



- 01 Lee Graham from the museum's Fleet section swims along the very edge of the Cumberland Entrance searching for signs of the *Hydrabad*. Photograph Xanthe Rivett, Silentworld Foundation
- 02 'Tween decks of a horse-ship loaded for India, Engraving from the *Illustrated Australian News*, 4 October 1882. ANMM Collection 00006032



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Courses for horses

THE CUMBERLAND ENTRANCE AND THE WRECK OF THE *HYDRABAD*

The Cumberland Entrance is a tortuous passage through the northern section of the Great Barrier Reef. **Kieran Hosty** was among archaeologists from the museum who recently visited the entrance to search for the remains of the ship *Hydrabad*, which was wrecked there in 1845 while carrying horses to India.

WHEN THE FIRST EUROPEANS arrived at Sydney Cove in January 1788 and occupied the land of the Gadigal people, they established one of the most isolated European settlements on earth. Some 13,000 miles from England, it was contactable only by ship and only after a lengthy and hazardous voyage across the Indian or Pacific oceans or via Torres Strait and the Great Barrier Reef.

When the new penal colony at Sydney Cove suffered a series of crop failures, its governor, Arthur Phillip, was forced to look for alternative sources of food for the colony. He sent HMS *Sirius* on an eight-month voyage to Cape Town in South Africa for the necessary supplies. Then in August 1791 Lord Grenville, the Home Secretary, granted permission for the struggling colony to trade with Calcutta in India for necessary supplies such as rice, flour and livestock.

From these tentative beginnings trade between India and Sydney evolved, leading to dozens of ships a year sailing between the colonies carrying all manner of cargo, including foodstuffs, ceramics, cloth, shoes, alcohol, spices, tobacco, leather, iron, coal, timber and seal skins.¹

Horse trading

One of the more unusual and profitable exports was colonial horses. The horse trade between Sydney and Calcutta had been slowly developing ever since 1822, when the Australian colonial merchant John Macarthur (1767–1834) presented Francis Rawdon-Hastings, Governor General of India from 1813 to 1823, with a New South Wales stallion.

One of the more unusual and profitable exports was colonial horses

Originally known as New South Walers or Walers (after the colony of New South Wales), the Australian colonial horses gained a reputation for sturdiness, stamina and the ability to cope with a harsh climate. By 1834 the demand for these horses had developed to such an extent that the East India Company was sending military officers to Sydney on behalf of artillery and cavalry units in India to purchase horses directly

from breeders in New South Wales and to arrange shipment of the animals back to India.

In September 1845 *The Sydney Morning Herald* reported that in that year, 950 horses (valued at more than £30,000) had been assessed by the East India Company as being suitable. They were subsequently exported from the colony on 12 ships.

One of these ships was the *Hydrabad* which, after taking on board 25 passengers, 118 horses and 275 tons of Newcastle coal, departed Sydney on 3 May 1845 bound for Calcutta. This 602-ton, three-masted wooden ship, built in 1843, was owned by famous 19th-century shipowner Duncan Dunbar, who in August 1844 chartered the vessel to the British government for the transportation of 260 convicts to Norfolk Island. After discharging them, the ship sailed on to Sydney, arriving on 4 March 1845.

While in Sydney, Captain Robertson decided to take advantage of the growing trade in horses between Sydney and India. He converted the *Hydrabad's* wooden internal compartments – which had formerly housed the male convicts and their guard



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– into horse stalls and installed forced air pumps to ventilate the lower hold and 'tween decks of the ship.²

Nothing more was heard of the *Hydrabad* until Lieutenant Aird of HM Cutter *Prince George* reported that the *Hydrabad*, along with the *Coringa Packet*, had been wrecked in Torres Strait.

