

Captain Tutty and the Port of Townsville

**Captain Tutty, who lived in the Worker's Dwelling, was
tug master for the Port of Townsville**

The first harbour

From 1864, when the first settlers arrived to found Townsville, until 1892, when the new harbour was completed, Ross Creek was Townsville's harbour.

It was very different then. The mouth of the creek was close to where the Strand road now begins. On the South Townsville side of the creek was a small hill known as Pilot Hill (because that was the location of the Pilot Station), and off shore from there was a small rocky island, called Magazine Island.

You cannot find any of these features today because the hill and island were quarried, and land was reclaimed from the sea to create the harbour that we know today.

In the 19th and early 20th centuries wharves lined the Flinders Street side of the creek from where the Barrier Reef Wonderland now stands to the site of the present Railway Station.

The old Victoria Bridge was built as a swing bridge to allow vessels to travel up the creek and discharge cargo at the wharf near the railway station. The only reminder we have of those days is Victoria Bridge

Only small craft could enter the creek; larger ships had to anchor in Cleveland Bay in the lee of Magnetic Island. Cargo and passengers were then transferred to smaller vessels called lighters, for transfer to the wharves in the creek. It was often difficult and sometimes dangerous, particularly with strong south-easterly winds.



NATIONAL TRUST
OF QUEENSLAND
Townsville/NQ Branch

Heritage Centre
5 Castling St, West End
Townsville Q4810
Ph (07) 4771 5873

Text:
Dr Dorothy M. Gibson-Wilde

Layout:
Bruce C. Gibson-Wilde

Photos:
Dr Dorothy M. Gibson-Wilde
and John Oxley Library



Original Townsville harbour in Ross Creek, about 1882



The causeway from Magazine Island to the mainland showing Pilot Hill, which was demolished to reclaim land for the sugar terminals

The new harbour

In 1875 the Queensland Government decided to construct a new harbour where larger ships could anchor at sheltered wharves. A long causeway was built, joining Magazine Island to the mainland, and two long rock breakwaters were constructed extending from each side of the creek mouth.

The harbour between the breakwaters was dredged, with a long channel leading out to deep water. Wharves were constructed inside the south-eastern breakwater.

It was a major undertaking.

The Townsville Harbour tug *Alert* and (right) Captain Tutty at the helm.



The tug *Alert*

As steamers grew larger in size, they were unable to enter the harbour and moor, or to turn around and leave, under their own power. They needed the help of a tug. So on 16 January 1908 the tug *Alert* arrived at Townsville harbour.

The *Alert* came from South Africa. Before its purchase by the Townsville Harbour Board (now Townsville Port Authority), it had been used by the Table Bay Harbour Board during the Boer War. It was a sea-going tug, fitted with fire and salvage pumps, and served Townsville harbour for over 50 years before it was scuttled.

Captain Tutty

The master of the tug was Captain Tutty, who lived in the worker's dwelling now relocated to the National Trust Heritage Centre. He was well liked and highly respected by the seafaring community. During his service the *Alert* was involved in a number of searches for missing vessels, and in rescuing vessels cast adrift in cyclones.

The best known search was carried out in 1911 when the coastal passenger steamer *Yongala* disappeared. The *Alert* and other vessels searched up and down the coast for many kilometres, locating wreckage over a wide area. Without the benefit of echo sounding (which

was not invented until much later) it could not locate the missing steamer.

* * *

Today the wreck is world-famous as a site for scuba diving. Tourists from all over the world 'dive the *Yongala*'.

The *Yongala* Story

The *Yongala* was built in 1903 for the Adelaide Steamship Company by Armstrong Whitworth & Co of Newcastle, England. It was a single-screw steamer with gross tonnage of 3664 and overall length of 106.7 metres, and speed of 14.5 knots. The *Yongala* and its sister ship *Grantala* were designed to provide the Australian coastal trade with a faster and more comfortable service.

Both vessels were well equipped and very popular with travellers, though neither carried radio receivers, as ship to shore radio was still in its infancy. *Yongala* had a crew of 72 under the command of Captain William Knight, an experienced and long-serving officer.

On March 21 it left Brisbane with 49 passengers and freight including the racehorse Moonshine as deck cargo.

Departure was delayed because of the late arrival of Moonshine, but two days later on 23 March 1911 the ship arrived off Mackay in reasonable time to discharge cargo and one passen-

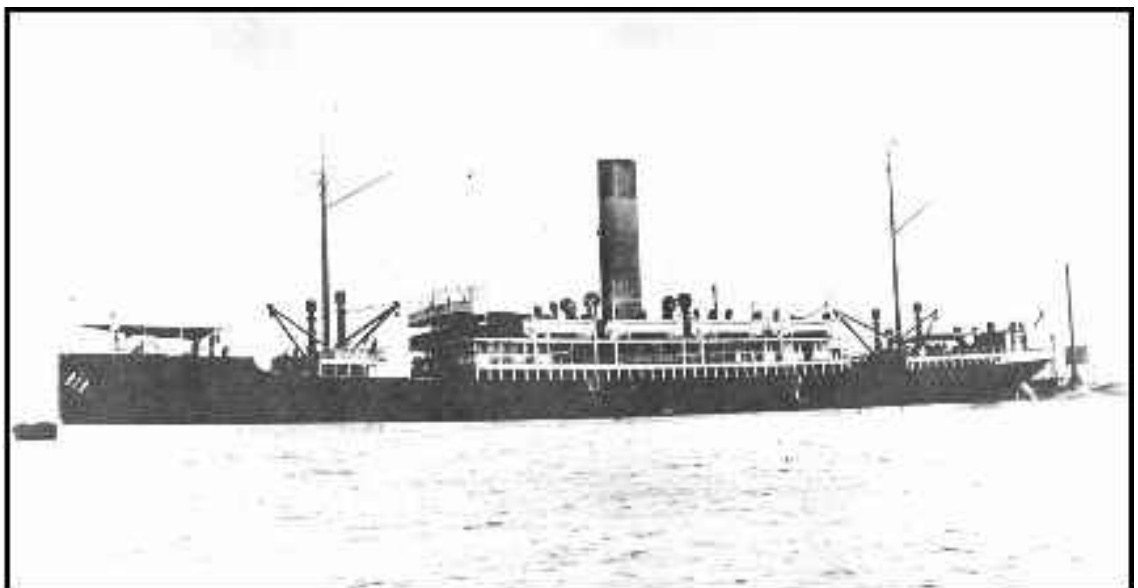
ger. At twenty minutes to two in the afternoon, it departed for Townsville.

