



Ships and Shipwrecks of the Gold Coast

Everyone knows the Gold Coast is famous for sun, surf and shipwrecks. OK, so it's probably better known for the wrecks found lying on Surfers Paradise beach on a Saturday morning, but as with any coastal town, over two hundred years of European settlement, it's seen its fair share of maritime misadventures.

As far back as 1823, a wreck, estimated to be 300 tonne and thirty years old, was noted by Lt. John Oxley at Cook Island. Coolangatta, the main suburb at the southern end of the Gold Coast, was named after the topsail schooner wrecked there on 19th August, 1846. The world famous surfing beach, Duranbah, draws its name from a 298 tonne steamer which ran aground there in 1920. This vessel was refloated after some weeks and gave good service for many years after, possibly then being captured by the Japanese during World War II.

Rainbow Bay, originally known as Shark Bay, was renamed in 1925 after the ship Rainbow, which did survey work on the Tweed Coast in 1828. Similarly, Letitia Spit at Fingal is named after the first ocean going vessel to cross the Tweed Bar.

Most local divers are aware of five main wrecks on the Gold Coast. The best known and the first was the Scottish Prince, an iron barque of 950 tonne, which went ashore on the Southport bar early morning on 3rd February, 1887. Today she lies in 10-12m of water to the north of Sheraton Mirage Resort, just inside the shark nets. This wreck is an easy dive and attracts a large amount of marine life.

The next and the largest of all is the Alberta, a steel screw steamship of 2214 tonne. En-route from Hong Kong to Melbourne with a load of coal, she went aground on Southerland reef (Kingscliff) on 19th October 1890. Since being salvaged in the 1960's/70's and pounded by swell for over one hundred years, she is very broken up. One large section of ribbing is now home to large wobbegong sharks. The boiler and other sections of wreckage make it an interesting dive.

Just four years later, on 3rd September 1894, on her maiden voyage from Glasgow to Brisbane, the Cambus Wallace, a steel barque of 1651 tonne, grounded at the narrowest point of Stradbroke Island. Five sailors died trying to get ashore in heavy seas. Part of her cargo of explosives was detonated on the beach, leaving a great hole in the dune. During a cyclone in 1898 waves broke through the weakened dune and washed a channel through the island, now known as Jumpinpin bar and created North and South Stradbroke Islands. Today the wreck is heavily sanded and very little remains.

On 19th July, 1907, the 1433 tonne single screw steamer, the Fido, ran aground just off Cook Island, on what is now called Fido reef. Unfortunately very little remains of the wreck, although the outline of the ship can be clearly seen in good visibility with the boiler just off to the southern side.

The grounding of the 411 tonne steamer, the Dellie, on 24th August 1941 off Fingal Head proved fortuitous for locals during rationing in World War II, when her cargo of apples, chocolate, cocoa, clothes pegs and rum started to wash up on coast beaches. Her position close to the beach has seen her constantly pounded by swells and she is very broken up and sanded over.

The Gold Coast has also long been home to a commercial fishing fleet. There are professional fishing boats lying in Gold Coast waters in various depths from 12 to 60m. At least two of these vessels took their skippers and one also a deckhand to the bottom with them. Herb Ilic, of Palm Beach Dive and technical diver Kevin Denlay, were asked by the family of the Nightlinger's skipper to recover his body after his trawler sank in March 2002. This was no easy feat, with the wreck lying in 60m of current prone water. Herb still takes suitably qualified technical divers to the wreck, however it's position makes getting good conditions difficult.

Recently another two vessels have been sent to the bottom. In December 2007 a trimaran sank east of Jumpinpin; it's new owner only having taken possession of the boat the day before. Water police had the vessel in tow but had to cut it free when it took on too much water and it sank shortly afterwards. Sunday 20th January, 2008 was a bad day for the owner of a luxury catamaran. The \$2.4 million vessel sank in 62m of water east of the Seaway (unsure if salvaged).

Unfortunately for divers, most of the Gold Coast wrecks have been down for such a long time, are in either shallow water where they are constantly battered by swell and sanded over, or in a depth of water beyond recreational divers. Consequently, none are regularly visited by commercial charter boats. It is a real shame that so little is left to show for such a rich maritime history.

References:

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Thanks to the dedicated staff of the Tweed Maritime Museum