

Victorian Heritage Database Report

Report generated on - 18/08/24

BRITANNIA

Location

Bass strait, off Cape Howe

Victorian Heritage Register (VHR) Number

S85

Date lost

11/1839

Construction material

Wood

Propulsion

Sail

Number of masts

2

Length/Breadth/Depth

0.00 / 0.00 / 0.00

Built port

Teignemouth

Built country

Britain

Date lost

11/1839

Departure

Melbourne

Destination

Sydney

Owner

H. Watts of Port Phillip (ASR)
 Captain Hugh McLean (Loney, Fermaner)

Master

Captain Morgan

Cause of loss

Foundered

Passenger comments

Mrs Capel

Statement of significance

<p>The wreck of the Britannia is socially and historically significant for the role it played in the white woman myth, that eventuated in the destruction of the Kurnai tribe of Gippsland.</p>

VHR history

The brig Britannia left Melbourne in November 1839 bound for Sydney but failed to arrive. The vessel's longboat was later found washed up on the beach near Cape Howe, but it was not known if any survivors had made it to the shore. Had been previously wrecked but refloated March 1839. Last voyage to Sydney was for re-registration.
 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 'eclectic 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)
Vessel appears to have foundered off the Victorian coast. It is thought that some survivors landed in a boat which was found later near Cape Howe. Wrecked but refloated March 1839. Last voyage to Sydney was for re-registration.