

GREAT OCEAN WALK

Walk Victoria's Icons

INTERPRETIVE NOTES

SHIPWRECK AND RESCUE

The route of the Great Ocean Walk (GOW) takes in a number of locations of shipwrecks as well as strandings. As a rule survivors of these wrecks had a long walk or wait for assistance, but whether their doomed vessel was a three masted Clipper carrying over a hectare of sail with 500 passengers and crew or a two masted ketch plying Bass Strait and this forbidding coast's towns – the terror engendered was the same.

JOANNA (two masted barque) - shipwrecked September 1843

This near new Van Diemen's Land built vessel was driven ashore at Johanna River while sailing from Launceston to Port Fairy west of Cape Otway. No lives were lost in the initial wreck and survivors made their way back around the coast in eight days to Geelong with the aid of the local native tribe. The newspaper reports of the day record that the coastal tribe showed the bewildered party from the boat which plants were edible and where water could be found.

The Joanna's cargo included flour, sugar, and brandy. A salvage operation organised by the ship's owners in Launceston went terribly wrong when a ship's boat overturned in the surf and two crew members drowned. Another salvage party then came from Port Fairy and had a month of, what La Trobe described three years later when he saw what remained of the wreck as, "a six weeks spell of drinking, quarrelling and fighting" – the liquor on board being the principal attraction.

At the time of the wreck and when La Trobe camped there in 1846, the Joanna (now know as Johanna following a sign writer's error on the long since closed Joanna Post Office) River had two mouths. The western outlet can still be traced in the sand dunes just before the eastern headland of the main beach when walking from Cape Otway. It silted up in the first decade of the 20th century – possibly from the impact of farming and stripping of the giant forests in the hills behind.

Johanna Beach, with its pounding surf and views west ward to the high cliffs of Milanesia and Cape Volney, is a highlight of the GOW. After winter gales the sand dunes occasionally give up reminders of the ships whose timbers have been washed ashore here a century or more ago.

SCHOMBERG - lost at Peterborough, Boxing Day 1855

The largest of the British built Clippers, the Schomberg, was lost on her maiden voyage to Melbourne under the command of the redoubtable, record breaking passage master, Capt Bully Forbes. The year before Forbes had driven the ship Lightning at unprecedented speeds across the Southern Ocean and set the record for out to Melbourne and back to Liverpool - five months and 21 days.

Although the beach Schomberg drove ashore on is west of the GOW, the Southern Ocean in the weeks following her stranding and the failed attempts to pull her off, smashed her triple plank thickness hull and 80 metre high masts into house size sections of flotsam. Some made their way as far away as the west coast of New Zealand and still lie there.

One of Schomberg's spars can occasionally be seen in the sands at Parker River. Schomberg was the largest vessel of her day and her owners had promised to break the "out and back to Melbourne" record held at the time by the Clipper ship Lightning. It was not to be.

GREAT OCEAN WALK

Walk Victoria's Icons

JENNY OF HULL - lost at Brown's Creek West of Cape Otway, February 1858

This brig had sailed from Hull in the United Kingdom and was driven ashore at night, breaking up in the days following and becoming a total loss. All 12 crew were saved and were given emergency accommodation at the Cape Otway Lighthouse for nearly a month. Henry Bayles Ford reported the wreck to the Chief Harbour Master in Melbourne.

Remains of the lighter Jenny of Hull carried out as deck cargo were found three decades ago in the mouth of Browns Creek. The 1850s were the height of the Victorian gold rush and with the majority of wharf labourers at the goldfields it was common practice for vessels to carry a lighter to make unloading and loading cargo easier.

MARIE GABRIELLE – lost at Moonlight Head 25th November 1869

This large steel hulled French registered and crewed barque was driven ashore at Wreck Beach at Moonlight Head at 1am in the morning. She was carrying a cargo of tea loaded in China.

At daylight, as seas calmed, the crew got ashore safely via the ships boat and a small party set off to walk around the coast to Cape Otway and the lighthouse visible away to the east. Four of the crew waited at the wreck. By the third day the main party were without water and cut badly by the dense scrub. Next day they saw the lighthouse tower as close and called for help.

Children of the light keepers were playing down on the beach below the lighthouse and mistaking the cries of the crew (in French naturally) and alarmed by their appearance ran away and told the lighthouse superintendent Henry Ford.

A rescue party set out for Moonlight Head and brought the remaining crew members to the lighthouse. The survivors stayed at Cape Otway and at the Aire River Station, established by the Roadknight family in the 1840's, for over a month and were conveyed to Melbourne when the lighthouse supply vessel made its next (twice yearly) supply trip.

The Ford's corresponded with the Marie Gabrielle's master for a number of years – the hospitality not soon forgotten.

Today you can see one of the anchors and a windlass from this ship on the reef west of the Moonlight Head car park – easily reached off the GOW. Your walk should be easier than it was for the crew of the Marie Gabrielle.

FIJI – lost at Moonlight Head 6th September 1891

The GOW passes the site of one of the worst wrecks on this section of coast in terms of loss of life but a wreck that brought an early Christmas to many of the local settlers. The 1400 ton ship Fiji was caught on a lee shore at night as the Moonlight Head coast loomed out of the night. An attempt at tacking off shore and away failed and the ship was driven ashore by the large seas running at the time.

