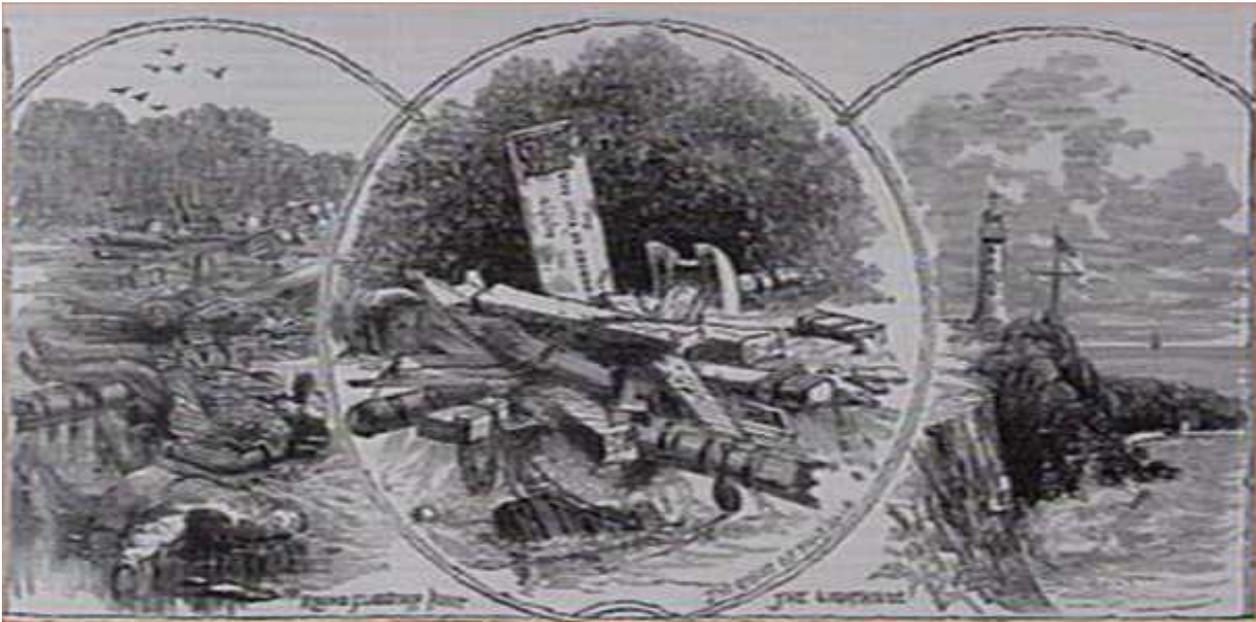
Yours obediently,

Arthur Seddon.

The auctioneer also stated that there was another condition attached to the sale, and that was that any property belonging to the passengers and crew that had been saved should be handed over to the agents of the ship for the benefit of these men. This condition appeared to meet with the

approval of all present. One intended buyer inquired whether the hunters on King's Island had any claim to the goods on the beach, but it was explained to him that as far as was known these men had done nothing towards saving the cargo. It remained on the beach as it was thrown up by the surf and no attempt had been made to place it above highwater mark. It was also announced that 15 cases of tobacco, which had been brought across by the ketch *Kangaroo* and was now at Sandridge, were included in the sale. The bidding then commenced,

...£500 being the first sum offered, and it rapidly increased until £2,000 was reached. The bidding then became less spirited, and at last it stopped at £2,750, when the wreck was knocked down at that price. The bidder could not, however, be discovered and the ship was again put up. This time the bidding was very slow and it was not until the lapse of nearly half an hour that the sum of £2,150 was reached and at this figure the lot was knocked down to Mr S Gardiner.



*The casualties, wreckage and the lighthouse on King's Island*

The following official reports of Captain Payne, chief harbour-master, and of Captain Anderson, S.S. *Pharos* in relation to the wreck of the *British Admiral* on Kings Island were then forwarded to the Chief Secretary,

**Department of Ports and Harbours, Melbourne, June 8 1874**

**I beg to forward Captain Anderson's report of his proceedings in connexion with his visit in the *Pharos* to King's Island relative to the wreck of the *British Admiral*.**

**Captain Anderson has carried out the instructions he received and states that for a distance of eight miles north and south of the wreck, which he visited, no more of the bodies washed ashore from the wreck could be seen. The hunters on the island have already buried a great number, and promised to inter others that might be washed up.**

**The vessel was no doubt wrecked on what is known as the Waterwitch Reef. The position pointed out by the man who went off to the *Pharos*, where he had seen the mast or yard sticking up, being only a mile and a half from the shore, was considerably inside the reef, but I am inclined to think, notwithstanding that she first struck the Waterwitch Reef and then was hove on to the inside rock.**

**Captain Anderson did not attempt any salvage of the goods, as that would have unnecessarily detained him, but having carried out the wishes of the Government, he returned to port as early as possible.**

I would beg to report that Captain Anderson has informed me that the officer and men lent from the *Cerberus* carried out their duties to his entire satisfaction.

