

Alexander Berry

by Carol Herben

The wooden steamer (drogher) **Alexander Berry** of 60 tons gross was built in 1873 by James Bower & Company of Pymont in Sydney and was owned by the Illawarra Steam Navigational Company for carrying supplies back and forth along the south coast. A vessel that laid low in the water when fully laden was made more as a river trader or drogher rather than an ocean going craft.

On Sunday evening 30 June 1901 an extremely violent storm was being experienced along the south coast with rain from the south and a south-westerly gale continuing into Monday 1 July 1901.

Early on Monday 1 July the Pilot at Kiama received a message from Shellharbour that a small steamer had run ashore at Long Point. The Pilot immediately hoisted the flag to alert the Kiama Life-saving Brigade to respond. Within half an hour with carts and horses secured they started

on their journey to the site. Arriving at Shellharbour they decided not to proceed to Long Point as the vessel had broken up.

The **Alexander Berry** had left Shoalhaven between 10 am and 11 am on Sunday 30 June and was proceeding to Merimbula under the command of Captain Frederick James Marshall. The weather was fine with smooth seas and a light wind until the vessel reached half way point, between Beecroft Head and Jervis Bay, when the seas began to rise. The captain gave the order to turn back to Abraham's Bosom for shelter. The **Alexander Berry** arrived at Abraham's Bosom between 2 pm and 3 pm and anchored close to the beach where she remained for the night. It was during this time that she was buffeted until the anchor cable parted at around 8 pm Sunday night. The captain ordered her engines started to take her out to sea away from the shoreline. Around midnight the rudder broke and the vessel was left to the mercy of the elements. The **Alexander Berry** was tossed about until daylight on Monday 1 July, and it was then that the crew sighted Kiama lighthouse.

With the sails out of commission the captain ordered a red blanket up to alert Kiama lighthouse, but the blanket was soon carried off by the gale force winds. The captain then ordered that a sail be made from blankets and hoisted in an attempt to keep the vessel from being blown onto the rocks, and again the wind destroyed any attempt by the crew to save the vessel and themselves. Captain Marshall thought if they could keep the vessel off the rocks they could beach her safely, and the order was given to lower the life-boat, which soon filled with water and became useless. Then all hands were ordered to put their life-belts on. Suddenly the **Alexander Berry** was driven inshore where she broke up. On her way in she struck a submerged rock which threw most of her crew over board. Her crew was Frederick James Marshall (master), A B Bartlett (engineer), Walter Sydney Pearce (fireman), John Pratt and John Jansen (able seamen). Four of the crew were drowned the only survivor was Walter Pearce a young man of 22 years of age.

The **Alexander Berry** was insured with the South British and Victoria Insurance Companies for £1,000.

Four men, namely Arthur James Millard, George Randall, Harry Roberts and Francis Sheerin, were on Port Kembla beach near the mouth of Lake Illawarra when they saw a body lying on the sand. He was later identified by the sole survivor to be John Pratt, a crew member. As it so happened the body of Captain Marshall was located off Clifton that same day. His body was completely naked with the exception of the life-belt.

The inquest into the disaster commenced at Wollongong on Friday 3 July 1901 before Coroner Charles Coffey Russell. One of the witnesses called was Walter Pearce, the only survivor of the wreck. He stated he was the fireman on board, although the Coroner did not want to listen to the evidence as their had only been one body recovered that of John Pratt whose remains were physically examined before the inquest began. The Coroner decided that if the other bodies were to be recovered that it would be better to hear all the evidence together.

When the inquest resumed Captain Archibald Fletcher, marine superintendent of the Illawarra Steam Navigational Company, was called, who stated that the drogher **Alexander Berry**, the property of the company was engaged on the Shoalhaven River, which was also a good seaworthy vessel which often went out onto the open ocean and the insurance company had approved her under the insurance to trade outside the river.

The sole survivor gave a full account of his ordeal to the Illawarra Mercury on 4 July stating:-

The steamer only hit once on the shelf of rock and that made an end to her. She went right to pieces. We were all in the water at once. At first I was thrown under, but on coming to the surface and shaking my head hard I saw nothing of my comrades, although they might have been in the wreckage around me. But there was such a dreadful sea, all surging and boiling about me, that it was with difficulty I could keep from being smothered. I had put on a lifebelt and that helped to keep me up well. Three of us had lifebelts and two had lifebuoys. My belt kept me afloat, besides which I am a very good swimmer. I was about an hour in the water. Then the waves tossed me upon the rocks. Twice they washed me up,

and as often drove me back again into the ocean. I was unable to help myself. The third time I was washed against the jutting ledge of rock, just a small piece big enough for me to get my arms around it and I hung on there. If another sea had taken me out again I would have been done for. I could never have come back again, for I had not the least strength left to struggle any longer. While I was hanging on to the projecting stone two men came out at the risk of their lives and rescued me. They were Messrs Charles Engstrom and Harry Warren. They were indeed brave and good. There were a good many men ashore, and they made a great fire to warm me at. As soon as I was rescued from the water, men from the shore dispersed themselves all along the beach to look for any of my shipmates, but did not see a sign of them. I was a good deal knocked about and I am getting stronger gradually, but the horror of it all seems to be very present and whenever I begin to doze it comes before me, I see it all again.