

Passengers on Wrecked “Kameruka” Saved by a Pig -And that’s no porkie! Or was it? By Shirley Jurmann

On 16th October 1897 nearing midnight, disaster struck the *SS Kameruka* as she steamed towards Moruya Heads. On board were 31 passengers, including six ladies and one child, 19 crew members, livestock and dairy produce, which included butter to the value of £600, bound for the Sydney markets.



Watercolour of the SS Kameruka by William Forster – from www.artnet.com

The weather was fine and clear but a bumpy sea was running. Except for the officer on watch, her Captain William Oscar Hersee, all passengers and crew members, were in their berths. But in the dark, there was a fearful crash as the *Kameruka* ran aground on rocks off Pedro Point, about two and a half miles south of Moruya Heads. The point includes a very rocky reef that causes the sea to break for a half to three-quarters of a mile from the shore. Many were thrown violently out of their bunks by the force of the collision. Captain Hersee was thrown from the bridge and rendered insensible.

The *Kameruka* was a twin screw steamer with a steel hull, belonging to the Illawarra Steam Navigation Company. She had been built by Russell and Co, Greenock, Scotland in 1880, specially designed for the company’s South Coast run. Having left Eden some days before, she called in at Tathra, Merimbula and Bermagui. At Tathra she had picked up a cargo of cheese, butter, bark, potatoes and pigs. At Merimbula she had added more butter, bark, potatoes, cream, eggs, 193 bags of ore, a bale of possum skins, sheepskins, leather and 50 bags of *maizena*, a type of cornflour. She picked up more cargo at Bermagui. At each port she had also picked up passengers. She was heading to Bateman’s Bay to pick up more people and produce.

Captain Bishop, acting first mate, pacified the agitated passengers and crew, and all behaved admirably. Many were lightly clad in their nightwear and they were soon drenched and shivering. The vessel began to fill with water and waves commenced to break over the decks, so all were given lifebelts. Some people took refuge in the rigging and daylight was anxiously awaited.

Distress signals were sent and picked up at the pilot station at Moruya Heads and Pilot Sutherland raced down to the scene of the wreck. He endeavoured to secure a line from the ship but was carried away by the current and became exhausted. Miss Isabella McLean had pluckily rushed into the water and with the assistance of the pilot's boatman James Constable, had rescued Pilot Sutherland, who was more dead than alive.

The Moruya Police were soon on the scene followed by hundreds of onlookers from all over the district. Efforts were made to establish communications with the shore by means of the ship's mooring rope but no rockets were available. Someone on board got the idea of attaching a rope to one of the pigs in the hope that it would swim ashore. No one was sure that pigs could even swim but it was worth a try. Several times a rope was attached to a pig, which struck off for the shore. Several times the rope broke but eventually a pig with rope attached made it to land. It was 11am before communications were established. Several stout ropes broke in the attempt and passengers saw their chances of getting ashore grow smaller. Eventually a rope was secured between ship and shore and tied around the large rock at Pedro Point. By about 1pm a travelling cage was erected and disembarkation of passengers and crew could safely begin.

Mrs Pass of Bega, and her child were the first ashore. The first few passengers who made the perilous journey had the easiest trip but later the rope became slacker with the weight and being constantly dipped in the seawater and the last passengers and crew had to be dragged through the surf and over the rocks, resulting in minor cuts and bruises. The rescue was completed by 4pm. The ladies of Newstead (the settlement at South Head), headed by the pilot's wife, Mrs Sutherland, built a fire on the shore and supplied the drenched escapees from the wreck with refreshments as they came ashore. Other passengers included Miss C. Robertson who was returning home after visiting friends in Bega, Mr John Munday, Mr John Gainford, Mrs Maher, Miss Quigley, Miss Dixon, Mrs Gordon and her three brothers, Mr Anderson, Mr Haugh, Mrs Hanscombe, Mr L. Waterson, Mr G. Waterson, Mr Ireland, Mr McCarty, Mr Bird, Mr Livingstone and Mr Samuel Bensusan. Captain Hersee's injuries required treatment and he was conveyed to Moruya Hospital. There seemed little hope of any of the produce being rescued but the mails were recovered.