C.B. Payne C.H.M.

*SS Pharos* Hobsons Bay, June 8 1874

'Sir - I have the honour to report that the *Pharos*, after coaling left the bay at 3am on the 3rd inst, and proceeded towards the scene of the wreck of the *British Admiral* on the Waterwitch Reef, King's Island, half past 6, passed out through the Heads; 4 pm, sighted King's Island, but being unable to reach the anchorage at New Year's before dark, hove to at 6pm, and lay off and on until 5 a m on the 4th, when the vessel was steered for the lighthouse; 7, hoisted flags to ascertain if they had any shipwrecked seamen but as the flag 'No!' was hoisted, proceeded towards the Waterwitch Reef; 11, landed at Currie Harbour, customs officers, reporters as well as Captain Daish, on behalf of the agents; 1pm, boat returned with one of the hunters on board, and he told me that there was the body of a woman on the rocks that they were unable to lift to bury, so I told off four men, and sent them on shore for the night to bury the woman, and search as much of the beach as possible that night for any others that might have been cast ashore; 6pm, steamed to sea about three miles and lay-to for the night. Friday, 5th at 8am, dropped the anchor in seven fathoms water, at the mouth of Currie Harbour. I went ashore with four hands, leaving the mate in charge and was informed by the men they had that morning found a man (a sailor), and buried him. I then took the men and examined all bights and points of rocks from Currie Harbour to about eight miles south and found two men and a girl. On one of the men I found attached to the body a little bag with six sovereigns two bank drafts (£225 and £170), and a passage ticket. I then went back to the vessel with part of the crew, leaving four men to bury the bodies, and then to examine the beach two or three miles further. They returned at half past 7pm, but there was nothing more to be seen any further south than I had been myself. Then as the weather looked threatening, with heavy swell rolling in, I could not see that there could be any more done, weighed, and proceeded towards Port Phillip. Made fast to the moorings at 11 o'clock Saturday night, after a passage of 27 hours; strong head wind all the way.

There is nothing to be seen of the ship but one of the hunters said he saw on the morning of the wreck a mast or yard sticking up about a mile and a half from above, a good bit inside of the reef. There was nothing to be seen of any of the yards, masts, or sails, but mostly all in connexion with the poop was on the beach - boats, studding sail booms, &c, smashed to pieces. The beach for about six miles is covered with the cargo of the ship. What has landed on the sandy beaches is in very fair condition, but that landed on the rocks is mostly smashed to pieces.

The hunter that came on board told me that he, along with the other hunters, had buried twenty-nine.

Left a supply of provisions for the customs men. Other passengers returned.

I have the honour to be, sir, your most obedient servant,

JAMES ANDERSON.

The Chief Harbour Master, Melbourne

It took over twelve months to recover the cargo, nevertheless, a large quantity was brought off the shoreline where it had been strewn for sixteen miles. Initially, simple beachcombing was carried out, then divers arrived from Melbourne, plus a party of stevedores on board the schooner *Cygnets*, as reported in the *Launceston Examiner* on Thursday 9 July 1874,

### THE BRITISH ADMIRAL

The schooner *Secret*, which arrived from the Forth on Monday evening, left King's Island about the middle of June. She went there, as stated in our columns at the time, to render assistance at the wreck of the *British Admiral*, and was the first vessel there after the arrival of the Customs officers from Melbourne. Acting under authority from the latter Captain Neilson commenced to gather up the most valuable portion of the cargo to proceed with it to

Melbourne, and had actually loaded nearly a score hogsheads of spirits, beer, etc., when the representative of the purchasers arrived, and as he could not agree with Neilson as to freight the recovered cargo was again discharged, Neilson simply getting a small sum to recoup him for wages paid to the hunters for assisting him to get the casks on board.