Newspaper and survivors' accounts vary, but it appears that Captain Robertson, originally intending to enter the Great Barrier Reef via the Raine Island Entrance, was forced by contrary winds further north, and he decided to use the little-used and much more difficult Cumberland Entrance, a passage some seven kilometres long and 800 metres wide. Almost immediately the ship struck a submerged reef, around 5.15 pm on 25 May 1845. After a desperate 12 hour-battle the vessel was abandoned. It eventually sank in 15 fathoms (27.5 metres) of water, almost in the middle of the Cumberland Entrance and some seven nautical miles from Mer (Murray Island). The survivors took to the ship's boats and first headed for Booby Island and then Port Essington before being rescued by the crews of HM Ships *Fly*, *Shamrock* and *Hebe*. Sadly, all 118 horses on board were drowned, trapped in their stalls below decks.

Given the remoteness of the Cumberland Entrance, the wreck site has never been found. The vessel sank in deep water on a sandy bottom – conditions that are very favourable for the preservation of archaeological material – so if located, the wreck could provide excellent

comparative archaeological data on mid-19th-century English shipbuilding, along with additional information on early trade between New South Wales and India.

Searching for *Hydrabad*

Thanks to the generosity of our sponsor and research partner, the Silentworld Foundation, archaeologists from the museum were given the opportunity early this year to visit Cumberland Entrance and carry out a detailed search for the remains of the ship.

We visually searched the edges of the reefs for any tell-tale shipwreck signs, such as straight lines, circles or bright, unusual colours

Arriving mid-January, we observed that Cumberland Entrance is bounded by a reef six kilometres long to the north and another 4.5 kilometres long to the south. The passage separating them varies in depth from 97 metres at its north-eastern end to 35–40 metres at its south-western end.

Although the main Cumberland Entrance through the Great Barrier Reef is quite distinct – an 800-metre-wide band of deep, dark blue water threading its way between the light blue–green water marking the edges of the northern and southern reefs

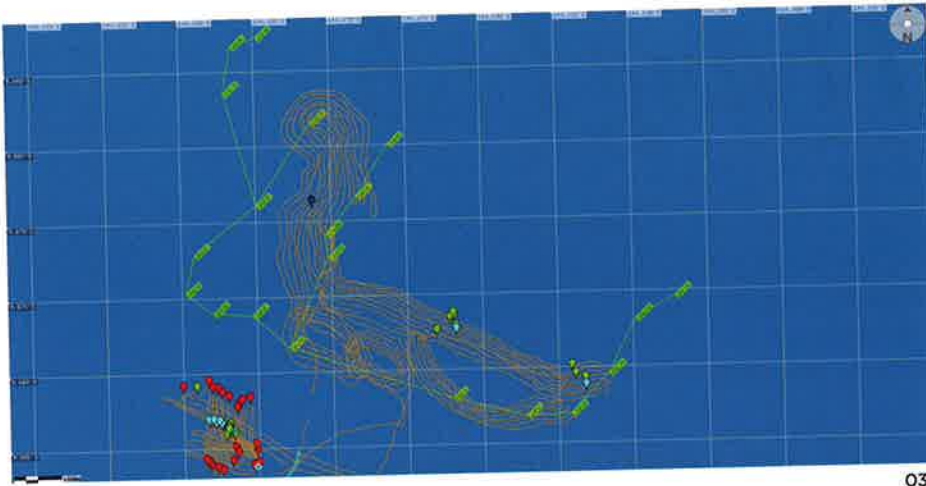
– we found a similar-looking deep-water passage a few hundred metres to the south of the actual entrance. This we designated the Southern Cumberland Entrance.

As some newspaper accounts at the time of the wrecking stated that Captain Robertson might have entered a false passage close to the real Cumberland Entrance, we decided to survey the more sheltered southern entrance first.

With the expedition vessel, *The Boss*, anchored in the southern passage, the survey team – Frits Breuseker (Seasee Pty Ltd), Trevor Marcusson (Silentworld Foundation) and I – readied the survey vessel, *Maggie II*, for action, loading laptops, batteries, differential GPS, magnetometer, tow cables, safety gear and additional fuel.

On the southern side of the southern entrance, Frits and I deployed the magnetometer and Trevor started running a series of tightly spaced search lanes, circumnavigating the southernmost reef, working outwards from the shallow breaking edges of the reef towards the deeper water of the passage. For various reasons, we could only tow the magnetometer at about four knots, so, after completing five 2,500-metre-long search lanes, it was well after dark and time to head back to *The Boss*.

