

Victorian Heritage Database Report

Report generated on - 31/08/24

SARAH

Location

Woodside, Ninety Mile Beach

Victorian Heritage Register (VHR) Number

S607

Date lost

1838

Construction material

Wood

Propulsion

Sail

Number of masts

2

Length/Breadth/Depth

54.80 Feet / 14.50 Feet / 6.80 Feet

Builder

George Brown

Year of construction

1837

Built port

Woollongong

Built country

Australia

Date lost

1838

Departure

Sydney

Destination

Port Phillip

Cargo

Howey family property

Master

William Winkworth

Weather conditions

Storm

Cause of loss

Driven ashore in a storm

Passenger comments

Mr & Mrs Howe & 6 children, 8 servants & 2 children

Number of crew

7

Statement of significance

<p>The Sarah is historically and socially significant for the mystery surrounding its disappearance, and the part its wreck played eventuating in the destruction of the Kurnai tribe in Gippsland.</p>

VHR history

The Sarah went missing while on a voyage to take Mr Howe and his family servants and possessions from Sydney to Mt Macedon station of which he was proprietor. The vessel was never heard of again until a succession of reports of a white woman living with the local Kurnai tribe, and a figurehead resembling that of the vessel (originally said to be from another wreck the Britannia (1839) were reported by local settlers. A tree in the area had the initials 'H.H.' carved into it believed to have been done by Henry Howey. The so-called 'White Woman' that was believed to be living with the Kurnai became the subject of intense rumours and large scale searches, including the leaving of handkerchiefs with messages in Gaelic on trees in the area, and led to the killing of many Kurnai by the Border Police and Native Police in a 31 day campaign in 1846 in their search for the women going from camp to camp.
 Syme records the vessel as having been lost near Sydney Heads after leaving Sydney on 21 June 1838.
 NSW Heritage Office believe the Sarah was lost in Victoria and their file was transferred 1998.

 Sarah (1837), Britomart (1839), Britannia (1839) and the 'White Woman

legend
A persistent story relating to Aborigines and shipwrecks on Victoria's east coast relates to reported sightings of a mysterious 'white woman' as well as sightings of half caste children, over a number of years. . The woman was supposed to be held a captive by Aborigines, and sightings were reported in the Port Albert and eastern Gippsland areas, By 1846 in Melbourne the white woman story had reached the stage of official and public concern. The fact that these three vessels had all disappeared in Bass Strait (wreckage from the Britomart was eventually found on Preservation Island in the Furneaux Group) and were carrying female passengers led to months of police searches between 1846-49 supported by the media, skirmishes with Aboriginal tribes and one private search that involved placing handkerchiefs with both English and Gaelic messages in the bush (Loney, 1994; Bateson, 1972).
The evidence of sightings were to lead to disaster for the Kurnai tribe. Hundreds were killed during the search including a Kurnai leader Bunjilee-nee and his wife who died after being held for eighteen months in police custody, despite there being no legal basis for their detention (Pepper and De Arrango, 1985: 74).
Ironically, following reports from Aborigines that a boat was lying on Ninety Mile Beach and they had seen footprints in the sand, the revenue cutter Prince George was despatched from Sydney to look for survivors. Wreckage identified as being from the Britannia and bodies were found, but the cutter's master formed the opinion that any survivors would have been murdered by Aborigines (Loney, 1994; Bateson, 1972). In fact some years after 1848 a white woman was eventually found living among the Kurnai. She was a Mrs Capel who had been a passenger on the Britannia. However she could no longer speak English, was in an 'exotic state and was placed in the care of her husband after being returned to Melbourne (Pepper and De Arrango: 75).
In 1875 the Port Albert harbour master D. Fermaner reported that he had seen both the white woman and local Aborigines with a carved wooden figurehead that he recognised as being from the Sarah, a wooden sailing vessel that went missing after departing Sydney in 1837. (Victorian Historical Society Magazine Vol. 31: 24, 175) This raises interesting questions such as why would a group of Aborigines be carrying the figurehead. In fact the leader Bunjilee-nee described above had told searchers that he had this figurehead in his possession, and described it in detail (Pepper and De Arrango: 69). The Sarah was believed to have gone missing shortly after leaving Sydney, but a later newspaper account suggests the Sarah was wrecked off the Gippsland coast, possibly on the Ninety Mile Beach near Woodside. It said that the crew were killed, but persistent reports of sightings of another white woman in the Port Albert area who had been a passenger on the Sarah gave birth to the White Woman legend. (Victorian Historical Society Magazine Vol. 31: 7-12)