The *Secret* then went on to another part of the island to pick up kangaroo skins, and subsequently finished loading at the Forth. Captain Neilson says that the beach is strewn with wreck and cargo for miles, and that much of it has been torn to atoms by the surf - articles left by one tide being carried off again by the next and either washed about among the rocks or buried in the sand. He does not speak very hopefully of the prospects of the purchasers, stating that the men sent down to recover the cargo were employed all the time he was there in making roads for the teams, instead of first placing the goods beyond the reach of the sea, and his impression was that when the roads were completed there would be very little to cart. The wreck of the *British Admiral* occurred at the south-west end of the island. The ship struck on the outer reef, over which she forged and sunk in six fathoms water about one hundred yards on the inner side and four miles from the shore. Captain Neilson knows the exact spot, as he passed close by and saw some of the angle iron that formed her deckbeams standing above the water in the trough of the sea; indeed the *Secret* herself was nearly coming to grief upon those same pieces of iron. Either the capstan or the stump of a mast was also visible, proving conclusively that the hull was there.

It seems there are at least five very tolerable harbours for vessels of light draught in the vicinity of the wreck - the most southern being Surprise Bay; another at the Dripping Wells (three miles north of where the *Cataraqui* was lost); another at the Ettrick River (formerly the residence of David Howie); Leatherby Point; and still further north, near the middle of the island, Currie Harbour. One of the bodies from the unfortunate ship was seen on the rocks at the Dripping Well, a distance of six miles south of the wreck.



*The crew of the *Pharos* find another body*

To help with the transshipment, the schooner *Royal Charlie* was sent from the Don River with horses and drays to take the salvage to Currie Harbour, from where it was sent to Melbourne for sale on board a fleet of small craft. The operations were just winding down when the ship *Blencathra* was wrecked at the entrance to Currie Harbour early in 1875.

Meanwhile, back on the mainland, news of the wreck of the British Admiral and the plight of the survivors had so concerned the local population that a series of concerts were held at the end of July to alleviate their situation,

**The wreck of the ship. British Admiral, at King's Island, has been one of the most melancholy catastrophes, which has ever occurred on Australian shores. The terrible loss of life, together with the destitute circumstances in which the few survivors were left, were sufficient to elicit the sympathy, and what was more to the purpose, the substantial monetary assistance of the public. Several entertainments have been given on behalf of the shipwrecked strangers, and each, without exception, has proved successful.**

We may be so caught up in the plethora of benefit concerts for all sort of causes we see today, that the image of them taking place in 1874 seems quite intriguing. Even a shipwreck 'broadside' was written and published at this time, no doubt performed at some of the concerts.



A Court of Inquiry into the wreck of the ship was held in Melbourne on 2 June 1874, which came to the conclusion that the ship's chronometers may have been damaged by bad weather and so cleared Captain Taylor and his officers of any blame for her loss. They declared,

**'There is no direct evidence to satisfy the Court as to the causes which led to the loss of the ship British Admiral on King's Island, on the morning of the 23<sup>rd</sup> May....**

**In justice to the memory of the captain and officers, it is right that the Court should record that the evidence shows they were careful and attentive to their duties during the voyage.'**

It is astonishing to learn that one of the survivors, Able-Seaman Danny Baker, stated in his deposition before the court that he could not swim and was one of those who survived by clinging on to timber wreckage.

In their summary they drew together the key events following the sinking – that a boat near the stern was launched successfully, containing 10 occupants including the chief officer. The master ordered him to stay alongside the wreck, but the *British Admiral* sank within 15 minutes of hitting the reef, and the boat was swept up the coast until it capsized off Currie Harbour. Six occupants, including the chief officer were drowned, but three male passengers and a crewman managed to struggle ashore and later met up with a kangaroo hunter. Meanwhile, another passenger and four crew, including the third officer, had managed to drift ashore on floating wreckage on a beach a little north of the wreck [*known today as British Admiral Beach*]. One of them had drifted into the surf clinging to a spar, and a finger which had become swollen after being forced through a thimble by which he had been clinging to the spar, had to be amputated to release him. They later met up with a party of hunters, led by the four survivors from the boat. A total of nine survived. Most on deck were washed overboard and drowned and more were lost while the forward boats were being launched.

