number of children on a long non-stop voyage.

THE CENTENARY OF THE WRECK OF THE BRIG ‘AMY’
Thirroul 13th February, 1898

The sea is terrifying in a storm. And our coast is littered with wrecks caused by by the force of the wind and sea and rocks and human error combining to cause loss of life.

Normally, a ship goes down and little more is heard about it, except for news of the death toll and - later - from amateur and professional marine archaeologists and historians who take great delight in recording the minutiae of tonnages and treasure.

But the wreck of the AMY is a very Wollongong story. It went on to become the only south coast nineteenth century wreck to be formally commemorated and, if we draw a slightly long bow, the sinking itself could be said to have some far reaching consequences - even extending throughout Australia and overseas.

It is a wonder the full tale has not been told before.

Even though it was built at Terrigal in 1872, the AMY owes its existence to Wollongong’s second schoolmaster - William Davis - who sweated it out in Throsby Smith’s barn, teaching eight male and twelve female pupils in 1833.

Realizing that this was not a life he would wish on his children, Davis had one of his many kids (we’re not sure which one, but it may well have been William Jnr.) apprenticed to the shipbuilder Cunningham who was then plying his trade in what was to later become known as Belmore Basin.

By 1839 the Davis family had moved to Brisbane Water, NSW - leaving Wollongong along with Edmund Hammond Hargraves (of gold discovery fame) and Jane (daughter of Dr Alick Osborne of Daisy Bank) who’d married Alfred Holden who was appointed police magistrate at Gosford after a stint in Illawarra.

The sons of William Davis went on to become serious shipbuilders at Cockle Creek, Davistown and Terrigal.

It was Thomas Davis who built the AMY at Terrigal in 1872. He moved to this area of few settlers at the end of the 1860s with his wide Sussanah, whom he married in 1855 and to
whom he had 12 children.

Not only was Terrigal then largely unsettled but it had plentiful supplies of timber. It was also roughly half-way between Sydney and Newcastle and its unusual headland provides some shelter for ships in a gale, although like Wollongong’s little port it doesn’t provide all that much protection. Nonetheless, its much wider bay provides infinitely calmer waters in very big seas.

Like Belmore Basin, Terrigal Haven is also immensely pretty. Today there’s a giant resort not far from the former site of Thomas Davis’s shipyard but the resort is nonetheless a very pleasant site from which to sip cappuccinos.

According to Gwen Dundon’s The Shipbuilders of Brisbane Water NSW (reviewed in our October Bulletin) Thomas Davis’s AMY was built at Terrigal Haven and was 220 tons and 107.4 x 25. x 11.7 feet. The term ‘Brig’ used to describe the ship is, in my experience, a very loose one. Even my pocket viewer’s guide to wooden ships is rather vague on what a brig actually amounts too. For the purposes of the AMY I suppose it’s best to rely on the Shipwreck Atlas of NSW published by the NSW Government Heritage Office (3rd edition, November 1996) which describes the Brig ROSA as “A vessel with two masts (foremast and mainmast), square rigged on both masts as in the two foremost masts of a full-rigged ship or barque.” But perhaps it’s not to be trusted either for it lists the AMY as being wrecked on “Thirrone” [sic] beach.

After launching, the AMY was towed from the Haven to Sydney by the tug Goolwa. Its owner was Robert Cox, a Sydney timber merchant. In 1880 it was sold to Charles Warburton, Sydney, and appears to have been generally used as a collier after this date.

On the afternoon of 13th February 1898 the AMY (presumably carrying some tons of coal, although one report claims it was ballast) was caught in a gale after leaving Wollongong for Sydney. It broke up off Thirroul beach and all hands were lost.