The Kameruka aground Photo – jervisbaymaritimemuseum.blogspot.com.au

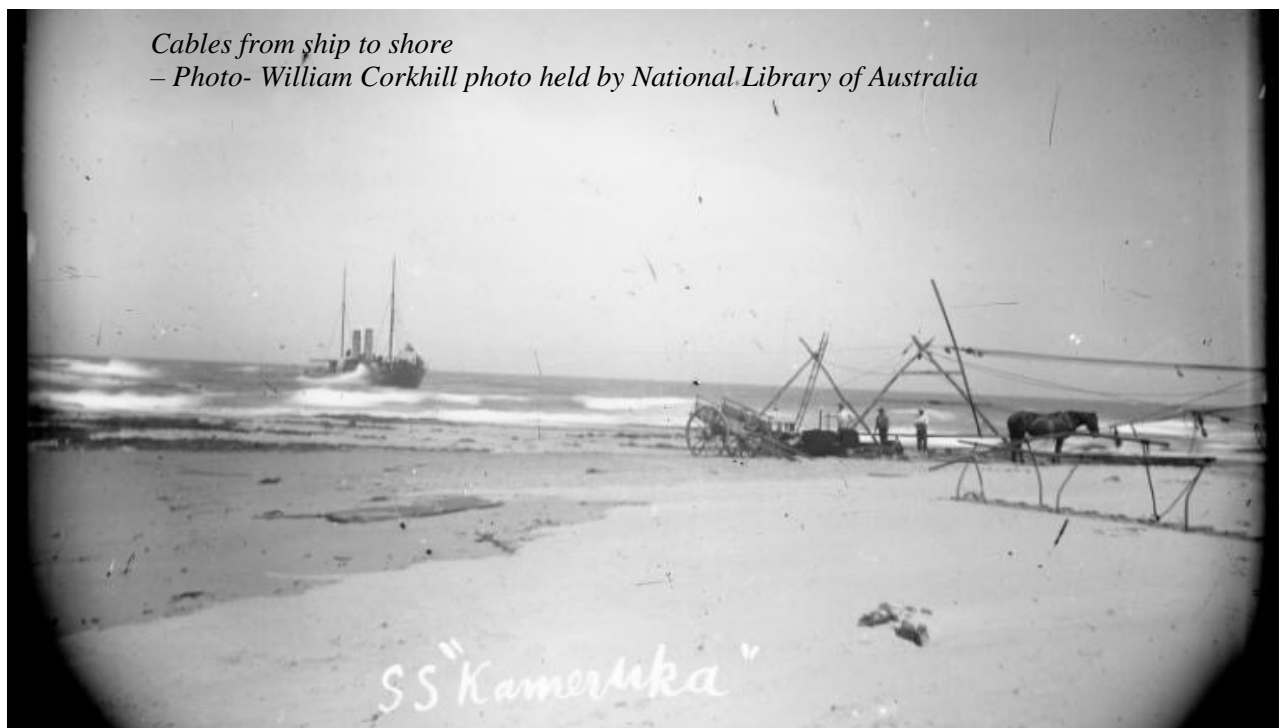
Captain Bishop, the crew and passengers were taken to Bateman's Bay and then continued their trip to Sydney on another of the company's vessels, the *Allowrie*. On arrival in Sydney, Captain Bishop praised the kindness and hospitality of the people of Moruya to the crew and passengers. The passengers had an exciting tale to tell family and friends but none expressed the desire to go to sea again any time soon.

The stranded steamer was to be offered for sale for salvage on the 23rd October but was withdrawn from sale. One of the passengers, Mr Bensusan, made a determined boarding of the wreck to recover his luggage from the abandoned vessel, leading to a reconsideration of the circumstances. Mr Alex McLean also went aboard and found that some of the produce 'tween decks was not damaged. A quantity of the cargo, mainly the butter and cheese, was able to be landed by way of the cage on the wire rope. The ship's second mate Charles McLaughlin remained at Pedro in charge of the wreck.

The *Kameruka* wreck was sold by auction for £65 on 9th November 1897 to the firm of Featherstone, McGlew and Muston. Shortly after Mr Muston and a gang of men left for Moruya on board the *Koonya* to carry out salvage operations at the wreck. It was intended to dismantle the wreck and make the speculation a profitable one. After Mr Muston arrived at the scene of the wreck with his workmen, no time was lost in commencing operations.



Men helping with salvaging at the wreck of the "Kameruka" -Photo Shirley Jurmann collection



*Cables from ship to shore
- Photo- William Corkhill photo held by National Library of Australia*

Several local hands helped in getting everything in readiness. A steel cable was made fast to the vessel and then hauled taut on shore. A cradle similar to that used to get the passengers ashore was run to and fro. The vessel's winches, anchors, and chains were conveyed ashore along with a number of lifebuoys and lifebelts, copper piping, barometer and anything which was sufficiently portable to be stowed in the cradle or slung beneath it. The engines were stripped of their copper pipes but the cylinders would require the services of a diver and a punt. The *Kameruka* was beginning to settle down in the water so it was essential that the work be done quickly.

