

## SS Kiama

by Carol Herben

The iron hull paddle wheel steamer/schooner **Kiama** (145 tons gross) was built in August 1854 by J G Lawrie at Whiteinch Scotland under the supervision of Captain Samuel Charles of Kiama NSW, who, as the master, sailed her from Scotland to Australia, taking 144 days for the voyage .

After the vessel's arrival she was fitted out and placed in service by the Kiama Steam Navigational Company on the south coast of NSW. She was built like most of the early steamers with a paddle wheel and boosted by twin masted sails. This method of ship building, a combination of steamer and schooner, assisted by sails, boosted the speed of the vessel with a low horsepower steam engine.

On the morning of Monday 30 April 1860, Pilot William Edwards recorded the weather in his log as a light wind with a cloudy sky. He further noted that the SS Nora Creina arrived from the Shoalhaven and left for Sydney after 6 pm.

The steamer **Kiama** departed Sydney at 10-40 am on the voyage to Wollongong and then onto the Clyde River. Aboard the Kiama that day were the Master Captain William Keft, crew members Chief Officer Thomas Porter, Second Officer Alexander McPhee, Firemen R Day and J Lynch, Able Seamen Sidney Mountcastle, Henry Wilson, Walter Riley and James Fuller. It was 11-30 am by the time the vessel cleared Sydney Heads and on the voyage to Wollongong faced a south-east swell all the way. Arriving off Wollongong at 5-30 pm the vessel anchored outside Wollongong Harbour. Pilot William Edwards of Wollongong lit the light at 5-35 pm for the steamer to enter the harbour, but the master of the Kiama considered it unsafe to do so.

The captain ordered the lowering of the life boat and placed Thomas Porter Chief Officer in command with instructions to deliver some of the passengers to shore. Passengers who boarded the life boat were Robert Howarth, one of the Directors of the Illawarra Steam Navigational Company, Mr Garrett, Mr Osborne, a gentleman, and a young girl. Thomas Porter landed his passengers safely before loading bags of coal and returning to the Kiama outside the harbour. In the meantime Captain Keft gave orders that the gig be lowered to deliver the remaining passenger and mail to shore. Walter Riley able seaman offered to take the gig to shore but Captain Keft ordered him to the wheel of the vessel and he then placed Second Officer Alexander McPhee in charge and sent Sidney Mountcastle and Henry (Dutch Harry) Wilson to man the oars. After delivering the passengers to shore the crew of the gig were instructed to bring more coal back for the Kiama as the Captain considered that the Kiama was short some two tons of coal to make the journey to the Clyde River and back to Sydney. Thomas Porter and the life boat set out first and made its way into the harbour. At the jetty the Wollongong Pilot Edwards informed the crew that there was no more bagged coal for them to take, and he offered to ring the bell for the coalman to come down to the harbour, but they said they would rather return to the **Kiama**.

Walter Riley, the seaman on board the Kiama, witnessed the gig going very close to the reef. On the return of the life boat Porter informed the captain of the situation with the coal. The captain accepted the situation as he would not have the crew risk their lives for the sake of

taking on a few more bags of coal. When the captain asked Thomas Porter where the gig and crew were he remarked that he had not seen them.

Concerns were raised on shore when on Brighton Beach the gig was found full of water. Parties on shore with lanterns began a large search and just north on the rocks three oars were found, one of them broken.

The incident was recorded in Pilot Edwards log as  
*The Kiama, came to off the port, two boats on shore with passengers, the boats took bags of coal, the chief Mate Mr Porter, returned with bags to take more coal off, he went with out them, shortly afterwards, he came on shore again and asked if we had seen anything of the other boat, we had not, went in search all round the beach, found the boat bottom up on the beach, three lives lost, the vessel appears to heave too for the night.*

Captain Keft brought the Kiama into Wollongong Harbour at daylight on the following morning, 1 May. A search was undertaken by a boat to see if the three crew members were still alive, but there was no joy found in this search. Some parties of searchers were formed and one, led by Donald McPhee of Bulli, the brother of Alexander, knowing well that they had to scan the shore to the north of Wollongong as the bodies would be inshore owing to the south-east swell of the previous night.

The bodies were found on Tuesday afternoon 1 May by the search parties. Alexander McPhee was found by his brother Donald at the Black Rock near Towradgi, Sidney Mountcastle was found on Fairy Meadow Beach and Henry Wilson near Fairy Creek. The turbulence of the ocean had removed most of the clothing from the bodies. The bodies were then taken to the Brighton Hotel.

On Wednesday evening the Coroner S S Rogers (solicitor) swore in a jury and asked them to examine the deceased to establish the cause of their deaths. The Jury consisted of Frederick Sinclair (foreman), Reuben Parsons, James Cosgrove, R May, W Osborne, Robert Beavis,

John Harris, Thomas Makin, J S Garrett, John King, H L Gordon and Richard Howarth. The bodies were then viewed by the jury and were identified by Thomas Porter First Officer of the Kiama. The Coroner pointed out to the jury that it was essential to have the Captain present for the inquiry, and that the inquest would resume Sunday or Tuesday next.

On Thursday morning, 3 May, the funerals took place for the three victims. Henry Wilson and Sidney Mountcastle were of the Church of England faith and Alexander McPhee of the Presbyterian faith. At the Brighton Hotel the bodies of Wilson and Mountcastle were placed in the hearse whilst McPhee coffin was carried on the shoulders of the mourners. The funeral procession stopped at the Protestant burial ground (Pioneers Rest Park) where the service for Wilson and Mountcastle was performed by Rev T C Ewing of the Church of England. The coffin of McPhee was then placed in the hearse for the journey to the Presbyterian burial ground where the Presbyterian clergy performed the service.

The inquest recommenced on Wednesday 9 May where evidence was given by Captain Keft, Thomas Porter, Pilot Edwards, Robert Howarth and Walter Riley. The jury retired after hearing all the evidence and after some forty five minutes returned with the verdict that

*Alexander McPhee, Second Officer of the Kiama steamer, was accidentally drowned off Wollongong Harbour on the night of the 30 April last, but how the said Alexander McPhee was thrown into the water we have no evidence to show.*

Similar verdicts were returned regarding the deaths of Mountcastle and Wilson.

The ss Kiama was sold to the Illawarra Steam Navigational Company in 1861 where she traded until sold in 1876 to D Sheehy. The register was closed in 1914 and the Kiama broken up.

A headstone was erected over the grave of Alexander McPhee in the Presbyterian Burial Ground. This headstone also includes the particulars of both the other deceaseds. It is a little confusing as they are not buried in this grave.

Three years later Captain Keft, while in command of another vessel, would be involved in another disastrous event where life was lost. The steamer **Mimosa** was bound for Sydney from Twofold Bay when it was wrecked on 18 September 1863 off Tathra with the loss of two passengers.

Some ten years later the **Kiama** was again to lose another crew member, James Brown, a married man with two young children, who had been in the employ of the Illawarra Steam Navigational Company for only six months. On Thursday 5 May 1870, whilst moored at the wharf at Greenwell Point around 4 am, loading was taking place. James Brown was on a punt transferring cargo to the steamer **Kiama** when he slipped and fell between the vessels. The current drew him away. A line was thrown from the **Kiama**, but to no avail. His cries could be heard away from the vessels and being still night the crew could not ascertain where he was. Being unable to swim it was presumed he drowned almost immediately. Boats were lowered, but no trace was found of his body.