



Thirroul disaster 1898: The wreck of the *Amy*

by *Christine Hill*

I live in a coastal community south of Sydney – between the Royal National Park and Wollongong. Early settlers, with their convict servants, started arriving in the early 1800s, for timber-getting and farming, and then coalmining.

The story of the coalmining operations in the Wollongong area and how they progressed from groups of men hacking at the bushland and carrying their sacks of coal down to the settlements, to the building of great wooden jetties to load coal onto sailing—and then steam—ships, is fascinating.

Of course, the arrival of the railway line and then modern roads changed everything, but little reminders of the old stories are still there to see.

At Thirroul Beach there is a memorial to the eight people drowned when the brig *Amy* was wrecked on the beach in 1898. Local libraries have a photocopy of a picture of the wreck. It seemed to be a worthwhile project for a painting, and I started investigating...

Surely someone's Grandad took them to the beach and described how the ship was wrecked there when he was a boy? I asked every 80 to 90-year-old I met, but no. I resorted to the local library's newspaper records, and *Trove* at the National Library in Canberra.

There was a lot written at the time; various papers local and national carried the story, each journalist highlighting different aspects of the event, so that I was able to gradually build up a 'picture' of the scene.

I précis the story:



On the morning of Sunday 13th February 1898, the brig Amy left Wollongong Harbour with three hundred tons of coal aboard, in fine weather. Around midday a gale blew up and by late afternoon she was lying broadside in the surf about a mile and a half north of Bulli Jetty, at Thirroul.

Mr William McCauley saw a ship very close in and looking as if it had 'had a bad time', and with two of his sons and Mr Thomas Kelly raised the alarm and went to the beach. They were the first to reach the scene, where they saw both ship's boats launched and lost in the tremendous waves. Mr Kelly, with a rope around himself, nearly reached a survivor who clung to a plank for over an hour before finally being claimed by the sea.

Men were seen clinging to the spars and rigging, then falling or jumping off. Captain McKee, his wife and child, and all the crew drowned that day, to the horror of everyone watching helplessly from the shore.

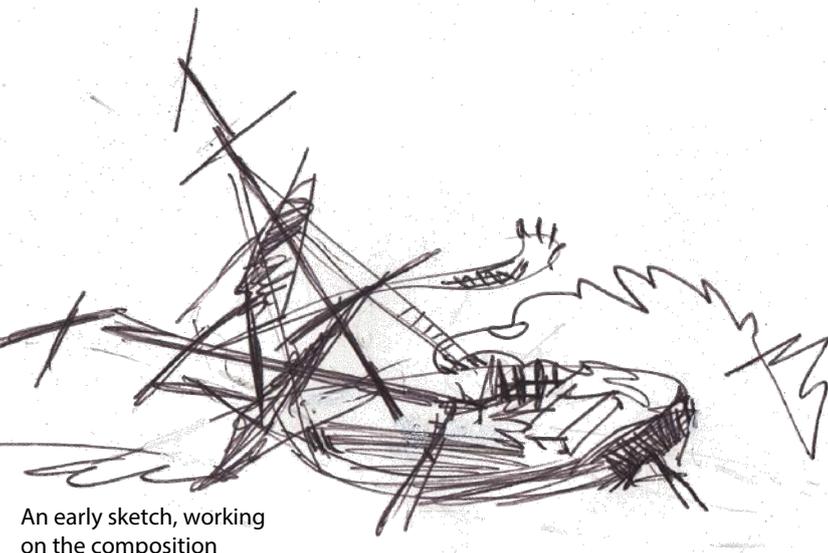
It was reported that within an hour and a half the Amy had completely broken up. (A witness to the subsequent Inquest stated that the hard-wood masts would not have snapped at the base, but would have ripped open the deck and hull when they fell.) Captain McKee's body was recovered the following day, one lifeboat was washed up unscathed two days later, and later in the week other remains were discovered along the shoreline. There was little to be seen of the three hundred tons of coal.

The schooner Malcolm and the brig Marion Fenwick were also lost off the South Coast that day; the wreckage which gradually came to Thirroul and Austinmer beaches over the following week was likely to have been from the *Malcolm* as well as the *Amy*. People said that such a storm had not been seen since the *Dunbar* was wrecked at The Gap in 1857. (It was recorded that 13 inches of rain fell at Clifton, just north of Thirroul.)

The jury at the Inquest recommended that lifesaving apparatus should be placed at frequent intervals along the coast.

A public subscription was raised and the memorial of this tragedy was erected on the main Thirroul beach the following November.

It is not known whether any lifesaving apparatus was set up at the time, but eventually a Surf Life Saving club was established at Thirroul.



An early sketch, working on the composition



ILLUSTRATION, used in all published references. Neither I nor the librarians can find the provenance for this image – was it drawn by someone who was there, or by a newspaper illustrator from journalists' description of events?

The view of the supposed wreck site from the low headland nearby is just like this, so maybe the artist did visit the site, or even witness the event.



'Amy' in Wollongong harbour, waiting to load coal. The ship's name cannot be read in this photo, but it is labelled as the 'Amy' in local historic photo collections.



'Brig Amy leaves the tow'. Nobby's Head in the background, Newcastle, NSW. A painting of 'Amy' in her heyday—Oil painting by marine artist Robert Carter, commissioned by descendants of the Amy's owners.

How the painting was conceived and composed

The painting was composed as shown on page 1 for several reasons:

- ❖ I did not want to be “copying” the old image by ‘Unknown Artist’.
- ❖ I wanted to show the whole scene: I know this beach!
- ❖ A storm happened while I was working on the ideas, so off to the beach in wind and showers with my sketch book, trying to picture the scene as it might have been. The water was white with foam. I sketched two different positions for the ship, but had to go with the correct way she would have lain on the beach in that hurricane, in that surf.
- ❖ After half a day of stormy seas I knew the dunes would have been washed out and the beach flattened. The waves would indeed have been huge; the crowd watched and the kids collected coal while all this drama went on.
- ❖ It’s midsummer, so although wet and windy, women would have been wearing their summer blouses, with perhaps a shawl for protection against the rain. The kids of this rural settlement mostly went barefoot anyway.
- ❖ Details of the ship were provided by studying rigging on *James Craig*, and photos of *Amy*, which were not very clear. ASMA President, Bob Carter, was very helpful with advice on how sails should have been furled in such a storm.
- ❖ Bob also had a photo of a painting he did as a commission long ago, of *Amy* in her heyday, at sea outside the port off Newcastle NSW. That also was helpful, especially when telling the story of the ship.



Detail from the painting

Early sketches



Christine Hill is a Fellow of the Australian Society of Marine Artist— an artist and book illustrator.

She lives by the ocean—for many years on Pittwater, north of Sydney, where her paintings reflected the area’s picturesque waterways and sailing lifestyle. She now lives on the NSW South Coast and the sea and its surroundings continue to influence her art practice.

Her work could be described as being of a narrative contemporary style, illustrating modern and historic maritime life, and often reflecting her interest in traditional wooden boats. Drawing is a strong basis for works in pencil, watercolour, oil, pastel, or acrylic.