Mr Muston returned to Sydney leaving a man in charge who was to get ashore anything he could. Eventually the wreck broke up and substantial parts were washed ashore. In March 1898, the pilot station boatman James Constable bought the ship's galley for ten shillings. With the help of George Watters and his team of five horses, the galley was put on skids and hauled to Constable's home where it was raised on four corner stones, given a floor, a door, ceiling and windows and became a useful workshop.

A month after the incident an inquiry into the reasons for the *Kameruka* being wrecked was held by the Marine Board. Captain Hersee, who was still in weak health, gave evidence that he held a master's certificate from the Board and was master of the *Kameruka* when the wreck occurred. The second mate, Charles McLaughlin had been on deck earlier in the night but Captain Hersee had taken charge at about 11pm. The course steered was the usual one steered at night. Everything appeared to be in good order. When the ship hit the reef the captain had been thrown from the bridge on to the main deck and remembered no more. When he came to, he was in Moruya Hospital.

McLaughlin, also gave a statement saying he had become anxious about the safety of the vessel. He thought the captain was under the influence of drink but not so much that he did not know what he was doing. Stephen Bishop, the chief officer, also gave evidence suggesting Captain Hersee was under the influence of alcohol. Lewis Oakey, the storeman gave evidence that the captain had told him that the ship was too far off land and gave orders to bring her further in. He told of warning the captain they were getting close in. Samuel Grant, second engineer, said he could not say the captain was under the influence of liquor. Albert Turner, a steward, said that prior to serving the captain coffee, he had served him with whisky during the day but he did not think he was unfit for duty.

In the end Captain Hersee admitted he was drunk and threw himself on the mercy of the court. His certificate was cancelled. The second mate was charged with not having taken sufficient steps to preserve the safety of the ship while the captain was incapable. The lookout man had been taken off his post without authority to assist in getting the ashes up. The Board deplored such a system and held that the lookout man should never leave his post in the fore part of the ship without precautions being taken on the bridge to prevent the ship running into danger during his temporary absence.

In January 1898 the National Shipwreck Relief Society held a meeting at which Miss Isabella McLean was awarded a silver medal and certificate for bravery shown in connection with the rescue of the Pilot, Mr Sutherland. The efforts of the pilot were also recognised but not those of James Constable, the pilot's boatman. He complained to the Society and got a reply but no medal. Isabella received various presentations from the passengers including a gold watch, inscribed "Presented to Miss Isabella McLean for her bravery at the rescue of passengers and crew of the 'SS Kameruka' wrecked October 16, 1897 by John Munday, John Gainford, S.L. Bensusan and E.V. Bensusan."

So - What happened to the pig?

Did this little piggy go to market?

Did this little piggy stay at home?

Did this little piggy have roast beef?

Did this little piggy have none?

Or did this little piggy go wee, wee, wee, all the way home?

Or perhaps his story is told in this yarn:

A journalist visited Moruya about a year after the *Kameruka* was wrecked. It is said he went to Fred Staunton's pig farm and bacon factory down by Malabar Creek on Mullenderree Flat. Here in the pigpen he spotted a pig with a wooden leg. He asked Fred why the pig had a wooden leg.

Fred replied: "Oh, that's a very heroic pig. He saved the people on the wrecked 'Kameruka' by swimming ashore with a rope tied around him so that contact with the shore could be established when they didn't have any rockets."

Journalist: "Yes but why does he have a wooden leg?"

Fred: "He's a top pig! A few months ago our house caught on fire in the middle of the night. The pig broke down the door, woke everybody up, and got us all to safety just in time."

Journalist: "Yes but why does he have a wooden leg?"

Fred: "He's a top pig! Just a few weeks ago our youngest kid fell in the dam. The pig raced in and dragged him out. Saved his life."

Journalist: "Yes but why does he have a wooden leg?"

Fred: "He's a top pig! Just a couple of days ago our daughter got bailed up by a huge red-bellied black snake. Pig raced in and bit its head off. Saved her life."

Journalist: "Yes but why does he have a wooden leg?"

Fred: "An heroic pig like that? You wouldn't want to make all of him into bacon or ham at the one time!"



There are conflicting stories in various newspaper reports. Some say a pig saved the passengers and crew. Some say three pigs were thrown overboard. Some say many attempts were made without success. Some say the pigs drowned. Some say there was not any truth in the pig story at all.

From <http://www.joelapompe.net>

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From <http://www.scubaverse.com>

Kameruka Details

515 gross tons, 300 net. Lbd: 179'6" x 24'5" x 15'6". Steel twin screw steamer. Twin compounded engines producing 98 horsepower. 10 knots.

<http://www.flotilla-australia.com/iscsnco.htm>