

The Ketch Margaret

21 June, 1867.

The wooden ketch, **Margaret**, of 35 tons gross was built by Benjamin Davis at Brisbane Waters NSW in 1858 and was owned by George Coleson and William Bate. Under the command of Captain William Stirling the **Margaret** departed Macleay River with a load of maize bound for Sydney.¹ Fighting a strong southerly gale with heavy showers and mountainous seas the vessel somehow ended up in the Wollongong area.² The crew fought for three days to keep the vessel from coming to any harm.

The crew was unable to open the hatches as the waves were breaking over the vessel. The crew was without food for that period of time. By 1 am on Friday 21 June 1867 the **Margaret** was some 50 miles south of her destination and about two miles off the Five Islands. The captain saw how strong the spray was over one of the islands and made the decision to take his vessel to land. The options he had was either to beach her or take her into Wollongong Harbour. On rounding the breakwater and lining up to enter the harbour Captain Stirling expected the vessels in the harbour to run him a line to bring his vessel to safety. He steered his vessel close to the breakwater and dropped both anchors having thirty fathoms of cable chain on each. After his anchors parted he hailed the vessel **Hirondelle** to throw him a line, but the crew on that vessel ignored his pleas.

At approximately 3 pm Pilot William Edwards, in company with his son Joseph, and a local volunteer, David Roxborough, went to the assistance of the crew of the **Margaret**. Pilot William Edwards and David Roxborough manned the 18 foot pilot boat. Joseph Edwards boarded the **Hirondelle** seeking assistance from the crew and their life boat. The Pilot made way to assist picking up the crew of the **Margaret**. He ordered the crew to jump from the **Margaret** so that the pilot boat could pick them up. It was not long before the pilot's boat was in some difficulties, the steer oar had been lost, although Pilot Edwards decided to continue. With the waves rolling into the harbour and the loss of the steering oar, it was not long before a large wave rolled the small craft over. David Roxborough came to the surface and observed that Pilot Edwards was floating some distance away in the harbour. The **Hirondelle's** crew refused to lower a life boat and never offered any assistance to the stricken crew.

The inquest into the death of Pilot Edwards commenced on Saturday 22 June at the Court House (old Court House) and the verdict was:
Deceased, William Edwards met his death by drowning whilst in discharge of his duty as a pilot.

The jury formed the following opinion:

*if the Government had only provided a proper boat and appliances this accident could have been avoided, rendering good and efficient assistance to the crew of the **Margaret** and probably saving that vessel;*

*further, had either Hironnelle or Nowra put out their boats Edwards would have been saved and Margaret might have been brought to safety.*³

There was no chance that the Margaret could be saved. She was dashed against the rocks and broke up.

¹ Sydney Morning Herald 25-6-1867.

² Pilot William Edwards log 21-6-1867. (Illawarra Historical Society held at Wollongong City Library)

³ The Wollongong Pilot Service 1840-1867. A P Fleming. (This book was used as a source instead of the newspapers as there was no Illawarra Mercury available on microfilm for this period.)