The gale was an extreme one and a number of other boats were either lost or damaged, including the MALCOLM which was presumed wrecked north of Stanwell Park and the MARION FENWICK which was wrecked near Port Hacking. The storm extended right up the coast and the Schooner HILDA, loaded with timber from Camden Haven put into Terrigal (where the AMY was built) for shelter, broke her chains and ran ashore but was saved.
All details of the wreck of the AMY which immediately follow are derived from reports contained in the Illawarra Mercury. These include both general news reports and supposedly accurate transcriptions of the inquest held on the body of the AMY’s Master, Captain James McKee held at Thirroul by District Coroner Mr C.C. Russell on Monday afternoon, 14th February, 1898 (reported in IM on 15th February) which was adjourned for two weeks and of the reconvened inquest which resumed before Mr C.C. Russell and a jury of 12 (this was reported in summary in the IM on Thursday March 3, 1898). Checking the State Archives Coroner’s Report (Reel 2225) I found that it recorded that the Inquest was held at the Bulli Pass Hotel (today the Ryan’s Hotel, but then a two-storey wooden hotel at Thirroul on the corner of Phillip and George Streets”) and that McKee was “about 50” and his place of birth was not known.

The original transcripts of the inquest do not appear to have survived (though I have some suspicion that they were deliberately removed and may still exist somewhere). The reports and summaries in our local newspaper are a salutary reminder that you can’t rely on the media for accuracy, particularly when it comes to shipwrecks where not all bodies are recovered.

Two years ago I suggested to a Wollongong Dentist, Thirroul resident and Member of the Thirroul Village Committee, Mike Jones, that I was disappointed his Committee had moved the AMY Monument for the second time and still not rectified the fact that the monument had failed to commemorate the names of the crew. For the only name recorded on the marble (apart from the dignitaries who officiated at its inauguration) was that of Captain McKee.

Dr Jones reply was that he and the committee didn’t know the names of the crew and I then informed him that I had a list at home. He then made efforts to raise funds through Wollongong City Council and asked me to provide the names of the crew for the monument.

I duly handed over the list which was from The Sun newspaper (6/2/1952) and told him that in order to be sure the names were printed correctly I would need to check the original death certificates. I also told him I would do the necessary background research.

On checking I found that the original list I’d obtained from The Sun would appear to be derived from the following list which appeared in the Sydney Morning Herald (February 15, 1898, p. 5) which, in turn, had been garnered from the names found on the ship’s articles at the Sydney Shipping Office.
James McKee, master, age 50, native of Belfast, married, wife and 3 children, resided 23 Junior Street Leichardht.

J.H. Ludvigson, mate, age 44, a native of Norway, believed to be married and residing somewhere in Surry Hills.

H. Polson, cook and steward, age 40, married with wife and family.

O.A. Olson, donkeyman, age 32, a native of Sweden, single

Carl Olson, AB, age 29, a native of Sweden

Peter Nagel, AB, age 30, a native of Germany

S. Dunphey, AB, age 25, a native of Linsburg

The much truncated information in The Sun contained the spellings “Lundergson Nagral” and these can probably be safely ignored as typos.

But checking the report in the Illawara Mercury (17/2/1898) revealed an immediate problem.

It contained information to the effect that the body of Captain McKee was found on Monday the 14th February; the body of Carl Olson (“winchman”) on Tuesday the 15th; the body of the cook “Jacobsen” also found on Tuesday the 15th; a portion of another body (also presumably found on the 15th but the report is not clear); a small portion of a man washed up (again presumably, but not certainly, on the 15th). The Sydney Mail (26/2/1898, p.435) claims that the “body of Jacobson came ashore at 2.00 p.m on the third day and at 6.40 p.m. that of the winchman (Carl Olsen?) was secured. The use of the word “secured” probably indicates that the surviving gruesome photo of a naked body being hoisted by rope from the sea and taken by Mr Sefton, the Thirroul station-master, is probably an image of the body of Carl Olsen. (Sefton, the stationmaster was an ancestor of Thirroul’s greatest naturalist Allen Sefton, after whom the Memorial Garden Thomas Gibson Park - yet another ancestor of Allen Sefton was named: Gibson was a blind physiotherapist and Bulli Shire Councillor).

The immediate problem found, however, was that I now had two cooks - “Polson” and “Jacobson” - which seemed unlikely on such a small ship.

This was further confused by the Herald report (16/2/98) which at first claims there were nine crew and then later provides the list of eight from the ship’s articles.

The report also claims that a spectator named Birch (Thomas is the Christian name later
given by the Mercury) took a fit and died on the beach. The Mercury report (17/2/1898) claims he died "after attempting with others to rescue the crew of the AMY." He was "interred" at "Bulli Cemetery on Tuesday with full Military honours as a member of the local company of artillery. Major MacCabe in attendance."