Shortly after it left, the signal station on Flat Top Island at Mackay received a telegraph warning from the Meteorological Bureau at Brisbane that a cyclone was approaching the coast between Mackay and Townsville. But the message could not be passed to the *Yongala* as it had no radio receiver and was out of sight of any signal station to receive semaphore signals.

In the meantime *Grantala*, the sister ship to the *Yongala*, left Townsville for the south at 4 pm the same day, and took almost twenty-four hours to reach Bowen after being forced to shelter from cyclonic winds in the lee of Cape Bowling Green. Passengers told newspaper reporters that they had never experienced rougher weather.

The *Yongala* was due in Townsville at 6 am on Friday, 24 March 1911. Some effects of the blow were felt in Townsville, but it was not considered strong enough to have caused a vessel like the *Yongala* to founder.

SS *Yongala*



So, it was thought that the captain had taken the vessel further out to sea to avoid the storm. By Saturday, 25 March, however, when three other vessels from the south had arrived battered by the storm, and none had sighted the *Yongala*, the vessel was posted missing.

Relatives and friends of those aboard still held out hope of its being found. Many of the passengers were well known in the north. The whole of Townsville knew Matthew Rooney, one of the popular Rooney brothers and manager of Rooney & Co., well known throughout north Queensland as saw millers, contractors and furniture makers. He and his wife and daughter Lizzie, a prominent local singer, were returning from holiday.

The wife of another prominent citizen, Cairns solicitor Abijah Murray, and their four children were among the passengers.

A search is started...

The passenger ships *Ouraka*, *Cooma* and *Tai-yuan* had arrived in port. They put to sea to search for the *Yongala*, but found nothing, before continuing their scheduled voyages. The *Yongala* had apparently disappeared without trace.

Other smaller vessels including the *Alert* continued the search from Cape Upstart to Lucinda Point for several weeks, hoping to find evidence of the *Yongala's* fate.

Eventually wreckage began to float ashore. The lighthouse keeper at Cape Bowling Green found five bags of pumpkins washed up on the beach and a seaman's shirt was found nearby. Other pumpkins turned up in various places. The body of the racehorse was found at Gordon's Creek near the mouth of Ross River. Five bags of mail were found at Cassady's Beach (now Forrest Beach) near Ingham — all of the mail was found to be legible and was eventually delivered. A cribbage board labelled Smoke Room *Yongala*, along with other wreckage, was found at Palm Island. On Eclipse Island a seaman's chest with the initials 'J.R.D.' was found. It had belonged to the second officer of the *Yongala*, J. R. Donald.

Captain Tutty of the *Alert* found wreckage at Kepper Reef, including part of a door with glass panels etched with the word 'festina', part of the Adelaide Steamship's motto, *Festina lente* (hasten slowly), which had been on the door of

the music room on the *Yongala*. Tutty also recovered a mail hamper with parcels from southern mail order firms; most were eventually delivered to the owners.

Clearly the *Yongala* had gone down, but where? The wreckage was so widely distributed that it was impossible to estimate where the wreck might be. No bodies of passengers or crew were ever discovered.

Why did the *Yongala* go down?

Many theories were put forward for the disappearance of the *Yongala*. It was quite clear that she had been caught in a destructive storm.

Robert Hayles and George Butler, two of the people involved in the search at the time, agreed that from Cape Bowling Green they could see where the cyclone had cut a huge trail through the bush, leaving all the trees uprooted or snapped off. The northern side of Cape Upstart was nearly stripped of all vegetation, though the southern side of the cape was almost untouched. It must have been a small but very intense cyclone that caught the *Yongala*.

The last sighting of the vessel was at 6:30 pm on Thursday, 23 March when the lighthouse keeper at Dent Island in the Whitsundays reported seeing her heading north, with the seas rising and the barometer falling.

The disappearance of the *Yongala* remained unexplained, its memory kept alive by those who had known passengers and crew.

* * *

In 1943 a minesweeper of the Australian Navy on duty in Bowling Green Bay located an unidentified shoal. In 1947 the survey ship HMAS *Lachlan* was ordered to investigate the find. Using sonar equipment, the *Lachlan* located the shoal and reported it to be the shape of a sunken vessel. Divers from Townsville made a closer inspection and recovered the ship's safe. It belonged to the *Yongala*.

After 36 years the whereabouts of the lost ship was finally discovered. What is not clear is the reason it had gone down with all hands. The latest theory is that the vessel capsized when trying to turn her head into the wind with the assistance of the anchor, but no one will ever know exactly what happened aboard the *Yongala* on the night of 23 March 1911.