

# Finding the *Royal Charlotte*



A team from the Australian National Maritime Museum has located an 1825 shipwreck that marooned sailors, soldiers, convicts and civilians – and a pair of emus – on a desert cay on the Great Barrier Reef. The museum's chief maritime archaeologist **Kieran Hosty** tells of this summer's expedition with the team that in 2009 located the government schooner *Mermaid* wrecked in 1829, 20 km south of Cairns.

ON 29 APRIL 1825, the Indian-built, three-masted ship *Royal Charlotte* arrived in Sydney from Portsmouth, England under the command of Captain Corbyn RN with 136 male convicts and their guard from the 57th Regiment under the command of Major Lockyer. It had been an eventful voyage with an attempted convict mutiny, leading to eight of the convicts being placed in triple irons and allegations of misconduct, ill treatment and poor rations made by several of the passengers against Captain Corbyn.

After a month in port Corbyn must have breathed a sigh of relief when he secured a contract to take detachments of the 20th, 46th and 49th Regiments and their families from Sydney to India. However, his run of bad luck continued and when he attempted to leave Sydney on Sunday 12 June 1825 the crew refused to work the ship and it was left to the



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soldiers and officers to raise the anchor, hoist the sails and prepare to put to sea.

After departing Sydney the ship took a course known as the Outer Route, sailing to the east of the Great Barrier Reef. The company encountered a series of severe southerly gales that persisted until the evening of the 20 June 1825 when the ship ran aground on the inaccurately charted Frederick Reefs, a large, fish-hook-shaped reef system that lies 450 kilometres north-east of Gladstone, Queensland.

Piling up onto the south-east edge of the reef, the *Royal Charlotte* fell onto its beam ends and was constantly raked by the huge seas as the soldiers and sailors worked together in a desperate bid to save the vessel. The ship's masts were cut away to steady the ship and its guns and deck cargo, including two emus, were cast over the side in an attempt to lighten the ship. Morning light revealed a small sand cay to the north of the ship, where two very wet and bedraggled emus could be spied making their way towards it.

Over the next days the ship was slowly abandoned as most of the crew, the soldiers and their families moved to a small sand cay (now called Observation Cay), partially submerged at high tide. The survivors built up the sand cay using timber and cargo from the wreck. They repaired one of the ship's boats and it was dispatched under the command of First Officer Parks for Moreton Bay to seek help from the distant colony. After six weeks clinging perilously on the wind- and water-swept sand cay, living on water and provisions salvaged from the shipwreck, the survivors were rescued by the government brig *Amity*. All but three had survived both shipwreck and the castaway life.

On 4 January 2012 a team of 24 divers and observers led by the Australian National Maritime Museum, in partnership with the Silentworld Foundation, left Gladstone for Frederick

Reefs in an attempt to locate the wreck site of the *Royal Charlotte*, and hopefully the remains of the survivors' encampment on Observation Cay.

Guided by two survivor accounts, that of Lieutenant Parkes and Sergeant McRoberts, the team narrowed down the search zone to an area just south of Observation Cay. With incredible luck on the first day at Frederick Reefs, the divers – hauling magnetometers (submersible metal detectors) from small boats – immediately began to locate shipwreck material, including a large iron staple knee and some hull planking, in the sandy lagoon at the back of Observation Cay.

Over the next days other finds surfaced including more deck planking, a lead scupper for draining water off a ship's deck, rigging components, rudder fittings, ship's fastenings, unidentified iron fittings and copper alloy tubing. All were located within a nautical mile of the Cay, but the question arose, were they from the *Royal Charlotte*? We knew from historical accounts that other vessels, including an iron-ore carrier, a United States Navy submarine and a World War II landing barge had all come to grief on Frederick Reefs and had been partially or fully salvaged. What of the material we were finding?

Thanks to some careful plotting and a captive brain's trust of museum curators including Paul Hundley and Dr Nigel Erskine, professional mariners, archaeologists, commercial and volunteer divers from Oceania Maritime Pty Ltd and the Silentworld Foundation, and Lee Graham from the museum's fleet section, it became evident that most of the older material formed a very neat, almost south-to-north, 800-metre-long line. It stretched from the south-eastern edge of the reef, over the reef top and into the lagoon at the back of the cay.

As the sea conditions moderated teams of divers worked both ends of this line

of wreckage, with one group reporting back that they had not only located a large, early-19th-century anchor on the very edge of the reef, but also several iron cannon. Another team located part of the vessel's keel lying in the more sheltered waters of the lagoon.

Analysing the timbers, knee staples, anchor, ship and rudders fittings confirmed that we had located an early-19th-century, copper-sheathed, iron-fastened sailing vessel of around 450 tons. This along with the information gleaned from the survivors' accounts indicated that the ANMM and its collaborative partner the Silentworld Foundation had located the remains of the ex-convict transport *Royal Charlotte*.

The team was elated. Very few Indian-built ships have been identified and surveyed, and locating the remains of the *Royal Charlotte* provides historical detail and information on convict and troop transportation in the 19th century.

The museum's 18-day expedition operated from the Gladstone-based vessel *MV Kanimbla* and *Silentworld II*, and was mounted in collaboration with Silentworld Foundation, part of Silentworld Ltd, an Australian shipping company that operates in the South Pacific and the Caribbean. The Silentworld Foundation was established to further Australian maritime archaeology and research, and to improve Australia's knowledge of its early maritime history. The expedition is part of an Australian Research Council project, a joint project between the Australian National Maritime Museum, the Silentworld Foundation and Sydney University. ■

Team divers Lee Graham (ANMM, left), James Hunter and Maddy Fowler (Flinders University, above) working to locate and record timbers and an anchor from the *Royal Charlotte*. Photographs by expedition photographer Xanthe Rivett