Other details provided by the Herald report (16/2/98) are that a lifeboat came ashore and a claim that one man named McCauley got within two yards of the winchman. It is also noted that only one body - that of the Captain - has been recovered and that it's feared many will not be found. The Mercury (17/2/1898) notes that Captain McKee was "interred Rookwood cemetery" and that "the body of Jacobson the cook and that of Olsen the winchman (the latter could not be identified by Mr Connors of Wollongong, was by Mr Cram) were interred at Bulli Cemetery. The wife, son and daughter of Jacobsen were present at the funeral."

Most intriguing is the report that "several people" declare a woman and child were seen on deck. It is also remarked that the winchman was the only one seen alive after the AMY smashed on to the rocks at McCauley's beach, Thirroul.

In the light of such confusion I was convinced that only the full death certificates would provide any reasonably accurate information as to the spellings of the crew’s names and other details. So Mike Jones used the funds of the Village Committee and the registration numbers I researched to apply for the death certificates which revealed the following (all right handed slashes indicate new column in death certificate):

98 12207 /13 February 98/ James McKee master of Brig AMY/ male 50 years/ Drowning/ [particular of registration] C.G [?] Warburton owner Brig AMY 22nd September 1898 Sydney/ [where born] Belfast Ireland

98 12208 13th February off Thirroul Beach N. S. Wales/ Jorgen Herman Ludvigsen mate on board Brig AMY/ male 44 years/ Drowning/ [Name & Occupation of father; Name and maiden surname of mother] Jorgen Herman Ludvigsen Master mariner, Olivia unknown/ (Informant Berta Ludvigson widow to deceased 9 Alexander Street

98 12209 13th February off Thirroul Beach N.S. Wales/ John Jacobson otherwise known as H. Polson Cook and Steward on board "Brig AMY"/ male 40 years/ Drowning/ [Name & Occupation of father; Name and maiden surname of mother] unknown/ [Informant] M[?] Jacobson widow to deceased Bunt Street Balmain/[particular of registration] C.G [?] Warburton owner Brig AMY 22nd September 1898 Sydney/ [where Born] Norway/ [Place of marriage, age and to whom] Sydney 39 years Margaret formerly Daley late
The Olsson/Olsen with two death certificates, the cook (and steward?) with two names - Polson and Jacobson - the lack of details on most certificates, the fact that the owner Warburton waited until September to register some deaths and that Olsen had his inquest which does not seem to have been reported in any newspaper is all very confusing and mysterious.

But things get really seriously interesting when one examines the transcripts of the inquests printed in the Illawarra Mercury.
the authorities should have allowed her [AMY] to leave port. Her timbers and masts were rotten. There was too much paint and putty."

George McCauley, farmer, "had seen the wreckage on the beach, the timbers seemed rotten. He had seen several wrecks, but he never saw one break up so quickly."

Joseph McDougall, a Pyrmont accountant for the owner of the AMY, Mr Warburton, countered by arguing that the "AMY was considered strongest wooden boat on the coast."

Allen Charles Sefton, the Thirroul stationmaster and photographer said that "nothing could have been done if we had life-saving apparatus as the wreckage was too profuse, even had we a line. The men were killed by the wreckage and not drowned. What timber he saw was sound with the exception of the mast."

John Myles, undertaker at Bulli, had been a ship's carpenter for 12 years and had helped in the building of vessels and understood timber of a vessel. He said "The timber appeared to be in sound condition in every respect with the exception of some gum veins."

Thomas Connor, labourer, said "some of the timber is seaworthy and some inferior, saw a piece of bulwarks which is in a very bad state as far as I can judge: a ship with one portion of bulwarks in that state I would not consider sound. There are other portions which are in a very bad condition."

Presumably realizing that such evidence was making things look pretty grim for the owner, the Coroner adjourned the inquest "until Tuesday next".

What happened at the continuation of the Inquest I am not sure, for I have been unable to locate the original transcripts. It is suspicious that they appear to be missing, but this could be the result of either carelessness, the inability of the State Archives staff to locate them if they are still extant or a deliberate attempt by persons unknown to dispose of damaging evidence.