Today there is no sign that the wreck was ever there, having been completely consumed by the elements. However, its memory is commemorated by a marble memorial standing above British Admiral Beach, which carries the inscription,

To,  
THE MEMORY OF  
**WILLIAM DALZELL NICHOLSON**  
THIRD SON OF THE  
**HON Wm. NICHOLSON**  
WHO ALONG WITH 78 OTHERS PERISHED  
IN THE WRECK OF THE BRITISH ADMIRAL  
23 MAY 1874  
AGED 26 YEARS

*TO LIVE IN THE HEARTS WE LEAVE BEHIND  
IS NOT TO DIE*



(the quote is from Glasgow poet Thomas Campbell's *Hallowed Ground*)



There is also a stained glass window to the sons of William Nicholson in the transept of Christ Church in St Kilda. The window is a memorial to Miles Nicholson, who died on 27 April 1874, aged twenty-eight, and his twenty-five year-old brother William Dalzell Nicholson. The window includes a very detailed hand painted depiction of the storm and shipwreck.

On King's Island, British Admiral Beach is wildly rugged, windswept and attractive and is an essential part of trail tours for visitors. The memory of this tragedy will live on for some time yet.

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As a postscript regarding David Keyes, one of the crew who survived the ordeal, he settled down at Houlaghan's Creek near Wagga Wagga, NSW with his brother Andrew. On New Years Day 1875, just six months after the wreck, David went shooting and managed to suffer an injury to his hand after the gun exploded. He had to have his hand amputated. Four years later he contracted a fever and died two months later on 25 January 1879 at the age of only 32. He was buried in an unmarked grave.

**Shipwreck Broadside:**  
***The Wreck of the British Admiral***

AIR: DRIVEN FROM HOME

Who have friends or relations at sea,  
I pray give attention and listen to me,  
'Tis a sorrowful story that now must be told,  
Of the dangers awaiting the emigrant bold;  
By hardships in England he's driven from home,  
Over the wild waters with his family to roam,  
And it too often happens when gone from our shore,  
They are shipwrecked at sea, and return here no more.

Chorus:

Out on the ocean on the deep sea,  
The Emigrant Steamer was their destiny.  
Eighty poor souls with hearts true and Brave,  
In the depths of the ocean have now found a grave.

The ship British Admiral from Liverpool sailed,  
Sad hearts in England her fate have bewailed,  
With eighty poor souls and crew,  
Australia's the land they were travelling to;  
But no one can tell when they're out on the main,  
What will take place ere they see land again,  
One day they are happy, light-hearted and free,  
The next they are doomed to lie dead in the sea,

At three in the morning on 23rd May,  
The dark hour that heralds the sun's glorious ray,  
The passengers were sleeping so calmly in their bed,  
Not dreaming the danger that hung o'er each head,  
But soon a loud crash struck their terrified ears,  
They had struck rocks, tho' land was so near,  
They ran to the boats each with a quick glance,  
The masts had fell on them, and destroyed their last chance.

The barren rocks re-echoed with despairing cries,  
Of eighty poor creatures whose pitiful eyes  
Are upturned to Heaven in that moment of prayer  
They know there's no hope if it don't come from there;  
'Tis but a few moments when the vessel goes down,  
Men, women and children are all doomed to drown,  
The Father, the Mother, the husband and his bride,  
Beneath the dark waves they laid side by side.

One brave fellow tried two children to save,  
For the sake of their dear lives he fought with the waves,  
But his strength gave way, 'twas a sad destiny,  
With the poor little children he sank in the sea,  
Forty-seven people by the mizzen mast stood,  
And all in a moment went down in the flood,  
No stone marks the spot, where their bodies now lay,  
But they'll not be forgotten upon their last day.

Think of the moments when they had to part;  
Think of the feelings of each breaking heart;  
Think of the mother caressing her child,  
The screams of the lost one so piercing and wild,  
Heaven preserve us from such a sad fate,  
May we no more such a story relate,  
What troubles or trials may fall on our head,  
Let us die with our friends at home in our beds.

*'We buried them as tenderly as we could...'*

WILLIAM HICKMOTT *Assistant lighthouse keeper at Cape Wickham*

# FEARFUL SHIPWRECK, AND Loss of Eighty Lives! NEAR AUSTRALIA.

The New Liverpool Steamer, "The BRITISH ADMIRAL," bound for Australia, struck on the Rocks at King's Island, Bass's Straits, on the 25th of May, 1874, when out of 89, all told, 80 were Drowned!

*Air—"Driven from home."*

London:—H. P. SUCH, Machine Printer & Publisher,  
177, Union-street, Borough, S.E.

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By hardships in England he's driven from home,  
Over the wild waters with his family to roam,  
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CHORUS.

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# King Island