The next day sea conditions had moderated enough to allow us to put in teams of divers to visually search the edges of the reefs for any tell-tale shipwreck signs, such as straight lines, circles or bright unusual colours –



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- 01 Thousands of fish are attracted to the nutrient rich waters of the Cumberland Entrance. Photograph Xanthe Rivett, Silentworld Foundation
- 02 Jacqui Mullen from the Silentworld Foundation on the edge of the reef inspecting a soft coral – possibly a *Dendronephthya carnation*, or Carnation tree coral. Photograph Xanthe Rivett, Silentworld Foundation
- 03 Magnetometer plot of Cumberland Entrance showing the northern reef and the magnetic anomaly area in the centre of the entrance, January 2015. Image courtesy Seasee Pty Ltd

white possibly indicating the presence of lead, or bright green possibly indicating copper, bronze or brass. The dive teams reported back that the area had very strong tidal currents of two to three metres per second, due to the restrictions caused by the relatively narrow passages. This forced them to work with the current, as swimming against it was impossible.

Over the next few days, the magnetometer survey party surveyed both the northern and southern reefs of the Cumberland Entrance, locating very few magnetic anomalies in what appears to be a magnetically 'quiet' area. They then commenced a series of north-south survey runs between the two reef systems across the deeper parts of the entrance. The dive teams, too, searched the edges of both sides of the passage from two metres down to 20 metres, looking for any material that might be associated with the *Hydrabad*.

Finally, after four days and many kilometres of survey, at the western end of the Cumberland Entrance the team located a series of more than 20 significant and repeatable magnetic anomalies in 35 to 39 metres of water. The linear nature of the run of anomalies from the south-east towards the north-west was also encouraging. This pattern might represent a spill of magnetic material such as anchors, iron cable and ship's fittings as the vessel drifted north-west under the influence of the prevailing wind and tide. Via side scan sonar, several interesting lumps were also observed on what was a relatively flat and featureless sea bottom.

The following day, the magnetometer team confirmed the repeatability and size of the magnetic anomalies and reported that they appear to be confined to an area some 150 metres long by 50 metres wide.

Given the maximum depth of water (39 metres), the limited bottom time (seven minutes) and the required surface interval, it was only possible for us to inspect five of the strongest anomalies. These were buoyed, and descent lines rigged up, before divers were deployed in pairs – first Frits and Xanthe Rivett (Silentworld Foundation), then Lee Graham (ANMM) and Grant Luckman (Department of the Environment), and finally Trevor and me.

When Trevor and I hit the bottom at 37 metres it was dark and gloomy (sunlight drops away remarkably quickly even in the clear waters of the northern Great Barrier Reef), with a very strong current pushing us towards the west. Armed with a metal detector and a trail line we pulled ourselves eastward along the sea bottom, working hard against the current.

After five frantic minutes of searching, out of the gloom we spied a ledge of rock some two metres high and 50 metres long, on top of which appeared to be the outline of a large ship's anchor thickly encrusted with coral growth. Fighting the current, we managed to swim to the object and scan it with the metal detector. It gave off a very slight but encouraging magnetic signal, indicating the presence of iron – but not enough for an object such as a 1,000-kilogram anchor. Unfortunately, before we could investigate further our bottom time was

up and we had to begin our careful ascent to the surface some 37 metres above us. The other teams of divers all reported similar results – dark, deep water, strong current – but no physical signs of wreckage.

It was a disappointing result, but we now know that a series of significant magnetic anomalies lies beneath the waters of Cumberland Entrance, and their most likely source is the wreck site of the *Hydrabad*. Hopefully in the near future we will have another opportunity to investigate this remote part of the northern Great Barrier Reef and finally locate and survey the former immigrant ship, convict transport and horse carrier the *Hydrabad*.

Notes

1 Erskine, Nigel, 'East of India – Forgotten trade with Australia', *Signals* 103 (June–August 2013), pp 1–13.

2 *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 27 March 1845.

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