At any rate, the Mercury (3/3/98) carries a report of the Coroners Inquest resumed before C.C. Russell and a jury of 12.

The owner of the AMY went all out to discredit the disastrous evidence previously taken
They led with a big gun, Alexander Kethel MLC, timber merchant. In his view “with one or two trifles and unimportant exceptions the timber was perfectly sound...to an inexperienced eye some of the timber presented a decayed appearance.” The only soft-peddling in which Kethel engaged was a remark that “the decks of vessels were now principally made of Kauri pine’ [presumably the AMY - some twenty odd years old - was not]. He also let slip that the “Amy had previously gone ashore at Port Hacking in June 1896”.

William McRitchie, shipwright surveyor for the Marine Board was then called and claimed that he had had a conversation with Captain McKee a week before the AMY went down in which McKee, remarkably fortuitously, “drew” McRitchie’s “attention to the sturdiness of his ship and the superiority of its timber.” His view was that “generally it was not bad, there might be soft planks here and there.”

Having salvaged the owners honour, Thomas Kelly, miner, was then recalled for cross-examination. From the report given in the Mercury, rarely has a witness made such a dramatic turn-around in his evidence: “when he said the masts were rotten, he did not mean they were, but at the place where they were broken he could pick it out with a pen knife. He could not tell whether it was gum vein or not and he could not pass an opinion because he was not an expert on such matters.

One down, just a few to go. A good indication of the tenor of the following proceedings is found in George McCauley’s recorded re-calling for cross examination. He recanted even more completely than Kelly and when asked about his previous evidence about “never” having seen “such bad timbers” he abjectly declared “I find upon careful examination that such was incorrect.”

A sea-captain was then called for his view - very favourable as regards the AMY” - and it was all over bar the shouting.

The jury found the owner blameless, the ship sound and that its fate was pure misadventure: a sturdy vessel at the mercy of the elements.

The jury at least declared: “we desire to add as a rider that life-saving apparatus should be placed at frequent intervals along the coast.” And so Thirroul beach can have some claim to be the birthplace of the Australian Surf Lifesaving Movement.
But what interests me more than claiming firsts is that the Mercury closes by noting that "Mr Waldron on behalf of the owner thanks the Coroner." Well, he would wouldn't he?

In the absence of more reliable transcripts of the inquests than that provided by the Mercury we will never know how much of a put-up job the sittings were, but on the basis of the Mercury's report it looks very suspicious.

But the event had a big impact in Thirroul. The Beatson family donated a site near the beach on the banks of Flanagan's Creek and by the end of the year Mrs George Adams, wife of probably the richest man in NSW (Adams of Tattersalls Hotel - The fabulous Marble Bar - and Tatts Lotto and owner of Bulli Colliery and Cokeworks) opened the AMY Monument on Thirroul beach. Adams couldn't open it himself because he was then living in Tasmania to where the NSW Government had exiled him because they didn't like his Tatts Lotto business and so his wife was probably then living in splendid isolation in Sandon Cottage on what is today known as Sandon Point after the village in England in which George Adams was born.

The Mercury (12/3/1898) reported that "a big celebration was to be held on April 30th 1898 to raise funds for a monument.

The Sydney Mail (10/12/98. p. 1409) contains the best depiction of the opening. This is
important for the monument today is so different from its original condition. It was moved in September 1952 from its original site - “described by the Mail as a “beautiful portion of beautiful strip of country” - to a site on the promenade at the front of Thirroul Surf Club where it was used for some 30 years as a cricket wicket by members of the surf club. As a consequence the original very tall white marble column at the top of the monument is now a very much truncated stump.

In April, 1996 the monument was removed to the car-park near the Thirroul Olympic Pool where the metal bollards and chains have been repeatedly run into by cars. Poor workmanship or cost cutting on the lettering of the ‘re-dedication plaque’ paid for by the Village Committee and Wollongong Council in 1994 has meant that the plaque is now completely illegible and the name of the crew which I researched and a plaque bearing their names added in April 1996 is fading fast. The original 1898 lettering was obviously of far superior quality, although the words “The Brig AMY” are today sometimes mistakenly read as “The Eric AMY” by those not in the know.