As well as general cargo for Melbourne, the Fiji carried 200 cases of dynamite in her rear hold. The crew were even more than usual in cases of shipwreck, wanting to abandon ship as quick as possible notwithstanding the fact that their doomed vessel was 150 meters off shore and hard aground with a broken back. The ships boat was launched but immediately capsized in the boiling seas.

When the Port Campbell Rescue Rocket team's heavy line failed to make it to Moonlight Head and night was approaching, the crew decided to use the light line fired to them earlier in the day to get ashore. One by one 10 men were swept away to their deaths while 16 made it to shore.

GREAT OCEAN WALK

Walk Victoria's Icons

The GOW passes the monument to the German sailors who lost their lives in the wreck of the ship Fiji in 1891 and of a local settler, Wilkinson who swam out to the wreck but was caught up in the wreckage and drowned after striking his head on the anchor chain.

To pass along this section of the GOW is to recall that lonely night the survivors spent on the beach and the terrible choice they were faced with. The non arrival of the heavy line became an important issue for the subsequent inquest. To this day no definitive reason can be given.

LADY LOCH – Blanket Bay Disaster 21st March 1896

The GOW passes behind Blanket Bay and this wide open beach has been popular with generations of holiday makers from the Colac-Otway District and further a field. It has always had a sense of the remote with a “no frills approach” to what a holiday constitutes.

Canvas rather than holiday homes - beach shacks dotted its shoreline up to the late 1970's and the location of a long gone jetty was betrayed by scores of pile stumps marching out into the bay.

A number of these shacks were converted lighthouse store sheds as Blanket Bay was where all the supplies for Cape Otway were landed for decades. Annually, and from the 1870's, twice yearly, supplies came ashore and were then taken by wagon around to the lighthouse. This was a job that all at the lighthouse were required to help with.

It was a time of great excitement for the lighthouse families as the Lady Loch Supply Vessel brought furniture, flour and any special item keepers had purchased when “up in town”. Mechanics were also aboard who would service the lighthouse machinery.

Parker River Inlet – also accessible from the GOW, was used for the first 20 years of supplying Cape Otway, but it was far more dangerous and there was no margin for error with the narrow entrance.

In March 1896 the Lady Loch's supply boat capsized in the surf at Blanket Bay and three men drowned. Two are buried at the Cape Otway cemetery - accessible from the GOW - while the Chief Mate Thomas Griffith's body was brought back to Melbourne and is buried at Williamstown.

When the narrow gauge railway reached the Otway Ridge towns within a decade of this accident – Cape Otway Lighthouse received the majority of its supplies over the Otway Ranges – the same ranges that had defeated explorers 60 years previous.

MILANESIA – 1902

The ship Milanesia was stranded for some days in 1902 on the beach that now bares its name. It is rare for ships to escape this coast when embayed between Moonlight Head and Cape Otway as this vessel was.

GREAT OCEAN WALK

Walk Victoria's Icons

THE LIGHTHOUSE KEEPERS - GUARDIANS OF THE COAST

The lives of the Cape Otway Keepers and their families were inextricably bound up with the coast their beacon guarded. From Cape Otway they could survey this coast all the way to Moonlight Head. They could see ships under sail coming in on this lee shore when the southerlies blew and then wave or fly signal flags as crews tacked back out away into Bass Strait.

The three keepers took various watches through the night and the light was maintained in all weathers – this was their sworn duty. The third assistant keeper generally cleaned the light at dawn ready for the next night's duty. In cases of shipwreck keepers rendered assistance but the nearest rescue rocket teams were based at Port Campbell. In times of mist, when the light could not be seen, exploding fog rockets were fired from the tower and could be heard out to sea and back around the coast. The rear stone shed at Cape Otway was where shipwreck survivors were housed.

The isolation of Cape Otway was slightly reduced in 1859 when the telegraph was connected to Geelong along the coast. From the GOW you can see the Signal Station (minus its wonderful tower) sitting high on the easternmost sand hill inside the Lighthouse reserve. An informative museum is housed here and explains the "cutting edge" technology this installation represented in confident Victoria at the time – the first cable link with Tasmania. The names of incoming vessels were telegraphed to Melbourne and other colonial capitals on the eastern seaboard with any other important news via signal flags they carried aboard.

The massive signal mast at Cape Otway, used for replying to these vessels, was restored in 2001 and is a permanent reminder of the excitement felt by all seeing their first sight of a new land and future.

The Signal Station also housed the Cape Otway State School in the 1890's providing a regular Victorian syllabus for these most isolated of children. Nearby settlers' children rode along the coast from the Aire River to this school as well.

Prepared by Donald Walker

Donald Walker is the author of "Beacons of Hope" – a history of the Cape Otway and King Island Lighthouses at the western entrance to Bass Strait. This work sets out the story of the rugged Otway Coast that the Great Ocean Walk now follows - its shipwrecks and settlements, its explorers and peoples. A practicing architect he continues to draw inspiration for his work in the Otways from the high ranges mist filled gullies as well as the cliff rimmed bays and the bold headlands the coast is known for.

For more information please contact:

Alysia Brandenburg
Strategic Tourism Adviser
Parks Victoria

Telephone: 13 1963

Email: abranden@parks.vic.gov.au

Updated May 2010