The original monument was described in one report as “a white marble column, sur-mounted by an urn arising from two marble pediments, the whole resting on a solid block of Pyrmont stone, on which is carved an anchor and broken cable.” The Sydney Mail mentions a “memorial of marble on freestone standing eight feet high.” The extant memorial in the car park today is, on my estimation, just under six foot high.

It is inscribed with the couplet:

“O Hear us when we cry to thee
For those in peril on the sea.”

I have no idea who the author of this less than inspired couplet might be.

The Sydney Mail report, however, includes some verse by Adam Lindsay Gordon which is not found on the surviving monument in Thirroul:

Man’s works are graven, cunning and skilful
On earth, where his tabernacles are
But the sea is wanton, the sea is wilful;
And who shall read her, and who shall mar?
Shall we carve success or record disaster
On the bosom of her heaving alabaster
Will her purple pulse beat faster and faster,
For fallen sparrow or fallen star.

Despite such execrable verse, the tragedy of eight foreign-born seaman dying far from home remains.

So too does the suspicion that the AMY was not satisfactorily repaired after it ran aground at Port Hacking two years before it met with complete disaster off Thirroul. It is claimed that a thousand pounds of repairs were executed on the AMY 1896 but the original testimony given by the eyewitnesses on the first day of the Inquest at Thirroul makes me think that a patch-up job was about all it was.

What remains is the fact that there are probably few sadder ends than dying unknown and alone, far from home in a shipwreck where your body is never recovered.

I feel particularly for S. Dumphey, male 25 years of Linsberg. All the other victims at least had their country of origin recorded. The best they can come up with for Dumphey is what he wrote on the ships indent - “Linsberg”. I’ve spent years trying to track down where on earth Linsberg might be. I found a two possibilities: a tiny place in Germany and one in the United States. His relatives, wherever they were from, probably never learned of his fate.

I am pleased that I’ve been able to assist in getting a memorial to his death recorded on the monument.

In my younger days, I was outraged by a monument that recorded only the death of the Captain and ignored the deaths of his crew. I never whinged once at the Surf Club members using the memorial as a cricket wicket and actually once or twice joined in their games (even though I detest cricket) probably thinking that containing such disgraceful omissions the monument deserved what it got.

Today, much closer to death myself, I think more of dying alone and far from home.

At least half of Robert Louis Stevenson’s famous couplet would probably have served the AMY monument better than the those which actually made it on to the marble:

Home is the sailor, home from the sea
And the hunter home from the hill.
But even this is a touch sentimental. Only Hal Thorpe's (John Hall Thorpe 1873-1947) rather good (though perhaps too Turneresque) sketch of the sinking has the makings of serious - if rather melodramatic - art. The rest is trash.

So often we reach for poetry when life throws up tragedy which is above the power of words. Poetry, itself, is a close kin of song. And one can only agree with Goethe who claimed that, “Anything too stupid to be spoken is sung.”

Joseph Davis

The Left Way To Write History
(a review of a history of Wollongong, Wollongong uni press, 1997 price $35)

Jim Hagan and Andrew Wells, as editors of A History of Wollongong, have attempted to mould a collection of thematic chapters to pursue an ideological approach to regional history.

To accept the labour inspired A History of Wollongong as a definitive history of the region would be to assume that the analysis of class struggle is the only legitimate form of history. The editors pose a principal question as the basis of the study: ‘how were the resources of the Illawarra exploited over time to meet changing human needs?’ This is answered with an ongoing theme of the exploitation by capital of resources both natural and human in the Illawarra region. In this respect the editors and authors have succeeded in fulfilling their aims.

Hagan and Wells also have definite ideas on who is capable of writing regional history. In their introduction, having largely dismissed chronological narrative and the ‘industrious amateur’ which they suggest give rise to ‘problems of undigested fact, larger-than-life personalities, simplistic chronologies and dramatic events’ editors Hagan and Wells emphasise the superior abilities of their ilk. In giving some examples of academic historians applying their skills to regional history they fail to alert the reader to the fact that there are also academic historians who write their history from below, often in a chronological narrative and use very much the same reconstructive approach as an ‘industrious amateur’ and may even work in conjunction with ‘amateurs’. Examples of this genre can be seen in Alan Atkinson’s Camden and Norma Townsend’s Valley of the Crooked River.